



# Unconventional

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Book

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The first page, and Lexi's in crisis. She's suffering from a 'very specific, palm-tree-related sensation' in the pit of her stomach. Problem is, she misplaced a hyphen in an email order, and the supplier's sent three boxes of inflatable metre-high palm trees when Lexi needs just one box of inflatable three-metre-high palm trees to decorate the convention registration area in only three days' time. Not any convention, but one of Max Angelo's conventions for fans of books and comics and cosplays (dressing up as super-heroes and elves and so on), with loads of writers and film people and art shows and themed parties and merchandise. Max is Lexi's dad and she leads the team of 'week-end grunts' who do all the underpinning stuff to keep everything running smoothly. Answer to the palm tree catastrophe? Call Best Friend Sam. As in Samira. Lexi talks with Sam like she talks with no-one else.

No-one else except her readers, that is. She confides and jokes with us as tirelessly as she does with Sam, barely drawing breath from that first page to last. The voice is attractively witty (often at her own expense), and she introduces us to scenes few readers will know 'behind the scenes, in fact, of the monthly, Easter-through-Halloween fan conventions. For Lexi, 'they're where I feel safest. They're what make me feel like me'. Life and friendships at home and Sixth Form College come a long way back in second place...she's always behind with her A-level course work and she's not improving her chances of university or career; she's too entranced by those frenetic weekends when she comes alive.

The chapters slide from one convention to another, putting constraints upon the author, since the mundane details of convention admin and incident lose their novelty. As Lexi says, each convention hotel is indistinguishable from the last, and the same is true of the conventions themselves. An actress might create a fuss when she loses her pet dog inside a wardrobe, the registration forms might be filed in the wrong order; but the plot needs more. Maggie Harcourt focuses on Lexi's growing relationship with Aidan Green, which begins badly in a short-tempered misunderstanding about an authorisation pass to the guest speakers' green room and some extended teasing about clipboards. To Lexi's deep embarrassment, it soon emerges that Aidan (pen name: Haydn Swift) has written a novel which is rapidly becoming a world best-seller with film rights, book signings and the accompanying rock-star celebrity. Lexi's read the book five times and adores it, which only makes her feel even worse. While the course of True Romance does not run smooth, it does keep running, albeit slowly. Will Lexi have to share Haydn with hordes of (female) fans around the world, or can

she and Aidan create something unique? Whenever they find time together, she and Aidan connect in sparky dialogue and even share some playful games such as sliding along carpeted hotel corridors on a metal tray. Though she feels incredibly powerful vibes whenever their hands touch or he's so close to her she 'breathes him in', they continue to circle each other as far as even a first kiss is concerned, though there's ample opportunity, notably when they get locked into a function room for the night. Given that she's 17 and he's 19 and the electric attraction between them, some sort of contact might well have been made before page 447 when, I think, they kiss and 'he tastes like the courage it's taken me my whole life to find'. This may provide a climactic moment for the plot, but it also may stretch readers' belief. Some firm less-is-more editing might have been helpful while still allowing space for Maggie Harcourt's engaging, comic enthusiasm and for Lexi to see that there's a life for her beyond conventions and, in a time-honoured RomCom conclusion, that she's 'not nobody. I'm me.'

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