

A romantic scene at sunset. The lower legs and feet of a couple are visible, standing on a wooden boardwalk. The man is wearing dark trousers and black sneakers with white laces. The woman is wearing a red top and black sneakers with white soles. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, warm glow and long shadows. The background is softly blurred, showing a railing and trees.

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES (BOOK #2)

LOVE

LIKE

THAT

SOPHIE LOVE

The Romance Chronicles

Sophie Love

Love Like That

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2017

Love S.

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2017 — (The Romance Chronicles)

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Keira Swanson, 28, returns to New York, her head spinning from her Ireland trip and still madly in love with Shane. But when a surprise event comes between them, their relationship may have to end. Keira is a star at her magazine, though, and they give her their next plum assignment: to travel to Italy for 30 days and discover what the Italian secret is to love. Keira, still reeling from her Ireland trip, finds her high expectations for Italy dashed, as nothing at first goes as was planned. In her whirlwind trip through Italy, spanning Naples, the Amalfi Coast, Capri, Rome, Verona, Venice and Florence, Keira begins to wonder if the Italians really do hold a secret to love. That is, until she meets her new tour guide—and everything she thought she knew is turned on its head. A whirlwind romantic comedy that is as profound as it is funny, LOVE LIKE THAT is book #2 in a dazzling new romance series that will make you laugh, cry, and will keep you turning pages late into the night—and will make you fall in love with romance all over again.

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Sophie Love

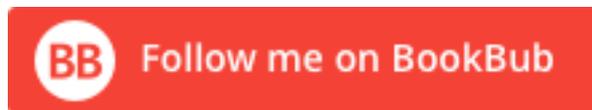
Love Like That

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!



BOOKS BY SOPHIE LOVE

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR

FOR NOW AND FOREVER (Book #1)

FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS (Book #2)

FOREVER, WITH YOU (Book #3)

IF ONLY FOREVER (Book #4)

FOREVER AND A DAY (Book #5)

FOREVER, PLUS ONE (Book #6)

FOR YOU, FOREVER (Book #7)

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES

LOVE LIKE THIS (Book #1)

LOVE LIKE THAT (Book #2)

LOVE LIKE OURS (Book #3)

CHAPTER ONE

Keira awoke on Bryn's lumpy couch with a crick in her neck and freezing feet. The temperature in New York City was growing chilly, with fall in the air. But despite the lumpy couch and the shivers, Keira woke in the best mood ever.

Today, October 22nd, Keira was going back to work in her new, more senior and better paid role at *Viatorum* magazine. She was looking forward to seeing Nina, her friend and editor at the magazine, and was itching to get back to her passion of writing again. What her next assignment would be she did not yet know, but she was certain it wouldn't be quite as exhilarating as her last month in Ireland.

Elliot was bound to give her something a little more low-key this time and Keira was absolutely fine with that. She'd barely had time to readjust to life back in New York City, to catch up with her friends and mom. And besides, Shane was coming to visit in a week and that was something Keira was far more excited about than jet-setting.

Just then, her older sister, Bryn, rushed into the living room, her hair a mess, hopping with one shoe on, one shoe off.

"I'm late for work," Bryn stammered. "Why didn't you wake me?"

Keira checked the clock.

"Because it's seven. You don't have to leave for an hour." She laughed at her perpetually scatterbrained sister.

Bryn stopped and squinted at the clock, then did a double take. "Oh yeah." She kicked off her one shoe and came and sat next to Keira on the couch. "I really thought I'd be better at life by the time I hit thirty," she mused.

Keira smiled. "Never."

Growing up was not something either of the Swanson sisters were in a rush to do.

Bryn leaned over then and nudged Keira. "So... first day back at work after your break. How are you feeling?"

"I feel good," Keira said. "It's going to be different without Joshua there to ruin everyone's mood. Mainly I'm looking forward to seeing Nina again. And of course, I'm excited to find out what Elliot's planning for me to write next."

"Will it be another trip abroad?" Bryn asked.

"I doubt it," Keira replied. "Although I could certainly do with some sun!" She laughed and cast her gaze out the window at New York City's gray October clouds.

"And your own bed again," Bryn joked, patting the couch.

"About that..." Keira began. "You know I'm not planning on being here forever. It's just taking a little longer than I thought it would to find an apartment. And I kind of need the deposit back from the place with Zach before I can. You know how much he's been dragging his feet."

"It's fine," Bryn said, waving away Keira's explanation. "Stay as long as you need. Just don't judge me for the men I bring home." She gave Keira a withering look. "I've seen the way you look at me sometimes."

Keira laughed. "I just think if you could really see how beautiful you are you wouldn't waste so much time with ugly men."

Bryn rolled her eyes. "Enough of that. So, why don't you think you'll be going abroad again?"

"I don't know." Keira shrugged. "Because it wouldn't be fair to the other writers, for starters. It would look like favoritism."

"Don't forget you're in a senior position now," Bryn told her. "And favoritism is a very schoolyard word to use. It's business. If you're better than the others, you're better than the others. Learn to accept it."

Keira didn't share her sister's confidence. She squirmed uneasily. "Well anyway, even if it was abroad I wouldn't be able to go." She thought of Shane and smiled dreamily. "I have plans here."

"Ah yes," Bryn said, smirking. "The *boyfriend*. How long until he arrives?"

Keira's mind conjured up the image of Shane's gorgeous face – the stubble on his chiseled jaw, those amazing Irish blue eyes – and flitted through a myriad of wonderful memories from the month they'd spent falling in love.

"A week," she said through a dreamy exhalation, thinking of the sensation of his lips on hers, the touch of his fingers against her skin. "Which reminds me, I should call him."

It would be approaching midnight in Ireland where Shane lived, and so it would be her last chance to speak to him before he went to bed. Then she'd have to endure an eight-hour-long Shane absence while he was sleeping. No texts, no cheeky messages or funny quips. Those eight hours were almost unbearable for her at the moment, so strong was her craving for him.

"You call him every morning?" Bryn asked, surprised.

Keira picked up the hint of disdain in her sister's voice. She was a perpetual singleton and serial dater, which made her suspicious of anyone who claimed to have found love.

"Yup," Keira replied. "You're usually snoring so you don't notice."

"Well, I think that's unhealthy," Bryn began. "You're already too reliant on him."

Keira rolled her eyes as she stood. Bryn liked nothing more than to be a know-it-all, despite being a rather dismal role model. And if she only knew, Kyra thought, if she could only witness what she and Shane had together, she wouldn't be so sure of herself.

Keira took her phone into the bathroom, knowing it would be the only place where she could get any privacy in Bryn's pokey apartment, then dialed Shane's number. The usual thrill of excitement ran through her body as she waited, listening to the dial tone, in anticipation of hearing Shane's beautiful voice again. She couldn't wait to tell him about all the exciting things she had planned for his visit, all the sights of New York she was planning on showing him, from sampling food along Restaurant Row to river walks in Tribeca, the Tenement Museum, the gardens in Battery Park, the apple farm upstate and art galleries in Chelsea. Her itinerary was packed to the brim and she knew Shane would be just as excited to experience the city as she was to show it off.

Finally the call connected and Keira felt her heart soar. But rather than his usual chirpy voice, Shane sounded strained. And rather than answering the call with a silly over-the-top pet name like bunny or petal, he used her actual name.

"Keira, hey," he said, sounding weary, like he'd had the worst day imaginable.

Keira's elation immediately turned to anguish. In the background she could hear unfamiliar noises, lots of conversations, and ringing telephones.

"What's happened?" she asked, starting to feel panicked. "Where are you?"

"Hospital."

"Oh my God, why?" Keira's heart began to race with terror, her mind going into overdrive. "Are you hurt? Sick?"

"It's not me," Shane said. "I'm fine. It's my dad."

Keira brought a picture of Shane's father, Calum Lawder, to the forefront of her mind. He was one of the kindest, sweetest people she'd ever had the privilege of meeting. To think something had happened to him was awful.

"Is he okay? Tell me what's going on."

Shane sighed deeply. "He'll be fine now they've operated."

Keira felt her bones turn to ice. "*Operated?*" she cried.

"I've been in Accident and Emergency all day. He had a heart attack. They had to put a stent in. It's a miracle he's alive. If it hadn't have been for the fact there was a heart surgeon in the hospital this morning for a scheduled appointment he wouldn't have made it."

“Oh, Shane, I’m so sorry,” Keira replied, feeling her chest clenching with anguish. She wished she could reach inside the phone and pluck Shane through it, smother him in care and affection. “How is your mom? Your sisters?”

“We’re okay,” Shane replied. “Still all in shock, to be honest. Especially Hannah.”

Keira thought of Shane’s youngest sister, the golden-haired sixteen-year-old she’d bonded with in particular. “Poor kid,” she replied. Suddenly now didn’t seem like the time to discuss Shane’s upcoming visit. It didn’t feel right to talk about all their exciting plans after the scare Shane had just experienced. “How is Calum now?”

“He’s awake and joking around, but I can tell he’s just trying to put on a brave face for the rest of us.”

“I’m so sorry, babe,” Keira said. “I wish I could be with you to support you, but I guess I’ll just have to store up all my hugs for the next week until you arrive.”

On the other end of the phone, Shane was silent. All Keira could hear were the ringing telephones of the busy hospital, beeping machines, the faint sound of sirens, and the general hustle and bustle of medical staff completing their duties.

“It sounds chaotic there,” she added when Shane still remained mute.

“Keira,” he said, cutting off the end of her sentence.

Keira didn’t like the sound of his tone. She got the distinct impression that Shane was about to break bad news.

“What...?” she asked, drawing the sound of the word out like it was a wince.

“I’m going to have to cancel the trip,” Shane stated.

Keira could tell he was devastated just by the sound of his voice. Her own voice dropped into a pained whisper. “Really?”

“I’m sorry,” Shane responded. “But I have to be here. For Mum and the girls. They’re in pieces right now. I would feel like a jerk if I swanned off to New York City and left them all.”

“But it’s not for a week,” Keira replied. “Won’t things have calmed down by then? Calum will be back on his feet. And you won’t be away for that long anyway. Only a week. It’s not like you’re staying for a month or anything crazy like that. They’ll be fine without you for a few days. I mean, they cope without you once a year when you’re doing your tour guide thing in Lisdoonvarna.”

She could tell she was rambling now, and coming across as more than a little desperate. But she’d been so looking forward to seeing Shane again, to bringing him into her world like he’d had the chance to do for her in his. Waiting was so difficult, the absence so painful to endure. Not to mention all the money she’d put toward his flights, everything she’d splurged on – all those prebooked activities that didn’t have cancellation policies. She could have used her bonus from Elliot toward her accommodations instead of staying on Bryn’s couch ruining her back. Could she even afford to reschedule the trip? It wasn’t like Shane had much money that he could contribute.

“My dad almost died, Keira,” Shane told her bluntly. “It’s not the same thing as me spending a month away from home once a year.”

“I know,” she said, meekly. “I don’t mean to be selfish. It’s just that I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too,” Shane replied, sighing deeply.

Keira’s throat felt thick with unhappiness. But she didn’t want to dwell, especially when it hadn’t been *her* relative in the ER. She made the decision to brighten up.

“I suppose there’s nothing to be done,” she said, sounding calmer than she really felt. “Let’s just sort out a date now so we don’t leave the trip in limbo. I don’t know how well I’ll cope not being able to count down the days.” She chuckled, trying to give the impression that she was way more okay than she really felt.

Once again, there was no reply from Shane. In the space where his voice should be, Keira could instead only hear the sound of a receptionist giving someone directions to the kidney dialysis ward.

“Shane?” she asked, timidly, when she’d had just about enough of the silence as she could stand.

Finally he spoke.

“I don’t think I can book another date,” Shane told her.

“Because of your dad? Shane, he’ll be better before you know it. Back on his feet, back to running the farm. I promise you, by November everything will be back to normal. Or if you prefer we could aim for December. That gives him ages to get back to work.”

“Keira,” Shane interrupted.

She snapped her lips shut, stopping the stream of consciousness that she knew she was engaging in as an avoidance tactic, to delay what she feared was coming next, a way of pausing the terrible inevitability of what Shane was about to say.

“I can’t come,” he stated. “Ever.”

Keira felt her hands begin to shake. Her phone felt suddenly clammy in her hand, like she didn’t have a proper grip on it.

“Then I’ll come to Ireland,” she said, meekly. “I don’t mind being the one to travel if you don’t feel able to. I loved Ireland. I can come to you again.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Keira knew what he meant, but she didn’t want to believe it. She wasn’t about to let Shane give up at the first hurdle. Their love was greater than that, more important and special. She’d have to convince him otherwise, even if it meant sounding desperate or becoming, in Bryn’s words, too reliant.

She listened to the sound of Shane take a deep, sad inhalation. “I’m needed on the farm, with my family. Ireland is my home. I can’t move anywhere else.”

“No one’s talking about moving,” Keira replied.

“But we will be, soon enough,” Shane said. “If we want our relationship to work, at some point we’re going to have to live in the same country. I can’t move there. You won’t move here.”

“I could,” Keira stammered. “I’m sure I could. At some point.”

She thought of the beautiful country she’d fallen in love with. She could certainly live there if it was necessary to be with Shane.

“On a farm?”

“Sure!”

The cute farmhouse filled with love and family was a wonderful draw for Keira. Her own family was fragmented, with Bryn always busy, her mom living miles away, and her father completely absent from her life. What wasn’t there to love about the instant family Shane could provide her with?

“With my family? My sisters? My parents?” Shane questioned her. “And all those sheep?”

Keira remembered the sheep dung she’d found herself knee deep in. She thought of Shane’s six sisters, who were all lovely but all still living at home. It would be a squeeze. Hardly the life she’d expected for herself. But neither was sleeping on Bryn’s couch. If she could put up with living with her own sister then she could definitely put up with living with all six of Shane’s! And wasn’t life supposed to be about overcoming the challenges it threw at you? Wasn’t it about embracing the crazy?

“Shane,” Keira replied, trying to sound soothing. “We don’t need to work this stuff out right now. Life changes. Who knows, all your sisters might get married and move out. Your parents might decide to sell the farm and sail around the world on a yacht. You can’t predict the future so let’s just stop worrying about it.”

“Please listen,” Shane replied, his voice cracking with emotion. “I’m trying to end it now so that it doesn’t become even more painful than it already is, later down the road.”

The word *end* repeated in Keira’s mind, like a hammer on steel. She winced, the painful lump in her throat growing even bigger and harder than it already was.

It dawned on her then for the first time that Shane’s mind was made up. He wasn’t backing down. Nothing she said would change his mind.

“Don’t do this,” Keira replied. Suddenly she was crying, sobbing loudly, uncontrollably, as it finally sunk in that Shane wasn’t going to back down. That he really was breaking up with her. Her One. The love of her life.

“I’m sorry,” he replied, crying too. “I have to. Please understand. If we didn’t have this ocean between us I would want to be with you all the time. I may even want to marry you.”

“Don’t say that!” Keira wailed. “You’re just making it worse.”

Shane exhaled loudly. “I need you to know how much you mean to me, Keira. I don’t want you to think that I just got cold feet or something. If we weren’t at this impasse I wouldn’t be doing it at all. It’s not what I want. Not even slightly. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Keira replied, her tears falling bitterly from her eyes. She understood loud and clear. The man of her dreams, a man who loved her and made her laugh every single day, was giving up on her just because things were a little complicated. The man she’d fallen so deeply in love with during the most transformative month of her life was giving up at the first hurdle. He wasn’t going to put the hard work into their relationship after all. The thoughts swirled bitterly in Keira’s mind.

“So I guess this is goodbye?” she said, coolly.

Shane must have picked up on her sudden dejected tone. “Don’t be like that,” he said. “We can stay in touch. We can be friends. There’s always social media. It’s not like I’m cutting you out of my life entirely.”

“Of course,” Keira replied, heavyhearted, knowing that even with the best of intentions, once-loving relationships rarely if ever successfully turned into platonic friendships. It just didn’t work that way. Once love was lost, it was gone, at least in Keira’s experience.

“Are you mad at me?” Shane asked, his voice sounding small and fragile.

“No,” Keira replied, realizing it to be true. Shane’s reasons for ending it were noble. He was putting his family first. They were exactly the type of qualities she needed from a partner, so it would be a bit unfair of her to begrudge him it. “I think you should go and be with your family now,” she added. “Give everyone a hug from me, will you?”

“Okay,” Shane replied.

Keira wasn’t sure, but she got the distinct impression from the way he said it that he knew she wasn’t expecting to ever speak to him again. He sounded crushed.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Goodbye, Keira,” Shane said finally.

Before she had a chance to reply, the call went dead. She removed her phone from her ear and stared at it in her hand. How could such a small chunk of metal and computer chips cause her to feel like the entire world had fallen away beneath her feet? How could one conversation turn her life upside down? She felt like every ounce of happiness she’d ever felt had been sucked through the phone’s speakers and spat out into some black abyss, never to be seen again.

And worst of all, Keira couldn’t even be angry. Shane hadn’t been a jerk like every other boyfriend she’d broken up with had. There was no cheating, no lying, no screaming matches or deliberate below the belt punches. Perhaps that was why it hurt so much more. Perhaps it was because she’d let herself get carried away thinking Shane could be the One, that anyone could be the One.

Her tears still falling, Keira left the bathroom and threw her phone onto the couch. Bryn, who was standing at the breakfast bar brewing coffee, flinched with surprise.

“What’s wrong?” Bryn asked. “Are you crying?”

Ignoring Bryn’s questioning, Keira grabbed her fall itinerary off the side table – glancing briefly at the list of events she’d planned for her and Shane, places where they were supposed to make precious memories to tell the grandchildren – and ripped it clean in half.

CHAPTER TWO

Bryn scooped her arm around Keira's shoulder as the younger of the two sisters wept bitterly. "You've done the right thing," Bryn soothed. "I know it won't seem that way right now, but trust me. You were getting in way too deep. You're twenty-eight, Keira, it's not time to settle down."

Her words did little to comfort Keira. Who exactly was Bryn to talk? Her life had been a series of disastrous relationships. She had no idea what kind of love Keira and Shane had found, and now lost. Sobs made her whole body shake.

"Come on," Bryn added, "Let's go get a coffee. I'll call Mom. You know how great she is with all this stuff."

Keira couldn't disagree more. Her mom, unlike Bryn, seemed to be in a rush to get her to settle down and have babies. She'd gone so far as to say that there was little point in Keira putting so much energy into her career when she'd be giving it all up in a couple of years anyway to have kids.

She shook her head. "I can't, I have to get to work."

Bryn pulled a face. "Babe, you are a wreck. They won't want you there in this state. You're no good to anyone."

"Thanks," Keira muttered. "But I can't not go in. First day back after a break. New senior position. Elliot's going to be in the office. He'll be expecting me to step up my game."

While she was speaking, Bryn reached over and plucked Keira's phone from her hands.

"Hey!" Keira protested.

Bryn tapped some buttons and then triumphantly placed the cell on the coffee table. "Done."

"What?" Keira cried, horrified, snatching it up. "Did you just request a sick day for me? I've never taken a sick day! You're so unprofessional. I can't believe you'd do that."

But when she scrolled through the most recent actions on her phone, she saw that it wasn't work whom Bryn had contacted, but instead Nina, Keira's friend and editor at the magazine. She read through the message that Bryn had sent her.

Shane dumped me. My life is over. Help.

Keira rolled her eyes, unimpressed, and fixed a death-glare at her sister. Bryn just shrugged cheekily. A second later, Keira's phone buzzed with an incoming message from Nina.

It's going to be okay. I'll tell Elliot we're having a meeting outside the office. Coffee in ten?

Keira's expression softened. Maybe Bryn had some uses after all.

"Nina's going to come and meet me," she said, stowing the phone away. "Happy now?"

"Yes," Bryn replied. "Now I just have to quickly tell my boss I'm not coming in today."

"You don't have to do that."

"Oh please, any excuse," Bryn said.

Keira gave in. There was no arguing with Bryn sometimes. Even though her sister wasn't always the most comforting shoulder to cry on, she was good at putting herself first and that practice occasionally worked in Keira's favor.

Several minutes later, the sisters left the apartment together, wrapped in their warmer fall clothes, and headed down the street to the coffee shop they'd agreed to meet Nina in. It was still very early. When they arrived, the coffee shop had only just opened up for the day. They were the first inside.

Bryn ordered flat whites and skinny muffins for them both and led Keira to the squishy leather couch. A moment later, Nina walked in.

"Keira," she said, her expression pained.

She sat down and hugged Keira tightly, which made her feel instantly comforted. Maybe skipping work had been a good idea after all, though she reminded herself not to make a habit of it. It was beyond unprofessional, even if Bryn and Nina didn't seem to think so. Keira probably didn't have

too much to worry about; she was on the verge of committing herself to a life of celibacy anyway so there was very little chance of her taking a heartbreak day ever again...

“God, I can’t believe Shane has been such a jerk,” Nina began.

Keira shook her head. “It’s not like that.”

Nina shot her a deadpan expression. “How is it not like that? He manipulated you into thinking you’d fallen in love with him and then a week before you’re supposed to reunite he dumps you?”

“Well, if you put it like that,” Keira said. “But trust me, that’s not what happened. His dad got sick. It made him, I don’t know, reevaluate things.” She felt tears threatening to choke her again. “But can we please not do this? I don’t want to be put in a position where I have to defend the guy who’s just broken my heart.”

Nina paused, seemingly deliberating over her request. “Maybe this is all for the best,” she said. “Elliot will probably be sending you abroad for a new assignment soon anyway. Maybe you’ll meet a new guy. An ever better guy.”

“That’s the last thing I want right now,” Keira replied glumly, sinking her chin onto her fist. “I don’t know how much more my heart can handle. Straight from Zach to Shane to someone else who’ll just treat me like crap? I don’t think so. I was right before to put all my focus on my career. It’s not like my job will tell me that if things were different it might have married me.”

Nina winced. “Shane said that?”

Keira nodded, feeling sadder and more dejected than ever.

Nina gave her another squeeze around the shoulders. “You’re young. Too young to settle. There’s a big world out there and you’ve only seen a fraction of it.”

“Thank you,” Bryn agreed. “That’s what I’ve been telling her. She’s still in her twenties, for God’s sake. Wait until you hit three-oh at least.”

Nina raised an eyebrow. “Make that four-oh,” she said, witheringly. “Plus a few more for luck. I’m in no hurry to settle down. Despite what the media might be telling me about my biological clock.”

“The media?” Keira quipped. “You mean like us? We are journalists after all. It’s our job to make people think they want things. Like love,” she added bitterly.

Nina laughed and Keira felt a little better. She glanced out the window at the busy New York City streets, filled with people on their way to work, people on their way home from all-night raves, people dressed in expensive suits, others in witty slogan T-shirts. She could see so many races and nationalities, and every conceivable hairstyle. They hurried along, battling against the cold winds that fall had brought in.

As she studied them, Keira realized just how much she loved her city. She’d never have been happy living in Ireland. Shane had been right about that. Moving away just wasn’t an option for her. She was New York through and through. The city practically ran through her blood.

She turned her attention back to Nina and Bryn.

“So, how did Elliot take my absence from the office today?” she asked Nina, more than ready to change the topic of conversation.

Nina stirred her coffee. “Honestly, he seems a little distracted today. I overheard him having a heated conversation on the phone the other night when I was working late. I think there might be someone trying to buy out the magazine.”

Keira raised her eyebrows in surprise. “That wouldn’t happen, though. Elliot wouldn’t sell. He loves *Viatorum*. Too much sometimes.”

Nina just shrugged and took a sip of her coffee. “Sometimes it’s not about how much you love something. If one of the big companies is going to start up a rival magazine, copy our model but use all their financial assets and connections to push themselves and bury us, he won’t have any other option but to sell. Sometimes the only way an independent like *Viatorum* can stay viable is for the boss like Elliot to make compromises over ownership.”

“But it would be like taking a demotion for him, wouldn’t it?” Keira asked. “He’d go from owning it outright to just, what, managing it?”

Nina tilted her head to the side. “It’s not all bad. He could make more money this way. He’d just have higher-ups to answer to. He’d probably lose some creative freedom.” She shrugged again. “Actually, he’d definitely lose some creative freedom.”

Keira chewed her lip, considering Nina’s premonition. Why did things always have to change so quickly? This morning she’d woken up with a loving partner and an awesome job. Now she was sitting tear-stained and depressed in a coffee shop, back on the market and worrying about her employment situation.

“Well, that’s one way to take my mind off Shane,” Keira said wryly to Nina.

“Oh God, sorry,” Nina said. “I didn’t mean to worry you. I’m sure nothing will change for you, or me, or anyone else for that matter. Just Elliot really. I’ve been through buy-outs before, countless times, in fact. It’s usually pretty unnoticeable for most of the staff.”

Keira pursed her lips. “We’ll see,” she replied.

Nina looked a little panicked, Keira thought, and she watched as her friend made eye contact with Bryn as if trying to prompt her to take over. Bryn suddenly lit up as though she’d been struck with a thought.

“I have an amazing idea,” she said, her eyes widening.

“Why do I get the feeling I am not going to like this one bit?” Keira replied, narrowing her own.

“There’s this awesome party thing at Gino’s tonight, you know, that authentic Italian restaurant in the city,” Bryn said. “It’s Halloween themed. Actually, it’s All Souls’ Day themed, which is an Italian holiday I’ve never heard of but it sounds super creepy and they’re taking it really seriously at Gino’s. It’s going to be half masquerade ball, half gothic meal. It sounds crazy but in a super cool way.”

Keira squinted her eyes further. Bryn was blabbering. “Go on...” she urged her sister.

“Here’s the thing,” Bryn said. “I was invited there for a date by this guy I met the other night, Malcolm. He wanted to see what it was all about, you know, something different to try. I obviously said sure, you know me, I’ll try anything once. Anyway, so he mentioned today that he has a friend who’s single and wondered if I knew anyone to double date with. I was going to invite Tasha, but why don’t you and I go instead? Now you’re back on the market.”

Keira didn’t even need a second to consider Bryn’s proposition. She shook her head with an emphatic no. “Absolutely not,” she said.

Nina leaned forward, seemingly on board. “I know this amazing costume store,” she said. “You could get a full-on ball gown, gloves, mask, the lot.”

Keira shot her a withering glance. “Why don’t you go on the double date if you’re so into the idea?”

Nina closed her mouth. Bryn took over as lead cajoler again.

“Just come for the food at least,” Bryn said. “Free meal. Fancy food. Dancing. Just think of it as a night out for the two of us, with just a couple of guys tagging along footing the bill. You don’t even have to tell them your real name if you don’t want to, or even take off your mask. It could be a night of anonymity. You could invent a whole new persona.”

Keira laughed. “Let me guess, you’ve done that before?”

Nina jumped in then. “Please, darling, everyone’s done that before. If you haven’t been on a date and pretended you work for the FBI or that you’re an heir to a billion-dollar inheritance then you haven’t really lived.”

Shaking her head, Keira glanced out the window again. She looked at the people milling through the streets. Some of the stores already had Halloween decorations in their windows. She spotted a goth couple walking down the street – the woman in a black lace dress carrying a parasol, the man on a leather lead. Only in New York City, she thought to herself, amused.

Life was supposed to be about embracing the crazy, she reminded herself. Hadn't she told herself that exact thing just this morning?

"Fine," she said, turning back to Bryn with a sigh of resignation. "I'll come to your ball."

*

Bryn was right about one thing, Keira discovered later that evening; Gino's looked amazing. The whole restaurant had been decorated to look like a gothic castle, the tables pushed to the perimeter so that the middle part was a dance floor. There was an incredibly creepy vibe, with old Italian folk music, waiters in velvet suits, and of course, everyone in masquerade masks.

If it had just been the two of them, Keira would have had a great night. But unfortunately, they were sharing their evening with Malcolm, Bryn's date, and Glen, Keira's date. They must have been two of the most boring men in the world.

Keira forked her pasta, barely able to keep herself awake, as Glen explained more details about his career in accounting. Work chat annoyed Keira at the best of times, but when it involved math the boringness was stepped up another notch. Not to mention he hadn't actually asked her a single question about *her* job.

There was a sudden lull in the conversation and Keira sat up as though startled awake.

"So, what do you do in your spare time?" she asked Glen, desperate to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Glen took a long time to answer, another thing Keira took as a bad sign. Who didn't know what hobbies they had? Or what they enjoyed doing other than their jobs?

"I watch sports," he said, finally.

"Watch," Keira repeated. "Not play?"

Glen laughed. "Hell no. I don't want an injury. I prefer to be a spectator."

"That's..." Keira struggled for a word. The one she landed on was probably the opposite of what she meant. "...interesting."

"What about you?" Glen asked.

It was the first time he'd asked her about herself, and Keira was almost surprised. "Oh, well, I'm in journalism so I spend a lot of my spare time reading," she began.

Glen cut her off immediately. "I read, too. The *Wall Street Journal* mainly."

Realizing her time to speak had been snatched from her, Keira felt her chest sink. She prodded her pasta again. "Cool."

Bryn leaned across the table then. "We were just talking about plans," she said. "What we want to achieve in five years. Keira, what about you?"

If Bryn had asked her yesterday Keira would have been certain that what she wanted in the next five years was to spend as much time as possible with Shane. Buy their dream house together. Maybe even marry and have some kids. But that dream was dashed now.

Keira just shrugged. "I'd like to travel. See the world. In five years' time I want to have set foot on every continent at least once."

Bryn clapped. "That's a great one, sis."

Glen scoffed. "Traveling is so overrated these days, now that we have the technology to map everything. I mean why spend hours in an aluminum tube flying through the sky, polluting the atmosphere, when you can see the world from the comfort of your own home? Virtual reality is in its infancy at the moment, but within five years it's going to take off. A fifty-dollar headset will take the place of hundreds of dollars wasted on flights."

Only Malcolm nodded in agreement, his expression revealing that he found Glen's point to be thought provoking. Bryn, on the other hand, looked horrified by his statement and she flashed Keira a look of apology. Keira just gave her sister a deadpan look, as if to say *I said this would be terrible*.

“What about you then, Glen?” Bryn asked, floundering to save the conversation. “If you’re not a fan of traveling, what do you think your next five years will look like?”

Everyone turned their attention to the accountant. He cracked his knuckles.

“I’ve got it all planned out,” he said confidently. He pointed at his index finger. “A wife in a year.” Then he moved onto his next finger. “Our dream family home in the suburbs the year after that.” He pointed at the next two fingers. “Two kids, eighteen months apart. One boy, one girl.” Then finally he wiggled his thumb. “And a dog.”

Keira sighed deeply. She’d known before she’d even left Bryn’s apartment that she wasn’t going to find anything resembling romance on this date. But there’d still been a flicker of hope. Just a little spark that someone who burned as brightly as Shane might appear in her life out of the blue, turning her world upside down just as quickly as Shane himself had done.

But she realized now, with bitter disappointment, that she’d been a fool to even entertain that idea. Shane was a one in a million experience. No, one in a billion. Her date with Glen had just confirmed her worst fears.

She’d never find a love like that again.

CHAPTER THREE

Keira had no choice but to return to the office the next morning. Heartbreak wasn't a valid reason to miss work in the first place, and two days in a row seemed to be really taking liberties. Besides, she didn't want to spend another day moping in coffee shops, and she definitely didn't want to get cajoled into another one of Bryn's stupid harebrained schemes! The last one, the date at Gino's, had left a very sour taste in Keira's mouth.

Despite feeling like she had a dark gray rain cloud hovering above her head, Keira managed to get herself dressed and ready for the day. Usually she felt empowered dressing for work, but today she felt like a phony, even though she'd opted for one of the more casual outfits from her business wardrobe options.

As she left Bryn's apartment, Keira saw that Nina had sent her a supportive text.

Everyone's looking forward to your return.

Keira smiled. She was glad she had such a good friend in Nina. Despite the age difference between them, they seemed very in tune with one another. And Nina had had such a glittering career within the world of writing that she was also an excellent mentor to Keira.

As Keira walked into the *Viatorum* head office she was surprised by the immediately different atmosphere inside. Before, there had always been an air of panic in the office, a sort of invisible stress that permeated the whole place. In the past, no matter how good a mood she'd been in when she entered the place, there was no chance that when she left she wouldn't feel tired, stressed, and anxious.

But of course the difference now was that Joshua no longer worked at the magazine. Thanks to Keira, he'd been fired by Elliot. It was amazing what a difference it had made to the place. It even looked more comfortable, though the tiles were the same clinical, pristine white they'd been before, the open-plan style just as echoing. There was only one real visible difference, Keira noted; all the doors to the meeting rooms and offices that lined the office were open. She could see Heather, Elliot's assistant, typing away at a computer in her office. Inside the conference room several staff members were engaged in a meeting that seemed joyous rather than stilted and awkward. In Joshua's day those doors were always shut fast, acting as a physical barrier between the senior staff and junior staff.

"It's Keira!" someone said, and suddenly heads were turning to look at her.

To Keira's complete surprise, someone started to clap.

She felt a blush rise into her cheeks as more and more people stood from their desks and began joining in the applause. Was this what Dorothy felt like after killing the Wicked Witch? A man had lost his livelihood after all, even if he did deserve it!

Nina came over from her desk and hugged Keira.

"You made it," she said, gently. "I told you everyone was happy to see you!"

Denise, one of the junior writers that Keira hadn't exchanged more than two words with in the past, rushed over and hugged her. Keira was surprised.

"Oh. Um, hey," she said, awkwardly.

"I just wanted to say thank you," Denise gushed. "I was so close to quitting because of Joshua. He made me think I was useless, that I couldn't write and had no talent. I was going to give up on journalism altogether. But thanks to you I'm still here and everything is a million times better than before."

"You're welcome," Keira said, feeling a little surge of pride. Standing up to Joshua hadn't been easy, but it had paid off, and it had helped more people than she'd realized. Any residual guilt she felt over her actions dissipated as she saw what an impact it had made on everyone here. Josh was a grown man, responsible for his own actions. No one had made him act like a jerk to everyone around him. He'd gotten himself fired, really; Keira had just been the catalyst.

Feeling a surge of confidence for the first time since Shane had shattered her heart, Keira went over to her desk, ready to throw herself back into her work. It was where she excelled, after all. Even if her love life was currently in tatters her career was blossoming and she was going to make the most of it.

But when she reached her desk she saw that none of her things were there. Her framed photo of her mom and Bryn was gone, along with her miniature cactus, the polka dot mouse mat she'd been given as a graduation present from her friend Shelby, and the cat-shaped mug her other bestie, Maxine, had gifted her last year. She hoped desperately they hadn't been thrown out by accident. Small trinkets, essentially worthless, but they meant a lot to her.

She looked about her, worried. It was then that she noticed Elliot striding toward her.

He stopped, his large six-foot frame towering above her, and shook Keira's hand. "Welcome back. I've had you moved to the corner office. I hope that's okay."

The relief that Keira's belongings were safe took center stage in her mind. Then she realized what Elliot had actually just said.

"I have an office?" she repeated, her tone one of disbelief.

"Of course," Elliot replied. "You're a senior now. All seniors get offices."

He beckoned her to follow. As Keira walked across the office, she caught Nina's eye. Her friend winked. She must have known all along.

They stopped at the open door to the small corner office. Keira's name had been etched onto a gold plaque screwed onto it. Her favorite items were positioned on the desk in much the same way they had been before but whereas before they'd made her work space feel crowded, now they were dwarfed by the rest of the empty room.

Keira felt elated, like she was walking on air. She'd never had her own office, or a plaque on the door.

"Is it okay?" Elliot asked.

"It's amazing!" Keira replied, walking inside and twirling. The room wasn't quite big enough for arabesques but that hardly mattered to Keira!

"We've adopted a doors open policy," Elliot said. "Unless you're having a meeting or on a call. There was a vote while you were on leave."

Keira looked at him with a surprised but pleased expression.

She couldn't even begin to imagine what a voting system at *Viatorum* would look like! In Joshua's day he just barked orders and everyone followed. If he called you into the office on a public holiday – be it Christmas, Hanukkah, Eid, or whatever you celebrated – you had to be there or be fired. It made Keira so happy to know that the junior writing staff were getting their voices heard now.

"Have you been introduced to Lance yet?" Elliot continued.

"Lance?" Keira asked. "No, is he a new junior writer?"

Elliot laughed. "He's your new boss," he said.

"Oh," Keira replied, frowning. "I thought you were going to be my new boss."

The thought of another person being in control worried Keira. What if he turned into another Joshua? What if their creative visions didn't fully align?

Elliot shook his head. "I can't be here twenty-four-seven. For all his foibles, Joshua was dedicated. I needed someone on the ground for when I couldn't be, hence appointing Lance. But don't worry, you'll love him. He's the opposite of Joshua, I promise."

She followed Elliot out of her office and into the conference room, where the aforementioned Lance was already waiting. Elliot was right, he was the opposite of Joshua, at least to look at. He was a short, stocky man in an old, ill-fitting suit with unkempt hair. When he saw Keira enter he grinned widely – something Keira suspected Joshua didn't even have the correct facial muscles to achieve – and held out a hand to her. She shook it.

"You must be the star of *Viatorum*," Lance began. "The heroine, Keira Swanson."

Keira giggled a little awkwardly. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I would,” Lance said, taking his seat again, and gesturing for Keira and Elliot to do the same. “I’ve read all your prior pieces and I must say, you have quite the talent.”

“Thanks,” Keira said, blushing.

She wasn’t used to receiving compliments. Elliot gave them sparingly, Joshua never. She still didn’t know how to take them, how to respond appropriately without seeming arrogant.

She looked over at Elliot as she sat down beside him and he gave her a knowing look, as if to say *I told you he was the opposite*.

“So, let’s just jump straight into assignments,” Lance said, clapping his hands. “Elliot’s arranged for the most plum one yet.” He rubbed his hands together, smiling with excited glee. “Competition is going to be fierce!” Just then, he leapt up and hurried to the door. In the most chipper voice imaginable he called out, “Assignment time, boys and girls!”

There was a flurry of activity as people rushed toward the conference room. Keira felt very out of her depth all of a sudden. Things were so different here, but the pace was just as speedy, it seemed. And the buzz of competitiveness was still there, it was just completely different from when Joshua had been in control.

As the rest of the writers filed inside, Keira could palpably feel their thirst and eagerness for a challenge. It had always been there but it had been shrouded in self-doubt. Clearly without Joshua to drag them all down, coupled with Lance’s friendly and encouraging approach, the other writers at *Viatorum* had begun to flourish, to come into their own. Keira realized with surprise that the competition at the magazine was fiercer than ever.

“One of you lucky people is about to get the best assignment we’ve ever had,” Lance said, grinning widely. “Three weeks touring Italy. I’m talking Florence, Tuscany, Verona, Capri.”

There was a tittering of excitement, a buzz throughout the meeting room.

Keira shifted in her seat, itching for the assignment. She couldn’t stop herself from imagining how amazing it would be to actually visit Italy, to eat real Italian pizza, pasta, and gelato, rather than the knock-off version offered by Gino’s.

This assignment was made for her, clearly. She was the only person there with prior experience. But everyone would want it! She’d let herself get lulled into a false sense of security, what with all the applause and the new corner office. But it looked like things were the same underneath it all, with just a different facade. She geared herself up for a fight.

“So,” Lance said, steepling his hands in front of him. “Who’s putting themselves in the running?”

Keira’s hand immediately rose.

Her days of waiting for opportunities to fall into her lap were well and truly behind her. She had a hunger for success now and she wasn’t going to let this opportunity slip from her fingers. Besides, she really needed this trip to shake Shane from her mind.

But to her surprise, she realized no one else had raised their hand. Confused, Keira looked from one face to the next, realizing everyone had turned to face her. And they were all smiling.

“What’s going on?” she asked, bringing her hand back down beside her.

Lance laughed warmly. “It’s yours!” he exclaimed. “Obviously. We were just pranking you.”

Everyone began to chuckle. Keira looked around, completely shocked. Since when had *Viatorum* been a place for office pranks?

“You mean you were always going to give it to me?” she asked.

“Yes!” Lance replied, still laughing heartily.

And to Keira’s great surprise, everyone else was light-hearted about it. They seemed happy for her. There was no envy anymore, no ruthlessness.

“They’ve all got great assignments too,” Lance explained. “Don’t you worry about that. I don’t like in-fighting, can’t stand it. Everyone has strengths. And yours is to travel abroad and write those amazing pieces.”

Keira wanted to pinch herself. Was this a dream? Was she still asleep on Bryn’s lumpy couch fantasizing about what she wanted her first day back at work to be like?

But no, it was real. Without Joshua, *Viatorum* had transformed into her dream job. And she had just landed her dream assignment.

“It’s our way of saying thank you,” Denise piped up. “For getting rid of Josh.”

Keira laughed, delighted. She was so excited about the new assignment. But she was also very nervous. Whether it was something that Joshua had instilled in her or whether it was just a part of her personality, a new assignment always brought anxiety and self-doubt with it. Deep down she wasn’t sure if she was up for it, especially since she was still reeling from Shane. But she also knew she couldn’t say no. Everyone was looking at her so eagerly. She had to get back onto the horse, so to speak.

“What’s the title of the piece?” she asked, trying to focus on the task at hand in order to keep her mind off of Shane.

“The Country of Love,” Lance said, spreading his hands in front of him theatrically.

“Another love piece?” Keira asked, shocked.

“Of course!” Lance cried. “It’s your talent, Keira. Your last piece was remarkable.”

“Only because I fell in love...” she said.

Lance nodded eagerly. “Exactly. It was beautiful. I want to see that again. So I’m sending you to the most romantic places. I want you to speak to the locals, discover their secrets. Do the Italians really know about true love? Why is it considered the most romantic place on earth? What secrets do they hold about romance?”

He was grinning widely, encouragingly. But for Keira, panic was starting to set in.

How could she write about love when her heart had been shattered into a thousand pieces? In Ireland she’d struggled with the assignment because she was naive, foolish, and inexperienced. This time she was going in bitter and jaded. It would never work.

“Is there any flexibility on the title?” Keira stuttered. “Any scope to change the angle? I don’t want to get typecast as the love writer.”

Lance looked bemused. “But you *are* the love writer, Keira. The romance guru. It’s what people want to read from you. Your unique selling point. Your USP.”

She couldn’t quite believe it.

But what choice did she have? Lance had gone above and beyond for her, making sure she had the best assignment. There was no choice, she had to take the piece. Everyone wanted her to, and her career depended on it. She’d just have to fake it.

Or, perhaps, she wouldn’t have to fake it. Perhaps she’d meet a new guy. Not another Shane, not someone she could fall head over heels in love with, but a passionate Italian man she could have a whirlwind affair with. No strings, no love, just lust.

She smiled to herself. Perhaps this was the cure to her broken heart! Love might be the last thing on her mind right now, but perhaps a fling with a hot Italian guy could be just the antidote she needed to get over Shane.

She looked at Lance and quirked an eyebrow.

“Thank you,” she said. “When do I leave?”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Tomorrow?” Bryn exclaimed, perching on the arm of the couch.

Keira nodded and hurried around the small apartment, collecting her things and throwing them into her case. She was buzzing with excitement.

“Can you believe it? You get your space back for three whole weeks.”

“But you’ll miss Halloween,” Bryn wailed. “Malcolm and Glen wanted to take us to a party.”

Keira rolled her eyes. “What a shame,” she said sarcastically.

Just then the doorbell buzzed. Bryn went over to answer it, using the intercom system to see who was there. She looked back over her shoulder at Keira, her eyes narrowed. “Why are Shelby and Maxine standing on my doorstep?”

Maxine and Shelby were Keira’s two oldest friends, whom she’d met at college. Bryn hated them, though Keira didn’t understand why and assumed it was jealousy.

“I completely forgot,” Keira gasped. “I invited them over for drinks ages ago. It was supposed to be for a catch up before Shane arrived and took all of my time. Is that okay?”

“I clearly don’t have a choice,” Bryn replied, looking put out. “Shame, though. We could have had a really fun evening just the two of us since you’ll be gone for so long...”

“Sorry,” Keira replied, shrugging. “I didn’t know it was my last night at the time I made the plans. I’d assumed you’d be out on a date with some guy like most nights.”

There was a knock on the door, and Bryn stood with a huff to answer it. As the door swung open, Keira heard the happy exclamations of Maxine and Shelby. She hurried over and took in the sight of her two friends – petite Shelby with her long, white-blond hair, and super-fit Maxine with her short black curls and dark skin.

“Keira!” they cried, throwing their arms around her.

“It’s been too long,” Maxine said into her ear.

“I was certain you were never coming back to New York City,” Shelby added in the other.

Keira drew back. “I know, I’m sorry. Everything happened so quickly – getting sent to Ireland, breaking up with Zach, moving out the apartment. I just haven’t found time to get my thoughts in line.”

Bryn, who was still standing holding the door open, added, pithily, “It was a family only time, you know?”

“Sure,” Maxine said with a stiff smile.

Keira tugged her friends further into the apartment. “Come on, let’s drink. And talk.”

“And pack,” Bryn added in a parental way.

They all tumbled inside, chatting with giddiness. Bryn reluctantly opened a bottle of wine for them to share, then sat at the kitchen island with a huff, handing a glass to each of Keira’s friends with a dark expression.

“So, you’re off to Italy?” Shelby asked, grinning with excitement. “How long for this time?”

“Three weeks,” Keira replied, folding clothes and placing them in her case. “It’s sort of my niche at the magazine at the moment. I go abroad and write an article on love. They’re calling me the Romance Guru.”

Shelby and Maxine exchanged a glance, one that Keira could immediately read into.

“I know, I’m hopeless with relationships. Two breakups in as many months, right? But I can just play a character.”

“You mean lie?” Maxine asked with a laugh.

“If I have to,” Keira replied, recalling how much she’d struggled writing the last piece. Then she’d been a cynic trying to deny the fact she was falling in love with Ireland, and, more specifically, Shane. Now she was supposed to be taking the other view, of being a hopeless romantic, a convert who would easily and willingly lose herself in love and passion. She felt anything but.

“You’ll just have to fall for a hot Italian guy,” Shelby added.

Keira smirked. “Wouldn’t that be nice?” she mused, though she felt as though a nun in a monastery had a better chance of a passionate love affair than she did at this moment in time.

“You’re going to miss Halloween,” Maxine added, glumly.

“I know, it’s a shame,” Keira replied. “It’s my favorite holiday. But they go all out in Italy too. It’s actually like a four-day public holiday, I think. The day of the dead, All Souls’ Day, All Saints’ Day, it’s a massive deal. A huge party.”

Shelby folded her arms in mock affront. “Basically you’re saying that your Halloween experience will be tons better than ours.”

“No!” Keira laughed, protesting. “Well, maybe.”

Everyone laughed. Except Bryn, of course. She was staring into her wine glass, pouting.

“Anyway,” Keira said, “we can have a great Thanksgiving together. I’ll be back by then.”

Bryn’s head snapped up. “We’re having Thanksgiving at Mom’s this year, remember. Just the three of us.”

“That’s the meal,” Keira contested, growing impatient with her difficult sister. “I can spend the rest of the day with my friends, can’t I?”

“Of course you can,” Bryn huffed. She went back to staring into her glass.

Maxine raised her eyebrows. She and Shelby were used to Bryn’s attitude but Keira just couldn’t understand why Bryn had to be so possessive over her. She was allowed other people in her life! Bryn was super independent herself and always had loads of friends and boyfriends, was always on the go rushing around to events. Yet as soon as Keira wanted to spend time with someone other than her she got in a mood. Honestly, sometimes Keira felt like she was the elder of the two. Bryn could be a spoiled brat sometimes.

“Thanksgiving sounds so far away,” Shelby mused.

“I know,” Keira replied. “I feel like I’ve barely had a chance to be in New York. It’s like I’ve been on vacation here! I thought I’d have more time to catch up. I haven’t even found a new apartment.”

“Speaking of new apartments...” Bryn said.

She was looking at Keira’s cell phone on the counter. The screen was alight from having just delivered a text message. And Zach’s name was clearly visible on her screen.

“This had better be about the deposit being returned,” Keira said.

Just then, Maxine and Shelby exchanged a guilty glance and Keira got the distinct impression that they were hiding something.

“What is it?” she demanded.

She’d had just about enough she could take of surprises.

It was Shelby who finally confessed. “I think it might be about Julia. They broke up.”

Keira raised an eyebrow, surprised. “They did?” The affair that had cost them their relationship had lasted only a few weeks?

She picked up her phone and read Zach’s message. It confirmed Shelby’s news.

Hey Keira. Long time no speak. I wanted to let you know before you hear it on the grapevine that I broke up with Julia. It just wasn’t working. I was wondering if you might be around for a drink? Tonight? Tomorrow? Let me know. X

“Ugh, he’s such an arrogant jerk,” Keira muttered.

“What did he say?” Maxine asked.

“Nothing about the fact he’s keeping my deposit for ransom,” Keira told her with a disgusted voice. “He wants to go for a drink.”

Bryn’s mouth dropped open with surprise. “You’re not going to go, are you?” she asked.

Keira looked at her, shocked. “Of course not,” she said. “Unless it’s the only way to get that money back.”

Bryn tutted loudly. “If he’s bribing you to date him I swear to God I will give him a piece of my mind...”

Shelby frowned at her. “He’s not *bribing* her. Don’t be so dramatic.”

Bryn looked affronted. “I’m sorry, whose friend are you? His or Keira’s?”

“Both,” Shelby replied, folding her arms.

Bryn did not look impressed. “Even though he cheated?”

“Guys!” Keira interrupted. She was not in the mood for bickering. Her eyes were still glued to her cell phone screen.

Suddenly, Bryn snatched her phone away.

“Stop considering it!” she ordered Keira.

“I’m not!” Keira cried, trying to defend herself.

But Bryn was right, there was a small part of her that *was* considering it. Zach, for all his flaws, had cared about her. They’d spent two years together, had lived in an apartment together. He’d been committed, reliable. And he was definitely familiar. It was just the fact that she was putting work above him that had ruined things between them, driven the wedge that drove him into Julia’s inviting arms.

Bryn’s expression was like thunder. She dangled Keira’s phone over her wine glass.

“Don’t make me dunk it,” she said.

In her peripheral vision, Keira could see Maxine and Shelby shaking their heads in disbelief at Bryn’s drama queen behavior.

She sighed loudly. “Okay, okay. I will not meet up with him. Is that what you want to hear?”

Bryn nodded, satisfied, and returned her phone to her sister.

“Now delete the message and take him out of your contacts.”

Keira exhaled loudly.

“This is ridiculous,” Shelby muttered under her breath.

Keira looked at her phone, at Zachary’s contact details. They’d been there for years. She couldn’t just delete him like he’d never existed.

But she had to accept that Bryn was right on this, again, despite her heavy-handed tactics. Because rekindling contact with Zach would be like taking a step backward. Keira’s life had changed so much in such a short amount of time, having him back in it in any capacity would be like a regression. She had to move on, step forward. Not just from Zach, but from Shane too. Now it was her time to shine, to stand on her own two feet and become independent.

Resolved, she deleted his details, watching as his name disappeared from her phone. It felt good, empowering. If she could just get the guts up to delete Shane too, then she’d really have made it. But no, not yet, the pain from their breakup was still too real.

Keira looked up at her sister.

“Happy now?”

Bryn grinned. “Of course. I’m always happy when I win.” Then she added, slyly, “And I always make sure I win.”

Shelby groaned. Maxine sunk her head into her hands, shaking it theatrically. Keira just laughed, happy and relieved that she’d taken the first small step toward moving forward with her life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Keira soon discovered that putting the past behind her was much easier said than done, and would involve a whole lot more than symbolically deleting contacts from her cell phone. Because the moment she made it to Newark airport the next morning, she was bombarded with memories of Shane, of Ireland.

Feelings of nostalgia whirled inside her as she walked through the concourse. As she handed over her boarding pass at the gate, she remembered with vivid clarity the emotions she'd had last time – the anxiety mixed with excitement and hope. It hadn't been that long ago but already she felt like a different person entirely, a sadder, more bitter person.

She boarded the plane and took her seat. Luckily, she was by the window, which gave her an excuse not to interact with the passenger beside her. She wasn't in the mood for chatting. Unfortunately for Keira, the man beside her seemed intent on it. As they took to the air, he leaned over and spoke.

"Name's Garrett. Ever been to Naples before?" he asked her, grinning jovially.

He was a middle-aged man, balding slightly. He appeared to be traveling alone. Keira noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding ring but that the skin was paler where a band had once been. A recent divorcee, she hypothesized, and groaned internally. It was going to be a long eight hours.

"No," she replied, monosyllabically.

"So why are you traveling today?" he added. "Business or pleasure?"

Keira hunkered down in her seat. "Business," she explained. "I'm –"

She stopped herself then, recalling what Bryn and Nina had told her in the coffee shop about playing with fake identities for fun. She could do with a bit of fun. "I'm a wine connoisseur," she said. "Top of my game. Heading to Italy to find some hidden gems for importing."

Garrett raised his eyebrows in surprise. "That sounds like fun. A darn sight more exciting than my job, anyway."

"Oh?" Keira asked. "What's your job?"

"I'm in accounting," he said. "Well, not completely. It's a bit hard to explain. It's easier just to say I'm an accountant for accountants. Does that make sense?"

Painfully so, Keira thought.

"Yes," she said aloud.

How typical that she'd be sitting beside an accountant. It was like fate was trying to tell her to give up the search for Mr. Right and settle down with Mr. Math!

"I'm sure you don't want to hear me drone on about my job though," the man added. "Yours sounds fascinating. How did you get into it?"

"It is fascinating," Keira continued, surprising herself with how easily she was lying and how much enjoyment she was getting from it. "My father was a wine importer," she added. "He loved his job so passionately I was even conceived in a vineyard."

She felt a little spark of excitement as the lie rolled easily off her tongue. She was really getting into the spirit of it. Her own father had left when she was very young and hadn't been involved in her life much at all, so inventing a persona for him was easy. Plus, all this embellishment was going to come in handy over the course of her assignment, she figured, since she was going to have to pretend she still believed in love.

"Oh my," the man beside her said.

"I know. He married there as well. But, sadly, he also died in that very same vineyard." She sighed theatrically. "It only made sense to have him buried there too."

Keira noticed the way the man moved to increase the distance between them. He was losing the will to speak to her, probably because of the way she'd steered the conversation toward the morbid. She laughed to herself as he tried to switch his attention to the in-flight movie.

The plane soared higher into the air. Soon the clouds were far below them.

Finally getting some peace and quiet, Keira took the opportunity to look through the itinerary that Heather had prepared for her. Immediately, it brought memories flooding back to her of her last assignment. Heather had used the same font, the same clinically organized layout with bullet points and headings. During the month in Ireland, Keira had defiled it, getting it covered in Guinness and bits of oil from the hearty Irish breakfasts she'd eat with Shane. There was no chance of that happening this time. She could already feel how different things would be with this second assignment. She felt older. More jaded.

Then, on the itinerary in her lap, Keira caught sight of a word that made her stomach drop. Tour guide.

Of course there'd be one, she realized now. Just because she'd fallen head over heels in love with the last tour guide, who'd then gone on to shatter her heart into a thousand pieces, that didn't mean there wouldn't be one for this assignment! Something about the thought felt dangerous to her. Was it just because of what happened last time? Keira wondered. Or because she had a spark of hope that it might happen again?

She shook the thoughts away and focused instead on the destinations. Touch down in Naples, and a night there before taking a train to the Amalfi Coast. A ferry to Capri. A gondola ride to a place called the Blue Grotto. Rome. The Vatican.

If she'd been going on vacation, Keira would have been thrilled with the itinerary. She looked at pictures of the places she'd be visiting on her iPad and they were all stunning. It was like the perfect romantic getaway. But that was just the problem. She'd be visiting some of the most awe-inspiring locations in the most romantic country on earth and she'd be doing it without Shane.

And to add insult to injury, she'd have to write about something she no longer felt. It would be like hitting herself over the head with romance day after day, rubbing salt into the wound of her heart, knowing that her own great love had been lost. It didn't seem fair. Poetic injustice, Keira thought to herself. She just couldn't get excited about the trip.

Feeling herself sliding into a depression, Keira called over the air steward and ordered herself a drink. Then she put her work things away and checked her social media accounts, which was always a great way to distract herself.

The drink arrived and Keira sipped it as she scrolled through Instagram, looking through a million pictures of cats, Bryn's photos from the disastrous double date night at Gino's, and Maxine's most recent sponsored charity marathon. Then she noticed that Shelby had posted something that had received thousands of likes. It was a simple photo of her hand, and there was a ring on her wedding finger.

"No way!" Keira cried aloud, almost spilling her drink.

Garrett, the man in the seat beside her, looked over, frowning. "Is everything okay?"

Keira waved his concerns away. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Shelby hadn't said a thing about marriage being on the cards. In fact, she spoke so rarely about her partner, David, that Keira sometimes suspected they'd secretly called it quits. How wrong she'd been! The two had been together since college, after all, so had a good seven years under their belt already. Marriage was the logical step for them. And yet it still stung for Keira to see it.

She called over the air steward again. "I'll have another," she said.

She needed something to calm her nerves. The man beside her looked over suspiciously. Keira just gave him a cold look, and he returned his focus to the movie, pretending he hadn't been snooping in the first place.

She quickly fired off a congratulatory message to Shelby and David, though she was feeling closer to bitter than celebratory. It wasn't something she wanted to feel. She'd much prefer to be happy for her old college friend. But she was too miserable right now, her heart too bruised.

She checked her phone, wondering whether Shane would get in touch with her at all. It had been a couple of days since they'd last spoken and she'd had no contact with him at all. He'd promised they could remain friends but clearly that was just something he'd said at the time. She doubted he had any intention of fulfilling that promise. Not even a message to let her know how Calum was doing, or any of the sisters. So much for friends...

She downed the second drink and soon the effects of the alcohol started to work on her. Feeling drowsy, Keira settled down into her seat and allowed sleep to overcome her.

May as well sleep through the unhappiness, she reasoned.

Keira slipped into unconsciousness and began to dream. Her mind conjured up the images of Italy she'd been looking at on her iPad. In the dream she was dressed in marathon gear and covered in mud. She'd had to run all the way to the Amalfi Coast in order to attend Shelby and David's wedding. But when she finally got there, panting and covered in mud, she found that everyone was wearing a masquerade mask. And when David removed his, she saw that it was Shane standing there. The woman he was marrying? That was Bryn.

Keira staggered across the beach toward them.

"How could you betray me like that?" she cried, looking in horror at Shane. "I thought your dad was sick, that that was why we couldn't be together."

He shrugged nonchalantly. "I just made that up," came his cold response. "I broke up with you because your sister is way hotter."

Keira turned her gaze to Bryn then. "You've been lying to me all along! My own sister!"

But Bryn looked completely unfazed. "What was I supposed to do?" She shrugged. "He has a hot bod."

Overcome with emotion, Keira looked around her, desperate, panting. One by one, the seated guests removed their masquerade masks. The first to unveil himself, Keira realized with horror, was another Shane. This Shane's date was Julia, the girl Zach had cheated on her with. Beside that version of Shane, another Shane was revealed, this time with Maxine. And again and again and again, Shane with Shelby, Shane with Tessa, the girl from Ireland she'd thought Shane had slept with, Shane with her *mom*. Over and over again. Everywhere Keira looked the male guests morphed into Shane.

She fell to her knees and began to cry. But someone was suddenly gripping her elbow. She peered up, the sun obscuring her vision, and found herself looking into the most beautiful brown eyes lined with thick lashes.

"Keira, don't cry," the man said in a soft, musical Italian accent.

"Who are you?" she asked, allowing him to draw her to her feet.

"You don't recognize me?" he asked, smiling.

His face was perfect, Keira realized as she looked at him. He was so gorgeous she felt herself growing weak at the knees.

Suddenly, he swept her up into his arms. He cradled her against his chest, holding her easily like she was weightless. The sea was suddenly sloshing around his calves. They were standing in the ocean.

"You still haven't told me your name," Keira asked again.

The man laughed, a noise that was pure pleasure to her eardrums.

"I don't need to tell you, you already know it," he said.

Keira wracked her brains. Then the name came to her, suddenly and full of clarity.

"Are you Romeo?" she asked with disbelief.

The man smiled, his face alive with beauty. "Yes. I'm Romeo. Your Romeo."

He leaned in toward her, slowly, their lips just millimeters apart.

A sudden jolt made Keira's eyes ping open. She looked around, disoriented, startled to find herself on an airplane. They were descending through the clouds and the seatbelt sign was on. The final approach must have begun. She'd slept the whole journey.

The dream had left her panting. She touched her chest, feeling her heart fluttering beneath her shirt. Her head was still swirling with the effects of the liquor that she hadn't managed to fully sleep off.

"I think you were having a nightmare," Garrett said.

Keira rubbed her temples, recalling the strange dream she'd had. "Yes, I think you're right. At first. I was being haunted by my ex-boyfriend who was marrying my sister. And all my best friends. And my mom."

The man looked bemused. Keira wondered what he really thought of her. By his expression, she'd take a guess that he thought she was a nut job. A crackpot.

The plane touched down with a shudder, then began taxiing along the runway. When it eventually drew to a halt, the man beside Keira leapt up the second the seatbelt light flicked off.

"Avoiding the queues," he said, sheepishly.

"Of course," Keira replied with a quirk to her smile.

The cabin doors were opened and Garrett bolted for them. Keira laughed to herself. She'd enjoyed her fake persona. Maybe Bryn wasn't as foolish as she always thought!

She gathered up her things and unbuckled herself, then retrieved her purse from the overhead storage. Heading along the aisle, Keira thought about how the game she'd played with Garrett would now need to be put into real action. For the next three weeks she was going to have to pretend to be someone she wasn't, someone who still believed in love. Somehow, she had a feeling that doing so was going to be a whole lot harder than being the wine connoisseur had proven to be.

She stepped out of the plane and let the warm sunshine caress her skin. It was much nicer than the cold weather she'd left behind in New York City. There was something about the sun that always made her feel optimistic. It made everything look more beautiful, and though she couldn't see much of Italy at the moment besides the airport, the surrounding hills looked stunning in the bright light.

She followed the path towards the concourse, knowing she'd soon be meeting her tour guide. For the first time since leaving New York, she let herself imagine that her Romeo was waiting for her...

CHAPTER SIX

By the time she'd collected her case and emerged out into the arrivals lounge, Keira's daydreaming mind had gone into overdrive. She'd merged the Romeo of her dream with the tour guide she was about to meet, turning him into a fully fleshed out character who would sweep her off her feet with his fiery, passionate personality. She just couldn't wait to meet him!

She stood with her case, looking around at the busy Naples airport. There were people all around holding signs and when Keira saw hers, her heart soared. The man holding it was a hunk.

Keira felt a charge of electricity race through her as she rushed over.

"Hi, I'm Keira," she said, pointing at the sign with her name on it.

The man looked at her, confused, then looked at the sign. "Oh? This?" He started to laugh. "I was just holding it for some guy while he went to the bathroom."

Just then, Keira caught sight of a man exiting the bathroom and heading in her direction. He was short, rotund, slobbish, badly dressed in a stained gray shirt and ill-fitting jeans, and what little hair he had left on his head looked like a messy bird's nest. She willed him to walk by but realized, her heart falling, that he was heading straight for them.

The hunk with the sign noticed him. Once he drew up to them, the hunk handed him the sign and hurried over to where a stunning gorgeous girl had emerged into the arrivals lounge. They proceeded to pack on the PDA. Keira grimaced.

"Young love, eh?" the guide said, scratching the strip of exposed skin that his shirt wasn't quite covering. "You Karla?"

"Keira."

He checked the sign and shrugged. "American names sound the same to me."

As he spoke a whiff of onion and coffee came off his breath, making Keira's stomach turn.

"Come on," he barked at Keira. "The car's this way."

He turned on his heel and strode off quickly, disappearing into the crowds of people and leaving Keira floundering in the middle of the airport. She grabbed her case and looked about frantically for the exit sign.

She saw it, and the back of the guide's head as he swiftly walked through it. He hadn't even turned around to check she was still with him!

With a grimace, Keira followed in the direction of the slobbish man, lugging her heavy case after her.

As she was knocked around by the jostling crowds, her excitement at the prospect of an Italian romance healing her broken heart was well and truly dashed. Instead of being whisked away by a handsome man she was going to have to endure onion breath and a rude tour guide.

So much for Romeo, she thought with a heavy heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Did you know that you’re late?” the tour guide, Antonio, said as he led her through the parking lot. The frown lines in his forehead were so deep it appeared as if he was scowling at her.

“It took a while for my bag to show up,” Keira replied, still reeling from the fact her hopes of meeting Romeo had been dashed.

Antonio made Keira feel very uncomfortable in his company, and not just because of the round, hairy belly that protruded over his waistband. His attitude was harsh, like a school teacher she could already tell she’d never be able to please.

The air was very hot, almost oppressively so, but that didn’t seem to slow him down. They hurried along, Antonio keeping a few paces ahead of Keira, who struggled to manage her cases. She was already becoming sticky with sweat.

“My back is bad,” he said, as way of an explanation for not helping her.

As they walked, Antonio spoke, his words coming out in a huge, fast stream, his voice like a barking dog. Keira thought of her dream Romeo. Antonio could not be further from that!

“Twenty-one days, huh?” he said, striding ahead so that Keira had to skip to keep up.

Already, she was dreading them.

He led her to a car. Keira had been expecting something nice, but instead was confronted with a small, old, rusty-looking vehicle.

“This is it?” she asked.

“There’s no room for the case in the back seats. Put it in the trunk,” Antonio ordered.

Keira popped the trunk and found that the car was filled with shopping bags. As she rammed her bag in beside Antonio’s groceries a waft of cheese stench emanated toward her. One of the bags fell open and some pecorino tumbled out. Keira put it back in, realizing with a mixture of surprise, curiosity, and disgust that all the grocery bags were full of pecorino cheese. Was that all the man ate? she wondered. Then she realized, additionally, that the smell was probably going to leak into her case and permeate all of her clothes. She was going to smell of cheese for the next three weeks!

She grimaced and shut the trunk. As she did so Antonio started the car’s engine, making a cloud of fumes sputter over her legs.

Furious, Keira climbed into the front seat beside him, discovering with horror that they were so close their knees were touching. She looked over at Antonio’s clammy, hairy hands clutching the steering wheel. The smell inside was a combination of cheese, sweat, and humid air.

Before she’d even had a chance to get her seatbelt on, Antonio gunned it. The car lurched forward and she gripped the sides of her seat as he drove, so tight her knuckles turned white. Antonio drove like a maniac.

“So tell me, New York,” Antonio said. “Bad place, huh? Lots of crime?”

Keira looked over at him, shocked. “No. I mean, not really. It has its problems, like all cities, but it’s wonderful.”

“Cold though, no?” Antonio pressed. To Keira he seemed to really be wanting to find the worst in her home city. “Like now it is cold. While we still bask in glorious sunshine.” He laughed wheezily, showing off crooked yellow teeth.

“Have you ever been?” Keira asked, a little offended by his comments.

“No no no,” Antonio replied, shaking his head as if the suggestion was ludicrous. “Never will I go to a godless city like that. Here we’re good Catholics.”

If Antonio had set out to rub Keira the wrong way he had certainly achieved his aim.

But if Antonio himself was a shock to the system, Naples was not what Keira was expecting either. The roads were very narrow, with terraced five-story apartment blocks towering up either side, with balconies made of rusting metal, clothes lines stretched between them covered in colorful

linen that fluttered in the wind. There were next to no sidewalks, which meant people wandered into the road, often without looking, darting out from behind parked cars. Even the road signs and street lamps, Keira noted, were actually attached to the walls of the houses, since there wasn't even enough space for a pole.

None of these obstacles made Antonio drive any slower, however. He just cursed loudly in Italian every time someone stepped into his path, swerving, sometimes honking his horn.

“*Che cavolo!*” he exclaimed loudly, gesticulating at an old woman who'd just stepped in front of him.

Despite not knowing exactly what Antonio was saying, Keira could tell it was some kind of expletive and felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment and shame for the old woman on the receiving end of his rage. But the woman just gestured rudely at Antonio. Clearly she was used to such occurrences.

Vespas whizzed past them. Keira noticed that the walls were covered with graffiti. There was so much that people had started drawing over the graffiti that was already there!

Keira lost count of the amount of pizzerias they passed. Her stomach grumbled. It had been hours since her bland airplane dinner.

They turned a corner and zipped past a stall set up at the side of the road selling fish. The smell made Keira gag and completely lose her appetite.

“Watch out!” Keira cried, as Antonio careened toward a filthy, mangy cat sitting in the middle of the road.

Luckily it ran out of the way just in time.

“Strays,” Antonio said, as if to explain why he hadn't even attempted to slow down. “Pests. We're infested with them.”

The cobbled streets made the car bump up and down. It was an uncomfortable journey to say the least.

“You'll be able to see the mountain in a minute,” Antonio said. “Vesuvius.”

“Oh,” Keira replied, almost alarmed at what she perceived to be his first attempt to make small talk.

“There,” he said, suddenly, pointing to her left.

If the mountain had been visible it was only for a second, because Keira didn't manage to see a thing.

“You saw it?” Antonio asked, rather aggressively. “Did you?”

“I must have missed it,” Keira mumbled in response. “We went by a little fast.”

“Fast?” Antonio scoffed. “Fast? I'm driving the pace of a snail thanks to this *idiot* in front of me!” He threw his arms toward the red car ahead of them, which they were practically touching bumpers with, then honked his horn over and over and swore again loudly.

He swung the car sharply down another side road. This one was filled with bags of garbage. The walls were covered in graffiti and many of the cars appeared abandoned, covered in dust and bird droppings. Here, several of the metal balconies above them were rusted and half falling from the walls. Many of the potted plants upon them were dead.

Antonio laughed suddenly and pointed at a huge billboard hanging over the entrance to what appeared to be a parking lot.

“A sexy lady, huh?” he said. “Our Italian women are goddesses.”

Keira squirmed even more. “Oh yes, they're very beautiful,” she said.

“You looking at the trash?” Antonio said in his barking voice.

Keira guiltily turned her eyes away from the mountains of bags.

“It's a big problem,” Antonio added. “Big problem. Here, they call it the Triangle of Death. All the waste causes cancer, birth defects, that sort of thing.”

Keira grimaced.

“The system does not do anything about it,” Antonio added.

“The system?” Keira asked.

“The mafia, you know?” Antonio added, again speaking in that way that made Keira feel like he thought she was a complete imbecile. “You will see them around. When there is a fight, they are there. They are the ones with the guns.”

With every passing moment, Keira felt more terrible. Had Elliot been aware of the conditions of this city when he’d arranged the assignment? She knew she was only supposed to be passing through but it still seemed like an oversight. Surely Heather would have known about the crime and poor conditions – she was so organized Keira couldn’t imagine such things evading her notice.

“Are there lots of fights around here?” Keira asked with trepidation.

“Sure, sure,” Antonio said. “Lots of bars and unemployed young people. It is a poor city. Always fights.”

Keira became increasingly worried about the time she’d be spending in the city.

“So, are we heading to the hotel now?” she asked.

“No time,” Antonio replied brusquely. “I am your guide. I am supposed to guide you.”

“Where are we going then?” Keira asked. She was exhausted and the uncomfortable interaction with Antonio coupled with her anxiety was making her even more tired.

“La Statua del Nilo,” Antonio replied. “Amazing statue. Ancient.”

He drove them at top speed through the narrow streets. Then suddenly he slammed on the brakes, making Keira jerk uncomfortably forward, the seat belt pressing painfully against her chest. She thumped back against the seat.

“There!” Antonio beamed.

Keira looked around her. The car was idling beside a stone plinth that was extremely weathered. Sitting atop was the statue, made of marble, depicting a man resting on his side, holding what appeared to be a bouquet of flowers.

“Amazing, huh?” Antonio pressed. “You do not get this in New York City! Culture! History!”

“Oh... um, sure...” Keira replied. “What is it?”

“The Nile God,” Antonio informed her. “With his decapitated serpent. People cut the head off the statue many times. This is not the original head.”

He seemed thoroughly amused by this fact. Keira, however, was not. It was an underwhelming attraction.

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