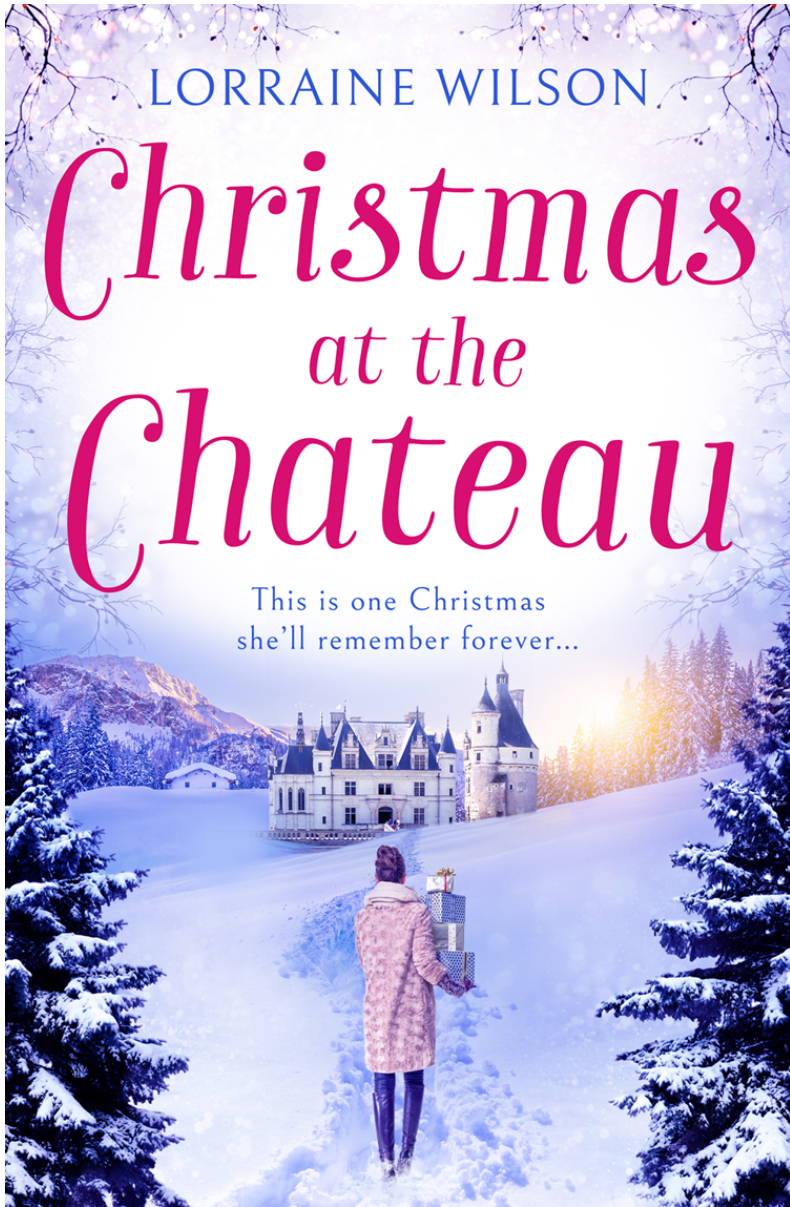


LORRAINE WILSON

Christmas at the Chateau

This is one Christmas
she'll remember forever...



Lorraine Wilson

Christmas at the Chateau: (A Novella)

«HarperCollins»

Wilson L.

Christmas at the Chateau: (A Novella) / L. Wilson —
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Map best viewed on a tablet device. An account of the Spanish civil war which portrays the struggles of the war, as well as discussing the wider implications of the revolution in the Republican zone, the emergence of brutal dictatorship on the nationalist side and the extent to which the Spanish war prefigured World War II. No war in modern times has inflamed the passions of both ordinary people and intellectuals in the way that the conflict in Spain in 1936 did. The Spanish Civil War is burned into European consciousness, not simply because it prefigured the much larger world war that followed it, but because the intense manner of its prosecution was a harbinger of a new and horrific form of warfare that was universally dreaded. At the same time, the hopes awakened by the attempted social revolution in republican Spain chimed with the aspirations of many in Europe and the United States during the grim years of the great Depression. 'The Concise History of the Spanish Civil War' is a full-blooded account of this pivotal period in the twentieth-century European history. Paul Preston vividly recounts the struggles of the war, analyses the wider implications of the revolution in the Republican zone, tracks the emergence of Francisco Franco's brutal (and, ultimately, extraordinarily durable) fascist dictatorship and assesses the way in which the Spanish Civil War was a portent of the Second World War that ensued so rapidly after it.

Содержание

Christmas at the Chateau	6
Chapter 1	7
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

Christmas at the Chateau

LORRAINE WILSON



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*For my wrapping paper shredding, sellotape stealing, disco dancing, joy giving bundles of fur
– Peanut, Treacle and Pickwick*

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

About the Author

About the Publisher

Chapter 1

“Romance is the glamour which turns the dust of everyday life into a golden haze” – Elinor Glyn

From: poppy@daydreamdesigns.co.uk

To: michelle.davis@yahoo.com

Subject: No Mince Pies!

Hi there,

It’s such a shame you can’t make it out to us. Christmas without my best friend is going to be weird, but I understand family pressure. Don’t I just! Mum is predictably furious that I’m choosing to spend Christmas at the château with Leo’s family instead of coming back to England. I’ve tried explaining that his dad isn’t in the best of health but ... well, you know Mum. She’ll probably consider it a just part of my punishment that I can’t find mince pies anywhere.

Still, I’m going to have lots of new French traditions to get acquainted with, including the *treize desserts* – yes, literally thirteen puddings, and if you don’t have a taste of all of them it’s bad luck supposedly so of course I’ll have to do my bit to ensure good luck for the new year.

I was thinking about last New Year’s Eve. Do you remember we wrote down our New Year’s resolutions and promised to keep each other accountable? If you’re prepared to overlook my rash plan to cut back on carbohydrates (well, I moved to the land of the freshly baked croissant, so that was never going to happen) I’ll promise not to say ‘I told you so’ about your pledge to go to the gym every day (but, to be honest, that was never going to happen either!). My big resolution to change my life and follow my dream ... I think I managed that one and this year has been pretty good to me, in spite of a bit of a crappy start. Moving to the South of France was definitely a good move because now I’ve got the lovely Leo in my life, not to mention that I’m illustrating my very own children’s book series, instead of someone else’s project. That’s another of my resolutions checked off. I told you they want ‘Only Dogs and Donkeys’ to be a series, didn’t I? I’ve told Peanut how popular her character is in the book and it’s totally gone to her head. For a rescue dog she has very healthy self-esteem. Her dancing chihuahua videos are getting really popular on YouTube too so maybe she’s been secretly checking how many views she’s getting. I was contacted by a company who want to license some of the clips. Wouldn’t it be funny if one of my dogs ended up earning more than me?

Setting up the art gallery at the château has been an amazingly rewarding project as well and I wouldn’t have had any of these opportunities if I’d stayed in England doing the same thing over and over, stagnating. Mum can’t see that the good things are as a result of moving to France though. I think she has emailed me virtually every scary Brexit story going this year and won’t admit that her doom and gloom predictions about me going ahead with the move alone haven’t come true yet.

I’ve tried to explain how good the climate is for me here, both for my health and for getting me painting outdoors again, but Mum’s never really recovered from the shock of me going to art college instead of doing something ‘sensible’. Sorry to go on about Mum, I just had an email from her so I’m a tad ... wound up. I have really enjoyed painting for pleasure again. The light here is just amazing and the views, well you’ve seen them yourself so you understand. Did I mention how lovely the weather has been here this autumn? A bit like an English summer but without the rain, humidity or thunderstorms. We’ve had some lovely walks up in the mountains. Unfortunately, now we’re getting a little rain and a few flurries of snow. Leo wants to take me skiing. You’d think that after six months of knowing me he’d have realised coordination isn’t exactly my strong suit!

Really, the only downer has been Leo's dad being ill. I think as a result Leo's family want to make this Christmas really special. Sarah and her husband are coming for a week and Angeline and Sophie will be here for the Christmas Eve meal. Leo says that Christmas Eve is always the special event, so I suppose I'll have to wait and see.

Are you going to be in Cumbria with your parents until New Year's Day? Send your mum my love. Oh, and can you let me know if the parcel I sent you arrives okay? You might want to take it up to Cumbria with you – I wanted you to have a little taste of France, given you might have to wait for the full experience.

I'm going to miss you, lovely. Have a fab Christmas!

Poppy xx

I read through the email to check that AutoCorrect hasn't added anything random. So it's a little bit braggy but isn't that what you're supposed to do? It seems like it's in the tradition of all those family-festive-jumper round-robin-letters Mum's been trying to get me to read over the years, mostly from people I barely know and occasionally from people I don't know at all.

It feels like Mum is still influencing me, despite my best efforts and the helpful distance I've put between us. I'd say we are definitely getting on better now that we live in different countries but given my current mood that isn't saying much.

I could have told Michelle that I've just had my first row with Leo but it would have struck an odd note given I was going on about how well everything is going.

And it is. The row is just a blip. Not even that, a blipette at most.

I sigh and put my phone away, a signal that the dogs know all too well. It means I am now fair game for fuss, walks, games and maybe a treat, if they are lucky. I am instantly mutt-mobbed but as the mob is comprised of two miniature chihuahuas and a miniature Yorkshire terrier it's not too bad really.

Now, if Leo's dog Maxi joined in I would be far more worried given he is a Pyrenean mountain dog.

"It's your fault you know," I tell Peanut, who is sitting up on her hind legs in her best meerkat impression.

Treacle shoves his nose under my hand.

"Okay, okay, it's your fault too."

Pickwick the Yorkie deposits his dinosaur toy at my feet, looking up at me with his most appealing, hopeful expression. He's been working on it for years and is very good at it.

I roll my eyes and fling the toy across the room, almost hitting Joanna as she walks into the living room.

"What's their fault?" She picks up Pickwick's dinosaur and throws it for him again. He bounds across the room in pursuit. "I don't believe it. They are totally blameless. Look at those angelic furry faces."

"Well, maybe not totally their fault." I pull a face and then show her the package I'm keeping down behind sofa – the cause of the argument. "Leo said it was a waste of money buying these. That I would be undermining his serious reputation as a vet. I don't know why, it's not like I'm asking *him* to wear one."

"Dog hoodies?" Joanna asks incredulously. "That's what you fell out about?"

"Not really fell out. We were debating, discussing ... Agreeing to disagree."

Though the discussion hadn't been quite as mature as that.

"The thing is, you know what Treacle and Peanut are like," I appeal to Joanna. "They shivered when we put the fan on during the heat wave. And they spent the summer nights buried underneath the duvet while we sweltered on top."

That was another issue Leo and I have had to work out. Dogs on the bed versus dogs *in* the bed ... But it turned out Leo's will was no match for Peanut's, and all the other dogs followed her lead.

After a few mornings of waking up to find her cradled in the crook of his arm, her body under the covers, her head poking up above the top of the duvet, he sensibly accepted it as a *fait accompli* and nothing more has been said about it since.

“But surely he knows that they feel the cold more than other breeds. Didn’t you tell me about chihuahuas having different physiognomy to other breeds?” Joanna asks.

“Yes of course, but he thinks they should wear decent dog coats that look like dog coats and won’t embarrass him. I say the hoodies keep their necks warm as well as their chests, and having their names printed on the back just makes sense. It’s brand awareness for Peanut’s YouTube channel.”

“And the fact that they’re going to look really cute in them ...?”

“Is just a bonus, yes.” We smile at each other and I’m glad she gets it. “I don’t know why I got so cross with him. I’d just had a bit of an email row with Mum about Christmas so that’s probably why.”

“Where is Leo?”

“He went off to the *château*. No doubt he’ll be telling his parents all about what the mad *Anglaise* has done now.”

“And Monsieur and Madame Dubois will just put it down to one of the many whims of the creative but slightly eccentric artist who lives next door.” Joanna throws the dinosaur toy again, watching Pickwick as he bounces after it, springing rather than running, his crooked little front legs not holding him back in the slightest. “You can do no wrong anyway. You’ve put a smile on their son’s face.”

I remember the way Leo glowered at me the very first time we met, and I can’t help smiling myself.

“True,” I admit, “And even if they do think I’m nuts they are both far too kind and polite to say it. Anyway, are you looking forward to spending Christmas at the *château*? You’re not regretting not going home?”

“No fear.” Joanna shudders.

Joanna doesn’t talk much about her life back in the UK. I only found out that she used to be in a reality TV show when Michelle came out to stay and recognised her. Joanna says I’ve saved her life by giving her somewhere to hide and the space to get her life back together. I’m not convinced I was the one doing the saving though. I really don’t know what I would’ve done without her help with the guest house. It’s a lot of work for one person, even more when you consider that the whole house had to be decorated and transformed into a *chambre d’hôte*.

I hadn’t planned on doing it alone though. Last Christmas I was binge watching, *A place in the Sun* and get-off-your-arse-and-change-your-life-type programs with my boyfriend at the time, Pete. I’d thought we would be doing this together, but it turned out he didn’t want to change his life after all. I guess for him watching the programmes was a bit like watching cookery shows but never actually intending to cook.

I bite my lip. It’s odd how much life can change in twelve months.

“Are we getting a tree today?” There is a plaintive note in Joanna’s voice that makes me think she might be missing home more than she admits and certainly far more than I am.

“Of course, we are,” I say. “I wasn’t sure at first if we wanted to bother given we will be up at the *château* for most of the festivities but of course we must.”

I remember decorating a tiny tree in my London flat last year and Pete moaning about having to listen to my Michael Bublé Christmas album while we did it.

What else will Leo and I fall out about I wonder? The thing is, it’s all been so utterly lovely with Leo that I’m almost waiting for something to go wrong. I’m convinced I’ll wake up and find that this has all just been an amazing dream – and a pretty saucy sex dream at that.

“Earth to Poppy.”

“Erm, sorry?” I look blankly at Joanna.

“Shall we pretend you were having a creative moment there and not just daydreaming about your hot boyfriend?”

“Let’s go and get a tree then.” I pull a face at her and do my best to look creative and inspired. “There is one proviso though.”

“What?”

We have to give the dogs the opportunity to be naughty and mess things up. I need more inspiration for *Only Dogs and Donkeys at Christmas*.”

“Does that mean you’ll be stopping every five minutes sketching and taking photos?”

“Of course,” I say. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep the Kir Royales coming. Got to keep the help happy.”

She rolls her eyes at that but good-naturedly. We both know she runs this place really and I just waft about, doing my arty-farty stuff, as she calls it, and getting in her way.

I wonder if Leo is coming back here later or if I should text and check if he’s going to his place. Things are okay between us, I’m sure.

Almost sure anyway.

“It will be fine. Stop fussing.” Joanna gives Pickwick’s toy a final toss. “Enough. I’ll get RSI from chucking a stuffed dinosaur and I have no idea how to say that in French if I need medical treatment.”

We spend the rest of the day decorating the house and listening to cheesy Christmas music. Peanut, head of the canine pack and chief troublemaker, decided to run off with a roll of wrapping paper and then later the Sellotape so she provided me with a few new sketches and ideas for the book that were still percolating when Leo came around later, Maxi in tow.

“I’ve brought pizza,” he announces. “There’s plenty for three people if you’re hungry, Joanna.”

I can’t help smiling widely at him, my lovely Leo. Always so thoughtful and considerate when it comes to other people. Not to mention gentle with animals. He does have a more forceful, strong side that I hope I’ll be seeing more of later on. If we’re not still arguing, that is.

“Are we good?” I ask later, once we’ve eaten everything and he’s pretended not to see me giving Maxi a cheesy crust. Joanna has gone to bed, Pickwick in her arms, her little hot water bottle and friend.

I never begrudge her taking Pickwick. After all, I have Leo and the chihuahuas to give me cuddles and Pickwick seems to like the one-on-one attention.

Leo pulls me onto his lap.

“Good?” Leo asks, puzzled. “Yes, we are good ... but I can be bad if you like?”

The Christmas tree is looking pretty special if I say so myself, glittering lights catching perfectly positioned red and gold decorations.

Joanna had petitioned for white and blue decorations but I vetoed her. It would have looked stylish but I wanted warm tones in the room so that when the fire blazed and flickered it would reflect on the tree decorations and make everything glow gold. I’ve lit some candles in lanterns too and switched off the main lights so the atmosphere has an almost magical quality to it.

I realise he has missed my meaning. Leo’s English is excellent – the result of time spent in America and London – but I forget he’s not always going to pick up on all my colloquialisms. I am making an effort to learn French but it’s much easier for us to communicate in English unless I’m ordering food in a restaurant, asking where the toilets are or apologising that my French isn’t very good. I am ironically good at apologising for my bad French.

I try, honestly I do, but anyone I speak French to instantly replies to me in English. If I speak French to Leo he just smiles because I apparently have a very sexy English accent ... and that makes it hard for him to concentrate.

“I mean, are we okay?” I shift closer to him on the sofa, one of my hands resting against his warm chest.

Given Leo's hand is running up and down my denim-clad thigh I assume we probably are, but I like to have it clarified. It's an anxiety thing.

"Okay?" He frowns.

"You know, because we were fighting."

Leo's brow crinkles even more and his hand stops moving. "Fighting? When? When have we ever been fighting?"

Oh. Okay.

"I thought, this morning ..."

"We were just talking ... A minor difference of opinion that is all. I was joking about my reputation. If I cared about that I wouldn't be with you."

I narrow my eyes and he grins to show he's only teasing.

"Also, you're right, it is up to you and the clothing is warm so it is suitable."

Bless him.

But his teasing deserves a tease in return.

"Good, because I've bought us all matching hoodies, Maxi included." I keep my face as expressionless as possible.

Leo blanches and then his dark eyes narrow as he realises I'm teasing him.

I shriek with laughter as he pushes me down on the sofa and tickles me.

"I take it back. You are not good at all. You are very, very bad." Leo's expression turns from teasing to intense and passionate and a shiver of sexual electricity travels through my body like a wave.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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