

Company for Three

by Julie Vellacott

Wendy wondered if it would be over the top to wear the elaborate hat. Probably, but Christmas was a special occasion. Also, and this was a powerful incentive, it would annoy her son Brett. The whole thing was Brett's idea and she hadn't bothered to argue.

Brett had tracked down her old schoolmate Albert on Facebook and things had steamrolled from there. All she'd done was mention Albert's name, spotted in an obituary earlier in the year. Albert's wife had been a research scientist of some renown, warranting a few paragraphs in the Courier-Mail. No children mentioned, just survived by her 'prominent physician' husband. Brett had become obsessed with him, possibly hoping that his flighty, unpredictable mother would make some respectable connections. He'd looked for and found Albert, eventually befriended him online and was now, it seemed, on sociable terms. Wendy wasn't on Facebook. She thought it was for people who didn't have a real life; she had real life in spades.

She hadn't seen or thought of Albert for forty years. What exactly was a physician anyway – some version of doctor obviously. It clearly meant that he had a few letters after his name and thinking back to the rather pompous schoolboy, probably used them whenever possible.

Had she ever fancied Albert? According to Brett, who heard it from Albert, she had, a bit. She remembered Albert clearly which must mean something. Tallish and thin with shoulder length red-gold hair. Skinny legs and sharp elbows came to mind. She'd liked his hair, even though some of the boys teased him and called him radish.

Wendy suspected Brett of wanting to play cupid and she didn't mind, it could be a laugh. He'd discovered they all lived within a fifty-kilometre radius and would all be alone at Christmas. Brett the benevolent, who had a big house and state-of-the-art kitchen, would host a Christmas feast for the three of them. Wendy was a bit over most of her friends, they were big on promises of a good feed and a good time but lacking on the follow-up. She'd played the ditzy role for so long, could she be finally growing up? And it was supposed to be a time for family, wasn't it?

She knew the food would be superb and hoped the alcoholic beverages would match up.

Brett had been afraid his mother would show up in something weird. Who else would wear a lolly-pink fascinator with skinny jeans and an Iron Maiden t-shirt. He immediately suggested she wear one of his shirts over the top.

He'd been so pleased to find Albert – it wasn't hard, he was quite famous in Brisbane – and liked the idea of his dotty mother and the dapper doctor getting together. Heaven knows she needed someone normal in her life. Apart from himself, of course.

The dining table was magnificent, set with his best silver and crystal and damask serviettes. His Villeroy and Boch dinner set was waiting to be loaded with seafood, exotic salads – the Moroccan watermelon salad with sumac was a winner – and the obligatory glazed ham. Then plum pudding (flambeed with cognac) and brandy butter followed by interesting cheeses and fruit. He'd go easy with the booze, didn't want Mother Wendy to make an exhibition of herself.

The front gate clanged open and shut, that must be Albert now. Good grief, he was wearing a tuxedo.

Albert knotted his bowtie and wondered how he'd managed to get himself into this situation. The tuxedo was a bit much but it gave him confidence, he often let his outfits make a statement. Despite his well-regarded career he wasn't socially confident, definitely not a natural at small talk. He remembered Wendy as a pretty blonde who always had plenty to say. Her school uniform skirt was usually rolled up higher than all the other girls, her blouse unbuttoned to the point of indecency. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. And she had seemed to accept his shy approaches willingly. He'd thought she quite liked his company. She liked it enough to copy his homework, anyway. Nothing came of it back then; he hadn't expected anything would.

He'd had a wife but no children. Wendy had a son but no husband, an architect son with his own business. Brett was fond of talking about his fabulous house - where he lived alone, it seemed – and was keen to show it off. Wendy did voluntary work now, Brett had told him, after a varied career working in bookshops, animal welfare and hospitality.

Albert had made a good marriage, he supposed. He'd admired and slightly feared his high-powered wife but even she couldn't defeat the illness that eroded her mind and then her body. Colleagues – he didn't have close friends – had jollied him along. He'd been determined to refuse all Christmas invitations but Brett had been very persuasive. To be honest, and he always tried to be, he was curious to see Wendy.

And there she was, framed in the upstairs window. Still blonde, still pretty.

The clang of the gate drew Wendy to the window of Brett's dressing room. She'd agreed to add one of his shirts to her ensemble with the proviso she selected it. She'd never seen such a boring lot of shirts in her life, if she hadn't given birth to him she'd swear Brett wasn't her child. The pink with purple stripes wasn't too bad and would have to do.

That must be Albert fumbling to latch the gate. He'd added a little paunch to his bony frame. She'd bet his legs were still skinny. Still had all his hair, faded reddish grey now and a bit long for a man of his age. She liked that, maybe he wasn't as dull as she remembered. He'd spotted her through the window and she was glad she'd removed the fascinator and agreed to put on Brett's shirt. The hat and t-shirt had been a bit much, but it had done the job of getting a rise out of her son.

She gave Albert a friendly wave and noticed, with a sudden surge of interest, that he was wearing a tuxedo. Surely that was even more outlandish than her sartorial selections. Not dull at all then.

Wendy checked her hair and makeup and went to join the others.