Isobel's Wedding

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The Wedding (Francisco Goya, 1791)

I was trying on the wedding dress when Tim phoned. Actually I was twirling around in front of the full-length wall mirror, admiring the way the skirt billowed around me in a carefree puff of white chiffon, when I heard the phone ring. It had taken me longer to make this wedding dress than any other I'd ever done, but this was *my* dress. This was the dress I'd wear when I married Tim in two weeks' time and it had deserved all of my time and all of my attention. I smoothed the skirt and fingered the tiny white pearls neatly hand-sewn onto the bodice. There were four hundred and twenty of them. I'd never sew a pearl onto a dress again.

'Isobel! It's for you!' Alison stood at the bottom of the stairs and yelled at me. 'It's your fiancé.' She broke into a guffaw at the word 'fiancé'. She always did. Alison, who was twenty-one, thought I was out of my mind to be getting married. Alison didn't approve of marriage; she believed that husbands only tied you down, limited your potential, trapped you for the rest of your life. She thought I was too young to tie myself down to one person. But I wasn't. I was exactly the right age. Twenty-seven. Long enough on my own to

have had some fun and make a few elementary mistakes. But mature enough, now, to know exactly what I was doing. To be ready to become Isobel Malone instead of Isobel Kavanagh.

I stared at my twenty-seven-year-old reflection. Brown eyes, red-rimmed from spending too much time at my sewing machine, a pale face that was looking forward to our honeymoon in Rhodes, and soft brown hair which was halfway between lengths because I wanted to be able to put it up for the wedding. It was a pity I wasn't taller because the dress would have looked truly gorgeous if I'd been a tall, willowy, Stella Tennant sort of person. But I'd stopped growing around the five-foot-one mark and remained the short one in our family. At least I was slim, although that was probably because I'd almost stopped eating in the last two weeks. There simply hadn't been time.

Alison (unlike me in almost every respect – taller, tousle-haired and bigger-boned) thumped her way up the stairs and pushed open the bedroom door. 'Are you deaf?' she demanded. 'It's Tim—' She broke off and stared at me. She hadn't seen the finished dress before. 'Oh, Isobel.' Suddenly her face was softer, gentler. 'It's beautiful!'

I grinned at her. 'Thank you.'

'I mean it,' she said. 'It's lovely. *You* look lovely.'

'I'll look more lovely when my hair is done properly and I'm wearing all the right bits and pieces.'

'You're like Cinderella going to the ball,' she breathed as she fingered the gossamer-light material. 'I never thought it would look like this.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' I laughed at her. 'Come down to earth, Ali. You're the one who thinks I'm off my head to be getting married in the first place.'

She shrugged. 'I just don't think that women can be

themselves if they're chained to some man,' she said. 'As soon as a girl gets married she puts her husband's needs ahead of her own. It's this nurturing thing. We can't help ourselves. That's why you shouldn't get married in the first place.'

'And what if you're truly in love?' I asked her as I slipped out of the dress and placed it carefully on the padded hanger. 'What then?'

She shook her head. 'Love is delusion,' she said. 'People only think they're in love.'

'Wait until you've fallen for someone yourself before making that judgement,' I told her briskly. 'I'll remind you of this conversation when you're mooning about over some bloke who doesn't take a blind bit of notice of you.'

I pulled my dressing-gown over my white slip and hurried downstairs, leaving her still gazing at the dress.

I picked up the receiver. 'Hi there.'

'What on earth were you doing?' asked Tim. 'I've been hanging on for ages.'

'Discussing the meaning of love with Alison,' I told him. 'She doesn't believe in it.'

Tim broke into a fit of coughing.

'I hope you're not getting a cold,' I said. 'It'd be terrible if you were too sick to say "I do".'

'I wanted to meet you,' said Tim.

'We're going out tomorrow,' I told him. 'And I was going to finish off the bridesmaids' dresses tonight.'

'I need to see you tonight,' said Tim. 'Really I do, Isobel.'

I sighed. 'It's not that I don't want to see you. It's just that I've so much to do!'

'Please, Isobel.'

'But there's only two weeks and—'

'Isobel, please.'

'Oh, OK.' I ran my fingers through my hair. 'I suppose I can practise with the headdress another evening.'

'Meet you in Kiely's?' he said.

'Tim!' Kiely's, in Donnybrook, was close to Tim's red-bricked, bay-windowed townhouse. I lived in Sutton, at least a twenty-minute drive over the toll-bridge.

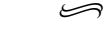
'I left the car in for a service today,' he said apologetically. 'I thought I'd have it back this evening but it wasn't ready. So I'm without wheels.'

'Oh, OK,' I said again. I always gave in to Tim, I couldn't help it. Maybe that was what Alison was talking about.

'Half an hour?' he said.

'An hour,' I told him. 'I need to get dressed. I was trying on my wedding dress when you called.' I laughed suddenly. 'I hope it's not bad luck to be trying on the dress when your fiancé phones – like him seeing you in it!'

Tim laughed too but he didn't sound convincing. It was all getting a bit much for him, I thought. Endless discussion about who to invite and what sort of menu to have, and which band to choose. All sorts of things that seemed so important at the time but probably weren't important at all really. In the end, the only important thing was that Tim loved me and that I loved him. The rest was incidental. But the incidental things took up most of our time these days.



I reversed my white Peugeot 205 out of the driveway and turned onto the coast road.

It was a grey, depressing evening. A thin layer of cloud blocked out any trace of blue sky and a cool easterly breeze whipped across the bay taking the struggling

warmth out of the sun. I hoped it would be fine for my wedding day. I dreamed of blue skies with cotton-wool wisps of cloud and still, warm air. I could be lucky, I thought, as I sped along the road. It would be May by then and the weather might have turned.

It took me half an hour to get to Kiely's. Cars littered the surrounding streets and I abandoned mine on a double yellow line. I hoped I wouldn't get a ticket but, if I did, I'd make Tim pay for it. Friday night was a bad night to arrive late to a pub.

I pushed open the door. A haze of blue-grey smoke wafted towards me and my eyes began to water. I looked around the heaving throng of people for Tim. Why on earth did he insist on meeting in crowded places?

Finally I saw him, leaning against the wall, pint of Guinness in his hand. He was incredibly handsome, I thought smugly. His hair was jet-black and fell in an endearing fringe over his navy-blue eyes. His face was tanned and healthy, with high cheekbones, the sort I'd die for myself. He wore an oversized maroon Aran jumper and ragged Levis.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw him – sometimes I found it hard to believe that he was mine.

I wormed my way through the crowd and tapped him on the shoulder.

'Oh, hello.' He looked startled. 'I didn't see you come in.'

'You can't see anyone in here,' I said. 'It's just one pulsating blob of people. Why didn't you pick somewhere quieter?'

'It was quieter when I came in,' he told me. 'It seems to have filled up in the last half-hour.'

'Do you want to stay here?' I asked. 'Would you like to go somewhere else?'

'No, here is OK. Do you want a drink?'

'Orange juice is fine,' I said.

He nodded, handed me his pint, and made his way to the bar. He wasn't in a good mood, I thought, as I watched him. There was something wrong. I hoped it wasn't his mother again. She'd kicked up blue murder because we'd limited the family invitations to twenty-five from each side and Tim had refused to allow her to add on some distant cousin he couldn't even remember.

'It's all right for Isobel,' Denise Malone had told him. 'She has a small family. There probably aren't twenty-five people on her side anyway.'

'Of course there's twenty-five on my side,' I'd retorted angrily when he told me. 'I'm not squeezing my family out just so that she can invite a crowd of freeloaders!'

It had all been very silly, got very heated, for no real reason. In the end, Denise's sister rang from the States to say that she'd love to come but that she really couldn't afford the trip over in May, since she'd already booked her holidays for July. So there was space for Cousin Maddy or Dotty or Biddy after all and no need to rearrange anything.

'Here you are.' Tim handed me the glass of orange juice and retrieved his pint.

'Cheers.' I raised my glass but he was already taking a deep mouthful of Guinness.

'I needed to talk to you,' he said. He wiped the thin cream line from his upper lip. 'I'm sorry I dragged you out tonight.'

'I don't mind.' I put my head on his chest. 'I know I said I was busy, but I'm never too busy to see you. Darling,' I added teasingly.

'It was important to talk to you,' he said.

I looked up at him. Something was wrong, and from the tone of his voice it was a bit more serious than

trouble on the Dotty, Maddy and Biddy front. 'What's the matter?' I asked.

He wiped at the condensation on the outside of his glass.

'What's the matter?' I asked again.

He looked up at me. 'I can't go through with it,' he said abruptly.

I heard the words but they didn't mean anything to me. 'What?'

'I can't go through with it,' he said again, a touch of desperation in his voice. 'I can't, Isobel. I need some time. I want to postpone it.'

'The wedding?' I stared at him. 'You want to postpone the wedding?' I clutched at my glass of orange juice.

'Yes.' He nodded and took another mouthful of Guinness.

I could still hear the buzz of the people around us, but their voices were muted, distant. I felt as though I was wrapped in a cocoon, separated from the world outside. My voice was paralysed. I opened my mouth and closed it again. I blinked a couple of times. 'You're joking,' I croaked finally.

'I'm not joking, Isobel.' His look was anguished. 'I need more time.'

'More time for what?' I demanded, the words tumbling out now. 'What could you possibly need time for? We've known each other for nearly two years. We've been engaged for six months! If you had a problem with it, why didn't you say so before now?'

'I didn't feel this way before now.'

'Feel what way?' I asked.

'Trapped,' he said.

I rummaged in my bag and found my asthma inhaler. I shook the canister a couple of times and then squirted the fine spray into my tightening lungs. Tim watched me.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

My breath was coming more easily again. 'No,' I said. I clutched the inhaler in my hand.

'Put it back in your bag,' he said. 'You don't really need it.'

'It's smoky in here,' I told him. 'You know I wheeze when it's smoky.'

'I thought it was me,' said Tim. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'And what did you think telling me you wanted to postpone the wedding would do?' I demanded. 'Make me dance around the pub with delight? I can't believe this, Tim. I really can't. Tell me you're joking. Tell me you don't really mean it. Why do you feel trapped? Is it just nerves? Is it—' I broke off. I couldn't talk any more. The tears were streaming down my face.

He watched me uncomfortably. He pulled a cotton hanky from his jeans pocket and handed it to me. I was crying far too much for it to be of any use. I knew that people were looking at me, but I didn't care. I could cry if I felt like it. I could have an asthma attack if I felt like it. I could die if I felt like it. I gulped and started to cough. I couldn't breathe properly. I thought, frantically, that maybe I *would* die.

'Isobel!' Tim's voice was harsh. 'Stop crying like that. You'll make yourself sick.'

'*You're* making me sick,' I said, gulping the smoke-laden air through my sobs. 'You're the one that's doing this to me.' I shook the inhaler again and took another dose.

'Isobel!' Tim grabbed me by the arm. 'Stop it. Stop it now.'

He steered me out of the pub and into the darkening street. I rubbed my eyes with his hanky.

'How could you do this to me?' I asked. 'Why? Why

now? If you don't love me, why have you let it go this far?'

'I'm not saying I don't love you.' Tim pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. 'I *do* love you, Isobel. I just don't feel that I can marry you. Not yet.'

I stared at him as I twisted the hanky around and around in my hands. I really couldn't believe I was hearing this. Part of me expected him to tell me it was all a joke, but I knew it wasn't. He looked too uncomfortable, too miserable, too serious for it to be a joke.

'We've been practically living together since we got engaged,' I said, trying to breathe calmly and evenly. 'Surely that must have helped you to think we could live together for ever.'

He sighed. 'That's just it, Isobel. Right now, everything is perfect. You stay with me most weekends, you go home during the week. You stay with me if we go out somewhere. But you're not there all the time. I know sometimes I'd like you to be there all the time – that's why I thought we should get married – but now I'm afraid. I like being on my own too. I'm not comfortable with the idea of having someone wanting to know where I am every minute of the day.'

'But I don't want to know where you are every minute of the day,' I said despairingly. 'I only want to know that you'll be with me every night.' I blew my nose and shoved the hanky into the pocket of my jeans.

Tim leaned against the wall and stared ahead of him. I remembered the day we'd met, at a twenty-first birthday party in the St Lawrence Hotel, in Howth. It had been a noisy, crowded party and I'd gone outside for a breath of fresh air. Tim was outside too, busily typing something into a personal organiser.

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked. I'd had a few

drinks – normally I wouldn't have butted into someone's private business.

'Making a memo of something I have to do tomorrow,' he said.

'You don't look like the business type.' I hiccoughed gently.

He laughed. 'I'm the computer type,' he said. 'I design computer software. I've been stuck on something for days and it suddenly came to me. So I thought I'd better get it down because sure as hell I'll never remember it in the morning!'

I grinned at him. 'Sounds reasonable.'

'Are you at the party?' he asked.

I nodded. 'But it was so hot and crowded I thought I'd come outside for a while. It's lovely out here, isn't it?'

'Want to go for a walk?' he asked.

'Why not?'

We walked along the pier together. The water lapped gently in against the wall and the wires from the boat-sails jingled against the masts. The moon sent a shaft of silver light across the harbour. We chatted as though we'd known each other for ages. Tim was unlike anybody else I'd ever met. I worked in a print and packaging company as the personal assistant to the managing director. I was used to people in suits, to graduate trainees wanting to get on, to the factory floor and the commercial work ethic. Tim was a creative sort of person. I'd always thought that computer people were boring and obsessed. I thought that they had to think in logical progression, like machines. I was way out of date. Tim said that he saw the results of his programmes before he'd ever written them; he thought in broad pictures as though he were making a film or writing a book.

'Wow,' I said. 'That's a sort of computer-nerd thing to say, isn't it? "Wow"?'

He laughed and put his arm around me. 'Wow,' he whispered as he drew me closer to him.

It was love at first sight. It was always like that for me, though; I fell fast and hard and then fell out of love as quickly. But it was different with Tim. With Tim, I knew that it would last for ever.

How could it all have gone wrong? I thought bleakly. We were so right together. Not opposites, exactly, but complementary. When he was working on a project, he was lost to me. When he'd finished, he was devoted. And I was always there, content to be with him, secure in the knowledge that no one else could love him as much as me, and that there was no one else in his life to usurp me.

He earned a lot of money as a software designer. The day I met him, he'd bought his townhouse in Donnybrook. He had a company car. He took two holidays a year: one to the sun any time between May and September, and a skiing holiday in February. I didn't weigh him up in monetary terms and decide that he was a good catch, but he was. I loved him and I thought he loved me.

I thought we worked as a couple. I thought that everything between us was perfect. I thought that I understood him. How could I have understood him when he was going through such agonies?

'I'm sorry.' I slipped my arm into his. 'I didn't realise it was getting to you so much.'

'I'm sorry too.' He hugged my arm to his side. 'I thought I was ready for this. Truly I did, Isobel. But I can't do it. I can't stand in the church with our friends and family and make such a big issue out of it all.'

I looked at him hopefully. 'Would you go through with a quick wedding in a register office?'

He disentangled my hold on him. 'Not yet. I can't do anything yet.'

We stood silently beside each other. Part of me felt sorry

for him. Part of me wanted to kill him. Part of me wanted to kill myself.

How could I walk into the office on Monday and tell them all that my wedding was off? The wedding that had been practically the sole topic of conversation in the company for the past month? How could I tell them that the Conrad was cancelled, that the gifts were being returned, that the honeymoon to the Greek islands wasn't going to happen? It would be awful. They'd be sorry for me. They'd put their arms around me and tell me that it wasn't the end of the world and then, when I wasn't there, they'd discuss it in breathless whispers and say that they knew it wouldn't have worked and that I'd made such a fool of myself over Tim Malone.

'I just need some time,' he said. 'That's all.'

I said nothing. There was nothing I could say. I stared across the road without seeing anything.

'I thought perhaps you might like to go on the honeymoon,' said Tim suddenly.

'What?'

'The honeymoon. It's paid for. I feel terrible about this, Isobel. I thought you might like to go on the holiday.'

'With you?' I stared at him incredulously.

'Of course not,' he said. 'With a friend.'

'Oh, Tim.' I burst into a fresh paroxysm of tears. '*You're* my best friend. I don't want to do anything without you.'

He held me to him and allowed me to sob all over his jumper. He patted me gently on the back and whispered that he still loved me.

'So why won't you go through with the wedding?' I cried. 'Why?'

'I've told you,' he said helplessly. 'I just can't. I still want to see you, Isobel. I don't want us to break up. I just want to postpone things for a while, that's all.'

'How can we go on seeing each other?' I sniffed. 'People will think we're insane.'

'When did we ever care what people thought?' he murmured into my ear. 'When?'

I leaned against his chest, the rough wool of the jumper coarse against my face. My eyes were closed. I still couldn't take it in. I couldn't believe that Tim felt the way he did. He hadn't shown it before now. I sighed deeply and he held me closer.

'How can you hug me like this?' I asked as I lifted my head to look at him. 'How can you hold me tight and not want to marry me?'

'It's not that I don't want to marry you, Isobel. I do. I just don't want to do it now. It would be a mistake to do it now. Really it would.'

'Is there someone else?' I hadn't wanted to ask, was afraid of his reply.

'Of course not,' he said sharply. 'How could there be? I haven't had eyes for anyone but you.' He kissed me on the forehead. 'It's such a big step, that's all.'

I leaned against his chest again. 'But I thought we were ready for it.'

'I'm so busy in work at the moment,' he continued. 'I'm working a twelve-hour day. I don't have time to be with you. I don't want to feel guilty that you're at home without me.'

I was silent.

'When I get myself sorted out,' he said. 'Later in the year.'

I moved away from him. 'What makes you think you'll be more likely to marry me later in the year? What if there's another project, something else to keep you working so hard? I know that you're busy. I understand that, Tim.'

'It's different now,' he told me. 'I know that if we were

married I'd be rushing a job just to get home. And I know that you'd be pissed off with me for not being there when you wanted. It's the wrong time, Isobel. That's all.'

'And you still love me?' I looked at him doubtfully.

'More than anything,' he assured me, and drew me towards him again.

There was a ticket on my car. I ripped it from behind the wiper, crumpled it into a tiny ball and flung it into the oily puddle in front of the Peugeot. Tim had half-heartedly asked me to go back to the house with him, so that we could talk things over. But I didn't want to talk things over with Tim. I needed to be on my own for a while. I needed to get my thoughts together, to make sense of what he had told me.

I still couldn't understand why. It was easy for him to say that he needed time, or that he felt pressurised, or that he was too busy at work. But it was hard for me to believe that they were insurmountable obstacles to true love. And I'd thought that what Tim felt for me and what I felt for him was true love. I'd never been this close to another person before. I'd never shared their dreams or desires or the trivial details of anyone's life the way I had with Tim. I knew the kind of toothpaste he preferred. I knew that biological washing-powders brought him out in a rash. I knew that he liked jazz music, mountain walking and Chinese food. I knew that he was cranky in the mornings, at his best late at night. I knew that when he was taken over by a problem he couldn't leave it alone until he'd worked it out. I knew so much about him, I thought, as I unlocked the car door, but suddenly it wasn't enough. I hadn't known that the thought of marrying me had been so truly terrible to him.

My parents were watching TV when I arrived home. Alison had gone out with some girlfriends, but – unusually – Ian, my loose-limbed, nineteen-year-old brother, was sprawled across the sofa, his legs dangling over the armrest.

'Susan Purcell rang a few minutes ago,' said Mum as I walked into the living room. 'She's dropping around tomorrow night with your wedding present. She told me that she's bought a Paul Costello suit for the wedding!'

'She should have saved her money.' I'd taken another puff of my inhaler before coming into the house but my breathing was still uneven.

'Oh, Isobel, a suit like that will last her for years,' said Mum. 'It's the kind of thing you can wear over and over again.'

'I meant, she should have saved her money on the wedding present,' I said. It was an effort not to cry again. 'I won't be needing her sheets or toaster or waffle-maker or whatever she's bought.'

Mum pointed the remote control at the TV and silenced Pat Kenny. 'What happened?' she asked.

'The wedding's off.' I flopped onto the sofa beside Ian, who sat upright and stared at me in amazement.

'Off!' Mum, Dad and Ian echoed my words together.

'Off,' I repeated.

They exchanged glances. 'Why is it off?' asked Dad finally.

'We've postponed it,' I said.

They were silent for a moment.

'Why?' asked Ian.

I twirled my glittering diamond engagement ring around on my finger. It had never occurred to me to

give it back to Tim – to make some kind of gesture by flinging it at him in temper.

'Tim feels that he's not quite ready for the commitment.'

'The bastard!' Ian stood up, his six-foot-one frame towering over me. 'I'll tear him apart. Who does he think he is? Not ready! Hasn't he been sleeping with you for the past year and a half!'

'Ian!' I looked at him in horror. It wasn't that my parents didn't know that Tim and I had slept together – given that I spent so many nights in Donnybrook it would have been pretty strange not to – but we never spoke about it, as though by ignoring it they could pretend that I was still an innocent virgin.

'He's got a bloody nerve.' Dad was angry. The tip of his nose was red, which was a sure sign.

'Oh, Isobel.' Mum put her arms around me. 'I'm so sorry.'

I felt the lump in my throat and swallowed hard, blinking furiously to get rid of the tears that threatened to spill down my cheeks. I was tired of crying. I didn't want to cry in front of my family.

'It's for the best,' I said shakily. 'It'd be terrible to get married and then decide it had all been a mistake. Anyway,' I cleared my throat, 'we haven't broken off our engagement. We've just postponed things until later in the year.'

'But you won't be able to book the Conrad for later in the year,' said Mum. 'It was a struggle getting it for Saturday week! Don't you remember? You won't get any decent hotel at such short notice. How much is it going to cost to cancel it now?' She put her hand over her mouth in dismay. 'Not that the money is important, of course, darling. Your happiness is. But all the same—'

'I don't want to talk about it now,' I said. 'I'm tired. I'm going to bed.'

'I'll bring you up some hot milk,' said Mum. 'Help you sleep.'

'I don't need hot milk,' I told her. 'I'm perfectly well able to sleep, thanks. I'm exhausted.'

I opened the door of the front room. The presents were there, neatly piled to one side. The Egyptian cotton bed-linen. The set of Newbridge cutlery. The Waterford glass decanter. I wanted to pick up the Waterford glass decanter and hurl it across the room. But I didn't. There wouldn't have been any point. Besides, it wasn't my decanter to throw anywhere. Half of it belonged to Tim.

I couldn't sleep, of course. I lay in the bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering how my life could crumble around me like this. My wedding dress hung on the outside of the wardrobe, mocking me. I hadn't the heart to put it away. I couldn't bring myself to touch it.

I heard Alison come in around one o'clock and the muted tones of her conversation with Ian. I pulled the covers around me and tried to make myself fall asleep. I didn't want to talk to Alison.

She pushed open my bedroom door and tiptoed to the bed.

'Are you awake?' she whispered.

I kept my eyes tightly closed and tried to breathe deeply and evenly.

'You can't possibly be asleep.' Her voice was louder.

I didn't move.

'OK,' she said. 'Don't talk to me now. I understand. But you're well rid of him, Issy, and you know it. He's a shit. He always was a shit. I never liked him.'

You liar, I thought, as I kept my eyes closed. I've seen you looking at him. You know as well as I do that he's an attractive, sensitive bloke and you probably fancy him yourself.

'I'll talk to you tomorrow,' she said finally. 'It's probably for the best.'

I supposed everyone would tell me that. It's for the best. People always say it when something rotten happens, as though rotten things can actually make your life any better. I couldn't see how calling off the wedding I'd dreamed about since I was a child was for the best. I wanted to believe that it was simply postponed for a few months, but there was a band of ice around my heart that told me it could be postponed for ever.

I don't know when I eventually fell asleep. When I did, I dreamed of my wedding. It was taking place as though nothing had happened. Tim stood at the altar and smiled at me as he took my hands in his and promised to love me. I promised to love him too. It was only when we posed outside the church for the photographs that I realised I wasn't wearing my beautiful wedding dress but some old net curtains which had been in the hot-press for years.

'It isn't a valid wedding,' Father O'Brien told me mournfully. 'You have to wear a dress to make it a valid wedding. I'm very sorry, Isobel, but it's all been a dreadful mistake.'