

# *Chapter One*

## **Felicity**

Felicity Bell could think of a number of places she'd rather be on a Friday night than in the pretentiously decorated living room of a house owned by her friend's no-good ex-husband. But here they were—she, Neve and Emma—for the benefit of their beloved sons who were all dressed up like James Bond and ready to attend their year twelve ball.

'Do you think I should get Botox?' Neve asked, reaching a perfectly manicured hand up to her forehead and brushing her fingers across her wrinkle-free skin.

Flick laughed and took another sip of her champagne—yes, actual champagne; Max and Chanel were obviously trying to impress tonight. 'You are the last person I know who needs Botox.'

Beside them, Emma sighed and eyed herself in the nearby floor-to-ceiling mirrors. She flattened a hand down the front of her dress. 'If you need Botox, then I need a total body makeover. Know any good plastic surgeons who do the full shebang?'

Flick shook her head. ‘Would you two listen to yourselves? You’re both being ridiculous. You’re beautiful.’

Neve was dressed for the occasion in a knee-length gold cocktail dress only a shade or two darker than her pixie-cut hair. Her muddy brown eyes almost looked gold as well tonight. Emma, less flashy but just as gorgeous, had gone for a simple black shift that showed off her curves. Her ash-blonde hair—usually tied back—cascaded in waves to just below her shoulders, indicating she’d made more effort than usual tonight. Although the grey beneath her eyes suggested she could do with a good night’s sleep. Flick, in a green silk shirt and black trousers she’d had for years, felt positively drab in comparison.

Neve wrapped her arm around Emma and turned her away from the mirror. ‘I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m being ridiculous. Maybe it’s the boys. I just can’t believe they’re so close to graduating. I feel really old all of a sudden.’ She sipped her champagne and glanced through the open windows to the landscaped backyard. It could have been a resort, or a set for one of those tropical reality shows.

Outside by the pool, Neve’s seventeen-year-old son, Will, a tall, cheekily handsome blonde, was larking with Flick’s own son Toby, Emma’s son Caleb and a couple of other boys from Dayton Grammar school. Their partners for the ball were a few feet away fawning over each other’s gowns, many of which Flick suspected cost more than her wedding dress had.

It didn’t seem five minutes since Toby had been a dark-haired newborn. But now her baby was a teenager in his final year at high school and her daughter, Zoe, was only a few months away from marriage. Wasn’t forty-five too young for a mother of the bride outfit? Never mind the fact that—these days—twenty was far too young to get married. Everything was changing too fast. ‘You’re right,’ Flick said. ‘We’re too young for all of this.’

‘No, *she’s* too young for this,’ Emma spat and downed the contents of her crystal champagne flute in one quick gulp. She pointed the empty glass at the skinny, platinum blonde currently schmoozing with her other more-deserving guests. Chanel and Max had been pointedly ignoring them since they’d arrived.

None of them knew exactly how old Chanel was, but Flick guessed mid-twenties at most. It was easy to see what Emma’s ex-husband Max saw in her, and let’s just say, it wasn’t her brains. But brains or not, if looks could kill Chanel would be lying in a pool of blood on her immaculate outdoor decking.

A waiter swooped upon the trio of women and refilled their glasses.

‘Maybe you should just leave us the bottle.’ Emma grabbed for it but the man had superhuman reflexes and raised it out of her reach. He smiled politely and then retreated hastily, taking the champagne with him.

Flick looked around, wondering where her husband had vanished to. Maybe Seb would steal them another bottle. He’d relish the challenge of sneaking into the kitchen without getting caught. He’d always been the life of the party, the first to suggest some kind of silly prank or accept a stupid dare, so much more spontaneous and social than she was—one of the many things that had attracted her to him.

‘Hey, did you hear about Julian?’ Emma’s question interrupted Flick’s thoughts.

‘Julian who?’ she and Neve asked in unison.

‘Julian Fletcher-Jones.’ At their blank faces, Emma elaborated. ‘He’s that hotshot basketball player in year twelve. Has had the Wildcats sniffing around him.’

Flick racked her brain for a face. Although Dayton sometimes felt like a small country town, it had in excess of six hundred students, so she didn’t know every kid in her son’s year.

‘Well...’ Emma leaned in close, indicating she had juicy gossip indeed. ‘Word is he got a girl from the local *public* high school up the duff.’

‘Pregnant?’ Neve whispered.

Flick gasped as her hand shot to cover her mouth. ‘Now I remember!’ She lowered her voice, hoping no one had heard her shriek. ‘His mum’s that toffee-nosed cow who wouldn’t let us join her book club all those years ago. What’s her name again?’

Emma smiled victoriously and nodded. ‘Anouk. Apparently she’s ropeable—“*The least he could have done was choose a girl of better breeding*”—and *her* parents are very religious and want them to get married the moment they are both eighteen. The baby is due smack bang in the middle of final exams. Poor kids.’

‘Geez.’ Neve shook her head, her face turning pale. She looked out at the pool, where the boys were joking around with their mates. ‘I’d murder Will if he got Stacey knocked up. I’ve been leaving condoms in his bedside table, just in case.’

Emma gripped Neve’s arm. ‘And has he been...you know... using them?’

‘I haven’t actually asked him. He’d probably die if I tried to talk to him about sex, but either there’s a condom fairy taking them during the night or, yes, he’s using them.’

‘*God.*’ Flick groaned, feeling simultaneously sick and in need of more alcohol. Should *she* be leaving condoms for Toby? Not that he paid much attention to girls; desperate to be a pilot, he put most of his energies into study and whatever was left over into sport.

At that moment, Seb appeared, his broad shoulders pushed back as he swaggered towards them with a smile on his face that would make a nun think about taking off her knickers. Where had he been? She stepped forward and kissed him, then he leaned across and gave her friends a peck on each of their cheeks.

‘Looking lovely as usual this evening ladies,’ he said, admiring their dresses as they batted their eyelashes at him.

Neve grinned. ‘Why thank you, Sebastian.’

Flick held out her empty champagne flute. ‘Make yourself useful and go find us another bottle. The waiter is rationing us and—’

‘And I’m not going to survive this unless I’m drunk,’ Emma interjected, her voice louder than it should be. Her face went pale as Max and Chanel finally made their way towards them.

Of course they’d wooed the other couples first; couples they no doubt considered much more their kind of people. Flick had never been one of the ladies-who-lunch—the group of mums that ran the Parents and Friends association. All those women aspired to was having the most expensive designer handbag or raising the most money at the annual P&F Art Show. They didn’t work; they all had help at home and none of them seemed to have anything better to do than keep up their regular beauty salon appointments. Flick glanced down at her hands, unable to remember the last time she’d been for a manicure. Besides, in her line of work, long nails were a hindrance.

Then there were the mothers with high-flying careers—lawyers, dentists, CEOs, pilots. There were even a couple of surgeons. The ‘professional’ mums weren’t as insufferable as the ladies who lunched, but Flick suspected that was more because they rarely had the time to interact with anyone than because they were actually nice.

The other group were the boarders’ mums, mostly country women who were friendly and often as well dressed as the in-crowd, but were always rushing about, too busy running errands while they were in the big smoke to stop and chat.

She, Neve and Emma worked just as hard as the professional mums, but as they didn’t make the same money, they’d become their own little group of misfits. The taxidermist, the make-up

artist and the travel agent—three unlikely friends who now rarely went a day without speaking to each other. Although they didn't give two hoots what the other parents thought of them, being a misfit wasn't always easy and tonight's gathering was the perfect example of why.

'Have you stopped going to the gym?' Max demanded of Emma, as if he still had any right to ask her anything. 'You look...' His voice drifted off but the expression on his face made his thoughts clear.

Flick opened her mouth to ask if he still used hair dye to cover his grey, but Seb came to the rescue first. 'I think she looks gorgeous.'

Emma shot him a grateful smile as Max raised his eyebrows disdainfully.

The truth was Emma may have put on a few kilos in the last few months, but she was by no means fat and anyway, it was no concern of Max's. Maybe if he hadn't left her near-destitute in the divorce, she wouldn't have to work so bloody much and she might have more time to do things for herself.

Five years ago, when Flick had first met Emma, Max had just left her for a legal secretary from his law firm, but she reckoned he'd always been a wanker. Obviously the only reason he and Chanel had volunteered to have the pre-ball get-together was so they could show off their new place. Personally, Flick didn't see the appeal—the massive house felt like a showroom, something you might admire in a magazine but not practical for normal everyday living. She could only imagine the way Chanel's nose would turn up if she came to Flick and Seb's place, where pieces of art and beautifully preserved and mounted animal specimens filled every available space.

'Nice decor,' Neve said loudly, making a show of gazing around the massive entertaining area.

'Why, thank you.' Chanel's eyes twinkled in obvious pride.

Neve gestured to the full-length mirrors lining one wall. 'Are those from Ikea? They look exactly like some I saw on the weekend.'

Chanel's smile faded and she almost choked on her drink as she shot a quick glance over at the other couples to make sure they hadn't heard this absurdity. She wouldn't be seen dead in Swedish flat-pack heaven.

As she spluttered, Max patted her on the back. 'We had them shipped from Milan,' he explained.

'Oh! That sounds pricey. I hope you didn't get ripped off,' Neve said with a saccharine smile.

Flick caught Emma's gaze, both of them trying not to laugh out loud. As the three friends and Seb smirked, awkward silence descended on the unlikely circle.

'Well.' Max glanced at his watch. 'The limos should be here to pick up the kids soon. Shall we get the photos started?'

That had to be one of the best ideas Max had ever had. The sooner the photos were over and the boys and their belles were on their way to the Hyatt Regency for their big night, the sooner Flick, Seb, Neve and Emma could make their escape.

As Max went away to fetch his camera, Seb embarked on his mission to unearth more booze and Chanel couldn't return to her other guests fast enough.

'I thought Max would have organised a professional photographer,' Flick mused.

It was good to hear Emma laugh. 'He doesn't always think of everything.'

'Was he always that much of a dick?' Neve asked. 'I honestly don't know how you tolerated being married to him for ... How many years was it?'

'Too many. I actually thought he was sweet when we first got together,' Emma admitted as Seb returned with another bottle of champagne.

Neve smiled her approval. 'That was quick.'

'My hero.' Flick took the bottle and poured a generous amount into Emma's glass, then did the same for herself and Neve. By the time she took her first sip, Emma had already downed hers and was holding her hand out for more.

Flick raised an eyebrow, but filled the glass again nevertheless. Who was she to judge? Lord knew if Seb suddenly left her for some tart almost half his age, she'd likely turn to drink as well.

Out on the pool deck, Chanel and Max were now trying to organise the ball-goers. The waiter circled with a plate of arancini balls. If this gathering had been at Flick and Seb's place, they'd have made do with a couple of dips and chopped up veggie sticks, but at least she'd have made the food herself.

*Bitchy*, she thought as she watched Chanel. Max's treatment of Emma had brought her claws out.

Max had an enormous camera—compensation for a smaller something else perhaps—and the other parents snapped their own shots with their latest-model smart phones.

Flick and her friends left Seb to do the honours with their sons, choosing instead to stand back and admire the young men their boys were growing into. She watched Toby offer his hand out to his date as she navigated the rocky garden stairs they were assembling on. Brooklyn, a sweet red-headed thing who had recently immigrated with her family from America, beamed up at Toby and laughed as he whispered something in her ear. A rush of love warmed Flick's insides, making her forget her bitterness of a few moments earlier. Although not usually very emotional, she found her throat clogging up and tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. Toby might have his moments (what teenage boy didn't?) but his sunny personality and hardworking nature made her and Seb proud almost every day.

‘Here.’ Neve conjured a tissue from her Mary Poppins handbag—she carried everything but the kitchen sink with her—and handed it to Flick.

Flick smiled her thanks as she wiped her eyes, once again grateful that she never bothered with mascara. ‘I reckon we’ve done okay with our boys.’

‘It’s easy to see where Toby gets his great personality from,’ Emma said, her words slightly slurring as she pointed her champagne flute in Seb’s direction. ‘Not to mention his gorgeous smile and impeccable manners. I just pray that Caleb doesn’t turn out anything like his father.’

‘Yeah, Seb’s great.’ Neve looked to Flick, a wistful expression on her face. ‘You’re so lucky to have him—he’s a wonderful husband, father and provider. I wish Will had a role model like that in his life.’

‘Yes, I’m very lucky.’ Flick smiled tightly—biting down on the impulse to remind her friends that he wasn’t the only one who contributed to the household income and their children’s upbringing. Honestly, sometimes she wouldn’t be surprised if Neve and Emma started a Sebastian Bell fan club.