

Love Me Do

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4 Weeks
Until Christmas

Chapter 1

Shay

Freedom. It was so close Shay Curtis could almost touch it. Only a few hours, and one boring ceremony, and high school would be done.

She'd been counting down to this day since her parents had forced her to move to Lighthouse Bay, Western Australia six months ago. It symbolised her escape.

The small side room in the town hall had wooden flooring, a window looking out over the main street, and a plastic Christmas tree set up in the corner. Shay's five classmates huddled together, chatting about Chad's party tonight.

The party she hadn't been invited to.

Not that she cared. She didn't need to make friends, and they hadn't made an effort when she'd arrived halfway through the year, not knowing anyone. They hadn't cared about her mother's illness. Their discomfort seemed to set her apart. And it didn't help she was studying completely different subjects. So Shay had thrown herself into her studies more than she had before.

With the time difference between WA and Tanzania,

she couldn't even speak to her friends during the week, and they were always busy on the weekends. Pulling out her phone she opened the last message her best friend, Nadiya had sent her. A photo of their class graduating. Shay should have been there, amongst her friends, not here in small town Australia with people she barely knew.

Shay shoved her phone back in her pocket and pulled on her graduation gown, taking the yellow satin sash her supervisor handed her.

"Are you excited?" Mrs Atkinson asked.

Shay shrugged. At least she didn't have to keep coming to school anymore. She could spend her summer holidays increasing her dive hours and get her Divemaster certificate so she was ready for any university excursion. Her parents couldn't force her to move after she turned eighteen in a couple of weeks.

"Is your mum gonna be here?" her teacher continued.

The stab of fear was sharp. Mum should be clear of bowel cancer by Christmas. She only had one treatment left, and then they'd go back to normal life. Shay refused to believe anything else.

She didn't know why her mum couldn't be treated in Tanzania instead of moving across the world and into Gram's place, but at least her grandmother was pretty chill about everything.

"She's going to try." Mum had promised that morning, but it was day two after chemotherapy, which was always her worst day, so Shay had her doubts. Plus, Dad was dead-set against Mum coming, and if she didn't, he wouldn't either. Not that it mattered. They were recording the whole thing, and Mum could watch later from the comfort of her bed.

The teacher clapped. "All right everyone. It's time." They fell into line as they'd been taught, in alphabetical

order by surname, with Shay behind Chad, a sun-bleached surfer guy who everyone loved. She clenched her hands and breathed deeply. No point being nervous about the ceremony. There wouldn't be many people there anyway. Just the family of each of the graduands and a few teachers.

Nothing like the big graduation ceremonies of the largest schools. Nothing like the graduation ceremony she would have been attending had her parents not moved her back to Australia. Nadiya had called her the night before to offer congratulations, but all Shay had heard were the wonderful plans her friends were making without her.

She straightened her sash as the principal, Mr Evans announced, "Please welcome our graduating class." She followed Mrs Atkinson into the half-empty town hall, her steps echoing on the wooden floor. A few teachers sat on the stage wearing black gowns, and there were six empty chairs for the graduands. A Christmas wreath was stuck to the front of the lectern and a generic *Congratulations* banner stretched across the back wall. They hadn't even bothered to take down the Christmas decorations to make this day all about the students.

Lame.

Family members sat in the few rows of chairs in front of the stage. On Shay's way to her seat, she spotted her family in the back row which was separated a little from the rest of the audience on account of her mother. Taj wore his primary school uniform, his black hair dishevelled. Next to him sat Gram, wearing an emerald green top, her short dark hair streaked with grey. Dad had his arm around Mum. Huh. It looked as if Mum had won the argument. A warmth filled Shay as they applauded along with the rest of the audience, Taj standing up with a big grin on his face, but Mum had a definite pallor to her skin, and a light sweat on her

brow. Worry replaced the warmth. Shay cursed. Mum shouldn't have come. She was too ill.

Taj waved frantically at her, beaming from ear to ear. He gave the secret 'all OK' signal their father had come up with when Shay was younger, pulling his left ear lobe and tapping his left elbow. She smiled and returned the 'all good' signal. She glanced at Dad to see if he would signal too, but he was talking to Mum. Of course he was. That's all he focused on these days. Shay climbed the steps of the stage and sat on the hard plastic seat. It was cool in here, despite the thirty-five-degree day outside, the high ceilings taking the heat away from the attendees. Gus, the owner of the dive boat she would soon work on, stood at the front next to the principal and looked as pale as her mother. It was quite a feat considering his suntan. What was wrong with him?

Mr Evans tapped the mike. "Thank you all for coming to help us celebrate this wonderful achievement." He spoke about how smart they all were and Shay tuned him out. He didn't care. He didn't know any of them, hadn't spent time in the tiny classroom demountable they'd allocated to the half-dozen students who wanted to complete secondary education, but couldn't afford to go to boarding school in the city.

They had one supervisor who was supposed to help them with a dozen different subjects and only knew the basics. Not that it affected her. Shay had had access to teachers online and been determined to get the score she needed to go to university and get her degree in maritime archaeology. Disinterested teachers weren't going to stop her.

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce you to our keynote speaker," Mr Evans said. "He's no stranger to you, but as a successful businessman, and a local, I'm sure he has many words of wisdom to impart to our

graduating class.”

Gus shuffled his papers as he approached the lectern. His light brown hair stuck up at the back as if he'd forgotten to comb it. He cleared his throat, and the microphone picked up the sound, echoing it around the room. Shay winced. “Th... Thank you for having me.” His hands gripped the lectern and sweat beaded on his forehead. He was terrified.

Shay's mouth dropped open. The one time she'd been out with him he'd been calm speaking to customers on the dive boat. Why would this bother him? He glanced at the students, and she gave him a thumbs up. He nodded, smiling faintly, and began. “I won't take up much of your time. I remember sitting there as a graduand, wanting all the formalities to be over so I could get on with celebrating.” The crowd chuckled and next to her Chad murmured, “Yeah, hurry up.”

Gus continued, “I'm not sure I'm the right person to give advice. I've tried many things over the years, but with all those experiences I've learnt one thing.” He paused. “You need to find your passion. Find the thing that brings you joy, that makes you want to get up in the morning, and make it happen. Some of you already know what it is.” He smiled at Shay. “And others will take time to find it. But that's OK. You don't need to know everything today or tomorrow, so don't panic. Eventually you'll find your passion and your tribe, and life will be good.” He looked at the crowd and the graduands. “And while you're searching for your passion, don't forget to help others. You never know when a kind word or act can make a person's day.” He gathered his notes, still a slight shake in his hands. “That's it. I promised it would be short. Congratulations to you all. You deserve it.”

The crowd politely applauded, and the principal

shook Gus's hand. "Thanks for those words of advice."

Next to Shay, Chad turned and high-fived the guy sitting behind him, and on her other side, the three girls whispered to each other. No one said anything to Shay, but she leaned a little closer to the girls as if listening, hoping her parents didn't notice. She hunched her shoulders. Only a little longer, and she wouldn't have to deal with these girls again.

"And now to present the certificates. First of all, Chad Brown."

Chad stood and swaggered to the lectern. Shay rolled her eyes. He might totally rock the blond surfer vibe, but that didn't mean he was a nice guy. He'd barely paid her any attention unless he needed help with his schoolwork.

She gazed at the audience. Taj bopped his head from side to side as if listening to a song in his head, a smile on his face. Nothing fazed her brother.

Mr Evans called, "Shay Curtis."

Shay shifted her shoulders back as she stood, aware of everyone's eyes on her. Her steps echoed around the town hall as she approached the lectern.

"Congratulations, Shay." The principal held out his hand and she wiped her sweaty palm on her gown and shook it.

Gus handed her the certificate. "Great work, Shay."

"Thanks, you too on the speech."

He shook his head and lowered his voice. "I'd rather be twenty metres under and low on oxygen than do that again."

She grinned. "I'll see you Monday."

"Yep. Seven a.m."

Behind her, someone cleared their throat. "Hurry up."

Shay flushed and hurried back to her seat, clutching the certificate to her chest. Across from her, Gram was

flapping the graduation program at Mum like a fan. Mum was paler than a piece of paper, the bright pink of her head scarf making the contrast all the more obvious. Dad clutched Mum's hand, while Taj leaned forward, watching anxiously, hugging himself.

Shay tensed. Mum shouldn't have come today. She urged the principal to hurry through the other graduates, her eyes not leaving her family. *Go*. Surely at the back of the audience, Mum could slip out with no one noticing.

Mum swayed in her seat, closing her eyes, a hand over her mouth.

Oh, no. Please don't let her vomit.

The last name was called, and Shay's mother stood, probably to leave, but it was too late. She took two steps away, Dad right behind her. Then she collapsed, Dad only just catching her before she hit the floor. Retching sounds announced she was vomiting.

Shay cringed, her heart racing, as fear filled her.

The crowd murmured as Shay's father picked up his wife and carried her out, the family following, leaving behind a pile of vomit. Shay shifted, as Maxine, the girl next to her, said, "Ugh, gross."

Bitch. She had no idea how hard it was for their family.

Shay couldn't stay here.

She leapt to her feet and followed her family out of the room.

She was done with school.

Her family needed her.



Erin

The doors of the hospital slid open and Myles Curtis rushed in, carrying his wife. "Help. I need some help."

Erin Talbot dashed across, her heart racing. “What happened?”

“She felt ill at Shay’s graduation. When she stood to go to the bathroom, she vomited and fainted.”

Erin suppressed a groan. Both she and the doctor had recommended Bev not attend the ceremony. “Bring her through.” She swiped them through to the back and gestured for Myles to lay Bev on the bed. Erin took Bev’s heart rate, which was slower than it should be. Behind her, Taj asked, “Is she going to be all right?”

The fear in his voice caught at her heart. It was his grandmother, Gwen, who answered. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. Probably got a little over-excited by it all.”

“She shouldn’t have come at all.” Erin winced at Shay’s dull tone. The teenager was still wearing her graduation gown and she was right, but that hardly mattered now.

Bev’s eyelids flickered, and Myles shoved past Erin to squeeze her hand. “Bev, wake up.”

Erin knew from experience there was no point trying to get him out of the way. At six feet tall, he was immovable, and when his wife’s health was at stake, he listened to no one but the doctor, and sometimes not even her. She moved around the other side of the bed to finish taking Bev’s vitals.

Bev groaned. “My head’s spinning.” She shifted, trying to sit, and slapped a hand over her mouth. Erin shoved a vomit bag in front of her just in time.

Isla Grey, the new temporary doctor in town, appeared at Erin’s side. “OK, take it easy. Lie back down.”

As Bev did so, she spotted her children and waved. “I’m fine, kids. Just a little woozy.”

It was more than that. She shouldn’t have been out of bed at all.

“What happened?” Myles demanded. “What’s wrong

with her?”

“I need to ask Bev a few questions,” Isla said. “Could you step back please?”

Erin spoke before Myles could protest. “Talk to your kids,” she murmured. “They’re worried.”

He scowled, but glanced over his shoulder as if he’d forgotten they were there. “I’m worried.” But he went to speak with them.

For the past six months, Erin had watched him obsess over his wife’s health. Erin couldn’t blame him for his concern. The tumour had been large by the time it was discovered, and required immediate surgery, but he had two children who were equally worried and needed him. It was just as well they had their grandmother. Bev had told her it was the reason they’d moved to town in the first place, so they could have Myles’ mother’s support in this difficult time. Her own parents had died years ago.

Support came in all different guises, and unlike Erin’s own parents, Gwen would have offered the emotional support they needed. Not that Erin had a reason to complain. At least her parents had provided a roof over her own and Kristyn’s head after her ex had kicked them out.

Erin glanced towards the doors. Kristyn should arrive from school at any minute. Her daughter walked through the sliding doors and into the emergency room, her long dark hair falling out of her ponytail as always. Erin didn’t know what she did, but it never stayed in place. Kristyn smiled and waved, then concern crossed her face as she spotted Taj and his family. Erin pointed towards the staff room where Kristyn normally did her homework, and her daughter nodded and went in.

The ever-present guilt washed over Erin. She hated that her ten-year-old daughter had to come to the hospital every day after school. It was only ever for

about half an hour until Erin finished her shift, but it was enough to keep the guilt constant, and her dislike strong for her cheating ex-husband. She refused to let her child go home to an empty house.

She sighed and turned her attention to the doctor.

“Looks like a severe case of vertigo,” Isla said. “She can’t sit up without vomiting.”

There was little they could do about that. “Exacerbated by the chemo?”

Isla nodded. “Probably. I’ll go tell the family.”

Erin moved next to Bev, whose eyes were damp with tears.

“Is it ever going to end?” Bev whispered.

Erin squeezed her hand. “You’re almost there. Just one more treatment to go.”

“That doesn’t mean the cancer’s gone, though, does it?”

Erin shook her head. “I know it’s hard. Try to think positively.” She’d been the nurse in charge of Bev’s treatment and had watched her fade as the chemo had taken its toll. The lack of control over her body would have driven Erin crazy. But others had recovered well and Bev would too, she hoped.

Myles jostled past her, grabbing Bev’s hand. “Darling. How are you feeling?”

“I’m all right as long as I don’t move.” She glanced past him to her children and her face crumpled. “Shay, honey. I’m fine. You shouldn’t be here with me. You should be partying with your classmates.”

Shay shrugged. “Nah, I’m good. I’d rather be here with you.”

“Nonsense. I’m not ruining your special day. Go.” She made shooing motions. “Have fun, but don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Her smile was more like a grimace. “I don’t want to see you until the morning.”

Shay opened her mouth to protest, but Myles cut her

off. “You heard your mother. Have a good time.”

Shay looked helplessly at her grandmother, and Erin felt for the girl. She obviously didn’t want to leave.

“Your mother will be fine. Go celebrate with your friends,” Gwen said.

The teenager turned and slunk away. Taj was over by the staff room, talking to Kristyn. Hopefully, her daughter could cheer up her best friend.

Isla wrote on the patient notes, and Erin returned to the task at hand.

She had a patient to take care of.

Then she could care for her own child.