



LINDSEY KELK

Christmas
Flung



'I'll read
anything
she writes'
EMILY HENRY

Christmas Fling

Lindsey Kelk



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DEDICATION

For The School Plimsolls – may the odds be ever in your favour

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CHAPTER ONE

'Laura Pearce, you're officially on the naughty list.'

Throwing an awkward smile at the bus driver, I fumbled with my earbuds as I dropped into the first available seat, my best friend Desi's voice echoing through my skull. It was one of my most deeply held beliefs no one should ever be allowed to talk on the phone in public without headphones and anyone who did ought to be sent directly to the centre of the earth, along with Cybertruck owners, people who post movie spoilers on social media and any man who has thought about starting a podcast, ever.

'What are you talking about?' I said as the bus took off, hurtling down the high street. 'I'm not on the naughty list, you're on the naughty list.'

'Naturally, I'd be gutted if I wasn't,' Desi replied. 'But you're the one who used all the milk then skedaddled out the flat. What am I supposed to do, make tea *without* milk? Drink it neat like some kind of animal?'

'Neat? You consider milk a mixer?'

'Where are you?' she asked. 'And the answer better be either at the supermarket or gone to the farm to buy a cow.'

'That's right. I'm negotiating with Old Macdonald right now. Do you think you can pick me and Buttercup up in your Honda Jazz or should we call an Uber?'

The man in the seat beside me let out a pitch-perfect, passive-aggressive huff and I pulled my scarf up over my mouth to muffle my voice. If I could tolerate the amount of aftershave he was wearing, he could tolerate my chat for another three minutes.

'I'm on the way to the flat,' I said as quietly as I could. 'Remember? I asked if you wanted to come with me to help measure up and you said you didn't believe in unpaid labour.'

'Manual or emotional,' she replied. 'How long will you be? I thought we could do something festive later, maybe have a mooch around Liberty and touch all the ornaments without actually buying anything.'

'The weekend before Christmas?' I frowned so hard my face almost collapsed in on itself. 'I would rather eat my own foot.'

'You mean you don't want to cram into a packed tube, fight with last-minute shoppers on Oxford Street then have your phone stolen out your hand by some git on an electric scooter?' 'Tis the season, Lau, 'tis!'

I sighed and massaged my right temple. 'Is this a good time to remind you that you're Jewish? You don't even celebrate Christmas.'

'I celebrate the true meaning of the season.'

'You like drinking Baileys and getting presents.'

'And your point is?' Desi yawned and changed topics, bored of her own argument already. 'Are you almost there yet? I thought you said it was close.'

As if on cue, the bus came to a halt and the back doors wheezed open to spit me out on the side of the street. Yesterday had been crisp and sunny but the weather had turned overnight, Jack Frost no longer nipping at my nose so much as slapping the shit out of it. I pulled my bobble hat down over my ears, dragging the chunky pink wool all the way down to my eyebrows and tucking my red hair underneath.

'Almost,' I said. 'According to Maps, it's an even fifteen minutes door-to-door.'

'And you're sure you don't want to look for a flat a bit further away?'

'Nice try,' I said, swiping at my wind-stung face with the sleeve of my coat. 'You know you're thrilled to have me so close by.'

'I'm thrilled to have you out my place,' she countered. 'I love you very much but you're a right ballache to live with, babe.'

For the last six weeks, I'd been living with Desi and Joel, the third side of our eternal friendship triangle, after my landlord decided it would be fun to sell my lovely little flat out from under me with very little notice. The three of us hadn't lived under one roof since the second year of uni and even though Desi and Joel had managed to survive together in imperfect harmony, adding a third adult to a two-bedroom, one-bathroom flat was, it turned out, a step too far. After discovering mine and Desi's cycles were perfectly in sync, we'd agreed it would be best for everyone's physical and emotional wellbeing if I was out by the New Year; otherwise, as Joel had so sweetly put it, he was going to kill the pair of us in a way that was so inhumane, no one would be able to identify the bodies.

'Don't take this the wrong way,' Desi said, 'but I still think you're an idiot.'

As usual, there really was only one way to take it.

'In general or specifically about the flat?'

'Both but this time I am talking mostly about the flat.'

Inside my bag, her face glowered up at me from the screen of my phone. It was my favourite photo ever, taken on her last birthday, me hanging around her neck, Desi scowling straight to camera, and Joel gumming wildly, half obscured by his own arm as he took the selfie. Our truest forms, captured forever.

'It's dangerous to rent privately,' she went on, a lecture I'd heard at least ten times already. 'Especially for a woman on her own. You should've gone through a management company, the whole thing could be a scam. Anyone could be waiting for you in that flat.'

'Lestat de Lioncourt?' I replied hopefully.

'I'd laugh if you weren't serious,' she said with a sigh. 'How many times do I have to tell you, if you become one of the undead, we can't be friends any more. I like my beach holidays too much.'

'Desi, let me move into my haunted vampire sanctuary in peace.' I turned off the main road and on to a pleasant-looking side street, all the noise of the high street fading away. 'It's not as though I'm renting from a complete stranger, he's friends with Stella, and I don't think your sister would set me up with a dangerous situation.'

It was quiet for Clapham. Rows of privet hedges, lots of neatly kept front yards, no overturned wheelie bins or rats the size of small dogs. A tiny thrill ran through me at the sight of number 42, the shiny red door, the triple-glazed windows with white trim. My new home. I pulled the keys out from my pocket, excited.

'He's not Stella's friend,' Desi said. 'He's Dave's friend, and you know I've never liked Dave.'

'Your own brother-in-law.'

'Just because dickhead Dave says a man is all right does not mean you should be living in his flat without running any background checks,' she replied hotly. 'Why did you get the keys so early? Why is the rent so cheap? It's very sketchy, Laura, it's very, very sketchy. He could be a serial killer for all we know.'

'A serial killer chef?' I replied.

'Perfect cover. Late nights, knife skills, weird stains on his clothes. He might bake his victims into pies. This entire set-up has been far too easy.'

My keys slid straight into the lock and the front door swung open on silent hinges.

'I know you won't believe this but sometimes easy is good,' I said, marvelling at the white painted entrance hall, the little wooden shoe rack, the frosted overhead light.

'Dave gave me the keys early because his friend has already moved out, the rent is cheap because he wanted someone in right away rather than leave the flat empty, and if he wants to chop me up and bake me into a pie, I hope he makes his own pastry because I can't think of anything more mortifying than being baked into shop-bought. Now sod off so I can measure my new flat in peace. I'll be back in an hour or so and if you're very good, I'll bring back treats.'

There was a brief pause on the line.

'From the little bakery?'

'From the little bakery,' I confirmed as I walked into the closed-curtained living room and waited for my eyes to adjust. 'I'm going, I'll text you when I'm on my way back.'

'On your way back with pastries. Love you!'

Ending the call, I put my phone back in my pocket and took my first proper look at my new home. It was perfect. Big windows, high ceilings, hardwood floors ... and an enormous naked man walking straight towards me.

It was very hard to say who was screaming louder, me or the enormous naked man, but I was definitely winning in the high-pitch stakes, alerting dolphins all over the North Atlantic to my current predicament.

'Oh my God!' I yelled, my earbuds popping out of my ears and falling to the floor. 'Help! Help!'

'Help you?' he shouted back while attempting to cover a most sensitive part of his anatomy with his hands. It was too late for that. Even in a panic, it was hard to miss a free-range penis when it was flying around in front of you. 'You're the one breaking and entering!'

'Am not!'

Because arguing with a wet, naked potential murderer seemed like such a good idea.

'Don't you move,' I said, hunched over in a defensive crouch, ready to spring. 'I'm armed.'

'With what?'

I clutched my bag to my body and tried to work out how much damage I could do with my Kindle, a half-eaten packet of Skittles and an infinite number of lip balms.

'My body is a deadly weapon,' I replied. 'One more move and I'll be forced to defend myself.'

We stared at each other for a moment, eye-to-eye, until I simply could not help myself and felt my gaze slipping lower.

'For fuck's sake,' the man muttered, rearranging everything he wasn't hiding underneath his cupped hands. He really was very large. Tall, broad. Strapping, my grandmother might've said but then again, if my grandmother were in my shoes, she'd have died of fright ten seconds earlier. It was a miracle I was still standing and I didn't have her heart trouble.

'OK, just be calm,' I instructed, even though I wasn't anywhere near calm myself. 'This is what's going to happen. You're going to turn around, get dressed and leave before I call the police.'

'And tell them what?' he asked. 'Why are you laughing? What's so bloody funny?'

'Well,' I waved a hand around the living room, unbidden hysterical laughter bursting out of me. 'There's a massive, stark bollock naked man in my flat so I can either laugh or start screaming again, which would you prefer?'

His shoulders stiffened.

'Your flat?'

'That's right,' I said with confidence. 'My flat, so will you please leave before I am forced to do kung fu.'

He raised a dark eyebrow.

'Not that I wouldn't love to see that,' he replied, a Scottish accent roughing up his words at the edges, 'but are you sure it's not Callum McClay's flat?'

'Callum McClay?' I repeated faintly. 'That's my landlord's name.'

The man nodded.

I blanched.

Oh no.