

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



# All I Want for Christmas

Amy Silver

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## About the Book

### **Twelve days and counting . . .**

It's Bea's first Christmas with her baby son, and this year she's determined to do *everything* right. But there is still so much to do: the Christmas menu needs refining; her café, The Honey Pot, needs decorating; and she's invited the whole neighbourhood to a party on Christmas Day. She really doesn't have time to get involved in two new people's lives, let alone fall in love . . .

When Olivia gets knocked over in the street, however, Bea can't help bringing her into The Honey Pot and getting to know her. Olivia's life is even more hectic than her own, and with her fiancé's entire family over from Ireland for Christmas, she shouldn't be lingering in the cosy warmth of Bea's café. Chloe, on the other hand, has nowhere else to go. Her affair with a married man has alienated her friends, and left her lonelier than ever.

But Christmas is a magical time, and in the fragrant atmosphere of The Honey Pot, anything can happen: new friends can be made, hearts can heal, and romance can finally blossom . . .

## About the Author

Amy Silver is a writer and freelance journalist, and has written on everything from the diamond trade to DIY dog grooming. She lives in London and has a penchant for vintage clothes and champagne cocktails. This is her second novel.

*Also by Amy Silver*

Confessions of a Reluctant Recessionista

# All I Want for Christmas

Amy Silver



arrow books

For Nikki

## ***Acknowledgements***

Thanks to Lizzy Kremer and Gillian Holmes.

## ***Tuesday 14 December***

**4.45 p.m.**

**Bea**

TERRY AND I were having an argument about garlic. Actually, that's not quite right: we were having an discussion, a perfectly genial one, about pesto, specifically regarding garlic's place (or not) in a pesto recipe. Terry claimed every Italian recipe book he'd ever seen advocated the use of garlic in pesto sauce. He may well have been right, but I learned the hard way, from my Italian mother-in-law, that garlic *has no place in pesto*.

'There's no need for it,' I insisted. 'It's a delicate sauce, the garlic overpowers the flavour of the basil.'

'It adds complexity,' Terry objected. Terry, who owns the antiques shop just across the road from my café, is a stubborn man, notoriously difficult in negotiation.

'Listen,' I said, ignoring the queue of customers standing behind Terry, some of whom were becoming increasingly agitated the longer this conversation went on. 'You take fresh basil leaves, and you crush them in a pestle and mortar. Don't chop! Crush.'

'I just stick it in a food processor,' Terry said.

'Heresy!' called out Sophia, the elderly lady standing a few places back in the queue. Her family originally hails from somewhere near Naples and she's on my side.

'Do you know why pesto is called pesto?' I asked Terry. 'It comes from *pestare*, "to pound". You crush the basil along with pine nuts and coarse salt.'

'Some people say cashews are a perfectly good substitute for pine nuts,' Terry said.

‘You’re just trying to wind me up now, aren’t you?’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, how long does it take to get served in here?’ Our friendly discussion was interrupted by a loud interjection from a tall, thin young woman who was standing directly behind Terry in the (admittedly rather lengthy) queue, regarding me with an expression of utter contempt. I’d seen her in the café before; I’d seen her quite often, in fact, although apart from taking her orders we had never had any interaction.

‘What can I get you?’ I asked her, giving her my most winning, customer-appeasing smile. She was a regular, after all. Couldn’t afford to chase custom away. The tall girl wasn’t listening though, she was answering her mobile phone. My hackles began to rise.

‘What can I get you?’ I asked again. She held out her hand to me, commanding me to be quiet. I moved on to the next person in line. ‘Yes, sorry, what would you like?’ I asked. But the tall girl was ready to order now.

‘Latte, very skinny – that’s skimmed milk *not* semi-skimmed – and very hot,’ she barked at me before returning to the conversation on her mobile phone. I took a deep breath and began to prepare her order.

I like my customers. Most of them, anyway. I have plenty of regulars who recognise that this is not a high-street chain, this is not Starbucks. This is the Honey Pot, Italian deli-slash-café, a place in which the serving staff (usually me, the owner, and Kathy, my number two) have conversations with our clientele. Sometimes those conversations last more than thirty seconds. Most of my customers understand that. Some of them – that tall girl talking on her mobile phone, for example – might find the service at breakneck speed that Starbucks offers more to their liking. They come back here, though, for the coffee. And the cakes and the pasta and the unbelievably good pesto that we import from Italy.

And we must be doing something right, because despite being a little off the beaten track – a quiet tree-lined road a few minutes from the Crouch Hill – we still manage to do very good business. Sometimes we do a little too well. That afternoon, that Tuesday, had started out fairly typically: a good stream of customers, most of our eight tables busy; it had been perfectly manageable. But come five o'clock, the December drizzle that had persisted for the last couple of days turned to a downpour, and from downpour to deluge. All of a sudden it seemed as if half of London had taken refuge in my café. There was a queue of customers snaking from my end of the counter, past the stairs that led up to the café's kitchen and right round to the opposite side of the room, and not a single table free.

The noise level was rising, and with it, my blood pressure.

'You got any of those sausages in red wine, Bea?' Danny, one of my regulars, was asking, half shouting to make himself heard over the din. 'Only the wife loves those, and she's been in an awful mood the past couple of days. Christmas shopping. She gets herself in such a state about it all.'

'I know how she feels,' I said, ladling spicy boar sausages into a Tupperware tub as fast as I could.

'Cappuccino,' the man after Danny snapped at me, without being asked.

'Coming up,' I replied. When I turned back, Terry was standing in front of me again. 'I really don't have time to get into the pesto argument again,' I pleaded with him.

'It's not that – I was wondering if I could put one of these up?' He held up some flyers. Something about puppies.

'Sure, of course. Over there – in the corner.' I pointed to our noticeboard, which rests on a shelf against the wall. 'If you can find a space, go ahead.'

'Large, black, decaf,' someone was saying to me. 'And do you have any of those biscotti I got last time?'

'Which ones were those?'

‘Oh, you know, the ones in the red tin?’

I didn’t know. I do not have the memory of an elephant. Behind me, there was a crash. Kathy was bending over, swearing quietly as she picked up the pieces of a plate she’d dropped. ‘Fucking mayhem in here.’

At the table nearest the counter, a child started to cry.

I took a deep breath. *Cut off the aubergine’s spiky green cap. Peel the aubergine and cut into cubes. Put the cubes in a colander and sprinkle them with salt. Lots of salt. Let the aubergine steep for an hour. Scoop up the cubes, rinse them in cold water, wrap them in a tea towel and twist it to squeeze out the moisture . . .*

Some people count to ten. Some people play with worry beads. I recite recipes, like mantras. Whenever I feel like killing someone, when I feel like strangling someone with my bare hands or clubbing them over the head with an axe, I think of a recipe. I repeat it to myself, as calmly as possible. I think about the preparation, about the processes involved, about the dicing and grinding and seasoning; I think about the look of the food, the textures, the aromas. It calms me.

That afternoon, I was thinking of a Sicilian aubergine and ricotta sauce, just like the one we’d eaten at the trattoria on the beach front in San Vito Lo Capo three summers ago.

*Put the vegetable oil into a large frying pan, place the frying pan on a medium to high heat. Add the aubergine cubes, but not all at once. They need to fit loosely into the pan, so do them in batches. When the cubes feel tender to the prod of a fork, they’re done. Take them out and put them on kitchen paper to drain. Pour off the vegetable oil. Wipe the pan clean, pour in some olive oil and add the sliced onions.*

Three summers ago? Four summers ago? Jesus, when was that? I couldn’t remember. I could barely remember what I’d had for breakfast, if I’d had breakfast at all. Everything was becoming a blur. It wasn’t just that the deli was so packed, it

wasn't just the rising noise levels, it wasn't just that I'd had around three hours, sleep the night before. It wasn't simply the fact that it had been raining, miserable, bleak, freezing cold rain for three whole days (*always rain in London, never snow*, that's what he used to say), or that the list of things I needed to get done before Christmas, the imaginary list, the one in my head that I still hadn't got around to writing down, kept growing longer and longer and nothing ever got done.

No, there was something else. All of a sudden, everything was irritating. That tall, skinny girl, the one who had been so rude earlier, the one who had been talking non-stop on her mobile phone ever since she'd sat down in defiance of the large 'No Mobile Phones' sign hanging prominently on the wall directly in front of her: she was incredibly irritating. The immaculately dressed and coiffed yummy mummies with their triple buggies clogging up the aisles; the young men who shouted their coffee orders because they couldn't be bothered to turn off their iPods for thirty seconds; the exaggerated, eye-rolling exasperation of the teenage girls who had to wait more than a minute for their double tall skinny no foam extra dry lattes: all these things made me wish that I had an AK-47 stashed under the counter.

Even Sam was irritating. Sam, my friend and neighbour, waving cheerily at me as he hurried past with a new girl on his arm, another day, another blonde, another romantic disaster in the making, he was in explicably infuriating. Usually I found his endless stream of women a source of amusement, but for some reason it was starting to piss me off.

I took a deep breath. *Sauté the onions until golden. Add the chopped garlic and stir. After a few seconds, add the tomatoes (tinned, plum, cut into strips). Cook for ten minutes. Add the aubergine. Season. Cook for a couple of minutes more. Cook and drain the pasta. Add grated Romano cheese, ricotta and basil leaves. Mix all the*

*ingredients into the pasta, toss and serve, with parmesan on the side.*

That was a good sauce. A simple, delicious sauce. I hadn't made that sauce in ages. I should do. I should make it soon. But not tonight. Tonight was not a night for chopping and sautéing, it was a beans-on-toast kind of night. I was dog-tired, dead on my feet, desperate to throw everyone out, to close up and clean up, to stagger upstairs and cuddle up on the sofa with Luca while watching something pleasantly mind-numbing on TV.

But I was feeling guilty, too, because some part of me didn't want to do that at all, some part of me wanted to ring my mother and say, 'Actually, Mum, why don't you just keep him there with you tonight?' and then I could open a bottle of red wine and down the entire thing in forty-five minutes and then open another.

'You with us, Bea?' Kathy gave me a sharp poke in the ribs. I looked down to notice that the coffee I'd been pouring was overflowing on to the floor. 'What's up with you today?' she asked crossly.

'Sorry,' I mumbled. Kathy, a stout cockney with a fearsome temper, is often mistaken for my boss, despite the fact that she's actually my assistant manager. I was about to explain that I was just exhausted because I hadn't had much sleep the night before when the real commotion started. There was a scream from outside, and then a lot of shouting and swearing and people milling around, and then I could see a girl, sitting on the edge of the pavement, a trickle of blood running down the side of her face.

**9.20 p.m.**

**Olivia**

When the doorbell rang, Olivia's heart sank. This had to be bad news. What else could it be, after the day she'd had? She had endured a miserable time at work. She had spent

the first half of her lunch hour fighting with the vicious Hamleys Christmas crowds in a failed attempt to get her hands on the TeenVamp (TM) doll and the second half trying on party dresses cut to fit rail-thin Amazon women. This had been followed by more office-based misery. Then, on her way home, she'd been run down by a cycle courier. And to top it all, somewhere in the midst of all this mayhem, she had managed to steal someone's purse.

The hellishness had started that morning with a summons to see Margie, the editor-in-chief of *Style* magazine, the number-one women's glossy on the news stand today and Olivia's employer. Margie's opening gambit – 'Close the door, would you?' – was sufficiently menacing for Olivia to know she was in trouble. Olivia did as she was told and stood in front of her editor's desk. Margie looked from her computer screen to the December issue of *Style*, opened to the page of Olivia's beauty column, and then back to her screen. She sighed.

'Have a seat,' she said. Olivia sat. Margie looked up at her and gave her a cold, thin-lipped smile. 'We've had a complaint, *another* complaint, about your column.' Olivia swallowed hard. 'It's about the Jakob Roth Soy Growth Factor Xtreme Serum. What did you say about it?' She scanned the article. 'Ah yes. "Nasty, greasy and foul smelling . . . Like slapping salad cream on your face . . . You would be better off nipping down to Tesco and buying their own-brand moisturiser for a fraction of the price . . .".'

Margie sighed again. She placed her elbows on the desk, tucked her hands underneath her chin and fixed her employee with a look of concern. 'As I'm sure you can imagine, Olivia, the people at Jakob Roth are not exactly turning cartwheels over your comments. In fact, they are most annoyed. And I have to say I don't blame them.'

Resisting the temptation to point out that Margie had read – or at least should have read – the column before it went to

press, Olivia stuck to her guns. 'It gave me a rash, Margie,' she pointed out. 'You saw it. I had spots for three days.'

'Mmmm . . . And you're sure that was the cream, are you? Not something you ate? I've seen you shovelling down Pringles at your desk, you know. They're terribly greasy. It might have been something else. The detergent you use to wash your sheets perhaps? Can you really say without any hint of doubt that your dermatological problems were caused by that cream?'

'Well, if they weren't it was a bit of a coincidence—' Olivia started to say, but her editor cut her off.

'It could have been a coincidence. Marvellous.' She gave a low, mirthless laugh. 'Olivia, I know that because of your, ah, *situation*, you may feel inured from the economic realities that face so many of us . . .'

'That is simply not true—' Olivia spluttered, but Margie cut her off again.

'Let me finish. We are operating in an incredibly tough market. An impossible market. We are competing with the internet and cheap weeklies as well as our established competitors. Circulation is down. Advertising revenue is down. Do you have any idea how many full-page advertisements Jakob Roth took in *Style* last year? No? They took twelve. One per issue. Do you know how many Tesco took? You do, don't you? That's right, they didn't take any, because Tesco don't advertise their own-brand moisturiser in magazines that charge up to forty grand for a full-page ad.' Olivia cast her eyes downwards, her eyes fixed on the hem of her skirt which, she had noticed, was starting to unravel. Margie went on. 'Do you know how many pages Jakob Roth have booked for next year? Yes, once again, they've booked twelve. Only now I have a letter from their chief executive threatening to pull all of those advertisements – nearly half a million pounds' worth of advertisements – because of *your* ill-advised remarks.'

Margie was no longer calm. Angry red blotches had begun to appear on her cheeks. She reached for the jug of iced water on the table next to her desk and poured herself a glass, her hands trembling slightly as she did. She took a sip of water, breathed in deeply and looked directly at Olivia. 'We need to find a way to put this right. Jakob Roth has a new fragrance, L'Amour Propre, it's being released for Valentine's Day. You will write about it in the February issue and you will not just write about it, you will *rave* about it. I don't care if it smells like pig swill.' She turned back to her computer, waving a hand at Olivia to dismiss her. But her editor wasn't finished; as Olivia opened the door, Margie screeched, for all the office to hear: 'This is *Style* magazine, Olivia. This is not the *Guardian*, this is not fucking *Panorama*. This is a top-of-the-range magazine for the kind of woman who would not be seen dead buying beauty products in Tesco!'

Back at her desk, Olivia checked her emails.

**From:** zarahobbes@style.com

**Subject:** Three Martini lunch?

I told you that Tesco comment was going to land you in the shit. Let's go to Joe Allen for a steak and get pissed.

Zx

Across the open plan office, Zara, Olivia's workplace sister-in-arms was grinning at her, miming knocking back drinks. Olivia hit reply.

**From:** oliviaheywood@style.com

**Subject:** Re: Three Martini lunch?

In an alternate universe maybe. Back here in reality, this is the list of things I have to do in my one-hour lunch break:

Buy tickets to Mamma Mia for the Kinsella clan  
Pick up dry cleaning  
Find presents for Shannon, Erin and Carey  
Buy a dress for the Luxe Cosmetics party

Maybe tomorrow I'll have time to eat . . .

Liv

Xx

**From:** zarahobbles@style.com

**Subject:** Cruel and unusual

Christ, that is brutal. No one should *ever* have to buy tickets for Mamma Mia.

Zx

Getting the tickets was in fact the easiest part of Olivia's lunch break. Picking up the dry cleaning was painless, too. Trying to find Christmas presents for her boyfriend's three pre-teen nieces, on the other hand, was proving something of a challenge.

The good news was that the pre-teen nieces had very clear ideas of what they wanted for Christmas. The bad news was that the items they wanted appeared to be on the wish-lists of virtually every young girl in the country, and so were almost impossible to get hold of. On this, Olivia's fifth attempt to find the incredibly sought-after vampire doll (what was it with pre-teens and vampires nowadays?) that Erin, the middle niece, had requested, Olivia's enthusiasm for the task was waning.

Under normal circumstances, Olivia liked Christmas. She enjoyed Christmas shopping. She came from a large family (two older brothers, one younger sister, countless cousins, aunts and uncles) and she had great memories of enormous clan gatherings at the house in the Bahamas, of Christmas lunches which lasted from midday until nine o'clock in the

evening, croquet games that began in a spirit of friendly competition and ended in sibling-on-sibling violence.

Olivia embraced the Christmas spirit. But Christmas shopping for her boyfriend's entire family, some of whom she had never met, was a severe test of her faith.

'You've no one to blame but yourself,' Zara pointed out helpfully when Olivia returned, late, frazzled and empty-handed save for a triple-pack ham and cheese sandwich she'd purchased on the way back to the office. 'After all, it was your idiotic idea to forgo Christmas in a paradise and offer to host the entire Kinsella clan in London instead.'

This was true. When Kieran mentioned that his mother, who was usually left to do all the Christmas planning, cooking and organisation, had decided to go on strike that year, Olivia had decided, in a fit of goodwill, to offer to host Christmas in London for his family instead.

'It'll give me chance to get to know everyone better,' she'd said, already picturing in her mind the somewhat Dickensian Christmas ideal, complete with snow falling thickly outside and angelic, ruddy-faced children sitting around the perfect tree. She hadn't really thought about the reality of her boyfriend's large family cooped up in her flat for days on end while it pissed with rain outside.

'Actually, it's not the entire clan,' she said to Zara. 'His grandparents aren't coming. Granddad's got a dodgy hip or something. He reckons he won't be able to get up the aeroplane steps.'

'Thank Christ for small mercies.'

The two of them were standing in the office kitchen, Zara making herself her umpteenth cup of coffee of the day while Olivia hastily wolfed down her sandwiches.

'I know, so now I only have to deal with Kieran's parents, his three brothers plus two wives and a girlfriend, two nephews, three nieces and - though this is yet to be confirmed - a basset hound.'

They were interrupted by the arrival of Margie, who had come into the kitchen to fetch her specially prepared macrobiotic udon noodle and vegetable salad from the fridge.

‘Good God, Olivia,’ she spluttered, picking up the now empty triple ham and cheese wrapper. ‘Please don’t tell me you just ate this entire thing?’ Olivia nodded sheepishly, gulping down the final mouthful. ‘Have you looked at the fat content of this? Twenty grams! There are more than seven hundred calories in this pack! You shouldn’t be eating more than fourteen hundred in a full day.’

‘Well, I think the recommendation is actually more like two thousand, but—’

‘Nonsense. They say that, but that’s only for very active people. Or very fat people. This,’ she said, proudly holding out her tub of salad, ‘has less than a gram of fat in it!’

‘Amazing,’ Olivia and Zara chimed in unison.

‘Isn’t it? Actually, Olivia, that reminds me. I might have a little assignment for you. Come along!’ She marched out of the kitchen, salad in hand and Olivia in tow, cutting her way through the maze of desks to the centre of the room where, just in between the subs desks and the art department, sat the Freebie Desk.

Olivia’s pulse quickened.

The Freebie Desk at *Style* was a hallowed place. It was here that all the goodies, from the lowliest of lip glosses to the most coveted of Balenciaga handbags, were deposited before being divvied up between writers to review and, in some cases, to keep. As far as clothes, shoes and bags went, most of the really expensive stuff had to be returned to the designers, but they still got to keep quite a bit – ‘they’ usually being Margie, her deputy editor and the fashion girls who fit the sample sizes. In her three years at *Style*, Olivia had come away with a ton of beauty products (she was beauty editor, after all), but in terms of the most desirable

loot, all she'd managed to get her hands on was a DKNY clutch and a Burberry key fob.

As they approached the desk, Olivia craned her neck, trying to spot what delights might be on offer. The beauty products for the next issue had already been distributed, so it had to be something else. Lingerie, perhaps? After all, the February issue was all about Valentine's Day. Or maybe . . . oh God, she could barely stand it . . . that bright pink silk dress from Marc Jacobs's spring line?

'Here you go!' Margie said brightly, holding in her hand a small, plain-looking white box. 'I thought you could give these a try?' Olivia opened the box. Inside was a plastic bottle with the word 'EEZYTRIM' printed on its side in large lettering. Diet pills. Olivia felt sure she could hear snickering from the hipsters on the art desk. She felt her cheeks colouring; for a horrible moment she thought she was going to cry. Margie, oblivious to her discomfort, was picking her way through a selection of Missoni scarves. 'I was going to have Suzie do us a feature on them, but that yoga retreat last month seems to have done for the last of her excess baggage. Why don't you give it a try? We could have something like . . . "Give your man a little bit less to hold on to this Valentine's Day . . ." Something along those lines.'

'That sounds like a great idea, Margie,' Olivia said sadly. 'Thanks very much.'

Olivia left the office just before six, ignoring the raised eyebrows of colleagues who would not dream of turning off their computers a minute before seven, determined to put the day's misery behind her. She wrapped herself up in her dark blue trench and set off towards the tube, oblivious to the admiring glances of the two security men on the door of the building. Margie could say what she liked, but there was no doubt that the average red-blooded male would regard the idea that Olivia, diminutive, blonde and curvy, with peaches-and-cream skin and enormous blue eyes, should do anything to change her appearance as insane.

Olivia had a reason for ducking out early and it wasn't just to put an end to her miserable day. She wanted to swing by the Honey Pot, her local deli, to pick up something suitably comforting (and fattening, Eezytrim be damned) for dinner, and then get home to get on with Christmas-present wrapping, phase one (of four). She needed to get her own family's presents done that evening ready to be FedExed to the Bahamas the following day if she was going to stand any chance of her nearest and dearest actually have something to unwrap on Christmas morning.

The journey home went perfectly smoothly – as smoothly as it could in torrential rain – until she was just five minutes from home, crossing Albany Street on her way to the Honey Pot. She was just about to step up off the zebra crossing and on to the pavement when around the corner came a Lycra-clad dervish going hell for leather down the hill and swerving ever so slightly too late to avoid a collision. He crashed into Olivia, who went flying, knocking her head on the pavement as she fell.

Everything went black for a fraction of a second and then she was aware of two things: a cranium-splitting headache and the fact that someone was shouting. As she struggled into a sitting position, Olivia was amazed to realise that the cyclist, the maniac who had crashed into her, was standing over her, red-faced and screaming expletives.

'What the fucking hell is wrong with you?' he yelled. 'You could have got me killed!'

Olivia gawped at him, incredulous. She was searching for a suitably scathing reply when a man, dressed in what looked to the casual observer to be a very expensive suit, said, 'What a ridiculous thing to say! I think you'll find that the young lady was crossing the road in the correct place. You, on the other hand, were going much too fast and riding quite recklessly.'

The psychotic cyclist fixed the suit wearer with a murderous glare. 'Fuck off, you ponce!' he snapped, before

returning his gaze to Olivia. 'And you, you fat cow, watch where you're going in future.' And with that he hopped back on to his bike and sped off down the hill, cursing loudly as he went.

Still sitting on the pavement, Olivia burst into tears.

'Don't cry,' Suit Wearer said, stiffly proffering a handkerchief. 'You're not badly hurt, are you?'

'And you're certainly not fat either,' another voice said. Olivia looked up to see a tall, chestnut-haired woman standing over her, holding out her hand. 'Come on, come into the café, have a cup of tea and we'll get you cleaned up.'

The Honey Pot café, which was not a particularly large place, was packed. The windows were dripping with condensation; shopping bags and baby buggies blocked the aisles. Olivia's good Samaritan, who introduced herself as Bea, ushered her through the chaos to a table in the corner – the largest in the café – where a tall, thin, dark-haired girl in a suit sat alone, speaking in an exaggerated whisper into her mobile phone.

'D'you mind?' Olivia's Samaritan asked, pulling out a chair for Olivia to sit in before the girl had a chance to object. Olivia sat down and started to sort through her over-sized handbag, checking the contents for damage. Finding none, she placed the bag on the floor next to her chair and dabbed at her temple with a paper serviette.

'It doesn't look too bad,' Bea said, giving the cut a cursory inspection before turning her attention to the girl on her mobile phone. Bea rapped her knuckles on the table to get the girl's attention and pointed to the 'No Mobile Phones' sign. The girl ignored her and carried on talking. Bea tried again. 'No mobile phones!' she said loudly, gesticulating at the sign. The tall girl rolled her eyes, sighed dramatically and got to her feet, tripping over Olivia's bag as she barged past her. She bumped the table with her hip, sending salt and pepper shakers flying.

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake,’ the tall girl hissed angrily, as though this were in some way Olivia or Bea’s fault. She stormed out of the café to continue her conversation, slamming the door as she went.

‘God, people are horrible at Christmas,’ Bea said. ‘Hang on minute, I’ll just get you that cup of tea.’

It wasn’t until Olivia got home that she realised she had somebody else’s purse in her handbag. She was just sitting down to a dinner of tortellini with Swiss chard, prosciutto and ricotta when her mobile rang, and when she delved into her bag to find it, she discovered a purse. A rather elegant, expensive-looking Alexander McQueen purse. A purse that did not belong to her.

Feeling guilty and intrusive, she opened it and inspected its contents. There was about forty pounds plus change in cash, a couple of receipts (£14.50 for drinks at the Compass, N1 and £39.99 for a top from Urban Outfitters), a dry-cleaning slip (one coat, two skirts, to be collected on Thursday), a passport-sized photograph of a man (forty-something, handsome, dark-haired), a scrap of paper covered in a barely legible scrawl, three credit cards in the name of Miss Chloe Masters, and a condom.

Olivia scrutinised the scrap of paper, hoping to find a telephone number, but there was none. It took her a while, but eventually she managed to decipher the handwriting: it appeared to be a food diary.

Monday

½ grapefruit

2 espressos

1 banana

Peppermint tea

Salad – leaves, avocado, crayfish

2 slices rye bread with cottage cheese

Baked salmon with steamed veg  
4 glasses red wine

'Typical,' Olivia muttered to herself as she polished off the remains of the deliciously calorific pasta she had picked up from the Honey Pot, 'I would nick the purse of a food fascist.' There was nothing in the purse which gave a contact number or address for Miss Chloe Masters, so she decided she'd just have to hand it into the police the following day - she was planning to go and speak to them about that insane courier anyway.

So there it was. That was Tuesday. Olivia had managed to piss off her boss, fallen further behind in her hideously hectic Christmas schedule, narrowly escaped death by cyclist and become a thief. So when, just before ten, her doorbell rang, she naturally assumed that something had to be wrong. It had to be bad news.

It wasn't. It was Kieran, devilishly handsome in the houndstooth coat she had bought for him for his birthday, sporting an enigmatic smile.

'You're a welcome sight,' Olivia said, giving him a kiss. 'I thought you had to work late. What a completely lovely surprise.' She stepped back to allow him in, but he didn't move. 'What is it?' she asked. 'Aren't you coming in?'

'In a minute. First I want to give you something.'

'Presents? Already? Ooh, are we doing the whole twelve days of Christmas thing?' Olivia asked excitedly. 'Do I get a partridge in a pear tree?'

'Actually, Liv, you godless heathen, I think you'll find that the twelve days of Christmas start on Christmas Day and end on Epiphany.'

'So it's not a partridge then? That's probably a good thing. I mean, I could probably cope with a partridge, but then tomorrow it would be turtle doves and then French hens, followed by all those calling birds . . . Where would I keep them all? And what comes after calling birds?'