

Christmas in Canberra



by Nicole Taylor

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Brunette Publishing, Australia 2011

ISBN 978-0-646-55424-2

First Edition

Printed in Canberra, Australia by Kwik Kopy

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Covert art by Jon Sommariva

Title lettering by Emilio Park

Web Design by Carolyn Fulgoni

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the wonderful women who have advised me, listened to me, assisted me, befriended me; and especially to those who helped me celebrate. Even when there was nothing to celebrate. You know who you are.

This is a work of fiction.
Any resemblance the characters may have to persons living
or deceased is co-incidental and unintentional.

“She lacks the indefinable charm of weakness”

Oscar Wilde

BANG BANG BANG!

What was that? Through the mental fog, Louise tried to identify the sound that had woken her. Gunshots? Hammering? Louise was dragged from sleep as quickly as her hangover allowed and scrambled out of bed. Completely disoriented now, she turned in a circle beside her bed trying to claim consciousness and her dressing gown.

BANG BANG BANG!

Peering cautiously round her bedroom doorway while fumbling with the ties to her gown, Louise could see the glass door to her basement unit and the attached venetians shuddering in response to the pounding knock of her landlord, who lived with his wife in the house above.

“Coming,” she called, thinking “For God’s sake – it’s Saturday – isn’t it?” She got to the door and opened it slightly, trying to hide her state of semi-attire from her visitor. She was immediately blasted by the brilliant morning sunshine which shone mercilessly into her now squinting eyes.

“Hello, Mr O’Neil,” she said politely, hoping he wouldn’t smell last night’s rum & coke on her breath as she shrank further behind the door and away from the bright light.

“Hello, there, Louise.” Mr O’Neil seemed thrilled to find her in sleepy disarray. Louise, quite horrified by his delight, hugged her dressing gown more closely and squeezing the door a bit more shut.

“Just wanted to let you know that we will be going away for a few days, to the beach house.”

“Oh, lovely,” said Louise. “Have a nice time!”

“You won’t forget to water the garden, will you?” Mr O’Neil was keen to justify – and, it seemed to Louise, prolong – his completely unnecessary visit. They had discussed these arrangements two days ago when she had paid her rent – in advance, as usual.

“No, no – of course not,” smiled Louise, closing the door even more. “Don’t you worry – it will all still be here when you get back. Bye bye!” And she had shut the door before finishing her last “bye”.

Her sister, Marie, had taught her that trick. Marie was a legal secretary and had to deal with some pretty irate customers. “What you do,” she advised knowingly, “is this: You start speaking really sympathetically and assertively, so they like what they are hearing and can’t get a word in. Then - you hang up on yourself.” And she was right – it was the most brilliant strategy. Louise was still perfecting it, of course, and she would never have Marie’s confidence and panache, but she was nothing if not a diligent student.

She stumbled into the shower, knowing she would not be able to get back to sleep now. Running the events of the preceding evening through her mind as she presented her face to the glorious shower of steaming hot water, Louise was greatly relieved to be unable to think of an especially embarrassing moment, or register any awareness at all of that deep feeling of fear she often woke up with when she had actually said or done something ridiculous but couldn’t remember exactly what it was. The trouble with drinking was that it led to a total loss of inhibitions which were clearly there to protect you in the first place. Uninhibited behaviour

often resulted in loss of dignity, and a moment's fun could easily melt into a week of shame. "Oh well," Louise finally gave up her morning-after audit and shrugged resignedly. "Hopefully everyone else was too drunk to notice."

The coffee was definitely clearing her head and, having already heard the O'Neil's station wagon pull out of the garage and drive off, Broulee Bay bound, Louise happily settled herself, her coffee and her Benson & Hedges in the courtyard outside her unit, to dry her hair in the sun. She smoked and drank leisurely, fluffing her hair absentmindedly, reliving the more memorable portions of the previous evening.

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It had all begun quite comfortably. The usual gang had met at Simon's for dinner. It was a combo-celebration: Louise had finished her graduate degree after too many years of night-time study; Simon had planted the last shrub in his now showpiece garden and Kim had been promoted – again. Added to that, on the previous weekend the whole group had done a tour of the local wineries and stocked up for the summer. A dinner party was all that was required to congratulate each other and taste the spoils.

"Well, Simon, I suppose we have to admit that all your labour has paid off," Alex acknowledged grudgingly. Simon's select group of friends, including Louise, were sitting under shade umbrellas on the terrace at the front of his verandahed home, enjoying the garden, the wine, and each other's company.

Simon chuckled and sat back with a very pleased expression on his face.

“Do I detect a note of envy, Mr Malcolm?” he enquired.

“Not a note, you bastard – I’m really jealous. All those weekends I sat inside watching Debbie Does Dallas while you were shovelling and digging and planting and building retaining walls – and you end up with a terraced garden, Debbie’s still doing Dallas, and what have I got?”

“A har-“ Simon was stopped from finishing his word by Kim, who popped a bite-sized savoury into his mouth.

Alex’s girlfriend, Jenny, laughed with shock.

“Here, have one of these,” said Kim, handing around a plate of delicious little pastries.

“Ooh – yummy - thanks, Kim,” said Louise gratefully. Kim was an innovative cook and always came up with tasty things at their frequent get-togethers. Louise pretended to compete with her, but it was a friendly battle which Kim always won and Louise was happy to lose. “Are you going to Melbourne for Christmas this year?”

“Well,” Kim answered cautiously, “we thought we might stay home this Christmas, and do something here.

Before she could explain, the doorbell rang and Simon got up to answer it. Louise looked around – surprised. Everyone she had expected to see was already here. Had they invited the neighbours? Having met them previously, Louise hoped not. As the only single woman – person – in the group, she was often the focus of any male “friend” who had been married so long that he had forgotten how lucky he was to find a wife; or worse – was married to such a good actress he believed that she was the envy

of all single women. Married women had a lot to answer for, and they only fooled their husbands.

But Simon returned with a very presentable male person. “Everyone, this is Gordon,” he said to no one in particular. “Gordon, this is Alex and Jenny, Louise, Tom and Judith, and you already know Kim.” Simon turned to the others and said “Gordon has just joined the Canberra office. He is from Sydney.”

Everyone, especially Louise, smiled their welcomes. Gordon was tall, with fair, curly hair, and very good looking. He was around thirty years old and had clearly made use of the Sydney beaches because, unlike the lily white Canberrans, he sported a well-developed, even tan. Louise felt a tingle as Gordon settled himself in the chair beside her.

“This is very civilised, Simon,” Gordon accepted the stubby Simon handed him with what could only be described as a toothpaste-commercial-quality smile.

“Well, we aren’t complete barbarians out here in the snowy mountain district, you know,” Simon bantered. “It might not be Sydney, but we have other amusements.”

“Oh – so you do get the Sydney television stations here, then?” Gordon countered, and got a laugh.

“Sydney television stations?” Simon feigned surprise. “I will have you know that we have no need of your crappy commercial hoo-ha. We have the Paynes!”

“The what?” Gordon was playing along.

“You have much to learn, my child,” Simon said mockingly. “You are now in the Illawarra tablelands, and new rules apply. The Payne family has run the commercial television station in this area for generations – since television first aired here. We have Mr Payne, the owner of Canberra-Goulburn Television; we have Sharon Payne, his daughter in law, who reads us the news, and his son, Rick, who decides which items of news we really want to know.”

“Is Sharon attractive?” Gordon asked.

“Ye – I wouldn’t know,” Simon nodded his head while casting adoring looks at Kim.

“She is short and has a pretty face but really huge thighs.” Kim provided the details.

“How can you tell?” asked Judy. “She sits behind the news desk – you can’t see her thighs.”

“I saw her in the supermarket a while back.” Kim explained.

“Wow!” Judy was clearly pleased with this titbit. “Big backside too?”

“Monolithic.”

Gordon watched this interchange and laughed. “So,” he interrupted the women, “let me get this straight. We have only one local commercial station –“

“We are getting two more this year –“said Alex.

“One TV station,” continued Gordon, “with a married, overweight newsreader –“

“So far, then, no different to the Sydney television stations.”

Louise thought she had better say something, otherwise Gordon might forget about her, or worse – he might think she was too stupid to contribute. Gordon turned his full attention to her, and a really sweet smile, as if to say that his ploy to get her to speak had worked. Louise noticed it and plunged on, not wanting to lose him now.

“Aren’t all the Sydney newsreaders overweight and married, too?” she finished with a shrug.

“Yes,” agreed Gordon, “I suppose they are.” He smiled and turned back to the group. “But they are men so it doesn’t matter.”

Louise, Kim and Judy howled their disapproval and all the men laughed at how easy it was to take them.

And so the evening had progressed. Drinks had become dinner as the summer sky changed around them. Baby blue became blotted with pink; the pink melted into mauve; and at last they sat under an indigo summer night sky, sparkling with a thousand stars.

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