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Felicity

Felicity Bell took a rather large sip of her champagne, slipped off her uncomfortable high heels and flopped back in her seat. All around people were dancing, drinking and laughing, but Flick simply wanted to go home. She was happy that her friends Emma and Patrick had finally tied the knot, but all the dressing up, trailing around the city for photos and then dancing the night away had been exhausting.

When were the jubilant bride and groom going to leave anyway? It was almost midnight—didn't they want to jump into the limo, head to their flash hotel in the city and make mad passionate love all night long like newlyweds were supposed to? Someone really ought to give them the memo.

'You looked whacked,' said Sofia as she lowered herself into the neighbouring seat and put her champagne glass down on the table.

'I am.' Flick smiled at the woman who used to be her husband. Out of a misguided sense of solidarity, Emma had worried about

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inviting Sofia but Flick hadn't wanted her to feel excluded. It was bad enough the looks and comments she sometimes got from strangers without her closest friends making her feel like an outsider as well.

'Nice frock.' Sofia nodded towards Flick's pink bridesmaid dress and smiled in a way that once upon a time would have sent her heart soaring.

She took in Sofia's black wrap gown with bright red flowers splashed across it. 'I could say the same about yours. It looked like you were having fun out there on the dance floor.'

'You know I love a good party.'

And wasn't that the truth. Sofia had always been the life of the party, so much better at socialising than Flick. Her friends had often admitted jealousy—*I wish my husband was more like him*. Well, she bet they weren't jealous of her now.

'It's been a great wedding,' Sofia added. 'Emma's dress is gorgeous. What about you? Having fun?'

Flick swallowed. She'd always been a hopeless liar.

'Yeah,' she said, cringing at her squeaky voice. It wasn't that she wasn't happy, not exactly, but being single at a wedding simply rammed home how alone she was these days. 'I'm so happy for Emma.'

They both looked over to the dance floor where Emma and her brand-new husband were locked in a passionate embrace. They'd been dating for almost four years—pretty much as long as Flick had been single—but Emma had wanted to wait to get married until all her kids were grown.

Not too far from the newlyweds was Flick's other best friend, Neve, pressed up close and personal with her handsome boyfriend James. She doubted they'd ever make their relationship 'official' but they were shacked up and committed in every sense of the word. Dotted around the dance floor were dozens of other

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loved-up couples, including Flick and Sofia's daughter Zoe and her husband Beau.

She couldn't believe Zoe's wedding had been four years ago now. So much had changed since. When Zoe had come home and announced her engagement to her high school sweetheart, Flick believed the biggest concern in her life was her daughter getting married too young. How naive she'd been back then.

As if Sofia could still read her mind, she said, 'So what are we going to get Zoe and Beau's baby to call us?'

'What?' Flick almost choked on the mouthful she'd just taken. 'She's *pregnant*?'

'No.' Sofia chuckled. 'But as they're about to start trying I thought maybe it was something we should discuss.'

'Oh right.' *Phew*. For a moment there she thought she'd missed a very important announcement, but she knew that babies were on the agenda asap—Zoe could barely talk about anything else of late. It made Flick feel old. Surely forty-nine was too young to be a grandma? 'How do you feel about becoming a grand ... parent?'

'You were about to say "grandfather", weren't you?'

'No!'

'It's okay.' Sofia squeezed Flick's hand. 'You've been so great and so supportive, but I don't expect you not to slip up occasionally, and we have plenty of time to decide what Zoe and Beau's baby will call us.'

Slip up? Flick *never* slipped up. As hard as the last four years had been, she'd done everything she could to be there for Sofia and that meant working hard to use the right pronouns and call her by her new name. Not wanting to get into an argument right now, she took another sip of her drink only to discover it was empty. 'So what are our options?'

'Granny? Nanna? Nonna?'

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‘I’ll be Granny.’ Who’d ever have thought she’d be fighting over the terms ‘Granny’ and ‘Nanna’ with her former husband?

‘I guess that leaves me with Nanna? Nonna would probably be a little weird, considering I haven’t got an ounce of Italian blood in my body.’

Flick laughed. ‘So, what’s new in your world?’

‘Um ... nothing much.’ Sofia’s eyebrows twitched.

‘Really?’ Flick hadn’t been married to her for almost twenty-two years not to be able to tell when she was holding back. She raised one of her own less tidy eyebrows. ‘What’s going on?’

Sofia sighed and reached for her drink. ‘It’s ... look, I’m not sure now’s the right time to tell you, but there is something I need to talk to you about. Are you busy tomorrow? Maybe we could catch up for a coffee?’

Flick frowned. ‘Why can’t you tell me now?’

‘I-It’s just ...’ Sofia’s voice trailed off.

God, don’t tell me she’s decided to transition back to ...

Don’t be stupid!

How could she even think such a thought after all they’d been through these past four years? This wasn’t like putting on one outfit and deciding you’d rather wear something else. She *knew* that ... at least intellectually, but sometimes, deep down in her heart, Flick couldn’t help wishing she could go back to easier times.

Maybe she’d been too quick to end things between them? Maybe she simply needed more time to wrap her head around a new way of being married? It wasn’t like they’d completely been banished from each other’s lives. Even after being separated for so long, they saw each other frequently and Sofia was still her closest friend.

‘Well, out with it then,’ Flick said. ‘Seriously, there’s nothing you can say that would shock me anymore.’

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‘Okay.’ Sofia took a quick sip of her champagne. ‘I’ve started seeing someone.’

Except. Maybe. That.

‘That’s ... *Wow.*’ Flick glanced longingly at her glass. ‘What’s her ... name?’

‘Actually ... *his* name is Mike. We work together.’

Flick opened her mouth, but no words came out.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I ...’

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ boomed the DJ. ‘It’s time to send our stunning bride and handsome groom off into the night.’

Whoops and cheers erupted all around and Flick shot up from her seat, welcoming the excuse to get away from Sofia.

‘However, before that, there’s just one final thing we have to do. It’s time for Emma to throw her bouquet. Everyone except the unmarried gals off the dance floor, please,’ the DJ motioned with his hands, ‘so we can get this game started.’

It’s not a game. It’s a stupid outdated tradition.

Saying that, at least it gave her an excuse to leave before Sofia said anything more about her new man. As the young single women formed a group in the middle of the dance floor, Flick pressed a hand against her stomach to stop the queasy feeling. Thank God the evening was almost over.

‘Is that everyone?’ called the DJ.

‘No!’ Zoe shrieked from across the other side of the room. ‘What about you, Mum?’

Flick shook her head as her daughter made a beeline for her, arms outstretched.

‘Come on, you’re single,’ she said, grabbing hold of Flick’s hand and tugging her towards the gaggle of women. At the same time,

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Beau—clearly finding this whole situation hilarious—made a big show of pushing Sofia onto the dance floor as well.

Were they for real? Did they think this was funny?

‘No no no no no no no,’ Flick protested loudly, but her friends and family refused to accept her resistance. Her protests were only prolonging the agony, so she gave a reluctant nod and stood among the other women, willing this stupidity, this whole damn day to be over.

‘Okay, could I ask our lovely bride to join me,’ requested the DJ.

Emma, glowing as all brides should, made her way to the front, the diamantes on the bodice of her sleek gown glittering under the lights. Following the DJ’s instructions, she turned her back to the group of single women, slowly raised her bouquet of beautiful fresh frangipanis and hurled it over her head. Mayhem erupted and Flick jumped out of the way as the scrum of bodies scrambled for the bouquet. Due to Emma’s terrible throw, it landed wide of the young women, right in front of Sofia. She blinked as if bemused, then stooped to pick it up as everyone around her began to shriek with delight.

Everyone except Flick.

‘Congratulations,’ Emma said, glancing nervously at her as she kissed Sofia’s cheek.

‘Looks like you’ll be next.’ The DJ winked. ‘I wonder who the lucky guy will be?’

Oh my God! As an image of Sofia’s wedding landed in Flick’s head, all the hurt and shock she’d been desperately trying to hide since her ex’s declaration erupted within her.

Tears cascaded down her cheeks and sobs heaved in her throat as she turned and fled towards the bathroom. She’d barely been there ten seconds, hadn’t even had the chance to lock herself in a cubicle, when the door flung open and in rushed Emma and Neve, just in

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time to see her vomit the expensive dinner and champagne into the toilet bowl.

‘Oh my God!’ they exclaimed in unison.

‘Please don’t tell me it’s the catering?’ Emma said. ‘I recently read this book where all the wedding guests got food poisoning!’

‘Not. The. Food,’ Flick tried to reassure her, but she wasn’t sure her words were decipherable.

While she heaved into the bowl, Neve held back her hair, rubbed her back, and made sympathetic noises.

‘I’m sorry,’ Flick said, when she was finally done. She emerged into the main bathroom area, took the proffered paper towel from Emma and dabbed it against her eyes.

The blushing bride, her dress swishing all around, closed the distance between them and pulled Flick into a hug. ‘Don’t be ridiculous, you’ve got nothing to apologise for. I didn’t think ... When the DJ pushed me to do the bouquet toss, I didn’t—’

‘It’s fine, it’s not you, it’s ...’ She sighed. ‘Sofia told me she’s seeing someone.’

Their mouths dropped open.

‘A man called Mike.’

This new snippet of information did nothing to ease their shock. While Neve and Emma digested what she’d said, Flick tried to wipe the mascara streaks from her face.

‘It was just a shock. I know it’s been nearly four years but ...’ She couldn’t bring herself to say the rest.

‘Is Mike a ... a serious prospect or merely a ... date kind of thing?’ Emma asked.

Thank God she didn’t say ‘hook up’.

‘Does Mike know Sofia ...?’

Neve didn’t finish her question, but Flick knew what she meant. ‘I don’t know. I didn’t get the chance to ask any questions before

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the bouquet toss. But I guess she's serious enough that she thought she should tell me.'

'And how do you feel about this?' asked Emma.

'How do you think she feels?' Neve snapped. 'I think the fact she exorcised her dinner gives us a pretty good idea.'

'You know, Flick,' Emma said, 'maybe this is a sign that it's finally time for you to start dating again too.'

Neve nodded encouragingly. 'Now Emma and I are shackled, we can live vicariously through your sexual escapades.'

This wasn't the first time her friends had suggested this. A mere six months after their separation, Neve had recommended Tinder as a good place to start. Emma, a little more conservative, had suggested she join some groups, things like ballroom dancing, tennis, gardening clubs.

You want her to meet people with one foot in the grave? had been Neve's response to these suggestions, but Flick hadn't been ready for any kind of interactions with the opposite sex.

Even almost four years later, she still wasn't.

Before she could comment, the door flew open again. Flick puffed out a breath of relief that it was her daughter rather than one of the other guests, or worse, Sofia.

Zoe rushed over to her. 'What's wrong? Are you sick? You look terrible!'

'Thank you, darling, that's kind of you to say. I think I just had a little too much to drink.' Utter lie. She probably *had* drunk too much, but that was not the reason for her falling apart. She looked to Emma. 'You should get back out there, but do you mind if I sneak off?'

The bride squeezed her hand. 'Of course not. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?'

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‘Don’t be silly. Tomorrow you’ll be too busy with your new husband to worry about me, and that’s how it should be.’

‘Beau and I will take you home,’ Zoe offered.

‘No, it’s fine,’ Flick said. ‘I’ll get an Uber. I don’t want to make a scene.’

Five minutes later, she slipped into the back of an Uber and rested her head against the seat. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks all the way home.