

Excerpt from Chapter 11: It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year (p 139 – 141)

I received an invitation from Holly to attend a queer orphans Christmas breakfast she was organising for Helping Hands. The email invite said:

This time of year can be hard on many in LGBTIQ+ communities. We're inviting LGBTIQ+ folk and allies to a morning of great food, a makers' market and entertainment.

I thought it might be good for me to be around other queers who struggled with complicated family situations, so I asked Gemma if we could drop in there before heading up to Leongatha in Gippsland for lunch at her nonna's place.

Flagstaff Gardens was right in the middle of the legal precinct, and thus not a place I associated with relaxing, good times. I tried to keep an open mind. When Gemma and I arrived, there were about thirty people sitting around on colourful beanbags in front of a giant inflatable rainbow, which people were taking selfies in front of. A buxom drag queen called Frock Hudson was onstage dressed as a sexy Santa, lip-syncing to Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas Is You'. We went to get some food, where Holly and her colleagues were serving up egg and 'facon' rolls with chutney. We walked around looking at embroidered patches, friendship bracelets and resin pendants, before spotting a boutique soap stand. The sign hanging off the table said, 'Handsome Henry's'.

I skipped up to Henry's stand, where he and his partner were selling fragrant soap in all the colours of the rainbow, decorated with imitation fruits, bow ties and candies.

'Henry, how are you?' I asked, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

'Great! How are you, Sam?' he asked.

'Oh, you know, it's the same as usual, so feeling pretty stressed. I'm so glad to see that you got your soap-making business going,' I said.

Gemma and I bought some Cherry Ripe-themed soaps to give to her family, and then headed over to find some spare beanbags to watch the show. We were offered a Christmas cracker by a volunteer. We tugged on it and I won the prize, which was a crispy red paper crown and a fake nose, which I put on in an attempt to be jolly. Moments later, a familiar face walked past me. It was Mona, the trans woman who had got upset with me a few weeks ago for not helping her get to the top of the Cotter Gender Clinic waiting list. Either she didn't recognise me or she didn't want to talk. I suddenly wondered how many more of my clients were here. I kept my fake nose on.

The next performer was Ze/zir salad, a non-binary slam poet dressed head to toe in fronds from an actual Christmas tree. Multicoloured baubles hung from their limbs and their face was painted as a gold star, dripping with tears. Ze proceeded to indulge the

crowd with an arguably too long, non-rhyming poem about topping Jesus with an 8-inch pink strap-on. After listening politely for the first five minutes, Gemma went to find a drink, while I quietly slipped my headphones on and checked Instagram. In the last couple of months, I'd started receiving a flurry of spam messages from fake accounts of scantily clad women. It felt like a milestone. Somehow, I'd crossed over the gender lines in the eyes of social media. I passed almost all the time in public now, but how on earth did the algorithm know that? Gemma brought me back a non-alcoholic sparkling wine and we cheered to our relationship, as the Victorian Commissioner of LGBTIQ Communities took to the stage. Like me, they had been a butch-of-centre queer woman who'd recently started using gender-neutral pronouns. They were the first person ever appointed to the role, which was created by the Andrews government. It was slightly unclear to me exactly what the role of the LGBTIQ Commissioner was, but they certainly knew how to give a speech. The crowd gave hearty applause as they came onto the stage. They were in their fifties, wearing a purple shirt with grey pants and a daggy dad tie of Santa catching a wave.

'This year, friends, after we survived the punishing marriage equality campaign, and continue to be subjected to harmful public rhetoric from the debates around so-called religious freedom, I wanted to reflect on mutual respect and compassion.'

The Commissioner went on to make an impassioned plea for members of the LGBTIQ community to support each other, and not get sucked into in-fighting. At this point Mona, who was sitting on a pink beanbag at the back of the crowd, interrupted their speech.

'You're nothing but a dog! You do nothing for us, you just take your big fat pay checks and let us suffer! You'll get your comeuppance.'

The volunteer with the Christmas crackers hurried over to Mona and led her away from the group, as tears poured out of her.

We all turned back to the Commissioner. How would they save this?

'Well ... what can I say? Merry Christmas, everyone,' they said, before handing back the mic.

I watched them head towards their parked car. I was certain I'd be on the receiving end of similar treatment soon enough. It felt like it would just take one vocal disgruntled former client to permanently sink my reputation.