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It Started with a Kiss

Written by Miranda Dickinson

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MIRANDA DICKINSON

It Started with a Kiss

A V O N

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1

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This book is about following your heart. I hope it inspires you to follow yours. xx

*For the Peppermints:
Andi, Clarko, Dan, Ed, Phil and Susanna.
The best friends ever.*

‘I dwell in possibility.’

Emily Dickinson

CHAPTER ONE

The most wonderful time of the year

When it comes to telling your best friend that you love him, there are generally two schools of thought. One strongly advises against it, warning that you could lose a friend if they don't feel the same way. The other urges action because, unless you say something, you might miss out on the love of your life.

Unfortunately for me, I listened to the latter.

The look in Charlie's midnight blue eyes said it all: I had just made the biggest mistake of my life . . .

'Sorry?'

Perhaps he hadn't heard me the first time. Maybe I should say it again?

'I said I love you, Charlie.'

He blinked. 'You're not serious, are you?'

'Yes.' I could feel a deathly dragging sensation pulling my hope to oblivion.

Gone was the trademark Charlie grin that had been so firmly in place only moments before. In its place was a look I didn't recognise, but I knew it wasn't a good alternative.

'H-how long have you . . .?'

I dropped my gaze to the potted plant beside our table. ‘Um – a long time, actually.’ Maybe I should have worn something a bit more ‘potential girlfriend material’ today? But then this morning when I pulled on my trusty jeans and purple sweater dress I wasn’t expecting to have this conversation. And judging by the look of sheer horror on Charlie’s face, it wouldn’t have made a difference if I had been sitting opposite him in a designer gown and diamonds. This was *such* a mistake . . .

‘But . . . we’re *mates*, Rom.’

‘Yeah, of course we are. Look, forget I said anything, OK?’

He was staring at his latte like it had just insulted him. ‘I don’t know how you expect me to do that. You’ve *said it* now, haven’t you? I mean it’s – it’s *out there*.’

I looked around the busy coffee shop. It was overcrowded with disgruntled Christmas shoppers huddled ungratefully around too-small tables on chairs greedily snatched from unsuspecting single customers. ‘I think it’s safe to assume that none of that lot heard anything.’

As attempts at humour go, it wasn’t my finest. I took a large gulp of coffee and wished myself dead.

Charlie shook his head. ‘That doesn’t matter. *I* heard it. Oh, Rom – why did you say that? Why couldn’t you just have . . .?’

I stared at him. ‘Just have what?’

‘Just *not said anything*? I mean, why me? Why put this on me now?’

I hated the look of sheer panic in his eyes. He’d never looked at me that way before . . . In my perennial daydream about this moment it had been so very different:

Oh Romily – I’ve loved you forever, too. If you hadn’t told me we could have missed each other completely . . .

‘We’re fine as we are, aren’t we? I mean, if it’s good then why change it? I can’t believe you actually thought this would be a good idea.’

Well, *excuse me*, but I did. Somewhere between my ridiculous, obviously deluded heart and my big stupid mouth, my brain got pushed out of the picture and I – crazy, deranged *loon* that I am – found myself persuaded that I might be the answer to his dreams. That maybe the reason for the many hours we’d spent together – cheeky laughter-filled days and late night heart-to-hearts – was that we were destined to be more than friends. Everyone else noticed it: it had been a running joke among our friends that Charlie and I were like an old married couple. The ‘Old Folks’ – that’s what they called us. We’d lost count of the number of times complete strangers mistook us for partners. So if it was this blindingly obvious to the world, how come Charlie couldn’t see it?

Of course, I couldn’t say any of this to him. Sheer embarrassment stole the clever arguments from my mind so that then and there, in the crowded café packed with people who couldn’t care less about what I was saying, I found that all I could say was:

‘I’m sorry.’

Charlie shook his head. ‘I did *not* see this coming. I thought we were friends, that’s all. But this – this is just *weird* . . .’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence, Charlie.’

He stared at me, confusion claiming his eyes. ‘I-I didn’t mean . . . Heck, Rom, I’m sorry – you’ve just got to give me a moment to get my head round this.’

I looked away and focused on a particularly harassed-looking couple talking heatedly at the next table over enormous mugs of cream-topped festive coffees. ‘You don’t

appreciate me,' the woman was saying. Right now, I knew exactly how she felt.

'The thing is,' Charlie said, 'you've always been just *Rom* – one of the guys, you know? You're a laugh, someone I can hang out with. But now . . .' He was digging an impossible hole for himself and he knew it. He gave a massive sigh. 'I'm sorry. I'm really not sure how to deal with this.'

This was awful – I'd heard enough. I rose to my feet, intense pain and crushing embarrassment pushing my body up off the chair. I opened my mouth to deal a devastating parting shot, but nothing appeared. Instead, I turned and fled, stubbing my toe on a neighbouring customer's chair and tripping over various overstuffed shopping bags, almost taking a packed pushchair with me as I beat an ungraceful retreat from the coffee shop and out into the bustling street beyond.

Outside, Birmingham's famous Christmas Market was in full flow, packed with shoppers grabbing last-minute Christmas shopping and crowding around the wooden beer stalls. The coloured lights strung overhead glowed brightly against the greyness of the December afternoon sky and Christmas music blared relentlessly from speakers along the length of New Street.

'Rom! Where are you going? I'm sorry – please come back! *Rom!*' Behind me, Charlie's shouts blended into the blur of crowd noise and Christmas hits of yesteryear. I picked up my pace, making my way blindly against the tidal flow of bodies, their countless faces looming up before me, unsmiling and uncaring. I had humiliated myself enough already: the last thing I needed was for Charlie to come back for Round Two . . .

As I passed each shop front the sale signs began morphing

into condemnatory judgements of my actions, screaming at me from every lit window:

Insane!
Stupid idiot!
What were you thinking?

As the jostling crowd propelled me involuntarily towards the marble pillars of the Town Hall, Paul McCartney was singing ‘Wonderful Christmastime’ like it should have an ironic question mark at the end. Unable to wriggle free, I found myself moving along with the throng. But I felt nothing; my senses were numbed by the faceless bodies hemming me in, and my heart too beset by ceaseless echoes of Charlie’s words to care any more. At a loss to make sense of the total catastrophe I’d just caused, I surrendered to the irresistible force of the crowd and, quite literally, went with the flow.

What was I *thinking* telling my best friend in the whole world that I loved him? I hadn’t even planned to say it at all – and now I couldn’t quite believe I had blurted out my biggest secret seemingly on a whim. One minute we were laughing about last week’s gig, his smile so warm and his eyes lit up in the way they always do when he’s talking about music; the next I was confessing the feelings for him I’ve been carrying for three years. What on earth made me think that was a good idea?

Maybe it was the impending arrival of the ‘Most Wonderful Time of the Year’ (thanks for nothing, Andy Williams) or the deliciously festive atmosphere filling the city today that had caused me to reveal my feelings to Charlie like that. Perhaps it was the influence of watching too many chick-flick Christmas scenes that had tipped my

sanity over the edge and made the whole thing seem like such a great idea (Richard Curtis, Nora Ephron, guilty as charged).

Dumped unceremoniously by the crowd at the base of the grand stone staircase in Victoria Square, I managed to squeeze through a gap in the tightly-packed, slow-moving shoppers and emerged breathless into a small pocket of pine-scented air by the barriers around the base of the huge Swedish Christmas tree. Tears stung my eyes and I swallowed angrily in a vain attempt to keep them at bay. *What was the matter with me? How did I get it so devastatingly wrong?*

All the signs had been there, or so I had thought: hugs that lingered a moment too long; snatched glances and shy smiles during nights out with our friends; moments of unspoken understanding during conversations begun in the early evening and ending as birdsong heralded a new day. Then there were his unexplained silences – times when I felt he had something more to say, when unresolved question marks sparkled magnificently in the air between us and the room held its breath – ultimately in vain. There had been more of these lately, peppering almost every occasion we spent together with an irresistible spice of intrigue. If they didn't mean what I thought they meant, then what on earth were they all about?

My mobile phone rang in my bag, but I couldn't face answering the call, so Stevie Wonder continued his tinny rendition of 'Sir Duke' unhindered by my usual intervention. Reaching into the crummy depths of my coat pocket, I retrieved a crumpled shopping list and read down the list of scribbled names: my 'To-Do' list for the afternoon. It was the last Saturday before Christmas and my final chance to buy everyone's presents. Christmas shopping waited for

no one, it seemed – not even thoroughly embarrassed owners of newly-shattered hearts.

*Mum & Dad
Wren
Jack & Soph
Uncle Dudley and Auntie Mags
Tom & Anya
Charlie*

Charlie. My breath caught in the back of my throat as my eye fell on the last name. *No need for that one to be there now*, I hissed under my breath. *I think he's had quite enough surprise gifts from me this year.* I stuffed the list back into my pocket and prepared to dive back into the undulating ocean of people.

'Rom!'

My head snapped upright in horror to see Charlie pushing his way through the crowd, further back down the street. *No*, this was *absolutely not* going to happen now. I couldn't face it – the lead-heavy mortification gripping my insides was already too much to bear. Turning on my heels, I pushed back into the crowd and ran on again.

'Oh come on, Rom! Just stop!' Charlie called behind me, closer this time.

Looking over my shoulder, I shouted back. 'Go home, Charlie!'

I saw him stop, throw his hands up in the air and turn back into the horde of shoppers behind him. Furious with myself for creating this awful situation, I wanted to put as much distance between me and the scene of my worst ever decision. Tears filled my eyes as I put on another sprint, rushing through the swarming mass of bodies. Part of me

wanted Charlie to be following me, to catch me and say that he'd overreacted, that I hadn't been mistaken, but I knew that wasn't going to happen and I hated myself for wanting the impossible. Angrily, I wiped the tears from my eyes – just in time to see the gaudy wooden stall laden with soft toys appear directly in front of me a split second before my body slammed headlong into it.

A collective gasp rose from the crowd of shoppers as I tumbled, helpless limbs flailing, in an ungracious slow-motion sprawl. Bears, rabbits and reindeer spun in the air around me like a shower of oversized plush snowflakes and, for a moment, it was as if all noise ceased as I descended. The clamour of the crowd and the Christmas music receded and my senses were now aware only of the sensation of moving through the air. This feeling was short-lived, however, followed as it was by the inevitable gut-wrenching crack as my body hit the unforgiving block-paved ground and I skidded to a halt amid a sea of stuffed animals on the frosted pavement.

It took a moment for me to catch my breath, my ears buzzing from my head's heavy meeting with the floor, but then it was as if someone flicked a switch and all the light, noise and music of the Christmas Market roared back into life – along with the shock of an intense flood of pain along my back and the appearance of one very angry stallholder.

His beetroot-red round face appeared directly over me as I lay there, but instead of helping me up he launched into a tirade of thick German-accented abuse.

'Crazy woman! Look at this mess! It is ruined, ruined!'

Thoroughly embarrassed, I scrambled to my feet, wincing as my bruised limbs creaked and groaned back into an upright position.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' I mumbled, grabbing armfuls of toys and wishing I could disappear.

In true British fashion, the crowd around me didn't offer to help – the spectacle of the woman who trashed the toy stall frantically trying to reconstruct it far too much fun for them to intervene. The disgruntled stallholder didn't help either, standing by the remains of his stall with pudgy arms folded tight across his squat body as he watched me. As if I wasn't morbidly mortified enough already, I was vaguely aware that some of the onlookers had produced mobile phones and were now happily filming the scene. *Great.* All I needed after the events of today was to become the unwitting star of the latest YouTube viral sensation. I was cold, aching, unspeakably embarrassed and all I wanted was to get home as quickly as possible. Christmas was ruined now anyway: Charlie wouldn't want to see me and when the rest of the band found out what had happened, everything would be awkward there, too. Only Wren would understand – and no doubt even she would have a strong opinion on it.

I bit back tears as I reached out to scoop more of the fallen bears from the pavement . . .

. . . and that's when I saw him.

As my fingers closed around a toy penguin, I was suddenly aware of a gloved hand reaching out for a polar bear hand puppet next to it. Lifting my eyes I came face to face with quite the most gorgeous man I had ever seen. His hazel eyes caught the light from coloured Christmas lights above, while wavy strands of his russet-brown hair picked up the twinkling blue light from the fairy lights that framed the toy stall roof. A slight shadow of stubble edged his jawline and I noticed that his cheekbones were quite defined.

'Hi,' he said, his warm smile and kind eyes momentarily numbing the sting of my bruises. 'Need some help?'

I smiled back. 'Please.'

We slowly moved around each other, gathering up the

scattered stock. As we did so I was aware that he was watching me, his shy smile appearing whenever our eyes met. And I can't explain why, but the sudden arrival of this kind stranger after the utter awfulness of the afternoon felt like a blissful reprieve – as if everything I had experienced was merely instrumental in bringing me to this moment, this meeting.

Once we had retrieved all of the toys from the wide circle they had been flung to, I turned to the stallholder and apologised again.

'Whatever,' he shrugged, disappearing inside his wooden stall and slamming the door.

Spectacle over, the onlookers dispersed back into the crowd and the stranger and I were left alone by the stall.

'Thank you,' I said.

'You're welcome,' he replied, pushing his hands into his coat pockets. I noticed tiny crinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes when he smiled.

For a moment, we stood in silence, our breath rising in puffs of Christmas-light-washed steam. It was clear that neither of us knew what to say and the awkwardness of the silence brought my earlier humiliation flooding back.

He's obviously just being polite, I reasoned, my heart sinking, and now he's looking for an excuse to leave.

'Well, I'd better . . .' I nodded in the direction of the Town Hall behind us, as though this would be some universal indicator of the Christmas shopping I still had to do before I could go home. Thankfully, he seemed to understand, nodding and looking down at his feet.

'Of course.'

'Thanks again.'

He raised his lovely eyes once again to mine. 'No problem. Merry Christmas.'

As I hurried away, I felt like screaming. Not content with

merely ruining my friendship with Charlie and making a complete idiot of myself in full view of a large section of city shoppers, I had now embarrassed myself in front of a really good-looking bloke. Nice work, Romily.

My shoulder was complaining vociferously as I reached into my coat pocket again for the list. At times like this, practicality was the only way forward. I headed towards the white lights of the craft market section. My aunt loves hand-painted glass and I vaguely remembered seeing a glass ornament stall earlier that day. Forcing my conflicting thoughts to the back of my mind, I wove my way through the dawdling shoppers until I found it.

Two middle-aged ladies wrapped up against the bitter December air were chatting animatedly behind the stall, oblivious to everything else. The voice of Nat King Cole was crooning from the speakers of a small CD player on the counter.

‘Gotta love a bit of old Nat, eh?’ the taller of the two was saying.

‘Tell me about it. Our Eth won’t listen to anything else at Christmas.’

‘Not even Bing or Frank?’

‘Nope. It’s Nat or nothing. Him and his chestnuts roasting on an open fire.’

‘Always thought that sounded a bit painful myself,’ the taller lady sniggered as the shorter one giggled.

I relaxed a little as their jovial banter continued, casting my gaze across the glass baubles of all shapes and sizes, suspended on delicate silver thread from white-painted twigs set in plant pots. A gentle breeze had sprung up, making the hanging glass shapes shiver and spin slowly, so that they caught the light from the white fairy lights woven around the stall edge and the coloured strings of Christmas

lights swinging high over the market. One particular bauble near the front of the display immediately caught my eye: a large, teardrop-shaped ornament adorned with tiny painted silver stars – delicate brushstrokes that sparkled from the glass surface. It was beautiful, a real work of craftsmanship, and I knew my aunt would adore it. I reached out and felt the icy coolness of the glass against my fingers.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ a deep voice said behind my right ear, making me jump and only just manage to save the bauble from falling from its twig. Leaving it safely spinning, I turned, my eyes first meeting a green, brown and cream striped scarf and then heading north to reach the shy smile of the stranger who had helped me. My breath caught in the back of my throat and I nodded dumbly at him.

‘I’m sorry to . . . er . . . I just wanted to check you were OK?’

‘I’m fine. Thanks again for helping me.’

‘You’re welcome. I couldn’t believe all those people were just watching.’

I smiled, despite the blush I knew was glowing from my cheeks. ‘I think they thought I was part of the entertainment.’

‘Some entertainment,’ he laughed, almost immediately hiding his amusement when he saw my expression. ‘So – you’re OK? I mean, you aren’t hurt or anything?’

His concern was touching but bearing in mind the afternoon I’d had, the last thing I needed was the pity of a gorgeous man. ‘All good. Nothing broken.’

‘Good.’ He stared at me and this time there was something more in his eyes than concern. ‘Look, this is going to sound mental, so I’m just going to say it. I couldn’t let you go without telling you that you’re beautiful. That’s why I followed you here. Please don’t think I’m a psycho or that

I do this a lot: I don't. But you're beautiful and I think you should know that.'

Stunned, I opened my mouth to reply, but just then a shout from behind us caused him to turn.

'Mate, we've got to go . . . *Now!*'

What happened next was so fast that even now the details remain frustratingly sparse in my mind. But here's what I know.

When he turned back to face me, the way he looked at me took my breath away. It was the kind of look you see in movies when a bridegroom turns to see his bride walking towards him for the first time: a heady, overpowering mix of shock, surprise and all-encompassing, heart-stopping love. It was the look that Charlie *should have* given me when I told him I loved him. But this wasn't Charlie; and that, in itself, was part of the problem. Because – apart from *not* being the man to whom I had publicly expressed my undying love not half an hour beforehand – *this* person was almost perfect: from his wide, honest eyes and shy smile, to the woody scent of his cologne now surrounding me.

But most of all because of what happened next . . .

He took a step back and I could see a battle raging in his eyes as the voice behind him called again, more insistent this time.

'We have to go – come on!'

'One minute,' he called back, just as a hurrying shopper crashed into his shoulder, momentarily throwing him off balance – and straight into my arms.

In utter surprise, I held on to him and his strong arms reached round to cradle my back. The shock of it blew all thoughts of Charlie instantly from my mind. Heart racing, I gazed up into his eyes.

'I'm so sorry, I have to go,' he whispered, his lips inches from mine. 'But you're beautiful.'

And then, he kissed me.

Although our lips touched for the smallest of moments, it was unlike anything else I've experienced. It was the type of kiss you only expect to see in Hollywood films, finally uniting the two leads as the credits start to roll over the delicious tones of Nat King Cole. In fact, even the soundtrack was perfect because at that very moment Mr Cole himself began crooning 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' via the muffled speakers of the bauble stall's CD player. All thoughts of Christmas shopping dissolved from my mind as I closed my eyes and gave in to the unexpected gift of the stranger's lips on mine.

It was almost perfect. *Almost*. But not quite. Because, as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone: swallowed up by the heaving, unyielding mass of shoppers. I remained frozen to the spot for what felt like an age, dazed yet elated, my heart beating wildly.

And then, from somewhere deep in the recesses of my consciousness, a thought began to push urgently through the swirling mass of emotions.

Go after him!

'Wait! Come back!'

I looked in the direction I thought he had gone, but there was no sign of him. Nevertheless, I began to shove my way through the crowds, rising on tiptoes to scan across the sea of bobbing bodies for a glimpse of his hair or his scarf as I ran. Shoppers tutted as I pushed past, but I was a woman on a mission and oblivious to their disapproving glances.

As I neared the end of the line of wooden stalls, I suddenly caught a glimpse of russet-brown hair, hurrying ahead of me. Heart thumping hard against my chest, I pressed on, gaining on him. Soon, I was within touching distance, so I reached out my hand and tapped his shoulder.

‘Hey, you can’t just kiss me and then leave without giving me your name,’ I said. He turned to face me . . . and my heart plummeted.

‘That’s one hell of a chat-up line, love,’ the older man grinned. His yellowing teeth and pockmarked skin were anything but kissable. ‘Now I don’t know about any kiss but I’m happy to oblige if you want.’

I recoiled, dropping my gaze as I backed away. ‘I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else.’

‘Story of my life, chick,’ he laughed as I hurried back towards the safety of the Christmas Market stalls. Utterly deflated, I stopped and looked up at the darkening sky, heavy with snow-laden clouds. I had lost him.

How was it possible for something so amazing to happen and then disappear as quickly as it had arrived? And how *stupid* was I for not asking his name? At least then I would know something tangible about him. My scarf still retained traces of his cologne and my lips were tingling from our brief kiss, but that was all I had to show for an event so significant it might just have changed everything.

All I knew about him was what I could remember. To all intents and purposes, he was just another stranger existing in a sprawling metropolis – another life lived in parallel to mine, with little chance of meeting again. But when he looked into my eyes and kissed me, I felt like I had known him all my life. More than an attraction, there was a connection that resonated deeper within me than any other. That one single meeting in a lifetime of acquaintance was enough to alter my life irrevocably.

And that’s why I had to find him.