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The Wedding Party

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One

Becky

'Ohmigodwhereisshe?Stupidstupidssillywomanshouldhavebeen herehalfanhourago.I'mgoingtobelateforwork.It'sabloody nuisance,that'swhatitis.'

'Mummy.' Ben was tugging at her sage green silk trousers, fresh from the dry cleaners. 'Stop crying, mummy. Someone's knocking on the door.'

Shit. So they were. It had to be Laura. Desperately hoping the nanny hadn't heard her tantrum, Becky swiftly opened it.

'Sorry I'm late.'

Not for the first time, the laid-back Australian accent set Becky's nerves on edge. For God's sake. How could she be so bloody calm? 'Got on the wrong bus.' Laura breezed in, slung an apple green backpack on the floor and knelt down to do up the shoelaces on her pink and silver trainers. 'Still, it was reelly interesting. I went past this playground with some cool things for the kids.'

Ben had already transferred himself from his mother's legs to Laura's and Becky's heart lurched. If her son didn't have any loyalty at six, what hope was there for him when he was old enough to date?

‘Mummy said it was a bloody nuisance that you were late.’

Ben was climbing up Laura’s skinny jeans now. Any minute now and he’d be swinging from her arms.

‘No, I didn’t,’ began Becky, feeling a line of sweat trickling down between her shoulder blades, newly-tanned from a series of six free sessions, in return for a review on the beauty page.

‘I just meant that . . .’

‘And,’ chirped Ben, swinging from Laura’s arm, ‘she said you were a stupid stupid silly woman . . .’

Becky grabbed her slim black leather briefcase which had been waiting by the door below the beige and black painting Steve had bought the other day, even though it had been a ridiculous price. Still, it was certainly eye-catching with that triangular Picasso-like nude figure and it went with the polished floorboards that they’d had put in throughout the house, in preference to carpet.

‘Got to dash now. It’s conference day and it’s already – oh, shit – 7.30. Listen, Laura. Daisy’s still asleep. I gave her a little something to help her get to bed last night after that cold.’

The nanny frowned. ‘I thought the doctor told you not to do that.’

‘Well she’s still not sleeping.’ Becky heard the words snapping out of her mouth, too late to take them back. ‘I’ve had to re-do the spreadsheet (in a minute Ben) because Daisy’s gymnastics class has been moved to Tuesday but that clashes with the Wriggle and Giggle session so one of the other mums – can’t remember exactly which one now but you’ll see when she gets here – is going to take. WHAT IS IT, BEN?’

‘Can I come to work with you? I could help you. Did you know that a flea can jump more than fifty times its height? It says so on Ask Jeeves.’

'No, I didn't and please don't tug at my trousers like that. Laura, if that's not clear, text me but don't ring.'

'Why not, mummy?'

'Because it's conference day.' Becky could hear her voice rising. If she didn't get out now and grab a taxi fast, she'd lose it completely. 'See you later. If Steve rings, tell him to call me tonight.'

Thank heavens. As soon as she walked into the chrome steel automatic rotating doors, Becky felt better. Here, at Charisma magazine, she was Becky Hastings, features editor, instead of Becky Hughes, hopeless mother who couldn't cope without a nanny.

Here – thank God – there was no one to shout at her. No one to scream when all she wanted to do was go to bed. No one who kept asking impossible questions like what keeps the clouds up in the sky and why don't they fall down. No one to throw temperatures of 103 like Daisy had last winter during Laura's day off and freak her out so she thought her daughter was dying, only to be leaping up and down the next day.

'I love my children,' said Becky silently, as though to convince herself. And she did. No one – least of all her mother who'd been desperate for her to get pregnant – had told her it would be like this, that's all.

Flashing her ID card with a smile at the new boy on reception (not bad!), she stepped into the lift, checking her reflection in the mirrored glass. Glossy chestnut hair in a sculptured bob, thanks to the wonderful Michaeljohn; light-reflecting foundation courtesy of a freebie from Beauty and – no, no, no – the beginnings of eye bags due to all the late nights at the office.

Better have a word with Beauty about that too.

Second floor. Going up. The lift walls were lined with promos that were on that week. A taster session in the kitchens of Homes To Come Back To which had been launched last month. Some talk by Annabelle Karmel on how to feed the family for one of the parenting magazines. A sale of beauty products at another well-known monthly glossy in the building. She might go to that one if conference finished on time.

Stepping out onto the fourth floor, Becky noticed the advertising people had changed the six foot high poster to show Charisma's latest cover.

HOW TO HAVE EXPLOSIVE ORGASMS EVERY THREE MINUTES

She was quite proud of that. OK, it was bending the truth a bit but the coverline had pulled in the readers. Becky allowed herself a small smile at the pun. She'd have to try it out with Steve sometime when he wasn't away on one of his never-ending work trips.

Sliding her card down the security panel, she pushed open the door. It might only be 8.09 a.m. according to the neon flashing clock on the wall but the floor was packed. In the early days of her career as a journalist, Becky could remember little cubbyholes where there was a certain amount of privacy. Now it was all open plan; the idea being that there was little room for private phone calls and everyone could see what everyone else was doing.

'Morning,' she said to Steffi, the editor's PA. Steffi smiled nervously. Everyone was twitchy on conference day and with good reason. Cat, the editor, hadn't brought Charisma magazine to its current circulation peak without demanding blood from her staff in return. In precisely thirty-two minutes, they would all be summoned into her spacious, glass-walled office (one of the few perks of being an editor as far as Becky could work out) and asked, in her dangerously silken voice, what each department head intended to suggest for the magazine that week. She'd probably be wearing an elasticated waist, even though the twins were two and

she should have shed that postpreggie bulge ages ago. More Devil in Primark than Devil in Prada, as Becky sniggered to Steve in private.

That week, of course, wasn't the week they were in right now. Like most other weeklies, Charisma worked two-and-a-half months in advance, although if a story was hot – really hot – it got squeezed in earlier.

'Fuck.' Becky was opening her emails. 'Where's the "I tried to sell my baby on eBay" copy? It was here last night.'

'There was a powercut last night,' offered Bel from Showbiz at the other end of the room. 'We've all lost some stuff. IT's working on it.'

Becky could feel the tell-tale sweat trickling down her back again. 'But I need it for conference.'

'Did you print out a copy?'

No, she fucking hadn't because she'd been late getting home last night which was probably why Laura had been late getting here this morning as a none too subtle reminder that she was fed up with her employer's hours.

Bloody hell, she couldn't even remember exactly what it was about. Becky ran her hands through her short chestnut bob. Let's see. Some woman from some godforsaken village in the Midlands couldn't pay her credit card bill so had tried to sell her kid on eBay (it had been stopped in time). The woman blamed post-natal depression, though that hadn't prevented her from being interviewed and pocketing the £750 fee.

Maybe she could type out a few notes, although that wouldn't be enough. Cat would want to hear the whole story and she didn't have it to give. Stabbing the IT number into her phone, Becky could feel the panic curdling in her throat like a golf ball. 'This is Becky Hastings from features on Charisma. Yes, I know you're

busy. What I want to know is how the . . . how I can get some copy out of this thing which was here last night and isn't now?

Numbly, Becky listened to the techni-rubbish which the girl at the other end was spouting. She couldn't take much more. She really couldn't. Bleep. Glancing at her mobile, she saw Steve's name flashing. He'd have to wait. 'What? When? Well that's not good enough. I've got conference in fifteen minutes and I need it now.'

'No luck?' asked Bel sympathetically as she slammed the phone down.

'No.' Becky could feel hot tears of frustration pricking her eyes. She'd have to take in another lead story but what? Scrolling down the list of features that hadn't been eradicated, she considered her options. The kid who was molested at the theme park by the known paedophile? No. It would clash with the piece on how to keep your kids safe on the street. The piece on the groom who slept with all six bridesmaids the week before the wedding? Too similar to last month's 'True Hen Night Confessions'.

The phone! Becky grabbed the receiver like a lifebelt. Dear God. Please may it be the woman from IT. Please . . . 'Becky!'

The very sound of his voice stopped her in her tracks, as it always did; transporting her back to another world when he'd been able to fix things. When he'd been there for her before he and mum had split up. When he'd been a real father.

'Dad. Look, I'm sorry but this isn't a great time.'

'I know and I wouldn't have bothered you except that I tried last night and you didn't pick up and . . .'

'Please, dad.' Becky could feel the hysteria about to escape through her mouth. 'I can't talk.'

'I need to tell you something.' His voice was low and steady.

'I'm getting married, Becky. And I wanted you to know before anyone else told you.'

Becky felt her fingers grip the receiver and her vision blur. On the screen in front of her, she thought she could see the headline 'I SOLD MY BABY ON EBAY' suddenly popping up but it didn't seem important any more. Dad was getting married? Who to? When?

She could hear him taking a deep breath, as though he'd been practising this. 'She's called Monique and I met her through work. We're getting married in November but I want you to meet her as soon as you can.' He paused and she could hear his nervous excitement oozing through the silence. 'I know we haven't exactly seen eye to eye over the years but I'd like your blessing, Becky. Please.'