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I Heart London

Written by Lindsey Kelk

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LINDSEY KELK

I Heart London

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1

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Della, Beth, Sarah, Jacqueline,
Ryan, Emma and Rachael.

People always ask me who my Jenny is and I tell them I'm lucky because I don't actually have one, I have all of you . . . I would absolutely take your diaphragm out if I had to.

Not you, Ryan.

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CHAPTER ONE

'I'm so sorry I'm late,' I babbled as I ran into the *Gloss* magazine office, unbuttoning my top as I pushed the door open with my arse. 'I had a Jenny emergency and lost my shoes and couldn't get a cab, and how come it's so hot today? Oh and my shirt is covered in crap but I think I left a T-shirt here so—'

'Ms Clark.'

My blouse was halfway over my head and my arms were tangled upwards in a dying swan when I heard someone who most certainly was not Delia Spencer say my name. The reason I knew it was not my colleague and friend Delia Spencer was because it was a man's voice. And it was one I had heard before.

'Mr Spencer?' I peeped through a buttonhole to see Delia's grandfather, owner of Spencer Media and ultimately my boss, leaning against Delia's desk with a very grim look on his face. Behind him, Delia sat in her squishy leather chair biting her lip and trying not to laugh. Neither of them seemed terribly impressed by my bra. It wasn't one of my best.

‘How lovely to see you,’ I said, trying to pull my shirt back down over my head as casually as possible before offering Mr Spencer a handshake and a dazzling smile. ‘I’m very sorry.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said. Then he stood up, ignoring my hand, and walked straight into our tiny meeting room. ‘I understand you had an emergency and are covered in crap.’

‘And I lost my shoes,’ I whispered to Delia with a wince.

‘Happy Monday,’ she whispered back, following her grandfather into the meeting room. ‘Jenny emergency? What threat level are we on there?’

‘Orange? Maybe even a lovely reddish coral. She’s losing it. I had to intervene.’

‘As long as she’s OK now,’ Delia gave me a sympathetic look and opened the door to the meeting room. ‘There’s a spare sweater on my chair. It doesn’t have any crap on it.’

Delia had enjoyed my BFF, Jenny’s downward spiral as much as anyone over the last few months. It had been six months since she’d broken up with her ex-ex and since then she’d been doing a fine job of ruining her life. That or she was auditioning for a role on the next *Jersey Shore*. I hoped that was it, she was definitely going to need a new job soon if she didn’t sort herself out.

‘Perfect,’ I muttered to myself, hurriedly changing shirts and checking out my blouse for permanent damage. ‘No good deed goes unpunished.’

‘So the launch phase will take place in Q three so we can be out for fashion week, with *Gloss* on limited availability in New York,’ I said, as confidently as I

could. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Delia nodding confirmation. Directly in front of me, Mr Spencer, my boss, formerly known as Bob, was not nodding. He was sipping coffee and fixing me with a gaze so steely I was fairly certain it could cut through a tin can. I concealed a tiny squeak and clicked onto the final slide of my PowerPoint presentation. Oh yes, I was a PowerPoint person now. 'Once we're out there and have established a solid audience, we'll launch on the West Coast in Q four, and then, Q one, we go nationwide with a long-term view to international expansion in Q three the following year.'

I was incredibly proud of myself. After a less than promising beginning, I'd got through all my slides without cocking up and I hadn't spilled a single thing down Delia's jumper. Things were looking up. Now all we needed was Mr Spencer's go-ahead and we were quite literally in business. I attempted my best *Wheel of Fortune* pose in front of the drop-down screen and gave my audience of two a dazzling smile. I was ninety-nine percent certain I looked deranged, but still, Bob was pulling his concentrated face and Delia hadn't kicked me yet, so I took that as a win.

'Interesting,' Mr Spencer said. 'Very interesting.'

Once upon a time, Mr Spencer and I had been best buds – he had brunched with me at Pastis, offered me dream jobs in Paris. We were total besties – but then I might or might not have accidentally called his granddaughter and Delia's identical twin sister, Cici, several very colourful and slightly unflattering names in an email and, well, punched her in the face at Christmas. After that, we sort of drifted apart. He'd given Delia

and me a chance to get *Gloss* going, we had a small office in the Spencer Media building and some office equipment, and he had reluctantly agreed to support my visa application, but that was where it ended. There was no free ride in the Spencer family. Not if you saddled yourself with a foul-mouthed British girl who knocked out a member of your family at a Christmas party while dressed like a slutty Santa. It was a long story, but Cici totally had it coming. Delia agreed. Often. I didn't have a sister but if I did, I'd want one like Delia. Kind, thoughtful and cleverer than anyone who had ever been on *The Apprentice*. I did not want one like Cici. She was the Ursula to her Ariel, the coffee cream to her hazelnut whirl. Pure evil. But she was out of the picture. At least she hadn't actively tried to ruin my life for the last couple of months so that was nice. It was just as well, I had been busy.

At last, we were ready to go. We had a killer dummy issue, we had a business plan that made sense, we had writers on standby, we even had a retailer lined up to distribute for us. We just needed advertisers. And to get advertisers, we had to get Grandpa Bob to include us in the annual Spencer Media sales conference. Delia was convinced it was a lock, but I wasn't so sure. Yes, he'd stayed all the way through our presentation without nipping out to the loo or anything. And he'd only picked up his iPhone once; and there was no way he'd been on it long enough to be playing Fruit Ninja. Unless he was very good. Which he probably was.

'So you have a retailer on board?' he asked Delia.

'*Trinity*,' she confirmed. 'As you know, the second largest women's fashion retailer in the US.'

‘And you’ll be distributing through them directly?’ he asked Delia again.

‘We will,’ she nodded.

‘And is she actually barefoot?’ He cocked his head in my direction.

Ohhhh.

‘She is,’ Delia confirmed. ‘But she’s also a very good writer, a fantastic creative planner and an absolute asset to your company.’

I tried not to blush. Shucks.

‘Even if she is a little eccentric.’

I couldn’t really argue with that. Even if it did take the edge off her original compliment.

‘I know I’m going to regret asking,’ Bob said finally, turning to face me, ‘but what did happen to your shoes?’

‘Well, I was at my friend Jenny’s house –’ As soon as I opened my mouth I knew I wasn’t going to be able to stop – ‘and I’d been borrowing her shoes, but she was just a big drunken weeping mess and she made me take them off—’

‘You don’t have shoes of your own?’ Bob interrupted. ‘I don’t follow . . .’

‘Maybe if we just deal with questions about the magazine right now?’ Delia suggested. ‘And let Angela’s shoe situation resolve itself. Do you have any questions about the business plan?’

Bob looked at Delia, at me, and then his phone. ‘No. It was very clear and concise.’

Delia beamed. ‘Any questions about the creative?’

‘None at all. You know more about that market than I do.’

‘So any questions at all?’ She straightened the collar on her sky-blue shirtdress. ‘Now’s the time to ask them, Grandpa.’

The stately, grey-haired media magnate leaned forward and rested his elbows on our glass conference table. 'In all honesty, Delia, I just really want to know why she isn't wearing shoes.'

Delia sat back, rubbed her forehead and gave me a quick, sharp nod.

'So . . .'

'That wasn't scary at all,' I said, spinning round and round in my office chair after Bob had left the office. 'What are we going to do?'

'It's fine.' Delia stretched her yoga-toned arms high above her head. 'He's going to say yes. There's no reason for him not to. I have a good feeling.'

'I'm glad someone has,' I said grimly. I didn't have any good feelings. I only felt like I had dirty feet and a craving for bacon. 'Then why didn't he just say yes?'

'Don't panic, Angela – I know my grandpa,' she said. Her confidence was somewhat reassuring. 'He never says yes on the spot. He likes to think about things, weigh up his options, but we've given him every reason to say yes. Besides, I know he wants me on the magazine side of the business. It's not like Cici is proving herself heir apparent to the business when he retires.'

Despite a lifelong ambition to work in publishing, Delia had avoided Spencer Media until we started working on *Gloss* due to her batshit mental sister already working at *The Look* magazine. But while Cici's ambitions only reached as far as stealing from the fashion cupboard and ruining the lives of British freelancers (*cough* – me – *cough*), Delia actually wanted to succeed. On the surface she was a blonde,

Upper-East-Side WASP princess, but underneath she was a fiercely ambitious uber-genius. She was basically Serena van der Woodsen with the brain of Rupert Murdoch, and she had enough self-confidence to make Lady Gaga look like she was a bit down on herself. God help anyone who got in her way.

'I just can't cope with the idea of this not working out.' I laid my head on the cool desk and peered at my iPhone. Ooh, some peas needed harvesting in my Smurf Village. 'If he doesn't go for it, then the last six months have been for nothing.'

'Not going to happen,' Delia said, enunciating each word with a clarity and confidence I couldn't even try to feel. 'Look, why don't you take the afternoon off? There's really nothing we can do now until he gets back to us.'

'I was going to try to talk to Mary about some new features ideas,' I said, twisting the emerald ring around my finger. Mary Stein, once we were officially off the ground, was going to be our editor. I was sort of surprised she'd agreed to it if I was being entirely honest. Mary and I had worked together on my blog when I'd moved to New York and I'd been nothing but trouble but I had a feeling she was itching to get off the blog and back onto a real magazine. That said, until we had full funding, she was still working on *TheLook.com*, but she made plenty of time to bitch out my ideas as often as possible. I loved her dearly. 'And I could do with looking at the website plans again.'

Delia smiled at me across the office. 'Do you realize you always do that when you're nervous about something? Twist your engagement ring?'

'I do?' I looked down at my diamond and emerald

sparkler and felt my frown turn upside down. 'I hadn't noticed.'

'It's cute,' she grinned. 'When you're stressed, that calms you down. Bodes well for the future, doesn't it?'

'I suppose.' It was a nice thought. 'I'm probably just terrified of losing it, though.'

'Speaking of engagement rings, I have something for you.' She pulled a thick glossy magazine out from her beautiful Hermès Birkin and tossed it across to my desk. It landed with a pleasing thud and spilled open on a page full of amazing wedding dresses.

'What is this?' I said, turning to the front cover. 'How do I not have this? I have all the magazines.' I did. There were so many stacks of glossies in my apartment, I'd started using them as coffee tables. It was all part of my wedding-planning procrastination. If I had the magazines, at least I was sort of trying.

'It's actually British,' Delia explained. 'I wore some of the designer's pieces when she did regular couture, but now she's doing bridal. They're amazing. I put a Post-it on the page you should look at.'

Regular couture. As if there were such a thing. I opened the magazine randomly to a painfully beautiful spread of painfully beautiful models wearing painfully beautiful wedding dresses. I ran my fingers over the glossy paper and tried to pretend I wasn't barefoot and wearing a borrowed jumper because I'd effed-up one shirt already today. How was I ever going to manage in a wedding dress?

'I marked the page with her dresses. Let me know if you want to talk to her – I'm sure she'd love to

help.' Delia's eyes were bright and shining. It warmed my heart a little bit to remember that people could be lovely sometimes, especially after the morning I'd had. 'And if you need any help with a venue, just say. I have so many contacts. Although I'm sure you're fine. But really, just say the word.'

'I will,' I said, wiping some melting mascara away from under my eyes and added 'wedding venue' to the never-ending list of things I needed to worry about at some point in the future. Then delved right back into the bridal porn. Oh, the gloves . . . The vintage lace elbow-length gloves . . . 'We haven't got anywhere with planning yet. So far, all I know is what we don't want.'

'Which is?'

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the pretty pictures. 'Agadoo. Any sort of live animal. Our parents.'

'I don't know what an "Agadoo" is. I'm with you on the live animals, but I really don't know how you're going to get away with leaving your folks out of the proceedings.'

'Well, if I never tell them, they'll never know,' I pouted. 'Sometimes I think we should have got married in Vegas.'

'You know you don't mean that,' Delia said with a shudder. 'Vegas weddings are very 2008. How is Alex?'

'Recording.' I gave her a small smile. 'Always recording.'

Everyone I met thought it was super-cool to be engaged to a boy in a band. They saw nothing but gallons of champagne, midnight rock-and-roll adventures and sweaty on-stage serenades. The reality was far less romantic. We were more cider than champers, and the

most adventurous I got pre-dawn was deciding whether or not I could be bothered to get up for a wee in the night. And as for the sweaty serenades, well, I couldn't lie. There was something wonderful about hearing a song written just for you; but the actual process of pulling that song out of Alex's head and recording it so thousands of other girls could pretend it was written just for them was an incredibly painful process.

At the beginning of January, a glazed look had come into Alex's eyes and overnight he'd turned into a nocturnal creature. From the first deep freeze of the winter until the frost broke and the sun started shining in April, he'd been working on songs all night long and sleeping through the daylight hours. All of them. Now it was May and he was still at it. Every evening he'd emerge from the bedroom, confused and dishevelled, as the sun went down, only managing to focus when he picked up a guitar, a cup of coffee or the keys to the studio. It had been cute at first, but after the third time I'd had to take the rubbish out by myself, I'd been forced to slap him round the back of the head.

'Seriously, go home,' Delia commanded. 'I'm ordering you to take the afternoon off. Go home, see your fiancé, read your wedding magazines. And don't come back until you've got a colour scheme.'

'A colour scheme?'

'Go!' she ordered. 'You did really great this morning. You showed my grandpa your bra, you gave a very convincing PowerPoint presentation barefoot, and you handled an international Jenny Lopez crisis all before lunch. You get the afternoon off.'

When she put it like that, it did seem fairly reasonable.

* * *

The apartment was silent when I got home. Even though I'd been given the afternoon off by my kind of partner, kind of boss, I still felt like I had won something. Was there any better feeling than being at home when you were supposed to be in the office?

'Hello?' I called out, only to hear my voice echo back at me. No answer from Alex. Our place wasn't huge, but it was airy – floor-to-ceiling windows, open-plan rooms, wooden floors. It would be beautiful if it weren't such a shit-tip. There were takeout boxes everywhere, piles of magazines doubling as coffee tables and half-full, half-empty glasses resting on every surface. We were animals.

The answerphone flashed two messages which I purposely ignored; instead I went to wash my poor feet. The only people on earth who called the landline were my mother, because she was scared Skype was going to steal her soul, and telemarketers, because they had no soul to begin with. I was in the mood for neither.

Feet de-hobbited, I looked around the living room. The place really was a mess. When all I'd had to do in this world was write a blog, there had been hours upon hours to spend horizontal on the sofa, occasionally cleaning and watching the world go by. I'd spent days wandering through the city, dreaming about my next adventure, lost countless weekends on the Lower East Side with Jenny and our friend, Erin, and one too many cocktails. Now, with a few sacred spare hours, I was trying to shake the obligation to do the dishes while Erin sat at home with swollen ankles and Jenny, who had been dumped twice by the love of her life, was going off the rails faster than an underage *X Factor* contestant. I stared out of the

window in the general direction of her apartment, wondering if she'd made it into the office. The Empire State Building winked back at me in the sunlight. It was such a tease.

A loud yawn emanating from the bedroom made me jump. Alex was home. I turned the AC all the way up and turned my back on the dishes. It was hot already, too hot for late spring, and all I wanted to do was hop into bed beside Alex and snuggle up under a blanket, but it was hard to snuggle under a blanket when you were sweating like a horse. Opening the bedroom door slowly and quietly, I smiled at the sight of my comatose boyfriend sprawled flat on his back, right across the bed. His dark hair slipped off his forehead as he stirred and his pale skin looked practically translucent from his self-enforced seclusion. The T-shirt he had passed out in had twisted up around his body, and his legs were caught up in our crisp white sheets. It was adorable. And hot. The good kind of hot.

Part of me really didn't want to wake him. He looked so peaceful, and it was nice just to take two minutes out to stare at him without making him feel uncomfortable or making me feel like a pervert. Unfortunately, I was a clumsy cow who could only take off a pencil skirt by twisting the fastening round to the front, and sometimes, when that pencil skirt is stuck to your skin, twisting it round to the front is harder than you'd think. After wrestling with the hook and eye for too many seconds, I yanked it as hard as I could and triumphantly knocked myself right into the nightstand. My lotions and potions scattered and rolled around the room, crashing and clattering as they went. I froze, clutching the table

and waiting for my pot of Crème de la Mer, a Christmas gift from Erin, to come to a silent standstill by the wardrobe.

'Morning, Angela,' Alex muttered without moving.

This was the problem with wearing lady clothes, as I had discovered. Taking them on and off again was hazardous to my health.

The bed was cool and the sheets were soft as I crawled in beside Alex. For a skinny boy, he was a great cuddle buddy. Broad shoulders and strong arms opened up and wrapped me up inside them as I sank into the bed.

'Hey.' He pressed his lips against my hair and yawned again. 'You're in bed.'

'I took the afternoon off,' I replied, pressing backwards against him, shivering with a happy. 'Thought it might be nice to see your face.'

'My face likes your face,' he whispered. 'Wait, it's the afternoon?'

Bless his sleepy, confused heart.

'You didn't come to bed until five a.m.,' I pointed out. 'So I suppose technically it's still the middle of the night to you.'

'You had a meeting today,' he murmured, reaching for my hand and entwining his fingers through mine. 'How'd it go?'

'I honestly don't know,' I admitted. One of the terms of our engagement was full disclosure at all times, which I had a feeling Alex was starting to regret. 'Delia says it will be OK, though. How's the record going?'

Alex fumbled for an iPod resting on the nightstand on his side of the bed and pressed it into my hand. 'Done.'

I rolled over quickly and kissed him square on the

lips. 'That's amazing!' I said, kissing him again. Because I could. 'You're really all finished?'

'You know I wouldn't let you listen to it if I wasn't,' he replied. 'I'm done.'

'Well done you.' I pushed my far-too-long-and-desperately-in-need-of-a-trim hair out of my eyes to get a better look at him. So pretty. 'I've missed you. What happens now?'

'Now I sleep,' he said, planting a kiss on the tip of my nose. 'For a really long time.'

'Sounds fair.' I helped myself to one more kiss. Delicious. 'And what happens after that?'

I really hoped he wasn't going to say touring, because I was very concerned I would be forced to tie him to the bed and never let him leave. No one brought out my inner crazy like that man.

'I was thinking . . .' His bright green eyes flickered open and the lazy smile I'd heard in his words found its way to his lips. I was such a smitten kitten. 'I might marry my girl.'

I pressed my forehead against his, completely incapable of keeping the biggest, brightest smile ever from my face. 'Well, that sounds nice,' I said. 'Do you have any sort of plan for that?'

Alex kicked the covers away to wrap his bare legs around mine and drew me closer. 'I have been putting a lot of thought into the honeymoon,' he said, rolling over until his warm body covered mine. This was the kind of hot and sweaty I was perfectly OK with. 'There's some stuff I kinda need to test out.'

It had been so long since we had used our bed for anything other than sleeping, snacking and the occasional *True Blood* marathon that I felt a mild panic come over me. I couldn't actually remember the last

time we'd both been conscious and coital. I was so nervous, it was like the first time all over again. I was holding my breath and second-guessing my touches, but as I gave myself over to the melting feeling in my chest and the tingling in my lips, I forgot that it was daylight outside, I forgot that my underwear didn't match, and suddenly, without even trying, it was like the first time all over again.

Amazing.