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Opening extract from

Cloudberry Castle

Written by

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Cloudberry Castle

Janey Louise Jones



Kelpies

For Katie Mackenzie, with love

Kelpies is an imprint of Floris Books

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1. Christmas at Cloudberry



It was Christmas Eve last year. I was sitting on my bedroom floor in Holly Cottage, wrapping presents for my family. I had been saving up some of my weekly pocket money since the summer, and Mum took me into Perth to do Christmas shopping. For my five-year-old sister, Sorcha, I had bought a dressing-table mirror surrounded by shells and mermaids. It was really pretty, but a bit tricky to wrap! As for Hamish, what *can* you get for a three-year-old boy? Mum helped me to decide. I wrapped the two "knights on horseback" figures for him, both wearing suits of armour. One of the horses had a kind face and the other looked mean. A goodie and a baddie, which is just what he likes.

For Mum and Dad, I had made a big memory box all about our family, the Mackenzies, and our life here

on the beautiful Cloudberry estate. Mum was always worrying that she couldn't find her favourite little family things, so I thought it would be good to put everything special together. I had painted the outside of the box with amber-coloured cloudberries, dark green fir trees and purple heather — all the varied colours of Cloudberry. *Thank goodness I don't have to wrap this one!* I thought, as the box was quite big.

My grannies and grandpas all love Scrabble, and they said they had lost a few tiles, so I got that game for the Mackenzies from Edinburgh and the Berrys from Boston, USA. Easy-peasy to wrap! And finally, for old Dr Campbell up in the castle, I had made some chocolate truffles, which were in a shiny gold box I had saved from last Christmas.

It's such fun preparing for Christmas! I love the way it gets really dark so early in wintertime. I had switched on the fairy lights around my bed, and a little lamp as well. My attic bedroom is really tiny, but I love it so much! The walls are painted a brilliant colour, which Mum found in Mr Morrison's hardware store down in Lochvale village. It's called Crushed Cranberries. Not red, not pink, not purple. Just right. The bed has a patchwork cover which Granny Mackenzie made for me when I first moved out of my cot. I've got a white wardrobe and a cupboard which used to be for toys (not any more, obviously — it's

now full of ballet outfits, shoes and handbags), and a huge ballet mirror and barre. Ballet is my only hobby. I want to be a prima ballerina, like Mum used to be.

The dressing table is at the window and it's crammed full with lip balms, hairbrushes, jewellery and nail polish. I like to try out new ballet buns at the mirror all the time, but my best ones are always on the days I *don't* have ballet! Then when I go to sleep, even though I plan to lie completely still and keep the bun in place, it always goes wonky by morning.

I was very happy with my wrapping. It looked so colourful. A couple of weeks before, Mum had bought lots of plain brown paper down at Mrs Renton's post office. I had decorated it at the kitchen table the week before Christmas with red, green and gold paint. My best design was the gold stars — all sizes, with dots of colour in between. I tied red ribbons round all the parcels and made some tags from leftover paper. I wrote messages to everyone in my gold pen and attached the tags to the ribbons. There! The presents were all done. Ready to put under the tree in the family room alongside all the other gifts which had appeared over the last week.

I got up and stretched, then stood at the barre and did a couple of pliés. I looked at myself in the mirror. I had grown such a lot in the last year. And I'd got thinner too, even though I was eating loads. My brown hair was

in its usual shoulder-length bob. My eyes are quite big and round, but they'd look so much better with eyeliner. Mum doesn't agree. I decided to get my make-up bag from my dressing table and experiment.

That was when I looked out of my window. The night was pitch black by now, not just a bit dark like it gets in towns and cities, where the street lamps glow here and there. I mean really, really dark, as if black velvet had been laid over the whole world. I'm used to that, but something looked different from usual. At first, I couldn't think what it was, then I realised — there were no lights on up in Cloudberry Castle.

The castle stands on a hill above our little cottage. It has four fairy-tale towers and a big clock tower in the middle, which always reads two o'clock. The date 1856 is carved into the main tower, so that's when it must have been built.

In winter, Dr Campbell, the owner, always sat in the library with a log fire burning and a few small lamps on. They were usually on by this time. Sometimes I could just make him out, prodding the fire with a long stick. Then he'd settle down again on his armchair, with a tartan blanket round his legs and a notebook and pen in his hands. I guessed he was writing about ancient Egypt — his favourite subject.

Occasionally, I saw him taking a key from behind the

clock on the mantelpiece. He would use it to open a little cupboard, hidden in the wooden panels by the fireplace.

He never went anywhere. A supermarket van came down the estate road with food shopping every few days, while Mum and Dad took in everything else he needed. I loved to go up with Mum when she took homemade broth or a rack of freshly baked fruit scones. The castle seemed to be enchanted, and it always made me want to dance through the corridors as if I was Cinderella at the ball in a wonderful white silk dress, covered in rosebuds …

At other times, I would just pass by the castle when I was checking on Bella, the estate's Shetland pony. In summer, she's always grazing in the meadow behind the castle, beside the shimmering Lily's Lake. In winter, she lives in a stable in the mews, where all the horses and carriages used to be kept when the castle was first built. Bella doesn't belong to me, or to anyone in particular. We can't remember when she first arrived here, but we make sure she is well fed and shod.

The thing about Cloudberry until that Christmas was that, even though the seasons brought their changes in the weather and the scenery, nothing else really changed at all. Everything was always the same, day after wonderful day, which is why I thought it was so strange that I couldn't see any signs of Dr Campbell on Christmas Eve.

"Mum!" I called as I ran down to the kitchen. "The castle is completely dark. Dr Campbell might have had an accident!"