

*Felicity*

Felicity Lewis paused a minute to take it all in.

It was a balmy night in Adelaide; the temperature had dropped just enough after a hot March day for perfect outdoor entertaining. At number seventeen Herbert Street, West Beach, two streets back from the ocean, a party was in progress. Behind Felicity the carefully selected mood music resonated from the curved teak speaker, enough to be heard but not so loud people couldn't hear themselves speak. It had been a birthday gift from Ian and Greta, not a total surprise, not any kind of surprise. She'd dropped several hints, which included leaving shop brochures lying around opened to pages with the desired gift circled.

The speaker sat on the polished shelf below their wall-mounted television in the big open-plan family room that stretched almost the full width of the back of the house. The glass doors to the deck were all thrown open. Around her milled friends and family enjoying the food she'd cooked and the drinks she'd selected.

Light spilled across the freshly oiled deck and out onto the back lawn where strands of festoon lights, hung in precise loops across the garden, added their glow to the glorious spectacle of a million stars twinkling overhead. It was a perfect autumn evening.

An arm slipped around her waist. "Everything looks fabulous, Mum."

"As do you." Felicity beamed at her daughter.

"I've taken lots of photos of the guests." Greta lifted her phone and leaned her head against Felicity's. "Selfie."

Felicity blinked at the flash. "I haven't had a chance to tell you how good you look in that outfit." She adjusted the soft bow pulling Greta's drapery pants in.

Greta batted her hand away and readjusted the bow. "I don't know that cream is a good colour for me."

"It's perfect against your tan."

"I was thinking more that I'm likely to spill something down it." She glanced around.

"Where's Suzie? I haven't seen her yet."

"I told you Paul took her to America for her birthday."

"No you didn't." Greta frowned.

"They'll be gone for two months."

"How will you manage not seeing her for that long?"

"Technology."

"Dad should have taken you away, instead of you doing all this work."

"I've enjoyed it—"

“Oh look, there’re the Gilberts. Thank goodness there’s some-one more my age. I’ll get a photo of them too.” Greta dashed away.

Once more Felicity stood alone. She’d organised this special night to the last detail, a combined celebration for her fiftieth birthday and the completion of the renovations. She’d been planning, styling, cooking for weeks. The only downside was her best friend Suzie couldn’t be there.

Suzie and Paul had only been gone for two weeks and were having the best time. Felicity had already seen the photos of their Caribbean cruise and now they were driving themselves up the coast to New York. Suzie had rung this morning via WhatsApp to sing her happy birthday all the way from Jacksonville, Florida. Her brilliant smile and animated words had filled the room. Felicity had sat for a long time after the call had ended trying to swallow her glum mood and lack of enthusiasm for a party without her best friend. Suzie had provided all the energy for both of them during the call.

“Happy birthday, Felicity.” Humphrey from next door drew her into a bear hug and planted one of his sloppy kisses on her cheek.

She adjusted her new glasses firmly back in place as his wife Melody also wrapped her in a hug.

“Perfect night for a party,” Melody said.

“Thanks for coming. What would you like to drink?” Felicity waved over one of the young uni students Greta had organised to act as waiters for the night.

“Feliciteee, I love what you’ve done with the house.” Pam, her social tennis friend, air kissed her cheeks. “I haven’t seen it since you did this back extension, and the deck is fabulous. I can picture us having a few post tennis sessions here.” Pam clutched a glass of champagne and as her arm swept out in a dramatic arc it connected with a man just stepping up onto the deck.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She dabbed at his wet sleeve.

“No problem.”

“Pam, I don’t think you’ve met Tony,” Felicity said. “He’s been overseeing the renovations.”

“Has he now?” Pam looked him up and down. “Well, there’s a secret you’ve been keeping to yourself.”

“Nice to meet you, Pam.” Tony smiled, and offered his hand. Pam’s return look was vampish.

“Let me get you another drink,” he said.

The bar was an old table Felicity had scrubbed to create a rustic look, adorned with

ice buckets and glasses and one large bowl of flowers in soft pinks and mauves. She'd canned Greta's suggestion of balloons but had allowed the banner, which looped across the sheer curtain she'd hung on the wall behind. In cursive letters cut from sparkly gold it said 'Cheers to fifty years'.

Tony set off towards it. Pam stared after him.

"Did you knock into him on purpose?" Felicity said.

"Moi?"

"He's married." Felicity didn't actually know what Tony's marital status was but he was too nice a man to get tangled up with Pam. Every one of her relationships since her last divorce had ended in drama.

"Really? No ring on his finger."

"You've checked already? He's too young for you."

"Past the age of consent."

"Hi Felicity, Pam." More hugs all round, this time from Tansie, another of their tennis group, and her husband Charles.

"This is Tony," Pam said as he came back with several glasses of sparkling gripped between his two large hands. "He's responsible for Felicity's fabulous renovation." Tony shrugged. "Felicity was the driving force, I just made sure the structural stuff was legit."

"You're very modest, Tony," Felicity said.

Tansie and Charles were planning a new bathroom and when Felicity could see Tony was safely in a discussion with Charles she edged away.

At the other end of the deck her own husband, Ian, was deep in conversation with their across-the-road neighbours, Sal and Les. Like Ian, they were bike riders. They rode regularly, along with several others from their neighbourhood. Not Felicity, of course. She didn't own a bike and never wanted to. Getting hot and sweaty in lycra had never been her thing. Nor Ian's until they'd moved here. Two years older than her, the approach of his fiftieth birthday had seen him turn into some kind of fitness freak. Not that Felicity minded. She was a homebody and the renovations had kept her busy, first in the planning, then in the construction and the refurbishing. Her workout was her weekly social tennis match and that was more about the company than the exercise.

After they'd moved they'd started taking regular walks to the beach but hadn't gone together in ages. These days Ian power walked everywhere on his own or with his walking group, training for more arduous treks, while she'd been filling her time with colour charts and fabric swatches. Ian had been involved in the renovations when

they were deciding on the structural changes to the house but after that he'd been happy to let her make decisions about the finishing touches.

This party was a birthday celebration but also the official end to the whole house renovation, a project that had consumed her since the moment they'd made the decision to buy the fixer-upper more than five years ago. She'd given up her job as practice manager at a doctor's office when they'd moved. Now she'd have to find something else to fill her time. It wasn't until she'd been dressing for the party that she'd realised she had no idea what that would be.

"Have you seen our parents yet?"

Felicity gave her sister a quick look then shook her head. Tall and lanky like their father, June was wearing a grass-green all-in-one jumpsuit. It reminded Felicity of a praying mantis. For two sisters born less than a year apart they were chalk and cheese.

"Not like them to be late," June said.

"Dad's hard to get moving these days."

"We did offer to collect them."

"I'm sure they'll be here soon," Felicity said. It was possible her father had pulled another of his tantrums and they wouldn't turn up at all but she kept that to herself. He could do no wrong in June's eyes but there had been so many times over the years when he'd spoiled celebrations or social occasions.

Her wedding day had been mortifying. Most dads were proud and happy on their daughter's wedding day but not her father. Felicity had caused a ruckus by daring to find a husband before June. Not that June minded but their father did. She was always first in his eyes and Felicity had stolen her position this time.

On the day of the wedding he'd been grumpy, oozing disapproval of the goings-on, as he'd called it, as Felicity and her bridesmaids, were getting ready. Just before they'd been due to leave for the church he'd gone out for a walk – to clear his head, he'd declared. They hadn't been bothered until the photographer was tapping his toes waiting to take the standard father–daughter photos. June had been the one to track him down and drag him home to walk his daughter down the aisle. Their mother had been upset and so had Felicity. They'd arrived fifteen minutes late to the church and for the rest of the day her father had told anyone who'd listen it was because Felicity had been disorganised with her preparations and the household had been carrying on like a bunch of chooks.

"Perhaps I should ring Mum." June cut into her thoughts.

“Let’s leave it for a while. They’ll turn up.”

Hazel Gifford was a saint to have put up with her husband all these years and if her father was in one of his moods Felicity would rather he didn’t come.

“Oh, isn’t that your old neighbour talking to Derek?” June waved in the direction of her husband and another man, both towering over the crowd. “The one that lived down the road and sold up and bought a caravan.”

“Yes.”

“Such a lovely couple. Can’t see her, what were their names, but then she’s so short, isn’t she.” June set off towards the new arrivals without waiting for an answer.

Instead of following her Felicity stepped down off the deck, fanning her face with her hand. The air was slightly cooler out from under the verandah and she relished it.

Hormone replacement tablets ensured the hot flushes of menopause didn’t affect her too terribly but just at that moment she felt as if her internal thermostat was ready to boil over. She moved further away and took the path to a corner of the yard that wasn’t lit. From her vantage point she had time to let her body cool down, to take a breath and observe. She’d been on her feet since she got out of bed this morning and she needed a few minutes to regroup.

She enjoyed creating special dinners for friends, loved parties and entertaining, but she was far better at the preparation, the cooking and the serving than the conversation. If it wasn’t for Ian insisting they go out for dinner, see an exhibition, travel, she’d simply stay home in her comfy clothes and slippers.

It had been more her idea to move than his but he’d gone along with it, liking their proximity to the beach and the walking and bike trails. His income was a good one and even though they’d extended their small mortgage to do the renovations they were comfortable these days. Felicity had been careful to stick to the budget they’d allocated and they hadn’t overcapitalised.

She took in the sleek lines of the back of the house, the glass, the deck and the party now in full swing. Someone had turned up the music and the voices carried loudly on the still night. All their neighbours were here so the noise shouldn’t bother anyone.

They’d been lucky with the people in their small street. Ian had made it his business to get to know them all as soon as they’d moved in and they’d proved to be a friendly lot. She was glad they could all come. Even a few who’d moved away were here.

“What’s the birthday girl doing out here on her own?” Ian came towards her, a glass of champagne in each hand. He offered her one, brushed a kiss across her forehead and tapped his glass against hers. “Happy birthday, Lissie.” She smiled, took a sip and watched as he did the same.

“Thanks,” she said. Ian rarely drank these days so she was pleased by the sentiment and that it was just the two of them.

“I should make a speech soon and you should cut the cake before our friends drink too much more of this champagne.”

“One more minute,” she said. Butterflies flapped inside her at the thought of being the centre of attention and she took another sip.

“You wanted this party.” Ian’s words were accusatory and yet his tone gentle.

“I love parties, just not being the main event.”

“Remember my fiftieth? I wanted us to go away but you insisted on a big party instead.”

“Hiking the Inca trail to Machu Picchu wouldn’t have been a holiday.”

“But it was what I wanted.”

She looked away from the yearning in his eyes back to the party. “We’ve been so lucky,” she said.

His yes was barely more than a whisper.

“I worry one day it’s all going to come crashing down.”

He took a sip of his drink before he responded. “That’s a morbid thought on your birthday.”

“We’ve had a trouble-free life.”

“Not always.” This time his reply was quick and sharp then he drew in a long breath and let it out again, slowly. “Remember when we first married. We had nothing.”

“Everyone started that way. We lived on love.” She smiled at him but he was looking at the crowd.

“You were laid up with that broken ankle and we nearly lost the house.”

“That was so long ago it’s hard to imagine now.” They’d not had income insurance in those days – a combination of thinking they were bulletproof and not being able to afford it. She’d asked her father for a loan. He’d refused. Ian came from a big family with not much money to go round but his parents had lent them a bit to get them by. They’d paid them back of course, but it had been a terrible struggle.

“Then the babies we lost.” Ian was still staring at the crowd. He was usually a cup-half-full kind of guy. This melancholic side of him was rare.

“I wish I hadn’t said anything now.” She sipped some champagne then tried a light laugh but the liquid caught in her throat and the laugh came out as a series of clucks.

“There were three little ones we never got to know,” he said. She gripped the stem of her glass. She knew how many babies they’d lost as well as he did. It wasn’t something she was ever likely to forget but there was no point bringing it up now.

“You really are going down the sad old memory lane. The miscarriages were tough but we’ve got our beautiful Greta.”

“She’s a wonderful young woman,” he said.

Happy to banish any further maudlin thoughts, Felicity tapped her glass to his. “I’ll drink to that.”

“We should go back to our guests, get the formalities over then you can relax.” He started to walk away, his look distracted. She’d hardly seen him these last few days. She’d been so caught up in party preparations, and now that she thought about it they’d not said more than two words to each other for...she couldn’t think how long. Weeks?

“Ian?”

He stopped, turned back. The frown he’d worn changed to a smile but she could tell it was forced. He reached out a hand. “Come on, Lissie. This is your night. Time to face the music and have your friends sing ‘Happy Birthday’.”

“Mum?” Greta came towards them across the lawn, the brightly lit house glowing behind her. “What are you doing out here? I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” She held her mobile phone towards Felicity. “It’s Nan. She sounds upset.”

Damn Dad, Felicity thought as she pressed the warm phone to her ear. He’s kicked up a fuss and decided not to come. “Hello, Mum.”

“Felicity, I tried June’s phone.”

“She never has it on her.”

“Then I tried yours.”

“Mum, take a breath. Why aren’t you here? Is everything all right?” She hated asking that question knowing everything wouldn’t be all right. Not that she really cared but for her mum’s sake...

“It’s your father.”

Felicity pursed her lips. Of course it was her father. “What’s he up to this time?” She raised her shoulders and gave a slight shake of her head at Greta and Ian who were both standing by.

“Is June there?” Hazel’s voice had an edginess to it. Felicity hoped she wasn’t going to have one of her dizzy attacks.

“Not right beside me but she and Derek are here.”

Ian began to tap his foot.

“I’ll call you back, Mum, we’re about to cut the cake.”

“Oh, I’ve ruined your lovely party.”

“No, you haven’t. I’ll bring you some cake and leftovers tomorrow.” Damn her dad for his moods. For the zillionth time in her life she wondered how her mother put up with him. Tomorrow there’d be the aftermath of the party to clean up and Felicity would

be tired but now she'd be stuck in the car for nearly two hours going to and from her parents when they could have come tonight.

"You'll have to be strong for June," Hazel said.

Ian was tapping his watch now and pointing back to the party. "Mum, I have to go – can you tell me tomo—"

"Felicity, brace yourself." There was a sharp intake of breath.

"Your father's dead."