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Cinnamon Girl 

Looking For A Hero

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Chapter 1

Love Is in the Air



‘How do you know when you’re in love?’ asked Leela as she kicked her feet through the carpet of autumn leaves on the way to Starbucks for an after-school hot chocolate.

‘You have butterflies in your tummy. You feel light-headed and your legs go to jelly when you see him,’ said Brook, offering round a packet of Liquorice Allsorts, then taking one herself.

Zahrah pulled her collar up against the chill wind. ‘Sounds like some kind of disease,’ she said. ‘One that you should avoid at all costs or at least take some supplements to stop you catching.’

‘*Lo-ove is the bug that I’m dreaming of,*’ sang Brook and she popped a pink Allsort into her mouth then linked her arm through mine. I linked my other arm with Zahrah and she linked with Leela. I glanced along the line at my new friends. I

still couldn't believe my luck – I'd only started at our school in September and had spent the first few weeks feeling like a Molly-no-Mates, but then, over the half-term, I'd got in with this great bunch of girls who were a real laugh. It was now nearly the end of October and I felt like I'd known them all my life.

As we walked along, I could see a few boys from the Sixth Form checking us out – my new friends are an attractive bunch, all brunettes apart from me. My hair is more red chestnut than dark.

'We're an exotic lot,' Brook had said one evening when we were talking about our families and the various places we'd lived before ending up in Notting Hill in London. I won the 'most travelled prize' hands down – my family has lived in five different countries since I was born (India, the Caribbean, Morocco, Italy and Ireland). Brook came second. Both her parents are American and she lived in New York until she moved to London with her mum when she was eleven. She's still got a slight American accent. She recently chopped her hair to a jaw length bob and it really shows off her beautiful heart-shaped face and her grey-green eyes that always seem so thoughtful. Leela is from an Indian background but was born here in the UK in Leicester. Her family moved to London when she was six. She's the smallest of the four of us with delicate features and long hair that shines like silk when she wears it loose but most of the time she wears it back in a clip. Zahrah is from a mixed background – Ethiopian on her

mum's side and English on her dad's. She grew up in the East End of London before moving to Queen's Park where her family live now. She's the same height as I am (five foot nine), and has high cheek bones and huge dark brown eyes with eyelashes that are so long and curly they almost look false. Her aunt does her hair for her, in plaited cornrows close to her head. One day, when I know Zahrah better, I'm going to ask her if her aunt will do mine in little plaits. At the moment, my hair's shoulder-length in layers and I think it's boring. I'd like to do something mad with it, like dye it white-blonde for a change. I was going to do it one weekend but Mum talked me out of it saying that the red tones in my hair suit my eyes which are amber. I'd love to be a blonde with blue eyes, at least for a couple of weeks.

'What do you think, India Jane?' asked Leela as we reached Starbucks and she pushed open the door. A blast of warm air that smelled of roasted coffee hit us as we trooped in after her. We quickly bagged the two leather sofas by the window where you get the best view of the boys coming out of the private school down the road. I immediately thought about Joe Donahue. I'd first seen him sitting here when I'd arrived in London back in the summer and thought that if he was a typical example of the local boys then I'd landed in heaven. A lot had happened since then and Joe and I had been on our first date last weekend. Well, sort of date. Actually it was a trip to an art gallery to see an exhibition by a local artist who my Aunt Sarah rates and, OK, so Aunt Sarah and Joe's mum were there too

(they work together), but he took my hand and stroked my fingers when they went off to buy something from the gallery shop and we were alone for a few minutes. It sent shivers up and down my spine and I thought that, in a funny way, you can kiss with your hands. I felt all the butterflies and jelly-leg symptoms that Brook had just mentioned. So, oh yes, it was definitely love as far as I was concerned when it came to Joe.

‘You feel on a high,’ I said as I put my rucksack in the corner of the sofa. ‘You want to be your best self and you can’t stop thinking about him and even the slightest touch, like brushing hands or arms, can make you feel all warm and fluttery inside.’

‘Joe?’ asked Zahrah.

I nodded.

She took a sharp breath in.

‘Oh I know all about his bad-boy reputation,’ I said. ‘Don’t worry. And I really think he’s over that.’

Zahrah sucked in the air through her teeth making a hissing sound and pinched her mouth tight with disapproval. I laughed. Although I’d only been hanging around with Zahrah, Brook and Leela for the couple of weeks since half-term, I had quickly learned that sometimes Zahrah didn’t speak, rather she let her face say what she was thinking. She even used her breath to communicate: she let out long sighs if she was unhappy, short sighs if bored and irritated and the sharp intake of breath meant watch out, beware or that she really *really* didn’t approve.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know,’ I said, smiling at her, ‘but I really do think it’s different with us. I can feel it. Now who wants what?’

‘Hot chocolate,’ said Leela.

‘Herbal for me,’ said Brook. ‘Peppermint.’

‘Cappuccino for me,’ said Zahrah. ‘I’ll come with you.’

We made our way to the counter and joined a queue made up of other pupils from our school in the same black and white uniform. Choosing to speak in Zahrah’s language, I let out a sigh of happiness.

‘Someone’s in a good mood,’ she commented.

I was. Life was good. I had three fab new girl friends. Joe Donahue was maybe my boyfriend and love was in the air.

‘I know,’ I said and I gave her arm a squeeze. ‘I love the autumn, don’t you? The crisp chill air and the smell of bonfires and damp leaves when the light fades. Wrapping up in scarves and gloves. Going home and getting cosy by the fire.’

Zahrah shrugged and gave me an ‘Are you bonkers?’ look. ‘I need the sun,’ she said. ‘I’m sure I get that SAD condition in the winter.’ She slumped her shoulders and made her face look so miserable that I almost laughed. I didn’t because I was still getting to know her and didn’t want to offend her in case she was being serious. ‘Seasonal Affective Disorder. It’s because my family are from the sunshine land.’

‘Oh yeah. Africa. Have you ever been there?’

‘No. Not yet. I’d like to. Mum goes back when she can but it would be too expensive for us all to go. Like six air fares if Dad came too. Can you imagine? But I can feel Africa is in my blood – that’s probably why I don’t like the cold weather.’

I had an urge to say something silly about it being painful

having a whole continent in one's blood but I bit it back. I felt slightly in awe of Zahrah. She came across as very cool and sure of herself and what she thought of the world, and I needed to get to know her better before I showed my daft side. We reached the part of the counter that displayed the cakes and pastries and got distracted for a moment by the fudge pecan cookies. On top of the glass counter, I noticed a chocolate bar with a red wrapper. It said it was cinnamon chocolate. *I'll get that for Joe*, I thought as I reached out for it. Zahrah raised an eyebrow as if questioning my purchase.

'Not for me,' I said. 'For Joe.'

She raised her other eyebrow but I wasn't sure exactly what that meant. *I must ask my cousin Kate for tips so that I can communicate more fluently Zahrah-style – she also does the eyebrow speak*, I thought as the queue moved along.

'It will remind him of me because it's cinnamon flavoured. My mate Erin always said that it's good to give boys things that remind them of you.'

Zahrah gave me a quizzical look.

'Dad calls me Cinnamon Girl —'

Zahrah nodded and pulled gently on my hair with her right hand and looked into my eyes. 'Hmm. Spice colours,' she said. 'Fits.'

I nodded back. 'And my mum makes me a perfume for my birthday which has cinnamon in it and I had it on once when I was sitting next to Joe and he said he liked it.'

'Hmm. That's good.'

‘Yeah. Mum says that smell is a very potent sense and that it is important to find your signature scent and stick to it so that every time anyone smells it, they’re reminded of you. My mum’s worn the same perfume all her life, since she was a teenager and, whenever I smell it, it makes me think of her.’

I could just imagine the scene. It would be so romantic. I’d give Joe the chocolate. He would smile, smell the aroma of cinnamon and cocoa, nuzzle into my neck and then promise to keep the chocolate bar for ever. It would be the first of many special mementos I’d give him in the course of our relationship.

‘So why not give him some of the perfume?’

‘Too girlie – although maybe I could send him a card that is scented with it for his birthday, but that’s not until February. He’s an Aquarian.’ I looked down at the chocolate bar. ‘But I can’t go wrong with this, can I? The cinnamon will remind him of me plus it tastes good.’

‘Wow. You’ve really got it bad, haven’t you?’

I raised an eyebrow and smiled. That was my silent way of saying, *Oh yeah*. She got it.

‘Good luck,’ she said as the person behind the counter looked our way, ready to take our order.

As soon as I got home later, I went up to my room to start work on the scenery designs – I had an hour spare before I’d arranged to talk to Erin on MSN. She’s my mate from my old school in Ireland and is my best friend in the world. I missed her like mad when I first moved to London and it was actually

thanks to her that I got in with Leela, Brook and Zahrah. Erin visited at half-term and soon made friends with them and got an invite for us to a Bollywood party at Leela's house. In fact, her whole visit was good because I'd been put in charge of scenery for *The Boy Friend*, the school end-of-term show and I had been agonising over what theme we should take. At first, I'd come up with ideas that had already been used for previous school shows and I could see that the scenery team were having serious doubts about me being in charge. And then, at Leela's party, I suddenly realised that Bollywood should be the theme and everyone loved the idea. All in all, I had a lot to be thankful to Erin for; she was a true friend.

I settled down at my desk and started work on preliminary designs for the scenery. Aunt Sarah had found me a fab book full of examples of the colours and designs used in Indian films and I spent an hour copying and drawing up some basic designs to take to the next scenery meeting. Bright pink, lime green and orange seemed to be the main colours needed for a Bollywood look, with a healthy addition of silver and gold glitter thrown in.

When I'd finished, I saw that it was the prearranged time to talk to Erin on MSN so I moved on to my computer. She was already there and waiting for me.

Irishbrat4eva: So my deario. How goes it in the land of red, white and blue?

Cinnamongirl: Most excellent. How goes it with you?

Irishbrat4eva: Not sure. Saw my liege, yon Scott the brave on the way back from school and methinks he is acting somewhat poxy.

(Erin and I speak our own Shakespearian made-up language.)

Cinnamongirl: Poxly how?

Irishbrat4eva: He hath been acting a bit weirdiedoodie of late methinks. Maybe he ist worried about something but I suspect he may be making merry too much with his fellow lords who like yon ale and acting like yon pissheds.

Cinnamongirl: Those who suppeth too much can be loud and boring.

Irishbrat4eva: Thou speakest the truth indeedie doo. How is Lord Joe of the house of Donahue?

Cinnamongirl: Methinks he will be my liege before the week is over. Tis true love that beats upon mine breast oh yay yay and thrice times yahey and a wahey too. Hey, how do you think you know when it's the real thing, Erin?

Irishbrat4eva: You just know. It's a feeling that it's right and a little cherub appears over your head and fires an arrow at you capow and your heart doth go, lalalalala. Cabung, cabung.

Cinnamongirl: Yon Cupid hast most deffo fired yon arrows into minest heart all right. Do you love Scott?

Irishbrat4eva: Fie that thou could thinkst so. I fanciest Scott but he is not boyfriend material, hey nonny no. He ist headmessing material, like if a wench would get serious over him, he would do her head in so I must stayeth cool. How are your new pals?

Cinnamongirl: Great. I totally love them. Love hanging out with them.

Irishbrat4eva: Fie on them, thou art my friend though I knowest that they are cool, but I miss you. Boo hooest.

Cinnamongirl: A moment fair lady, lend me your ear for methinks me hears the door bell. Forsooth, indeed, it is. There art someone at the door.

Irishbrat4eva: Go forth and see who stands there and anyway, my supper calleth and my stomach doth rumbleth. Later.

Cinnamongirl: Later.

I logged off and flew down the stairs as no one else was home. Mum, Dad and Dylan had gone to an early movie, my cousin Kate never answers the door even when she is in and Aunt Sarah was out working. I opened the door and my stomach did a double flip.

Standing at the door was a vision of boy handsomeness. Tall, broad-shouldered, wide-mouthed, smiley-eyed. Joe.

‘Ah . . . oh . . . hi . . .’ I panted and tried to regain my breath, smooth my hair and look cool all at the same time.

It clearly didn’t work. ‘Been running?’ he asked.

‘Was u . . . uh upstairs?’

‘Can I come in?’

‘Sure,’ I said and stood aside for him. I was so chuffed that he’d come over to see me. I showed him into the living room at the front of the house. He followed me in and hovered by the fireplace. The atmosphere felt awkward then I remembered the chocolate bar I’d bought for him.

‘Oh, I have something for you,’ I said.

‘Me? Thanks and —’

‘Back in a sec,’ I said and raced upstairs. *He was about to say something*, I thought as I grabbed the bar from my rucksack, then charged back down the stairs, into the living room and thrust it in his hand.

‘For you,’ I said. ‘You were about to say something, sorry. Go ahead.’

Joe looked at the chocolate bar. ‘Oh. Cinnamon chocolate. That’s different. Thanks. Um. Yes.’

‘What were you about to say?’

‘Is it to eat or look at?’

‘Eat. I, er . . . cinnamon . . .’ Suddenly my speech about wanting to give him something to remind him of me sounded presumptuous.

Joe thumped his forehead with the palm of his hand. ‘Oh right. Cinnamon. You’re Cinnamon Girl, right? Yeah. That’s sweet.’

‘Yeah. Sweet. Chocolate usually is.’

Suddenly I wanted to die. I wanted the ground to open up

and swallow me. I shouldn't have bought him the chocolate. It was too much, too soon to buy him a gift. We weren't even dating properly. I needed to make light of it.

I took the chocolate back from him and ripped open the paper. 'Want a bit?'

Joe gave me a strange look. 'Isn't that like taking grapes to someone in hospital then sitting and eating them all?'

'No. How? You're not in hospital.'

'I know. Just . . .' Joe sighed.

'It's not a gift or anything. I just bought it on the way home and wanted to try it and I was about to and then you arrived and . . .' I knew I was rambling.

'Go on then, give us a bit.'

I snapped off two sections, handed one to him and put the other piece in my mouth. We stood there chewing, but it felt like I was eating glue. I wanted Joe to go. *Why is it so uncomfortable?* I asked myself. We'd been getting on so well lately.

'I . . .' I began.

Joe burst out laughing.

'What?' I asked.

He pointed at my mouth. *Oh God, I've smeared chocolate like a five-year-old*, I thought as I walked over to the mirror above the fireplace to see the damage.

'Tooth,' said Joe.

I hadn't smeared it. A blob of it had stuck over one of my teeth on the top row, giving me the appearance of missing a tooth. Toothless. Like an old witch.

Joe came and stood behind me. 'Hmm, that's an interesting look.' For a second, our eyes met in the mirror and I thought he was going to pull me back to lean against him and even nuzzle into my neck and I felt my insides melt, but then we heard someone at the front door, footsteps in the hall, and Aunt Sarah came in.

'Hello you two,' she said.

Joe stepped back, reached into his pocket, pulled out an envelope and handed it to her. 'Mum asked me to drop this into you,' he said.

'Thanks, Joe,' said Aunt Sarah.

Oh God. He hadn't even come to see me. My humiliation is now complete, I thought as I licked over my teeth with my tongue then stood there like an idiot.