

DO YOU TAKE THIS STRANGER?

Justine's heart was thumping harder than most brides – because she'd never set eyes on her groom



It was break time at the nursery where I worked, and a colleague had the radio on.

I've just been listening to a competition called Two Strangers And A Wedding; he grinned. 'You have to enter!'

Intrigued, I went on local station Jack FM's website after work. They wanted to find a girl who'd marry a total stranger. 'I love it,' I thought. I requested the application straightaway.

At 34, I'd had my share of boyfriends. Two years on from the end of a serious relationship, I felt ready to find The One.

But how? The nursery was a mainly female environment and I was studying for further childcare qualifications as well, which didn't leave much time for socialising and meeting a man.

I didn't fancy endless getting-to-know-you drinks at the local pub. Internet dating didn't appeal either. But this form of extreme dating was perfect for a bubbly extrovert like me.

Even filling in the form was fun. *Should your ideal husband be ambitious?* Tick. *Tall?* Tick. *Home*

owner? Tick. *Handsome?* Double tick. Days later, the radio station called me at work to say I'd been picked from 11 other applicants to win the £30,000 wedding and luxury honeymoon to Majorca.

'I'm going to be a bride,' I squealed, then kept having panicky: 'Oh blimey, what have I done?' moments. But the excitement washed them away.

Whatever happened, this was a brilliant opportunity. The wedding was actually just a commitment ceremony, so there was nothing legally binding.

Mr X would have no claims on my two-bed house. If things didn't work out, we wouldn't have to go through a divorce.

Still, I wanted to believe I could be on the verge of meeting the love of my life. The first stage was speaking to the three shortlisted bridegrooms on air.

'Hi guys, this is Dancing Queen,' I flirted.

One, Mr Inquisitive, stood out from the start.

'What did you buy your mum for Mother's Day?' I asked him.

'Er, I forgot,' he replied. Hmm. At least he was honest.

Question two. 'How do you feel about your job?'

'I'm a fitness instructor,' he



'I loved being a bride'

said. So he must be fit – phwoar!

'I'm also interested in helping kids who are bullied at school,' he continued. He had the body, plus a brain and a heart, too!

Last question. 'Can you dance?'

'Yes,' he answered.

Done deal.

Days later, on air, I called Mr Inquisitive. 'Will you marry me?'

'I will,' he replied.

The radio station erupted in cheers. It was wonderful – what I'd always imagined getting engaged would feel like.

So what if I'd never met the groom, and wouldn't see him until we faced each other at the wedding? This was all about *me*.

When I announced the news to my parents, they quickly got into the spirit of it.

'I'll give you away,' Dad said. My sister

Amanda, 33, agreed to be my chief bridesmaid.

The next week was a flurry of dress fittings, decisions over flowers and colour schemes.

My hen night was a giggly affair. My hubby-to-be might be a faceless mystery, but as we 10 girls laughed and drank, it didn't feel phoney at all.

First date

Two days before the wedding, Mr Inquisitive and I had our first and only date at a riverside pub. But I still wasn't allowed to see him. He sat behind a curtain as we talked and enjoyed drinks and a three-course meal.

His name was Robert Kitson and he was 30.

We began chatting – about work, family, wedding vows...

'What about our first dance?' I asked, nervously.

'It'll have to be *Dancing Queen*,' he replied. He seemed



'There was nothing sexual between us'

exquisite, filled with candles and flowers. Even the chair sashes matched my bouquet.

As my groom and I wouldn't see each other until the very last minute, I held up a mask.

At the other end of the aisle, I could see him waiting, a mask disguising his features, too.

As I joined him, the registrar said: 'Remove your masks now.'

Truth time. We whipped them off.

I was pleasantly surprised as Robert stared back at me. I couldn't tell what he thought!

'I need to confirm you want to go ahead,' the registrar said.

'Yes,' we both nodded.

I said my vows: 'I, Justine, take you, Robert...'

Then we exchanged white gold rings. I loved the novelty of seeing a band on my left hand. 'I'm actually married!' I thought, jubilantly.

Everyone was euphoric. Dad made a funny, touching speech.

As Robert and I danced, I thought: 'He's amazing.'

To be honest, I was on such a high, I could have fallen in love with anyone that day.

At 1.30am, we went up to the honeymoon suite together.

Alone at last. It suddenly felt awkward, uncomfortable. 'Er, hi,

we're married,' I managed. What did we do now? Kiss? Have sex?

There was a knock at the door. Robert's friends. He followed them out and disappeared.

I waited, but he didn't come back. Exhausted, I fell asleep, still wearing my fairy-tale gown.

Separate bedrooms

When I went downstairs in the morning, Robert had gone.

I felt disappointed and really embarrassed. I hadn't anticipated passionate wedding-night sex – but after the day we'd shared, I'd hoped we might be able to talk for a while.

Days later, we met for a coffee. 'I was terrified,' Robert confessed.

Next time we saw each other was on our honeymoon.

The hotel was gorgeous, the Spanish island a dream backdrop for romance and lovers – despite having separate bedrooms.

I was determined to enjoy myself, but I had to face facts. There was nothing sexual between my husband and me. No frisson. Not even the smallest spark. Without that, I realised, there was nothing to get any relationship going. It was so disappointing.

I spent the next few days sunbathing on my own. I'd meet

Robert for dinner, always with our chaperone from the radio station, before retiring to my own bedroom.

One night, after a few drinks, Robert and I relaxed, staying up until 5am, joking and chattering.

I couldn't help hoping we'd found some kind of bond after all. But I was wrong.

Home from honeymoon a week later, there was no being carried over the threshold.

'See you then,' I said, as Robert and I went our separate ways.

I couldn't help feeling sad for what might have been.

But now, five months on, that's gone. I'll never regret winning the competition. It was brilliant.

I even wear my wedding ring from time to time, to conjure up memories from the day.

I feel so lucky to have been a bride, even if the magic only lasted a little while.

If I get married for real, I'll never be able to afford such a lavish celebration. But I've learned about what really counts.

Every element was in place on my wedding day, but one thing was missing. A man to love.

Justine Oakley, 35, Oxford

ROBERT, WHOSE FAMILY DIDN'T APPROVE OF HIS INVOLVEMENT, SAID:

'What we did was such a unique thing and I was curious to see if it would work out. Love could

have blossomed if there had been a spark, but it didn't. We said it was like an extreme first date, then we got to know each other.'

SUE CARTER, JACK FM'S PROGRAMME DIRECTOR, SAID:

'We always said it was a social experiment. We hoped we'd find the right person for Justine but it didn't work out for them.'

AS TOLD TO AMANDA REVELL WALTON AND CHRISTABEL SMITH

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'I thought he



'The whole thing was all about me'

PHOTOS: ALAMY/ISTOCKPHOTO