

Chapter One

Angie was trying her best to talk Judy out of getting married.

‘You don’t really want to,’ she said persuasively.

‘I do,’ Judy insisted.

‘You wouldn’t if you really thought about it.’

‘I *have* thought about it. We’re getting married on Saturday – it’s hard to think about anything else.’ Indeed, she had spent many hours that morning worrying over the place settings for the meal. There was one particular uncle with whom absolutely everybody had fallen out and it looked like they would have to organise a table for him on his own.

‘Ah, yes,’ Angie went on knowledgeably, ‘but you’re only thinking of the nice bits like walking up the aisle, and Barry unpeeling your dress inch by inch on your wedding night, and two weeks in Barbados rubbing sunscreen into each other.’

Judy made a mental note: put sunscreen down on the blessed list. Then: where was the blessed list?

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‘That sounds lovely,’ Ber chipped in dreamily. ‘And having breakfast in bed and skinny-dipping in the Jacuzzi before having lots of squelchy, wet sex!’

Angie gave her a stern look. ‘Contain yourself.’

‘Sorry,’ Ber said humbly. She tended to get very involved in other people’s weddings. She maintained it was good practice for her own. She had already earmarked a wedding dress, even though it would be a register office marriage, obviously, and decided on a menu for the meal – prawn cocktail followed by duck à l’orange. The only trouble was, it was all taking rather longer than anyone expected and the dress had begun to look not so much last season as last century. And nobody really ate duck à l’orange any more, although prawn cocktail had made a comeback. Still, it wasn’t as though she had put down a deposit on the dress, as she had told the girls, and she could always change the menu. Really, she was quite lucky, if you wanted to look at it that way.

Angie fired up a fresh cigarette and looked at Judy kindly through the clouds of smoke. ‘You see, right now you’re blinded by romance.’

‘Am I?’ Judy thought, oh great, something else to impede her progress up the aisle. The four-inch satin wedding shoes were already proving quite a challenge. She had worn them around the house yesterday to get used to them, at one point pitching dangerously towards the television screen.

Angie nodded. ‘Well, of course – look at you!’ Judy did, warily, or at least at her knees. ‘Giddy with love hormones. Senses awash with passion and longing. Half crazed at the prospect of getting that ring on your finger and galloping off into the sunset!’ She wagged a finger at Judy. ‘In fact, you haven’t said a sensible word since you arrived here today.’

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Judy had that pain in her forehead again. Yesterday, when she had gone to investigate it in the mirror, sure it was a big boil coming on – please, God, not four days before the wedding – she had discovered her whole forehead pleated in big wrinkles, right up to her hairline, like that woman out of *Star Trek*. She had taken a few deep breaths, along with several sniffs from a bottle of tea tree oil given to her by a friend who had herself survived a wedding, and her forehead had relaxed back down again.

People told her it was perfectly normal. Weddings were right up there with birth and death in the greater scheme of things (thank God they had bought the house five years ago or she would have been moving, too). Like childbirth, nobody told you how bad it was going to be because there was no sense in frightening the life out of you, and you'd find out for yourself soon enough in any case. Besides, the happiest day of your life doesn't come cheap, she had been vigorously warned; naturally, there were gallons of blood, sweat and tears to be shed first. Judy didn't know if there was a direct correlation between the degree of stress endured in the run-up and the happiness of the day itself, but if there was, hers should be off this planet.

'The point is that you're unbalanced,' Angie finished up gently. 'Incapable of making a rational decision.'

Judy *had* felt a bit unbalanced for several weeks now. She had put it down to the list-making and the endless entertaining of little-known relatives who dropped by with big lumps of Waterford glass. But if what Angie was saying was true, it wasn't wedding stress at all that was waking her up in the dead of night in a cold sweat, but pure, unbridled happiness and lust.

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‘Barry and I have been living together for the last five years. We’ve known each other since we were children,’ she pointed out cautiously. ‘Do you not think we’re over all that kind of thing?’

‘Not at all,’ Angie said. ‘If anything, long relationships increase your longing for each other.’

‘She’s right,’ said Ber vigorously, and she should know.

‘Face it, Judy, love has turned your head completely. And I wouldn’t be your friend if I didn’t strongly urge you to look beyond the glamour of the wedding to the grim reality ahead.’ Angie’s voice dropped to a new, gloomy low. ‘The back-breaking mortgage, the horrible mother-in-law, having to pop out babies one after the other while desperately trying to hold on to your career. You putting on weight and him losing his hair, or the other way around. Next thing you know, you won’t be able to find a single thing to say to each other.’

There was a depressed silence. Outside, the sun retreated behind a big black cloud.

‘Bloody hell.’ Even Ber’s relentless optimism had deserted her for once and she looked a bit fed up.

For two pins now, Judy was thinking darkly, she nearly *would* change her mind. Let them all swing! The whole shooting lot of them! She included in this the hairstylist who had imprinted her ear with a pair of tongs last week during a test run, and Granny Nolan whose de luxe wheelchair was too wide for the church ramp and whom Barry said might have to be airlifted in.

Then, at the very last minute, she giddily realised that this whole conversation wasn’t about her and Barry at all, but the Big Ignorant Fucker From Orlando, or Biffö for short.

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Of course! She went limp with relief that everything was fine after all, and that she was still getting married on Saturday.

To lovely, lovely Barry. Last night he had spent a whole hour coaxing her shoulders down from her ears, massaging them with his big warm hands, and murmuring soothing things like, 'Don't worry, I'm just going to give you a little jab,' and, 'You'll be fine, we've got your finger on ice.' (He had just come off a ten-hour shift at the surgery and it always took him a while to come down.) But she had felt a lot better afterwards, even without a jab.

Barry had that effect on people. He had been born with a bedside manner, his mother maintained, and had cheerily gone through childhood trying to push people down stairs and in front of cars so that he could see what the damage looked like. While other children were busy punching the stuffing out of each other, Barry could be found putting a plaster on Action Man, or inserting a thermometer up various cuddly toys. For a while they had been worried that he would turn out odd, like those silent, bearded men you see in documentaries about the unravelling of DNA, but thankfully they caught him under a bush with the girl next door at fifteen, and it wasn't her tonsils he was having a look at.

He never grew a beard either, except for a charity event once. In fact, he had turned out quite handsome and was easily the most popular doctor at the surgery, although the competition, Dr 'Hairy' Stevens and Dr Yvonne Jacobs, who was permanently sick herself, wasn't that intense. He was particularly liked by older people – he had a genuine fascination with digestive systems – and could hardly venture into the local supermarket without being set upon immediately by gangs of elderly patients delighted to see him and asking

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if he could read the price on packets of fig rolls. When Judy would collect him half an hour later, having done the entire weekly shop, he would sheepishly extricate himself, and apologise to Judy. But his cheeks would be all pink – whether from pleasure, or from being squeezed by old folk, she was never quite sure.

Nobody ever accosted Judy in the supermarket. In fact, she tended to have the opposite effect. They all knew her from the library and they would flush guiltily upon seeing her and back away quickly whilst making stuttered excuses about books being eaten by dogs or gerbils or vacuum cleaners.

Barry joked gently that when she made her grand entrance to the church on Saturday afternoon, half the congregation would suddenly remember overdue library books and gallop out.

‘I’ve been talking to the wall, haven’t I?’ Angie said sadly now, taking one look at Judy’s rosy, love-stricken face.

‘Yes,’ Judy admitted sheepishly. ‘I’m sorry, Angie, but I love Barry and I’m getting married to him on Saturday!’

Ber clapped enthusiastically. ‘Hurrah!’ She confided to Judy, ‘I was never really worried there.’

But there was still the problem of Biffo. He had left the country over a year ago now, although a bottle of his after-shave was still in Angie’s bathroom cabinet. An oversight, Angie had explained when confronted, but Judy had her suspicions. Also, Angie had kept one of his Liverpool T-shirts, ostensibly as a duster, but Ber told Judy that she had once caught Angie sniffing it.

‘Look, Angie,’ Judy said, ‘I know things might be slightly awkward on Saturday.’

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Angie managed to look incredibly vague. 'Sorry?'

'You know who I'm talking about. Biffo.' His name landed on the lunch table like a stink bomb. Ber's nose wrinkled up and she began hunting around for a tissue.

For a moment Angie did a very good impression of not being able to place the name. 'Ah!' she said eventually. 'Biffo.'

And her mouth did a little wobble. Judy and Ber exchanged fearful looks – surely she wasn't going to break down in those terrible, keening sobs that were so heartbreaking that the whole café would be in floods along with her. She had drenched hundreds of ham sandwiches last summer, and a computer at work, which hadn't functioned since. You never saw such tragedy in your life, not even in *Terms Of Endearment*.

Of course, things hadn't been going so well for a while. Angie had spoken darkly of silences, and inexplicable black moods, and wild nights out with the lads. Sex had dwindled off. Then dried up altogether. Even the most civil inquiry as to what the hell was going on was met with a defensive shrug and a 'nothing'. In a last-ditch attempt to salvage the relationship, she'd splashed out on a hideously expensive trip to Rome, hoping that they could thrash things out. 'Oh, typical!' Biffo had said, cryptically, when she'd presented the tickets.

That very night he had announced that things weren't working out and that he was off. She had thought it was just from her apartment. But apparently she had driven him further than that: all the way to America, to be precise. By the end of the week he had handed in his notice at work, and his company white van, and had left the country without a backward glance.

It was impressive how Angie managed to smile wryly now

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and say, 'Judy, I appreciate your concern, but I think I can just about cope with meeting my ex at your wedding.'

'Of course you can,' Ber told her encouragingly.

'I'm sure we've both moved on,' she went on efficiently. 'I mean, I'm with Nick now.'

Ber gave a nervous little start. Nick was a stockbroker, like Angie. Every time they met him he tried to talk them into investing in plastics as a pension. 'You're not going to stay young forever,' he would say sternly. Recently, he had amended this to 'youngish'.

He and Angie had been seeing each other for four months. She didn't laugh like she used to with Biffo, and he hated football, but things seemed to be going well enough.

But Judy had further news to break. 'Biffo is bringing someone to the wedding, Angie.'

Something crossed Angie's face briefly. But then she said calmly, 'He's perfectly entitled to bring anyone he wants to the wedding. *I'm* bringing Nick. I'm not saying it won't be awkward, but I think we can manage to be civil to each other.'

'I'll put you at opposite ends of the dining room,' Judy promised her. 'With your backs to each other.'

Angie waved this away as though it were entirely unnecessary. 'So who is she, anyway?' she asked brightly. 'His date?'

'Her name is Cheryl.' She didn't want to reveal anything else, such as the fact that she was a 26-year-old with legs like Barbie.

Ber didn't know about the legs, and said to Angie consolingly, 'She's probably dog ugly.'

'Oh, I'm sure she's not,' Angie said. She was very nice like that. Even despite everything.

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‘Well, he’s not exactly an oil painting himself, is he?’ Ber went on belligerently. ‘Unless you were thinking along the lines of Rubens.’

You had be very careful how far down that road you went, for a number of reasons, and so Judy said neutrally, ‘She’s American.’

‘Well, I suppose I’ll meet her on Saturday,’ Angie said, putting an end to the conversation.

‘Me too,’ Ber said stoutly. ‘And I’ll have Vinnie warned not to let me drink too much.’

‘Will Vinnie definitely make it along then, do you think?’ Judy inquired.

Ber gave a little sigh. ‘Well, we hope so.’

‘How is Vinnie Junior’s jaw anyway?’ Judy hoped that she sounded concerned. Vinnie Junior was Vinnie’s teenaged son.

‘All right. They’ve wired it together but he can only drink out of a straw. And he can’t talk at all, Vinnie says, but you’d hardly notice because he never really said anything anyway. All the same, Vinnie is keen to stick close to home.’

‘Well, of course,’ Judy murmured, thinking of the bout of gastroenteritis that had invaded Vinnie’s house last month and curtailed his freedom, and his wife’s unexpected summons to jury duty last year, or any of the serious rugby injuries that seemed to plague his two sons on a weekly basis.

But nobody ever said these things, of course. In fact, the whole thing had been going on for so long now that nobody even thought them any more. It was just the way things were, and they weren’t likely to change at any time in the near future, no matter how optimistic Ber remained.

She was obviously thinking along the same lines because

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she said to Judy, rather enviously, 'What does it feel like? To be getting married?'

The list popped into Judy's head again and her stomach rose in revolt. But then there was Barry at the end of it all, and so she smiled and told Ber, 'Great. It feels great.'