

## Bridesmaid

by Hayley Lawson-Smith

Loretta was always the show-pony of our group. But not always in the good way that makes people happy. Sometime you just wanted to...well, that sounds pretty awful to say after what's happened.

The police have just left my house and mum, shocked by what they've told us, is in the kitchen making tea. I'm sitting here on the couch, pondering what I've told the police, everything that led up to Loretta's murder.

It was the night of Gertie's Hen's Party. I'd spent all day, preparing decorations, making a great big, pink and silver poster, which read, "Gertie's Getting Married!". Most of us made sure to call her Gertie and not Gertrude, or at least when her parents weren't around. Gertie had been named after her German grandmother and she hated the name; there weren't too many young people in Melbourne called Gertrude and the poor thing was already different enough without a name that sounded like a sneeze. Loretta, on the other hand, had a habit of addressing Gertie as "Gertie Rude", which she thought was hilarious. Gertie, chubby, patient, bespectacled, quiet Gertie would always grin and bare it. That was Gertie's way; she was simply too kind to say anything to Loretta, even when Loretta was being at her most painful, like the time she borrowed Gertie's favourite shoes, the only ones which made her legs look hot, even when she knew Gertie wanted to wear them. But Gertie is such a gentle soul. No wonder she didn't object when Loretta took over all the Hen's Night plans.

Yesterday afternoon, the day of Gertie's Hen's Party and the night Loretta was found chopped to pieces, I arrived at Gertie's house baring the poster Loretta had ordered me to make. Gertie's mum answered the door, and took me to the kitchen where Gertie sat at the table, reading the paper. As usual, she was absorbed. She never failed to read the paper, cover to cover, every day. Gertie's a good reader, she's our own personal news reporter, since the rest of us never bothered to check the papers. After finishing the article she was reading, Gertie hurriedly folded the paper, chucked it in the recycling and hugged me shyly. Even though we've known each other since we were kids, Gertie was shy to hug me.

"I've got the poster!" I announced proudly. "Pink, to go with your dress."

"Oh, I'm not wearing the pink anymore," Gertie replied, trying to smile.

"What?" I exclaimed, very surprised. "But we spent ages picking that dress."

Gertie didn't meet my eyes.

"Oh, Loretta thought the pink made me look washed out, so I'm wearing the grey one instead. It's alright though, she's given me some money for the pink one and had it altered to fit her..." Loretta

I was stunned. But before I could get a word out, Loretta herself walked into the house.

"Thanks so much for having the party here, Mrs. Kluge," I could hear her saying to Gertie's mum as she clipped along the tiles in her high-heels, "I would have had it at my house but my place is probably too big and this is going to be such a small party, after all."

If it wasn't Gertie's Hen's Night, I would have yelled at Loretta. But I knew that would have ended in Loretta crying miserably, and becoming the centre of attention. So instead, as she came into the kitchen wearing what should have been Gertie's party dress, I plastered a grin to my face and pretended to be happy to see her.

"Hi Loretta," I said, as friendly as I could.

Gertie seemed to give Loretta her most nervous smile, as gorgeous, tanned, honey-voiced Loretta grinned at her, like a patronising Barbie doll.

"Miss Gertie Rude!" She squealed, dumping her handbag into Mrs. Kluge's arms to hug Gertie. "You look fantastic! So pleased we swapped dresses! You have to let me do your make-up though, I know you get a bit confused about how to do your eyes."

I watched Gertie's face and could see she was trying hard to look cheerful. I watched Loretta's face and saw something that was almost jealousy. I suppose, after all, that none of us expected Gertie to be the first of our group to marry. She was mousy and placid and didn't flirt half as much as any of us, certainly not a quarter as hard as Loretta. But she had found someone who made her happy, someone she wanted to live the rest of her life with. And I had thought we were all happy for her, until I saw that look Loretta's eye.

The doorbell rang and the rest of our group trooped into the room. The six of us screamed as though we were back in high-school and Emily and Jane, assigned to food duty by Loretta, began laying out delicious looking platters on the coffee table. Kathryn, putting down what looked like enough drinks to quench the thirst of one hundred thirsty uni students, said,

"Okay, everyone except Gertie put in some money for these drinks or I'm going to be broke for the rest of the month!"

Loretta, while the rest of us searched in our purses to chip in for the drinks, looked at the bottles of cheap champagne and smiled apologetically.

"I don't think I'll be drinking that stuff," she said gently, "so I'm sure you understand if I don't put in. I'll wait till we get to the club. Also, I probably won't eat either; don't want to get bloated!" She turned to Gertie, who was sipping on bubbly and had an olive in one hand, with a flashy smile and added, "you probably shouldn't drink much either, Miss Rude. You don't want to dance like a crazy woman too early in the evening!"

Gertie laughed nervously and I thought we should change the subject.

"Let's get some music on," I suggested, downing my drink, "and then we can start playing some games."

"Oh, I have some wonderful games in mind," said Loretta, and I hesitated in the middle of putting a C.D in the player.

"But, I thought the games were my job," I said. Loretta shrugged.

"I know," she replied, "but I realised that there are some traditional games we probably shouldn't play with Gertie Rude. Like that one where you wrap the bride up in toilet paper. Not all women look cute done up that way you know."

Again, I clenched my teeth as I pressed play on the stereo. Well, I thought, let her try and take charge, there was one thing she couldn't take from Gertie and that was the fact that it was her night.

"Gertie, we have presents for you!" I announced, and Emily and Jane sat her down conspiratorially on the sofa, "and you have to receive them before we play games."

During the week Kathryn, Emily, Jane and I went on a mission to buy all those wonderful toys we girls buy for the Hen. A tiara with an attached sequin veil, a glittery wand, and a book of cheeky dares for Gertie to play out during the night. We hadn't bought anything too rude though, because Gertie gets embarrassed by even the slightest innuendo.

She received all our gifts and looked more happy and excited than I'd ever seen her, like a kid at her birthday party, when Loretta, who had been sitting quietly, suddenly sprang up.

"Oh my God," she said, grinning at Gertie, who looked quite pretty wearing the sparkling tiara, "I've got a present too!"

And she snatched up her handbag, rifled through it, and pulled out another wand, a green, luminous one, with a tip which looked like...

"Is that a – it looks like a..." Stammered Emily.

"A penis?" Gasp'd Jane.

"Yes!" Replied Loretta, laughing gleefully at the sight of Gertie staring clueless at the penis-shaped

want in her hand. "Oh! We should take some photos! Hold it near your ear, Miss Rude!"

Gertie, kind, complacent Gertie, did what she was told as Loretta took photo after photo.

"These are going to look great on Facebook!" She declared and I could see Gertie struggling to smile, trying to look as though she appreciated Loretta photographing her posing with a toy penis and promising to post the happy snaps on the world wide web. But that was Gertie's way, to put up with anything because she was just too gentle to utter an angry word.

The hours before the taxi arrived to take us to the club dragged. Loretta, forgetting she hadn't chipped in for the drinks, assumed the role of life of the party after two tall glasses of champagne. I tried to start a game of Twister, which has been Gertie's favourite and most wild party game she played since primary school. We were having fun until Loretta changed the rules so that instead of "right hand on blue circle," she'd say, "right hand on Gertie's bum!" I brought this game to an end quickly when Mrs. Kluge walked in, wanting to join in the fun.

"You're mother's too cute!" Loretta whispered loudly to Gertie as Mrs. Kluge started dancing to Robin Williams with Emily and I. "My mother wouldn't dare come out of her room when I was having a party. She'd be too worried about embarrassing me."

Finally, the doorbell rang and I breathed an inward sigh of relief; the maxi-taxi I'd ordered in the morning had arrived and at last we could be off to the nightclub. But when I opened the door I received a surprise, and not the kind of surprise that made my heart flutter with joy.

"He is saying he is taking you," said the taxi driver in broken English, pointing at a man in a swanky suit behind him. He stood beside a gleaming white limousine, waiting in the lamplight for passengers unknown.

"What...?" I began, but Loretta pushed past me, arm in arm with a befuddled Gertie.

"Surprise!" She shouted, forgetting that Mr. Kluge was trying to sleep. "How's that? Bet you never expected anything so glamorous!"

"But Loretta," I said, a little surprised by Loretta's generosity, "I booked the taxi..."

"Oh, you should have double checked with me," replied Loretta, ignoring my taxi driver's furious glare, "go on Gertie, hop on in. I figured you probably wouldn't have one for the wedding, being on a budget and all." Loretta smiled at me, Kathryn, Emily and Jane and said, without a hint of an apology, "You guys can put in your share by the end of the week, no rush," and hurried off to to join Gertie in the limo. Wordlessly, the other girls gave me some money to pay the taxi driver's cancellation fee and with a look at each other we silently decided not to have a go at Loretta over this latest trick until after the

Hen's Night.

We piled into the limo and I had to admit that it was a luxury, even if it cost a fortune and we were only going fifteen minutes into town. Loretta gave the chauffeur the address as though giving directions to a servant but as he drove off Gertie yelled,

“Oh, we've forgot mum!”

The driver began to slow down, until Loretta told him to keep going.

“Don't worry Gertie Rude,” she said, straightening Gertie's tiara, “I had a quiet word with your mum, told her you were too kind to say, but that you'd probably be embarrassed to have her come with us.” She laughed. “It's a club after all, not the RSL!”

Gertie smiled meekly.

“Oh, um, thank you Loretta,” she said, but I knew she was hurting inside, she had to be; Gertie's wedding reception was being held at the local RSL.

There was a line of people filing metres away from the door of the club. We resigned ourselves to a long wait and walked past the beefy bouncers but they, spotting Gertie, had a different plan in mind.

“Oi, love!” One of them called, waving a tattooed hand in our direction. “You getting' married?”

Gertie blushed, half-smiling, and nodded.

“Thought so,” said the other bouncer and he unclipped the red rope blocking the entrance, gesturing for us to walk through, “you look gorgeous sweetheart, congratulations.”

As our little party of six swaggered passed the impatient people in the queue, I noticed again that jealous spark in Loretta's eye; although we'd all been allowed to jump the queue, the bouncers had only had eyes for Gertie.

“Well Miss Rude,” said Loretta once we'd pushed our way through to the bar, “your first drink is on me. We'll have two Jager Bombs and two cranberry vodkas please,” she added to the barman without asking Gertie what she'd like. Gertie was too polite to refuse, and she downed both drinks as fast as I'd ever seen her drink anything. Before Loretta had a chance to order more alcohol, Kathryn and Emily grabbed Gertie's hands and pulled her to the dance floor. Gertie was not well known for being able to hold her drink and we did not want her to have a messy night.

Loretta paid for another vodka and she, Jane and I joined the others to dance. We were mostly the kind of girls who dance for fun, but Loretta liked to be noticed. Gertie was a modest dancer and never did any sexy moves, but Loretta wouldn't have any of it.

“Come on Gertie Rude!” She yelled above the music. “Shake that booty! I'm sure your future

husband loves a woman who can wiggle all those curves!”

As thoughts of dunking Loretta's head into the girls' toilet bowl flashed through my mind, I jumped up beside the D.J.

“Can I request a song?” I asked.

The D.J, holding his headphones, nodded.

“It's for my friend,” I said, “it's her Hens Night.”

I requested a song we'd all loved since high school and hurried back to dance with the others, just in time to see Loretta down another drink.

“This one goes out to Gertie!” The D.J said into his microphone. “It's her Hens Night. Get up here and dance Gertie!”

I don't think I remember ever seeing Gertie let loose the way she did as she danced up on the stage. And her face beamed as the randy, drunken boys in the club wolf-whistled and cheered. Then her smile vanished. Loretta was up on the stage with her. I could almost see her glowing green with envy. Without bothering to be subtle, Loretta edged her way into the spotlight and shuffled Gertie out.

She danced the way you'd expect one of the girls at our local strip club to dance and as the hoots and whistles came Loretta's way, Gertie stumbled off stage. Emily, Jane, Kathryn and I made a big fuss over her, turning our backs on Loretta, but she wouldn't be ignored for long. She jumped into the arms of a hulking bloke and pranced towards us.

“Sorry Miss Rude,” she panted, flushed with the effects of alcohol, “but I thought I'd jump in there, before anyone started laughing. Your dancing's so...unique! I'm just gonna get another drink.”

The rest of the night passed quickly and the more we partied, the more I wanted to push Loretta in the way of a malfunctioning tram. When a good looking guy asked Gertie if he could buy her a congratulatory champagne, Loretta butted in and informed him that Gertie couldn't drink because of how easily she got drunk. When we went into the bathroom, Loretta said loudly what a pity it was that Gertie never brought make-up out with her, because her face was all shiny and needed powdering. And when we sat in the lounge she noted what a shame it was that club lights made people wearing grey look so tired.

But the last straw, the most painful insult, and the final nail in Loretta's coffin, came towards the end of the night. Gertie's tiara and veil meant that she had stood out all night and people had been paying her lots of attention, as well as compliments. And not just now and again, but all night. Girls were telling her how pretty she looked, boys wanted to dance with her, and she even scored a couple of free

drinks. But Loretta hadn't convinced the barman that she deserved drinks, other girls only sneered at her, and she was soon too drunk to stand let alone dance. Kathryn, Emily, Jane and I made a unanimous decision to hail a taxi and send her home. Loretta was sloppy and wobbled barefoot into the fresh air where the lamplight revealed her smeared make-up and messed up hair. Her shoes dangled pathetically from her fingers as she clumsily clung to Gertie.

"Gertie Rude," she slurred, "Miss Rude, let me take your tiara. It might get me a discount on the taxi fare and besides..." And the envy in her was no longer hidden. "... I would make a more believable bride."

It was a chilling moment. We could do no more than stare at this woman, who was so pissed she was beyond retribution. Slowly our eyes watched Gertie's face; surely this would be the moment she would crack. How could she not be driven to tears, when Loretta had finally demanded to take away the one thing that was Gertie's and Gertie's alone? Her Hens Night. Her one and only night that was just for her.

Gertie stared at Loretta and Loretta, drunk and ignorant, gazed back at her expectantly.

For a moment, Gertie's lips appeared to tremble, her forehead creased. And then her expression settled, a tiny smile rested on her lips and she seemed to decide something.

"Yes Loretta," she said softly, kindly. She removed the tiara, untangling strands of her hair from the sequins and, almost lovingly, fixed it onto Loretta's head.

Loretta grinned.

"Thank you Miss Rude," she said and climbed into her taxi, waving us goodbye like a queen farewelling her subjects.

It was the last I ever saw of her.

The tea mum made for me is going cold. I'm too distracted to drink it, repeating each word the policeman told me in my head. He'd said that Loretta had been murdered by a man the reporters had dubbed the "Bride Slayer", a murderer who preys on young women celebrating their Hens Nights. The officer said his killings had been in all the papers.

Gertie had been reading the paper yesterday.

I wonder why she never mentioned it.