

“It might just be okay,” wedding coordinator Renee Grothen murmured softly to herself as she surveyed the wedding reception. She wouldn’t risk admitting everything had turned out as planned until the last guest had left, but four and a half hours in, things were going really well.

Jim and Monica Martinez were a sweet couple with a fun firefighter theme for their big day. There was a long tradition of firefighters on both sides of the family and plenty of cute touches in the wedding and reception.

Monica’s dress laced up the back and instead of white ribbon to cinch her gown, she’d used bright red. The centerpieces were ceramic boot vases painted to look like firefighter boots, filled with red, orange and yellow flowers. There was even a walk-through fountain at one end of the reception area, created with fire hoses, a pump and a lot of engineering.

Renee walked around the perimeter of the indoor reception space, looking for problems. So far, so good, she thought with cautious optimism. The cake had been cut, the bar service was about to end and the tone of the party had faded from raucous to comfortably tired—exactly as it should. With a little luck, things would wrap up on time and without a crisis. This was Monica and Jim’s day—Renee wanted it to be as perfect as possible. While she always took care of her clients, she tended to unleash her mother bear instincts for her special couples and Monica and Jim certainly qualified.

She spotted Pallas Mitchell, her boss, walking toward her. It was nearly ten on a Saturday night and Pallas, a pretty brunette only recently returned from maternity leave, yawned widely. When she spotted Renee she held up her hands, palms up.

“What can I say? I’ve been home with an infant. These wild late-night hours are going to take some getting used to.”

“No one’s judging,” Renee told her. “As I said at seven, at eight and again at nine, *go home*. I can handle this. You’re barely back and you need to give yourself time to adjust to the schedule.”

“You’ve been running things for nearly six months. You need a break.”

In truth, Renee *was* a little ragged around the edges, but she’d loved handling Weddings Out of the Box while Pallas had been gone. She’d enjoyed the challenges each unique wedding presented and watching all the details fall into place on the big day.

“I had lots of help,” Renee pointed out. “Hiring college students on summer break was a good idea.” And what they’d lacked in experience, they’d made up for in energy and enthusiasm.

“Now that I’m back, things can return to normal,” Pallas said, covering another yawn.

“Go home,” Renee urged. “Please. I can handle things here. I promise.”

“Okay. I will. Thanks. Don’t you dare come in tomorrow.” Pallas’s voice was firm. “For once, we don’t have a Sunday wedding. Enjoy the break.”

“I will.” Renee would probably pop in to do a little paperwork, but she wouldn’t stay long. “Are you coming to The Boardroom on Monday night?”

In a wedding destination town, the rhythms of the residents were determined by weekend weddings. Happily Inc’s workweek started on Wednesdays as the businesses geared up for the dozens of nuptials that occurred in multiple venues. Which meant the town’s Friday night was actually on Monday.

The Boardroom, a local bar, hosted game nights on Mondays. Board games ruled and tournaments were heated and fun as friends crushed each other at everything from Candy Land to Risk.

Pallas shook her head. “I’ll admit to being a bit of a worrier. When we went a couple of weeks ago, I couldn’t stop thinking about Ryan. He’s only five months old. It’s too soon to leave him at night.”

Renee held in a smile. “Sure. I get that.”

“I know you don’t, but thank you for pretending. Have fun for me, too. Oh, Jasper’s back, so tell him hi, if you think of it.”

Jasper was back? Renee hadn’t heard. She liked knowing he’d returned from his big book tour. Not for any reason in particular, she amended hastily. Sure, he was nice, but there were a lot of nice guys in the world. There was just something about Jasper. Maybe it was because in addition to being good-looking and just a little dangerous, he wasn’t a forever kind of guy.

“I saw that!” Pallas grinned. “I totally saw that. You did the predatory smile thing I was never good at. You want to use him for sex! Did I know this?” She stomped her foot. “Did this happen while I was on maternity leave? What else went on while I was off having a baby?”

Renee laughed. “You’re reading way too much into my smile. I’m happy he’s home from his book tour. That’s all.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Jasper and I are not involved. I doubt we’ve had more than a three-sentence conversation.”

Not that it took many sentences to ask *Your place or mine?* And while the description of predatory was nice, it gave her too much credit. Would she stalk him and pounce? Not even on her best day. Would she say yes if the man asked? She smiled again. Oh, yeah, she would. Definitely. Okay, probably. *If* she was feeling brave. Because while she worked her butt off to give her couples their perfect happily-ever-after day, she knew it was never going to happen for her. Those who could—did. Those who couldn’t became wedding planners.

Avoiding relationships might be the smart choice, but it was also a lonely one. She knew Jasper was into the long-term, monogamous, not-serious kind of thing and she was pretty sure she could handle that. Assuming she was his type and he was interested. They could have some laughs, lots of sex and walk away completely unscathed in the heart department. Where was the bad?

“There’s something going on and you can’t convince me otherwise,” Pallas said. “You have depths. I’m very impressed. Okay, use Jasper and then tell me the details because hey, he’s got to be great.” She yawned again. “I’m such a lightweight. I’m leaving now.”

“Good night. Hug Ryan for me.”

“You know I will.”

Pallas walked out of the reception hall. Renee continued to circle the space, looking for any forgotten handbags or phones, and noting how long it would take the cleaning service to return the huge room to order. Doing her job and not thinking about the fact that Jasper was back—that was her.

A loud whoop got her attention. She turned and saw three teenaged guys running through the fountain at the far end of the big, open room. Each of them jumped, trying to touch the arc of water dancing overhead.

The younger brother, she thought as she made her way toward them. And his friends. No doubt they were bored after so many hours with not very much to do. Regardless, she was not going to have them disrupt the reception when it was so close to being over.

As she approached the running, jumping teens, she saw both sets of parents, along with the bride and groom, still dancing. They swayed in time with the music, oblivious to the fountain and the idiots messing with it. Then several things happened at once.

The younger brother started an extra long run toward the fountain. Jim let go of Monica and spun her out the length of their arms. Monica bumped her mom, who stumbled a little. Dad grabbed Mom, moving all of them closer to the fountain and the younger brother running, who had to swerve suddenly to avoid them. As he swerved, he lost his balance and slipped, tumbling into the fountain mechanism. One of the hoses broke free, wiggling and spraying water everywhere.

Renee saw it all happening and knew there was no way she was going to allow her beautiful bride to get soaked. She lunged for the hose, caught it and held it tightly against her chest as the bride’s father rushed to turn off the water to the hose. It took only seconds, but by then the entire fountain had spilled over and Renee was drenched, shivering and had water up her nose even as she wondered if she looked half as ridiculous as she felt.

The new Mrs. Martinez hurried over. “Renee, are you all right?” She turned on her brother. “How could you? This is a wedding, not a water park.”

Aware that end-of-wedding exhaustion could easily lead to emotions spiraling out of control, Renee quickly faked a smile.

“Monica, it’s fine. Don’t worry. Keeping you and the rest of the wedding party dry was my only concern.” She glanced at the water draining onto the floor and realized part of the fountain was still pumping out water. That couldn’t be good. If she couldn’t get everything turned off, she was going to have to call in one of those companies that took care of disasters like flooding. “Really. It’s no problem.”

“You’re dripping and the water’s rising. My dad went to find the main shutoff.”

Renee wrung out her hair and hoped her makeup wasn’t too badly smudged. Then she realized the water level in the reception hall was indeed climbing and hoped Monica’s father found the shutoff soon.

She was just about to go help him when he returned.

“All turned off.” He glanced at the mini flood. “Sorry about this.”

“It’s fine,” Renee lied, her tone soothing, because that was part of her job. To pretend all was well even when they needed to be figuring out how to build an ark.

The rest of the guests were heading out. Nothing like the threat of an unexpected flood to get people moving, she thought, trying to find the humor in the situation.

“I’m so sorry,” Monica told her as she held her dress out of the water and slipped out of her shoes.

“Don’t be. You had a wonderful wedding and reception. Why don’t you and Jim start gathering your things? I have a spare set of clothes in my office. I’ll get changed, then help you make sure you have everything.”

As she spoke, she noticed the water seemed to have settled at about the six- or seven-inch level. Yup, she was going to have to call someone. No doubt she would be here all night. Oh, joy.

“I’m really sorry,” Jim said. “We thought we’d planned for every contingency.” He glared at his new brother-in-law. “Except for stupid.” He turned back to her. “Let us know the cost of cleanup. We’ll pay for it.”

“Thank you. I think the deposit should take care of it but I’ll let you know if there’s a problem. Now if you’ll let me go get changed, I’ll be back with you in ten minutes.”

Monica nodded.

Renee slipped out of her shoes and walked through the ankle-deep water. When she reached her office upstairs, she carefully closed the door behind her before undressing, then slipped on jeans and a T-shirt. Not exactly professional, but she wasn’t going to worry about that right now. Before she returned to her bride and groom, she looked up the local disaster cleaning service. The number was in her files, but wasn’t one she had had to use before.

They picked up on the first ring.

“Happily Inc CleanUp. This is Hilde. How can I help you?”

“Hi. I’m Renee Grothen at Weddings Out of the Box. We had a firefighter wedding tonight with a big fountain. There was an accident with one of the hoses and now our main reception hall is flooded.”

There was a pause. “Um, did you say firefighter wedding? Never mind. How much water?”

“About six inches.”

“That’s a lot.”

“It was a big fountain.”

“Give us thirty minutes and we’ll be there.”

“Thank you.”

Renee hung up, gave herself a second to catch her breath, then headed back to deal with the bride, the groom, the flood and anything else that might happen tonight. Because with a wedding, it was always something.

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