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The Wedding Day

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chapter one

'So you don't think she'll mind?' I asked again, coming back to the breakfast table with two slopping mugs of coffee. I handed him one.

'Annabel, for the last time, I *know* she won't mind.' David reached for a piece of kitchen towel and carefully wiped the bottom of his mug before setting it down. 'That house stands empty for months on end, for heaven's sake, except when she deigns to pop in for two weeks in September. She'll be delighted to have the place occupied; she always is.'

'And you won't mind? I mean, us going?' I perched on a chair opposite him in my threadbare blue dressing gown, cradled my mug in my hands and peered anxiously at him over his propped-up newspaper. 'You'll be here all on your own, David, for the whole summer. Well, most of it, anyway. Be awfully quiet.'

With a sigh, he folded *The Times* carefully into quarters, laid it aside and smiled. 'I'll cope.' He reached across my rickety old pine table, laid his

immaculate Hilditch & Key shirt sleeve in the crumbs and detritus of breakfast and squeezed my arm. 'I've coped on my own for the last thirty-odd years. What makes you think I'll forget how to boil a kettle now? Or go out with my underpants on back to front, perhaps? And with the best will in the world, Annie, it's not as if your culinary skills are keeping me from wasting away, either. I think I'll survive. Incidentally, speaking of things culinary, there is a terrible pong in this kitchen.' He dropped my arm and sniffed the air cautiously. 'Emanating, I think, from those Waitrose curry cartons you so lovingly decanted our supper from last night. They're not still lurking about somewhere, are they?' He looked around suspiciously.

'It *would* be rather marvellous,' I went on abstractedly, gazing at a small patch of sunlight on the wall above his left shoulder, dimly aware that my eyes were shining but that I couldn't help it. 'And just what I need right now. Nearly two months of peace and quiet to finish this wretched book, and by the sea, too. And without . . . well . . .'

'Shopping to do and beds to make and the telephone ringing constantly and your bloody sister popping round every five minutes, yes, yes, I agree. We've been through this a million times, Annie, *take* the house in Cornwall and *fin*ish the wretched book and get it over and done with.' He grinned and propped up his newspaper again. Gave it a vigorous shake. 'Go on, bog off.'

'And we'll get married the moment I get back,' I said, putting my mug down decisively.

'And we'll get married the moment you get back,' he repeated from the depths of the broadsheet.

'In the church at the bottom of Cadogan Street? You know, the one we were going to look at? Bully the vicar into letting us use it even though we don't live round there? Offer him, I don't know, money for the church roof or something?'

He ground his teeth, just perceptibly. 'In the church at the bottom of Cadogan Street, corruptible vicar permitting, yes.'

'And only because Mum was cheated out of the church bit the first time round and would love it so, and—'

'Look,' he interrupted, shaking his paper again irritably. 'We've been through this a hundred times, Annie. We've been through the unsatisfactory nature of your charmless wedding to your faithless first husband, and the not unreasonable demands of my future mother-in-law for church nuptials the second time around, and I've *said* yes. Please don't make me tread on hot coals again,' he implored plaintively.

'And Flora would love it too,' I mused, picking up my plate and drifting absently to the sink, stacking it high on top of an already tottering pagoda of dirty dishes. 'The wedding, I mean. Being a bridesmaid, all that sort of thing.'

He caught my wrist suddenly as I floated back and kissed the palm of my hand hard. In a swift movement

he'd drawn me down on to his lap. 'Yes, she would,' he murmured, kissing me purposefully on the mouth. 'Now stop it. We've agreed. You go to Cornwall, you take my dippy aunt's house if it hasn't already been washed away by the sea, and you finish your book. Then you return, six weeks later, a woman of letters – and hopefully means, if they sock you the advance they've threatened – and in a matter of days you'll have a ring on your finger and all the bourgeois respectability that goes with being Mrs Palmer, the doctor's wife. Frankly, I think it's an admirable plan, and to be honest I don't really mind what you do so long as you stop burning the toast and making me drink coffee you can stand a spoon up in in Flora's chipped Groovy Chick mug.' He peered balefully into its pink depths.

'I'll have it back then, shall I? Since you're fussy?' Flora, having pounded downstairs, came through the door in her school uniform and plucked the mug from under his nose. She tasted it and made a face. 'Ugh, you're right, it's vile. Mum, pretending to make real coffee by putting in three spoonfuls of instant is not going to wash with your urbane, sophisticated boyfriend, you know.' She went to the sink and poured it away. 'And what are all these curry cartons doing in the sink?' She poked the precarious pile with an incredulous finger. 'No wonder it stinks in here. And stop hopping around,' she added as I hastily got off David's lap, blushing. 'You're sharing a bed together in this house, for

God's sake, I don't see that a cuddle at the breakfast table makes any difference.' She grinned conspiratorially at David, clearly relishing her role as the mature observer of impulsive love-birds. He winked good-naturedly back.

'Flora's right. Stop behaving as if we're just playing Scrabble up there and give her a little credit. And incidentally, where exactly does my new step-daughter fit into this great summer scheme of yours?'

I looked at him quickly, wondering for the first time if this was a veiled reproach, but his grey eyes were twinkling with amusement.

'What scheme?' demanded Flora. She threw back her head and gathered a sheet of silky dark hair into her hands, ready for the scrunchy poised between her teeth.

'Well, Flora, nothing's set in stone,' I began nervously, 'but you know this book I've been trying to—'

'Oh God, is it ten past?' Her eyes flew to the clock. 'My bus!' She seized a piece of burnt toast from the toaster and simultaneously stuffed books in a bag with the other. 'Yes, I know your book.'

'Well, Gertrude has a place by the sea, apparently.' I twisted my fingers anxiously, following her as she dashed around the kitchen gathering together gym kit, pencil case, trainers. 'You know, David's aunt—'

'Yes, of course I know Gertrude. Has she? I didn't know that.' She threw an enquiring glance over her shoulder at David as she reached behind the door for

her lacrosse stick and shoes.

He nodded. 'She does.'

'And . . . well, I thought I might go there. Borrow it, just for the summer. Just for six weeks or so—'

'Six weeks!' She paused. Stopped her packing and gazed. 'What, you mean . . . and I'll stay here? With David?'

'Oh no! No, I didn't mean that. No, it'll be during the school holidays, so you'll come with me. I'll be working, obviously, but I could get a nanny or something . . .'

'A *nanny.* God, Mum, I'm twelve. I don't need a nanny.'

'Well, you know, a girl, a teenager or something. An Aussie girl perhaps. Just for you to play with, to keep an eye on you.'

'Play, Mother?' She regarded me witheringly. Shook her head and resumed her packing. 'I can amuse myself. And anyway, I think I'd rather be in London. All my friends are staying in London for the summer, and I could stay here with David, couldn't I?'

'Doesn't matter a jot to me,' said David equably, getting up from the table and reaching for his suit jacket on the back of a chair.

I looked at him gratefully, loving him for playing to her bravado. For not saying: 'What friends, Flora?' or: 'Flora, do me a favour, you can't even manage a *sleep*over without your mum, let alone six weeks.'

'You girls sort it out between yourselves,' he went

on. 'Frankly, I think you'll have a job persuading your mother to leave you behind, but on the other hand, I think Flora's right. I'm not convinced she needs nannying amongst the rock pools. Other than that' – he held up his hands to stem the flow of protests en route from both of us – 'not my problem. I ain't getting involved.' He grinned. 'One of the perks of marrying into a ready-made family, see. They get to sort out their own domestics.' He glanced at his watch. 'And I'm going to be late for surgery if I don't get a wiggle on, so I'll see you both later.' He kissed me again on the mouth and tweaked Flora's pony-tail on the way out. 'Bye, you.'

'Bye.' She grinned good-naturedly back.

When he'd disappeared down the front hall and the door had shut behind him, the stained-glass panes rattling in the frame, I turned anxiously to her.

'But you will come with me, won't you, Flora? I hadn't planned on doing this without you, you know.'

She munched her toast without looking at me. Brushed some crumbs from her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Hadn't talked to me about it though, had you?'

'Well, no.' I hesitated. 'Obviously I had to talk to David first.' I paused, letting this new level of hierarchy sink in, then lost my nerve. 'I mean,' I said quickly, 'he's the one being left behind, and anyway, apart from anything else, I haven't asked Gertrude yet. The house does belong to her, and I

haven't even asked if I can borrow it yet.'

There was a silence as she fixed a silver grip carefully in the side of her hair.

'Where is this place, anyway?'

'Down on the north coast of Cornwall, near Rock. It's really pretty.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, apparently. And perched high up on the top of a cliff and – oh Flora, you can surf there and water-ski, sail dinghies, learn to ride, all that sort of thing. You'll have a terrific time! You'll meet people, make friends—'

'OK, OK, stop selling it. You'll be throwing in sing-songs around the campfire next. And what about David? Why isn't he coming?'

'He will, of course he will, for weekends. But he can't take all that time off, particularly if we want to have a honeymoon later on in the year.' I hesitated. 'Flora, you do realise we will *have* a honeymoon . . .'

'Oh God, I'm not coming on that!'

'No no,' I said quickly. 'Just checking you knew.'

'Mum, do me a favour.' She made a gormless face. 'Anyway, Granny will come and look after me, won't she?' She contrived to look nonchalant but her dark eyes were anxious and my heart lurched for her.

'Of course she will.'

Suddenly her face paled as she saw the sock she'd been looking for in the fruit bowl. She seized it.

'Oh Mum, my name tags! You didn't sew them on my games things and Miss Taylor said I'll get a debit

if they're not on by today!'

'Flora, it's quarter past already. Why didn't you remind me last night?'

'But I'll get a debit!' she wailed, pulling the whole kit out of her bag in a crumpled heap. 'And you never ironed it, and she said unless each piece is named, including the socks—'

'Here.' I snatched them up and ran to the kitchen drawer. The first biro nib disappeared up its plastic shaft, the second had no ink, so I seized a red felt pen and began to scrawl frenziedly.

'In pen?'

'So long as it's named, she won't mind,' I muttered. 'Tell her I'll do it properly tonight.'

As the red ink ran hideously into the cuff of her white socks I avoided her eyes which were round with horror. Poor Flora, always on the lookout for something new to fret about and always finding it in me. My daughter: so immaculate, so conscientious, so pristine, so fearful of incurring the potential anger of her teachers; a classroom helper and practically life-time holder of the manners badge, with shoes you could see your face in she shined them so assiduously at the kitchen table; and with a mother who tried hard to come up to her scrupulous standards, but failed miserably.

'Anyway, games today?' I stuffed it all back in hurriedly. 'I thought I wrote you a note? I thought you weren't doing games this week?'

'I tore it up,' she quaked. 'I know what she'll say.

It's no excuse. Lots of girls have periods, Mum. She won't let me off for that.'

I glanced up at my daughter's fearful face, but didn't comment. My petite, small-boned Flora, beautiful and dark with her huge brown eyes and her underdeveloped, childlike body, who, since the beginning of the year, had been brutally and systematically felled once a month with crippling tummy cramps and nausea. Doubled up with pain, her white face contorted with agony, she'd come home from school, drop her bags on the floor and collapse in a heap on the sofa whilst I hastened to get her a hot-water bottle to clutch to her stomach and a fistful of paracetamol.

'What is it, gym or netball?'

'Netball,' she said thankfully. 'At least I get to wear a skirt.'

I nodded, tight-lipped. 'OK. Now go. Go, darling, the bus will be at the corner any minute.'

We both glanced up as the familiar rattle heralded its approach and, through the kitchen window, saw the yellow school bus trundle around the corner.

'Go!' I yelled.

She went, snatching up her bags, flying down the passage and through the front door as I followed behind. But halfway down the garden path she turned. Ran back. Threw her arms around me.

'Bye, Mummy.'

'Bye.'

I hugged her hard. Kissed the top of her dark head

furiously to remind her how much I loved her. Then I turned her around by her shoulders, gave her a little push, and off she flew.

I stood at the door, shading my eyes against the low morning sun, watching as she boarded the bus. I saw her glance nervously over her shoulder as a couple of the older girls in short skirts bounded noisily up behind her. This morning they smiled as she turned, so she smiled back, then glanced quickly at me, to see if I'd noticed she'd been included. I held my smile, a lump in my throat.

'Four o'clock,' she mouthed, and I nodded. And not a moment later, she meant. Not a *mo*ment later.

The bus purred off and I stayed in the doorway, leaning on the frame and glancing up and down the quiet, tree-lined London street. The Victorian villas were more or less identical, give or take the window-box planting or the variety of white geraniums artfully arranged around the front doors, and the sun, at this time in the morning, lit up our side of the street like a film set. Periodically, doors would open and spew out their occupants: schoolchildren followed by harassed mothers raking combs through their hair, jingling keys down to four-wheel-drives at the kerb, yelling enquiries to their offspring about violins and book-bags; fathers, less crumpled – dapper even – in their dark suits, firmly shutting garden gates behind them (something the mothers never did) and forgetting, in that instant as it clanged behind them, the food-encrusted high chairs and

spilled Rice Krispies packets within, focusing only on the day ahead and the ebb and flow of the money markets as they headed purposefully for the City. Men who looked a whole lot like David, I reflected as I stood there, pleased, for once, to have a man who fitted in. Who conformed. Unlike Adam.

David was a GP, with salubrious premises in Sloane Street, which – if he'd caught his bus – he was doubtless striding towards even now. Off to heal the monied sick, off to the oak-panelled surgery where his late uncle, Hugh, Gertrude's husband, had practised before him, and Hugh's father before that; to the spacious second-floor consulting rooms which, lofty and sunlit, were flanked on either side by Gucci and Armani, ensuring, as I always quipped to David, that his patients arrived truly well heeled. But, as David always rather caustically quipped back, money couldn't cushion everything, and bum boils were bum boils no matter whose arse they were on. Neither the sheen on his mahogany desk nor the warmth of his Persian carpet, he maintained, could glamorise the lancing of them, however tasteful the underwear that had been dropped to reveal them.

So Belgravia was his given patch; and whilst it might be more uplifting, soul-wise, to serve the poor, to be shoving his way through a jam-packed, bug-ridden waiting room full of terminal coughers to get to his broom cupboard of a surgery in Peckham, people were still taken ill in his part of the world, and he was no less conscientious or hardworking

than his colleagues on the other side of the city. Yes, he had chi-chi premises, but he still did everything in his power to save his patients from undue pain. And it was here, near to his Sloane Street surgery, that he'd saved me, too. In so many ways.

The first thing I'd noticed about David had been his eyes, huge with horror as he came towards me at a run, arms outstretched, ready to push me away.

'Look out!' he cried as a sheet of plate glass, the one in the window of Boots the Chemists, had been about to receive a mighty blow from a parcel of bricks swinging precariously from a rope as they were incompetently raised by distracted workmen to scaffolding on the roof above. As the bricks hovered, swayed, and then lurched perilously close to the window, David simultaneously launched himself at me and Flora – just as the glass smashed to smithereens. As we were flung across the pavement with David prone on top of us, he looked up and let loose a stream of abuse at the workmen, the first and last time I ever heard him swear.

Thankfully the glass had fallen pretty much vertically and hadn't injured us, but David wasn't satisfied. As he picked himself up from the pavement and helped us to our feet, he took one look at the two tremulous females before him – who for various reasons hadn't been in the best of health even before the glass had shattered – and insisted we accompany him back to his surgery so he could check us over. I protested, but he was adamant.

'I promise you,' he said, 'you're as white as a sheet.'

'No, really, I'm fine.'

'Then you won't mind if I take your pulse?'

'No . . . but I think – oh God . . .' I put a hesitant hand to my forehead.

'You might be about to pass out?'

I nodded and, as I crumpled, he helped me to sit in an undignified heap on the kerb again, this time with my head between my knees in the gutter.

He squatted beside me, one hand on my back, and made me stay like that for a good few minutes whilst making reassuring noises and reminding me to breathe. Flora, meanwhile, scratched her leg awkwardly and went very pink. An interested flow of people were rubber-necking past, and even as the nausea swelled within me I knew she was thinking: Oh, please God, please *God* don't let there be anyone from my school.

After that little bit of street theatre I didn't really have a leg to stand on – literally or figuratively – so, with Flora trailing behind us, David helped me around the corner to his rooms on Sloane Street. They were through an archway, off the main road, and above a shady courtyard, and shaken as I was, I do remember thinking that the little Italianate piazza complete with fountain and exotic palm plants we skirted around before going up the stone entrance steps and through the heavy oak door was all pretty damned swanky. Once inside, in the hushed, marble

hall, David nodded to the uniformed concierge before shepherding us into an old-fashioned lift which concertinaed shut behind us like a gilded cage. We purred up in silence. On the second floor, the smooth blonde receptionist instantly abandoned Nigel Dempster and was all tea and sympathy at the sight of us, which Flora and I – completely overwhelmed now by the opulence of our surroundings – meekly lapped up. As we trooped into David's consulting room, the deep shine of the furniture, the pall of antiquity on the oils hanging from the panelling and the chesterfield sofa I was invited to sit upon all further contrived to render us mute and helpless. My daughter and I recognise social superiority when we see it.

David shone a torch in my eyes, and then carefully looked at my face.

'I'm checking for minuscule shards of glass . . .' he murmured, really very close up now, peering disconcertingly around. I could feel my cheeks reddening.

'But actually . . . you look . . . perfect.'

I flushed to my roots at this and, for a split second, he caught my eye. And that's where it all began, I think. In the eyes.

He cleared his throat and moved swiftly across to examine Flora, who was perched on an identical sofa on the opposite side of the room. This not only gave me an opportunity to breathe, but also to look at him.

God, he was handsome. Crouched as he was at my daughter's feet in his immaculate charcoal-grey suit

– oblivious of the fact that he might be kneeing his trousers on the oriental carpet – he made an attractive spectacle. His hair was fair and soft and swept back in a rather up-market way, and his narrow intelligent face, lightly tanned from a recent holiday, was concentrated into a look of deep concern. Flora sat before him, quiet as a mouse.

'You both look fine,' he declared suddenly, springing athletically to his feet. He snapped the torch back into a nifty little leather holster and went to perch on the edge of his desk, arms folded, elegant long legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles. He regarded us kindly. 'Though a little shaky. But if I were a betting man, I'd put your pallor down to exhaustion rather than the shock of that plate-glass window shattering. When did the pair of you last eat?'

I cleared my throat and tentatively admitted that we'd missed breakfast. Oh yes, and lunch too, on account of Flora being unable to face a thing with her appalling tummy cramps and me being too tired to contemplate food having been up all night trying to write. He frowned.

'I see. And you thought, having been up all night, that a little shopping spree in Knightsbridge might revive you?'

I smiled at his irony and gave him some of mine.

'Flora had set her heart on a pair of trousers. A crucial, must-have combat style that can't be found locally. Without them, her life would not be complete.

It had to be Knightsbridge.' I wasn't to know he wasn't a parent and that this would be lost on him.

He looked perplexed and said that he thought a decent breakfast a bit more important than a pair of trousers, and that since he'd been on his way to lunch when he'd literally bumped into us, why didn't we accompany him to Starbucks for coffee and sandwiches?

All of which, naturally, was above and beyond your average GP's call of duty, but as he explained to me later – much later, in bed in Fulham – behind the shock and fragility I was exhibiting that day he'd glimpsed something else. Something that made me an A1 example of the sort of woman – pale, gamine, ethereal and with long dark tresses – that he wasn't aware that he liked. And, whilst he didn't normally succumb to fey charms of this kind, he was suitably intrigued, not just to check me out for scratches, but to follow up the consultation with sustenance.

The hot chocolate and egg mayonnaise rolls in the window of the sunny café went down a treat and Flora and I guzzled greedily as dust motes gathered in shafts of light around us. Afterwards, equilibrium restored and swivelling restlessly on her high bar stool, my daughter announced that she was going down to Gap to secure the trousers. Promising to be no longer than twenty minutes, she disappeared, leaving the stage free for David to use those twenty minutes – impulsively I now realise, with the convenience of hindsight – to extract from me a promise

to be allowed to restore my blood sugar levels further at a restaurant of his choice the following evening.

That next night, after dinner, he'd taken me to bed. To my bed, in Fulham, becoming the only man to occupy the slot on the left-hand side of the Heal's summer sale bargain since my ex-husband Adam had vacated it. All of which totally disproved a long-held theory of mine, which went that if I ever *did* meet someone I liked enough for that to happen, I'd let him dangle for months for fear of making the same mistake again. Yet after our very first date – only thirty-six hours after our very first en*count*er in fact – there he was beside me, and I knew it was no mistake. Sexual desire had been obvious – it had been clear and sudden for both of us, minutes after meeting – but as he'd taken my elbow outside the Italian restaurant that night and manoeuvred me across the rain-soaked street to a taxi, threading his way expertly through the traffic, I'd been surprised to find myself, not only with all nerve endings tingling, but also precipitously in love with a man I hardly knew. Happily, he'd known it too, and a year later – almost to the day – here we were, on the brink of a wedding and a future together.

David moved into my tiny, bijou Fulham house, full of folk art and scatter cushions and twee clutter and rickety pine furniture, and left behind his spacious, minimalist, double O seven flat in Islington. It made sense, practicably, Islington being too far for

Flora to travel to school; but nevertheless, in my eyes, it was another expression of his love. The plan was to marry in the autumn, to sell both the properties and to buy in leafy Hurlingham, where, David predicted, the garden would soon play host to a pram, a paddling pool and, later, a tricycle or two.

All of which, frankly, made me want to pinch myself. In fact, as I confided to my sister Clare a few weeks after the Sloane Street incident and the Italian dinner, and with David safely installed in my tiny Fulham house, it almost made me want to believe there was Someone Up There rooting for me after all. We were in her kitchen at the time, picking at a carrot cake she'd ostensibly made for the children.

'I mean honestly, Clare, considering.'

'Considering what?' she'd retorted, spraying crumbs everywhere.

'Well, considering there've been times over the last couple of years when I'd begun to wonder if my continued existence on this earth was to anyone's advantage – let alone my own – to find myself feeling like a contender for the happiest girl in the world is surely little short of miraculous, isn't it?'

Clare had made her famous face: mouth turned down at the sides, neck muscles taut, head bobbing dubiously from side to side. But in the end she'd conceded that actually, given my provenance, it probably was. She snapped the lid smartly on the cake tin. Little short of miraculous.