Tales from a Wedding Day

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Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

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PIATKUS

First published in Great Britain as a paperback original in 2008
by Piatkus Books

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7499-3929-8

Typeset in Times by Action Publishing Technology Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

Piatkus Books
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Four o'clock

Only four o'clock?

I think I've been awake all night. It's starting to get light now, and already there are some irritating birds awake at this ridiculous hour practising their trills and arpeggios ready for the full-blown chorus. My eyes are aching and stinging with tiredness. I can't believe it – tired already, with such an important, *stressful* day looming ahead of me! How unfair is this!

'Get off!' I mumble grumpily as Toffee gets up from his position on the end of the bed, stretches, turns round three times and tries to climb onto the mound of my legs. I shift my feet and the cat jumps, yowling in annoyance, onto the floor and trots over to the bedroom door. In the faint light from between the curtains, I can see his tail, upright and quivering with indignation, as he starts parading up and down at the door.

'Oh, I suppose you want to go out now!' Sighing, I roll out of bed and pad over to let the cat out of the room before he starts to really complain and wakes up the whole household. 'Didn't want you on my bed in the first place!'

The thing is, today is not about what I want. None

of this is about *me* at all – it's about Sam – Sam the bride, the queen for the day. Nobody else matters today – and especially not Toffee, who always wants to sleep on Sam's bed when she's staying here at her parents' house. We weren't going to let him do that last night, in case he kept her awake, so I got lumbered. Fair enough – all part of the bridesmaid's role, I suppose. Was I shown the job description for this post at any time?

I shoo Toffee out and pause for a minute in the open doorway. There's a light showing beneath the door of Sam's room. Is she awake too? We're both awake at four o'clock on the morning of her wedding? If neither of us can sleep, wouldn't it be nice to sit curled up together under her duvet and talk? We could have our very last, final, last ever, ever, ever, chat together as two single girls.

Holding my breath, I tiptoe across the landing, watching out for the squeaky floorboard I've known about since I was eleven years old and first came home from school to play with my new best friend.

'Sam?' I whisper outside the door.

I don't want to wake her up if she's just fallen asleep with the light on. Maybe I should just go downstairs and make myself a cup of hot chocolate instead? Turn on the bedside light and read a book? Count sheep? Count wedding guests?

No – Sam won't mind. She'll be glad. Aren't all brides supposed to be anxious and nervous on the morning of their wedding? She's probably lying there worrying about everything, and I'll be able to make her laugh and calm her down and get her back to sleep. That probably *is* part of the job description.

I turn the door handle quietly and peer into the

room. Sam's awake all right – she's sitting on the side of the bed, with her back to the door, facing the window. I'm just about to rush into the room and jump on the bed when I realise she's talking. To herself? Or saying a prayer for the wedding day? No – look, of course – she's got her phone in her hand. Probably an early morning call to Phil. Blimey – at four o'clock? One night apart and she misses him so much she has to call him at the crack of dawn? All right – to be honest, it feels strange to me, too, to be sleeping back here at Sam's parents' house – in her brother's old room instead of sharing with Sam like I used to when we had late nights out together when we were teenagers. But of course, I've got no boyfriend to miss. I'm used to sleeping alone.

I open the door and start to squeeze myself carefully through the doorway. What I'll do is I'll creep up behind her, make her jump and take the piss out of her about the phone call. She'll probably drop the phone and swear at me and we'll fall about laughing, and then she'll have to call Phil back and apologise for her crazy friend. But just as I'm about to make my move, I overhear a snatch of Sam's conversation, and the whole moment suddenly changes.

'I know,' she's saying softly, urgently, into the phone. *'But I had to say something. He needs to* talk *to her about it, Phil! Do you think I should have kept my mouth shut? Do you think she's going to hate me? Oh, God. I hope I haven't done the wrong thing. I couldn't bear it if anyone's upset. Not on our wedding day!'*

I step back and let the door close silently behind me, make my way back to my own room, climb under the duvet and turn to face the wall. What now? What

upset, what incident, what terrible row's brewing *now* in this bloody family? I wish I'd never got up; I wish I'd never heard!

It was all very well Sam asking me to be her chief bridesmaid. That's what you do, isn't it, when you're best friends? You look after the bride on her special day. You're there to help and support her, straighten her dress, check her hair, calm her nerves. You're there to make sure everything goes smoothly, that there are no hitches, no disasters, nothing forgotten, no sour memories to spoil the sweet ones.

But how can I do all that when any disasters are likely to be caused by her own family? I've got no chance. It's all going to go horribly wrong – I just know it. And I won't be able to do a thing about it. What else could I expect from the Pattersons?

Half past six

Morning at last. I shrug off the duvet and lie on my back, watching the pattern of sunlight on the wall opposite the window. I think I've slept for an hour or so; I feel a bit better, anyway. It's a lovely day. Sam's wedding day! I can't believe it's finally arrived. All the time we've been busy with the preparations – the plans, the bookings, the endless, endless lists – I somehow never imagined that when it came to the crunch – when it came to the morning of the Actual Day – I was going to feel like this.

Like what?

Scared? Anxious? Worried that I'm not going to be able to make it perfect?

'It's not your responsibility,' said Sam when we were talking about this yesterday. 'Don't be ridiculous! I never asked you to take all this on your shoulders. You've done so much to help me, Abbie. Now just relax and let's enjoy the day.'

I'd like to. I really would like to be able to relax and enjoy it all. But how can I, when the bride comes from a family of total nutcases, any one of whom is likely to ruin her day with just a look, a frown in the wrong direction or a couple of ill-chosen words? And

then she'll be upset and I'll feel like I've failed her. It's no good telling me it's not my responsibility! It is. She's my best friend.

The first time Sam brought me home to meet her family, I think I went into shock, and I haven't really recovered since. The thing is, you see, basically, we're so, so different. It's weird how we became friends, but we did: we liked each other straight away, from that very first day at James Radford High School. The teachers were cruel to their new intake of eleven-year-olds: they mixed up the year-group so that we weren't in the same classes as our friends from the various feeder primary schools. I remember sitting down in a free seat in our appointed homeroom and feeling so totally lost and alone without Carol, my only real friend from my junior school, that I wanted to cry. Or go home. The misery must have been clear on my face because I'd hardly sat down when the girl next to me nudged me, so hard that I flinched, and whispered: 'What's up?'

'Nothing.'

I wasn't going to admit to being scared and lonely. I'd been a target for teasing all my life, and I'd learned how best to avoid it. Keep quiet, don't show any weakness.

'Have you got any friends in here?' persisted my neighbour.

I shrugged.

'*I* haven't,' she went on. 'The bastards put my mates Jackie and Tina in 1G.'

I sniffed. I was *not* going to cry. And I was secretly shocked at her saying 'bastards' about the teachers. But she had a point.

'My friend Carol's in that class too,' I admitted.

'I'm Sam,' she said, giving me a grin that seemed to fill her whole face. 'Want to be my new friend?'

Even at that age, I think we knew that we complemented each other. Being with Sam gave me a new confidence; in her company life was brighter, more colourful, more fun. I forgot to worry about myself. I never quite understood what I gave her in return but it must have been enough, because we quickly became inseparable.

I never stopped being surprised by her house. It's a big old four-bedroomed semi with an extra room added on over the garage for Sam's granddad. My own dad was the vicar of a run-down, under-funded, unpopular church on the edge of our estate. The house that went with the job was a basic two-up, two-down, with a 'kitchenette', an unheated bathroom and tiny garden. There were only three of us in the family and I spent most of my time in my bedroom, reading – or sitting on the wooden bench in the garden, reading. My parents were getting on a bit when I was born and when I look back now, I realise they didn't have much idea about the demands and expectations of modern-day children. Luckily I wasn't normally any trouble – and they were far too busy with parish commitments to worry about entertaining me.

The first thing that hit me when I went to Sam's house for tea – after the fact that it was twice as big as my own house – was the noise. It seemed to me – coming from my quiet little family where the most noise ever generated was when the ladies from Mum's Bible group brought their tambourines with them to a meeting – that the Pattersons' house was actually

alive, vibrating, *pulsating* with sound. There were three different types of music being played – one downstairs, two upstairs – and a cartoon blaring forth from the TV, which nobody was watching. Mr Patterson was shouting up the stairs at Sam's twin brother David, who was shouting at Sam. Sam's little sister was crying in the kitchen and her mum was telling her to shut up, whilst trying to have a conversation on the phone. The kettle was boiling. The washing machine was rattling and shaking. I rang the doorbell four times before anybody heard me, apart from the cat, a predecessor of Toffee called Blackie, who meowed and squealed until I was finally let in, and then shot around the house like a mad thing, knocking over cups and lamps as he went, and being hollered at by everyone. I stood in the hallway and stared. It was bedlam, but I seemed to be the only one who was aware of it.

Even now I sometimes feel like I'm watching the Pattersons acting out their lives like it's some kind of bizarre TV reality show. I imagine myself touching the screen and finding they're not real. Not any of them, not even Sam, with her shock of auburn hair and her laughing and her singing and her dancing. Least of all Sam, really. She's so vibrant, so *much* somehow, I often wonder how life can even hold her. One day she'll break right out of it. Right through the screen! But of course, I'll be there to catch her.

I wait till after seven o'clock. I can hear someone up and about already – probably Christine, Sam's mum, down in the kitchen. She never has a lie-in – she says it gives her a headache. I think to be honest if I woke

up next to Brian every morning I'd have a permanent headache. That man starts moaning the minute he opens his eyes, and carries on till he either goes back to bed or passes out drunk.

I need to go to the loo, anyway. I open my door and creep across the landing. When I come back out of the bathroom, something brushes against my legs and makes me almost shout out loud with fright.

'Bloody cat!' I scoop Toffee up in my arms and carry him back to bed. 'There you go, you big fat furry lump,' I tell him affectionately, dumping him on the bed and then pulling on my dressing gown. 'You can sleep there while I go and make a cup of tea.'

'He had a mouse,' Christine tells me nonchalantly in the kitchen. 'Bloody big'un, it was. Brought it in through the catflap, all its legs still wriggling.'

'What did you do?' I'm trying not to shudder. It's the only reason I can't have a cat myself. I'd die at the first sign of wriggling mouse legs.

'Do?' Christine laughs – a throaty, smoker's laugh that ends in a coughing fit. 'Chased the bloody cat round the house with the broom till he dropped the bugger, picked it up and . . .'

'Was it dead?' I can't hide my disgust now. I'm getting mugs and tea bags out of the cupboards, waiting for the kettle to boil.

'Didn't look too healthy!' She laughs again. 'Had to finish it off though, poor little sod. Would've died of shock. Or died of a mangled head. Whichever got him first!'

I can't ask. I just can't ask how she *finished it off*. I don't want to know, but my mind's making ghastly, horrific, pictures.

'Never mind, love,' she says as if I've spoken. She

shrugs. 'It's only nature, isn't it, at the end of the day? You can't help nature, love.'

Nature explains, and excuses, everything for Christine. It's *only nature* when men get drunk and shout at their wives and kids. It's only nature when Troy, her five-year-old grandson, throws his toys across the room and stamps his feet and screams if he doesn't get his own way. It was only nature, come to that, when David got his girlfriend pregnant five years ago and they ended up with Troy despite the fact that they had nowhere to live and all three of them moved in with Christine and Brian for two terrible, traumatic years, which nearly brought the whole family to the point of collapse and disintegration.

Nature, from the point of view of the Patterson women, can be a bit of a bastard if you ask me.

'Want a cup of tea?' I ask Christine to change the subject.

'Lovely, dear. Been up since five o'clock, I have. Couldn't get a wink of sleep. Too excited, love. Big day, isn't it?'

'It is.' I smile at her. 'And it's beautiful, too – look at the sunshine.'

'Rain forecast later,' she says without an ounce of regret as she bustles off to put the rubbish out.

Well, I suppose it's only nature.

I carry a tray up to Sam's room with two mugs of tea.

'Did I wake you up?' I ask her anxiously.

'No. I've been awake ages. Reading. Trying to stop myself panicking!'

I plonk myself down on the bed and she sits up and takes a mug of tea. Her mobile phone's lying next to her book on the bedside table. I remember

the conversation I overheard, and a shiver of anxiety runs through me as the thought flashes briefly – What now? Which member of this bloody family is causing trouble? Why today? What's *wrong* with them?

'What's there to panic about?' I ask her brightly. 'Everything's going to be absolutely fine . . .'

'You are *such* a bad actress, Abbie!' she says with a toss of her hair and a peal of laughter. 'You always were! You know as well as I do that there's never any guarantee of everything being "absolutely fine" with this crowd!'

'There isn't anything worrying you, is there, Sammy? Anything . . . in particular?'

Anything that makes you call your husband-to-be at four in the morning and talk about the possibility of a family upset? Just for instance?

'Don't be silly. Of course not. I'm just being realistic.' She sips her tea, watching me over the rim of the mug. 'I know what they're like, Abbie. Dad'll get drunk. Mum'll be loud and embarrassing and probably cry. Granddad will talk nonsense, fall asleep in church and probably ask Phil who the hell he is – again. Troy will have a tantrum and kick the other children. What's new? They're all unbearable. They drive me mad.' She puts the mug down and gives me a funny, lopsided smile that makes me think she might actually cry. 'They're my family, though,' she adds in a whisper. 'And I love them all!'

Ah, well. I suppose someone has to!

Eight o'clock

The whole family has gathered in the kitchen for breakfast. This is unusual, and pretty ridiculous in itself, as there isn't room for us all.

'Why don't I get breakfast for me and Sam, and take it into the living room so we're out of the way?' I suggest brightly, trying to be helpful.

Good bridesmaid, thoughtful bridesmaid.

'Absolutely not!' retorts Christine, sounding shocked and almost offended. 'That wouldn't be right at all, Abbie!'

'For God's sake, woman,' says Sam's dad, Brian, irritably. 'Let them go and eat their breakfast wherever the hell they like. What's the problem?'

'Brian!' Christine sounds even more shocked. 'What are you like? Did you not see that booklet I brought home about wedding etiquette? It said it doesn't matter what form the wedding breakfast takes, as long as it's a special social occasion for everyone. It's not a *special social occasion* if Sam and Abbie take their plates through to the other room and sit on their own watching TV, now is it?'

Sam's sister Chloe is doubled up with laughter.

'Mum!' she snorts. 'The "wedding breakfast" is the

meal after the wedding! Not your toast and cereal in the morning! Didn't you know that?'

Christine drops her spatula into the pan of eggs and bacon she's frying and stares back at her. 'That's daft, that is! We're not having breakfast after the wedding, are we! We're having dinner! Soup, and chicken, and . . .'

'Yes, Mum,' says Sam, calmly, putting an arm round her mum's shoulders and rescuing the spatula with the other hand. 'Don't worry. The meal's all booked. They won't be fobbing us off with corn-flakes. They just *call* it the wedding breakfast. It's just a name.'

'Daft!' repeats Christine unhappily, turning bacon so that it spits fat over the hob.

Chloe's still laughing.

'Grow up,' Sam tells her sharply. 'It's not that funny.'

Actually, I thought it was. But I love Sam for not laughing at her mum.

In the event, we all take our breakfasts into the living room and sit at the table.

'Let Mum have her social occasion,' Sam whispers to me as we're putting out knives and forks. 'Keeps her happy.'

'You shouldn't be worrying about keeping everyone happy,' I remind her gently. 'It should be the other way around today.'

'Can't change the habits of a lifetime,' she says cheerfully.

Brian sits at the far end of the table, his usual place, with the morning paper spread out, waiting for his eggs and bacon to be put down in front of him. I stifle an urge to tell him to put the paper away, take

his elbows off the table, make an effort, make conversation – it's his daughter's wedding day! I stifle the urge because he's actually less trouble while he's reading the paper. Maybe once he's had his breakfast he'll cheer up and be pleasant company for the rest of the day. Hmm. Pigs might fly.

'Thanks, Mum,' says Chloe chirpily as Christine brings in her eggs on toast – no bacon as she's vegetarian this week – and passes her a cup of tea. 'Cheers, everyone! Happy *Wedding Breakfast*!'

She goes into another fit of giggles at this, and Christine looks away, biting her lip anxiously.

'All right, Chloe! Enough!' snaps Brian, coming to life and throwing the paper on the floor. 'Don't try to be clever with us, miss. Not everyone's had the benefit of your education, remember.'

This is a well-worn theme in the Patterson household. To be honest – I kind of sympathise with it, too.

Chloe, you see, is the Brains of the Family. Not only that, she's also the spoilt baby of the family. She's only eighteen – ten years younger than Sam and David. Christine and Brian must have taken a long time to recover from having the twins before daring to try for another baby – and I reckon that by the time Chloe was born, they'd forgotten how to be the proper strict parents they were before, and just let her do what she wanted. And it certainly shows – she's a right little madam. Fortunately for everyone else, she's only at home now in the holidays – she's in her first year at Durham University, where she's doing a degree in something very intellectual that I can never remember the name of. It begins with a 'P' – it's psychology, physiology or philosophy, I'm not sure which and I refuse to ask her yet again and give her

the satisfaction of raising her eyes at my ignorance.

As you can probably tell, I am *not* a graduate – not of anything beginning with a P, not of anything at all. I'm not stupid either – definitely not stupid enough to be talked down to by that precocious minx – but I left school after my GCSEs because a fantastic opportunity had come up for me to do what I'd always wanted to do – work in the local library. One of Dad's parishioners was a library assistant there and she was retiring. I spent half my spare time in the library anyway and it was as if my dream job was just sitting there waiting for me to take it.

Mum wasn't happy.

'If you must *insist* on working in a library,' she said in pained tones, 'please, Abigail, at least go to university first. Get a degree. Go to library school and become a proper, qualified librarian.'

'I don't want to.' I shrugged. 'I don't want to be in charge. I just want to work there. I love it there. It's what I want to do.'

'But there are so many opportunities open to girls these days,' sighed Mum. 'Don't you have *any* ambition, Abigail?'

'Yes! My ambition is to work in the library!'

'To be honest, Susan,' said my dad quietly, 'I think it's quite admirable that Abbie knows what she wants to do. I see too many young people drifting, wasting their lives. Let her go out into the world and be useful! *You* never needed to have a career, my dear.'

'No,' agreed Mum, managing to convey a whole world of regret with that single syllable.

'You married me,' he reminded her, as if she might have forgotten.

'Yes,' she said.

For some reason they didn't discuss it any further. But I got the job.

We're halfway through breakfast when Sam's granddad wanders into the room, looking puzzled. Christine's been calling him.

'Where have you been, Dad? Your egg and bacon's getting cold.'

'Where have I been?' he repeats, looking at her with annoyance. 'I've been at work. Where do you think I've been?'

He retired from the docks fifteen years ago.

'All right, Dad. You're home now,' says Christine calmly. 'Sit down and eat. I'll make you a nice cup of tea.'

'Tea? Bloody tea? I'm going out for a pint. A man doesn't want a cup of bloody tea after he's been at work all day.'

'Sit down, Frank. It's half past eight in the morning,' says Brian without looking up from his plate. 'Pubs aren't open.'

'Bloody pubs,' says Granddad, sitting down nevertheless. 'Never open. What's the matter with them? War's finished, hasn't it?'

Chloe raises her eyebrows and starts to get up from the table.

'Sit and talk to your granddad,' growls Brian, pushing away his plate and picking up his paper again.

'*You* talk to him,' she retorts evenly. 'I can't talk about the war, can I? I wasn't born.'

'Think yourself lucky,' says Christine. She looks thoughtful for a minute and then adds, 'Neither was I,' as if it's only just occurred to her.

'You've heard enough about it, though, haven't

you, Mum?' says Sam with a smile and a nod at Granddad. 'I bet you feel as though you've lived through it!'

'I do,' she agrees with a heavy sigh. 'But never mind, Sammy. He can't help it, love. He's a bit vague nowadays.'

'Vague?' says Chloe, half under her breath as she leaves the room. 'He's totally lost it, if you ask me.'

'Nobody did,' Sam hisses at her departing back.

'Piss off,' Chloe whispers back, without turning round. Just loud enough for Sam and me to hear.

I feel my jaw tighten and the muscles in my fingers clench into fists. If Chloe was my sister, I think I'd have to kill her. A nice thought for the wedding morning.

Christine tries again with Granddad when he's finished his cooked breakfast.

'Do you remember what's happening today, Dad?'

He stares at her for a minute.

'Today? What day is it? Monday?'

'It's Saturday. It's the wedding today, Dad. Our Sammy's getting married.'

'Sammy.'

He's quiet now; you can see him concentrating. He looks around the table, his eyes resting on me and suddenly lighting up.

'Sammy? Little Samantha?'

I push Sam towards him, in front of me. He always does this; it must be so hurtful for her.

'Here's Sammy, Frank. I'm Abbie – remember? Abigail – Sam's friend.'

'Little Abbie,' he repeats, looking unsure. 'You were always such a good girl, weren't you? Always did your homework. Always looked after your mum.

Shame you had to marry that miserable bastard.'

'No, Dad,' says Christine, closing her eyes for a minute and sighing – a pale, tired wisp of a sigh, hardly even a breath's worth of energy. She picks up a stack of plates and starts towards the kitchen door with them. 'No, that wasn't Abbie, bless your heart, you're getting muddled again. That was me.'