

A MIRACLE FOR CHRISTMAS



CHARMAINE PAULS

**A Miracle For
Christmas**

by

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Published by
Melange Books, LLC
White Bear Lake, MN 55110
www.melange-books.com

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Published in the United States of America.

Cover Art by Lynsee Lauritsen

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Michael Slanders only wants a steady job and a family of his own, but instead he lives from hand to mouth with his sick mother. Fired a week before Christmas and down on his luck, Mike needs nothing short of a miracle. Sometimes, goodness prevails. Sometimes, magic is made.

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“Mike!”

Michael Slanders switched off the blowtorch and lifted his protective mask. The boss stood on the rusted landing of the metal works factory.

“In my office,” he said, throwing a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the corrugate iron building.

“I’ll be right there, Andy,” Michael called from across the yard.

It was Friday, payday, five days before Christmas. Michael was still on contract, therefore paid a weekly wage, but he was holding out for a permanent placement and his hopes were high for the annual Christmas bonus that normally only went to the men on the regular payroll.

Stamping clusters of mud from his heavy-duty boots on the iron steps, he made his way upstairs. He stripped the leather gloves from his hands and pushed the glass panel door to Andy Fairchild’s office open.

“What’s up, Andy?” Michael said by way of greeting.

Andy averted his eyes. “Sit.”

Michael stared at the single chair facing Andy’s desk. It was a plastic, chipped chair, the dark blue type that you see in school halls. Andy probably found it abandoned somewhere and dragged it here because he thought a desk needed a visitor’s seat, but this one was covered in dust. As far as Michael could remember, he had never seen anyone make use of that chair. He didn’t like the look and sound of this. Andy generally barked out orders, good naturedly, or punched you on the bicep to show his approval of a job well done. He certainly didn’t invite you in a subdued civil fashion to take a seat. No, this was very

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unlike Andy, and not the stance of a supervisor on the verge of offering a welder a bonus. Michael remained standing.

“What’s going on, Andy?” he said tightly, the strain of a bad premonition slipping into his voice.

Andy sighed and picked up an envelope from his desk pad calendar, the one dating from five years ago that he never used because each page was personalized with his initials in embossed gold.

“I wish I didn’t have to do this, Mike.” He finally met Michael’s gaze, his expression apologetic. “Here.” He held out the envelope.

Michael hesitated. Instinctively, he knew if he touched that white sheet of paper it was over, but Andy thrust it forward, coaxing him to go for the bait.

“What is it?” Michael said.

Andy shook his head. “I’m sorry, man.”

Slowly, Michael reached out for the inevitable. He took the envelope and tore it open, licked his thumb and slid out two pieces of paper apprehensively, like one would deal a bad hand of cards. It was his paycheck. No bonus. He didn’t have to open the folded letter to know what it was. He recognized the letterhead. Andy only used official stationary for serious stuff like Dear Johnny letters.

“You’re laying me off, Andy?”

“Bad times, man. Don’t have a choice. Business is taking a strain.”

Michael knew Andy was telling the truth. The factory produced custom-designed gates and fences to protect the properties of upper-class suburbs, and the fact that the even the rich guys were holding back on something as important as security was telling. Things were tough everywhere, especially in Johannesburg, especially for a thirty-seven year old male with no qualification other than an apprenticeship in welding.

Michael took a deep breath and propped his hands on his hips, his shoulders hunched. He wouldn’t be a man if he weren’t at least going to fight.

“I could work on commission,” he offered. “You pay me as the work gets in.”

Andy blew out another burdened sigh. “Listen, man, I’ve got bills to pay too. That’s the way it goes. I’ll give you a good reference.”

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“I’m almost forty, Andy. You know how it is.”

“Yeah.” Andy scratched his baldhead. “Unemployment is a bitch.” He looked at the dirty window, tapping his foot on the concrete floor.

Michael followed his gaze to look over the messy yard cluttered with rusted metal half hidden by overgrown weeds. The lonely pine tree on the pavement had been sloppily draped with fairy lights, Andy’s weak attempt at reflecting what was supposed to be a festive season. The reek of oil and paint was overpowering. Michael became painfully aware of the smell that he had taken for granted for the past year.

“I’m sorry, man,” Andy said again, and Michael realized that he had been dismissed.

He hung his head in silent defeat. “Don’t beat yourself up, Andy. I know the way the dice rolls.”

The men nodded at each other, Andy’s furrowed eyebrows giving him a genuinely pained look, and because there was nothing else to say, Michael left the office of the dingy metal factory and slipped his last pay as welder into his back pocket.

* * * *

Five o’clock was the official business *tjaila* time, going home time. It was just before six. The streets of the South African suburb of industrial Richmond, where the factory was located were quiet, except for a corner between Park and Empire Roads where other weekly wage earners like him drank their hard-earned cash away in a forgotten pub.

The bar had outlived the major business’s evacuation when violent crime hit the area hard. A board advertised Friday Happy Hour and Christmas cocktail specials. Michael didn’t stop when he got to the drinking hole. He crossed the street and carried on west.

On the way to the box shaped house he shared with his mother in Westdene, Michael sat down on a bus stop bench, his head in his hands. He made a quick calculation. With the little money he had in the bank, he could pay the monthly electricity bill, his mother’s medicine, and that was that. Before the month ended, they’d be on the street. It wasn’t the kind of news he wished to break to his fragile mother just before Christmas. A number twenty-four bus with a cheerful Holiday Season municipality message pulled to the bus stop. On impulse, Michael got