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Opening Extract from...

The Christmas Party

Written by Carole Matthews

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Merry Christmas!

Thanks for choosing to delve into my novel, *The Christmas Party*, which is amazingly my 25th book. That's worth a celebration! I hope you're feeling suitably festive or, if you're not quite there yet, that this story gets you in the party mood.

Now I'm an author – I work mainly alone. Although I do share an office with my partner, Lovely Kev. When it comes to our office Christmas parties, they're quite sedate affairs. We go to a very posh restaurant – the same one every year – with one other couple. We have a very convivial time with canapés and amuse bouches served. We may drink a little too much but no one snogs someone inappropriate in the stationery cupboard and we don't even have a photocopier! But I remember a time when I did work in proper offices for large companies and I've also served my time as a corporate wife. Back in the day, I went to some very raucous Christmas parties – some that involved not only red faces the next day, but disciplinary action and resignations. Oh dear. So I've drawn on my considerable experience to bring you a riotous tale of the office Christmas party.

If you do go to a Christmas party this year, I hope that you have a fabulous time and have only wonderful memories of it. With every good wish for the festive season!

Love, Carole ☺ xx



SPHERE

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To my dear friend Bernie,
for fun and inspiration.



The Day of the Christmas Party

Chapter One



'You need to have eyes in the back of your head with that one, Louise Young. You mark my words.' Karen from Customer Accounts gives me a meaningful look and inclines her head towards my dear boss's office. 'There was a scandal involving his last personal assistant, you know.'

I didn't.

She leans forward and checks that no one's listening. Quite unlikely when there are only the two of us here.

'There was talk all over the office about *an affair*.' The last bit is whispered, feigning discretion while she clearly relishes sharing the gossip. 'She was a nice girl too. By all accounts.'

I'm sure she was.

'Everyone called her Knicker-Dropper Debbie after what happened.'

'Wow.'

'Oh, yeah.' Karen flicks the tinsel she's wearing as a feather boa and examines her nails. Her reputation as the office oracle is a source of great pride to her. I only met her a few weeks ago, when she kindly helped me with a query about one of Tyler's clients, but I already feel as if she's been a good friend to me here. She's been showing me the ropes at Fossil Oil and I'm glad of her insights. There's nothing she doesn't know.

So I'm also hoping that Karen is my best bet in relieving my current plight. It's fair to say that I'm experiencing certain difficulties at Fossil Oil, and up to now I've been trying to handle them by myself, but I can't hold it in any longer. Anyway, I've finally taken my courage in both hands and spilled the beans, confiding my woes to Karen. She doesn't look surprised at all, which worries me even more.

Deep breath. Here goes. I hate to admit it but my boss, Tyler Benson, takes every opportunity to touch, grope or brush against me. I've never encountered anything like this before and I'm at a loss. I just don't know how to deal with it. He's my boss, my senior here. I should be looking up to him, learning from him. He should be mentoring me, teaching me. I shouldn't spend my days running round my desk to keep away from him like I'm in a Benny Hill comedy. It's got to stop and I'm hoping that Karen, as she clearly knows the score here at Fossil Oil, might have some bright ideas.

Besides, who else can I tell? I'm the new girl and I don't feel I can go running straight to Human Resources the minute something goes wrong. What would that look like? They might think I'm too weak to manage my job. I'm a responsible grown-up and have to show that I can stand up to Tyler and sort this out myself. But, believe me, I think I've done all I can to communicate to him that I'd rather he kept his distance and didn't paw me. However, it seems to be like water off a duck's back to Tyler. Which is tricky, because on the one hand I love my new job and really need to maintain a good relationship with him. But on the other hand I don't want things to carry on like this.

'You need to tread carefully with Tyler,' Karen warns. 'He's such a slimy toad, everyone knows that, yet he can do no wrong in this place.'

'Why?'

'Brilliant salesman. That's all this company is bothered

about.' Karen deals with the tea she's brought from the vending machine for us both, stirring this way and that with a plastic spoon in a ponderous manner. 'I can't stand him, but you can't deny that he knows how to play the corporate game.'

I think I realised that on day one.

'When it all blew up, poor Debbie was the one who was squeezed out, not Golden Balls.' Tea dispensed, Karen continues to play with her tinsel adornment. 'You don't want that.'

I most certainly don't.

Karen and I had a tea-break date to meet up in the staff canteen but at my request she's come to my office instead. If I don't use this short time to put up some Christmas decorations in here, there won't be any at all. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve and I need to get a move on or I'll miss the boat completely. There are some fabulous, out-size baubles hanging in the main atrium of the building, but the rest of the place is bare. I'd hate it if I didn't mark Christmas at all in my own office. How miserable would that be?

'I don't know why you're bothering,' Karen says, nodding towards my stash of decorations as I blow up yet another balloon.

I pinch the top closed and take a breather. 'It's Christmas. I want it to look pretty.'

Karen waves a hand at my decorations. 'Christmas a-go-go.'

'Likey?'

'Lovey. They're too good for this place. '

They're actually mostly bits and bobs that I brought from home. Mum and Dad have boxes and boxes of the stuff in the loft, lovingly gathered over the years. They are the king and queen of Christmas junk and they didn't mind me pinching a few bits to liven this place up. I think Mum was quite relieved that I was taking some of it off her hands. Our loft must be like the Tardis. She's accumulated so much Christmas stuff over the

years, there's barely room for the humans once she gets it all out. Still, I have to say that they don't look too bad at all.

'It'll be nice,' I assure Karen.

My friend shrugs her indifference to my attempts to be festive. I've not been here at the Fossil Oil Corporation for very long – just a few months – and now Karen has taken me under her wing, and for that I'm very grateful. This is a massive, fast-moving, glamorous company and I so want to get everything right.

'Tyler Benson is *far* too important for them to lose him, Louise. It's the likes of us – the oppressed masses – who get the boot when things go pear-shaped.'

I sigh. 'How very depressing.'

'Better to keep your tits covered and your gob shut and hold him at arm's length for as long as you possibly can. He might get bored and leave you alone.'

'But he'll only do it to someone else. It's sexual harassment or something. He shouldn't be allowed to get away with it.'

She shrugs again. 'You can try to fight it if you want to, but don't say I didn't warn you when they're handing you your P45.'

'That's something I can't risk. This is the first decent job that I've had since Mia was born.'

'She's four now?'

I nod. 'Not long before she's five.'

Karen looks at the picture I have on my desk. 'Pretty like her mum.'

Mia is a pretty girl, and I don't think I'm saying that just because I'm her mum. She's got my brown hair and deep blue eyes, my creamy colouring. A chip off the old block, but with a sprinkle of extra cuteness. There's very little of her father in her, which I'm always thankful for. Mia is definitely her mother's daughter. My heart warms just to think of her and I miss her

every minute of the day when I'm away from her. 'She started school in September, which freed me up to rush back to the big bad world of work.' And, by some divine miracle, I've bagged myself a really great job.

'What did you do before you had her?'

'I was behind the counter in a bank. Being a cashier wasn't the best job in the world. You've seen those uniforms. But I didn't mind it. The hours were OK, the pay all right, and there were even prospects for advancement. At least, there were when I started.'

'So why leave?'

'By the time I was due to return from maternity leave, my branch had been closed, and they wanted me to go over to Bedford, which would have meant travelling miles to work every day – a good hour each way in rush hour. With a new baby, I didn't think I could manage that.'

'Bummer.'

'Tell me about it.'

I've bought a pretty Christmas tree for the office, which stands on top of the low filing cabinet as if it were tailored for the space. It's the only thing I've splashed out on. It was cheap and cheerful in Home Bargains but it glows with different colours and there's a sweet star on the top. I bought one for Mia too, in pink, for her bedroom. I abandon the balloons for the moment and climb on to my desk to pin another pretty gold-coloured garland into the corner.

'I was struggling enough just trying to get through the day at home,' I tell Karen as I drive my drawing pin home, hoping it holds. 'I had no idea how much work a baby was until I had Mia.' I smile at my own naïvety.

'Why do you think I haven't got any kids?' Karen shudders at the thought.

'The bank couldn't – or wouldn't – offer me part-time hours

either, which, apart from the inevitable drop in money, might have helped a bit.'

If I'm honest, my life was a total mess then. Looking back, I think I had a touch of the baby blues, but you never really want to acknowledge that, do you?, So I was trying to soldier on when I just felt exhausted and overwhelmed by it all.

I jump down, cross the office trailing the garland in my wake and, using a chair as a ladder, fix it diagonally across the ceiling. Maybe I should have got my mum to come in for an hour after work to do this. That would have been a plan. She'd have been in her element and I'd love to show off my posh office to her. She's been so supportive while I've been out of work and I want to make her proud of me. I want her to see that I'm getting my act back together.

'Was there a *Mr* Young on the scene?' Karen asks. 'Couldn't he have helped?'

'Mia was a good baby, but Steve and I were going through a really difficult time. We'd never had the easiest of relationships, and after Mia was born he just got worse and worse.' I shrug, as if the pain isn't still there when I talk about this. 'Mum and Dad were trying to help, but they were having to tiptoe round Steve too as he didn't like them in our house too much. He said that they invaded our privacy. They fuss, my parents, but they have hearts of gold. Steve could never see that side of them: they just irritated him beyond belief.'

'Sounds like a twat.'

'Yeah.' I can't disagree with her succinct assessment. I still wonder now what I saw in him. He was a bad boy and I should have run a mile in the opposite direction when we first met.

To shift the image, I turn my attention back to the balloons, tying them into bunches with elastic bands. I'd like to say that there's some sort of colour scheme, but there isn't. This is a party pack of assorted colours, so I'm having to take pot luck

and lump it. Besides, when it comes to Christmas, colour co-ordination is vastly overrated.

'With all that going on, I really don't know if I could have coped with the stresses and strains of modern-day banking anyway,' I confess. My confidence in myself was at an all-time low. If anyone had snapped at me, there would have been tears. 'There are hardly any front-line staff left now, just rows of cash machines and lots of grumpy customers who, quite rightly, complain that there aren't any staff. I didn't have the strength to face going back to that, so I gave in my notice, hoping I'd find another job quickly. Turns out I was way too optimistic. I hadn't bargained on how hard the recession had made it to move around in the job market.'

'It's tough out there,' Karen agrees. 'My sister's been out of work for ages, and she went to university and everything.'

That's another reason why I feel so lucky to have got this position. How many kids have gone through university, only to find themselves doing menial jobs on minimum wage? Or, worse, not employed at all.

'So where's Mia's dad now? I assume you're not together any more.'

Shaking my head, I pin the balloons so that they blossom out from the corners. 'He walked out on me and Mia while all that was going on and we haven't seen hide nor hair of him since. Last I heard, he was running a bar in Spain, ducking and diving, which would suit Steve down to the ground.'

Good riddance too. He was so controlling that, when he went, it was the first time in years that I felt I could breathe freely without asking anyone's permission.

'You could give me a hand instead of sitting there on your bum,' I say to Karen.

'Nah. Christmas is not my bag. Can't stand it. You're making a great job of it. Knock yourself out.'

The only problem – and it was quite a major one – was that he stopped paying his half of the mortgage on our tiny house the day he left.

My debts, of course, starting racking up instantly. I wasn't working and was struggling to get another job. Spending all day at home alone with Mia had me slowly tearing my hair out. I tried to manage on my own but it was just so hard. When I contacted the mortgage company to tell them of my situation, they foreclosed on the loan and I had no option but to sell the house.

It went for less than Steve and I had paid for it, so I was instantly in negative equity. Yet it still broke my heart to leave. It was just a tiny, terraced place with a garden the size of a handkerchief, but it was in a good area and it was home. My home. Mine and Mia's. I kept it spick and span as I've inherited the house-proud gene from my mum.

'We had to move back in with my mum and dad,' I tell Karen. 'That was the only downside.'

What could I do? There was no way I could downsize: there's nowhere smaller to go than minuscule. To rent somewhere was even more expensive than the mortgage had been, so that was out of the question too. Eventually, and with much soul-searching, the only option was to go home to Mum and Dad. Thank goodness they were more than willing to take me in. Bless their hearts.

But Karen doesn't need to know all this. Some things are better kept to myself.

'If I had to live with my parents we'd all kill each other within a week,' she chips in.

'To be honest, it was such a relief. Mum and Dad swept in and looked after us both, as I knew they would.'

'They sound great.'

'They are.' Throughout my life, they've just taken everything I throw at them with stoic supportiveness. 'Mum looked after

Mia and I got a job in Boots, mainly stacking shelves. It wasn't great, but it brought some money in.' Not enough to pay off the twenty grand I still owe on the house though. At least my sanity slowly returned. With my parents helping me, I got back on my feet and my confidence started to come back too. 'That was fine for a while. I was doing a job that wasn't very demanding and I could concentrate on giving Mia a good start. With my mum and dad's financial support, I could spend more time with her, but I couldn't rely on them for ever. It wasn't fair.'

To be honest, they've never uttered a word of complaint. But I got to a point where I began to believe that I had so much more to offer the world than making sure its favourite brand of toothpaste was always to hand. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I just wanted to find something with a bit of a challenge and with more opportunities to progress.

'So now Mia's at school all day and it's time for you to strike out again,' Karen says.

'Yeah. Just because I'm a single mum, it doesn't mean I'm on the scrapheap. I've got so much to offer, and doing it for my daughter has given me the drive I need. I'd love to have the cash to buy Mia little treats and make her proud of me.'

I want to turn my life around. I want to be someone who's going places. I want to pay off all of my debts. I want to make sure I've got a good, steady income and our own home.

Standing back, I admire my handiwork. 'Do you think I've put enough up?'

'Depends what you're aiming for. You passed the bounds of good taste with those balloons, but you've not yet achieved Santa's-grotto level.'

'Then we need more.' I delve into Mum's boxes. A trio of white glittery reindeer statues that we bought together in Next a few years ago. Perfect.

That's why I feel so very fortunate to have landed this position

at Fossil Oil after such a long gap. Despite my parents' assurances that any company would be lucky to have me, I'd been bruised by too many rejections and was terrified that my skills were just too rusty. Yet, despite my worst fears and insecurities, this time round I got a job quite quickly.

'I only had five other interviews before I landed this job.'

'Result!'

'It's been a steep learning curve, but I feel I'm holding my own here.'

'Everyone likes you,' Karen says.

Which is nice to hear.

'The money's good, the job's fantastic. I've no complaints on that score . . . '

'The only problem is that Tyler is very free with his hands and his smutty comments,' she concludes.

'Yes.' I hug the biggest reindeer to me. 'Now I've been given this chance, I want to really make something of myself. I can tell you, the last few years have been hell. Absolute hell. If it wasn't for the love of my mum and dad and my darling daughter, I don't know how I'd have survived.'

It's not been easy though. Who wants to go home to their parents at the age of twenty-nine, a single mum with a daughter in tow? They've been great though. The best. They've never once been judgemental about my poor choice of partner or the debts that are haunting me. And they're the most perfect grandparents anyone could have. They've done nothing but lavish love on Mia. She, in turn, absolutely adores them. I know I'm lucky – incredibly lucky – to have their love and support. But there's no escaping the fact that I'm back in the room I last inhabited when I was eighteen.

That's why there's no way on God's earth I'm going to let some jumped-up little toad like Tyler Benson spoil it for me.