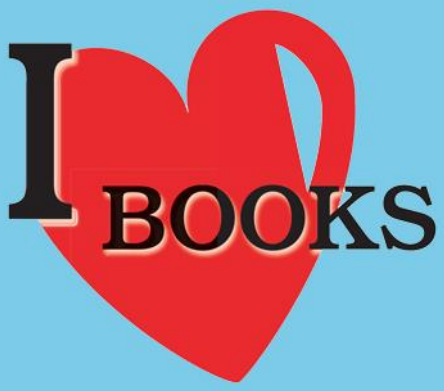


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Opening extract from

...And a Happy New Year?

Written by

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To all my brilliant spinsters

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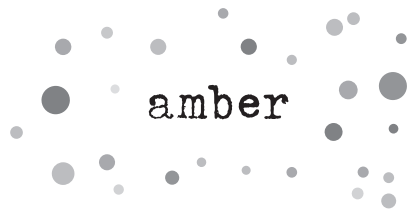
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"I can't believe I'm actually going to have someone to kiss at midnight on New Year's Eve." I took two ornamental vases off the mantlepiece, ready to hide them in the airing cupboard. All breakables were going into lockdown.

Kyle made his *aww baby* face and wrapped his arms around my waist. I had to put the vases down on the carpet.

"You don't understand." I buried myself into his chest. "This just isn't something that happens to me. I'm worried that if we do kiss at midnight, it will cause a giant rip in the space-time continuum or something.

Dinosaurs will come back to life. The grid will go down. Evil Craig will get nice…"

He pulled my face up to look at him, holding it in his hands. "Do you want me to kiss someone else? To be safe?" he asked, in his American twang.

And I thumped him, laughing. "Don't you bloody dare."

"You sound so English right now." He leaned down to kiss me. He. LEANED DOWN. To kiss me. Even after a year and half of dating, I couldn't get over how great that was.

I picked the vases up and carried them into the bathroom; began wrapping them up in towels. For extra protection.

"I don't trust it, Kyle," I called behind me, placing a vase right at the back of the cupboard shelf. "Nice things don't happen on New Year's Eve. That is not what it's about. It's not about new beginnings, or the best night of your life, or your great lost love hunting you down at the countdown to tell you he made a horrible mistake letting you go." I shut the door and walked back into the living room to find Kyle fiddling with the sound system.

"What is it about, then?" he asked scrolling through my party playlist.

"It's about feeling let down by life. It's about a sinking feeling in your stomach that the night should've worked out better. It's about high expectations being dashed. It's about your feet getting really cold watching shit fireworks. It's about worrying everyone is having a better time than you. It's feeling, only ten seconds after midnight, that actually, yes, your problems are still here and you were a deluded idiot for thinking a new year could change that." I threw my hands up in the air. "And, in my case, it was always, ALWAYS not having someone to kiss at midnight."

Kyle held up my phone, which was plugged into the speakers. "Did you show any potential kissers your terrible playlist before midnight?" he asked. "Because that might explain things."

I threw a cushion at him. But, being a jock and all, he ducked and it knocked a lamp off the table. It fell to the floor with a crash.

"Bollocks."

"I think you've found another breakable."

I rushed over to the fallen lamp and gulped in relief to see it intact. I picked it up, cradling it like a baby, and wondered if I could fit it in the airing cupboard. "Honestly, if Dad and Penny find out we had a party, I'll be so dead that they'll resuscitate me after murdering me, just so they can murder me again."

"If you hate New Year so much, why are you even having a party?"

I shrugged. "Because it's New Year's Eve. It's just what you do."

Kyle took the lamp off me to bring me into another hug. I loved how tactile he was – like he knew physical affection was something I'd missed out on most of my life so he wanted to make up for it.

"It will be fun! I'm here, aren't I? And your dad won't find out. It will be fine. We've still got a while before people arrive to hide the rest of the smashables. Plus Lottie and Evie will be here soon to help."

We managed to peel ourselves apart to finish preparing the house. Glass things were hidden. Plastic

cups were stacked high on the kitchen table. I let Kyle add three whole songs to the playlist. Bowls of cheesy snacks were artfully arranged. I even put signs up on the bedroom doors, saying *Please don't have sex in here, please*, which Kyle found hilarious.

"But are *we* allowed to have sex in here?" He tried to pull me onto the bed. I looked at the time on my phone. It was seven thirty.

"We've only got half an hour before people start arriving." I leaned into his kisses on my neck, my whole body unravelling under his touch. His smell. His Kyle-ness.

"What I've got planned will most certainly take less than half an hour."

"Way to sell yourself, Kyle."

We laughed and fell backwards onto my bed, Kyle on top of me, raining kisses on my face. His hands creeping up my blue dress, which was too short on me, like every other dress in the universe. I knew the doorbell could go any second. A scrunching sound behind my back – we'd fallen onto some of my art coursework. I sat up, pulling

my paintings out from under me and then fell back on the mattress again.

It had been the most amazing two weeks – having Kyle here for Christmas. He'd come for a few days last Christmas too, but stayed in London as Dad still hadn't forgiven him for the whole taking-me-away-on-a-road-trip thing. I'd been terrified about him coming to stay this year. Worried Penny and Craig would tell him horrid stories, that Dad wouldn't approve of how serious things had got. We heard that a lot. "*Don't you think you should slow down? Aren't you both a bit young?*" That and, "*You're doing long distance? Between here and America?*" Like being together for over a year and a half wasn't proof of our seriousness or anything. Everyone at art college thought I was mad.

But then Kyle had turned up on December seventeenth, looking totally weird without his summer tan. He'd crashed college on the last day of term and charmed all my new friends the way he charmed everyone. He'd had Penny eating out of the palm of his hand since the get-go. Even Dad had thawed to him.

Just as things were getting very compromising, my phone went.

"Ignore it," Kyle whispered into my ear. "It can wait."

My phone went again.

And again.

I sighed, and pushed him off. "I have to get it. It might be Dad."

Kyle groaned face down into my pillow, as I got my phone.

Then it was me letting out a groan – of anger.

It was Lottie.

Three totally non-urgent messages.

Home Alone.

It's a Wonderful Life.

EVEN THE MUPPET CHRISTMAS CAROL??????

"Your dad?" Kyle asked, still face down on the bed.

"No, it's Lottie. She's off on one."

"About what now?" It came out a bit more annoyed than he normally sounded when he spoke about Lottie.

Kyle'd been getting defensive recently about how Lottie had been treating Evie and me since she went off to uni in September. By "treating" I mean "borderline ignoring". She hadn't even invited us to come and stay. And her messages were always just vague, or droning on about how great London is.

"She's claiming not one Christmas film passes the Bechdel test."

Kyle sat up, covering his crotch with one of my cushions.

"But Christmas is over already."

"You know what she's like. Once she's latched onto something…"

"She doesn't let go," Kyle finished.

I punched out a reply.

Christmas is over.

Her reply came instantaneously.

But the patriarchy isn't.

When you getting here already? I sent back.

On my way.

I sighed and stood up. Lottie only lived ten minutes away. And though what Kyle and I had planned usually didn't take longer than half an hour, it did take more than ten minutes. Most of the time anyway…

"Come on, we should turn the music on. Get the party vibe going."

Just as I got to my door, Kyle called over.

"When are you going to tell them?"

I stopped, my hand on the door frame. Leaning on it, holding myself up.

"Soon." I didn't turn back.

"The later you leave it, the harder it will be."

My stomach riddled itself with instant knots.

"I know…"