

CHAPTER 1 - The Wedding

Alun, Mike and I navigated to an empty table and sat down.

We were on a mission to buy me a new suit and had unanimously voted for a pause in the proceedings. A drink on Grenoble's "Victor Hugo" square was what the moment called for, we decided.

My daughter's wedding was to take place the following weekend, and I had been ordered by my wife to buy the clothes without any further delay. This new suit was to replace my beloved straw-yellow one, which was ruined at Christmas when I fell into a fountain at Yeovil.

'Do you know,' I mused, 'being considered incompetent, has certain advantages.'

Alun frowned across the table at me, 'I wouldn't say that our having had a few little adventures and one or two minor brushes with the authorities in our younger days, automatically means that we're incompetent.'

'Well, odd as it may seem, our wives seem somehow to have got hold of that idea,' I said.

Mike shook his head and sighed, 'You two ARE incompetent. That's where they got the idea from.'

Ignoring this, I went on, 'That being said,' I paused and nodded, 'the advantage of being unjustly considered incompetent, is that the Girls won't trust us with organising this wedding.'

'Yes,' nodded Alun, 'that's unquestionably an appreciable advantage.'

His wife, Margaux, and mine always agreed on things like this.

Mike shook his head doubtfully, 'In any case,' he said, 'I don't yet see how you two will manage it, but disaster will strike, regardless of any precautions they take.'

I frowned at this and pulled a face while exchanging a look with Alun. Experience, unfortunately, had shown that

Mike's words were less an omen of things to come than a quasi-certitude.

'Oh. By the way!' Alun sat up and leaned forward, his elbows on the circular bistro table, 'Do you remember last summer at Tregastel?'

'Oh God.' moaned Mike, 'please don't remind me.'

Alun grinned and got to his feet. 'Oh, OK. I'll tell you later. Come on, you two. Let's go and get that suit before the shops close.'

'Is that absolutely necessary?' groaned Mike.

'Margaux will scalp me if the suit is not on this guy's shoulders before the weekend. So yes. Absolutely...'

'No,' said Mike, 'I mean, do you really have to tell us your nonsense about Tregastel later?'

'Yes, I do as a matter of fact.'

'Pity that!'

We rose reluctantly and set off across the square.

The tailor's shop we headed for was one of the better ones in the town and reputed to be expensive.

'If you come back with some horrible cheap rubbish, I'll send you back straight away,' scowled my wife as we took our leave earlier. 'So, choose well. You can go up to one thousand euros.'

'How much!' exclaimed Alun, 'that's about two hundred pints of beer.'

'No.' said Margaux, 'That's minus two hundred pints of beer, for you three. But don't worry, that's only about a week or two's rations for you three.'

'Oh, come off it!' cried Alun, 'what do you take us for? Drunkards?'

My wife and Margaux exchanged sighs and head shakes.

'Come on, Alun.' I interrupted, 'Let's go and drown our sorrow in silk suits.'

'Silk.' Exclaimed my wife, 'I said one thousand euros, not ten thousand. You can have a silk one when you've become a famous something-or-other.'

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'A Queens Councillor, in fact,' smiled Mike, who had missed the sense of our little exchange.

'We'll have to make do with a sow's ear suit, then,' frowned Alun.

'Get a move on, you lot,' grumbled Margaux, we've got things to do.

So here we were looking at a window full of suits.

However, as I placed my hand on the door handle, I turned, 'Try and keep your sarcastic remarks to a strict minimum, you two. I know these guys are snobs, but remember I'll probably have to come back.'

'Sarcastic comments!' cried Alun.

'Us?' added Mike.

'An absolute minimum,' I scowled at the two innocent faces, 'remember that please.'

As I pushed open the door, the owner was already sizing us up and estimating potential spending power. Although he was still in his early forties, he was already surprisingly good at this. However, even though he set us in the "roughly five-hundred" bracket, customers with friends were always bad news.

Friends inevitably cramped his style and hindered his usually smooth transition up the price tag slope.

He sighed to himself as he took in the three of us and decided that we were not worthy of his time. He, therefore, made a sign to his assistant who was lurking in the background.

The three of us were already leafing through the hanging merchandise in various parts of the shop.

'Hey, have a look at this one,' Called Alun, 'nice.' He said, flipping the price tag in his fingers.

The owner stiffened. We were already at the expensive end of the rail, and he knew the price tag Alun had glanced at was nine-hundred euros.

He quickly moved towards us, placing a light hand on the assistant's shoulder, who obediently went back to lurking.

'Can I be of assistance, gentlemen?' He smiled.

'We're looking for a suit for my friend. For a wedding,' smiled Alun.

'What about this one?' I called over, 'I like it.'

The owner stiffened again.

'But that is corduroy, sir. I don't think corduroy is quite suitable for a wedding.'

'Not expensive enough, perhaps,' smiled Mike, who, as was his custom, had taken an immediate dislike to the man.

The man forced a laugh, 'bottle-green corduroy is usually kept for less formal occasions, sir.'

'Yes, I agree,' smiled Mike, 'Like pruning the roses on Sunday morning.'

I sighed and shot Mike a hard look.

'Exactly,' nodded the salesman.

'Or for reading the Sunday papers in front of the crackling wood fire. Once the hounds are back from the hunt, of course.'

'Mike.' I scolded. 'I said, a strict minimum.'

Mike went off to the other side of the shop and sulked next to the lurking assistant.

'I like the corduroy one, but you are probably right. What have you found Alun?'

'An excellent choice, sir,' said the owner. 'You clearly have a good eye for quality. Feel this material, sir.' He said, pulling the suit out.

I did as he asked, and as I did, shot a glance at the price tag, Alun had carefully turned towards me.

'Yes, quite nice. A little dark, though,' I lied. 'For a wedding, I mean.'

'Perfectly correct sir. I was going to mention that myself.' said the man moving smoothly along the rising price rail. 'How about this one, sir?'

Alun rose his eyebrows in warning, and I nodded back at him.

I first tried on the light grey one he presented me with and stepped out of the cubical.

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'A bit baggy, don't you think?' called Mike testily from across the room.

'Here and there,' agreed Alun.

'A bit tight across the front too,' added Mike.

'Yes, he does seem to fill it out rather more amply than required.' Said Alun.

'Shut up, you two,' I sighed.

The owner kept in the background, contenting himself with pulling the suits about, more to make them look worse than better because he was aiming at something more expensive.

The next one was made of some magnificent material which shimmered in the sunlight. The owner shot a quick look at my face to check my reaction, 'Lovely fabric, isn't it. And a perfect cut.'

Alun walked around me, inspecting the price tag as he did so. 'It bulges out terribly in the front, don't you think Mike?'

Mike scowled and came over. Then he leant forward and prodded. 'That him bulging, not the suit. The suit is perfect. He just not the right shape for expensive clothes, that's all.'

'Go and wait outside Mike,' I scolded, 'or shut up.'

Mike smiled to himself, satisfied with having upset me. 'The Corduroy one hid the bulges perfectly. That's why overweight old men favour corduroy.'

I sighed and returned to the changing cubical.

Regardless of all Mike and Alun's help, I eventually managed to out-manoeuvre the shop owner back under the thousand mark, and our negotiations finally settled down at nine-hundred and fifty euros. Marking off the length of the legs and the sleeves took only a few minutes, then we made our way to the counter to pay.

Mike leaned on the counter and put on his most ominously innocent look. 'I suppose that suits at this price come with an insurance policy.'

I sighed, 'Mike!'

'Insurance policy?' The owner looked up from the counter.

'Well Yes. Against damage.'

'No, I'm deeply sorry, sir.'

'That's a pity. I was thinking about the risk of my friend falling into a weed-infested pond or something like that.'

'It was an ornamental fountain,' corrected Alun.

The shop owner gazed at Mike in astonishment, 'Falling into an ornamental fountain?'

'That's how he ruined his last one. It was made of pale-yellow crepe.'

'Good heavens!'

'Yes, yellow crepe is pretty daring.'

The man hesitated for a moment, 'No. I meant falling in the fountain, of course.'

'Yes, "good heavens" is roughly what his wife said about that. In different words, though.'

'Perhaps your home insurance would cover most accidents. But falling into fountains is rather unusual. You would have to check carefully.'

'Read the small print, you mean,' suggested Alun.

'Exactly.'

'Unusual?' Frowned Mike, 'is it? Mind you it was in England.'

'Oh! I see!' This seemed to clarify everything satisfactorily to the man, who nodded and handed the credit card back.

'Anyway, it takes a brave man to wear a pale-yellow suit like that said Alun.

'It certainly must have been a very noticeable attire, sir.' said the man.

'Head-turning. I'd say.' I contributed.

The salesman nodded, 'But as they say, sir, "Faint heart never won fair maiden.'

'True,' said Alun. 'Have you won any fair maidens since you ditched the suit.'

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'It wasn't a ditch; it was a pond so "Ponded it" would be more exact.' I said, 'But no, I haven't won any fair maidens recently.'

'Just goes to show then,' smiled Alun.

'The girls must be relieved too then,' said Mike.

The owner frowned then coming around the counter, he deftly manoeuvred us to the door and held it open to get rid of us before Mike could embark on some new theme.

We smiled at each other, 'One job out of the way,' Mike said, as we crossed the road on our way back across the square to the bistro.

'So that was your "strict minimum" was it, Mike?' I asked.

'More or less,' he nodded, 'I didn't like that guy.'

'Really!?' I said.

As made our way back across the square Alun stopped as we passed the vast stone-built ornamental fountain which occupies its centre. 'Nice fountain this. Just right for trying out your new suit in.'

Mike sniggered, 'not half enough weed though,' he smiled, 'one can see right to the bottom.'

'No,' Alun frowned, 'we'd have to import some from the UK, where they know about weeds.'

'Yes, nice slippery, slimy stuff. You always get value for money with the great British weed.'

'The worlds best.'

'No doubt we can get some on the internet. You do have the internet up there in your mountain hovel?'

I shook my head and sighed, 'Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't.'

Mike nodded, 'that's because the electrons have so much trouble climbing the slope. It's too steep for standard domesticated French electrons.'

'Yep,' nodded Alun, 'they get out of breath about halfway up and have to stop for a rest. That slows the bit-rate.'

'And it causes a bit-jam which can back-up all the way down into the valley. That sort of thing takes hours to sort out.'

'Can you back-up, down a slope?' asked Alun.

'I think so,' said Mike.

'I didn't know that,' frowned Alun.

'That's because I'm an engineering Wizzo and you're not.'

By this time, we had made it back to the bistro, and I dropped into my seat and ordered coffee all round.

'Oh,' said Alun taking his place at the circular table, 'getting back to the discussion we started just before Mike drove us off to buy the suit.'

'It wasn't WE, who started the conversation Alun, it was you alone,' scowled Mike, 'I thought I had diverted you from that.'

'Diversion doesn't work on me,' said Alun, 'my brain simply goes into "pause" mode.'

'Brain!?' cried Mike, 'which brain was that?'

Alun ignored this and continued unperturbed, 'Do you remember last year at Tregastel?'

'Oh God!' moaned Mike, 'please don't remind me.'

'You remember at the time that we were debating on the relative merits of Battery-Oysters versus Free-range ones.'

'You mean between paid ones and wild ones?' I asked.

'Oh god, Alun. Shut up. Please.' cried Mike, 'Can't you stop talking nonsense for once?'

'Now that you raise the point,' mused Alun, 'I'm not sure that I can.'

'Do you know Mike,' I turned and looked at him, 'if we stopped being creative and innovative in the way you have come to appreciate...'

'Who said I appreciated all that rubbish you two vomit forth perpetually...'

I ignored this and went on. 'If we didn't sprinkle our conversation with sparkling repartee, and in the process,

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brighten up your existence, we would inevitably become deadly serious.'

'Exactly what I have been dreaming of becoming for years,' nodded Mike. 'I practice every time I'm away from you two.'

'Well, if we didn't do as I said,' I continued, 'all three of us would probably, turn into horrible boring old men with nothing of any interest to say,' I nodded at him.

'You'd get bored to tears,' added Alun.

Mike frowned, 'there might be an element of truth in that,' he said.

Alun smiled, 'You would probably end up in a monastery, counting beans.'

'Counting what?' cried, Mike.

'Beans or at least some stuff like that.'

'You mean runner beans.' I asked, interested by this point.

'Good heavens, no!' cried Alun, 'In monasteries, beans are not allowed to run,' he smiled, 'running is absolutely against the rules.'

'Naturally,' I agreed, 'and it shows bad breeding. A stately stride is only just permissible.'

'Are you sure they breed beans?' frowned Alun, 'I always thought it was more like growing.'

I nodded, 'Perhaps "bringing-up" would be a term which avoids any possible confusion,' I said.

'Shut up,' said Mike.

'Mind you,' I volunteered, 'bringing up beans might be misunderstood too.'

Mike sighed a long noisy sigh.

'Oh, and that reminds me of what I wanted to say. Thanks, Mike.' said Alun.

'Damn it,' groaned Mike

'Getting back to Oysters...'

'Oh God,' exclaimed Mike, 'can't I have something stronger to drink?'

'Stronger?' frowned Alun, 'I find this coffee almost too strong as it is.'

'Almost bitter,' I nodded.

'I meant something like pure alcohol,' he sighed. 'With perhaps a dash of morphine.'

'That would send you straight to sleep, Mike,' I laughed, 'It always does.'

'Why do you think I asked for it?' he retorted, 'It would save me having to listen to the rot you are about to vomit forth.'

'Well, anyway,' continued Alun, completely ignoring Mike's interruption, 'do you know why along the Atlantic coast of Wales, oyster breeders never live close to their oyster fields?'

'I don't care, and anyway, one does not "breed" oysters...' sighed Mike resignedly.

'I know, I know,' interrupted Alun, 'they breed themselves.'

'What I mean is that it isn't call breeding.'

'I know that, but Margaux doesn't like me to use that sort of word in public.'

'You know perfectly well what I mean,' grumbled Mike.

'Are you sure they're called "Fields"?' I asked. 'Sounds odd somehow. Anyway, why don't the blokes who grow oyster live near the places where they grow them?'

'I suppose you are going to tell us some more absolute rot, whether we want to hear it or not.' sighed Mike.

'Correct,' smiled Alun.

'I thought so.'

'It's because of the noise, during the mating season.'

'The mating seasons!' spluttered Mike into his coffee.

'As you probably know, they have a traditional saying amongst Welsh oyster breeders,' went on Alun.

'I bet they have one about idiots like you too,' sneered Mike.

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Alun went on unperturbed, 'the old saying goes, "When the Osters squal, brave men pale",' he looked at us nodding.

'Squale?'

'That's old Welsh dialect.'

'Oh. *Really!*' sighed Mike, 'I call that "crap" myself.'

'Yes, in fact, it's the medieval Welsh word for "squeal",' nodded Alun, 'and, of course, "Osters" is just the local word for Oysters.'

'Oysters do not squeal. They don't make any damn noise at all.' Mike sighed again, louder, this time. 'At most, they bubble a bit.'

'Bubble a bit!' exclaimed Alun, 'go up there and tell that to those breeders. They'd certainly be pleased to learn that, after hundreds of years of forced emigration,' nodded Alun.

'Emigration is not the right word Alun,' I said.

'Exile, then,' he said, 'chased from the homelands of their forefathers by a few bubbles and intense silence.'

Mike covered his face with his hands and groaned. 'What a lot of crap you talk,' he said.

'Well,' Alun shook his head in pity, 'during the oyster mating season, you can hardly hear yourself think out there on the fields. They all wear noise-cancelling headphones nowadays.'

'What? the oysters?' I exclaimed, 'Incredible.'

'No, the breeders.' said Alun.

'Or growers.' I added.

'At the time of the full moon...'

'Oh God!' moaned Mike.

'...when the oysters' nuptial dance is in full swing, the big rogue males arrive from afar, raise themselves on their strong hind legs and squal to the moon.' Alun sat back. 'And the loudest squaler gets the big blonde, I suppose,' I suggested.

'Exactly. And then they get on with the breeding exercises.'

'Do you mean breathing exercises?' I asked.

'No,' said Alun, 'I do not.'

'Haven't, you got anything less stupid to say?' gasped Mike.

'No, I don't think so. At least not for the moment.'

'I didn't know that the Welsh said Squal instead of Squeal.' I said.

'No,' said Alun, 'not many people know that.'

'Not surprising,' grumbled Mike, 'Maybe that's because they all managed to grow up.'

'Interesting though,' said Alun.

'No, it isn't,' said Mike. 'Its' damn rubbish.'

I sat forward, 'What do they call a group of Oysters, Alun?'

'What do you mean?' he sat forward, a frown furrowing his brow.

'Well, we have herds of cattle, shoals of fish, flights of swans,' I said. 'So, what about Oysters.'

'Interesting question, that,' said Alun.

'No. It isn't,' said Mike. 'It's time-wasting rot.'

'For battery oysters, a group is called a "confine",' I said. 'But what about free-rangers?'

'A confine!' Exclaimed Mike falling back in his chair. 'Now I've heard everything.'

'Are you sure of that, Mike?' asked Alun.

'Oh, hell!' gasped Mike looking about for some sort of moral support.

'Of course,' continued Alun, rubbing his chin, 'one should remember that for most of the time, Oysters are loan hunters...'

'Oh God,' exclaimed Mike, 'Here we go again.'

'But, of course, when the mating season approaches, they only group together, for safety when they return to their hereditary breeding grounds in the fiords of Norway.'

'Yes, but what is the group called?' I said, interested by all this new information about oyster migration tactics.

Alun frowned and shrugged, 'Maybe a "Muster".'

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‘A “Muster”? What a lot of crap!’ Mike got up. ‘Come on you madmen, let’s get home, or we’ll miss the aperitif.’

Now, this sort of diversional tactics was admittedly a bit under-the-belt, but it never failed with Alun, so we were on our feet in a twinkling and heading for home.

Four days before the wedding, a lorry arrived at the front gate, and two grumbling and overweight men dragged several huge boxes out and laid them on the lawn.

My wife and Margaux went out to drive the delivery men crazy by checking and rechecking every single package before they signed the chit they had handed over.

‘Time for a strategic retreat,’ whispered Alun.

We obediently crept out of the side door and around to the back of the house. We were about to vault the fence and disappear when Margaux came into view.

‘Where are you three off to?’

‘Oh, we’re just checking the fence posts, then we thought we’d go for a short walk. Got to keep in shape. You’re always saying so.’

‘Well, you’ll be happy to learn that you won’t have to trouble yourselves with walking.’

‘It’s no trouble, Margaux,’ said Mike, ‘we see it more as a duty.’

‘Well, you can do your keeping-in-shape duty here. Follow me.’

We sighed. ‘Your wife must have eyes in the back of her head,’ groaned Mike.

‘And several extra senses,’ I suggested.

‘No,’ frowned Alun, ‘She just knows us.’

We nodded at this obvious truth of this remark.

The two girls were standing, hands on hips, in front of the enormous pile of odd-shaped cardboard boxes.

‘Just caught them as they were sneaking off,’ Said Margaux.

'We were not sneaking off. We were checking the fence posts,' said Alun.

'It looked like you were going to check them all the way up the road to the pub,' She replied.

'There isn't a pub, "up the road". We're in a godforsaken French alpine village,' groaned Alun.

'God-forsaken...!' My wife turned on him with a dangerous look in her eyes.

'God-forsaken is perhaps not exactly the word I was looking for; it just sort of slipped out in the heat of the moment,' he apologised.

'Well,' continued my wife, glancing at her friend, 'in that case, you can continue with the "slipping-out" by unpacking all this.'

'What the hell is it?' I cried.

'This,' said my wife with a visible effort to control her temper, 'is the marquee tent I told you about.'

'Ah!!'

'Yes. This is the tent that you three are going to erect for the wedding.'

'Oh, yes. I seem to remember now.'

'I'm pleased to hear that,' she smiled one of those unpleasant smiles one doesn't feel pleased about being on the wrong side of. 'So,' she went on, 'you no doubt also remember that I mentioned that, if it collapsed on top of the hundred or so nicely dressed guests who will be under it, you three would have to leave the country for several years.'

Alun nodded, 'yes, I certainly remember that bit.'

'You will also not be surprised to learn that Margaux and I have a relatively limited amount of confidence in your capacity to do things properly.'

'Oh. Come on!' I exclaimed.

'Highly limited, would be closer the mark, I'd say,' contributed Margaux appearing from the other side of the pile of boxes.

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'So, we deemed it wise for you to do a test run here so that we can check that you can do it properly,' Smiled my wife.

'It would also make the final job far less stressful for you three on the day,' added Margaux.

'But that means we'll have to take it all back down again, pack it up and transport the whole lot over to the wedding place and start all over again,' I groaned.

'It's amazing just how fast you grasp things when you put your mind to it,' nodded my wife.

'But can't we take it over today and set it up on-site.' Suggested Alun, 'Wouldn't that be a better idea?'

'No, it wouldn't,' said my wife.

'Because we wouldn't be able to see you do the job,' added Margaux.

'Is that absolutely necessary,' smiled Alun.

'Yes, it is. Otherwise, you'll spend most of the day drinking beer then you'll rush to get it finished and botch the job?' my wife shook her head.

'And then you'll camouflage all the errors you made, before we could spot them, by winding fake ivy all over the place. NO way,' added Margaux.

'I don't believe it,' I cried, 'Have you absolutely no confidence in our mechanical talents?'

'Absolutely none,' said my wife.

'You're treating us like uneducated children.'

'Exactly,' nodded my wife. 'Come on, open that lot, and when you've done that, I'll give you the installation manual.'

'Can't we have a beer first?'

'After.'

'Damn it.'

'Sorry?' my wife tilted her head on one side and screwed up her eyes.

'Nothing.'

'Get on with it then.'

Getting this twenty-five by five-metre marquee tent up took us all afternoon.

Even the grass ended up blushing scarlet after an hour or so of having to listen to our swearing.

Mike, as an experienced sailor, contributed more to this exercise than we two, and we were suitably impressed by his fluency. He was capable of stringing together, into an uninterrupted flow, an astounding number of nautical curses. One had to bow to this prodigious talent. It also relaxed the tension a little, which helped things along unexpectedly.

However, our first attempt was not entirely satisfactory.

For some unexplained reason, the marquee seemed to prefer to curve round into a semi-circle.

We thought that this lent it a modern and original look, but the girls thought otherwise.

When we did get it right, the girls came and shook and rattled it about with disturbing violence, but surprisingly it stayed up.

'OK,' nodded my wife, 'Now take it back down, and you can have some beer before your meal. We've already had ours.'

'Thanks for waiting.' I scowled.

'If you had got it right the first time we would have done. Come on. Tomorrow you take it over and set it up. I'll come and show you where it goes.'

'Tomorrow...?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

'Morning?'

'That'll give you all day to get it right.'

'Brilliant.'

'Come on. You haven't got all night...'

The following morning, we loaded the big van and drove the sixty kilometres to the small chateau we had rented for the wedding.

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Margaux and my wife showed us where the marquee was to be erected and left us. 'We've got lots of things to do. Please try to do it right...'

I sighed but held my tongue.

'Come on,' called Alun, 'let's get this thing up quickly, then we can spend the rest of the day lounging about in the sun.'

'What about sustenance?' asked Mike.

'The kitchen is overflowing with the food and drink for nearly two-hundred people.' I smiled, 'Nobody will notice if a few plates of cold meats and cheeses are missing.'

'Or a few bottles of that lovely wine you got in?'

'Exactly. But best to get the work done first.'

'Yep,' said Alun, 'If we want it to look roughly the right shape.'

Well, the construction went remarkably well, and in less than an hour and a half, the marquee was up, and what was more surprising, looked right from whatever vantage point the girls would survey it from.

The final job was to hammer in the fixing pegs. This done, it remained only to attach the guy ropes, which had been included in the kit, in anticipation of wind.

One side of the tent was close to a line of old oak trees, so we wound the heavy guy ropes around their trunks.

Mike made them fast with some incredibly complicated looking nautical knots, which lent the structure an impressively solid look.

On the opposite side, the guys were attached to pegs we had to hammer into the ground.

'I'm not much convinced with these pegs,' frowned Mike. 'A strong gust of wind would drag them out of the ground with no trouble. We need something far stronger.'

'I spotted some iron fencing posts in the outhouse, and a sledgehammer too. I'll get that shall I?' I suggested.

'Perfect, 'nodded Mike, 'but hurry up, there's a bit of wind coming on, I think.'

'I'll give you a hand,' said Alun and we set off around the corner of the ancient building.

I dragged out four of the heavy iron posts from the cobwebbed pile leaning against the wall and pointed out the sledgehammer to Alun.

A whooshing sound of wind in the branches of the ancient oaks above the building roused us.

'Hell!' exclaimed Alun, 'let's get back before the wind demolishes the tent. I don't want to have to build it all up from scratch.'

We hurried back as the noise of swishing branches and rattling leaves increased.

As we came in sight of Mike, he called out, 'Quick. Come and help me hold this damn thing down.'

Even as he said this, the wind changed direction and came charging in, right under the long tent.

Mike put all his weight on the horizontal bar it to keep it down, but before we could grab the dangling guy ropes, the entire structure lifted into the air.

Mike's feet left the ground as the ropes we had fixed to the trees took the strain, but held.

The free side of the marquee rose, carrying Mike up with it. Luckily, its progress was halted by the overhanging branches of the oaks. However, Mike, not being rigidly attached to the tent, carried on in the same direction, as dictated by Newton's first law of motion. His feet overtook the rest of his body, and he spun upwards following a graceful trajectory.

A handy oak tree stood between Mike-the-human-projectile, and the flagstone terrace beyond. Even though he was upside down at the moment of impact, Mike's flailing arms managed to grab one of its massive branches. He swung himself down onto the mighty bough and leant against the main trunk, which must have been at least eight feet in diameter.

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Looking down, he nodded at us. 'Phew! That was a close one.'

We nodded back.

'The tent OK?' he called down from his perch, some six metres above our heads.

'Looks OK from here,' I called.

'From here too,' called back Mike. He then looked around him, 'Hey! How am I going to get down from here?'

The old oak hadn't a single branch below him, thanks to a century or two of careful lopping or whatever they call it.

'I'll throw you up some rope,' called Alun. 'We'll lower you down.'

'Yes.' I called. 'Just knot it firmly around your neck and let yourself drop. We'll do the rest.'

'Ha-ha!' shouted Mike, 'throw it up quick, before I pee on you.'

We got Mike down easily enough, and then we had a closer look at the tent.

It seemed undamaged by its flight and had settled down just slightly closer to the trees.

However, when we entered it, we discovered with consternation that the rose beds, which had been just outside, were now just inside the tent.

We tried to lift it, but it was well and truly jammed under the overhanging branches of the Oaks.

'At least it won't get blown any further now,' said Alun.

'Unfortunately,' I remarked, 'although the roses do add a nice decorative touch, there's not enough room left for the chairs.'

'Oh, they won't mind standing,' said Mike.

We turned and gazed at him with pity in our eyes. 'Mike,' I said, 'It not the guests who are the trouble. It's the girls. You remember, my wife and Margaux.'

'Oh, they probably won't notice. We just have to say we thought it was nicer that way.'

'Are you mad, Mike?' cried Alun. 'We were given instructions, and wifely instructions never include the freedom to innovate.'

'Oh, I don't know...' shrugged, Mike.

'We do, though,' I sighed. 'Rose beds were not included in the decorative scheme.'

'So, we'll have to dismantle the damn thing and build it again,' he smiled, 'it's as simple as that.'

'Another two hours of work?' groaned Alun.

'Oh, all right then,' smiled Mike, 'so they'll have to go then.'

'What?'

'The rose beds.'

We stared at him with wonder and renewed respect. Of course, a simple, straightforward solution to an awkward dilemma.

'You two get those guy ropes fixed properly, and I'll deal with the roses. I saw some tools around the back. Come on.'

Half an hour later, the guy ropes were firmly attached, and the rose bushes were no more.

'I cut them up into little bits and hid them in the compost heap round the back.'

At this, we all stepped into the marquee.

Mike had strewn dead leaves over the earth where the rose beds had been, but Alun shook his head, 'Margaux will spot that at once. Can't we do something better in the way of camouflage?'

Mike smiled, 'Easy. Let's go and cut some slabs of grass from the bottom of the grounds and cover it.'

'Brilliant.' I said, and off we went with a wheelbarrow and a light whistle.

An hour later, the job was done. As we stood and looked at the interior of the marquee, we were justifiably proud of ourselves.

'Perfect,' Smiled Alun, 'just in time for lunch.'

'And a drop of that lovely wine you got in,' added Mike.

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Alun set up a table under the shadow in the tent, while I went off and brought back a big tray heavily laden with food and drink. We sat down and sighed as we gazed around us.

‘Good job, that,’ Smiled Alun.

‘Brilliant,’ Added Mike.

We tucked into the sample of some of the food ordered for the wedding day with enthusiasm and were just testing the second bottle of wine when a voice roused us from behind us. The side flap of the marquee lifted, and a wizened old man appeared.

His practised eye at once spotted the bottle I was lifting. ‘Ah. I see you lads are getting down to the serious part of the job,’ He nodded.

‘Like a glass?’

The groundsman’s job was to keep the gardens and outside structures in trim. One couldn’t call him a gardener, more a jack of all trades. Or a professional botcher as Alun had dubbed him.

The man advanced towards us, ‘Lovely.’ he said. He had the Frenchman’s innate ability of being able to evaluate wine by its label at fifty paces and knew this one would be worth tasting. We filled his glass, and he sipped it. ‘Lovely,’ he repeated, smacking his lips. Then turning to look around the marquee he froze.

‘Oh!’

‘Yes?’

‘Those rose beds...’ he stepped over to the place where they had been and looked down. He stamped the grass and turned to us.

Mike coughed, ‘they got a bit in the way,’ he said, ‘so we had to move them, didn’t you?’ he said, turning to me.

‘You moved them?’ said the old man.

‘Well, you see,’ added Alun, ‘the truth is that the wind blew the tent against them and they got a bit damaged.’

‘Ah!’ said the man, ‘a bit damaged.’

'So, we thought it best to...' his voice trailed off, as the old man shook his head sadly.

'So, you dug them all up and camouflaged the place with grass,' Said the botcher-gardener.

'Well. I suppose you could put it that way,' I said, not really knowing how to deal with the situation.

'The owner won't be pleased,' frowned the man sipping his wine and rolling it around his mouth with respect. 'She liked them roses.'

'Don't worry,' improvised Alun, 'we'll plant some new ones once the wedding's over, won't we?' He said, looking at me.

Oh yes. Of course.' I agreed. 'Some more wine?'

'Lovely wine, this.' He said, taking the bottle from my outstretched hand and scrutinising the label. He nodded, 'an excellent choice for a wedding.'

'So, if we plant some new ones after the wedding, it'll be alright then?' I questioned.

'Good heavens, no!' the old man spluttered. 'Them damn roses cause me no end of trouble. They're always catching every damn bug or disease that exists. Black spot, greenfly, you name it...' He sipped the wine and smiled into the glass. 'No, much less work for me if they stay gone. If you see what I mean.'

We relaxed. 'But what about the owner?' I asked.

'The old man frowned. 'I think it will have to be wild boar.'

'Wild boar?' frowned Alun.

'Yes,' replied the old man with a wry smile. 'I think I might discover that the fence down in the woods had broken down and that a family of wild boar had got into the grounds and had rooted them all up.'

'And you tidied things up by placing turf.'

'Exactly,' he smiled. 'Nice wine this...'

'Oh!' I said hurriedly, 'perhaps a few bottles of this would go down nicely for your evening meals. No one will notice if one is missing.'

'A case did you say?' Suggested the man.

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'Yes. Exactly? I pop around and get one.'

'Don't bother. Just pop them in the outhouse, behind those crates in the corner. I'll pick them up another day.'

'Perfect.' I said.

'Well,' he said, draining his glass. 'You lads must have plenty more to do.'

And with this, he lifted the tent flap and disappeared.

Alun smiled, 'It always astonishes me what a powerful negotiation tool, good wine is.'

'Yes, smooths over many otherwise tricky situations.' I agreed.

'What about another bottle?' suggested Mike.

'Good idea.' said Alun and I simultaneously.

On the day of the wedding, everything seemed to go off without a hitch. The sun shone, and everyone was happy.

There was admittedly a little tension when the moment for the champagne fountain to be filled arrived.

My wife unkindly ordered the three of us to go and stand at the other end of the room until the thing was done and until only a single tier of glasses remained.

'Tastes the same anyway,' said Alun by way of consoling us.

'And...' I smiled, 'I happened to slip a few bottles in the outhouse as a precaution.'

'The outhouse was a bad move,' groaned Alun.

'Why?'

'It's bound to be full of fornicating guests. They always are.'

'There's plenty of other places here for fornicating, the woods, for example.'

'Oh well let's go and see if we can get at it without embarrassing anyone.'

Luckily, the spectacle of the champagne fountain seemed to have temporarily emptied the quiet shed, so we extracted the bottles and hid them in a less risky place.

We then found ourselves a comfortable spot on a warm stone wall and set a bottle between us. Just then, one of the guests rounded the end of the chateau.

'Oh god!' whispered Alun, 'quick men, stomachs in, shoulders back. Tight red dress on the horizon, with all flags flying.'

The guest in question was undoubtedly the one person that nobody had missed. She was slightly under forty and dressed in the deadly James Bond spy style. Her red dress moulded her perfectly shaped body in a way which ought not to be allowed in public. Naturally enough, she didn't walk either; she undulated.

'Wow!' whispered Mike, 'That's a bit on the hot side, don't you think? Do you think she's got a rendezvous for games in the outhouse?'

'Possibly,' let's push off and give the lucky devil a clear field,' said Alun.

We jumped down from the low wall and made to leave her to her occupations.

'Oh!' she purred, 'the three musketeers.'

Alun took in her contours and nodded, as she smiled at us, 'I'm afraid that our brief is only for damsels in distress. We didn't get the impression that there was all that much distress here about.'

'It might be hidden under the surface.' She joked back.

'Possibly,' nodded Alun, always quick with the retort, 'but it would have to be really deep under it to escape observation, don't you think?'

She laughed, 'very clever.'

'It's just training. But we must be off, duty calls,' he said.

'Yes,' I added, 'I think I heard distressed damsel-like sounds emanating from somewhere in the woods.'

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The red apparition smiled again, 'Do be careful not to trip over them in the undergrowth, there are different sorts of distress you know. Especially at weddings.'

'We'll be on our guard. All for one and one for all,' cried Alun, 'forward musketeers all.'

We moved reluctantly on, but just as we passed her with a smile, Mike paused and looked down.

'Oh,' he said, looking up into her smouldering eyes, 'You've got a thread loose on your dress hem.'

'Have I,' she said, sizing him up for later use. 'My saviour.'

'Oh, Mike was always a good scout,' I laughed.

'But, oh, dear. It really wouldn't do for my dress to fall to bits, would it?'

Then Mike said one of the silliest things I have ever heard him say.

'Would you like me to bite it off for you?'

The woman blinked then smiled a slow, wide smile and laid a burning, long-fingered hand on his forearm. 'Good heavens! Would you really do that for little me? I had no idea I had had such a devastating effect on men.'

Mike stared uncomprehendingly, but she went on 'But surely, you might still need it one day...'

Mike blinked back while Alun and I burst out laughing.

'Come on, Mike, get it over with. The quicker, the better,' I smiled.

Mike shook his head and knelt. He got hold of the hem of the dress and leant forward taking the thread between his teeth.

At this precise moment, Margaux and my wife appeared.

'Mike! what on earth are you doing!' cried, Margaux.

Mike jumped to his feet, blushing.

However, the thread remained caught between his teeth, so as he rose, so did the dress.

'Wow!' cried Alun.

'Wow!' I added.

'Oh, hello Margaux,' smiled the red-dressed female, 'your friend Mike was just helping me with my dress.' She smiled. 'Dear me!' she cried, smoothing the dress back down from above her waist where it had stopped on its upward trip.'

'Let me help,' said Alun, stepping forward.'

'Down Fido.' Called Margaux. 'Mike seems to have got things nicely in hand.'

'In teeth, would be more exact,' I pointed out.'

Mike, however, seemed quite content to remain gazing at the naked lower part of the women, while she unravelled the thread from his teeth, and snapped it off with an deft movement. Then she turned to the girls. 'These dresses come undone so easily nowadays. Thanks, Mike.' She said, squeezing his forearm.

'Come on, you three,' called my wife, 'you're needed.'

'Me too?' asked Mike. 'I thought I might go for a little walk back here.'

'Yes, especially you.'

He shrugged to the women, who was obviously already going back into hunt mode.

'Wow,' he whispered, 'what a body! She was burning hot too. Christ!'

'I heard that Mike,' said my wife over her shoulder. 'your heart wouldn't stand it.'

'Might do.' He said, 'I could always stop if I felt trouble coming on.'

Margaux snorted, 'trouble, where women like that are concerned, comes after, not during,' she stopped and put her arm around Mike's shoulders. 'believe me, Mike.'

'Do I have to?'

'In any case, you won't have a chance to have a heart check-up today. I need you to come and do some toast making. You have prepared a speech, I suppose.'

'I'll do one.' Said Alun with enthusiasm.

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'Oh God, no!' cried Mike, 'anything but that. I'll do it; I'll do it. The James Bond girl will have to wait. This is an emergency.'

We all laughed. Mike was back to normal again.