

Chapter One

Don't you just hate Christmas? Well maybe you don't. I mean, what is it that makes people so sentimental at this time of year? There are the gruesome office parties of course, which if I am truthful I did once enjoy, well always enjoyed in fact, until this year. Actually, if I am totally truthful, I adore Christmas or at least did. How splendid it always is when that first sprinkling of snow falls like talcum powder along with your tears of happiness. Christmas is when you can feel sad and happy all at the same time and everyone seems to know why. Best of all, you can forget the diet and the cellulite, in fact you are expected to. After all isn't that what Christmas parties are all about? Quality Street, sausage rolls, mince pies and prettily wrapped presents with nice bows on the top. Everyone talks about the diet they will start in the New Year with firm deliberation, knowing they never will of course, and for one week of the year everyone smiles at you. Total strangers, sometimes even handsome ones, offer to help carry home your Christmas tree and then the cosy warmth of an open fire while the snow piles up into a neat heap outside your front door as you decorate it fills you with the warmest feeling in the world.

Then, as I said, there are the gruesome office parties, where everyone gets drunk and some of us even get groped. Not always by the person we like but it's cool to be groped just the same. In times past I was always the first up for the Karaoke. It was widely acknowledged I could hold my drink... at least in my hand anyway. I am, Charley, good time girl, always guaranteed to get the party going. Of course, there was always Nigel to spin me around the dance floor in my slinky black dress. Now, what can I tell you about Nigel? Everything, everyone ever told me? That he is the biggest prick on earth? Naturally, if you had asked me about Nigel a year ago, I would have swooned into my bubbly and declared him to be the answer to every woman's dream. This year, I have to agree totally and unequivocally that he is every woman's nightmare.

So, here we are, or at least here I am, at the office party, just two days before Christmas. The office is *Our Celebs* by the way, the top celebrity magazine in the country. For almost two years I have been personal assistant, dogsbody and sleeping partner to Nigel, the editor, whom I suspect has been seeing someone else for the past six months. That someone else happens to be my best friend Sam, or at least I thought she was my best friend. So, here we are, or here I am, about to hit thirty in just under a month, standing alone at the Christmas party,

one hand holding a plastic plate filled with finger food, the other an empty glass of champagne.

“Have you heard the rumours then?” Clio jiggles her hips in front of me and I watch as champagne dribbles from her glass down the front of her lacy top.

Oh no. Surely she cannot mean Nigel. Rumours don’t spread that fast do they?

“What? What do you mean?” I respond and hold my breath in anticipation of the answer.

“You know, about some big scoop or other. I thought you would know. Oh well...”

She blows smoke from her cigarette into the air with a loud huff.

“Great do, huh?” She shouts above the music.

I suppose it is a great do if you are enjoying it.

“Yes, great,” I reply somewhat unenthusiastically.

“You okay Charley?” She enquires as she grabs two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter.

“Where’s Nigel? Incidentally you look fantastic tonight. I just love you in that dress, is it designer?”

Before I can reply she is jiggling off into the arms of an admirer.

Yes, indeed just where is Nigel? Twenty minutes ago he had been twirling me around the dance floor in my slinky black dress and then he had gone to fetch some food from the buffet. I stand on tiptoe to try and see him and feel myself wobble and veer to the right colliding with Max, one of our photographers.

“Whoa, had one too many have we?”

I force a smile. I really do not want to hear anything Max has to say. After all hadn’t it been him who had put doubts in my mind in the first place? I thought back to last month when he had cornered me in the cafeteria.

“Hey, you lovely woman,” he had declared. “When are you going to see what an arsehole that Nigel is and come out with me?”

“Actually, he is not an arsehole,” I had retorted defensively.

I remember his laughter.

“Yeah, right, babe. He plays the field better than David Beckham.”

But, of course, it had made me think. After all, Nigel had stood me up more than once in the past few months. Then a few days later I had barged into his office—well I am his PA after all and if I can’t barge in who can? Sam was perched seductively on his desk and I swear his lips were pink. They only turn pink like that when he is sexually aroused.

“Want to dance?”

I struggle to keep my forced smile pasted on my face,

“Actually Max, I am feeling a bit hot, hence my little wobble just then. I think I may just get some air.”

Oh, how I wish I had agreed to the dance. You know how some decisions are just life changing? Well, this was one of them. I waltz out onto the patio and am about to take a deep breath when I see them. My deep breath turns into a gasp as my eyes glue onto Nigel who is in a tight clinch with Sam and frankly snogging the life out of her. I must have let out a groan for suddenly they break apart and Nigel is upon me like a slimy leech.

“Charley, babe, it isn’t what you think?”

It isn’t? Sam avoids looking at me as she quickly heads back to the party.

“You know, I think it is what I think,” I say stupidly and pull myself away from him.

I feel the tears running down my cheeks and hastily head for the loo. Love is most definitely blind it seems. Why did it take me so long to see what was clearly under my nose? After five minutes of quiet loo sobbing, I wash my face and don my sunglasses. Minutes later I am standing in my shades with gold cufflinks in my handbag, inscribed with the initials C&N and which I had wrapped with the greatest of love. I had envisioned an engagement announcement on my birthday. Oh, stop blabbering woman...Get over it. You can’t cry through the whole of Christmas. Oh, can’t I? Just watch me. How could I have been so stupid? Oh God, he’s walking my way. He smiles, his bright white even teeth breaking into that happy toothpaste advert. Oh lord, he is so handsome, with his dark curly hair and come to bed eyes. I sigh and attempt to look nonchalant as he approaches and feel my knees go weak as they always do when I look at Nigel in a dark shirt. It should be illegal for someone to look so sexy. His black hair falls in a gentle wave over the collar of his shirt and I feel an overwhelming urge to run my hands through his adorable locks, however, I run my hands through my own newly highlighted blonde hair instead.

“Hey,” he says but I barely hear him above Slade’s *so here it is, merry Christmas* thumping around me.

“Hey,” I respond, my voice quivering.

“Why are you wearing those?”

He lifts the sunglasses and sharp needles pierce my eyes.

“Christ, how much have you had tonight?”

He grabs my hand and two glasses of champagne and suddenly I am outside on the patio. Hadn’t he just been kissing Sam here, right here? Possibly, even on this exact spot? Another couple are canoodling nearby and I try to ignore them but visions of Sam and Nigel enter my head again.

“Charley, listen, you have to believe me, it isn’t how it seems. Sam was upset and I was trying to comfort her.”

“Oh, I see, a good snog is a great comforter I am sure,” I say, feeling the tears well up again.

He sighs.

“Look, I have something for you. It’s kind of a favour really and your Christmas present all in one.”

I fumble in my bag for the cufflinks, although for the life of me I don’t know why, and hand them to him almost spilling champagne onto his shirt in my haste. He laughs but it sounds false and my heart skips a beat.

“Oh, honey, you shouldn’t have.”

I almost agree and am tempted to say I shouldn’t have too, you cheating bastard.

“It’s not much,” I respond far too flippantly.

He is looking beyond me to the hall where the music has stopped and an announcement is being made. For a moment his face darkens.

“Listen, Charley, I have been meaning to talk to you about something but it’s been so damn uncertain...”

Again, he grabs my hand.

“Come on, this is big news.”

I see him push the cufflink box into his pocket and I realise I am holding a small brown envelope. Everyone is crowding around our boss, Bryan Alder. If Bryan is making an announcement it must be something big. He usually stays for one hour, mingles and then leaves but never makes a speech of any kind.

“Ah, Nigel, good, just the man,” he declares as we walk in.

I hastily thrust my sunglasses into my handbag as everyone’s eyes focus on us.

“What’s happening?” Clio whispers into my ear.

Clio is my secretary. I shrug and look to Nigel who is grinning widely. The room is heaving with people and I strain to see Sam but there is no sign of her.

“Boys and girls enjoy yourselves tonight for we have the biggest scoop of the year. In just five days’ time Marc Lassiter is getting married, in Italy, and thanks to Nigel we have exclusive rights to the whole story and by Jove I can tell you it took some getting.”

There are gasps and loud applause. Marc Lassiter is not only the highest paid actor ever but also the most private. Nigel is red faced from grinning and I can’t help wonder why he never mentioned this to me.

“Thanks, of course, to some great journalistic undercover work by Sam,” continues Bryan.

All eyes and applause are on Sam now. I mean Sam of all people. If Nigel arranged all this why did I not know? I am his personal assistant for Christ sake and this is the first I have heard of it.

“Did you know about this?” Clio shouts above the applause.

“Of course,” I lie, “Sorry Clio had to keep it quiet.”

I slide my glasses on. It is true then.

Sam is now sidling up to Nigel and smiling. I watch mortified as her hand strokes his bottom. I focus my attention back to Bryan.

“So, not only do we have the story and exclusive photos but we are indeed helping escort the wedding cake, thanks to Charlotte.”

What! Suddenly all eyes are on me as I stand incognito in my shades, which Clio pulls off a touch too hastily for my liking. I feel Nigel’s arm on my shoulder.

“Sorry, Charley, I thought there would be time to tell you but we only got confirmation we had the contract early this afternoon. Those are your tickets, happy Christmas, you’re flying tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I echo.

This is surely some kind of elaborate joke. It is impossible that all this had been going on without me knowing. Sam smiles cruelly at me.

“I thought you would be pleased. You said how much you hated being alone at Christmas,” Nigel whispers in my ear.

I did? Why do I not recall any of this? Bryan begins talking again but I don’t want to hear anymore. I walk onto the patio grabbing another glass of champagne on the way. Inside the envelope is a ticket to Turin, traveller’s cheques and a Christmas card. My vision blurs as I read the scribbled message.

“Happy Crimbo Charley, see you in Turin in a few days. You are travelling business class darling, two whole weeks in Italy. I’ve emailed ‘Turin.doc’ to you so be sure to check your laptop on the flight as it explains everything. Enjoy, Nigel x”

Bugger bugger.

“Am I going too?” Clio has crept up behind me.

“No you bloody are not,” I retort in tears and run down the steps to the nearest waiting taxi.