

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Mother of the Bride

Marita Conlon-McKenna

About the Book

Everyone knows that **Amy** and **Dan** are made for each other. So when they announce their engagement their families are over the moon, especially Amy's mother **Helen**. What could be more exciting than planning a daughter's wedding?

But as the countdown to the Big Day begins, and mother and daughter throw themselves into creating the wedding of their dreams, not everyone's prepared for the commotion this involves.

Bride-to-be Amy sees her best-laid wedding plans start to unravel, as Helen struggles to pick up the pieces and get her family back on track. Amy and Helen each discover what love and marriage is all about... but is it too late?

It's not easy being a mother, let alone the *Mother of the Bride!*

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Chapter Fifty-Three
Chapter Fifty-Four
Chapter Fifty-Five
Chapter Fifty-Six
Chapter Fifty-Seven
Chapter Fifty-Eight
Chapter Fifty-Nine
Chapter Sixty
Chapter Sixty-One

Chapter Sixty-Two
Chapter Sixty-Three
Chapter Sixty-Four
Chapter Sixty-Five
Chapter Sixty-Six

Acknowledgements
About the Author
Also by Marita Conlon-McKenna
Copyright

MOTHER OF THE BRIDE

Marita Conlon-McKenna

For James with love

Chapter One

HELEN O'CONNOR LISTENED to the deep rumbling snores coming from the other side of the bed. Looking at Paddy's contented face, as he snored on oblivious, she resisted the urge to thump him or turn him over. Instead she snuggled down under the cosy quilt, trying to lull herself into her usual deep sleep.

The house was quiet, the sound from the big grandfather clock in the hall strangely comforting as Helen turned over. She was tired, and could feel herself relax as the familiar comfort of their big bed worked its magic. She was almost asleep when the phone beside the bed began to ring. A quick glance at the bedside clock showed her that the time was after midnight. Concerned, she began to sit up as she answered it; beside her, Paddy was already beginning to rouse himself and wake.

'Hello!' she answered, barely able to disguise the trepidation in her voice. Calls in the middle of the night usually signalled trouble of some sort. She held her breath, anxious.

'Mum, it's all right. It's Amy. I'm just phoning to tell you that Daniel and I have got engaged.' Their elder daughter, Amy, was breathless with excitement on the phone. 'We're in Venice, and it's so romantic. Dan proposed on this lovely little bridge over the canal as the sun went down, and then we went for dinner to this amazing restaurant called La

Rondine. We're so happy. Can you believe it, Dan and I are going to get married?'

'Amy and Dan have just got engaged!' Helen shouted, shaking Paddy awake. 'Oh, Amy, that's wonderful news.' Helen was so happy for them both. Amy and her boyfriend Daniel were touring around Italy for a week, and were flying back from Florence at the weekend. Although they had only been together for about two and a half years, Helen and Paddy had secretly hoped that this relationship would work out. They both really liked Daniel, and felt he would make a great son-in-law; everything that the parents of a daughter would wish for. 'Congratulations to you and Dan, we're so pleased for you.'

'Mum, Dan and I don't want a long engagement,' Amy continued. 'We want to get married next summer!'

'Next summer!' Helen was a little surprised. From what she could gather, weddings took a lot of organizing. Still, if that's what Amy and Dan wanted. 'That sounds perfect. Here, I'll put you on to your dad. He's dying to congratulate you, too.'

Paddy at this stage was propped against the pillows, gesticulating madly that he wanted to talk to Amy. Helen passed him the phone, and craned to listen to the conversation.

'Amy, pet, congratulations. We're delighted. Dan's a lovely fellow, and I know that you'll be happy together,' Paddy said, trying to control his emotion. 'From the minute I met him I knew that he would always take good care of you. And now he's going to marry *my little girl!*'

'Oh, Dad,' Amy wailed. 'I'm glad that you and Mum are so pleased for us. It's just so exciting.'

'Put Daniel on the phone a minute,' prompted Paddy. 'We want to tell him just how happy we are with the good news.'

They both pulled the phone off each other telling Daniel Quinn just how happy they were at the prospect of his

joining the O'Connor clan. And they were both reassured by his promises to take care of their elder daughter.

'Mammy, is Ciara there? I want to tell her too!'

Paddy yelled for their younger daughter, Ciara. Her dark hair standing on end, she arrived like a zombie in black pyjama bottoms and an ancient T-shirt, and grabbed the phone off them.

'Hey, Amy, I can't believe it. You and Dan getting engaged ... it's so grown up!'

She curled up on top of their bed as she chatted with Amy, eventually passing back the phone. Helen listened as Amy excitedly went through every detail of the proposal and told them she was sending them a photo of her engagement ring from her cell phone. Ciara went and grabbed her phone as the image appeared on the screen, and passed it to them, Helen being struck by the technology that could enable her to see the ring on her daughter's finger, even though she was in Italy and they were back home here in Dublin. All of them admired Amy's beautiful diamond ring.

'It's absolutely gorgeous.'

'Mum, listen, we've got to go! We have to phone Dan's parents and Ronan and Jess, but we're dying to see you all next week, when we can celebrate properly together.'

'Good night, love,' Helen said as the call ended, Ciara, Paddy and herself all agreeing that the engagement was great news.

'She asked me to be a bridesmaid,' yawned Ciara. 'Does that mean I have to wear some disgusting frilly dress or something?'

'That's great,' said Helen, wondering how in heaven's name Amy was going to get her normally Goth-styled sister into anything resembling a bridesmaid dress. 'I'm sure you'll be a wonderful bridesmaid and a great help to Amy.'

'Mmmm!' said Ciara, before giving them a quick hug and sloping off to her own bedroom.

'That will be something to see!' Paddy joked as he clambered back into bed beside Helen.

'Can you believe it, Amy getting engaged and married?' Helen fixed her pillows as she sat up in bed. Why, it only seemed like yesterday that Amy had been born and they'd brought home a wriggling, squealing baby from Holles Street Maternity Hospital, and had looked at each other with hardly a clue as to what to do with her. Somehow Paddy and herself had muddled through that first year of parenthood and survived it. The years had flown by as their young family had grown.

'She's thirty years old, Helen.'

'Oh, Paddy, you know what I mean. She's our first baby, and now she's going to have a husband, and then a family of her own.'

'I know, love,' said Paddy. 'I know.'

'Can you believe it, Paddy, Dan and Amy engaged!'

'Of course I can. They both love each other, and Dan is a gentleman, and I told him that I'd be delighted to have him as a son-in-law.'

'You told him that ... when?'

'When he asked me for Amy's hand; he wanted to be sure that I approved of them getting married, and would give my permission.'

'He asked you!' Helen gasped, incredulous. 'When?'

'We had lunch in town together about five weeks ago, and he told me what he was planning.'

'Paddy O'Connor! Do you mean to tell me that you knew all about this engagement weeks ago, and you never said a word to me!'

'Not a word! I was under strict instructions to keep it a secret. Dan wanted it to be a total surprise for Amy.'

'Paddy!' She couldn't credit it, her husband of thirty-two years keeping a big secret like that from her. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I promised Dan, and you know you would never have been able to keep it in, Helen. You know you wouldn't.'

'I could have,' she protested, indignantly.

'Really?' he said, wrapping his arms around her.

She had to laugh. Paddy knew her better than she knew herself. She had to admit that he was right. It would have been very hard to have not said something, or even not smiled every time she was around her daughter. Thank heaven for Paddy's good sense.

Wrapped in her husband's arms, she hoped that her daughter's marriage would bring the same fulfilment and happiness that she and Paddy shared. Like all couples, they had endured the ups and downs that life brings, the good times and bad times, but theirs was a happy marriage, and she knew in her heart that fate had smiled down at her the night she had met Paddy O'Connor.

'Honestly I'll ...'

'What will you do?' he teased.

A while later she listened as Paddy began to snore again. A bull elephant, a train hurtling down a track, or a juggernaut. The sounds varied but were for the most part consistent. She resisted the usual urge to nudge him, thinking instead of the wedding. There was nothing like it: a big family wedding, with aunts and uncles, cousins and relations and friends, all gathering together to celebrate Amy and Dan getting married.

A summer wedding! Could anything be more perfect?

Chapter Two

AMY LOOKED AT the sparkling ring on her finger again. She loved it! Loved the way the beautiful single diamond caught the light. Daniel had chosen the most perfect ring for her, one that fitted her finger exactly. He knew her so well, he knew just what she liked. She still couldn't believe that they were engaged, and were going to get married and live together happily ever after. It was like a dream come true. She smiled, thinking of Dan getting down on one knee on the bridge overlooking the canal and asking her to marry him!

From the minute they had met Amy had realized that Dan was 'the one', the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. He wasn't just her best friend and soulmate but the love of her life. She loved Daniel Quinn with all her heart, and now he was going to be her husband. Husband! She liked the sound of it ... the very word ... husband.

Her parents had been delighted, and she was sure that secretly it was a huge relief to them that at thirty years and five months she had found a husband. And not just a husband, but Daniel, who she knew they both totally approved of and liked.

'They are over the moon. I knew they'd be!' She laughed as Daniel began to phone his parents and friends. Just imagine! In less than a year she would be Mrs Amy Quinn!

The proposal had been so romantic. They'd been walking through the streets of Venice as night fell. During the day Venice bustled with tourists and their cameras; groups of

Japanese visitors following guides around St Mark's Square as they tried to see all the sights; and queues for vaporetti and expensive gondola rides. But as the sun went down on the lagoon and the island emptied, the tour bus crowds left and it became a different place. *La Serenissima*: a place of lovers and trysts and secret history, filled with centuries of romance and intrigue. Where lovers walked hand in hand through narrow streets, and disappeared behind the shuttered doors and hidden balconies of palazzos and villas and old houses, and pledged to love each other for eternity.

No wonder Dan had insisted that they go for a pre-dinner walk far from the Grand Canal, and crossed one of the smaller bridges to a place that was quiet and beautiful, where they could watch the red sun slip from the sky and disappear into the water.

'I wanted to be sure that we were alone.' He had grinned, touching her shoulder.

They certainly had been alone: most people had already crammed into the *bacari* for drinks and to sample the tapas-like *cicchetti*; or were dining in the busy restaurants.

'It's just so beautiful here!' she had said, leaning against him as she'd taken in the breathtaking views all around them. Amy could not believe this City of Bridges on the Adriatic, with its myriad canals, huge lagoon, and waterbuses that ferried people from place to place.

'You know, legend has it that Italian lords and nobles of old would bring their lady loves here, to this Santo Cristo bridge, to look at the city and the water at twilight, so they could pledge their love,' Daniel had said slowly.

Amy had held her breath, barely daring to speak, as he'd got down on one knee and taken her hand in his.

'I love you, Amy,' he had said, his eyes fixed on hers. 'Will you marry me? Marry me!'

She hadn't even had to think or hesitate for a second: marrying Daniel was all she'd ever wanted. 'YES ... YES ... YES! A hundred times "yes"!' Amy had shouted, like some

crazy mad Irish woman, as Daniel had stood up and taken a small jewel box from the pocket of his trousers. Dumbfounded and delirious with happiness, Amy had looked at the perfect diamond on its slim band of gold which he'd slipped on to her finger. Dan's long face had been intense and serious as he'd held her hand in his.

Lightheaded and giddy for a second, Amy's heart had flipped over! She had felt it pounding crazily against her ribs as she'd looked at Daniel, overwhelmed, while he'd enveloped her in his arms, kissing her and holding her like he never wanted to let her go.

'I'm so happy,' she'd told him, trying not to cry.

'I wanted it to be somewhere special. Somewhere we'd always remember and think about. Italian legend says that the couples who pledge their love to each other here will love each other till the end of time.'

'I love you now and for ever,' she said aloud, overcome with emotion.

Dan was the best boyfriend in the world, and she was the luckiest girl to have found him. They had been going out for two and half years, but both of them had known almost immediately that they were meant for each other. Now she couldn't believe it: they were engaged and going to get married!

'Come here, you!' she'd said, pulling him closer and kissing him.

A long time afterwards, as they'd watched the last rays of the sun disappear and lights flicker, lighting up the city and sparkling on the dark water, they'd begun to walk back slowly towards the restaurant he had booked for dinner. Hand in hand, they'd laughed and chatted.

'I booked us a table at La Rondine.'

'Oh, Dan, you've everything planned.' Amy had laughed. La Rondine was one of the best restaurants in Venice, and there was a waiting list for a table.

He'd told her that they were going somewhere fairly fancy for dinner, so luckily she'd decided to dress up a bit and put on her cream linen shoestring dress, instead of her normal jeans and T-shirt and flip-flops. She had flicked her light brown hair softly around her face and pinned a piece of it back with an antique comb he'd bought her in a little shop near the Rialto.

The restaurant was on a small side street and overlooked the water. It had candles on the tables, and fairy lights decorating the beautiful wrought ironwork on the balconies and windows and doors. The former summer residence of an Italian prince, it still had most of its original stonework and carvings, and there was a fresco on one wall.

They had the best table in the house; and Dan, wanting to celebrate, had ordered a bottle of champagne before they'd even had time to study the menu.

'You look so beautiful,' he'd said, kissing her hand.

'And you look so handsome,' she'd said, returning the compliment as she'd gazed at his blue eyes fringed with dark lashes, and his unruly dark hair - which he hadn't combed when he'd got out of the shower earlier. He'd been wearing a light blue shirt and beige chinos which emphasized his lean body.

Knowing this night was going to be unforgettable, Amy had ordered gnocchi to start and the house special of butter fish for her main course. The setting was so perfect, and Dan had squeezed her hand as they listened to the band singing 'L'amore' over in the corner.

Amy hadn't been able to resist every now and then watching her ring sparkle in the flickering candlelight as they shared the most romantic night ever.

'Wait till the family and everyone hears!' She'd laughed. 'They won't believe it.'

'The lads will be surprised!' Dan had said.

Talk about understatement: most of Dan's friends had been going out with girls for years - some since college and two or three since school - and yet none of them had gotten around to making the relationships permanent. Dan's best friend Liam was an utter player, and went from girlfriend to girlfriend, all of them beautiful and blonde - and none good enough for him to commit to!

'Will we phone them?'

'Let's enjoy the rest of the night here,' Dan had teased. 'You know if you start calling people you'll be doing it for hours.'

She'd laughed. He was so right. 'We'll phone them when we get back to the hotel.'

A long time after midnight they had taken a water taxi back to the hotel. Wrapped in each other's arms, both deliriously happy and a little drunk, they'd been ready to tell everyone the good news about their engagement.

Chapter Three

'ENGAGED?' JESSICA KILROY screamed. 'You and Dan got engaged!'

She couldn't believe it. Her best friend Amy had woken her in the middle of the night, phoning from Venice to tell her that she had just got engaged to her boyfriend.

'The wedding's going to be next summer, Jess, and I really want you to be my chief bridesmaid. Say yes, please!' insisted Amy, all excited.

'What about Ciara?'

'Of course Ciara's going to be a bridesmaid, too, she's my sister. But I want you to be chief bridesmaid, Jess. Will you do it?'

'Of course I will,' Jess agreed immediately, knowing that no one in their right mind would have a flaky weirdo like Ciara O'Connor as their chief bridesmaid, sister or not.

'Then that's settled,' said Amy, happily. 'Jess, I'm so glad that you'll be there when I'm walking up the aisle.'

Jess smiled. She had always been right beside Amy, ever since their first day at St Teresa's School. Both terrified and missing their mummies, they'd struck up an immediate friendship, clinging on to each other as they braved the class of twenty-five boys and girls. All through school they had been there for each other: like two little angels dressed in white frilly dresses on their First Communion day; or trying to control their giggles during numerous school plays, which involved dressing up as everything from shepherds to pirates and dancing fish. They'd shared years of birthday parties, and school outings, and tours! They'd

both got lost on their transition-year trip in Paris. They'd been seasick together on the car-ferry to Holyhead, en route to Stratford-on-Avon, and both frozen to the marrow up in Mayo on a class outdoor-pursuits weekend which involved bogs and mountains and abseiling - and far too much cold water for their liking. They'd cheered each other on, playing hockey and basketball, both relegated to their school's worst teams. One year they'd worked on a joint science project which got them a place in the Young Scientist of the Year exhibition - much to the surprise of their science teacher, Miss Heaney.

They'd both got drunk for the first time together, followed by a night spent secretly puking in Amy's house, and deep, deep regret - with vows to become teetotallers, which they had promptly both broken at the following weekend's disco in the rugby club. They'd fallen in love in the same week at Irish college, and had bawled like two red-faced babies the whole way home on the bus from Donegal with their young hearts broken. They'd gone to the same university and backpacked around Europe together, got burnt to a crisp in various holiday resorts from Marbella to Crete in their skimpy bikinis, and bailed each other out more times than they cared to remember. Their friendship had spanned almost their whole lives, and Jess knew that she wouldn't have missed being part of Amy's wedding for the world.

'Listen, Jess, Dan says I've to get off the phone or we'll be rabbiting on for the night and it'll cost a fortune.'

'Tell him to shut up.' Jess laughed. 'It's not every day my best friend gets engaged.'

'No, I'd better go.' Amy sighed happily. 'Anyway, I'll see you the minute we get home. There's so much to talk about.'

Jess sat on the side of her bed in her pyjamas. She really was happy for Amy, delighted for her. Daniel Quinn was drop-dead lovely, the ideal boyfriend, and would make a

perfect husband. Amy was so lucky to have met him. They were a perfect pair and were meant for each other. Being Amy's bridesmaid was an honour, and one that she would take seriously. She'd have to organize Amy's hen weekend! Help with the wedding! She wanted everything to go smoothly for her best friend.

Looking out at the dark street Jess thought just how differently their lives were running now, both going in different directions: Amy getting married and settling down with Daniel, while she was resolutely single. She could hardly remember the last time she had gone on a decent date, let alone had a romance with someone. She met guys all right, in bars and discos, and they seemed interested in her, but usually she never heard from them again. In teacher training college she'd dated a guy called Brian Carson for a year, trying to convince herself that he was special, but she hadn't been surprised when he'd told her that he had met someone else, a girl from Cork, and had got a job in a school down there. There had been a few guys that she had seen briefly since then, but nobody special, and her heart ached to meet someone and love them just the way Amy loved Daniel.

She glanced at herself in the bedroom mirror, seeing a broad face with brown eyes, framed by wavy fair hair. She was wearing an old Mr Men T-shirt and red and black doggy print bottoms. Hardly attractive! Who'd love someone who looked like she did? Guys only wanted to date girls who were anorexic and thin! This wedding was a wake-up call ... time for her to be not only a bridesmaid but to get herself in order, get focused on finding her own Mr Right. She would lose weight, at least a stone! There was no way she was walking up any aisle the size she was now. She had no intention of looking like an elephant dressed in a bridesmaid dress beside skinny Ciara O'Connor, who hadn't a pick on her. She would get fit. Go for long walks every weekend. Let her nails and hair grow. Set up a file on

her laptop immediately called 'Amy's Wedding'. This would be her bible, with lists and plans of all kind. She was a good organizer, all her friends knew that, and first thing in the morning she would text them all and tell them the good news.

Chapter Four

HELEN SLIPPED OUT of bed, pulling on her dressing gown and slippers quietly, so as not to disturb Paddy. How could he sleep with all the excitement of Amy's engagement! Her mind was racing, filled with plans and lists and ideas! Trying not to wake him, she went downstairs to the kitchen and plugged on the kettle. She liked it when the house was still and quiet, sleeping. It gave her time to think, the only noise the sound of a thrush singing somewhere out in the trees.

As the pale sun began to rise she curled up on the window seat with the warm mug of tea in her hand. She still couldn't believe that Amy was all grown-up now and was engaged! It only seemed like yesterday that the kitchen had been littered with a high chair and a playpen and baby toys; then there had been Lego sets and Barbies, My Little Ponies and Sylvanian Families, Nintendos and Amy's rollerblades! Where had those years gone? Soon Amy would be married and creating a family of her own!

All the birds were leaving the nest: Ronan, their twenty-six-year-old, was living with his Polish girlfriend, Krista, in a house in Ranelagh with a few friends. And Ciara, their youngest, who was still in college, had made it quite clear that as soon as she was able to leave home she'd be gone, too. Soon there would be just Paddy and herself and Barney the dog left rattling around the house. Helen suddenly felt old, as if a big chapter of her life was beginning to close while another one opened.

She glanced at the clock. It was only 6.55 a.m. She made another cup of tea and some toast for herself. She was dying to phone Fran Brennan with the news. She'd give her best friend another hour. When Paddy was up and dressed they'd phone Dan's parents. She had met Eddie and Carmel Quinn only once, briefly, when they had bumped into each other at a charity fund-raising concert with Amy, but they had seemed nice. Hopefully they were equally pleased about the engagement, and the fact that they were all going to be in-laws. She was dying to tell everyone the good news. Her eighty-four-year-old mother Sheila would be thrilled with the romance of the proposal in Italy and news of her first grandchild's wedding. It would give Sheila something to look forward to: at her age, births, marriages and deaths became huge milestones.

From her friends, Helen knew that a daughter's wedding was fun but also a lot of work. It was going to be such a happy time, and she couldn't wait till Amy got home to sit down and talk about their wonderful wedding plans! It was so exciting!

Helen put Barney on the lead as she crossed over to Fran's house. Fran, in her navy tracksuit, congratulated Helen with a big hug as the two of them set off for their regular morning walk through Linden Crescent and down through the big public park close by.

'Go on, tell me all about it. I love news of engagements and weddings!' Fran encouraged. Katie, her eldest daughter, had got married only three years ago. She had enjoyed every minute of organizing the wedding - and now was the proud granny of two-year-old Saoirse.

'Well, it was very romantic,' Helen began, retelling the whole story about the proposal overlooking the canal in Venice.

'Lucky Amy,' said Fran enviously. 'When Tom and I got engaged it wasn't very romantic! I was twelve weeks

pregnant with Greg. Poor Tom nearly had a fit. We were terrified telling our families. I think Gladys Brennan thought that I was a brazen hussy and had trapped her son and forced him into marrying me. Funny, because when Greg was born she was mad about him. He was her favourite out of all her sixteen grandchildren.'

'I remember when Paddy asked me to marry him it was coming up to Christmas and my family was upstairs in bed. You could hear my dad snoring!'

'Talk about romance.' Fran laughed.

'We were sitting at the fire with the Christmas tree lights on and Paddy took me totally by surprise when he proposed. We bought the ring the next day in town, and came home and told my parents. It's so different to now. Couples fly off somewhere exotic, like New York or Paris or Venice, to pop the question!'

'Engagements are great! But they're nothing compared to the wedding, as that's what it's all about!' insisted Fran. 'You know me, I love weddings.'

'You are such an old romantic,' Helen teased. Fran couldn't see a wedding car pass or watch a bride going into a church without getting emotional.

'But when it's your own daughter's wedding it's so much fun, Helen, I promise. I know there's a lot of work and stress organizing things, but it's great. I loved it! It's just such a special time. I really enjoyed helping Katie organize her wedding, and I'm sure that Amy's wedding is going to be wonderful. You're going to have such fun!'

'I hope so.'

'Have you met Dan's parents yet?' quizzed Fran.

'Only very briefly, but I think we should have a family get-together dinner when Amy and Dan get home. The dad, Eddie, seems grand, but Carmel ... I'm not that sure about her. She's tall and very elegant and rather full of herself. A bit intimidating!'

'Do you remember I had the mother-in-law from hell?'

Helen laughed, remembering Fran's mother-in-law, Gladys, who had visited every Sunday and always complained about the dinner Fran had made.

'She was a right rip! She had me scalded. Nothing I could ever say or do was good enough for her. She criticized my cooking, my cleaning, my childrearing, my weight.'

'At least she spoke to you.' Helen laughed. 'Bridey O'Connor didn't speak to me for years. She thought I wasn't good enough for Paddy. She rarely visited, and made me feel so unwelcome when we used to go down to Cork that eventually I stopped going.'

'But you were good to her in the end, Helen.'

'She was Paddy's mother. I wouldn't have it on my conscience not to be good to her.'

'God, I hope we don't end up like that with our daughters-in-law,' worried Fran.

'You and Sandra get on like a house on fire - although of course she isn't actually married to Greg,' teased Helen. 'Anyhow, I don't think Carmel's that bad. It's just she's rather distant and caught up in her own life.'

They walked along the leaf-strewn paths, turning down by the lake, where Barney barked at the ducks dabbling in the muddy water. Then they passed by the new playground, where a few mothers watched toddlers playing on the swings and slides.

'Pity they didn't have that here when ours were young,' said Helen aloud.

'Are you mad? We'd never have got them out of it! I brought little Saoirse here when I was minding her one day last week, and I had to bodily lift her, hysterical, from the swings, and she screamed the park down. A woman came over to check that I wasn't kidnapping her.'

'Things have changed so much.' Helen laughed. 'We used to let our kids run around this place on their own. The only worry was that they'd fall in the water with the ducks.'

We'd be called unfit mothers these days for letting them loose in the park without an adult.'

'Do you remember the time my Lisa walked to the shopping centre? She can't have been more than three years old and the security guard brought her home.'

'You hadn't even missed her,' said Helen. 'God, it was so easy and uncomplicated then.'

After doing another circuit of the park they turned for home and a celebratory cup of coffee back in Helen's place, with Fran promising to give her an idea of how to start planning a wedding.

Chapter Five

AMY AND DAN decided to hold a party to celebrate their engagement a few days after they got back from Italy, but when Amy looked around their two-bedroom apartment in Milltown, she wondered how in heaven they were going to squeeze so many friends and family into such a small space!

As they were one of the first of their group to get engaged there was great excitement, and having a party seemed the perfect way to announce it. Both sets of parents were coming to the party, Dan saying it was a chance for them to meet in a relaxed, informal way. Amy worried that they wouldn't hit it off.

All week everyone had been congratulating them. Norah Fortune and the crew in Solutions, the marketing company where Amy worked, had made a great fuss and bought a big chocolate cake.

'You came home with more than a tan from Italy,' Jilly had joked, admiring her ring.

* * *

'Do you think there are enough candles?' Amy asked.

'Enough? The place looks like a church!'

'Candlelight is romantic!' she teased, slipping into his arms.

'I'm feeling romantic, then.' Daniel mussed Amy's freshly blow-dried hair as she tried to stop him. Undeterred, he ran his hand sensually over her hips in the

silky blue and grey wrap dress she had bought especially for the occasion.

‘Dan,’ she teased, kissing him slowly. ‘We don’t have time! People will be here any minute.’

‘Later, then!’ he promised, reluctantly letting her go.

She mentally did a run-through: the champagne and white wine were chilling in the fridge, the crates of beer were out on their narrow balcony, and a case of Bordeaux was sitting at room temperature in the corner of the spare room. Both of them had been to scabby engagement parties which hadn’t even provided one drink for the guests, an early harbinger of wedding guests having to shell out a fortune to see friends marry in some out-of-the-way location. Neither of them wanted anything like that!

Amy had made some canapés and finger food for the party, and her mum was bringing some quiches.

‘People are not coming for the food!’ murmured Daniel, wandering into the kitchen and grabbing two cheese and mushroom vol-au-vents. He stuffed them into his mouth.

‘They’re for later,’ she warned, smacking him on the fingers as he tried to pinch a few more. Then the bell rang downstairs and she pressed to open the door.

‘Take these, Amy love.’ Her mum and Ciara arrived laden down with four massive home-made quiches – which they would serve later – and a basket of crusty sliced French bread. Meanwhile, her dad and brother lugged another big crate of beer into the apartment.

‘Thanks, Mum, here’s some wine. You deserve it.’

Helen O’Connor grabbed the reviving glass and glanced around the apartment approvingly. Amy and Daniel had done a great job on the place, and it was a true reflection of both their styles, with two big red comfy couches and a mixture of family photos and quirky art prints decorating the walls.

‘Do you have any vodka?’ asked Ciara, rooting through the kitchen cupboards.

'No!' said Amy, glad that their bottles of vodka and rum and gin had been secretly stashed away. She had no intention of having her younger sister get plastered drunk tonight in front of her friends. 'There's plenty of wine and beer, though, so help yourself.'

Looking disgruntled, Ciara contented herself with a can of chilled Heineken, then she joined Ronan and his girlfriend Krista, and Dan's friend Jeremy, who were smoking out on the balcony.

Amy watched, amused, as her mum automatically began to serve drinks and introduce people, dragging her dad over to meet Dan's brother Rob and his girlfriend Hannah. Rob was a taller, bigger, fatter version of Dan, and had been going out with Hannah for years. Hannah stared enviously at Amy's ring, and Amy wondered why they hadn't got around to getting married.

'We should all try to get to know each other before the wedding,' she coaxed, as her dad did his best to be polite and friendly.

As her girlfriends arrived they demanded not only to look at her beautiful engagement ring, but to try it on and make a wish.

'Please, Amy, for luck! We just want to make a wish!' begged Lisa and Tara in unison.

Reluctantly, Amy slipped the ring off her finger and on to the fingers of two of her closest friends. She knew exactly what each of them was wishing. Lisa was wishing that Simon O'Keefe, the lazy sod she was living with, would do the decent thing and after six years of being together propose before she was an old lady; whilst Tara was wishing that her boyfriend Johnny would stop cheating on her.

'Amy, the ring is gorgeous,' Tara said, twisting it around her finger.

'If Simon ever gets me jewellery it's usually totally wrong!' sighed Lisa. 'Do you remember that awful watch with the brown leather strap he got me last Christmas? I had to bring it straight back and exchange it and he was in a huff for days as a result. And what about that vile pearl choker!'

Tonight of all nights, Amy wasn't in the mood for a litany of complaints about Simon. Excusing herself, she moved off to open a few more bottles of wine as the crowd swelled and the music began to get louder and louder. There was no sign of Carmel and Eddie Quinn yet. She glanced across the room to see Dan surrounded by Colm and Kev and a load of his mates, who were downing cans at a fierce rate. Dan raised his can to her, and she silently mouthed I LOVE YOU before grabbing the fancy silver corkscrew.

'Do you want a hand with that?' Jess slipped in beside her and grasped another opener and a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

'You look great,' Amy said, noticing that Jess had made an extra special effort to straighten her normally wayward hair and was wearing a short, V-necked dress with tights and a pair of sexy new peep-toe black shoes.

'Do you think so?'

'Yes I do,' Amy said, giving her friend a hug. 'And if Dan's friends don't notice you then they need to go and get laser surgery on their eyes.'

'Is Liam coming?'

Amy groaned inwardly. What Jess saw in Liam Flynn was beyond her. He and Dan might be best friends but she wouldn't wish him on her worst friend, let alone her best one. Liam went through girls like nobody else she knew, charming and winning over each poor sucker before a few months later getting bored and breaking it off, and moving on to some new conquest that he swore to Dan was just the woman he was looking for ...