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Chapter One

Is it love?

I ponder the big question as I get ready for my date with Luke, while my best friend Livvie lies sprawled on my bed, nose pressed in a book, unaware that I'm in the middle of an existential crisis.

There's a certain *je ne sais quoi* about poet Luke that makes me giddy with the thought of what might be. He's so *different* to any other guy I've dated. There's no 'dinner and a movie' blandness with him. Our dates are wonderful escapades that make me feel wholly alive.

Luke and I often go bookshop-hopping, spending long lazy Sundays in lesser known shops. My favourite is a moody little place down some long-forgotten laneway, where hardback books sit in rigid piles, the sultry scent of the past heavy in the air. Our footsteps disturb the dust as an elderly gent watches us through the swirling smoke of his pipe, as if time has stopped in that fusty ancient patch of London and the rules don't apply.

I want to find that sort of paradise for myself, and maybe I'm getting there with Luke, who's taken me to poetry slams, where he swaggers on to the stage and wins against other poets, always managing to convey so much feeling with so few words. The way he manipulates the twenty-six letters of the alphabet into something heady and wondrous quite takes my breath away.

Luke seems to take up so much space with his big ideas and brevity. It's like he pulses with life and, by osmosis, I soak up that enthusiasm, as I'm exposed to how literature can change a mood, a life, a heart.

We've snuck into art galleries, hung out in libraries, and attended women's empowerment rallies – he's a feminist. An ally! He's the real deal; *finally*, after all this time, I've found the type of man I've always dreamed of, after so many false starts with lesser men who only wanted to change me, quieten me, make me not so . . . loud, I guess.

Luke's opened my eyes up to a whole new world I didn't know existed. He's so complex in one way and so simple in another, and he's stolen a piece of my heart after a very short amount of time. But best of all, he doesn't offer any suggestions on how I'd be the perfect girl if only I altered myself to fit in, to conform.

Right now, my wayward curls refuse to be tamed – a bit like me, I suppose – so I leave them wild. I finish my make-up with a dab of glittery eyeshadow and a swipe of thick mascara. 'It's been two months, Liv. Do you think this last-minute drinks invitation means things are about to get serious with Luke?' I'm falling for the guy, truth be told, but does he feel the same way? Each and every failed relationship has made me that little bit warier about opening my heart. Every break-up, of which there have been many, has chipped away at my confidence. I'm always 'too much' for men.

She glances at me over the top of her book. 'Yeah, I'd say so. What did his text say exactly?'

'*Meet me at The Crooked Shingle for a drink. I need to see you.*'

Taking a moment to consider it, she says, 'It sounds to me like he's missing you. Aren't you supposed to be going out with him to that book launch tomorrow?'

‘Yes, tomorrow night. I had to beg Magda to let me switch with Jonah for the day shift.’ I love everything about my new job at Deck the Halls Christmas Emporium, except maybe the fact that my boss is a fire-breathing dragon and my co-worker Jonah manipulates any situation to suit himself. But hey, you can’t have everything and if I get paid to sing carols while I assist customers, it’s a win for me. My previous career history can be summed up in one word: *disastrous*. Usually because I speak before I think. My mouth has a tendency to get me into all sorts of bother, so I’m trying really hard lately to clamp down on any idle chitchat at work and do my job to the best of my ability. I feel like I’ve found my home, amid the nutcrackers at Deck the Halls, somewhere that resonates with my passion for all things festive.

‘So that means Luke can’t wait a mere twenty-four hours to see you – he’s had to demand your presence on this fine wintry eve, eh?’ Livvie shrugs. ‘The man is smitten and who could blame him?’

I smile. ‘I hope so. We’re moving in the right direction, I think. Men are just so very hard to pin down, especially men in London, but Luke doesn’t fit that mould.’

She dog-ears the page of the book and I swear I hear bookworms the world over screaming. ‘Do you think he’s going to make it official?’

‘I do. We’re moving from situationship to a proper committed relationship.’ I’ve been in countless situationships, which is really a kinder term for friends with benefits, or worse, as my American friends say – a booty call. I blame unrealistic Hollywood movies for this spate of non-committal men in big cities.

‘Well, you’re on the right track, Flora. He seems genuine, like he’s got a decent brain in his head.’

‘It’s his intensity that I like most. The way he knows what he wants and he goes for it. He doesn’t overthink.’

‘A little like you, then? Spontaneous *is* your middle name.’

‘Sort of?’ We laugh. Up until this point my love life could best be described as short, sharp and chaotic. For some reason I never seem to make it to the three-month mark with men. I don’t bat my lashes and pretend to be coy, or act haughty and unavailable. I’m just me, in all my technicolour glory – but that doesn’t get me anywhere. I quiz men on what they want out of life, early on, which tends to frighten them. But why can’t we say how we feel? And what we want? Why do we have to pretend?

I *love* love! I fall head over heels before it all fizzles out, time and time again. I’m always told I’m rushing things but is that true or just an excuse because the guys I date never want to settle down? Don’t want to be tied to one woman for the rest of forever?

As I near the big three-oh, I’m keen to find true love. Who hasn’t been planning their wedding since primary school? After kissing way too many frogs, I’ve made a checklist to save time and angst. It’s long, detailed and a little whimsical but it’s for the best in the long run . . .

That’s why Luke is special. He hasn’t blanched when I’ve subtly quizzed him while simultaneously ticking the boxes on that magical must-have perfect-man list.

‘He must be keen to take the relationship to the next level,’ Livvie says. ‘And that can only be a good thing.’

I spritz on perfume. ‘Yes, I suppose. That or he just wants sex.’

She laughs. ‘I’m sure it’s crossed his mind.’

‘Only one way to find out, I guess.’

‘I won’t wait up.’

‘I’m not sleeping at his place until it’s been at least three months! It’s all so juvenile with his flatmates hovering around, giving him the nudge and those sly winks. Not for me, that kind of thing.’ I shake my head at the thought.

‘Ignore them – they’re probably jealous! Just go for it.’

‘And I’m not adding casual sex into the mix until I know for sure he’s the real deal.’

She makes a show of being exasperated. ‘Fine, you be you, Flora, and I expect to hear all about it at breakfast tomorrow.’

‘At breakfast? Are you not listening, Liv? You know I’m not a prude but I’m also not an advocate of casual sex for the sake of it. Unless the guy is Jason Momoa’s single twin brother, then I’m not interested until I know for sure we’re solid! But if you’re asleep when I get home I’ll text you a full report, don’t you worry about that!’

Livvie gives me a hug and soon I’m heading out into the icy cold London night.