

LINDSEY KELK

*The*  
**Christmas**  
*Wish* a novel



# THE CHRISTMAS WISH

Lindsey Kelk



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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## Dedication

*For my brother,  
may we always ruin Christmas, one way or another*

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## CHAPTER ONE

Bundled up against the cold, I stood outside my flat, waiting, until an ancient Volvo rolled around the corner, Mariah Carey's whistle tones filling the formerly quiet street. Shaking my head, I smiled as the car stuttered to a stop in front of me and the tinted driver's side window rolled down slowly to reveal the cheerful face of my cousin, resplendent in a pair of fluffy reindeer antlers. It was Christmas Eve.

'Ho, ho, ho, Gwen Baker! Have you been a good girl this year?' Manny asked in a deep and booming voice. He watched as I walked over to the car, struggling with my little suitcase and the several bags full of gifts hanging from my arms, making absolutely no move to help.

'Depends who you ask. What about you?'

'Depends on your definition of "good".' He reached over his seat to open the back passenger door. 'You'll have to chuck your stuff in here. I can't open the boot without the key and if I turn the engine off, it might never start again.'

I heaved everything into the car, filling the empty back seat with my precious cargo. 'I feel like I'm going to regret asking this, but where are your presents? Please don't tell me we've got to stop at the twenty-four-hour Tesco to do your Christmas shopping? Again?'

As usual, Manny was one step ahead of me. He patted the left-chest pocket of his jacket and grinned. 'Oh, ye of little faith. I've cracked it this year, everyone's getting Amazon gift cards.'

Slamming the back door, I climbed into the passenger seat and stared at him through a damp tangle of red-brown hair. 'Everyone? You're giving the kids gift cards?'

'Yes.' Manny's grin dissolved into a dismissive frown. 'Don't look at me like that, they're awful kids anyway. You ready to go?'

'Not in the slightest,' I replied as he gunned the engine.

'No sleep till Baslow!' He raised one fist in the air as we pulled out into traffic, only to be immediately stalled by a red light, both of us straining against our seatbelts when he slammed his foot on the brake.

'Sorry. Only legally required stops till Baslow!'

'I'll be impressed if we make it there at all,' I whispered as the light changed and we sped off into the night.

'I cannot wait to get home,' Manny declared once we were safely on the motorway and following what felt like half the country up north, headlights to tail lights all the way home. 'This year has been a bear and not the good, sexy kind. I thought Christmas was never going to come. On a scale of one to Elf, how giddy are you?'

He held his hand out for a sweet, more interested in a sugar fix than my answer. This was our deal, Manny drove and I was in charge of the CD player and the tin of Quality Street, two very important jobs and both of them just about within my capabilities. I pulled out a Toffee Penny and put it right back. Manny was soft centres and nut-based truffles only. I got first dibs on the fudge. Dad got the hard toffees and Mum liked the big purple ones, a statement that caused no end of entertainment after a couple of Christmas brandies. My sister, Cerys, didn't like sweets. My sister, Cerys, was a monster.

'I'm trying,' I said as I passed him a Strawberry Delight. 'I just don't know if I'm in the mood for it.'

'Not in the mood for what?'

'Oh, you know. Christmas.'

He gasped so loudly, I almost rolled down the window to make sure there was enough oxygen left in the car for me. 'What's wrong with you? Are you sickening for something?'

I shook my head and popped a chocolate triangle into my mouth. 'No. I'm not really feeling the festive spirit, that's all. No big deal.'

'But you love Christmas. You're *obsessed* with Christmas.'

'Don't exaggerate, I'm not obsessed.'

'How many advent calendars did you have last year?'

I looked down at my nails, giving my shoddy home manicure a close examination.

'One.'

'Liar.'

'Two?'

'You're a liar who lives in a house of lies.'

'Fine, I had five,' I replied, ignoring his indignant caw. 'A Cadbury one and a Galaxy one.'

'Entirely reasonable. What else?'

'One from The Body Shop, a nail polish one,' I paused and sucked in my bottom lip. 'And one that turned out to be full of cat treats.'

'But you haven't got a cat?' Manny replied, confused.

'Yes, well,' I said, tucking my hair behind my ears. 'Didn't realize until I'd got it home from the supermarket, did I?'

The inside of the windscreen fogged up as he exhaled heavily. I reached forward to rub it down with my sleeve then cracked my window open. The heating was broken again meaning we had the luxurious choice of being freezing cold or red hot for the entire three-and-a-half-hour drive up home. Even though he spent more money fixing the Volvo than he would spend on buying a brand-new car, Manny refused to consider junking the old thing. It had belonged to his dad which meant the topic was not up for discussion.

'Right, let's make sure I've got this straight, last year it was five advent calendars, a fully decorated tree in every room of your house and a deeply annoying jumper that played "Jingle Bells" every time you breathed, and now I'm supposed to believe you've randomly gone full Grinch and decided to bah humbug the whole thing off?' he scoffed. 'I don't think so.'

'Not full Grinch. More like a partial Grinch, just the Grinch tip.' I unwrapped another chocolate and watched the cars blur into one another on the other side of the carriageway. 'I've had a lot on my mind, as you well know.'

A couple of months ago, I would tell anyone who asked (and plenty of people who didn't) that my life was perfect. I had an amazing job at Abbott & Howe, one of the oldest and most prestigious law firms in England, and I was so close to being promoted to junior partner, I'd been having borderline erotic dreams about my new business cards. I lived in a lovely house in lovely west Hampstead with my lovely boyfriend and we were talking about potentially considering adopting a dog. Everything was moving in the right direction. At least it was until my lovely boyfriend declared he was leaving me for Justine, his receptionist, and I had to move out of my lovely house. Shortly after that, I had something of a meltdown at work and now, when I looked at myself in the rear-view mirror, it seemed likely that the RSPCA would put me up for adoption before they allowed me to take charge of a living, breathing animal.

'So now he's not only the chump who broke your heart, he's Michael Darden, the dentist who stole Christmas?' Manny asked with a scowl. 'I knew I should have punched him in the nuts when I went to pick up your stuff but no, you told me not to.'

My stomach performed a clumsy death drop into my pelvis. More than three months and I still couldn't hear his name without wanting to wash my hair in honey and headbutt a beehive.

'Like I said, you can't punch him in the nuts because it will make things weird if we get back together,' I said. 'And we *could* still get back together.'

Manny tightened his grip on the steering wheel but said nothing.

'I saw a TikTok that said men who are about to make a major commitment need to stretch like an elastic band, to test their boundaries before they come back to you. Michael could be stretching.' I was babbling. I knew I shouldn't want him back, but I couldn't help myself. I missed brushing his blond hair out of his green eyes before we kissed. I missed the way he always put the coffee on before I woke up. I missed coming home to hear him shouting at the television then turning it off and pretending he was reading. I missed us. Everything fell apart when we did, and all I wanted was my life back the way it was.

'The only thing he's stretching is his receptionist's vagina. You are thirty-two, you are not allowed to get relationship advice from a fourteen-year-old on TikTok who has skim-read her nan's copy of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* then made up a dance about it,' he replied. I bit my lip to stop myself from telling him it was actually a very well-choreographed routine. 'You've got to let him go. You've been in goblin mode for far too long – you don't go anywhere, you don't do anything and you haven't posted so much as a half-decent meme in weeks. I rely on you for all my astrology content, it's really not on. No one else cares about my moon sign, Gwen, no one.'

'Been trying to stay off Instagram,' I muttered, clicking my fingernails against each other. Michael hardly ever posted, but seeing his face hurt in just the right way. Nevertheless, Manny had a point. I felt all wrong. It was as though I'd been put through a hot wash and I'd come out the wrong shape. Fundamentally the same but irrevocably bugged. 'I'm officially changing the subject. Talk to me about work, are you excited to go back?'

'Yes?' I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt all the way up and over my face. For someone who wanted me to cheer up, he was going the wrong way about it. 'Next question.'  
'Are you going to tell your mum and dad what happened?'  
'Absolutely not and neither are you,' I replied. 'I don't want to worry them.'  
Or deal with how impossibly disappointed they would be if they knew what had happened.  
'What if they want to be worried?' Manny countered. 'They are your parents, you know.'  
'And they have enough on without me adding to their load,' I reminded him. My job was to smooth things over when Manny stayed out too late and didn't call, when Cerys got her nose pierced without permission, when Dad got drunk at Aunt Gloria's second wedding and told her it was about time she got a good seeing-to and Mum didn't talk to him for a week. Whenever we hit a bumpy road, I was there to smooth it out, with good grades, a smiling face and absolutely no drama.  
'Anyway, it's not that big of a deal,' I added. 'I probably made things sound worse than they were when I told you what happened.'  
He did not look convinced.  
'I'm not sure how you could make it sound any better. I've had nightmares about it and I wasn't even there.'  
And that was exactly why I couldn't tell my parents.  
'I'm serious, there's nothing to tell them,' I insisted, fighting off flashbacks of flying staplers and high-pitched shrieks. 'Once I'm back at work, it'll be like nothing ever happened. All I want is for life to go back to the way it was, back to normal.'  
'Whatever that means.' Manny took his hand off the gear stick to squeeze my knee. I smiled and covered his hand with my own. He truly was the best cousin a girl could ask for and I knew I was lucky to have him. Even if he did buy us Amazon gift cards for Christmas. 'I know it's been a rough couple of months but I think this is exactly what you need. Broken-hearted big-city lawyer comes home for a family Christmas in the country? All that's missing is for you to meet a member of the landed gentry who's fallen on hard times and needs free legal advice.'  
'What if I get snowed in at the pub and meet a visiting prince from a very small Scandinavian country?' I suggested with a grin. 'It's a shame we don't have a family bakery that needs saving as well.'  
'Or a failing shop that somehow has survived until now selling nothing but Christmas ornaments and is about to be put out of business by a mega corporation? Although you never know what Nan's been up to in our absence, I wouldn't put that one past her.' He held his hand out for another sweet and I rummaged around in the tin for his favourite. 'I'm serious though, let's make a pact. You are going to have a perfect Christmas. Twenty-four hours with your nearest and dearest, no worrying about ex-boyfriends or London law firms or how long it's been since you had your highlights done.' I reflexively reached a hand up to my sad hair. 'Nothing but pure, unadulterated, festive joy and more Ferrero Rocher than you can shake a stick at. Then, when we get back to town, we'll set fire to your sweatpants and all will be right with the world.'  
'That does sound nice,' I admitted, warming to at least part of the idea. 'Everything except for the sweatpants.'  
'Fine,' he said with a grunt. 'You can keep your elasticated waists but you have to give me a fifty per cent increase in goodwill to all men and promise to join in all my reindeer games.'  
'Done and done,' I replied. A good lawyer always knew when to take the deal. 'We will have the perfect Christmas. Should be doable as long as we start on the Baileys before Cerys arrives.'  
'Gwen Baker, the woman with the plan.' Manny held up his hand for a high five, only swerving into the next lane for a second. 'You always were the clever one.'  
I turned up the volume on the CD player as the first bars of 'Last Christmas' echoed through the speakers, the festive spirit almost, *almost* upon me.  
'If I'm the clever one, what does that make you?'  
'The pretty one,' Manny replied, cranking the volume even higher, the swell of tinkling keyboards drowning out the sounds of the motorway. 'Obviously.'  
'So obvious,' I agreed, clapping as the beat dropped. 'Thank you for the pep talk.'  
'Any time,' he said with a flash of a smile. 'I just want my Gwen back.'  
'All you want for Christmas is me.' I grinned and my cousin laughed.  
'There's my girl,' he said as he pulled off the motorway. 'And here's our exit, almost there now.'  
Out of nowhere, I felt a tiny flicker of excitement somewhere so deep inside it would have taken a crack surgical team to find its exact location, but still, it was there. Maybe this was what I needed. A couple of days away from London, my caring family waiting on me hand and foot and a never-ending supply of food, drinks and tiny wrapped chocolate we never ate any other time of the year even though they were perennially available and always delicious.  
Maybe I would have myself a merry little Christmas after all.

## CHAPTER TWO

'Anyone home?' I called through the open door of my parents' house. 'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house the sound of the news at ten blared so loudly, I had to assume my dad had lost his hearing aids again.

'Here she is, here she is,' he bellowed, bursting out of the living room like an oversized toddler, cracked out on mince pies and late nights. 'Well? What's the news? Have they come to their senses and put you in charge of the whole bloody place yet?'

Since retiring earlier in the year, my father had transferred all his legal eagle ambition on to me. He'd always had grand plans, ever since I told him I was going to LCL to study law, just like he had, but lately things had got a bit out of hand. Casual monthly check-ins slowly became well-meaning weekly probes and, more recently, frighteningly frequent demands, more than once a day, wanting to know what was going on with my job. If I didn't answer his text, I got a phone call, if I didn't answer the phone call, we went to FaceTime. I was getting better at responding early for fear of him showing up outside my flat with a megaphone.

'Not yet, but there's still a couple of hours left in the day,' I quipped, my cheeks flaming as red as his festive pyjamas. 'Is Mum still up?'

'In there, still fannyng around with the tree. You know your mum, she never stops.' Dad held out his hands for my suitcase. 'Go and say hello, I'll help Manny get the rest of the stuff out the car.'

'Thank goodness,' I said, rolling my eyes. 'He could use a hand with all those heavy gift cards.'

No matter how busy things were, I did my best to get home as often as I could, but it felt as though I'd hardly been up at all over the past year. Once for an ill-fated Easter weekend that ended in family-wide food poisoning and an up-and-down pop-in for Dad's big birthday and retirement party back in July, but when I entered the living room to a roaring fire in the hearth, Christmas cards on the mantelpiece and a real, towering tree taking up half the living room, my heart grew three sizes. This was exactly where I wanted to be.

'There's my little girl!'

Mum jumped up to her feet, hurling her entire five-foot-nothing frame at mine for a bear hug and then thrusting me into the armchair by the fire. My mother was like something straight out of an advert for vitamins marketed to the over fifty-fives. Petite and lean and always in motion, she simply never stopped. Up with the lark for a run around the village, healthy breakfast, packed lunch, off to school where she'd been head of science since I went there, yoga after work, cooked dinner on the table, smart silver and black bob, tidy cupboards, go go go. In my mind she was a blur.

'We were worried you wouldn't make it up,' Mum said, tidying away a box of chocolates she'd been hanging on the tree. They never went up until Christmas Eve because my dad quite rightly claimed being made to stare at chocolates you can't eat for an entire month is a human rights violation. 'They said the traffic was terrible on the news. Was the traffic terrible?'

'No worse than usual, it was fine, gave me more time to eat more sweets.'

'Do you want anything?' she asked. 'Something proper to eat? Something to drink? You look completely haggard. Oh, you're not well, I can tell. Are you ill? Is it flu? Or are you just not wearing any make-up?'

'Didn't sleep well last night,' I choked out as she yanked at my coat, wrapping the arms around my back and turning it into a straitjacket for one very brief, panic-stricken moment. 'I'll be right as rain in the morning.'

But I wasn't getting off that easily. She stood in front of me, her blue eyes boring into my brown ones, like a human lie-detector test. There was no upside to having a schoolteacher for a mother. She had seen it all.

'Are you really all right?'

I nodded. Somewhat true.

'Work's going well?'

I nodded. Entirely false.

'The new flat? How's that working out?'

Like living in a poorly ventilated bookshop stockroom that only had one window, barely functioning heating and a boiler that only warmed enough water for one tepid shower a day. Manny's friend Beck had described it as 'bohemian' when she showed me around but in truth it was a disaster.

'I love it.'

'And have you spoken to Michael?'

I attempted a casual shrug, but my shoulders got confused and forgot the second part of the motion, locking up around my ears instead, and instead of smiling, I just showed her my top teeth. I looked like a confused, constipated badger.

'I'm giving him space.'

An entire galaxy of it, against my will.

'You know you don't need to worry about me, Mum, everything is fantastic,' I lied, actively squeezing my shoulder muscles with my hands until they relaxed. 'Life couldn't be better, I promise.'

Aside from the aching, cavernous void in my soul that kept me awake at night and routinely sent me spiralling down a 3 a.m. YouTube rabbit hole, searching for bad acoustic cover versions of 'Someone Like You' performed by off-key teenagers in Idaho, while I shoved chocolate Häagen-Dazs down my gullet in between gut-wrenching sobs.

But still, Christmas. Hurrah.

I beamed at the room around me. Manny was right, Christmas was going to be wonderful. Nothing to do other than eat myself into type two diabetes and occasionally change the channel on the telly. 'I should've known, you never give me any trouble. Thankfully I get enough from your sister and your cousin,' Mum said, her Welsh accent lilting as she clutched my coat to her heart. 'Now take your bloody shoes off, I've hoovered up in here.'

There really was no place like home.

'I didn't know if you were planning to stop at the services on the way up so I didn't make you a proper dinner.' She pulled me out of the chair she'd just pushed me into and led me, shoeless, into the kitchen before I could say a word. 'But I put a few bits out for you and Manny, you can help yourself.'

'There are enough sausage rolls here to feed the entire village,' I said as I came face to face with what looked like an entire stockroom of the big Tesco laid out on the kitchen table. Be still my grumbling tum. Mum and Dad weren't particularly adventurous eaters but if you made it in a mini size and whacked it in the snack section, they were all over it. The Bakers really did love their picky bits.

'Can't have Manny going hungry,' Mum replied, bustling over to the oven to remove a batch of mince pies. 'He's a growing boy.'

'We're both thirty-two and he's already six-foot-three,' I reminded her as I took my regular seat at the table, already halfway through a mini pork pie. Underneath the table, I subtly unfastened the top button of my jeans. Might as well start as I meant to go on. 'The only direction he's going to grow if he eats all this is outwards. I saw on the news it might snow tomorrow.'

'So your dad said, I'll believe it when I see it. Did he tell you your Aunt Gloria called right before you got here? Natalie's gone into the hospital, we might have a Christmas baby in the family if we're lucky.'

'Bloody unlucky for Natalie if we don't get a Christmas baby,' I replied as I swallowed the pork pie and grabbed a jam tart. 'I very much doubt she wants to be in labour for more than twenty-four hours.'

'You shot out of there like you couldn't wait another minute. Made a right mess of me you did, but it was worth it.' I choked on a bit of pastry. Since when was an episiotomy something to get nostalgic about? 'Your sister on the other hand, now she took her sweet time. Nearly two days I was in with her. Your dad had to go out and buy another box of cigars because he couldn't hold his water in the waiting room.'

'And he almost missed the birth altogether when he went out for a bacon sandwich,' I finished the story for her and we both smiled. It was not the first time I had heard it.

'Classic Cerys. Probably wanted to run through the numbers one more time before she made her appearance.'

'Bickering already and she's not even here yet,' Mum shot me a mild warning look. 'You're worse than the kids at school. I don't want any arguments tomorrow.'

'What was it you always used to say? I want never gets,' I replied with a smile. My older sister was my peacekeeper kryptonite, but then Cerys could get a rise out of a Buddhist monk.

Mum placed a brand-new jar of Branson's pickle on the table. 'My kingdom for a quiet Christmas. One day without you three fighting, that's all I ask for.'

'You never know.' I nabbed a cocktail sausage. 'Christmas is a good time to pray for miracles.'

'I'll give you a miracle,' she said, clipping me lightly around the back of the head. 'Go and get your cousin, I bet him and your dad are out there gossiping with the front door wide open.'

Pausing to slip on my trainers, I made it to the front doorstep in time to see Manny locking up the Volvo, my dad kicking at a slightly underinflated tyre with his slipper then clapping his nephew on the back. Manny put his arm around Dad's shoulders and the two of them laughed at a joke I couldn't quite hear. I smiled, lingering in the doorway so as not to interrupt.

I didn't remember much about my Uncle Jim, Manny's dad. He was a lorry driver so he worked away a lot and Manny and I were only nine when he died. An invisible patch of black ice, no one else involved, nothing anyone could have done. But I did remember how sad people were afterwards. Dad didn't cry in front of me or Cerys but his grief was always with us, hanging around the house like an uninvited guest: no one knew how long it might stay or when it might be polite to ask it to leave, so we quietly entertained it for as long as it cared to stay.

A week or so after the funeral, Manny moved in with us. Just for a little while, while Aunt Sue went to stay with her sister in Portugal to 'get herself together'. A few weeks turned into a few months and after a year or so, Aunt Sue decided she wasn't coming back and it became clear Manny was staying with us for good. It worked out perfectly for Dad, who had always wanted a son and missed his brother something fierce, and for ten-year-old Manny, who was completely alone and all at sea. The two of them needed each other and the universe seemed to know it, plus I'd been in the market for a brother ever since Cerys cut the hair off my Rollerblading Sindy so it worked out pretty nicely for me as well. Twenty years later, we were more twins than cousins, and I couldn't imagine our lives without him.

'Who wants a drink?' Dad asked as I placed the last of my presents underneath the tree.

'Me please,' I called, head lost in the branches. Mum's tree was a marvel, tall and full and swimming in ornaments, most of them even older than me. I lay on my back underneath it, sniffing up a great big lungful of its precious pine scent and felt every atom of my body relax.

'Use the nice ones,' Mum instructed when Dad reached for the everyday glasses. 'It's officially Christmas now these two are home.'

Shuffling out from underneath the tree, I sat cross-legged on the floor, watching him pour out sensible measures I knew would be doubled by this time tomorrow. Whisky for me, Mum and Manny, a Tia Maria and Coke for himself. Legend had it he switched to peach schnapps and lemonade for one heady summer in the early eighties but I refused to believe it.

'What's the plan of attack for tomorrow?' Manny asked, gratefully accepting his glass.

'Good question,' I said, shooting him the finger guns before receiving my own. 'Anything we should be aware of in advance?'

'You can always tell the lawyer in the room,' Dad clucked with puffed-out pigeon chest pride as I took a deep sip of the single malt. 'Nothing you need to worry about. Get up, do presents, your sister will be here by one, I should think.'

'Nan said she'd be here for half-eleven,' Mum said. 'Lunch at two, then it's open house at Dorothy's across the road as usual, there's someone there I want you to meet.'

'An old biddy who needs free legal advice,' Manny whispered in my ear.

'And I might have one or two surprises in store,' Dad added with a wink. 'A little bit of something to brighten up the day.'

I cheered, Manny groaned and Dad laughed, all while Mum chugged her whisky in one gulp. She took great pride in being the strongest drinker in the house, not that it was much of a competition. Dad was under the table after a sniff of the barmaid's apron, but Mum had the iron constitution of a particularly lairy ox, a trait I had sadly not inherited.

'Right then, I'm off to bed,' Mum declared with a double slap of the thighs. 'Someone has to be up at half past five to put the turkey in the oven and I'm guessing it won't be any of you. Are you coming, Steve?'

'Aye, I'll be up behind you as soon as I've finished this,' Dad replied, contentedly sipping his cocktail. 'Maybe I'll give you your present early.'

'You can stay out of my stockings, you randy old bugger.'

He winked as Mum put the Tia Maria back in the cabinet. 'She says that in front of you but it'll be a different story upstairs.'

It was always so good to know your parents were having more sex than you were.

'Don't you two be up all night,' Mum warned. 'You know Father Christmas won't come if you're not asleep by midnight.'

Manny looked over at me with feigned innocence. 'Did you hear that, Gwen? Auntie Bronwyn doesn't want you scaring off another man, all right?'

'Self-employed small businessman with working transportation who does things on the day he's actually supposed to do them *and* keeps his boots shiny?' I scoffed. 'Father Christmas is well out of my league.'

'I worry about you two sometimes,' Dad said, groaning as he stood before stooping to kiss me goodnight. 'Listen to your mother and don't be long for bed.'

'We won't,' we promised in chorus as they disappeared upstairs leaving us alone with the twinkling tree, carols playing in the background and most importantly, the open bottle of whisky.

'How are you feeling?' Manny asked as I sipped my drink.

'Surprisingly warm and fuzzy,' I replied.

'Perfection. Now all you have to do is stay that way.'

Closing my eyes, I listened to the carols playing in the background, the crackling flames of the fire.

'I have a plan,' I said. 'Don't worry about work, don't think about Michael and don't fight with my sister. Simple, right?'

'More simple than a meerkat trying to sell me car insurance,' Manny nodded. 'Fancy a top-up?'

'Go on then, since it's Christmas,' I peered up the chimney, just in case. No sign of red trousers, shiny boots or a sack full of toys. 'Besides, it isn't as though anything legitimately catastrophic can happen, is it? Christmas is only one day. How bad could it possibly be?'

## CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, I woke up warm and cosy in my childhood bedroom, the central heating absurdly high as always and the smell of Mum's cooking wafting up the stairs, and I smiled.

It was Christmas Day and it was going to be wonderful.

I felt around under the bed, searching for my phone, the wall socket too far away and my charging cable too short to reach the bedside table. All my friends with kids had been up for hours, posting picture after picture of their kids tearing into piles of presents. New Barbies, first bikes, so much excitement. I tapped away at the screen, loving each one as it came up, my heart swelling at the joy of it all. If that wasn't the definition of Christmas, I didn't know what was. Making new memories and reliving old ones, all wrapped around each other like layers of wrapping paper. The year I got my roller boots and promptly decked it on the driveway, skinning both my knees in my nightie. Getting properly drunk for the first time on Christmas Eve with Manny and Dev, our friend from next door. Slipping my job offer from Abbott & Howe into Dad's stocking. The first time I brought Michael home to meet the family ...

Nope, I reminded myself sharply, I was not going to think about Michael today. It was part of the plan.

It was nice to wake up in familiar surroundings for once. Getting dumped by the man you thought you were going to marry was in and of itself incredibly shit, and waking up every day in a strange flat, surrounded by strange things didn't make it any easier. I wasn't the one who'd chosen to end things, why did I have to leave? Aside from the fact it was technically his house and as soon as he made his announcement, he told me he'd already packed my bag and called me an Uber? Fairness had always been one of my biggest concerns in life and losing my dream man *and* my heated bathroom floor in one fell swoop still felt like injustice of the highest order. It definitely should have been one or the other, not both on the same day.

A text popped up in front of a photo of a toothless toddler on a skateboard and broke my train of thought. *Rhiannon Liberty Conners, born at 4.47 a.m. this morning. Mummy and baby doing well, best present we could have wished for!*

I tapped on the photo sent by my Aunt Gloria to see my cousin, Natalie, tired and emotional, damp blonde hair pushed back from her face, gazing down at the squishy pink lump in her arms. My baby cousin had a baby of her own. A tiny sob escaped my throat as I enlarged the photo of the newest member of the family.

'Happy birthday, Rhiannon,' I whispered a solemn oath. 'I promise I will always buy you separate Christmas and birthday presents.'

'Gwen? Are you up?'

Dad rapped on the door before poking his head into my room, beaming from ear to ear. 'What are you doing still in bed, chicken? *He's been!* Don't you want your presents?'

'Well, that's a silly question, isn't it?' I replied, bouncing out of bed and slipping my feet into a pair of red slippers. 'Give me a minute, I'm coming.'

'Bacon butties will be ready in five,' he called as he trotted off down the hall to bang on Manny's bedroom door. 'Up and out of bed or I'll eat them all myself.'

Now there was a threat that could get me moving.

'Simply having a wonderful Christmas time,' I sang to the Gwen in the mirror before giving her a wink and rushing off downstairs.

The tree lights twinkled in the semi-darkness of the living room, front curtains still closed, because you did not open the front curtains when you were all still in your pyjamas, according to my mother. Dad's promised bacon butties waited patiently on the coffee table and four mugs of tea sat in their four traditional spots, two on the side table, one on the corner of the hearth and one tucked away around the corner of the settee where I was less likely to kick it over, which I had only done once in thirty-two years but this family had the memory of an elephant. Christmas morning 1996 – when I spilt tea on her Sweater Shop sweatshirt before she had a chance to wear it – was only one among many things Cerys had never forgiven me for.

'How about a walk after this?' Dad said, looking at me and Manny as he lowered himself into his chair. 'Get some fresh air into the lungs?'

'Someone go with him,' Mum ordered. 'He won't admit it but he's got a bad hip.'

'I'll pass,' Manny replied. 'Bit worried my choked-up city lungs wouldn't cope with it.'

Sliding under the tree, I began sorting all the presents into piles.

Manny looked like a festive Adonis in nothing but a pair of black Calvin Klein boxers and a pair of reindeer antlers, entirely unfair for someone who only went to the gym to use the nice shampoo and take selfies. Not that I blamed him, I was sweltering in my red tartan pyjamas and dressing gown. 'What about you, Gwen?'

'Sorry, can't.'

'Why not?'

'Don't want to.'

I smiled sweetly as I handed him the first present.

'You'd think a bit of exercise would kill you,' he grumbled, holding the gift up to his ear and giving it a shake.

'Can you say for certain that it won't?' I asked. Dad sighed, giving up. 'Exactly,' I said, passing a shiny silver parcel to Manny. 'I rest my case.'

'Now, don't get too excited,' Mum said as I scuttled behind my gifts once distribution was complete. 'I told you we weren't going mad this year, it's mostly sensible stuff, socks and smellies and a few silly bits.'

Dad tossed a handful of red serviettes at Manny who already had tomato sauce running down his chin and scoffed. 'Don't listen to her, if anything she's got worse. There hasn't been a day gone by in the last three months when she hasn't come through the door with something to be hidden away in a cupboard.'

'Says the man who's already eaten and replaced an entire tin of Quality Street,' she replied. 'I obviously didn't hide them that well, did I, Steven?'

'Tis the season,' Dad said, proudly sipping his tea.

'OK, Mum goes first,' I ordered, my heartbeat quickening at the sight of all the shiny paper and sparkly bows. As far as I was concerned, presents were the best part of Christmas. Not in a greedy Scrooge way, it didn't really matter to me what was inside the presents, what mattered was the fact someone had taken the time, effort, and their hard-earned cash to go out and pick something with you in mind, wrap it up and give it to you as a token of their affection. A present was confirmation that you mattered, that you were loved, whether it was a bottle of bubble bath or a diamond ring. Not that anyone had ever given me a diamond ring, but obviously that was still something of a sore subject. Gift-giving was one of my love languages (along with physical affection, acts of service and a never-ending exchange of cat gifts) and Christmas gifts were the best kinds of gifts, because everyone gave and received at the same time. It was impossible to be unhappy when you were handing out and unwrapping presents, that was an indisputable scientific fact. Probably.

'You're up, Gwen.' Mum pointed to the large, rectangular box in front of me. The very last gift left. 'That one's from your dad. He even wrapped it himself.'

'Only the best for the best,' Dad said, flushing with pride. 'I know it's been a stressful year for you, this will help you relax.'

'If it's the codeine left over from your root canal, she has to share,' Manny said, pulling a brand-new black hoodie over his antlers.

'If you're very nice to her, perhaps she'll let you have a go with it,' Dad replied with a wink. 'I read an article in *The Lawyer* magazine that said Austin, Rhodes & Rollins gave them to all their partners last Christmas. It only seemed right that you should have one too.'

Ignoring the unpleasant sinking sensation in my stomach that came along with any mention of my job, I pasted a smile on my face and focused on tearing away the wrapping paper. What could it be? Bubble bath? A silk dressing gown? A weighted blanket so heavy it would pin me to the settee and trap me in their house forever?

No.

Oh no.

It was not any of those things.

Holding the box at arm's length, I looked up at my dad, horrified.

'Oh, you lucky girl,' Manny gushed, snatching the box out of my hands. 'Father Christmas brought you a vibrator!'

'What are you on about? It's the Gen 2 Cordless Personal Wonder Wand!' Dad replied, grabbing it away from him as I sat frozen in shock. 'It's a massager not a vibrator!'

'No, Uncle Steve,' Manny said, shaking his head. 'I'm both sorry and delighted to say you've bought your daughter a vibrator. And a good one as well, from the looks of it, very nice.'

'It's a *massager*,' Dad repeated as he read the back of the box, the look on his face less certain now. 'See here? Three speed settings, four massage patterns. *Massage, Emmanuel!*'