

CHAPTER ONE

Jackie was late to meet Dan. She had a suspicion it was their six-month anniversary too, and wished she had taken the time to check. But it had been so busy in the shop today. And Lech, the delivery guy, had mixed up the orders again, and dropped off a bouquet of red roses with a jaunty card reading 'I Love You!' to a lady who had just yesterday passed away. The wreath, meanwhile, had arrived at the lunch table of a young couple on their third date. Well, you can imagine. Jackie had had to put him on probation, which was a terrible shame but what could she do? Flower Power was only just starting to turn a profit and she couldn't afford mistakes like that.

Anyhow. She fanned her face and hurried along, or at least as fast as she could in her new red boots. Oh, she *knew* she shouldn't have; red wasn't even her colour. And the heels were far too high – a gust of wind at lunchtime had almost blown her over – but when she'd seen them in the shop window they had reminded her of something that a sassy, sexy career woman would wear. Or a streetwalker, possibly.

She looked down at them doubtfully. Still, she could be forgiven. After all, she was a beginner really, just growing into the role of businesswoman and not quite there yet. Her wardrobe would catch up eventually, she was sure. The customers didn't seem put off in any case; they knew that when they bought a bouquet they were paying for a lot more than just flowers, and she wouldn't insult them by showing up in a navy pinafore and Ecco shoes.

There was Dan! Sitting at their favourite window table in Le Bistro. She felt a little rush to her stomach. He saw her too, and his big, brown, steady face lifted, and she felt so happy that there was someone in the

world whose whole evening grew better just upon seeing her that she had a ridiculous urge to burst into song. 'The Hills Are Alive With The Sound of Music', to be specific. She had never told Dan about this. She had learned that it was better not to reveal every last tiny scrap of your heart and soul to men. As if they gave you half as much back! No, Jackie had developed a small solid core inside, which was aloof and untouchable and hers alone.

She waited for a suitable break in the traffic before making a dash for it. In the window, Dan grimaced. For some reason he found it difficult to watch her crossing roads, or making fruit smoothies with her blender.

She pushed open the restaurant door, and waved across at Fabien, the owner.

'*Bonsoir!*' she said, as usual. '*Ça va?*'

'*Bien, bien,*' said Fabien, very resigned. Occasionally, he tried to speak to her in English, but she was determined to do her bit for Irish- French relations and so they had been stuck on the same two sentences for a couple of years now.

Dan rose to greet her. She noted sadly that he was more dressed up than usual. There was a telltale bulge in his jacket pocket too: he had probably bought her a six-month anniversary present, which would just make her feel worse.

'Hi,' he said, bending down to kiss her. He was six foot seven and had thighs like giant chicken drumsticks. But he wasn't big in a freaky way, she would hastily add when describing him to her friends. None of them had met him. No, he was more like an action hero; he'd played club rugby, for goodness' sake, until a couple of compound fractures and a burst pancreas had finally driven him off the pitch. 'When can we meet him?' everyone had demanded. 'Soon,' Jackie always said, but never arranged anything.

Tonight he was all keyed up. He tapped his fingers on the menu and shifted about in his chair.

'So!' he said.

She might as well come clean. 'Dan, I forgot, OK? I'm sorry. But I've had such a hectic week . . . I'll make it up to you. I swear. We'll go to Paris next weekend, how about that? Just the two of us.' Emma would go mad.

She was in charge of the work roster and was always accusing Jackie of taking off just like that. And after working a seventy-hour week last week! But of course Emma didn't have any use for men at all, and hadn't been out with one since 1998, and didn't understand about romantic dinners and dirty weekends away.

Now that Jackie thought about it, she really couldn't go to Paris next weekend. They had a wedding booked and Emma insisted she just didn't have Jackie's flair.

'Unless, of course, you're busy,' she said to Dan, hopefully. Usually there was something mucky going on at the weekends involving pitches and balls.

Dan said, delicately, 'Why Paris? Not that I'm knocking it.'

'Well, to celebrate our six-month anniversary.'

'Oh,' he said.

She knew from his expression that she had made a fool of herself, or was just about to. But there was no place left to go but onwards.

'Have I got the date wrong?'

He thought for a moment before admitting, 'Technically, it was actually Wednesday.'

'I see! Well. There you go.' So much for Paris. They hadn't even gone out on Wednesday night. He had wanted to watch a TV documentary on elections in Cuba; not even on the making of a porn movie or anything like that.

'Sorry, Jackie.'

'It's fine.'

She dived into her menu, feeling presumptuous and exposed. And to think that only a moment ago she had prided herself upon learning her lessons! So pious and smug, sure that no man would ever get the better of her again. What about all those nights spent crying into her wine, raking over all the mistakes she'd made, and vowing never to repeat them again? And here she was, right back where she started. In fact, she wondered whether she was actually regressing. The thought was so depressing that she thought she might go for the broccoli and three cheeses soufflé, and to hell with the calories.

'It's not fine,' Dan fretted. Look at him now, trying to take her hand,

sucking up to her. 'It's just, it's hard to believe that it's a whole six months since your back tyre blew out.'

It was hardly the most romantic start to a relationship. There she'd been, stranded on the M50 in the depths of winter with five dozen carnations on the back seat rapidly going off. Dan had jogged out of the darkness like some golden-haired hero, gleaming with sweat, and wearing the tightest, shiniest shorts she had ever seen, the kind they had stopped making back in the eighties. He had told her he was handy with a car jack. She had lied that she was too, just in case he'd thought it was a rescue-a-damsel job. Then they discovered that she didn't have a spare in the boot anyhow, and they'd waited in the dark for the tow truck to arrive, him kind of folded over in the cramped passenger seat and her twiddling nervously with the gear stick, only to realise that it was actually his knee.

He had spared her blushes by pretending to sneeze. Several times. Then his eyes had swelled up rapidly and he'd said in an odd, choking voice, 'You wouldn't happen to have flowers in the car, by any chance? It's just that I'm allergic.'

He'd asked her out in Casualty, once they'd given him a steroid shot and he could breathe again.

'Is it wise?' she'd said. 'I'm a florist.'

'So what? I'm a business banking manager,' he'd offered bravely. 'I go into client meetings and I bang the table and I say things like, "Your commercial interests grew by one hundred per cent in the last six months alone!" I bet you won't go out with me now.'

'Why wouldn't I?' she'd said, buying time. It was one of her new rules: prevaricate, instead of launching herself like a half-starved puppy at the first decent man who asked her out on a date. Sometimes it made her feel a bit false, but then she looked upon it as a necessary defensive mechanism; the toughening up of Jackie Ball.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I have a feeling I might be too boring for you.'

'I'm sure you're not,' she said, even though she had her doubts.

'No, no, you have no idea how much mileage I'll get out of this – how-I-ended-up-in-hospital-with-a-flower-allergy. I'll be telling it for years. That's how boring I am.'

She should have said no. What about all that time spent building up a solid core? But she could still go out with him and not let him near it, a little voice in her head whispered. And, frankly, she was sick of being good and pure and abstemious, and he had the kind of great, big, muscly arms that were meant for hugs. So she'd let her heart rule her head – again – and she had thrown a vicious look over at a staff nurse who had been inching forwards hopefully, and announced, 'I'll cook.'

And suddenly there they were, six months into the whole thing. Not that anyone was marking the date, it seemed, except her.

But Dan had had a chance to think about things, and he said now, 'You didn't remember it either. In fact, you came in here tonight and started apologising about how *you'd* forgotten it.'

'I didn't say—'

'You said your week had been too hectic. That you'd try to make it up to me, like I'm some kind of inconvenience. My God, you tried to palm me off with Paris!'

'Stop twisting the whole thing!'

'Not even Vienna!' he huffed. '*Paris*.'

Her cheeks felt hot. They'd never had a big, proper row before. In fact, they'd scarcely had a disagreement. Sometimes she thought they were a bit like a couple from a Daz commercial, all toothy smiles and hugs and romping happily through the surf. But wasn't that one of the things that had attracted her to him? The sheer comfort of the whole thing? She knew exactly where she stood with Dan; there would be no false expectations and bitter disappointments.

But tonight the gloves were off. Perhaps this was what they needed. Shake them up a bit. See what they were made of. So she counterattacked with, 'At least I tried to make it up to you! You weren't even going to bother!'

'I was, actually,' he retaliated.

'How?' she demanded. Let him try and top Paris.

'I was going to ask you to marry me.'

For a moment she almost looked around, wondering if Fabien was having a little joke. But it was Dan all right.

'What?' she said.

'I had *planned* to go down on one knee, and do it all romantically and properly,' he said, crossly. Then he seemed to remember the occasion, and he sat up a bit straighter and cleared his throat portentously, and asked, 'Jackie Ball, will you do me the honour of marrying me?'

'Well, I . . . this is quite a surprise, Dan.' To say the very least. Getting married right now was the last thing on her mind. The very furthest thing, in fact. More remote than the idea of some day landing on the moon and opening a new branch of Flower Power.

'I suppose,' he said, obviously reconciling fast to the fact that she wasn't going to scream with joy and leap over the table at him. 'Look, I know exactly what you're thinking. You're thinking, it's way too soon. You're thinking, I hardly know this guy! He takes me out on lousy dates to rugby matches in the rain, and thinks I want to spend the rest of my life with him? He doesn't even mark our sixmonth anniversary, and expects a yes? And his feet stink to high heaven!' He paused for a moment. 'Hang on, this isn't going the way I planned.'

'Dan—'

'On the plus side,' he went on, 'the rugby season doesn't last all year. Barely six months, in fact. Other positives include,' and he started ticking off on his fingers, 'I have a job, a car, a house, a pension – did I send that form back? – and most of my hair, and I will promise to love, honour and obey you for as long as we both shall live. And give you possession of the TV remote control. How's that for a deal?'

'Oh, Dan.'

'I don't like the way you say that. Like you're gearing yourself up to let me down.'

'I'm not.'

'You're not going to let me down? Or you're not going to marry me? Go on, give it to me straight, I can handle it. Just there.' He pointed to a spot on the tip of his very square, very broad chin.

'Oh, Dan.'

'You're saying it again!'

She took a breath. 'It's just, marriage is a very big step, you know?'

Another cheap ploy to buy herself time. Really, she was a despicable creature. Beneath contempt! But she hadn't known he was going to ask

her to marry him! She had thought . . . well, *what* had she thought? It had been obvious from about two weeks in that this was going to be more than just dinner. On his side, anyhow; she was old enough to see the signs. There was very little use now bleating about solid untouchable cores when she hadn't even been honest with him.

Dan didn't notice her guilt. 'Jackie, I'm thirty-six years old. I want to settle down with the right person. I want to buy a semi-detached house in suburbia and convert the attic into a playroom. I want to trade in my BMW for a people carrier – stop sniggering – and have a boy and a girl, and if I still have the energy, maybe a dog too. I'll call him Biff, or maybe Edward.'

'You'd name your dog before you'd name your children?'

'So you've agreed to children?'

'I've agreed to nothing!' But when he laid it out like that for her, it all sounded so reasonable. So attractive and complete, like one of those 'packages' that he was forever putting together for work. And he was offering her the whole thing, no expense spared, and with a dog thrown in for good measure. How could anybody, at least of her age, resist?

But she said, 'Dan, there's something you don't know about me.'

'I'm sure there is,' he said. 'There are things you don't know about me either. We all have our dirty little secrets from the past.' And he gazed wistfully at some point above her head.

'Dan, I'm serious.'

'Monsieur? Mademoiselle?' Fabien was at their table, bearing champagne on ice. 'May I be the first to offer my congratulations.' He looked slightly embarrassed in the role of romantic host and gave a kind of a cough.

'Too soon,' Dan hissed, waving him away. Fabien retreated fast, looking at Jackie as though she were mad for not clinching the deal while she could. Even he knew nothing better was ever going to come her way.

There was a little silence after he'd gone, like the fizz had gone out of everything.

Dan said, 'Look, Jackie, I know that you've been hurt before, OK? It doesn't take a genius to work it out. The way you get all kind of prickly sometimes and cross your arms over your chest, you're doing it right

now, and that's OK, you know? People get hurt. *I've* been hurt. I've been dumped on holiday, for goodness' sake. I'm not naming names but she knows who she is. Took me months to get over that.' She knew he was exaggerating a bit. He really was sweet. 'But, you know, we're together now. Whatever about the kids or the house – maybe you don't want kids, or a house, maybe you want to live on a boat, well, let's talk about that later. The point is, I love you. I've never met anyone like you. And I think we'd have a really good future together. If you want to.'

'I do . . .'

'So is that a yes?'

'Well, yes, I suppose.'

'You just said yes.'

'Yes. I know I did.'

'I got a yes! She said yes!'

'But Dan—'

'I don't want to hear any more buts. I officially declare all buts saved till the morning.' And he leaned over and kissed her, and Jackie felt everything in her life shift a tiny bit and slip firmly into place. Oh Lord. She was going to *settle down*. With a man called Dan. What was more, she welcomed it! Absolutely. She was through with unreliable men.

Impulsively, and to kind of put a seal on things, she declared loudly, 'I love you, Dan Lewis, and I don't care who hears me!'

Nobody did, actually; everyone was too busy forking in big plates of food to notice the little drama at the window table. Fabien had been keeping an eye on things, however, and he went scurrying off to the kitchen to retrieve the champagne.

'I hope this fits.' Dan produced a ring then, and Jackie drew in her breath. It was a serious ring, unhampered by fun or fashion, just five fat diamonds set high and proud. It would make all her other jewellery look like it had come from a lucky bag, which some of it had, but oh, she didn't care.

'Don't even start about how much it must have cost me, OK?' he said. 'Number one, it hurts to think about it, and number two, you're worth every cent.'

Now she was in tears. She'd always been able to cry with great abandon

(after Dr Green's death in *ER* she had become slightly dehydrated) but not usually tears of joy. Not recently, anyhow.

'You'll set me off in a minute.' But anyone could see he was pleased as Punch.

She would do the flowers for the wedding, of course. Red and white roses everywhere, even her bouquet! Or would that be too much? She wanted to suggest passion, not a bloodbath. But she didn't think she could confine herself to plain white roses, or freesias maybe, in yellow or pink, which she often advised. 'Keep it simple and you can't go wrong,' she would assure nervous brides. As if she ever followed her own advice. She was thinking daisies now, hundreds and hundreds of them, maybe even scattered underfoot.

But Dan was allergic. Blast. She would be a florist with no flowers at her own wedding. She'd have to make some out of crêpe paper, like you see on Barney videos.

'Let's set a date,' Dan said.

'A date?'

'That's the usual procedure, Jackie.'

'No, I know, it's just . . . I thought we were going to enjoy the moment first.' And she tickled the underside of his wrist in a way that usually made him giggle.

But he wasn't to be distracted. 'I don't want one of those big long engagements.'

'No.'

'One of my aunts was engaged for nineteen years.'

'Well, that's just ridiculous.'

'Then let's say three months from now,' he declared.

She did a quick calculation in her head. It was completely impossible. But she said, 'Agreed!'

The romance of the evening made them bold and they skipped dinner and rushed from Le Bistro and into bed, where Dan roundly trounced all previous records, and then flopped onto his back as happy as a puppy dog. She was unsure whether to applaud him or not.

'Next time keep those hooker boots on,' he said sleepily, snuggling into her shoulder.

She waited until he was snoring. Then she lifted his arm and scuttled out of the bed. Downstairs, she shut the living room door quietly and tiptoed to the desk in the corner. It was only then that she realised she had forgotten the telephone number. Imagine! And she could picture so clearly the telephone: a black modern cordless affair, shaped closely along the lines of a large willy, with hundreds of important-looking buttons and a built-in answering machine. When you were finished using it, you could slide it back into its base – an attractive, deep, accommodating snug cradle that gave an excited little beep upon contact.

The effect of all this testosterone-inspired technology was quite spoiled by a large, rather tacky picture of the Sacred Heart hanging over the phone table. For it had been her house too; still *was* her house, or at least half of it, even though she had stopped going to Mass years ago and found herself unable to remember the telephone number. Could it be some sly trick on the part of her subconscious, to blot him out? But no. It was unlikely her subconscious had a sense of humour, and besides, she could hardly remember her current telephone number, never mind one she had left behind eighteen months ago.

Then it came to her in a flash. It had three sixes in it: the number of the devil. He had laughed at her superstition at the time. And look how well-founded it had been! Now she would have to talk to him, to explain herself. And she always got so tongue-tied under stress! Whereas he, on the other hand, was a man whose temperature never rose above ninety, and who had an armoury of quips and put-downs for every available occasion. What would he say to her news? After he had stopped laughing, that was.

She could just hear him now. He would most likely call it an act of supreme impetuosity. Or impulsiveness. Or any of those other *i* words he had routinely used in relation to her. Well, she had a few for him too. Most of them began with an *f*. Look at her; she was all hot and bothered now. She reminded herself that she must be careful not to let herself get irritated or riled up in any way, and Lord knows that would be easy enough. She mustn't rise to any bait. Also, she should guard against getting involved in blame. Apart from anything else, it tended to send her

voice, already high-pitched, off the Richter scale. All it took then was for her hair to break loose from its clip, which it nearly always did, and her metamorphosis into a squeaking, shrieking witch was complete. 'Calm down, Jackie,' he would say, in that infuriating way that would make her want to apply a frying pan to his head.

At least she had the advantage of surprise. She took a moment to run through a few openers in her head. 'Hi there, Henry! It's Jackie!' No. She despised him, for God's sake. Maybe something more sombre: 'I think you know what this is about. Unfinished business.' But he'd just crack up laughing at that.

In the end she lifted the telephone receiver and dialled very fast. It began to ring at the other end in the home they'd shared in London. At least, *she* had tried to make it a home, with her tea cosies and ethnic cushions and a wonderful floor rug that she had bought at the market, and that clashed wildly with Henry's colour scheme. As for Henry, he had just carried on as usual, except to complain about her clutter and mess. She had learned early on that he was self-sufficient that way. He didn't seem to need things, not the way she did.

But then why would he bother being homely? After all, in his head he had always remained gloriously free and single.

She supposed he had quickly restored the place after she had gone. It would be male, spare, stale. He wouldn't have opened a window in months and unsuspecting visitors would fall to the ground in an oxygen-deprived dead faint. The lid on the toilet seat would resume its rightful position, which was permanently up, and he would have plonked the TV back in the centre of the room. All would be well with the world.

'Hello?' It was him. He always answered the phone as if he expected it to be someone trying to sell him double-glazing.

It must have been the shock of hearing his voice after eighteen months, because her rehearsed speech immediately flew out of her head. Her tongue was so dry that she had to unpeel it from the roof of her mouth, before blurting thickly, 'Henry! Um, hi, it's Jackie here.' Then, not wanting to appear presumptuous – after all, it had been a while – she added, 'Your wife.'

But his voice just went on, smooth and unperturbed. 'I'm sorry I can't take your call at the moment but if you'd like to leave a message I'll get back to you.'

Typically, he didn't say goodbye at the end of the message. That would be too polite, too normal. Instead, there was an abrupt, rude *beep*.

She wondered why she was surprised he wasn't home. It was Friday night after all. He was most likely working. Or else hanging out at the opening of some trendy bar with the newspaper crowd from work. Or maybe even in bed with someone and didn't want to be disturbed. Carrying on like none of it had ever happened. Like Jackie had been a mere blip in his life, and normal transmission had now resumed.

Without saying a word, she quietly hung up.