

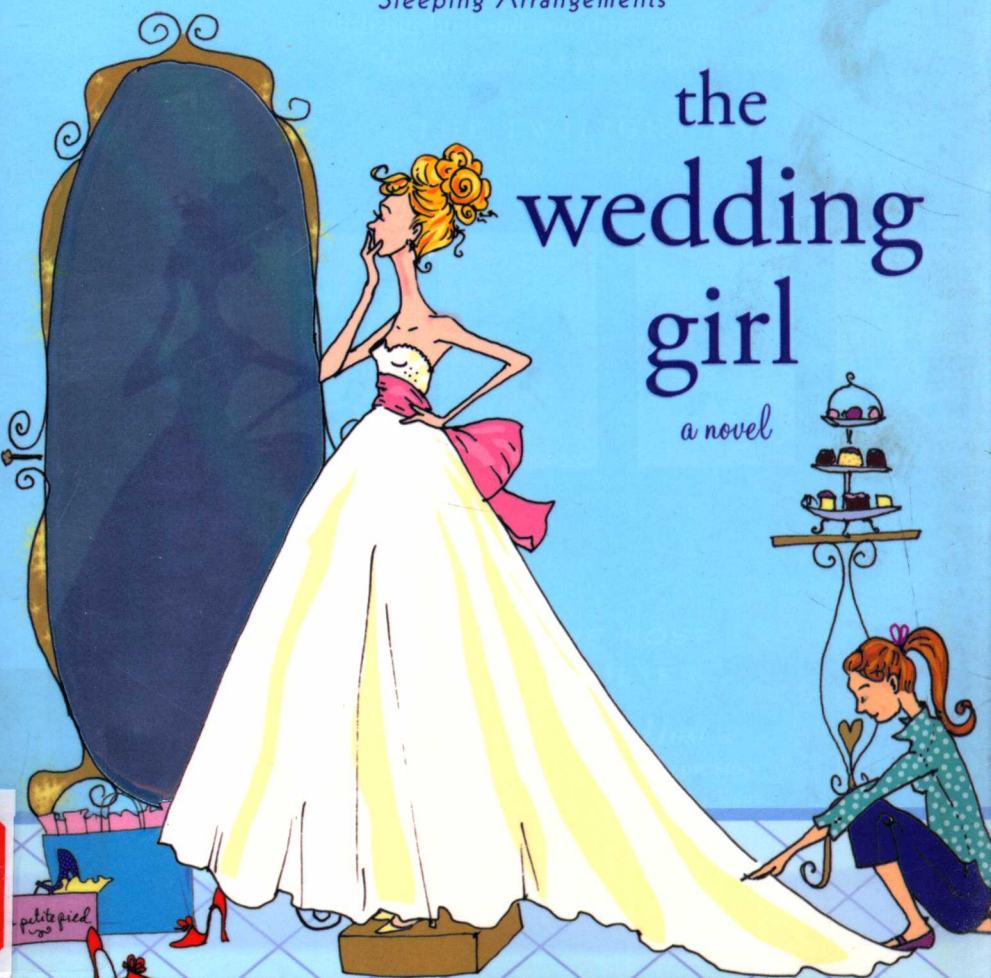
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the wedding girl *a novel*



THE WEDDING GIRL



THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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PROLOGUE

A group of tourists had stopped to gawp at Milly as she stood in her wedding dress on the registry office steps. They clogged up the pavement opposite while Oxford shoppers, accustomed to the yearly influx, stepped round them into the road, not even bothering to complain. A few glanced up towards the steps of the registry office to see what all the fuss was about, and tacitly acknowledged that the young couple on the steps did make a very striking pair.

One or two of the tourists had even brought out cameras, and Milly beamed joyously at them, revelling in their attention; trying to imagine the picture she and Allan made together. Her spiky, white-blond hair was growing hot in the afternoon sun; the hired veil was scratchy against her neck, the nylon lace of her dress felt uncomfortably damp wherever it touched her body. But still she felt light-hearted and full of a euphoric energy. And whenever

she glanced up at Allan—at her husband—a new, hot thrill of excitement coursed through her body, obliterating all other sensation.

She had only arrived in Oxford three weeks ago. School had finished in July—and while all her friends had planned trips to Ibiza and Spain and Amsterdam, Milly had been packed off to a secretarial college in Oxford. ‘Much more useful than some silly holiday,’ her mother had announced firmly. ‘And just think what an advantage you’ll have over the others when it comes to job-hunting.’ But Milly didn’t want an advantage over the others. She wanted a suntan and a boyfriend, and beyond that, she didn’t really care.

So on the second day of the typing course, she’d slipped off after lunch. She’d found a cheap hairdresser and, with a surge of exhilaration, told him to chop her hair short and bleach it. Then, feeling light and happy, she’d wandered around the dry, sun-drenched streets of Oxford, dipping into cool cloisters and chapels, peering behind stone arches, wondering where she might sunbathe. It was pure coincidence that she’d eventually chosen a patch of lawn in Corpus Christi College; that Rupert’s rooms should have been directly opposite; that he and Allan should have decided to spend that afternoon doing nothing but lying on the grass, drinking Pimm’s.

She’d watched, surreptitiously, as they sauntered onto the lawn, clinked glasses and lit up cigarettes; gazed harder as one of them took off his shirt to reveal a tanned torso. She’d listened to the snatches of their conversation which wafted through the air towards her and found herself longing to know these debonair, good-looking men. When, suddenly, the older one addressed her, she felt her heart leap with excitement.

‘Have you got a light?’ His voice was dry, American, amused.

'Yes,' she stuttered, feeling in her pocket. 'Yes, I have.'

'We're terribly lazy, I'm afraid.' The younger man's eyes met hers: shy; more diffident. 'I've got a lighter; just inside that window.' He pointed to a stone mullioned arch. 'But it's too hot to move.'

'We'll repay you with a glass of Pimm's,' said the American. He'd held out his hand. 'Allan.'

'Rupert.'

She'd lolled on the grass with them for the rest of the afternoon, soaking up the sun and alcohol; flirting and giggling; making them both laugh with her descriptions of her fellow secretaries. At the pit of her stomach was a feeling of anticipation which increased as the afternoon wore on: a sexual frisson heightened by the fact that there were two of them and they were both beautiful. Rupert was lithe and golden like a young lion; his hair a shining blond halo; his teeth gleaming white against his smooth brown face. Allan's face was crinkled and his hair was greying at the temples, but his grey-green eyes made her heart jump when they met hers, and his voice caressed her ears like silk.

When Rupert rolled over onto his back and said to the sky, 'Shall we go for something to eat tonight?' she'd thought he must be asking her out. An immediate, unbelieving joy had coursed through her; simultaneously she'd recognized that she would have preferred it if it had been Allan.

But then Allan rolled over too, and said 'Sure thing.' And then he leaned over and casually kissed Rupert on the mouth.

The strange thing was, after the initial, heart-stopping shock, Milly hadn't really minded. In fact, this way was almost better: this way, she had the pair of them to herself. She'd gone to San Antonio's with them that night and basked in the jealous glances

of two fellow secretaries at another table. The next night they'd played jazz on an old wind-up gramophone and drunk mint juleps and taught her how to roll joints. Within a week, they'd become a regular threesome.

And then Allan had asked her to marry him.

Immediately, without thinking, she'd said yes. He'd laughed, assuming she was joking, and started on a lengthy explanation of his plight. He'd spoken of visas, of Home Office officials, of out-dated systems and discrimination against gays. All the while, he'd gazed at her entreatingly, as though she still needed to be won over. But Milly was already won over, was already pulsing with excitement at the thought of dressing up in a wedding dress, holding a bouquet; doing something more exciting than she'd ever done in her life. It was only when Allan said, half frowning, 'I can't believe I'm actually asking someone to break the law for me!' that she realized quite what was going on. But the tiny qualms which began to prick her mind were no match for the exhilaration pounding through her as Allan put his arm around her and said quietly into her ear, 'You're an angel.' Milly had smiled breathlessly back, and said, 'It's nothing,' and truly meant it.

And now they were married. They'd hurtled through the vows: Allan in a dry, surprisingly serious voice; Milly quavering on the brink of giggles. Then they'd signed the register. Allan first, his hand quick and deft, then Milly, attempting to produce a grown-up signature for the occasion. And then, almost to Milly's surprise, it was done, and they were husband and wife. Allan had given Milly a tiny grin and kissed her again. Her mouth still tingled slightly from the touch of him; her wedding finger still felt self-conscious in its gold-plated ring.

'That's enough pictures,' said Allan suddenly. 'We don't want to be too conspicuous.'

'Just a couple more,' said Milly quickly. It had been almost impossible to persuade Allan and Rupert that she should hire a wedding dress for the occasion; now she was wearing it, she wanted to prolong the moment for ever. She moved slightly closer to Allan, clinging to his elbow, feeling the roughness of his suit against her bare arm. A sharp summer breeze had begun to ripple through her hair, tugging at her veil and cooling the back of her neck. An old theatre programme was being blown along the dry empty gutter; on the other side of the street the tourists were starting to melt away.

'Rupert!' called Allan. 'That's enough snapping!'

'Wait!' said Milly desperately. 'What about the confetti!'

'Well, OK,' said Allan indulgently. 'I guess we can't forget Milly's confetti.'

He reached into his pocket and tossed a multicoloured handful into the air. At the same time, a gust of wind caught Milly's veil again, this time ripping it away from the tiny plastic tiara in her hair and sending it spectacularly up into the air like a gauzy plume of smoke. It landed on the pavement, at the feet of a dark-haired boy of about sixteen, who bent and picked it up. He began to look at it carefully, as though examining some strange artefact.

'Hi!' called Milly at once. 'That's mine!' And she began running down the steps towards him, leaving a trail of confetti as she went. 'That's mine,' she repeated clearly as she neared the boy, thinking he might be a foreign student; that he might not understand English.

'Yes,' said the boy, in a dry, well-bred voice. 'I gathered that.'

He held out the veil to her and Milly smiled self-consciously at him, prepared to flirt a little. But the boy's expression didn't change; behind the glint of his round spectacles, she detected a slight teenage scorn. She felt suddenly aggrieved and a little foolish, standing bare-headed, in her ill-fitting nylon wedding dress.

'Thanks,' she said, taking the veil from him. The boy shrugged. 'Any time.'

He watched as she fixed the layers of netting back in place, her hands self-conscious under his gaze. 'Congratulations,' he added.

'What for?' said Milly, without thinking. Then she looked up and blushed. 'Oh yes, of course. Thank you very much.'

'Have a happy marriage,' said the boy in deadpan tones. He nodded at her and before Milly could say anything else, walked off.

'Who was that?' said Allan, appearing suddenly at her side.

'I don't know,' said Milly. 'He wished us a happy marriage.'

'A happy divorce, more like,' said Rupert, who was clutching Allan's hand. Milly looked at him. His face was glowing; he seemed more beautiful than ever before.

'Milly, I'm very grateful to you,' said Allan. 'We both are.'

'There's no need to be,' said Milly. 'Honestly, it was fun!'

'Well, even so. We've bought you a little something.' Allan glanced at Rupert, then reached in his pocket and gave Milly a little box. 'Freshwater pearls,' he explained as she opened it. 'We hope you like them.'

'I love them!' Milly looked from one to the other, eyes shining. 'You shouldn't have!'

'We wanted to,' said Allan seriously. 'To say thank you for being a great friend—and a perfect bride.' He fastened the necklace around Milly's neck, and she flushed with pleasure. 'You look

beautiful,' he said softly. 'The most beautiful wife a man could hope for.'

'And now,' said Rupert, 'how about some champagne?'

They spent the rest of that day punting down the Cherwell, drinking vintage champagne and making extravagant toasts to each other. In the following days, Milly spent every spare moment with Rupert and Allan. At the weekends they drove out into the countryside, laying sumptuous picnics out on checked rugs. They visited Blenheim, and Milly insisted on signing the visitors' book, Mr and Mrs Allan Kepinski. When, three weeks later, her time at secretarial college was up, Allan and Rupert reserved a farewell table at the Randolph, made her order three courses and wouldn't let her see the prices.

The next day, Allan took her to the station, helped her stash her luggage on a rack, and dried her tears with a silk handkerchief. He kissed her goodbye, and promised to write and said they would meet in London soon.

Milly never saw him again.

CHAPTER ONE

Ten Years Later

The room was large and airy and overlooked the biscuity streets of Bath, coated in a January icing of snow. It had been refurbished some years back in a traditional manner, with striped wallpaper and a few good Georgian pieces. These, however, were currently lost under the welter of bright clothes, CDs, magazines and make-up piled high on every available surface. In the corner a handsome mahogany wardrobe was almost entirely masked by a huge white cotton dress carrier; on the bureau was a hat box; on the floor by the bed was a suitcase half full of clothes for a warm-weather honeymoon.

Milly, who had come up some time earlier to finish packing, leaned back comfortably in her bedroom chair, glanced at the clock, and took a bite of toffee apple. In her lap was a glossy magazine, open at the problem pages. 'Dear Anne,' the first began. 'I

have been keeping a secret from my husband.' Milly rolled her eyes. She didn't even have to look at the advice. It was always the same. Tell the truth. Be honest. Like some sort of secular catechism, to be learned by rote and repeated without thought.

Her eyes flicked to the second problem. 'Dear Anne. I earn much more money than my boyfriend.' Milly crunched disparagingly on her toffee apple. Some problem. She turned over the page to the homestyle section, and peered at an array of expensive waste-paper baskets. She hadn't put a waste-paper basket on her wedding list. Maybe it wasn't too late.

Downstairs, there was a ring at the doorbell, but she didn't move. It couldn't be Simon, not yet; it would be one of the bed and breakfast guests. Idly, Milly raised her eyes from her magazine and looked around her bedroom. It had been hers for twenty-two years, ever since the Havill family had first moved into 1 Bertram Street and she had unsuccessfully petitioned, with a six-year-old's desperation, for it to be painted Barbie pink. Since then, she'd gone away to school, gone away to college, even moved briefly to London—and each time she'd come back again; back to this room. But on Saturday she would be leaving and never coming back. She would be setting up her own home. Starting afresh. As a grown-up, bona fide, married woman.

'Milly?' Her mother's voice interrupted her thoughts, and Milly's head jerked up. 'Simon's here!'

'What?' Milly glanced in the mirror and winced at her dishevelled appearance. 'He can't be.'

'Shall I send him up?' Her mother's head appeared round the door and surveyed the room. 'Milly! You were supposed to be clearing this lot up!'

'Don't let him come up,' said Milly, looking at the toffee apple

in her hand. 'Tell him I'm trying my dress on. Say I'll be down in a minute.'

Her mother disappeared, and Milly quickly threw her toffee apple into the bin. She closed her magazine and put it on the floor, then, on second thoughts, kicked it under the bed. Hurriedly she peeled off the denim-blue leggings she'd been wearing and opened her wardrobe. A pair of well-cut black trousers hung to one side, along with a charcoal grey tailored skirt, a chocolate trouser suit and an array of crisp white shirts. On the other side of the wardrobe were all the clothes she wore when she wasn't going to be seeing Simon: tattered jeans, ancient jerseys, tight bright miniskirts. All the clothes she would have to throw out before Saturday.

She put on the black trousers and one of the white shirts, and reached for the cashmere sweater Simon had given her as a Christmas present. She looked at herself severely in the mirror, brushed her hair—now buttery blond and shoulder-length—till it shone, and stepped into a pair of expensive black loafers. She and Simon had often agreed that buying cheap shoes was a false economy; as far as Simon was aware, her entire collection of shoes consisted of the black loafers, a pair of brown boots, and a pair of navy Gucci snaffles which he'd bought for her himself.

Sighing, Milly closed her wardrobe door, stepped over a pile of underwear on the floor, and picked up her bag. She sprayed herself with scent, closed the bedroom door firmly behind her and began to walk down the stairs.

'Milly!' As she passed her mother's bedroom door, a hissed voice drew her attention. 'Come in here!'

Obediently, Milly went into her mother's room. Olivia Havill was standing by the chest of drawers, her jewellery box open.

‘Darling,’ she said brightly, ‘why don’t you borrow my pearls for this afternoon?’ She held up a double pearl choker with a diamond clasp. ‘They’d look lovely against that jumper!’

‘Mummy, we’re only meeting the vicar,’ said Milly. ‘It’s not that important. I don’t need to wear pearls.’

‘Of course it’s important!’ retorted Olivia. ‘You must take this seriously, Milly. You only make your marriage vows once!’ She paused. ‘And besides, all upper-class brides wear pearls.’ She held the necklace up to Milly’s throat. ‘Proper pearls. Not those silly little things.’

‘I like my freshwater pearls,’ said Milly defensively. ‘And I’m not upper class.’

‘Darling, you’re about to become Mrs Simon Pinnacle.’

‘Simon isn’t upper class!’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Olivia crisply. ‘Of course he is. His father’s a multimillionaire.’ Milly rolled her eyes.

‘I’ve got to go,’ she said.

‘All right.’ Olivia put the pearls regretfully back into her jewellery box. ‘Have it your own way. And, darling, do remember to ask Canon Lytton about the rose petals.’

‘I will,’ said Milly. ‘See you later.’

She hurried down the stairs and into the hall, grabbing her coat from the hall stand by the door.

‘Hi!’ she called into the drawing room, and as Simon came out into the hall, glanced hastily at the front page of that day’s *Daily Telegraph*, trying to commit as many headlines as possible to memory.

‘Milly,’ said Simon, grinning at her. ‘You look gorgeous.’ Milly looked up and smiled.

‘So do you.’ Simon was dressed for the office, in a dark suit

which sat impeccably on his firm, stocky frame, a blue shirt and a purple silk tie. His dark hair sprang up energetically from his wide forehead and he smelt discreetly of aftershave.

'So,' he said, opening the front door and ushering her out into the crisp afternoon air. 'Off we go to learn how to be married.'

'I know,' said Milly. 'Isn't it weird?'

'Complete waste of time,' said Simon. 'What can a crumbling old vicar tell us about being married? He isn't even married himself.'

'Oh well,' said Milly vaguely. 'I suppose it's the rules.'

'He'd better not start patronizing us. That *will* piss me off.'

Milly glanced at Simon. His neck was tense and his eyes fixed determinedly ahead. He reminded her of a young bulldog ready for a scrap.

'I know what I want from marriage,' he said, frowning. 'We both do. We don't need interference from some stranger.'

'We'll just listen and nod,' said Milly. 'And then we'll go.' She felt in her pocket for her gloves. 'Anyway, I already know what he's going to say.'

'What?'

'Be kind to one another and don't sleep around.' Simon thought for a moment.

'I expect I could manage the first part.'

Milly gave him a thump and he laughed, drawing her near and planting a kiss on her shiny hair. As they neared the corner he reached in his pocket and beeped his car open.

'I could hardly find a parking space,' he said, as he started the engine. 'The streets are so bloody congested.' He frowned. 'Whether this new bill will really achieve anything . . .'

'The environment bill,' said Milly at once.

‘That’s right,’ said Simon. ‘Did you read about it today?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Milly. She cast her mind quickly back to the *Daily Telegraph*. ‘Do you think they’ve got the emphasis quite right?’

And as Simon began to talk, she looked out of the window and nodded occasionally, and wondered idly whether she should buy a third bikini for her honeymoon.

Canon Lytton’s drawing room was large, draughty and full of books. Books lined the walls, books covered every surface, and teetered in dusty piles on the floor. In addition, nearly everything in the room that wasn’t a book, looked like a book. The teapot was shaped like a book, the firescreen was decorated with books; even the slabs of gingerbread sitting on the tea-tray resembled a set of encyclopaedia volumes.

Canon Lytton himself resembled a sheet of old paper. His thin, powdery skin seemed in danger of tearing at any moment; whenever he laughed or frowned his face creased into a thousand lines. At the moment—as he had been during most of the session—he was frowning. His bushy white eyebrows were knitted together, his eyes narrowed in concentration and his bony hand, clutched around an undrunk cup of tea, was waving dangerously about in the air.

‘The secret of a successful marriage,’ he was declaiming, ‘is trust. Trust is the key. Trust is the rock.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Milly, as she had at intervals of three minutes for the past hour. She glanced at Simon. He was leaning forward, as though ready to interrupt. But Canon Lytton was not the sort of speaker to brook interruptions. Each time Simon had taken a breath to say something, the clergyman had raised the volume