

Chapter One

Don't you just hate weddings? Well, maybe you don't. Generally, I don't either, but when it is your own wedding, things just get so stressful. Jesus, I feel like I am having my nineteenth nervous breakdown. I mean, there is the dress nightmare for a start. I can't even look at a Hobnob, without everyone going into a massive panic and screaming, '*you will never squeeze into the dress if you eat that*', whilst removing the offending Hobnob and plonking a Ryvita into my hand. I mean, seriously, like one Hobnob will make that much difference. This is, of course, bearing in mind, I am a size ten and if I say so myself, with an enviable figure. So, it comes to something when I am denied the basic human right of a Hobnob. Anyway, back to weddings, or at least *my* wedding. There are just so many *what ifs* when it comes to weddings. You know, *what if* he isn't the right one? *What if* after the wedding you find that sharing a duvet is just too big a sacrifice? Worst of all, *what if* the second thoughts you are having are for real and you ignore them? I find myself spending the mornings worrying about the big day and the afternoons worrying if it is all a big mistake. I can't decide if the terrible churning in my stomach is simply wedding nerves or if I am really having serious doubts. So I decide to visit my mother a few hours before my flight. Not the best decision of my life. The front door is flung open and before I can say 'hello,' Candice mounts me dramatically and I fall backward, pulling the seam on my new Yves Saint Laurent blouse on the coat rack and landing with a thud on the new shag pile carpet. Don't you just hate bloody dogs?

'Shit. Damn animal, get the hell off me you monster.' I attempt to push her back with my hand but only encounter her wet cold nose. The house is stiflingly hot and I feel myself perspiring. I swear a sauna is cooler than my mother's house.

'Darling, I thought you were coming for lunch.' My mother's voice somewhere beyond the great hound who is now licking me to death.

'Candy, down now,' commands my dad, who shuffles into the hall, wearing his gardening gloves and carrying a knee rest. His old gardening trousers are scuffed at the knees and there is a contented look on his face.

'Hello darling.'

'Dad, can you get this bloody monster off me. God almighty, this dog is so over-the-top affectionate,' I puff as I battle to get up. The smell of freshly baked cake reaches my grateful nostrils. I feel so emotionally exhausted from all my wedding worries that even fighting off a dog arouses a chocolate craving.

'Language please, Bels,' scolds my mother, who emerges from the kitchen decked top to bottom in Boden Country Casuals and smelling of Estee Lauder White Linen and Elnett hair spray. I scramble to my feet.

'What? I didn't swear and ooh that's nice,' I say stroking her cashmere cardigan.

'I heard you say S.H.I.T and B.L.O.O.D.Y,' she says, spelling out the words.

'Oh, mum, come on really.'

She sighs. I hug her and she enfolds me within her bosom. Her perfume is decidedly comforting. My old-fashioned mum who has never sworn in her life, drinks only sherry on a Friday and wouldn't know Germaine Greer if she fell over her. But, ask my mum about fashion and she is a guru. Her wardrobe is an absolute delight.

'Come along, I have made a lemon drizzle cake for you. Take Candy out, Julian. Bels and I need to talk, and do change that hideous jumper.' We both give the offending jumper a sizable dirty look. I slyly turn down the central heating thermostat as I pass. I watch as dad raises his eyebrows. I smile and give him a conspirator's wink. He gives me a quick bear hug.

'It is lovely to see you Annabel. Right, come on Candy, we have our order's,' obeys dad, shaking a lead. Candice bounces towards him while I exit to the kitchen. The door slams and mum pushes me into a chair at the table. I check my blouse and see the damage is not as bad as I had imagined, thank goodness.

'Why didn't you get a Chihuahua? I thought that was what you wanted. That dog is huge, I hate it.' I say checking my skirt for hairs.

'Candice is a loving dog, and hate is a very strong word. Now, come on, tell me everything that is on your mind.'

I watch as she places a large slab of lemon drizzle cake onto a plate, followed by a smaller piece of fruit cake. I take a deep breath. Christ, where to start. What exactly is on my mind? I am living every woman's dream. My job is fantastic. Okay, so I am almost thirty but I am features editor at *Versity*, the top fashion magazine. I have even managed to combine my wedding trip to Rome with a fashion show in the city. I mean, some of the world's top models are on my wedding guest list, just how cool is that? My future husband is handsome, spectacularly rich and exceptionally kind. What more could a girl ask for? Okay, a Hobnob right now would be nice, or even a simple digestive, but generally though, life is pretty good. And it would be even better if I didn't have these terrible second thoughts.

'God, mum, is it too quick?' I blurt out.

She hands me the cake which I put to one side.

'Mum, you know I can't eat cake, I have to get into my dress.' I protest somewhat feebly.

'Oh, a small piece won't hurt darling,' she says confidently, clicking on the kettle.

She cuts an even larger piece for herself. I take a bite of the lemon drizzle and savour the tangy lemon sponge, quickly following it with a chunk of still warm fruit cake.

'Darling, you are thirty, how can it be too quick? I was actually starting to wonder if you were, well you know, batting for the other side,' she says sheepishly.

I choke on a raisin.

'What! Why would you think that?' I ask shocked.

'Well, you work with all those women models and... Well, you only have to watch films to know what happens. Anyway...'

She places a mug of tea beside the cake and I wrinkle my nose.

'Oh, mum, can I have proper tea?'

'Green tea is proper tea,' she says, looking insulted.

'Oh, I thought it was that Elderflower stuff,' I say, relieved. The Elderflower stuff tastes like a combination of coconut and cats piss.

'This cake is divine, mother.'

'Do you think it would be healthier if it was made with wholegrain flour?'

I shrug. I've never baked a cake in my life but I feel sure that somehow it would not taste half as good made with wholegrain flour. My mother, the middle-aged health food addict. Last year my parents went to Tibet and mum returned with strange tinkling bells and even stranger ideas. Tetley tea bags were replaced with weird herbal ones and my mother started an enlightenment group called 'Touch the Spot,' which I always thought sounded more like a mutual masturbation group, but I knew better than to say anything. She meets with fifteen other weirdoes once a month where they meditate, burn incense and share together and I wouldn't be at all surprised if marijuana were involved somewhere.

'I can't seem to get that Elderflower tea anymore,' she says thoughtfully. 'Jane said, she thinks you can buy it in Harrods. Maybe you can get me some. Anyway, seven months is not too soon, and Simon is ideal for you. And who gets to have a fairy-tale wedding in Rome? Oh dear, I still think I should wear Stella McCartney for the ceremony, what do you think? I mean, the Dior is nice but I think I should be more with it as mother of the bride. Kat said, you know, our cleaner, that the bride's mother is the second most important person at the wedding. By the way did I tell you her boyfriend is going blind?'

I yawn, my mother, the archetypal do-gooder.

'Yes, you did mother,' I say feigning interest.

She nods and her face brightens.

'And the fund-raising thing we are doing with Waitrose?'

I nod emphatically.

‘Surely, though, that would be Simon wouldn’t it?’ I say thoughtfully. She looks confused.

‘What would be Simon, darling?’

‘The second most important person at the wedding, wouldn’t that be the groom?’

‘Ah, good point. I must tell Kat... her boyfriend...’

‘Mum,’ I snap.

Christ, does anyone care about me and my future? Jesus, I have known the guy for seven freaking months, he could be a closet alcoholic for all I know. Then there are his parents, oh shit.

‘I have not even met his parents yet, I mean they could be like something out of the fuckers,’ I say, feeling decidedly depressed.

‘What?’

‘God, sorry, I meant the *Fockers*. God, I am so stressed.’ Waves of exhaustion seem to engulf me.

‘Well, I am sorry Annabel. Even stress is no excuse for the ‘F’ word. Now, listen to me. In a few hours you are flying to Rome to meet your in-laws, by the way I meant to tell you, I have been learning Italian.’

Clearly delighted, she reaches behind me to the large oak dresser and grabs a book. Oh, for goodness sake, am I under some silly illusion that my mother wanted to discuss my future? I indulgently swallow another chunk of lemon drizzle and gulp down some tea.

‘Look, I have been using this, with a CD. But, anyway, the good thing is I will be able to converse with your mother-in-law. I have been practicing on your father.’

I sigh and wipe my hands on a piece of kitchen towel. What a waste of time this is. Any minute now I will hear how my heavily pregnant sister is making a big sacrifice by getting on an aeroplane.

‘Mum, she may be Italian but she lived in England up until a year ago. I have already told you this. They live in Rome now because they retired. She speaks perfect English.’

‘Yes, but she *is* Italian and we must make an effort, I mean your sister Alex...’ Here it comes.

‘Heavily pregnant as she is, Alex is still making the effort to come to your wedding. I just hope, I really do, that she will be okay. What with you being thirty and not married, Alex almost forty and finally pregnant and I thank God every day for that, it makes me realise we just can’t be picky Bels.’

I play with my cake.

‘I’m not picky. I just don’t want to make a mistake. I mean, even the *getting married in Rome* thing, I just feel you know, kind of bullied. Surely, I shouldn’t feel like that.’ I say dipping into the biscuit barrel.

She nods knowingly.

‘Have you been meditating like I told you?’

Oh God.

‘But, what if he is not *Mr Right*, mum?’ I ask, feeling that churning again.

She clutches her breast.

‘Oh, Annabel, tell me, tell me, how this cannot be Mr Right? Huh? A man running his own law firm...’

‘His father’s law firm,’ I correct.

‘His father’s, his, whatever, it is all the same thing. It is family. Oh and how you met, so romantic,’ she says dreamily.

It was?

‘On a boat, it’s romantic, it was fate.’

‘I had had far too much to drink mother. I almost fell into the Thames, along with my phone, and it was more sordid than romantic. Okay, he rescued me, kind of, if you call yanking me back by my skirt, rescuing me.’

I have found a Hobnob and feel decidedly better. I guess she has a point though, I mean, let’s face it, just how much longer can I wait for Mr Right? After all, Simon feels like Mr Right, I think. How do you know when it is Mr Right anyway? If I leave it much longer I’ll be so old and wrinkled and all the Mr Rights will have been spoken for. Yes mum knows best, I must stop being picky, but hell this is the rest of my life. My Blackberry shrills and I yank it out of my bag, it is flashing *Kaz*, my assistant, best friend, and courier for my wedding dress. Oh God, something must have happened to the dress.

‘Oh, no, what’s happened, did you spill wine on it or something? I swear I will cut out your heart and sell it to Satanists. You haven’t ripped it have you?’

Mum gasps and *Kaz* whistles.

‘Geez Bels, thanks for that vote of confidence. You are evil do you know that? Actually, I was just phoning to let you know the dress is on its way to Rome. Are you still at your mums? Christ Bels, get to the airport. Love you and see you in two days.’

I throw the phone into my bag and hug my mother.

‘I’ve got to go mum. Off to get married to Mr Right. Thanks for the chat, I feel loads better.’

The hell I did.

‘See you in Rome,’ I call back with a wave.

Rome here I come, and I just hope you’re ready for me because I certainly am *not* ready for you.