

Chapter One

Traffic. Meetings. Traffic. Rinse. Repeat. Luke Stevens repeated to himself as he sat in his silver Mazda MX-5 backed up on route 95 east of Baltimore in the August heat.

Washed out. Sitting at his desk at home later that evening, Luke tried to work online but threw in the towel at nine p.m. Retreating to the kitchen, he put the dishes now dry on the rack away in the cupboard, warmed up a can of split pea soup in the microwave, and returned to his desk with a steaming bowl in hand. Between soothing spoonfuls of soup, he pulled up an online dating app.

Scrolling through potential candidates in the Baltimore metro area, he read: Abigail Ling – Chinese medical student, former Olympic gymnast, long shiny black hair, eyes the size of a harvest moon only darker, 25. *Why does a fashionable gymnast take a name like Abigail and need to look online for a date?* Then, Luke noticed that she was online and connected with her in the chat.

“Hi, I’m Luke. I love your online profile. What’s special about studying in Baltimore?”

“Hey, Luke, call me Abi. Good question—the harbor reminds me of summers along Bohai Bay with my family. What about you—Why Baltimore? Why economics?”

Wow. That was quick. It’s like she read my profile and waited for me to connect.

“Baltimore? Like you, I love the harbor and the ships. They remind me of my time at the Naval Academy and later service at sea. Unfortunately for the Navy, I discovered a passion for economics at the academy and finished a graduate degree in economics during my spare time in the service. When my time was up, I began working as an analyst and developed a fascination for building financial models. So why did you take up studying medicine?”

“After my grandmother died from breast cancer three years ago, I devoted my life to helping people. One thing led to another and here I am.”

Luke fidgeted with his spoon, stirring his soup and thinking about his own grandfather. He responded: “That’s tough. It sounds like you were close to your grandmother. Was she a doctor?”

“Yes. We were very close. My grandmother was a pediatrician who loved working with kids.”

Luke paused to consider what to say next and finished up the last couple spoonfuls of

soup.

Abi jumped in: “I hate to break this up but I have an exam in the morning. Would you like to get together in person tomorrow evening? Tomorrow is Friday so I can take some time off and sleep in on Saturday.”

What? Most women chatted several times online before considering a date. Abi must be super self-confident.

“Sure. What kind of food do you like?” Luke responded.

“Let’s meet in front of the aquarium at eight p.m. and figure it out from there. My life is so programmed that I try to be more spontaneous when I am free to choose.”

“Great! See you then—I will be the guy with the Santa hat. You have my cell number if things get too spontaneous. ;=)”

“Okay Santa. Look for Sailor Moon, the Japanese cartoon heroine.”

Luke hung up intrigued that he had a date to look forward to. He washed his soup bowl and spoon, and placed them in the cupboard. Then, the phone rang.

“Hello, mom? How was your week?” Luke heard a Turkish game show theme song playing in the background.

“Fine dear, I just got off the phone with a colleague. We have been working through an audit together from an agency in the Department of Defense.” Sarah responded.

“I thought that you were taking some time off. It’s August. Why aren’t you taking a vacation?” Luke asked.

“You know that I love to be at home—why aren’t you taking one yourself?”

“Being single, I have been appointed the designated adult while everyone else takes their family to the beach. The good news is that I have a date tomorrow evening.”

“Is this someone that I should know?”

“Nope. First date. Wish me luck.”

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