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Opening Extract from...

A Proper Family Christmas

Written by Chrissie Manby

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CHRISSIE MANBY

*A PROPER
FAMILY
CHRISTMAS*



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Prologue

December 1971

A week before Christmas, in a tiny bedsit in a little town in Essex, a young woman carefully wrapped her Christmas gifts.

The list of people she had to buy for that year wasn't long. She didn't need to get anything for her mother or father. She had no siblings. She had no boyfriend. She hadn't been in town long enough to have any real friends. In fact, there was just one person she wanted to remember. But that one person on her Christmas list was more precious to her than anyone else in the world. That person's name was Daisy.

The young woman wrapped the small pink teddy bear with infinite precision, finishing the package with a ribbon. She placed it on the table alongside the baby blanket and the white romper suit and the rattle shaped like a heart. She had chosen them all so carefully, spending more than she could afford to buy the very best.

As it was, she had no idea whether the gifts would ever reach their intended recipient. Having wrapped each one in Christmas paper, she put them into a cardboard box that she addressed to an anonymous office. It would be up to someone she didn't know whether the gifts were passed on to Daisy's new family. It would be up to Daisy's new family whether the teddy bear made it under their Christmas tree.

A nagging voice in the young woman's head reminded her she might be wasting her time but her heart could not let this moment pass unmarked. It was Daisy's first Christmas. What mother wouldn't want her child to have a gift?

'But you're not her mother any more,' said the little voice. 'She's someone else's baby now.'

Five days later, the box full of gifts arrived at a smart Victorian mansion in the countryside near Warwick. The lady of the house thanked the postman and carried the box into the kitchen. She opened it with a sigh. She recognised at once the girlish handwriting on the gifts' colourful labels. Reading the messages brought tears to her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she tore off the wrapping paper and regarded the contents. She held the tiny romper suit, which was already much too small.

'I can take all this to the charity shop,' said her husband, when he found her crying over the pathetic little pile. 'Someone will be glad to receive them.'

'No,' said the lady. 'Not everything. We should at least hang on to this.'

She put the little pink teddy bear beneath the Christmas tree, on top of a mountain of presents from new grandparents, godparents and friends. Though she would never know whom it had come from, the baby would keep that teddy bear close by her entire life.

Chapter One

Annabel Buchanan

December, last year

Everything about Annabel Buchanan breathed entitlement. From the way she looked, with her pearls peeking out from the collar of a crisp white shirt under a V-necked cashmere sweater, to the way she walked, shoulders back and head high as though balancing an invisible book. She had a way of gaining the attention and assistance of everyone she came across, from baristas to barons. Her voice was clear and commanding and spoke of an ancestry peppered with generals and admirals. Her manners were never less than impeccable. She was a firm favourite for chairing committees and sitting on councils and organising village fetes. Though she and her husband had only recently moved into the Great House in Little Bissingden, you would have thought her to the manor born.

The ladies of Little Bissingden looked to Annabel when it came to all matters of taste and etiquette, which was why Annabel was horrified when, on a shopping trip to London, her daughter emerged from the changing room in Peter Jones in a dress that looked like a sweet wrapper. It was certainly about the same size as a piece of foil from a Ferrero Rocher. Annabel winced.

‘Darling,’ she said to Isabella – Izzy – her only child. ‘Isn’t that just a little bit common?’

‘Common? Mum!’ Izzy pouted. At sixteen years old, the only criteria she had when it came to choosing a dress was that one of her friends already owned something just like it. ‘Jessica’s got one,’ was her defence now.

‘Which just about proves my point,’ said Annabel. Jessica was not one of Annabel’s favourites among Izzy’s private-school friends. She was the original ‘bad influence’.

Annabel sent her daughter back into the dressing room to try on the classic little black dress she had picked out for her instead. They were searching for a dress for the Little Bissingden Christmas Ball. It was especially important that the Buchanan family make a collectively classy impression that year as Annabel was hoping to host the ball at the Great House in twelve months’ time.

Izzy reappeared in the black dress, which was suitably demure and elegant. It very nearly reached to her knees.

‘Perfect,’ said Annabel. ‘You look like a young Inès de la Fressange.’

‘Who’s that?’ Izzy wrinkled her nose.

‘Someone with a lot more class than your friend Jessica. Or her mother. That’s who.’

‘Class isn’t the only thing that matters, Mum,’ said Izzy with a world-weary sigh. ‘You act like anyone who doesn’t speak like you isn’t worth knowing.’

Annabel smiled at her daughter in a way that said, ‘one day you’ll learn’, absolutely unaware as she did so that the universe was lining up a few lessons of its own.

But for now, Annabel Buchanan was set for a perfect Christmas. She’d got her daughter in modest black velvet and had an organic bird for the big day, picked

up from a butcher in Mayfair. Well worth the drive from the Midlands.

Later that evening, turning into the driveway of the Jacobean pile she now called home, Annabel was struck once again by the incredible beauty of the place. She would never get bored of driving her car down the long, tree-lined driveway that opened on to the most exquisite house Annabel had ever seen. She had known from the first moment she saw the Great House – on a mini-break fifteen years earlier – that one day she would live there. Richard took a little longer to be persuaded. He baulked at the thought of maintaining a listed building. He didn't understand why they needed something so big. There were only three of them, after all. But Annabel had told him he could have his own wine cellar. That was all Richard needed to hear.

They had been at the Great House for just over two years now. The renovation was almost complete. Annabel had overseen much of the refurbishment herself, stripping out the previous owner's ridiculous Essex-style fittings and replacing them with National Trust tones and carefully curated antiques inherited from both Annabel's and Richard's families. The interior designer who had assisted had asked whether the Buchanans would allow their finished home to be photographed for *Architectural Digest*. Annabel was delighted. Richard asked if the magazine would pay.

The cost of the renovation had become a small bone of contention. It was true that the original estimate of costs had more than doubled and it had taken twice as long as it should have done. But it was worth every penny to have created such a showpiece. The perfect family should have the perfect home. And money was really no object for the Buchanans.

Back from the shopping trip to London, Annabel decanted eight bags from the back of her Porsche Cayenne into the hallway. Izzy was sulking, having been refused a trolley dash round H&M because Annabel wanted to beat the traffic. While Izzy went straight to her bedroom, Annabel headed into the kitchen. She flicked on the Nespresso machine, which coordinated perfectly with the Smallbone of Devizes cabinets. The cleaning lady had arranged a pile of post neatly next to the fruit bowl.

As the Nespresso maker gurgled away in its corner, Annabel filleted envelopes. Bills went straight into a pile for her husband. A society wedding invitation was placed for high visibility on the shelf above the Aga. A leaflet about local council elections went straight into the bin (Annabel and Richard would be voting for their friends). A flyer from Harrods announcing a ten-per-cent-off day for black card holders was also filed in the rubbish. Christmas cards from suitably impressive senders joined the wedding invitation as Annabel wondered briefly whether the tinsel along the edge of the shelf was *de trop*. That was Richard's doing, of course. The mix of metallic green, red and gold clashed horribly with the kitchen colour scheme.

The rest of the house was decorated for the season in suitably tasteful style. There were three Christmas trees. One in the stairwell in the hallway, dressed in silver and white. That one was almost twelve feet high. Another stood in the corner of the dining room – a mere nine footer with blue baubles. The third, and most spectacular, was in the 'great room' with its double-height ceiling and inglenook fireplace, which was where the family would gather to open their presents on Christmas Day. The perfectly shaped Norwegian fir was dressed in silver and gold.

A Proper Family Christmas

Annabel carried her coffee into the great room now and took a moment to look at her handiwork. The coordinated decorations. The beautifully wrapped presents beneath the tree. The glow of the logs in the fireplace. It was like a page from a glossy magazine. The only hint of whimsy was the old teddy bear, wearing a tattered tutu sewn by Annabel's mother Sarah some forty years earlier, which always took the place of the traditional fairy on top of the tree.

Yes, the scene was set for another perfect family Christmas.