



LOVE LIKE THIS

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES (BOOK #1)

SOPHIE LOVE

The Romance Chronicles

Sophie Love

Love Like This

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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Love S.

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Keira Swanson, 28, lands her dream job at Viatorum, a slick magazine in New York City, as an aspiring travel writer. But their culture is brutal, her boss is a monster, and she doesn't know if she can last for long. That changes when Keira, by a fluke, is handed a coveted assignment and given her big chance: to travel to Ireland for 30 days, witness the legendary Lisdoonvarna festival of love, and to debunk the myth that true love exists. Keira, cynical herself and in a rocky place with her long-term boyfriend, is all too happy to oblige. But when Keira falls in love with Ireland and meets her Irish tour guide, who just may be the man of her dreams, she is no longer sure of anything.

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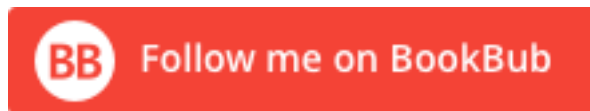
LOVE LIKE THIS

Sophie Love

#1 bestselling author Sophie Love is author of the romantic comedy series, THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR, which includes six books (and counting), and which begins with FOR NOW AND FOREVER (THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR – BOOK 1).

Sophie Love is also the author of the debut romantic comedy series, THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES, which begins with LOVE LIKE THIS (THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES – BOOK 1).

Sophie would love to hear from you, so please visit www.sophieloveauthor.com to email her, to join the mailing list, to receive free ebooks, to hear the latest news, and to stay in touch!



CHAPTER ONE

Keira Swanson pushed open the glass doors of *Viatorum* magazine and walked purposefully inside. It was Labor Day, but she, along with the rest of the writing staff, had been summoned to work at short notice.

Keira knew full well there was no real emergency, nothing big enough to trigger a summoning on a public holiday. But the travel magazine was a hugely competitive environment and her boss, Joshua, liked to “create opportunities to weed out the weak.” Anyone who kicked up too much of a fuss about working on a holiday or looked too miserable during their meetings would find themselves swiftly unemployed. Keira had fought so hard for a writing job, she wasn’t about to fail at this hurdle, even if it did mean leaving her boyfriend, Zachary, at home to host a family brunch without her.

Her black stilettos click-clacked across the pristine, white tiles as she hurried to her desk. The *Viatorum* HQ was located in the hippest part of New York City, in a huge, old warehouse that had been stylishly repurposed for office use. The windows were enormous, stretching all the way from the floor to the steepled ceiling, where steel beams with large bolts were still in place from the days when it had been used as a warehouse. The open-plan environment meant that every conversation was heard. Even whispers echoed. It also meant that no one dared bring in anything too pungent for lunch. Keira could still recall the moment a new writer, a ditzy young woman named Abby, had brought in a tuna salad on her first day. The second Joshua had caught a whiff of it he’d quickly ensured it was Abby’s first, last, and only day at *Viatorum*.

Peering across the vast room, Keira noticed that she wasn’t the first to arrive. Nina, her friend and one of the assistant editors at *Viatorum*, was already hunched over her desk, tapping away at her keyboard. She flashed Keira a quick grin before reimmersing herself in her work.

Keira slung her purse down on her desk and slumped into her chair, careful to make her sigh inaudible. She hadn’t realized working at the prestigious *Viatorum* magazine would involve so much acting, so much faking interest in conversation, so much pretending to be oh-so-accomplished.

Through the glass partition that separated Joshua from his employees, Keira realized that he was watching her. She wondered what he was thinking, whether he was surprised to see that she was the second person who had responded to his urgent summoning, or whether he was on the hunt to fire someone and she’d just become the prey that had wandered into his territory.

Joshua emerged around the glass partition. He was wearing an electric blue suit and his hair was styled into a quiff. He stalked up to Keira’s desk.

“Have you finished the Ireland research yet?” he asked, not even bothering to say hello.

Ah yes, the Festival of Love article that Joshua had been assigned to write by Elliot, the CEO of *Viatorum*. It was supposed to be a huge, important project – at least that’s what Joshua had insinuated – though Keira herself couldn’t fathom how a silly fluff piece on matchmaking during an outdated ceremony in a quaint Irish village could be construed as important. Even so, Joshua had been in an even fouler mood than usual and, as his most junior writer, Keira had been tasked with doing all the research he was “far too busy” to do himself.

More like far too self-important, Keira thought silently to herself, as she looked up and smiled. “I emailed it to you before I left on Friday.”

“Email it to me again,” Joshua demanded without missing a beat. “I don’t have time to trawl through my inbox looking for it.”

“No problem,” Keira said, remaining as cordial as ever.

Joshua stormed back to his office and Keira pinged the email containing the vast amount of information she’d gathered on the Irish Festival of Love over to him, smirking to herself as she recalled how silly it all was, how sickeningly *romantic*.

No sooner had the email left her inbox than the doors swung open and a handful of *Viatorum*'s writing staff bustled in, each pretending they weren't peeved to be in the office on what was supposed to be a national vacation. Keira could hear their chatter as they tried to outdo one another with their sacrifices.

"My niece was competing in a baseball tournament," Lisa said. "But this is much more important. She cried her eyes out when I said I was leaving but I know she'll understand when she's old enough and has her own career."

Duncan was not to be outdone. "I had to leave Stacy at the airport. I mean, we can visit Madrid another time, it's not like it's going anywhere."

"I just left my mother's hospital bed," Victoria added. "It's not like she's critical or anything. She understands my career comes first."

Keira kept her smirk to herself. The corporate environment at *Viatorum* seemed completely unnecessary to her. She wished her career could develop through dedication, skill, and hard work, rather than through her adeptness at schmoozing by the water cooler. That wasn't to say Keira wasn't focused on her career – it was the most important thing to her in her life at the moment, though she wouldn't admit that to Zachary – she just didn't want to change herself to fit into the culture at the magazine. She often felt like she was biding her time, waiting for her moment to shine.

A second later Keira's phone buzzed. Nina had sent her one of her covert messages.

I'm guessing Joshua hasn't prepared you for the fact that Elliot's coming in for this meeting.

Keira held in her gasp of surprise. Though the CEO at *Viatorum* was a million times more pleasant than Joshua, she felt more anxious when in his presence. He held the key to the future of her career. He was the one with the power to hire and fire on the spot, the one whose opinion really mattered. Joshua would never tell Keira if she'd done good work, or that her writing had improved, no matter how hard she'd worked. Elliot, on the other hand, gave compliments when they were deserved, which was rarely, but that made it even better to get one.

Keira was about to text Nina back when she heard the sound of Joshua's fast footsteps approaching.

"What the hell is this crap, Keira?" he shouted before he'd even reached her desk.

His words echoed around the office. All heads turned to watch the most recent verbal bashing, simultaneously glad they weren't on the receiving end of it and excited by the prospect that some other sacrificial lamb would satisfy Joshua's urge to fire.

"I'm sorry?" Keira asked pleasantly, although her heart was racing.

"That crap about Ireland! All of it's useless!"

Keira wasn't sure how to respond. She knew she'd done good research; she'd kept to specification, she'd presented her findings in a user-friendly document, she'd gone above and beyond. Joshua was just in a foul mood and taking it out on her. If anything, this was a test to see how she would respond to a public verbal bashing.

"I can do some further research if you'd like," Keira said.

"There's not enough time!" Joshua yelled. "Elliot will be here in fifteen minutes!"

"Actually," Nina interrupted, "his car just pulled up." She leaned over in her office chair, taking in the sight from the large window.

Joshua turned bright red. "I'm not taking the rap for this, Swanson," he said, pointing at Keira. "If Elliot's disappointed I'll let him know where the blame lies."

He went to stomp back to his partitioned desk. But as he went, one of his patent-leather brogues landed right on top of a puddle of coffee one of his harried, rushed writers had spilled on the tiled floors in their haste to get to work.

There was a moment of suspended animation, where Keira could sense that a terrible event was about to unfold. Then it started, Joshua's cartoon-like sliding and stumbling motions. He twisted his

torso as though in a strange dance as he tried to keep his balance. But the combination of granite tiles and macchiato was too great to overcome.

Joshua lost his footing completely, one leg shooting forward while the other twisted oddly beneath him. Everyone gasped as he landed heavily and loudly on the hard floor. A crunch noise rang out through the huge office, echoing sickeningly.

“My leg!” Joshua screamed, clutching his shin through his electric blue pants. “I’ve broken my leg!”

Everyone seemed stunned into paralysis. Keira ran up to him, not sure what to do to help, but certain that breaking one’s leg in such a manner had to be impossible.

“It won’t be broken,” she stammered, trying to be reassuring. But that was before her gaze fell to the awkward angle of Joshua’s leg, to the tear in his pants through which she saw protruding bone. Nausea gripped her. “Actually...”

“Don’t just stand there!” Joshua screamed at her, rolling around in agony. Through a squinting eye he stole a glance at his injury. “Oh God!” he screamed. “I’ve ripped my pants! These cost me more than you earn in a month!”

Just then, the main glass doors swung open and in strode Elliot.

Even if Elliot hadn’t been six foot three he’d have been imposing. There was something about him, about the way he held himself. He could strike terror and obedience into people with just one glance.

Like deer caught in headlights, everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at him in fear. Even Joshua was scared into silence.

Elliot took in the sight before him; of Joshua lying on the ground, clutching his leg, screaming in pain; of Keira standing helplessly over him; of the crowd of writers standing at their desks with horrified expressions on their faces.

But Elliot’s expression didn’t change at all. “Has someone called an ambulance for Joshua?” was all he said.

There was a sudden flurry of movement.

“I’ll do it!” everyone began saying over the top of one another as they clambered for their desk phones, desperate to be seen as the savior in front of Elliot.

A sheen of cold sweat glistened on Joshua’s forehead. He looked up at Elliot.

“I’ll be fine,” he said through his clenched teeth, trying to sound nonchalant but failing miserably. “It’s just a broken bone. Good thing it’s my leg and not my arm. I don’t need my leg to write the Ireland piece.” He sounded somewhat delirious.

“But you do need it to get on a plane and trek around the hillsides,” Elliot said calmly.

“Crutches,” Joshua said, grimacing. “Wheelchair. We’ll just need to adapt a bit.”

“Joshua,” Elliot replied, sternly, “the only place I’m sending you is the hospital.”

“No!” Joshua cried, trying to sit up. “I can do the assignment! I just need a cast and then I’ll be good as new!”

With no emotion at all, Elliot ignored Joshua’s pleas and glanced at his watch. “I’m beginning the meeting at eleven sharp,” he announced to the writing staff. Then he waltzed off to the conference room without so much as looking back.

Everyone stood there, silent, shocked, unsure what to do. Then Joshua’s screaming snapped them back to attention.

“Let me get you some water,” Lisa said.

“I don’t want frickin’ water!” Joshua yelled.

“Here,” Duncan said, rushing forward. “You need to elevate the wound.”

He reached for Joshua’s damaged leg but Joshua smacked his arms away. “Don’t touch me! I swear to God if you touch me I will fire you!”

Duncan drew back, hands in truce position.

“The ambulance is here,” Nina called from the window, blue lights flashing from the other side. *Thank God*, Keira thought. She’d had about as much of Joshua as she could stand for one day. For a lifetime, if she was being honest with herself.

Just then, she looked up and realized Elliot was standing in the doorway of the conference room, watching them all bustle around Joshua, acting like headless chickens. He looked less than impressed. Keira noticed the clock. The meeting was starting in less than one minute.

Keira realized there was an opportunity here. There was no way Joshua would be completing the Ireland assignment, Elliot had made that quite clear. Which meant everyone else would fight for it in order to get noticed. It wasn’t the most glamorous of jobs but it was more than Keira had ever had. She needed to prove herself to Elliot. She needed that assignment.

Leaving her colleagues behind her, Keira strode toward the conference room. She passed Elliot in the doorway and took a seat next to the one she knew Elliot would soon be occupying.

Duncan noticed her first. Seeing her sitting in the empty conference room seemed to make it dawn on him suddenly what Keira herself had realized, that the Ireland assignment was vacant and one of them was needed to fill it. He rushed (while trying to hide the fact he was rushing) to be the next one inside. The others noticed, and there was a sudden scramble for the conference room, each colleague politely apologizing for “accidentally” shoving into the other in their haste to get inside, to impress Elliot, and to win the coveted assignment.

Which left Joshua completely alone in the middle of the open-plan office, paramedics hoisting him onto a gurney and stretchering him away, while a conference room full of his staff prepared themselves to battle it out for his assignment.

*

“I’m sure you’ve noticed by now,” Elliot said, “that Joshua’s unfortunate accident has left me in a bit of a predicament.”

He folded his large hands on top of the conference table and glanced at all of the writers sitting in front of him.

Keira stayed quiet, biding her time. She had a strategy: let the others wear themselves out asking to be given the assignment and then swoop in at the last minute.

“The Ireland piece,” Elliot continued, “was going to be our cover story. *Viatorum* is going in a new direction. Personal pieces, first-person accounts. The writer drives the narrative, creates a story, in which the location is a key character. I’d briefed Joshua on this. I don’t know if any of you guys have the talent to do this, to understand my vision.” He looked down at the tabletop, frowning so hard a vein bulged in his forehead. “The plane leaves tomorrow,” he lamented, as though he didn’t have an audience.

“If I may,” Lisa said. “My Florida piece is almost done. I can finish it up on the plane.”

“Absolutely not,” Elliot replied. “No one can be on two assignments at once. Who’s free?”

There was a collective deflating as several of the writers around the table realized that they were already out of the running.

“I’m free,” Duncan said. “I was supposed to be flying to Madrid today but work comes first. Stacy won’t mind if I defer the holiday.”

Keira only just managed to stop herself from rolling her eyes on hearing Duncan’s rehearsed line. She wondered how chill Stacy really was about her holiday being cancelled.

Elliot scrutinized Duncan across the table. “You’re that Buxton guy, aren’t you? The one who wrote the Frankfurt piece?”

“Yes,” Duncan replied, grinning proudly.

“I hated that piece,” Elliot said.

Keira could feel it bubbling up in her, the excitement. This was her moment. Her time to shine.

Ignoring the nerves she felt, she raised her hand with forced confidence. “I’m available for the piece.”

Everyone’s heads turned to look at her. She fought the urge to hunker down in her seat.

“Who are you?” Elliot asked.

Keira gulped. “Keira Swanson. I’m Joshua’s junior writer. He tasked me to do some preliminary research for this piece.”

“He did, did he?” Elliot asked, sounding unimpressed to learn that Joshua was dishing his duties out to his junior staff. He stroked his chin in contemplation. “You’ve not been abroad on an assignment before?”

Keira shook her head. “Not yet,” she replied. “But I’m excited to.” She hoped the warble in her voice couldn’t be heard.

She could feel her colleagues around her bristling with irritation. They probably thought this was all very unfair, that Keira didn’t deserve this assignment. They were probably kicking themselves for volunteering for less glamorous pieces in the weeks prior because now they were stuck with them. The only person showing any hint of support was Nina, who smiled in her knowing way. Internally, Keira felt herself smile as well. This was her moment. She’d been biding her time at *Viatorum*, mopping up after Joshua, rewriting his pieces on his behalf, working all hours with little reward. Now it was her turn in the spotlight.

Elliot drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “I’m not sure,” he said. “You haven’t proven yourself yet. And this is a big task.”

Nina boldly piped up from the other end of the room. She’d done her time, earned trust and respect. Years of editing at high-end magazines had hardened her. “I don’t think you have any other options.”

Elliot paused as though letting the words sink in. Then his frown began to relax and with a reluctant sort of acceptance he said, “Fine. Swanson, you have the piece. But only because we’re desperate.”

It wasn’t the best way in the world to receive such good news, but Keira didn’t care. She’d gotten the piece. That was all that mattered. She had to fight the urge to punch the air.

“It’s a four-week trip,” Elliot explained. “To the Lisdoonvarna Festival, in Ireland.”

Keira nodded; she already knew all of this. “The Festival of Love,” she said wryly.

Elliot smirked. “So you’re a cynic?”

Suddenly nervous, Keira worried whether she’d said the wrong thing, had let her disdain slip out by accident. But then she noticed Elliot’s expression was actually one of approval.

“That’s exactly the sort of angle I’m looking for,” he said.

Everyone around the table looked like they’d sucked lemons. Lisa outright glared her jealousy at Keira.

“The truth,” Elliot added, his eyes sparkling with sudden excitement. “I want you to debunk the silliness of the romance of Ireland. Debunk the myth that one can be matched with their life partner just through some sentimental festival. I need you to be brave and show how it’s all nonsense, how love doesn’t work like that in the real world. I want it warts and all.”

Keira nodded. She was a cynical New Yorker, and the angle of the assignment sat very well with her. She couldn’t help but feel like the perfect opportunity had landed in her lap at the perfect time. This was her chance to shine, to show off her voice and talent, to prove she deserved her place at *Viatorum*.

“Meeting dismissed,” Elliot said. As Keira stood, he added, “Not you, Miss Swanson. We need to go through the finer details with my assistant. Please, let’s head to my office.”

As the others filed out of the conference room, Nina caught Keira’s eye and flashed her a thumbs-up. Then Keira walked across the length of the office, side by side with Elliot, her heels clacking and drawing jealous stares from everyone around her.

*

The second the door shut to Elliot's office, Keira knew the real work was about to begin. Elliot's assistant, Heather, was already seated. She frowned with confusion when she realized Keira had been picked for the assignment, but she didn't say anything.

You're just another person to prove wrong, Keira thought.

She took her seat and so did Elliot. Heather handed a binder to her.

"Your plane tickets," she explained. "And details of your accommodations."

"I hope you're an early riser because you'll be leaving first thing in the morning," Elliot added.

Keira smiled, though her mind reeled through all of the planned events she had in her calendar, all the things she would have to cancel and miss out on. A cold sweat descended over her as she realized that she'd be missing Zachary's sister Ruth's wedding, which was the very next day. He was going to be so pissed!

"That's no problem," she said, looking down at the tickets in her binder that were for a 6 a.m. flight. "No problem at all."

"We've booked you into a quaint little B and B in Lisdoonvarna," Elliot explained. "No frills. We want you to experience everything."

"Great," she replied.

"Don't screw this up, okay?" Elliot said. "I'm taking a huge risk on you. If you mess this assignment up your days here are over. Got it? There's a hundred other writers waiting for your spot."

Keira nodded, trying not to show the anxiety on her face, trying to make herself look bold and confident and totally together, while inside, she felt as if a thousand butterflies had taken flight.

CHAPTER TWO

Later that evening, when Keira arrived back home to the apartment she shared with her boyfriend, she found herself still shaking with excitement and disbelief. Her hand trembled as she tried to get her key in the lock of their apartment door.

Finally, she opened the door and walked inside. The smell of cooked food lingered in the air, mixed with the smell of cleaning fluids. Zachary had been cleaning. That meant he was angry.

"I know, I know, I know," she began before he'd even come into her eye shot. "You're mad. And I'm sorry." She chucked her keys into the pot by the door and slammed the door shut. "But, babe, I have great news!" She slipped her heels off and rubbed her aching feet.

Zachary appeared in the doorway of the living room, his arms folded. His dark hair mirrored his dark expression.

"You missed brunch," he said. "The whole thing."

"I'm sorry!" Keira implored. She threw her arms around his neck but found he was resistant, so decided to change tack. She put on her sultry voice. "How about we argue about it and then I make it up to you?"

Zachary shoved her arms off of him and stomped into the living room, where he slumped onto the couch. The room was immaculately clean. Even his PlayStation had been dusted. He was more pissed off this time than ever, Keira realized.

She sat next to him and gently rested a hand on his knee, stroking the denim texture beneath her fingertips. Zachary stared ahead at the TV that wasn't on.

"What do you want me to do, Zach?" she asked softly. "I have to work. You know that."

He exhaled and shook his head. "I get that you have to work. I work too. The whole world works. But not everyone has a boss that clicks his fingers and makes his staff come running like drones!"

It was a fair point.

"Wait, you're not jealous of Josh, are you?" Keira asked. The thought was laughable. "If you only *saw* him!"

"Keira," Zachary barked, finally looking at her. "I'm not jealous of your boss. At least not in that way. I'm jealous that he gets so much of you, of your energy and your focus in life."

Now it was Keira's turn to sigh. She understood where Zach was coming from on one hand, but on the other she wished he could be supportive of her success. She wanted him to ride out this wave while she was at the bottom of the ladder. Things were about to get easier, once she'd made this next step in her career.

"I wish he didn't, either," Keira agreed. "But putting that much effort and energy into my career isn't going to change. At least not for the next month."

Zachary frowned. "What do you mean?"

Keira wanted to keep her excitement contained out of respect for Zach but she just couldn't help herself. She almost squealed as she said, "I'm going to Ireland!"

There was a long, long pause, as Zach absorbed the information.

"When?" he said, coolly.

"That's the thing," Keira replied. "It's a last-minute change of staff. Josh broke his leg. It's a whole long story."

Zach just glared as she rambled, looking at her expectantly for the punch line.

Keira hunkered down into the couch, trying to make herself seem as small as possible. "I leave tomorrow."

Zachary's expression turned as quickly as a flash storm. If he'd been rain clouds before, he was now thunder and lightning.

"But the wedding is tomorrow," he said.

Keira grabbed both his hands in hers. “The timing sucks, I’ll be the first to admit it. But I swear Ruth won’t mind.”

“Won’t mind?” Zach snapped, yanking his hands back. “You’re in the wedding party!”

Suddenly he was on his feet, pacing away, running his hands through his hair. Keira leapt up and rushed to him, attempting to placate him with affection. But Zach was having none of it this time.

“I can’t believe this,” he gasped. “I spend all day hosting a brunch with *your* family, listening to Bryn going on and on about how hot her new meditation teacher is and all her vacuous opinions – ”

“Hey!” Keira said, angry now. Criticizing her big sister was not okay.

“And instead of thanking me,” Zach continued, “you drop this on me! How the hell am I supposed to tell Ruth?”

“I’ll tell her,” Keira suggested. “Let me be the bad guy, I don’t mind.”

“You are the bad guy!” Zach exclaimed.

He stomped out of the living room. Keira followed helplessly. They’d been together for two years and she’d never seen him this angry before.

She followed him into the bedroom and watched as he pulled her suitcase out from under the bed.

“What are you doing?” she asked, exasperated.

“Taking this out,” he snapped back. “You can’t go without a suitcase, can you?”

Keira shook her head. “I know you’re angry but you’re taking things a bit far.”

She took the suitcase from his hands and slung it on the bed. It fell open as if inviting her to start packing it. Keira had to fight the urge inside of her to start filling it up.

Zach seemed to momentarily lose his strength. He deflated, sitting on the end of the bed with his head in his hands.

“You always choose work over me.”

“I’m sorry,” Keira said, not looking at him as she grabbed her favorite sweater from the floor and flung it discreetly into the case. “But this is an opportunity of a lifetime.” She went over to the dresser and rummaged through her bottles of moisturizers and perfumes. “Ruth hates me anyway. She only put me in the bridal party because you asked her to.”

“Because that’s what you’re supposed to do,” Zach said sadly. “You’re supposed to do family stuff together.”

She turned and quickly added the items to her case. But Zach noticed what she was doing and his ever darkening expression grew darker still.

“Are you *packing*?”

Keira froze and chewed her bottom lip. “Sorry.”

“No you’re not,” he said in a cold, measured way. Then he looked up and said, “If you go, I don’t know if we can stay together.”

Keira raised an eyebrow, nonplussed by his threat. “Oh really?” She folded her arms. Now he’d gotten her attention. “You’re going to give me an ultimatum?”

Zachary threw his arms up in frustration. “Don’t act like you’re not forcing my hand! Can’t you see how embarrassing it will be for me to turn up tomorrow at Ruth’s wedding without you?”

Keira sighed, equally frustrated. “I don’t understand why you can’t just tell them that I’ve landed an awesome opportunity at work. Something that I couldn’t miss.”

“My sister’s wedding should be something you can’t miss. It should be a priority!”

Ah. There it was again. That word. Priority. The thing that Keira would never admit to Zach wasn’t him but her career.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, feeling her resolve finally weaken. “But it’s just not possible. My career has to come first.”

She hung her head, not from shame but from sadness. It didn’t have to be this way. Zach should never have pitted their relationship against her career. It was a battle he would inevitably lose.

Keira didn't know what else to say. She looked at Zachary's enraged face. No more words passed between them. There were none left to say. Then Zach got up from the bed, headed out of the room and down the corridor, and grabbed his keys from the bowl by the door before pulling the door open and slamming it shut behind him. As Keira listened to the sound of his car driving away, she knew he wouldn't be back tonight; he'd sleep on Ruth's fold-out couch to prove his point.

Keira had won the fight but there was no pleasure in her victory. She slumped onto the bed beside her open case and felt a hard lump form in her throat.

In need of some TLC, she grabbed her cell and called her mom.

"Hello, darling," the woman said, picking up right away, as if the sight of her youngest daughter's name on the caller ID had propelled her into immediate action. "Is everything okay?"

Keira sighed. "I was calling to tell you about an assignment I was given today at work. It's a cover story. I get to fly out to Ireland."

"Darling, that's wonderful news. How exciting! Congratulations. But why do you sound so glum?"

Keira rolled onto her stomach. "Zach. He's annoyed. He basically said if I went it would be over between us."

"I'm sure he doesn't mean it," her mom said kindly. "You know what men can be like. You've just bruised his ego by putting your own priorities above his."

Keira plucked the corner of a pillow case absentmindedly. "It's more to do with Ruth's wedding tomorrow," she explained. "He thinks I'm ditching him, leaving him in the lurch. Like if he turns up without a date his whole world will implode." She laughed wryly, but was met with silence on the other end of the line.

"Oh," her mother said.

"Oh what?" Keira asked, frowning.

Her mom's voice had lost some of its warmth. There was an edge to it that Keira recognized well enough, since she'd heard it a thousand times as a kid. Disapproval.

"Well, I didn't realize you'd be missing his sister's wedding," she said.

"And does that change things in your opinion?" Keira said, growing a little terse.

Her mom replied in the voice Keira recognized as "diplomatic." "If you had prior engagements already. And it is his sister. Turning up at weddings alone is really the worst. Everyone stares and whispers. He'll be quite uncomfortable."

"Mom!" Keira wailed. "This isn't the 1950s anymore. A man's comfort isn't more important than a woman's career!"

"That's not what I mean, darling," her mom said. "I just mean that Zachary is a lovely young man and there's nothing wrong with prioritizing the wedding. You don't want to be like your sister, always on those dating websites, having those terrible evenings with men who say they're six foot but then turn out to be barely five!"

"Mom!" Keira yelled again, cutting an end to her rambling. "I need you to be supportive right now."

Her mom sighed. "I am. I'm very pleased for you. And I love your ... passion. I do."

Keira rolled her eyes. Her mom wasn't very good at being convincing.

"I just think that in this situation you should stay with your boyfriend. I mean, really, what matters more? You'll be quitting that job in three years anyway to start having babies."

"Okay, Mom, stop talking right now!" Keira snapped. Making babies was so far from her radar it was a laughable suggestion.

"Darling," her mom soothed. "It's very honorable that you work so hard. But love is important too. Just as important. If not more so. Does writing this article really mean more to you than Zachary?"

Keira realized she was gripping her phone tightly. She relaxed her grasp a little. "I have to go, Mom."

“Think about what I said.”

“I will.”

She hung up, her heart heavy. The elation she’d felt earlier today had entirely evaporated. There was only one person who could cheer her up now, and that was Bryn. She quickly found her big sister’s contact details and called her.

“Hi, lil sis,” Bryn said when she answered. “You missed brunch.”

“I was working,” Keira replied. “Joshua dragged us all into the office, I think just to show off in front of Elliot about this Ireland cover piece he was going to write. Only he slipped and... well, he broke his leg.”

“Are you kidding?” Bryn exclaimed, bursting into hysterics. “How does that even happen?”

Already, Keira felt her unhappiness begin to melt away, such was the power of Bryn.

“It was insane,” she said. “I saw his bone. And then he screamed about how he’d ruined his expensive pants!”

The two sisters laughed together.

“Then what happened?” Bryn asked, being the captive audience Keira had sought in Zachary and her mother.

“He was getting carried off on the gurney by the paramedics and I realized the meeting was about to start – Elliot hates it when people are late – so I went and sat down. And I guess I caught his eye because of that and he gave me the Ireland piece.”

“No way!” Bryn exclaimed. “Are you kidding me? My baby sister is writing the cover story?”

Keira smiled. She knew Bryn didn’t fully understand the extent to which this was a big deal for her, and was at least feigning twenty percent of her enthusiasm, but she appreciated it. It was the kind of reaction she’d hoped for from Zach.

“Yeah. It’s great. But I have to go to Ireland tomorrow so I’m going to miss Ruth’s wedding.”

“Oh pft. So what?” Bryn said. “This is way more important. I didn’t think you liked Ruth anyway.”

“I don’t. But I like *Zach*,” Keira said, prompting Bryn to consider why jetting off to Ireland at the drop of a hat might not be the easiest thing to do in the world. “I’ve really upset him this time.”

Bryn exhaled. “Look. Sis. I know this is hard. And I like the guy, believe me, I do. But you have got to go! You have to do this. I hate to be the one to say it but you really shouldn’t be with a guy who holds you back. You’ll only resent him if you give in to his demands.”

“And he’ll only resent me if I don’t.”

“Yup. It’s a sad truth, but sometimes life just gets in the way of love. Two people can be right for each other but the timing can be all wrong.”

Keira felt her chest ache at the thought of dumping Zachary in favor of her career. But maybe Bryn was right. Maybe it just wasn’t the right time for them.

“So, what are you going to do?” Bryn asked, breaking Keira from her reverie.

Keira took a deep breath. “You know what, I’ve gone through too much crap climbing the corporate ladder to give up at the last hurdle. I *can’t* turn this down.”

Keira felt her drive return back to her. She was sad about the prospect of leaving Zachary behind, but she really didn’t see any other option. Turning down this opportunity would be the end of her career. There were no two ways about it.

She had to go.

CHAPTER THREE

Keira's alarm clock woke her up at a stupidly early time the next morning, blaring like a foghorn. She rolled over and turned it off, then realized that the other side of the bed was empty. Zach hadn't slept there last night.

She got up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, and peered into the living room. No Zach. So just as she'd predicted, he hadn't returned last night. He must have stayed at Ruth's.

Pushing her disappointment and sadness away, Keira took a quick shower, fighting hard to stop the warm water from lulling her back to sleep, and dressed in comfortable clothes for the long journey.

Grabbing her bag, she checked to make sure she had the tickets and itinerary that Heather had given her. Satisfied that her paperwork and passport were in her possession, she headed out of the house and hopped into the back of a waiting cab.

As she sped through the early morning streets of New York City, Keira took a moment to collect her frantic thoughts. This was really happening. She was really about to head abroad for work, something she'd always dreamed of doing. She just wished Zachary had chosen to share in this moment with her, rather than keep his distance.

The Newark airport was as busy as if it were rush hour on the subway. A 5 a.m. start was par for the course for so many busy career types, and Keira felt a sudden surge of pride to consider herself among them. She checked her luggage onto the flight, feeling like a superstar at LAX, her head held just as high. Then she found a coffee shop to get her morning fix and kill the time before her flight was ready to board.

As she sat in the bustling coffee shop, she checked her phone over and over. Even though she knew Zachary would still be sleeping, she desperately wanted some kind of communication from him. She knew she'd done the right thing by taking up the assignment and she hoped Zach would see it that way eventually. Or perhaps their relationship really was doomed like Bryn seemed to think it was. Perhaps their differing priorities really were a blockade they could no longer pass.

She fired off a light-hearted text to Zachary, leaving out any mention of their dispute, hoping that if he awoke to a sweet message he may feel more warmly toward her.

Her phone pinged and she leapt with excitement, thinking Zach had replied. But it was Heather checking everything had gone according to plan and she was on time for her flight. Disappointed, Keira texted back, telling Heather everything was fine.

Just then, she heard the boarding call for her flight. Quickly downing the last of her coffee, Keira headed to the check-in gate, vowing to call Zachary as soon as she landed. There was a five-hour time difference between New York and Ireland that she'd have to keep in mind throughout the duration of her stay.

On board the aircraft, Keira settled into her seat, checking one last time for any communication from Zach. But there was none, and the flight attendant flashed her a disapproving look to see her using her phone after they'd asked that all electronic devices be switched off. Sighing, Keira turned her phone off and stashed it in her pocket.

Just then, a crowd of stag party-goers crowded onto the flight, chatting loudly. Keira groaned. It was going to be a long flight. Seven hours, in fact, to Shannon in County Clare. It would be dark when she landed, but her body would think it was midday. She'd been hoping to get a bit of rest on the flight but the group of loud men was going to something of an impediment.

The plane began taxiing to the runway. In an attempt to block out the rowdy stag party, Keira put in earbuds and closed her eyes. But it wasn't anywhere near close enough to blocking out their loud banter.

The plane took to the air and Keira resigned herself to plan B: caffeine. She called over the air steward and ordered a coffee, knowing it would be the first of many. She drank it, huffily, to the background sound of the stag party.

As she cruised through the skies, Keira took some time to look through Heather's itinerary and reminders.

There aren't any cabs so a rental car will be waiting for you in the parking lot. I hope you can drive a stick shift. And remember to drive on the LEFT.

The thought of having to drive while so sleep deprived worried Keira. She hadn't driven in ages, since she usually took the subway everywhere. Stick shifts certainly presented an extra challenge. And driving on the left was going to be even harder. If she stood any chance of not crashing, she was going to need to drink a heck load more coffee!

You'll be staying at a traditional Irish pub and B&B so don't expect the Hilton treatment. It will be basic.

That didn't bother Keira. She'd been a starving writer ever since graduating from college; hotels had been out of her price range for years! She could slum it for a month no problem. As long as she wasn't expected to pee in an outhouse, she was certain she'd be able to survive even the most basic of accommodations.

You'll have the evening to acclimatize before work starts. We've arranged for a tour guide to show you around. You'll be meeting the matchmaker and festival owner the next morning. The festival begins the following evening.

Keira began to feel even more excited as she read through all the information. The flight seemed to be going by faster than she was expecting, which must have been thanks to the adrenaline pumping through her body. That and the copious amounts of caffeine.

Keira landed in Shannon in good spirits, stepping off the plane and into the cold, fresh September air. She'd been expecting to see rolling green hills and fields dotted with cows and sheep, but instead the Shannon airport wasn't much to look at. The area was somewhat industrialized, with large gray buildings that lacked any kind of architectural flare.

The car rental place was just as grim. Instead of a warm Irish greeting, she encountered a stony-faced young man who took her booking slip silently and handed her the keys without so much as uttering a syllable.

Keira took the keys and found the car in the lot. It was impossibly small. She got in the right-hand side, remembering Heather's reminder to drive on the left. It took her a while to refamiliarize herself with the concept of a stick shift and clutch pedal, and then she was off, using the SatNav to direct her out of Shannon. It would take approximately an hour to reach her destination, Lisdoonvarna.

No sooner had she left the main road than she found she was suddenly driving along small, winding roads with no sidewalks, no road signs, and no streetlights. Keira clutched the steering wheel anxiously and put every ounce of energy and concentration she had into driving along the roads that just seemed to become narrower and narrower.

After fifteen minutes or so, she began to relax somewhat. The traffic was very light, which helped calm her nerves because she wasn't so terrified about crashing into anyone. The environment was also very relaxing, with nothing around for miles but hillsides and fields dotted with sheep. The grass was the greenest green Keira had ever seen in her life. She wound down the window in order to sniff the pure air, but instead got the smell of manure. She wound the window up quickly.

There were hardly any road signs to guide her so she was thankful for the SatNav. But there were also no streetlights, which made driving difficult, especially with so many tight, blind corners. And the markings on the road had all but faded. Keira also found driving on the left disorientating. The difficult drive was compounded further by the sheer number of tractors she had to overtake!

Just then the road became so narrow there was only space for one car. Keira almost plowed headlong into oncoming traffic and had to squeal to a halt, the car juddering to the side of the road

and scraping against the hedgerow. Keira held a hand up to apologize to the driver of the other car but they just smiled kindly as if it were no bother at all, and reversed a little in order to allow the space for her to pass. Back home in New York City, such an incident would have resulted in Keira being loudly cussed. She was already getting a feel for that infamous Irish hospitality.

Her heart still pounding from the shock of the near miss, Keira managed to slowly inch forward past the car.

She continued onward cautiously, feeling more terrified of the roads than she had before. She hoped the scrape against the hedges wouldn't be visible on the paint work – she wasn't sure how the company would feel about her coming back with a huge bill from the car rental place for damage!

Any residue of excitement she'd been feeling before the treacherous drive had begun started to wane. Running on adrenaline and coffee had only gotten Keira so far. Now instead of being in awe of the beauty of nature, she saw her surroundings as sparse and somewhat bleak. The only living creatures she saw were sheep. There were old stone farmhouses dotted around that were abandoned, crumbling. Up in the hillsides, Keira also saw a derelict castle nestled within a smattering of trees and wondered how such a historic old building had been left to decay.

She began mentally taking notes for her article, remembering the cynical angle Elliot wanted her to take. Instead of seeing the beauty in the coastal view, she focused instead on the gray clouds. Instead of seeing the vast view over the ocean as miraculous, she instead decided to cast her gaze to the bleakness of the distant craggy mountains. Though it was stunningly beautiful on one hand, Keira felt that debunking the romance of Ireland wouldn't be that much of a challenge. She just needed to know where to look and how to twist things.

She passed through a handful of small, stone-walled towns. One was called Killinaboy and she laughed aloud, quickly texting a picture of the town sign to Zach, who she hoped would appreciate it.

She was so distracted by the amusing road sign, Keira almost didn't notice the next obstacle in the road – a herd of sheep! She slammed on the brakes and came to a halt just in time, stalling the car in the process. It took a long time for her terror to abate. She could have mown down a whole family of sheep!

Taking a moment to calm her heartbeat, Keira grabbed her phone and took a photo of the crowd of sheep's backsides, sending it to Zach with the caption: *the traffic here is a nightmare*.

Of course, she received no reply. Frustrated with his complete lack of interest, she sent the same pictures off to Nina and Bryn in turn. Both responded almost immediately with laughing emojis and Keira nodded, satisfied to know that at least someone in her life found her escapades interesting.

Keira revved the engine back to life and slowly overtook the convoy of sheep. They watched her pass with knowing expressions and she almost found herself apologizing aloud. The sky was starting to darken, making the drive feel even more precarious. It didn't help that the only buildings she saw were churches, with solemn statues of the Virgin Mary praying by the roadsides.

Finally, Keira arrived in Lisdoonvarna and was pleasantly surprised by what she saw. At least it looked like a place where people lived! There were streets where more than one house stood side by side, which gave it the feel of a town... almost. All the buildings, houses, and shops were so small and quaint, many barely a couple of feet away from the road, and they were painted in bright rainbow colors. Keira was glad to finally be somewhere that seemed like a community rather than just single dwellings connected by roads.

She slowed her car, following the street signs until she found the address she was looking for, the St. Paddy's Inn. The B&B was right on the corner of two roads, a three-story, dark red brick building. From the outside, it looked very Irish to Keira.

She parked in the small lot and leapt out, grabbing her bags from the trunk. She was exhausted and ready to get inside and rest.

But as she approached, she realized rest was not something she was about to get. Because even from here she could hear the sounds of merry conversation and rowdy debate. She could also hear the sound of live music, of violins, pianos, and accordions.

A bell over the door tinkled as she walked inside to find a small, dark pub with old crimson wallpaper and several round wooden tables. The place was filled to the brim with people, beers in hand. They looked over at her as if they could tell right away she didn't belong here, that she wasn't just a tourist, but an American.

Keira felt a little overwhelmed by the culture shock.

"What can I get yee?" a male voice said in a thick accent that Keira could hardly understand.

She turned to the bar to see an old man standing behind it. He had a wizened face and a tuft of gray hair sprouting from the center of an otherwise bald head.

"I'm Keira Swanson," Keira said, approaching him. "From *Viatorum* magazine."

"I can't hear yee! Speak up!"

Keira raised her voice over the live folk music and repeated her name. "I have a room booked here," she added when the man just looked at her with a blank frown. "I'm a writer from America."

At last the man seemed to understand who she was and why she was there.

"Of course!" he exclaimed, a smile spreading across his face. "From the paper with the fancy Latin name."

He had a warm aura about him, very grandfatherly, and Keira felt herself relax again.

"That's the one," she confirmed.

"I'm Orin," he said. "I own the St. Paddy. Live here too. And this is for you." Suddenly, a pint of Guinness was plonked onto the bar in front of Keira. "A traditional St. Paddy welcome."

Keira was taken aback. "I'm not much of a drinker," she laughed.

Orin gave her a look. "You are while you're in County Clare, my lass! You're here to let your hair down just like the rest of the locals. And anyway, we have to toast your safe journey! Thanks be to the Virgin Mary." He crossed his chest.

Keira felt a bit shy as she accepted the Guinness and took a sip of the strong, creamy liquid. She'd never tasted Guinness before and the flavor wasn't particularly agreeable to her. After just one sip she was certain she wouldn't be able to finish the entire pint.

"Everyone," Orin called out to the patrons in the pub, "this is the American reporter!"

Keira cringed as the whole pub turned around and began clapping and cheering like she was some kind of celebrity.

"We're so excited you're here!" a woman with frizzy hair said, leaning in a little too close and smiling a little too widely for Keira's comfort. Then in a lower voice she added, "You might want to wipe off your Guinness stash."

Feeling her cheeks burn with embarrassment, Keira quickly wiped the suds from her top lip. A second later, another of the pub's patrons had wedged her way forward, barging elbows with others on her way – not that anyone seemed to mind. Her drink spilled a little as she stumbled. "I can't wait to read your piece!"

"Oh, thanks," Keira said, shrugging. It hadn't occurred to her that the people here would want to read what she'd written about them. It might make the whole cynical angle a little harder for her to pull off.

"So what made you want to be a reporter?" the man next to her said.

"I'm just a writer," Keira said with a blush, "not a reporter."

"Just a writer?" the man exclaimed, speaking loudly and looking for the attention of the others around him. "You hear that? She says she's *just* a writer. Well, I can barely hold a pen so you're a genius as far as I'm concerned."

Everyone laughed. Keira nervously drank small sips of her Guinness. The Irish hospitality was very welcome but it was also a culture shock, and she found herself cringing, thinking of the myriad ways she could bash this place in her piece.

"I'll show you to your room," Orin said finally, once she'd managed to drink almost half the pint of Guinness.

She followed him up a creaking, narrow stairway and along a corridor with a threadbare carpet that smelled strongly of dust. Keira walked silently, taking it all in, constructing cutting sentences in her head as she observed the dated decor. The walls were decorated with framed, faded photographs of local soccer teams from the past and Keira smirked when she saw that the majority of the players shared the same surname, O'Sullivan. She took a discreet picture of the black-and-white soccer team and pinged it off to Zach with the caption: *Mr. O'Sullivan must have been a prolific breeder.*

"Here you go," Orin said, opening a door and showing her inside.

The room was awful. Though large, with a double bed and a huge window, it was decorated horribly. The wallpaper was a sort of peach color, stained in places as if from years of grubby handprints. The bed had a thin duvet on it, which was quilted but not in an endearing country-house way, more in a thrift store castaway way.

"This is the room with the desk," Orin said, grinning with pride, gesturing to a small wooden desk under the window. "For your writing."

Keira blushed. She was inwardly horrified at the thought of staying in the grimy room for an entire month, but she managed to squeeze out a grateful, "Thank you." So much for thinking she'd be able to slum it for a month!

"Do you want a bit of time to settle in before meeting Shane?" Orin asked.

Keira frowned, confused. "Who's Shane?"

"Shane Lawder. Your tour guide. For the festival," Orin explained.

"Of course," Keira said, remembering in Heather's notes she'd said there would be a tour guide. "Yes, please, I'd like to meet Shane." She had no desire to spend another minute in the room, so she dumped her bag on the bed and headed back down the creaking staircase.

"Shane!" Orin cried as he took his position back behind the bar.

To Keira's surprise, it was the fiddle player who responded. He put his instrument down – though the group of musicians he was playing with carried on as if nothing had happened at all – and came over.

Beneath his scraggly beard, Keira could tell he had a chiseled jawline. In fact, if it weren't for his hair, which desperately needed cutting, and scruffy clothing, Shane would be quite handsome. Keira felt guilty for thinking such a thing, especially since things with Zach were on such rocky ground at the moment, but she thought of Bryn's motto: *Ain't nothing wrong with looking.*

"You don't look much like a Joshua," Shane said as he shook her hand.

"Oh, didn't anyone tell you?" Keira said. "Something came up so I was sent instead. Sorry about that."

Shane gave her a cheeky look. "What are you apologizing about? I'd much prefer to spend thirty days with a fine-looking lady like you. No offense to this Joshua fellow, I'm sure he's attractive enough, but he doesn't sound like my type. You know, being male and all."

Keira gulped. She hadn't expected Irish men to be quite so forward. But she reminded herself of Zach and repeated the mantra in her head that she was just looking.

As Shane took a barstool beside her, Orin put a Guinness in front of each of them. Keira groaned silently. She couldn't handle this much alcohol!

Shane took a deep sip of his drink, then spread some documents onto the bar.

"The Festival of Love is thirty days long," he explained. "Most of the activities don't start until the evenings so I've prepared an itinerary of places we can visit while you're here, so you can get a better feel of the country as a whole. We'll start with the Burren for the mountain scenes, then the

Cliffs of Moher to look at the ocean, then we'll head over to the next county, Kerry, to the beautiful old stately home in Killarney, then onwards to Dingle."

"I thought you were just guiding me through the festival," Keira said. "Not the whole country!"

"You'll go crazy if you don't get a bit of space from Lisdoonvarna during the day," Shane explained. "The sheer amount of groups of people coming and going, it gets a little much."

Keira laughed silently to herself. She seriously doubted Lisdoonvarna was anywhere near as hectic during the festival as New York City was on any normal day.

"There's a lot of drinking," Shane continued. "Some of the parties go on until the early hours of the next day. I say some, but really it's most."

Keira thought of the rowdy stag party she'd shared the flight over with and wondered whether she was going to get any sleep over the next month at all.

"This looks great," she said, glancing over the itinerary. "But I will need some time each day to write. It can't be all fun and games."

Shane smirked at her. "You only just got here and you're already thinking about work?"

"I have to," Keira explained. "This is a really big deal for me. I don't want to screw it up."

"And not screwing it up equates to not letting your hair down?"

Keira wasn't in the mood to be challenged about her life choices. She'd had just about as much of that as she cared for from Zach and her mom.

"It just means setting aside time each day to write," she refuted, sounded a little huffy.

Shane's expression remained in an amused kind of smirk. He took a languorous swig from his pint. "You're one of those straight-laced types, aren't you?" he quipped. "All work and no play."

Keira gave him an unimpressed look. "I don't know how you can presume to know anything about me," she said. "You've known me for all of five minutes."

Shane just kept smirking. He didn't reply, as though the argument was already settled.

Keira tensed up. He was handsome, that was true, but if he carried on like this he was going to get on her nerves. She didn't know if she could handle thirty days of teasing and drinking and not getting any space to write.

Maybe this assignment was going to be harder than she'd expected.

*

Keira finally managed to excuse herself at midnight. She'd lost count of the number of Guinnesses Orin and Shane had sunk, but luckily for her they'd stopped cajoling her to keep up with them. Still, her head was spinning somewhat as she climbed the stairs to her room.

She shut the door, but the pounding sound of the music and merriment downstairs didn't cease. Keira felt fraught, like she was wound far too tightly. She checked her phone, but found that there was no message from Zach. He would definitely have had the time to read them by now. Which meant he was giving her the silent treatment. *How mature*, Keira thought.

At least she'd received responses from both Nina and Bryn, asking a myriad of questions. She texted Nina – who would be editing the piece – to tell her that her itinerary was filled to the brim and not to expect any work for a while. To Bryn, she texted a brief description of Shane's physical features and some flame emojis.

He's a pain, though. One of those arrogant guys who thinks it's endearing to tease you.

Bryn's reply came quickly. *It IS endearing.*

Keira laughed and put her phone away. The music downstairs was certainly going to keep her awake for some hours, so she may as well put in some time on her laptop. She took it from her bag and began writing an email to Elliot with some of her initial ideas for approaching the article. Thanks to all the Guinnesses, she found herself able to adopt an even snarkier tone that she'd anticipated.

If you've ever wondered what decades' worth of stale Guinness smooshed into a carpet smells like, then look no further than St. Paddy's Inn in Lisdoonvarna, County Clare. As an exotic American, my arrival here prompted an outpouring of suffocating Irish hospitality. I say suffocating, because turning down the offers of copious amounts of alcohol was simply not an option, hence the aforementioned stale Guinness smell that permeates every inch of this gritty, dark dive. In fact, the place is so saturated with Guinness the carpets, curtains, and wallpaper are all tacky to the touch. Let's just say I won't be surprised if the water of my morning shower (in the dated, cramped en suite) comes out black and frothy...

She continued in the same snarky tone. She knew it was mean to bash the B&B and the friendly people she had thus far met but she just couldn't help herself.

She finished up and hit send. Elliot replied almost immediately with a praising email.

Keep this up, Keira. It's gold!

Just then, Keira's phone rang. It was Bryn. Keira sighed, realizing she wasn't going to get any more work done tonight. She folded down her laptop and answered the call, climbing into bed as she did so.

"What's up?" she asked her sister.

"I just had a failure of a date," Bryn explained. "So I thought I'd call you for the lowdown on this hunky tour guide."

Keira laughed. "Well, he has too much hair. And his fashion sense sucks. But he would scrub up nicely."

"I think you should go for it," Bryn said.

Keira gasped, surprised by how forward Bryn was being, even for her. "What about Zach!" she laughed.

"What about him?" Bryn replied dismissively.

Keira groaned. "He's my *boyfriend*," she reminded Bryn. "And even if Shane got a haircut and a whole new wardrobe I wouldn't be able to spend more than five minutes in his company before throttling him."

Bryn laughed. "That's going to make the next few weeks a bit difficult, isn't it?"

"That and the fact that my room is above a pub that seems to have no closing time and a live folk band twenty-four/seven."

"That sounds amazing," Bryn refuted. "Jeez, Keira, you work so hard you can't even see what an exciting situation you're in! You've just told me the party never stops with a *groan*."

"You sound like Shane," Keira replied. "If I don't want to drink, dance, and be merry I don't have to!"

She and Bryn finished up their conversation, and Keira found that in spite of all the noise coming from downstairs, she was hardly able to keep her eyes open. So she settled down under the thin cover and rested her head against the lumpy pillow. There was still no response from Zach to any of her humorous texts. She tried calling him but the phone just rang and rang.

She checked Instagram and saw photos of Zach at Ruth's wedding. He was looking gorgeous in his suit, but his expression was so lonely. He seemed awkward standing there alone, and she felt bad not to be there with him. Maybe her mom had had a slight point. Turning up at weddings alone clearly was very embarrassing.

As she began to fall into slumber, Keira began dreaming that she was there at the wedding with Zach. Only it wasn't Zach, it was Shane, shaved and in a sharp suit. He looked more handsome than she'd even anticipated.

Keira woke herself with a start. Things were already complicated enough without her developing a crush on her tour guide!

She pushed all the thoughts from her mind and, finally, fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Did you sleep well?” Orin asked the second Keira descended the staircase early the next morning, emerging into the pub part of the B&B.

She rubbed her bleary eyes. “Yes, thanks.” The lie came so easily. Much better to pretend she loved her rickety bed, thin duvet, and lumpy pillows than to complain and have Orin fuss about it. She could write about it later, after all, and get some cathartic release that way.

“Take a seat and have some breakfast,” Orin said, leading her to a table and placing a coffee in front of her. It was swiftly followed by a bowl of oatmeal. He sat in the seat opposite. “I’ve made it the Irish way. I hope you like it.”

He was grinning rather widely.

“What’s the Irish way?” Keira murmured suspiciously.

She took a sip of the coffee and was surprised by how delicious it tasted. Whatever the Irish way was, it was good! Then she spooned some of her oatmeal into her mouth and almost cried out in delight. She’d never tasted anything so creamy, so utterly fantastic.

“Wow, what makes this taste so great?” Keira said, as she munched on another spoon of oatmeal. “Are the cows fed organic grass and milked by the hands of maidens?” she joked.

Orin’s grin grew wider. “Baileys in the coffee. And a splash of whiskey in the milk.”

Keira was shocked. “Liquor at eight a.m.?” she gasped. “Is that a good idea?”

Orin gave her a wink. “The best way to start the day. That and a brisk walk. Which you’ll get just as soon as I escort you to your meeting with William Barry, the head of the festival.”

Keira realized then that Orin was already ready to leave the B&B. He was wearing boots that reached halfway up his calves as if in anticipation of puddles. Or mud. Either way, Keira wasn’t in the mood for perambulating.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “I have SatNav in the car so I won’t get lost.”

Orin pointed at her coffee. “That’s not why I’m doing it.”

The cynical part of Keira’s mind wondered whether Orin had deliberately inebriated her in order to ensure she couldn’t refuse his offer of a walk. But she knew that was crazy thinking. Orin was just a gentle old man, proud of his town. He wanted to show it off to the cynical New Yorker he’d been lumped with.

“Come on,” Orin continued. “You’re here to get a real taste of Ireland! To live like a local! You won’t really know what our lives are like if you don’t walk a mile in our shoes!”

He yanked on her arm playfully, encouraging her to join him. His enthusiasm was quickly turning to cajoling and Keira realized there was literally no way of turning him down. Orin was going to make her walk to the meeting with him no matter what she said! There was no refusing.

Giving in, she downed the last of her boozy coffee, feeling the effects as soon as she stood. Then she and Orin left the dark B&B and emerged into the bright early morning sunshine. Even though the sky was a muted gray, Keira squinted against its harsh glare.

“Lead the way,” she said to Orin, as she glanced down the only path, a winding country road that snaked its way down the hillside. There were occasional buildings dotted on either side but it was mainly surrounded by lush green fields filled with sheep.

“It’s a two-mile walk to the town hall if we stick to the road,” Orin said. “But if we cut across the fields it’s half that distance. Of course, the farmer has every right to shoot us since we’d be trespassing but everyone around here knows everyone else so we’ll be fine.”

Keira gulped. “Let’s take the scenic route, huh?” she said.

“If you want,” Orin said nonchalantly, clearly not even picking up on her alarm.

They began strolling down the street. Despite the early hour, everyone they passed seemed so happy and friendly. When they reached the main street (if it could be called such) there was even a

small troupe of musicians playing fiddles and accordions, singing old folk songs. People danced and sang along. Keira couldn't really believe what she was seeing. How could a place be so collectively happy? Maybe she'd been wrong to make such harsh, snap judgments.

"Here we go," Orin said as they arrived at their destination.

Like all the buildings in Lisdoonvarna this one was brightly painted, a burnt orange color in this case, adding to the rainbow streets. A sign above the door proclaimed: Home of the Matchmaker. The door itself was covered in images of cupid.

Keira raised an eyebrow at the tacky decor, then followed Orin inside. An elderly gentleman rose from his desk and came toward her.

"William Barry," he said, extending a hand. "You're the American reporter."

Keira shook his hand. "I'm a travel writer, not a reporter."

"So this piece isn't going in the *New York Times*?" William asked, frowning.

Keira glanced appealingly at Orin. Had William been under the impression she worked for some huge organization? What if Heather had bent the truth a little as she'd organized this event, knowing that Josh would have been willing to lie and sweet talk his way to his goal?

Suddenly, Orin burst out laughing. Keira looked back at William. He was creased over with laughter as well.

"You should have seen the look on your face!" he exclaimed, his face turning bright red.

Keira wasn't quite able to see the funny side. There was too much at stake for her with her first real assignment that teasing was not exactly welcome.

"Take a seat, take a seat," William said as his laughter began subsiding.

Keira did, drawing up one of the wooden chairs and sitting at the desk. Orin sat beside her. Just as William sat down, a woman with fiery red hair entered holding a tray with a teapot, mugs, and a milk jug on it.

"This is my secretary, Maeve," William said as the woman put the tray down. "Thanks, dear."

She disappeared out of the room, leaving William to pour the cups of tea. It didn't matter that Keira wasn't much of a tea drinker, she felt unable to decline, and so she took the mug of steaming tea without protest.

William folded his hands across the table. "I must say we're ever so excited to have you here, Keira. With the way the world is changing and all these Internet dating sites, it's becoming harder and harder to get customers. I'm hoping your piece ignites some renewed interest."

Keira covered her guilty expression with her tea mug. She felt bad knowing that she was going to write such a cutting piece. William and Orin seemed like sweet, genuine people, and they'd treated her with such hospitality. But she had her assignment, had her instructions. She told herself that bashing a silly festival from halfway around the globe in a magazine that didn't even get imported to Ireland would hardly cause their business to fold.

"Do you know the history of the festival?" William continued.

"I did some research before I came," Keira said, nodding.

But as William launched into his monologue about the festival, she shut her mouth. Clearly she was going to be given the aural history whether she liked it or not.

"It was my father's business. His father's before that. In fact, the Barrys have been matchmakers for as long as anyone can remember. Way back then it was about matching the nobles who were visiting for the water with a beautiful young local girl. Irish girls are considered very prolific child bearers, you see, which was a matchmaker's main selling point."

Keira could hardly stop the look of disgust on her face. William didn't notice, however, and continued with his story.

"It would usually take place just after the harvest, when the girls were at their plumpest and their bosoms fullest. A good matchmaker would make sure the girls were married and whisked away before winter fell, since the chances were they'd get pneumonia and die over the winter."

Keira pressed her lips together to stifle a giggle. She couldn't tell how much of what William said was tongue in cheek but she had a slight inkling that he was deadly serious. Though she'd done her research, hearing the way William phrased it really was amusing.

"Then of course times changed. Different sorts came to the town. Wars depleted the male stock. The threat of famine made people desperate to marry young, and marry anyone. It was a hard time for the matchmaker. When I took over the business from my pa I was mainly paid by farm apprentices to match them with one of my local girls." He patted a book. "So I kept a list of them."

"Is that legal?" Keira said, finally breaking her stunned silence. "It sounds a bit stalkerish to me."

"Nonsense!" William laughed. "The girls loved it. They all want to get married. Even if it is to a farm hand with no brain cells to his name and terrible hygiene habits."

Keira just shook her head. Her article was writing itself!

Just then, the door opened. Keira was expecting to see the flame-haired Maeve again, but when she looked over her shoulder it was Shane she saw entering the building. She suddenly felt tingly all over and sat up, stiff-backed, in her chair.

"Morning," Shane said, taking a seat in the corner.

William continued. "Now here is my book of matches." He handed her a huge, hardback leather tome. "Well, one of them. I've been doing this for so many years now I've got quite the collection."

Keira began to thumb through the book, reading all the names of happy couples. Some included photos, others had dates of weddings. There were cards addressed to William from couples he had matched. It all looked very twee. Keira, ever calculating, began to formulate a paragraph for her article in her mind.

"You know," William said, leaning across the table toward her. "I could match you. Maybe a nice Irish lad is just what you need."

Keira felt her cheeks burn. "I have a boyfriend," she said. Maybe she imagined it, but out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Shane flinch. "Zach. He works in computers."

"You're happy with this man?" William asked.

"Yes, very," Keira replied, trotting out the old party line.

William didn't look convinced. He tapped the book that Keira had set down on the desk. "I've been doing this a long time. I'm an expert in love and I can see it in people's eyes. I'm not so certain this man is right for you."

Keira knew he wasn't trying to be rude, but his skepticism touched a nerve, especially with her and Zach arguing so much at the moment. But William was also journalism gold and she wanted as much out of him as possible.

"Not right for me in what way?" she pressed.

"He doesn't support you in the ways you need. You're no longer growing together, no longer following the same path."

Keira felt chills all over. This was far too close to the bone.

"You're a fortune teller as well as a matchmaker?" she quipped. "You hiding a bunch of tarot cards under there?"

William let out a belly laugh. "Oh no, nothing like that. But I have developed an intuition over the years. There was no sparkle in your eyes when you said his name. No lilt in your voice."

"I think that's just my cynical New Yorker personality," Keira said.

"Maybe. Or maybe it's because you don't really love him."

Keira pondered that statement. She and Zach rarely exchanged the L word. In fact, she couldn't even recall when they last had.

"I don't think love always has to come into these things," she said.

"But why waste your time with someone you don't love when you could be out looking for The One?"

Keira folded her arms. "Because maybe there isn't a 'One.'"

“You don’t believe in The One?” William pressed.

Keira shook her head. “Nope.”

This admission seemed to excite William. “We have a naysayer,” he exclaimed with a laugh. “Which means it’s our challenge to change your mind. Shane, lad?” He gestured for the tour guide to come over, which he did. Once he was standing beside him, William slung an arm across his shoulders. “You’ve been promoted,” he joked. “You’re no longer just to guide this young woman through the festival, you’re to guide her towards true love. I fear it may be a tall order!”

Keira shuffled uncomfortably in her seat. But despite her discomfort at being the center of the strange meeting, she knew she’d collected some excellent material for her article, thanks to the doddering old man and his antiquated opinions on relationships. Elliot was going to love this. And writing it, for Keira, would be somewhat therapeutic.

She just had to get through her first day with Shane and then she’d be able to purge herself of all this silliness by typing.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I don't know how long this trip we're going on is supposed to be," Keira said as she got into the passenger side of Shane's car and fiddled with her seat belt. "But I need a coffee ASAP. And if you could get me back with a few hours to spare before the festival kicks off that would be great. I need to get in some solid writing hours." She finally got buckled in. "So, where are we going?"

When she received no response from Shane she looked over to see him wearing his characteristic amused expression. She folded her arms. "What?"

He gave her a shrug. "Well, it's hardly the weather for sunglasses, that's all I was thinking."

Keira pushed her sunglasses resolutely against her nose. "There might be early morning glare," she replied, cringing at the haughtiness she heard in her voice. "And anyway, you're hardly one to judge someone else's attire. Did you even use a mirror to dress this morning?"

Shane tipped his head back and laughed with abandon. Keira felt her lips twitch with satisfaction, then checked herself. She'd just allowed herself to take one step closer toward flirting with him, which definitely was not part of the *ain't nothing wrong with looking* philosophy!

"I thought I would take you somewhere nearby to start off with," Shane told her as he accelerated onto the main street. "So I've chosen the Burren, which is only a twenty-minute drive. It's a national park. You heard of it?"

Keira shook her head. "I can't wait," she said as a mental picture formulated in her mind of a beautiful Irish scene.

She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw Shane smirk. When they pulled up in the parking lot of the Burren twenty minutes later she realized why. There wasn't a blade of grass in sight! The Burren was made of bleak, gray rock.

She turned to Shane, frowning. "Is this a prank? I thought you said it was a national park."

Shane started laughing. "It is! One and a half thousand hectares of protected land, consisting almost entirely of limestone."

Keira let out a sigh of exasperation. "So of all the places you could have taken me to show off the majesty of Ireland, you chose this."

"I picked up on some snooty vibes back at William's place," Shane said, raising a combative eyebrow. "I figured this would be the best place to take you to get you off your high horse. Ireland isn't some fantasy land filled with leprechauns, though there are some parts that play up the stereotypes for the sake of the tourists. But if you dig a little bit beneath the surface we're a country with real heart, real romance. We have a rich and interesting history, if you let yourself give us a chance."

Keira folded her arms. Everything he'd said about her was right, of course, but she wasn't about to admit that. "I'm not snooty," was all she said.

Shane just shrugged. "Come on, this way. The view from the top of the hill is incredible."

Keira followed. "I don't really have the appropriate footwear for a hike," she complained.

"Don't worry, I won't take us on the three-hour mountain trek, although it's breathtaking and a shame to miss out on." He gave her a withering look. "Think you can handle a half hour loop? It'll take us through meadows and some amazing woodland."

"Yes, I think I can I manage thirty minutes," Keira muttered.

"I meant without killing me," Shane laughed.

He seemed to enjoy winding Keira up.

"I feel like we've gotten off to a bad start," Keira said as she tried to keep up with his brisk pace. She wasn't used to hilly walks. "Have I said something to insult you?"

At first, Shane ignored the question. Instead, he pointed to a wooden stake in the ground with several colorful arrows on it. "We're following the orange trail, okay?"

Keira nodded. They continued ascending the gray hillside. The landscape was so barren Keira felt as if she were walking on the surface of the moon. The craggy craters on either side of her added further to the illusion. When she saw a tuft of grass – somehow growing through a crack in the rock – it gave her a bit of a shock to think that grass could grow on the moon. She had to remind herself that this place was actually on Earth.

“Well?” Keira pressed. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“About whether we got off on the wrong foot or not?” Shane said. Then he chewed his bottom lip in contemplation. “Why does it matter?”

“Because we have thirty days to spend together so we may as well get along.”

Shane fell silent again. Keira couldn’t help but feel frustrated by the amount of time it took him to answer a question. She wasn’t comfortable with the silences he was constantly bestowing on her. It made her feel awkward.

“I wonder,” he said finally, “if you just don’t like the idea that someone might not like you.”

“Excuse me?” Keira felt instantly insulted by his comment and immediately put up a defensive front.

“You have one of those nice-guy complexes. You expect everyone to find your quirky Americanness charming and I don’t.”

“*Me* charming?” Keira scoffed. “You’re the one with the whole cheeky Irish chappy thing going on!”

“That bothers you?”

“It’s an infuriating stereotype.”

Keira could hear herself growing snappy. In complete contrast, Shane’s tone hadn’t changed at all. He was completely neutral, as though the conversation wasn’t even remotely irksome.

“I think you’re finding a lot more than just me infuriating,” Shane said. “I mean, you weren’t that nice to William.”

“And?” Keira scoffed. “I’m here to work, not make friends. And I feel no obligation to be nice to someone with such old-fashioned ideas about love. It annoys me when people think they know exactly what men and women want from one another.”

Shane raised his eyebrows. “For someone who says they’re happy in their long-term relationship you seem very hostile towards the concept of love.”

Keira shot him a look. “It’s not love that’s the problem. It’s this idea that it’s a picture-perfect thing. That some old man who’s never met you in your life can just match you to someone else he doesn’t know from Adam, and then you’ll fall instantly in love and stay that way forever and ever. Real life isn’t like a novel.”

Even as she spoke, Keira could tell that Shane was enjoying her reaction. He was deliberately winding her up. *Two can play that game*, Keira thought.

“So you’re a romantic then?” she said. “Is that what you’re telling me? I suppose you’ve only ever been with your high school sweetheart and plan on marrying her.”

Suddenly, Shane fell silent, and Keira could tell she’d accidentally spoken out of turn. She snapped her lips shut, knowing not to press it any further.

They reached the top of the hill and an incredible view opened up before Keira. It was like looking at the cooled lava of a volcano, or the surface of an asteroid. Keira had never seen anything quite like this alien landscape, and never had she felt so small or insignificant.

For the first time since arriving, Keira felt a new sense of humbleness. Maybe Elliot *had* made a mistake sending her to Ireland. Joshua would never have come over all sentimental at the sight of a beautiful, mystical landscape. He’d remain cynical and cold just like Elliot needed him to be. But Keira herself could feel something in her core softening. For the first time since arriving in Ireland she felt as though something in its bleak barrenness had touched her.

“Come on,” Shane said, his voice lacking all of the joviality she’d become accustomed to. “Let’s go.”

“Can we stay a bit longer?” Keira asked.

“I thought you needed a coffee.”

“It can wait.”

They stood side by side, silent, watching the world. There was no one around for miles, not another living soul. Keira couldn’t recall any other point in her life when she’d been in such a remote location. Back home in New York City she was always surrounded by people, by noise and civilization. But here there was just nature in its starkest form.

“Did I say something to upset you?” Keira asked Shane.

It had been a good ten minutes since he’d uttered a word. It felt so strange to not hear him taking a swipe at her.

“Actually, yes,” Shane said finally.

“Oh.” Keira hadn’t been expecting such candor. In some ways it was refreshing. But the brutal truth could be just that: brutal. “I’m sorry for whatever it was I said.”

Shane looked at her for the first time in a long time. “I’m not sure you are.”

He began walking again, descending now, leaving Keira standing, floundering on the precipice of the world. She finally pulled herself together and followed.

“That’s not fair,” she said, stepping up beside him, swinging her arms in wide arcs in order to keep up.

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