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I Heart Christmas

Written by Lindsey Kelk

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LINDSEY KELK

I Heart Christmas

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CHAPTER ONE

'Can you explain to me exactly why I'm dragging this thing through the streets of Brooklyn,' Jenny asked, huffing and puffing behind seven feet of majestic Christmas tree, 'when you have a perfectly acceptable husband to do these things? What's the point in being married if he's not going to carry heavy shit for you?'

'Because we're strong, independent women who don't need men to carry things for us,' I offered, shivering as I fumbled for my front door key. 'We are woman, hear us roar.'

'I am woman, hear me call a delivery service to do this so I don't have to,' she grumbled through a mouthful of the finest Douglas fir. 'Where is Alex anyway? Isn't this the kind of cutesy shit you two should be doing together?'

'He's out, somewhere.' I shuffled backwards, pulling Jenny and the tree towards the lift and pretending not to see the trail of pine needles. 'God knows.'

'You really make marriage sound like a dream,' she replied.

Getting the tree up to our floor would not be the

perfect crime. Our building super already disliked me with a fiery passion. I couldn't quite work out if it was because he had trouble with my accent and never quite understood what I was saying or because I still couldn't remember which bin was for recycling and which was for rubbish. Or there was a small chance that it was due to all those times I'd locked myself out at three a.m. when Alex was away on tour and I'd had to call him to let me in. Regardless, the fact of the matter was, he just wasn't that keen on me and this unquestionably seasonal, yet unrequested new carpet of Christmas tree needles in the lobby was not going to go down well.

'I don't know where he goes.' I tiptoed backwards into the lift, trying not to fall over my own feet. Again. 'That boy is a wanderer and it's too bloody cold for me to wander with him. Besides, I wanted to get the tree. I wanted to do it with you, oh bestest friend in the entire universe.'

Jenny poked her head around the tree to fix me with a narrow-eyed stare.

'He said you couldn't have a tree yet, didn't he?'

'Yes, ma'am,' I nodded.

'And why not?'

'Because I still haven't cleared away all the Thanksgiving dishes,' I admitted. It wasn't like I hadn't put them in the dishwasher, I just hadn't taken them back out again. For over a week. 'But I needed it. It's been a weird day.'

'You're disgusting.' She yelped as she pricked herself for the eighteenth time in two minutes. 'And it's been a weird day so you picked up a Christmas tree? You couldn't just buy shoes like normal people? You're what's weird in this scenario.'

‘Something’s going on at work,’ I said, jabbing at the buttons and willing the doors to close faster. ‘I’m sure of it. Delia and Mary are being all whispery behind closed doors.’

‘Don’t you and Mary share an office?’ Jenny asked. ‘What are you doing, following them to the ladies’ room?’

‘Um, yeah, we have separate offices now.’

Mary, the editor of *Gloss*, and I had started off sharing a big, beautiful office but since I apparently couldn’t stop singing show tunes when I was trying to concentrate and occasionally enjoyed the odd YouTube video of kittens with narcolepsy, she’d had a wall put up in the middle of the room. I tried not to take it personally. If she couldn’t appreciate my celebrated (by me) rendition of ‘I Know Him So Well’, that was her loss.

‘Something’s definitely going on, though. They’ve both had time blocked out in their diaries and—’

The silver doors slid together for just a moment, before springing back apart to let another passenger inside.

‘Not the super, not the super, not the super,’ I whispered into the branches of my glorious tree.

‘Hi, I’m Jenny.’

Before I could deliver my admittedly paranoid work theories, Jenny interrupted me with her best ‘hello, you’re a hot man’ purr. Nestled behind the bulk of the tree, I might not have been able to see either of them but I could hear her sparkliest smile twinkling through her introduction. Lowering myself into a squat, I squinted through the branches to get a better look at her target but all I managed was an eyeful of sap and the suggestion of some very shiny brown hair.

‘Oh, uh, hi,’ a deep voice that most definitely did not belong to my gnarled Italian super replied. ‘I’m Doug.’

‘Doug?’ Jenny repeated his name like it was the most interesting thing she had ever heard. I wondered whether or not someone had actually pressed a button. I was desperate for a wee. ‘You must be new to the building, right?’

‘Pretty new,’ he confirmed. I leaned back against the wall of the lift and pushed up onto my Converse tiptoes, trying to get a look at this ‘Doug’. If that was his real name. ‘You live on the top floor?’

‘More or less,’ she replied, with a tinkly laugh that made me want to punch her in the boob. ‘I’m a Manhattan gal. This is my best friend’s place, which I guess means I almost live here, right?’

‘Nice to meet you,’ I shouted in his general direction through a mouthful of tree. Which did not taste as good as it smelled. ‘I’m Angela.’

‘Oh shit,’ Doug replied. ‘I didn’t know you were hiding in there. Hi.’

‘She’s behind the tree,’ Jenny explained. Doug made an ‘oh’ sound. Doug was clearly not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

‘This is my stop,’ he announced as the bell sounded and the doors opened on the third floor. ‘Have fun.’

‘Oh, we will,’ I heard Jenny promise. ‘We always do.’

‘You massive slag,’ I said as the doors closed quickly, slicing through the sexual tension. ‘Haven’t you got a boyfriend?’

‘No, I don’t have a boyfriend and I was just flirting.’ Somehow Jenny managed to find a way through the tree to punch my arm. ‘Relax, Mom.’

I paused, thought better of my question, then asked it anyway. 'Was he hot?'

'Super hot,' she sighed. 'He looked like Clark Kent. Real gentleman. Can I set off your smoke alarms? See if he comes to help us?'

'That'll be a fun one to explain to Alex,' I muttered, pushing Jenny backwards out of the door as we arrived at my floor. 'Oh, sorry, darling, we burnt the apartment down to see whether or not the new neighbour downstairs was as chivalrous as Jenny assumed he was after a fourteen-second conversation.'

'Screw you,' she replied, giving me the finger for extra emphasis.

'A real lady, worthy of a real gentleman,' I smiled over the top of the tree.

One hour, two arguments and three beers later, the Christmas tree was safely(ish) in its stand and towering proudly over my apartment. It only leaned ever so slightly to the left and somehow we'd managed to string the fairy lights without throttling each other, but sheer exhaustion and desperate thirst meant we'd been forced to pause in the decorating for a beer break.

'So, you didn't finish your story.' Jenny picked a single stray pine needle from her sweater and tossed it on the floor with disgust. She was so thoughtful. 'What's going on in the office?'

'I didn't finish because you were too busy cracking on to "Doug" to let me finish,' I stated. 'Actually, I'd barely even started.'

'Then stop whining and start now,' she said, curling her legs up underneath her. 'What's the goss at *Gloss*?'

Gloss had launched ten months earlier and, against all odds, it was doing really, really well. While other

magazines were disappearing from the stands, our weekly freebie was everywhere. We had even launched an enhanced iPad edition that people were actually paying for – it was crazy. And while I was the first to put my hand up and say the editorial was fantastic (possibly because I was deputy editor), it really was all down to Delia. She was an incredible businesswoman and no one on earth was able to say no to her. Every time I saw her, I wanted to do a little dance and sacrifice a goat. Or maybe just give her a Kit Kat. Admittedly, I saw her less and less as the magazine got bigger and bigger. I knew her grandfather, Bob, the president of Spencer Media and ultimately our big boss, was grooming her to move up in the company and while I was happy for her, I wasn't ready for her to disappear from the mag. Bob was basically the Donald Trump of publishing, which might have sounded like an exaggeration if I hadn't known for a fact that Delia and The Donald were on first-name terms. While the New York billionaires' club was bigger than you might think, it was still pretty cliquey.

'There's nothing specific,' I said. 'It's just a feeling. Mary and Delia have been in and out of each other's offices all week and they've both been very quiet around me or so—'

'They've been quiet or you've been extra loud?' Jenny asked. 'It is December. I figure you've been running around in some ugly Santa sweater singing holiday songs since the first, right?'

'Don't interrupt me.' She didn't need to know that was exactly what I'd been doing. 'They've been weird, all right? Something is up.'

'You didn't think to just ask them?'

I stared at her revelatory concept. Oh Jenny, you and your common sense.

'Um, no?'

'Right,' Jenny sighed, 'because why would you do something as obvious as that?'

'Oh, fuck off.' I hopped up and grabbed two fresh beers from the fridge, popping the tops and handing one to Jenny. 'I want everything to be OK, that's all.'

'You'd know if it wasn't,' she reassured me. 'You're a pain in the ass like that.'

I nodded slowly, considering her sage advice. Tomorrow, I would march into Mary's office and ask what was going on. Definitely tomorrow or the day after. Although maybe it would be better to wait until Monday. By Monday, I would totally know when I was going to ask.

'We ought to be drinking mulled wine.' I frowned at the bottle of Brooklyn lager, changing the subject. 'Or at least eggnog.'

'Mulled wine takes too long and eggnog tastes like shit,' Jenny pointed out. While my old Topshop jeans and Splendid T-shirt were speckled with a year's worth of dust from the tree ornament boxes, Jenny's black leather leggings and white cashmere sweater looked like she had just slipped them on. Probably because she'd been about as much help as a chocolate teapot as soon as she'd taken her coat off. 'Besides, you're the one who insists on living in hipsterville. I don't think you would find either of those things on Bedford Avenue.'

'I can sniff out Christmas like Rudolph the red-nosed bloodhound,' I said, sipping the cool, bubbly goodness. 'Christmas makes everything better, even hipsters.'

'Nothing makes hipsters better,' Jenny disagreed. 'Give me a man in a suit any day.'

'Aren't you dating a hipster?' I reminded her, putting my beer down and grabbing my handbag while I was still sober enough to climb the stepladder. 'And haven't you been doing so for some time?'

'Yeah, I think that might have come to a natural end, you know?' she said, watching me drag the stepladder away from the wonky Christmas tree and position it underneath the air-conditioning vent. 'What the hell are you doing?'

'I'm going to hide a copy of *The Great Gatsby* in the ceiling,' I explained, holding up a small padded envelope. 'It's Alex's Christmas present and I know he'll go looking for it if I don't hide it.'

'I think you're confusing Alex with yourself.' Jenny eyed my climb up the ladder with badly hidden nerves but didn't offer to get off her arse and help. 'Never had him pegged for a reader.'

'Unlike you, he reads all the time,' I replied, straining to open the vent cover. There was a reason I let boys do things like this, feminism be damned. 'I've tried to get him to watch telly like normal people but he won't have it.'

'I read,' she protested, flat on her back across the sofa. 'Like, every day.'

'I don't know if self-help books actually count as reading.' I finally got the vent open enough to slide the book inside without trapping my fingers. 'And have you read them all yet? When do you know if you're self-helped?'

'Self-improvement is a process, Angela,' Jenny announced. 'It's a journey without a destination.'

'It's a journey that's keeping Barnes & Noble in business,' I replied. 'What's going on with Craig?'

'Nothing. Ever. That's kind of the issue.' She pulled

a thick strand of shiny hair upwards until the curl straightened out, then let it spring back down onto her face. 'I think I'm ready to date a guy who wants to take me out for dinner instead of ordering pizza. There are only so many evenings a girl can spend watching *Breaking Bad* until three a.m. without going totally crazy.'

'Yeah,' I agreed, wondering whether or not that number was as high for Jenny as it was for me.

'Dude, can you believe Erin has two babies? Two of them. It's crazy.'

'It is weird.' I pretended not to notice that she'd changed the subject. I figured we'd get around to whatever was really bothering her sooner or later. 'One minute there were no babies, now there are two babies. It feels like she moved away or something.'

Our friend Erin had recently rebranded herself from a super-hot PR maven into a baby-making machine. As soon as she was married, she got pregnant with Arianna and as soon as Arianna was sitting up straight, she was pregnant with Thomas Junior. Obviously, she wasn't quite so available for manicure dates and spur-of-the-moment cocktails as she used to be.

'I know, I talked to her yesterday for the first time in a week. Says she's coming back to work super soon.' Jenny made a clucking noise. 'But, dude, one baby and your own business is one thing, but two? It's not going to be easy.'

'Erin has two babies.' I rested my head on the cool steel of the stepladder and shuddered. 'I can't even process the fact that she has one. It's madness. It's like you having a baby.'

'And why wouldn't I have a baby?' Jenny looked up sharply. I saw her tightly drawn mouth and arched

eyebrow and closed my eyes. Oh bollocks. 'What? I'm fundamentally unbabyable?'

'That's not what I meant.' I was too tired to pick my words as carefully as they needed to be picked. It had been a long day, I'd just put up a Christmas tree and I was halfway inside an air-conditioning vent. Me and my bright ideas. 'I only meant that it's strange that when I moved here, we were all single and going out and dating different guys and stuff and now Erin's got two babies, you've been dating Craig forever, I'm *married* to a *boy* and it just seems weird when you think about it.'

There. That should do it. And now to shuffle backwards out of the air-conditioning vent and safely back down the ladder. Piece of piss.

'So you think it would be weird for me to have a baby? You think I wouldn't be a good mom?'

Oh, for fuck's sake.

'No, I'm sure you would be amazing,' I said, shuffling half an inch at a time, clenching my hands into tiny, tight fists and then stretching out my fingers as far as they would go. A yoga teacher had once told me it would calm me down in stressful situations. She was incorrect. 'What's this all about? Where's it coming from?'

'Well, I've been thinking,' Jenny said, sitting up and fluffing out her hair. 'I want to have a kid.'

I paused on the ladder, took a moment and considered my response.

'You mean you want to have a baby at some point in the distant future?'

Jenny shook her head. 'I mean I want to have a baby now.'

I breathed out slowly, puffing up more dust, and

spun my wedding ring round and round on my finger. Maybe if I rubbed it hard enough a genie would appear and I could wish some common sense into my best friend.

'I've been thinking about it,' Jenny said, launching into her clearly prepared speech before I had a chance to get a word in. 'There's never going to be a better time. I've got a great job with great maternity benefits and I'd absolutely be able to work around my pregnancy. So many of the girls in the office are pregnant right now, Erin's been talking about opening a day care centre in the building.'

'In the building?' I asked.

'Next to the gym,' Jenny nodded.

'Of course.' I raised my eyebrows and tried to restrain the tutting noise I was desperate to make. 'Where else?'

Sometimes I forgot Erin was obscenely wealthy. Most people would just get a childminder but why bother with that when you could open your own nursery?

Jenny had been working for Erin's PR company for a couple of years and she was good at it. She was also good at making rash decisions without thinking about the long-term effects on her life. Usually it meant spending a month's rent on shoes, dip-dying her hair badly or indulging in the odd love affair with a complete dickhead, but a baby? This was a worry.

'I've got a great apartment, great friends, I'm healthy, financially stable and I want a baby.' She sounded so pleased with herself, I didn't quite know what to do. 'Why wouldn't I do it? The longer I wait, the harder it's going to be.'

'I'm going to say something controversial now,' I

said, shuffling down the ladder with three drinks' worth of utter grace. 'But is Craig, who is still technically your boyfriend as far as I know, the best candidate for Father of the Year?'

I tensed, gripping the metal handlebars, expecting her to pull the ladder out from under me. Instead, she laughed. It was tough to say whether or not a shot to the chops would have surprised me more.

'Oh Angie, Craig?' Something I'd said had clearly tickled her. 'No way! Craig can barely look after himself. And it's been fun but we both know it isn't serious.'

I was confused. Did we know that?

'We, you and me, or we, you and Craig?' I asked.

'We, me and everyone.' She spoke very slowly, rolling her eyes. Really? I thought. As though I was the mentally unstable one in the situation? 'Craig knows this is what it is. He's not ready to have a baby.'

'But you definitely, definitely, super certainly are?' I trod as carefully as humanly possible, metaphorically and literally. After all, a slap could still be in the offing. 'This is the biggest decision you'll ever make, Jenny.'

'Which is why I've been thinking about it so seriously, Angie.' She gave me a gentle, knowing smile. I assumed she'd been working on it as her 'maternal' look. 'It's all I've thought about for, like, days.'

'Days?'

And that was the precise moment when I lost my shit.

'Like, a week. Two weeks,' she muttered into her beer bottle. 'Since Erin had TJ.'

'You've been thinking about it for days?' I knew I was shrieking but I had absolutely no control over the

volume or pitch of my own voice. 'You can't make a decision like this that quickly, Jenny. Just because someone you know recently heaved a tiny person out of their vagina doesn't mean you should do the same. If Erin jumped off a cliff, would you jump after her?'

I jumped off the bottom step and gave her the frowning of a lifetime.

'It's hardly the same,' she snapped back. 'I want a baby.'

'And I want a unicorn to fly me to work every day but that's not going to happen, is it?'

'Unicorns don't fly!' Jenny shouted.

'That's not the point!' I shouted back.

We stared at each other in silence for a few moments, Jenny sipping her beer, me imagining how useful a flying unicorn might actually be. Anything else was too traumatic to think about.

'I have an appointment with my ob-gyn tomorrow after work,' Jenny said quietly after a couple of minutes. 'I was going to ask you to come with me but if you don't feel comfortable, I'll ask Sadie.'

'Of course I'll come, you daft cow,' I replied, lifting up her legs and dropping onto the sofa. Clearly I was going to have to go along, if only to make sure she didn't accidentally fall on someone's penis en route. 'I just don't want you to rush into anything that's permanent. Life-changing.'

'Like running away from home and moving to New York without knowing a single soul and ending up married to one of the only decent men left in the Tri-State area and landing your dream job?' She pursed her lips and raised her eyes to the ceiling.

Ooh, the sneaky cow would use my own silver-lining fuck-ups against me.

‘Yes, exactly like that,’ I replied with a gentle slap on the back of her head. ‘Because if I hadn’t met you and listened when you tried to talk some sense into me, I would have been back at home by now, either living with my parents or, God forbid, married to a horrible man who was cheating on me.’

‘Whatever,’ she replied, setting her empty beer bottle on the floor and slapping me back. ‘But you’ll come with me tomorrow? To the doctor’s?’

‘I’ll come to the doctor’s with you.’ I held her cold, damp hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. ‘But I’m staying at the head end. I’m not getting involved with anything in stirrups.’

‘You’re such a prude,’ she sniffed, pulling away and turning her nose up at my filthy sweater. ‘I would totally take a look at your cervix if you asked me to.’

‘And I never, ever will,’ I promised.

‘Well, would you look at that – we have a tree.’

I heard the door close behind Alex an hour or so after Jenny had left, while I was busy adding the decorations to my masterpiece. It was taking longer than I had anticipated and I’d already cried twice. Dressing the Christmas tree always made me emotional. As did drinking four beers in an hour and a half with my wannabe-babymama best friend.

‘We do,’ I said, turning my face up for a kiss as he tossed the mail on the coffee table behind me. ‘I was on my way home and Jenny was coming over and I thought, well, we might as well pick it up and save you a job at the weekend.’

‘You’re so thoughtful,’ he replied, looking over at the blatantly-still-full dishwasher. ‘The dishes are still totally in there, aren’t they?’

'I love you so much. Have I told you how much I love you?' I replied with another kiss. 'Isn't it pretty?'

'It's beautiful,' Alex replied, picking up a silver bauble and hanging it on a random branch. 'Like you.'

'Charmer.' I waited until his back was turned and his attention fully on finding a beer before moving the bauble to a more suitable spot. 'Where have you been?'

'Around,' he said, leaning against the kitchen counter and wiggling his eyebrows at me. 'I was gonna get a haircut but I didn't.'

'Around?' I carefully placed a blown-glass Santa Claus on a low branch of the tree. 'You are an enigma, Alex Reid.'

'I know, I'm trying to cultivate an air of mystery so you don't get bored of me.' He popped open his beer and took a deep drink. 'How was your day? How's Lopez?'

'Something weird is going down at work – my money is on an alien invasion – there was half a mouse in someone's sandwich at lunchtime and Jenny has decided she wants to have a baby.' I added a delicate silver star above the little Santa. 'What do you fancy for dinner? Don't say half a mouse.'

To his credit, Alex didn't even look fazed. Instead, he just sipped his beer and nodded slowly, keeping his eyes on the tree.

'Half a mouse?' he asked, swinging the beer bottle between his thumb and forefinger. 'Was it fried at least? Everything tastes good when it's fried.'

I smiled and felt my shoulders drop. Just being in the same room as him made my life a thousand times better. I let my attention waver from decorating the tree for a moment, just long enough to get a good look at the hottest man I had ever had the privilege of

touching. His green eyes were dark and heavy against his pale skin and his cheeks glowed from the cold outside in a way that not even *Gloss*'s beauty editor could replicate. He gave me a questioning smile and brushed his too-long hair out of his face, tucking the fringe behind his left ear. I still wasn't quite sure how I'd managed to lock him down but, sparkle sparkle, the two rings on my left hand reminded me I had pulled off that miracle.

'Can I help with the tree or should I keep a safe distance?' He hovered by the tree for a moment, before settling on the arm of the sofa, poking around in the ornaments.

'I'd stick with a safe distance,' I admitted, stopping myself from slapping his hands away from the glittery box of joy. 'This is not me at my best.'

'I know, you're a tree Nazi,' he said with a half-yawn. 'My mom was the same, I get it. So, what do you want to deal with first? The aliens, the mouse, Jenny or my hair?'

Finishing off his yawn for him, I shook my head and picked out a pretty glass snowflake. 'Start where you like, they're equally unpleasant.'

'I didn't see anything on the news about an invasion of the body snatchers today, so I think you're OK there.' He rolled his head from side to side and stood up, wrapping his arms loosely around my waist as I tended to my tree. 'And I don't think there's much we can do for the mouse.'

'It was not a dignified end,' I replied, revelling in the feeling of his body pressed against mine. It never got old. 'But it definitely woke everyone up for a bit.'

'I can see how it would.' He pulled my hair away from my face and held it back in a makeshift ponytail,

making me catch my breath. I was conflicted. As nice as it was, these were not the ideal conditions for tree trimming. 'And as for Jenny, you know how she is. She's seen a baby, she wants a baby. Last time I talked to her, she was obsessed with those dumb little dogs, right?'

'She was quite intent on Pomeranian ownership, yes,' I agreed, my heart beating a fraction faster as Alex slid his hand down my hair until it rested on my shoulder. He wasn't the only one who needed a haircut.

'Right, and she forgot soon enough.' His breath was warm on my skin and I was just tipsy enough to have developed a sudden case of the raging horn. 'And I can't see Craig pushing a stroller any time soon, so I wouldn't let that worry you too much.'

'I don't think she's really involving Craig in her plan.' I spoke in a whisper in case my voice broke and tried to turn around to face him, but instead Alex tightened his grip around my waist, pinning me in place. He carefully took the snowflake bauble from my hand and hung it somewhere on the tree. I stared at the floor and tried to steady my breath. Where he had stuck the ornament didn't seem terribly important anymore. I was so fickle. I tried to keep my breath even as he ran his fingertips down my back but it was all too much when I felt his teeth against my ear. I heard a tiny gasp escape from my lips and Alex had to pull me backwards just to keep me upright.

'Maybe you shouldn't worry about Jenny's plans so much.' His voice was low and warm in my ear. 'Maybe you should only worry about my plans.'

'Why?' I asked, clasping my hands over his to stop

them from moving lower and to stop me from toppling over into the Christmas tree. 'Are they dangerous?'

'Only if you don't do as you're told,' he replied, spinning me round for a kiss. Even though his eyes were dark and dilated, he was still smiling. My stomach fluttered and I felt myself blush before I kissed him back. 'You're going to have to finish the tree later.'

'Sounds fair,' I squeaked, following him happily into the bedroom, tree be damned.

Afterwards, when Alex was fast asleep and I was too restless to sleep, I padded back into the living room in my knickers, picking my jumper up off the floor where it had been abandoned and slipping it over my head. I turned out the big lights and perched on the edge of the sofa, just as Alex had an hour earlier, picking up his abandoned beer and taking a sip. It was flat and a bit warm. So obviously I kept drinking it.

'American beer is like pop,' I told the tree. 'Practically shandy.'

But that was the good thing about Christmas trees, they never judged. They just stood in the corner, looking all stately and wonderful, reminding you that it was the most wonderful time of the year and that all would be well. I had always loved Christmas, ever since I was tiny, and every year I worked my arse off to make sure the season was as jolly as the many, many adverts on telly promised that it would be. But this year . . . this year was going to be the best Christmas ever. Since I no longer had the Boots Christmas catalogue to tell me It Was Time, I now had to rely on the red Starbucks cups, the Coca-Cola advert and my own in Christmas-dar, honed from decades of

seasonal celebrating. I'd spent months searching for the perfect present for Alex and finally found a first edition copy of *The Great Gatsby*, his favourite book, which I hoped would make up for the time we saw the movie, which I loved and he hated. It really was the closest we'd come to divorce – there had been a distinct threat of legal action in his eyes as we walked to the subway that night.

As well as excelling at gifting, I'd been squirrelling away my favourite things for months. Not quite whiskers on kittens but there were some brown paper packages, tied up with string. Louisa, my best friend from forever, had been sending care packages from England ever since the Boots Christmas catalogue came out. I had assorted advent calendars, boxes of crackers and endless supplies of Ferrero Rocher, After Eights, Quality Street and Cadbury's Roses hidden away in the top kitchen cupboard. I hoped she hadn't forgotten the savoury selection . . . On top of the British Christmas essentials, I'd already ordered my turkey and, following a Thanksgiving nightmare that involved a paring knife, a stubborn carrot and the tip of my left little finger, many pre-prepped vegetables. I would still be making the pigs in blankets myself, though, I wasn't a complete heathen.

Christmas was going to be perfect. I hadn't taken more than two days off since the wedding and I was completely exhausted. For the first time in forever, I'd booked an entire week's holiday and, quite frankly, I was going to Christmas the shit out of myself. I wanted to OD on the season of goodwill to such an extent that the sight of a candy cane would make me vomit by the end of it.

As long as it had been since I'd had time off, it felt

even longer since me and Alex had spent quality time together. Now I was working full-time, it seemed like every weekend was filled with chores and obligations. I hated for him to feel like he should do the food shopping or the laundry in the week just because he wasn't working a nine-to-five in an office, mainly because when I wasn't working a nine-to-five in an office, I sure as hell wasn't doing the washing. But fitting real life around work did mean some of the shine had gone off our relationship. There were no last-minute jaunts to watch him play international festivals or days spent lazing around in McCarren Park just because we could. The week was going to be all about us and I couldn't bloody wait.

Seven straight days of festive fun, culminating in twenty-four hours of just me, Alex, loads of food and an entire day sat in front of the TV, playing with my presents. And just in case he didn't quite come through on the gifting front, I'd picked up a couple of things for myself on one of my Christmas shopping binges and informed my mother she owed me the money. I was a very considerate daughter.

The lights on the tree twinkled on and off in an unfathomable pattern, echoed by the lights of the city outside the window. I closed the drapes on Manhattan and stared at the tree. I couldn't remember how I'd set them not to blink last year but then I couldn't remember how I'd made my wireless printer work two days earlier so that wasn't such a shock. I just wanted them to be the same as they had been. I just wanted one thing to be predictable for one moment. And that moment needed to start with Jenny. Alex was probably right, she would have her heart set on something else

soon enough. And if she didn't, I'd just have to remind her how horribly Erin had suffered through both of her pregnancies – the morning sickness, the uncontrollable lactating, not being able to get into a single pair of her beautiful, beautiful designer shoes for over a year.

Emptying my beer, I picked up a stack of mail from the coffee table and leafed through the assorted flyers and bills. One was a reminder that I was due for a check-up at my own gynaecologist. It had been a year already? If there was one thing you could say about the US healthcare system it was that they were thorough. As long as you had insurance anyway. I pressed my hand against my belly and, just for a second, I stopped wishing it was flatter and pushed it out against my palm. I had spent so much time and energy over the years trying to get thinner, the idea of suddenly ballooning up, full of baby, was terrifying.

Halfway down the mail pile was a thick cream-coloured envelope with mine and Alex's name written in elegant script. Ooh, the first Christmas card of the season! I smiled beatifically at my Christmas tree. It felt good not to be the only seasonal crazy in the city.

But it wasn't a Christmas card. It was an invitation.

To the wedding of Mary Stein and Bob Spencer.