

LINDSEY KELK

I heart New York

*When you're running away from
heartbreak, there's only one place to go...*



I Heart New York

Lindsey Kelk

 HarperCollins e-books

To the people that taught me everything I need to know: Nana, Granddad, Janice, Phillip and Bobby

And to the people that taught me everything else: James, Della, Catherine, Beth, Mark and Louise

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CHAPTER ONE

The aisle looks really, really long.

And my tiara feels so tight.

Can you put weight on around your head? Have I got muffin top on my scalp? And my shoes really hurt. No matter how beautiful or how expensive they might be, the balls of my feet feel as if they've been up and down a cheese grater and then dipped in TCP.

I saw Mark standing at the end of the aisle, looking relaxed and happy. Well, I suppose he doesn't have to walk down it in four-inch Christian Louboutins and a fishtail floor-length gown. You can't even see the bloody shoes, Angela, I chide myself. Not even the tip of the toe.

And now my hands feel sweaty. Do I have sweat patches? I tried to sneak a peak under my arms without dislodging anything important from my bouquet.

'Angela? Are you all right?' Louisa frowned at me, a picture of perfection, calm as anything, immaculate make-up and not teetering a touch. And her heels are higher than mine.

'Uh-huh,' I replied, as eloquent as ever. Thank God it's her wedding and not mine. And please God, while I'm at it, could you not let Mark focus on what a shoddy bridesmaid I'm turning out to be, just in case it puts him off setting our date. Seriously though, sweat patches would show horribly, the dress is a light coffee colour, specially selected to make me look sick as a dog.

I stumbled down the aisle behind Louisa, with a small smile for my mum and dad, looking appropriately happy whilst acknowledging the solemnity of the occasion. I really hope that's how I look, anyway. There is a good chance I look as if I am wondering whether or not I've left my hair straighteners on. Shit! What if I have left my hair straighteners on?

I'm always struck by how short wedding ceremonies are. The months of engagement, hours of planning, a whole weekend for the hen do even, and the lifelong deal was done inside twenty minutes and a couple of hymns. Even the photos took longer than the actual service.

'I can't believe I'm married!' Louisa breathed. We'd got to the not-at-all cheesy bride and head bridesmaid smiling by a fountain section. Oh dear. The poses came naturally, we'd been practising them with each other since we were old enough to hang pillowcases off the back of our heads, after all. 'Angela, can you believe it?'

'Of course I can,' I said, squeezing her closely to me, ignoring the photographer's direction. 'You and Tim have been practically married since you were fourteen.'

We switched positions and paused to smile.

Click, flash.

'It's just unreal, you know?' She flicked a soft blonde curl over her shoulder and patted a stray light brown hair back into my chignon. 'It's really absolutely happened.'

Click, flash.

'Well, get ready,' I said through a pearly smile. 'It'll be me and Mark next and you'll be the one in the bridesmaid dress.'

'Have you talked any more about setting a date?' Louisa asked, fussing with the puddle train behind her. Was I supposed to be doing that?

'Not really,' I shook my head. 'I mean, we talked about it all the time when you two finally set a date, but since Mark got promoted we've hardly had time to blink. You know how it is.'

Louisa waved the photographer away for a moment. 'Mmm. I just mean, do you think you'll definitely get married? To Mark, I mean?'

Click, flash—not a good one.

I had to hold my hands to my eyes to get a proper look at Louisa. The August sun lit her from behind, obscuring her face and highlighting a halo of wispy blonde curls.

'Of course,' I said. 'We're engaged aren't we?'

She sighed and shook her head. 'Yeah, I just worry about you sweetness. With the wedding and stuff I feel like we haven't really talked about you and Mark in ages.'

'There's nothing new to tell you. You probably see him more than I do. At least you get your tennis time every single week.'

'I tried to get you to take up doubles,' she muttered, messing with her hem again. 'I just want you to be as happy as I am right now. Oh, that's so patronizing, sorry. You know what I mean babe, just, be happy.'

'I am happy,' I reassured her, taking her hand and closing in on the dress for a scaffolded hug. 'I am really happy.'

Just after the speeches had finished but a little bit before the dancing began, I finally managed to escape to the loo.

The reception was being held in a converted barn, that only had two ladies' cubicles, neither of which were big enough to turn around in, so I had escaped up to our room. I looked around at my scattered belongings. I carried my life in my massive, battered handbag—laptop, iPod, phone, a couple of knackered old books. Bits of make-up and scraps of clothes were strewn all over the room, contrasting with Mark's carefully organized suitcase. A place for everything and everything in its place, even in a hotel.

I was happy, I thought to myself, flopping down on the bed and idly flicking the pages of one of my books with my toes. I had a fun job that was flexible, I had Louisa, the best friend in the world, and I'd lost twenty pounds for this wedding, which had put me comfortably in the size twelve bridesmaid dress. I could even convince myself (if no one else) that a ten might have been a better fit. I wasn't horrible to look at, long, light brown hair, greeny-blue eyes and since I dropped the extra weight, I'd discovered a pair of fairly impressive cheekbones. And I had Mark. Who wouldn't love a good-looking, up-and-coming banker boyfriend? He should think himself lucky, I tried to convince myself. Yes, he's got all his own hair, no hereditary diseases, a city banker salary, car and a mortgage, but I'd been attending horribly humiliating weight loss classes for the last six months (it wasn't the weigh-ins that broke you, they were fine, it was the team leader who moonlighted as a dog trainer), I could cook and I cleaned the bathroom every Sunday without being asked. So no, sainthood didn't beckon, but I wasn't an awful girlfriend and we'd been together for ever, since we were sixteen. Ten years. But Louisa's words bothered me a little bit. Was I happy? Maybe more content than bouncing-off-the-sofa-like-Tom-Cruise-ecstatic, but that's still happy isn't it?

I looked at my engagement ring. Classic solitaire. Not huge or flashy trashy, but not magnifying glass necessitating tiny. Mark had bought it with his first paycheque and presented it to me on a holiday to Seville, post-pony and trap ride and pre-lovely sex back at our hotel room. It had seemed horribly romantic at the time, but now it just seemed a horribly long time ago. Shouldn't he be pushing me for a date? Just a little?

'Don't be silly,' I said out loud to my confused reflection. Louisa was probably just getting in front of herself, she was married now after all, I just hadn't expected her smug-married neuroses to kick in before she'd even got out of the church. There was nothing wrong with me and Mark. Ten years of nothing wrong, why would I worry? I tried to slip my beautiful, beautiful heels back on but my left foot seemed to have gained ten of my twenty lost pounds. After five fruitless minutes of searching the suite for my standby flats, I accepted that my shoe bag hadn't made it out of the car. Which meant I would have to brave the drunken uncles, the dancing children high on wedding cake (I had seen balloons too—they were armed) and go to the car park.

CHAPTER TWO

Tiptoeing barefoot, Louboutins in hand, I searched for the car. Over in a dark corner, hidden beneath beautiful weeping willows was Mark's Range Rover. When he had bought it six months before, Louisa had taken it as a direct sign that he was ready for kids. I saw it as a direct sign that he was not ever going to let me drive it on my own. So far, I'd been the one proven right. Scrambling around in my handbag for the spare keys, I noticed that the reading light was on in the back. I smiled to myself, knowing Mark would be so happy that I had come out and saved his battery. Pressing the button to turn off the alarm, instead of the reassuring double pip, I was greeted by a loud siren and flashing indicators. Which was when I realized someone was inside the car.

Shit, our car was being stolen and here I was, hobbling barefoot over gravel with a pair of £400 shoes in one hand and wearing a floor length gown. And I'd just set the alarm off. Brilliant. The car thieves were definitely going to kill me. If I was murdered at Louisa's wedding, she would be furious. All her anniversaries would be ruined. Would she still go on her honeymoon? Maybe I could use my heels as a weapon. Well, maybe not, I didn't want to stain them. But the soles were already red...

I was all ready to turn and hightail it out of the headlines when I remembered my shoes. They could take Mark's car but, damn it, they weren't taking my fall-back flats. Two-year-old Topshop maybe but they were the comfiest damn shoes I'd ever owned. I pulled open the back door to confront the thief before I bottled it. And then, in a startling moment of clarity, I realized there wasn't a man trying to steal the car or my shoes, but two people, very much having sex on the back seat.

And one of them was Mark.

'Angela,' he stuttered, his red sweaty face staring out at me, indentations from my Hello Kitty seatbelt protectors on his left cheek. He wouldn't let me put them in the front. It took me another moment to register the naked woman underneath him. She looked at me, frozen underneath Mark, with smudged mascara and a red chin from Mark's omnipresent five o'clock shadow. I didn't recognize her at all, blonde, pretty, looked fairly skinny from what I could see of her bony shoulders, and she had a lovely tan. A peacock blue silk dress scrunched up on the parcel shelf suggested she had been at the wedding reception, and the beautiful pair of silver Gina sandals clamped around my boyfriend's waist told me I really should have spotted her earlier. I did love a nicely turned shoe.

'I came to get my flats,' I said, numb, not moving.

I stumbled backwards as Mark pulled himself out of the car on his belly and dropped to the floor in front of me, his boxer shorts working themselves further back down his legs as his sweaty skin peeled away from the leather.

'Angela,' Mark stood up, he pulled his pants up high, and wriggled into his shirt. I looked past him into the car. The girl had managed to get her dress on and was rubbing under her eyes to try to get rid of the mascara. Good luck, I thought, if it's as good a quality as your shoes you won't get that off by rubbing. Shoes still looked great though. Bitch.

'Angela,' he tried again snapping me out of my shoe-induced haze. 'I—what are you doing out here?'

I looked back at him. 'Shoes,' I said, waving my sandals at him and gesturing towards the car. 'You didn't bring my flats in.'

He stared at me wildly, glancing from me to my high heels and then back at the car. Slowly, as though I were a startled animal that might bolt, he took a step back towards the backseat and reached under the passenger seat for a small cloth shoe bag. He held it out to me, afraid to touch me, afraid to make contact. 'Thanks.' I took the bag.

Mark stood, bathed in the backseat light, red, sweaty, trousers off, socks and shoes on with a little wet patch growing on the front of his boxers to add insult to injury.

'What the fuck are you doing?' I asked. Incredibly eloquently.

'Angela,' Mark shuffled forward half an inch.

'And who, the fuck, is she?' I asked, pointing to the girl with my left Louboutin, still in my hand. The girl looked away, trapped in the back of the car.

'Angela,' he stuttered, retreating from the perfectly pointed toe aimed at his temple.

'No, I'm Angela. I can see how you might be confused though,' I said, feeling my eyes starting to well up. My boyfriend was having sex in the back of our car, our beautiful future children's car, at our best friends' wedding. I was not going to cry in front of him while he pissed away ten years together on a cheap shag in a car park.

'Angela, this is Katie. I, erm, I—' he looked back again and met her eyes briefly and I swear I saw a hint of a goofy smile cross his goddamned face. It was the most painful moment of the whole thing. 'We, well, we've been playing tennis together, and, well—'

'This is what you think playing tennis is? Shit, does Louisa know you've been "playing tennis" with Tim?' I wanted to hit him, I wanted to hit her, and just as I was about to toss a coin to see who was getting it first, I realized. 'You haven't been playing tennis with Tim,' I said.

'No.' He shook his head.

'And you haven't been working late.' It was all making a horrible sort of sense.

'No.' He sighed, his shoulders dropping with acceptance.

'Does Tim know?' I asked.

'Yes.' I didn't even look up.

'And Louisa knows?' I gripped my heels tightly and was vaguely aware of a buckle cutting into the flesh of my palm.

'I think so.' He nodded. 'I mean, well, we do play tennis sometimes. Doubles. I—I'm not sure though.'

Was I happy? Louisa had wanted to know if I knew.

'You've all been playing doubles together?' I gulped, trying not to be sick.

He looked at me, eyebrows raised, breath caught in his throat. 'Angela, don't,' he put a hand out towards my forearm.

'Don't you dare!' I said, feeling the bile rise in my throat and pulling my arm away. 'Don't you dare touch me.' Heel raised high above my head, I saw for a second how easy it would be. He was frozen and she was trapped in the back seat and Louboutins are beautifully made, I'm fairly sure they would do two skulls without breaking.

But, instead of seeing two bloody corpses, all I could see was Tim and Louisa laughing hysterically in their tennis whites after a game of doubles with Mark and Katie. While I sat at home, tapping away on my laptop, not eating and waiting for my cheating, lying, scumbag boyfriend.

Potential murder weapon in hand, I turned on my heel and started back across the car park. Mark was still pitifully calling my name as I charged through the French doors and across the dance floor, cutting a swathe through the tiny bridesmaids dancing to the pop-tastic disco. Tim and Louisa were standing by the dance floor cradling champagne, waiting for the DJ to announce their first dance, when Louisa saw me.

'Angela,' she said as I ploughed to a stop in front of them. Right away, I knew she knew.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I shouted. All concern for ruining her wedding was long gone. I had been completely betrayed by the people I trusted most in the world.

'Angela, I—why don't we—' Tim reached out and placed his hand on my forearm. Before I knew what I was doing, I snatched my arm away and cracked his knuckles with my shoe.

'Will you stop saying my name like it's a bloody tranquillizer!' I paused, gritting my teeth. 'I have just caught Mark shagging your tennis buddy in the back of our car.'

If I didn't have everyone's attention before I broke the groom's knuckles, I did now.

'Oh, Angela,' Louisa sobbed. 'I tried to tell you, I just, I thought you must already know. You know, somehow, deep down.'

'At what point did you think that? When I told you I was perfectly happy and was still sure I was marrying Mark? When I didn't tell you my boyfriend was a cheating shit? Or when you first started playing *doubles* with him and that slag?'

Louisa burst into tears and turned to run out of the room, but her exit through the French doors was blocked by Mark. Still in his stained boxers, socks, and half buttoned-up shirt, he stood frozen under the gaze of three hundred wedding guests, most of whom had just about worked out what was happening. Finally remembering to breathe, I took a moment to observe the scene. Tim looked at me with pale terror as he clutched his bloody hand. Louisa was standing bawling in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by crying children, and Mark, clutching at the doorframe as though it was all that was holding him up, stared at me in disbelief. I looked backwards towards the guests and saw my mum emerge from the crowd. She looked everyone up and down, paused, pursed her lips and walked right up to me. Loosening my white knuckles, she prised my Louboutins out of my left hand, then gripped it tightly in her own.

'Come on,' she said quietly, placing a hand on the small of my back and guiding me across the room. I couldn't see anything but the floor in front of my feet, or hear any of the murmurings around me. All I knew was my mum's hand and the gravel still stuck to my bare feet.

It must have been about five in the morning when I woke up. The room was so big and quiet and I could hear the bones of my bridesmaid dress scrunching into my ribs. I turned over and realized that lying next to me in the big beautiful bed wasn't my fiancé, my Mark, but my mother. Her perfect wedding outfit was carefully folded over the back of a chair and I hesitated for a moment before looking down at what she was wearing instead. It's a bit weird to see your mum wearing an old Blondie T-shirt and a pair of your boyfriend's boxers. Ex-boyfriend. I sat up slowly and tried not to catch sight of myself in the mirror until I'd locked myself in the bathroom. My hair was a bird's nest of slept-in chignon, my make-up smeared with sleep, tears and pillow creases and the parts of my dress that hadn't already been torn or muddied, were twisted and creased up beyond all recognition.

Stripping myself of everything, earrings, necklace, engagement ring, I stepped into the giant shower and just let the water run. How had this happened? Destroying my best friend's wedding aside, how had I not noticed that my boyfriend was cheating on me and had been doing so for so long and so openly that my friends all knew? It wasn't just a quick shag, it was clearly serious. What would I do? Where would I go? As the shower stall steamed up and I lathered, rinsed and repeated, I tried to be rational. Keep a clear head in any situation. Mum always said it was one of our strengths.

I'd have to go home and get my stuff. Home. I supposed it wasn't even my home any more. He'd probably move her in tomorrow. 'Katie,' said a little pixie-ish voice in my head. 'Not "her", it's Katie.'

'This shower feels amazing,' I said out loud, pushing that voice out of my head as the hot, hot water streamed down from three different jets. It was as if none of it was real. If only I could live in a hotel. Not having to go back to that shit heap and rummage through my stuff like I was the one that had done something wrong. Jesus, the splitting of the CDs. I just couldn't face it. A couple of renegade tears started to seep out of my eyes. If only I could stay in this hotel for ever and pretend none of it had happened.

Why not stay in a hotel?

Not this hotel, clearly. I had a strange feeling I wasn't going to be terribly welcome at breakfast, but another hotel. Somewhere impersonal and wonderful where the staff's only concern would be keeping me happy rather than whether or not I was going to ruin another gala event. I had a little bit of money, we'd been saving for my non-existent wedding for years, and it seemed fairly appropriate to tax Mark his share of the cash for shitting on me. My work was freelance, I had my passport, credit cards, driver's license (no burglar was stealing my identity while I was away at a wedding for almost a week!) enough clothes, my favourite shoes, what else would I need? I definitely had enough stuff not to need to go home for a while. Screw the CDs even, I had my iPod. There was really no reason not to go, and God knows, I am the queen of talking myself out of anything even vaguely confrontational.

I forced myself out of the shower and into the bathroom. For a second my gaze rested on Mark's wash bag, next to my engagement ring. A lovely leather piece I'd bought him last Christmas. He's bound to want to come back for that, I thought as I slipped on my earrings, my necklace, it's full of all his fancy shaving stuff his mum buys him for his birthday. For a moment I thought about filling it with shaving foam, but froze with a flashback as I picked up the can. Him, hunched over that cow, all sweaty and confused. Maybe I should throw it out of the window. Then I remembered him smiling at her. Smiling at her, in front of me, in those scummy boxer shorts.

And so I sat on the loo and pissed in the bag. It was the most disgusting thing I'd ever done, and I was so so proud. Once it was nicely ruined, I dropped in my engagement ring, zipped up the bag and left the bathroom.

'Mum,' I whispered, sitting beside her on the bed. 'Mum, I'm off.'

She opened her eyes and looked a bit confused as she remembered everything, and then she looked at me as though she was going to commit me to the same home where she had stashed my nan.

'What do you mean?' she asked, sitting up, looking even more confused at the sight of her nightwear. 'You don't have to go anywhere because of that shit.'

It was the first time I'd heard her call Mark anything other than 'darling boy' or 'that lovely Mark', and I was quite touched.

'I know,' I nodded towards my packed travel bag. 'But with the wedding and everything, I think I'd better get off early. Thing is, I thought I might nip off for a few days to sort myself out.'

'Oh no,' she said, taking my hand. 'You're just coming home with me and your father, he's going to come and collect us later. You've done nothing wrong, you know. Well...'

'I know, Mum,' I said. 'But I think it would do me good to get away. I've booked a taxi to the airport.'

She looked at me slightly oddly. 'Really?' she asked. 'You're really going somewhere on a plane?'

'Yes,' I said, standing up, clutching my bag.

'Where are you going?' she asked, looking at the clock. 'Wouldn't you rather just come home with me and your dad?'

'Hmm,' I pecked her on the cheek. 'I think I'm actually going to go with my first idea.'

Mum shook her head. 'But where is better than home at a time like this?'

CHAPTER THREE

The plane landed at JFK without a hitch and, while the homeland security guard didn't seem that interested in my break-up (business or pleasure didn't seem to cover why I was there), he did let me into the country. Good start. Once I stepped out into the sunshine, everything began to feel real. The cabs were yellow, they were on the wrong side of the road, and my taxi driver even swore a blue streak tossing my bag into the boot of his car. Man alive, it was warm. If women glow, men perspire, and horses sweat, right at that moment, I was one sweaty bloody horse.

'Where to?' the driver asked.

'Erm, a hotel?' I asked, plugging in my seatbelt as we took off. 'I need a hotel.'

'You fuckin' serious?' he asked, swerving onto the highway before I could even reply. 'Which fuckin' hotel? There are fuckin' millions of hotels.'

'Oh, yeah, I—well—I—' before I could finish my sentence, I started to tear up. 'I don't know anywhere. I just sort of got here.'

'Well, guess what lady?' the driver yelled back at me, 'I'm a fuckin' taxi driver, not tourist information. You want me to fuckin' drop you here in the middle of Queens or you want to give me the name of a hotel?'

In response, I burst into tears. Witty comeback, thy name is Angela.

'Jesus fuckin' Christ. I'm dropping you off at the first fuckin' hotel we pass,' he muttered, turning the radio all the way up.

Twenty minutes of talk radio later, I was hanging out of the window like a dog in a bandana, and I had just about stopped crying when I spotted it.

The New York City skyline. Manhattan. The Empire State Building. The beautiful, beautiful Chrysler Building. The Woolworth Building with its big old churchy steeple. And I fell in love. It hit me so hard that I stopped crying, stopped thinking, stopped breathing. I felt as if I'd been winded. Winding the cab window all the way down, I breathed in the skyscrapers, the giant billboards, the industrial riverside stretches and the sweaty, steamy air. I was in New York. Not at home in London, not at Louisa's wedding, and nowhere near my filthy, cheating fiancé. And so, for the want of something else to do, as we disappeared down into the midtown tunnel, I burst into tears again.

The first hotel we passed turned out to be the last hotel the cabbie had dropped off at, and it was beautiful. The Union was set just off Union Square Park, with a lobby dimly lit to the point of a power cut, and filled with the overpowering scent of Diptyque candles that smelled like fresh washing on the line. Overstuffed sofas and ancient leather armchairs filled the space, and the reception was picked out in fairylights. Suddenly finding myself in such perfect surroundings, I was very aware of the state of my hair, my dehydrated skin and my rumpled clothes. I really, really did look like complete crap, but this place couldn't be further from a two-bedroomed terrace in south west London. It was just what I needed.

'Welcome to The Union,' said the incredibly beautiful woman behind the counter. 'My name is Jennifer, how can we help you today?'

'Hi,' I said, pulling my handbag high up on my shoulder and kicking my travel bag towards the reception desk. 'I was wondering if you had a room available?'

She smiled serenely and began clicking away on a keyboard. As she tapped, her glossy spiral curls bounced away behind her. 'OK, we are a little busy but...I have a junior suite at \$800 a night?' She looked up. My expression apparently suggested that was a little bit out of my price range. 'Or I have a single at \$350. But it only sleeps one.'

'Oh, OK,' I fished around in my battered old bag for a credit card and tried not to work out the cost of the room in real money, 'it's just me. Well, I just found out my boyfriend was cheating on me and we broke up and I had to leave home and I thought, well, where's better to get away to than New York? And,' I paused and looked up. She was still smiling at me, but with a healthy dose of terror in her eyes. 'Sorry, I'm sorry. A single would be fine.'

'And how long would you be staying with us?' she asked, tapping away again. I guessed she was alerting everyone to the fact that there was a desperate woman checking in. My photo was probably being distributed to the whole staff with a 'do not engage in conversation' note.

'Sorry?' I hadn't thought that far ahead.

'When will you be going home?' she said slowly.

'I—I don't have a home,' I said, equally slowly. 'So, I don't know.' I was dangerously close to tears and really didn't want to let them go in the reception of the swankiest hotel I'd ever stepped in. But, wow, I really didn't have a home.

'Well, I kinda just wanted to know when you would be checking out, but the room is free for the next week, shall I put you in for seven nights and see where we go from there?' she suggested. I nodded and handed over my credit card. Jennifer exchanged it for a sexy black room pass key, emblazoned with a silver U. 'Room 1126 on floor eleven, take the elevator and then turn left. It's at the end of the corridor.'

I nodded numbly and took the key, tripping over my own bag as I turned.

'Do you need anything at all, Miss Clark?' Jennifer asked. I turned and tried to smile, shaking my head.

'Head check?' I could only make jokes for so long before I evaporated.

'Just phone down if you want anything at all,' I heard her call. Hopefully, she wouldn't send up a therapist, I had always been warned that Americans didn't always get sarcasm.

If the room was a single, Mark's house was a mansion. A huge, white bed dominated the tastefully painted cream bedroom, topped off by a dramatic brown leather headboard. Past the bed, a floor to ceiling window with beautiful views of Union Square Park below. A walk-in wardrobe was tucked away to my left, and to my right was the bathroom. I dropped my travel bag and opened the door. It was beautiful. White tiled walls, black slate floor. The toilet and sink were tucked neatly away against the wall, while the rest of the room was completely taken over by a glass encased bath and shower. Two chrome showerheads jutted out from opposite walls, and a glass shelf held small but perfectly formed designer toiletries. A chrome shelf by the sink groaned under the weight of fluffy towels, and a thick waffle robe hung behind the bathroom door.

I backed back into the bedroom and looked out at the window, but paused before I got there. This was just what I'd been looking for, but between being completely exhausted and suddenly incredibly hungry, I just couldn't bring myself to look outside and see a strange city. Instead, I headed back into the bathroom, via the well-stocked mini bar, and ran a bath, using the whole bottle of bubbles. Stripping off my clothes, I stepped into the bath, wishing that my brain would stop ticking over for just a second. Using the edge of the bath as a makeshift bar, I mixed a \$15 vodka and coke in the toothbrush glass and poured half a packet of \$8 peanut butter M&Ms into my mouth. It was less than twenty-four hours since I was in that shower back in the UK, thinking how badly I needed to get away, and here I was. Away.

I lay back and sighed deeply, letting the ends of my hair soak through. Gradually the sigh turned into a whimper, and the whimper became a sob. I was allowed to cry, wasn't I? I'd been cheated on by my fiancé, deceived by my best friend, and humiliated in front of all my friends and family. Reaching for the M&Ms, I managed to polish them off in one go, washing them down with a large swig of my drink. What was I thinking, coming all the way to New York on my own? I wasn't being brave, I was being stupid. There was no one here to help me, to talk to me, to watch *Pretty Woman*, *Dirty Dancing* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* with me. I should towel off, call my mum and get a plane home. This wasn't impulsive and exciting, it was immature and cowardly. Just a really, really elaborate version of hiding in my room and getting wasted. I'd made my point, and more or less paid a grand for a bath and a bag of sweets, now it was time to face reality.

Pulling myself out of the bath, I slipped on the robe and padded across the carpet, leaving miserable-looking footprints behind me. I rummaged around in my bag for my phone, half hoping it was old and crappy enough not to work in America. Buzzer, five whole bars of reception. I stared at the screen. Three messages. Hmm. Did I really want to do this with only one vodka in me? Forcing myself to stand up, I walked over to the window. If I was just going to turn around and go home, I wanted at least to get my money's worth out of the view. It really was beautiful, the sun was shining, people were wandering through the park, dashing to the subway, ducking into shops, carrying bags and bags and bags.

How weird would it be if I went home and it was as if nothing had happened? If I'd been confused somehow and it wasn't what I thought. Or Mark had realized what an idiot he was and did everything he could to win me back. And in years to come, we'd be able to smile ruefully, maybe even laugh, at Mark's mad moment and the time I ran away to New York for fourteen hours.

'Angela, it's your mum, just calling to say I got the hotel to refund the cost of my room since I stayed with you, so that will go back on your credit card.' Bless my mother for always thinking of the practical things in life. 'I spoke to Louisa and she was very apologetic—very, oh Annette, I don't know what to do—well, that young lady should know better, and I spoke to Mark as well. The less said about that right now the better, I think. Anyway, call me when you can and give me your flight details for coming back. Dad'll come and get you and I've made up your room. Call me when you get a chance, I hope you're having...' cue slightly awkward pause while my mother looks for the right word. 'I hope you're safe. Love you dear.'

'Angela, it's Louisa, please call me back? It's Sunday morning and I know you must be really angry and everything but, well, I'm sorry. And I didn't know what to do and, oh God, I can't do this over the phone. I'm such a shit friend.' Yes, you are, I thought. She sounded gutted, but I really couldn't have cared less. 'I spoke to your mum, it was horrible, she hasn't been that mad with me since I brought you home drunk from that sixth form party at Tim's house...Oh and Tim's hand is broken, but he'll be OK in a couple of weeks. It's not a serious fracture. Erm, call me?'

I decided she could stew for a while longer.

'Hi, it's me,' he started. I pressed my hand against the window and watched the people below. 'I had to call and say something.' Even from way up on the eleventh floor I could see people emerging from Starbucks with huge vats of coffee. Coffee would be great right now. Coffee or Sambuca. 'I'm so sorry for what happened, it was incredibly stupid of me and heartless and, well, just awful.' There were so many shops around the square. I would definitely feel better if I could go shopping. 'I should have told you what was happening.' Even though the aircon was high in the room, I could see how hard the sun was beating down on all the gorgeous people in their tiny shorts and cute T-shirts. 'Katie and I, well, I should have told you, it's sort of serious.' So many people were bustling around. 'I think we need to have a really sensible chat about the mortgage and everything, I mean, you can't just vanish, Angela.' And I could see squirrels darting around in the trees. 'Your mum said something about you being in New York? I don't know, well, can you call me? I know I fucked up, but you have to call me, you can't just hide. I'm not going back to the house, I'll stay with, well, I won't go back to the house until we've spoken.' I spotted a subway station peeping out from the trees. Wow, the subway. 'We have to talk about what's going to happen. I do love you Angela, but, well, I'm just not in love with you any more. Anyway, call me.'

I rested my forehead against the glass and hung up. So much for him doing anything he could to get me back. Just because this was all a big shock to me, didn't mean it was a shock to him, more like a relief. Shit. What the hell was I going to do now? I couldn't stay with my mum for the rest of my life and I couldn't rely on my friends any more. I couldn't even throw myself into my work, I was freelance, and it was a really slow time for me. I breathed in deeply and stepped back from the window, keeping the tips of my fingers on the glass as I dialled Mark's number.

'Hello?' His voice.

'It's me,' I said, pressing my fingers harder against the window, against the skyline. 'I'm sending Mum over for my stuff, she'll pack it up.' I traced the tops of the opposite buildings and carried on breathing. 'I won't be coming back to the house, so do whatever, just, I'm not coming back.'

'You're at your mum's?' he said hesitantly.

'I can't talk to you,' I said, looking down on the park and breathing deeply and slowly. 'And I'm not at my mum's, I'm in New York and I don't know when I'm coming back, so go and do whatever you want to do with whoever you want to do it with, and don't ever, ever call me again.'

I hung up and leaned my entire weight against the window. So, I'd chosen New York, now I needed it to support me in that decision. And to celebrate, I dashed to the bathroom and threw up the vodka and Coke, followed by the peanut M&Ms. Nice.

'Hi, Miss Clark?' The door opened, leaving me just enough time to pull my robe tightly around me and push myself up from my comfy fetal position around the toilet bowl. The girl from reception pushed through the door with a trolley. 'It's Jennifer, the concierge? Is it OK for me to come in?'

'Yes,' I called, checking nothing was flashing in the mirror and staggering across the room to let her in. 'Of course.'

'I wasn't sure that you would have all your essentials,' she presented the trolley with a flourish. It was stacked with piles of giant cookies, boxes of cereal, a kettle of steaming water, hot milk, cold milk, pancakes, toast and a big box of beauty products. 'And, you know, you mentioned a break-up and no one should be on their own after a break-up. This is our complimentary "All Men Are Shits" break-up service.' She picked up a cookie, snapped it in half and grinned.

'God, thank you, and it's Angela, please,' I said, feeling incredibly English. I took the half cookie she offered and stood awkwardly, taking it in. 'This is wonderful, thank you, I was starving.'

'Well, we're a whatever, whenever hotel, and I'm a whatever, whenever kind of a person,' she said, hopping on to the bed. 'Say if you want me to go though, I'm totally overstepping my concierge boundaries. I just thought, if I'd come to New York after a break-up with one tiny travel bag and no hotel booked, what would I want? So I hit the supplies room, dug out some pyjamas,' she pulled out a pair of white cotton button-up PJs from the bottom of the trolley, 'slippers, socks, cleansing stuff, sewing kits—I don't know, everyone seems to need a sewing kit—and all the food I thought I would want if I was post-break-up. And tea, because, you know, you're English.'

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but I was more than happy for this girl to keep talking until I made a decision. 'Thank you again, I suppose I do need pyjamas, I hadn't thought about it really. About anything, actually.'

She mixed a hot chocolate for both of us and broke up another cookie. 'They're the first thing I need when I break-up with someone, I just take to my bed for like, a week or something, and then I eat until I'm over him. So, that's why all the food. I'm guessing it was a bad break-up if it sent you all the way across the Atlantic, huh?'

I took the pyjamas and instinctively made towards the bathroom, but I had a feeling this girl wasn't going to mind me putting them on in front of her. She had already flicked on the TV and was nodding to a music video. I slipped the bottoms on under my robe and quickly dropped it to slide on the top. They felt great, like the coolest, softest sheets I'd ever slept in.

'Too bad to talk to a stranger about?' she asked. 'It's OK, I am the hotel's resident shrink.' She patted the bed and I flopped down, like the pyjamas, it felt completely luxurious and inviting.

'Well, I haven't talked to anyone so far,' I sighed sipping the hot chocolate. 'I literally just found out my boyfriend is cheating on me so I decided to take a holiday to sort my head out.'

'Seriously? What a douche. How did you find out?' Jennifer asked, moving on from the cookies to a bowl of Lucky Charms.

'I caught them having sex in the back of his car at our best friends' wedding. Our friends all knew. Just me the moron that hadn't noticed.' I paused to accept a bowl of cereal. So much sugar in one bowl. Amazing. 'We always said we would just walk away if either one of us cheated, so...I think I'm single.'

'Ouch,' she said, crossing her legs under her and shifting a couple of pillows. 'That sucks. But you've got friends in New York?'

'Nope.' I munched on mini marshmallow pieces and watched the milk turn green. Eww and yum. 'I sort of got on the first available flight at Heathrow that met my criteria of English-speaking, full of shops and really fucking far away from Mark.'

'You picked good. New York is like Mecca for people that have had horrible break-ups, trust me, I'm president, treasury and social secretary of the local broken heart society. But not many people just get up and leave the country though honey, you're real brave.'

'Not really,' I confessed. 'I couldn't go back home and I just really can't bear the idea of talking to my friends now and finding out they've all known for months. And well, when you break the groom's hand and make the bride cry all before the first dance at their wedding when you are the maid of honour, you think about leaving the country.'

'Wow,' she said, staring at me. 'You're my new personal hero.'

She looked so genuine, I burst into tears. Seriously, I'm not a crier, but this had been a tough twenty-four hours.

'God, that's so sad,' I mumbled through the tears. 'I'm almost twenty-seven, I've been cheated on, I'm homeless, my friends are all arseholes and I'm alone in a city with one tiny travel bag, a pair of £400 shoes that double as a weapon, and half a Toblerone. That's not my definition of a hero.'

'Nope, I think you're a hero. You confronted a life changing situation head on, you challenged people who were negative influences on your life even though they were cornerstones in your social system and you came to the best city in the world to rediscover yourself. And, you're not alone now, you've got me whether you like it or not,' she said, smiling broadly and scraping her mass of dark brown curls back into a loosely contained ponytail. 'Jenny Lopez, New York's number one free psychiatrist. Make the most of me before I cost you a billion bucks an hour. And don't laugh at my name. And can I see those shoes?'

'I won't make fun,' I said, wondering how I could drink the milk out of my bowl without her seeing. Proof that E numbers are addictive. 'And thank you, for all this and for listening and well, talking. And yes, the shoes are by the bed.'

'Oh, never thank me for talking,' she laughed, hopping up off the bed and picking up a shoe. 'Wow, Hyde Park Louboutins, nice. Well, I've got to get back to the desk and I would guess that you need to sleep, the jet lag must be kicking in about now.'

I nodded, she was strangely insightful. When I tried to stand up to see her out, my legs were like lead.

'Don't get up,' she said, opening the door. 'Just enjoy the food, watch some shitty TV and get ready for tomorrow.'