

SOPHIE LOVE

**LOVE
LIKE
THEIRS**

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES (BOOK #4)

The Romance Chronicles

Sophie Love

Love Like Theirs

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2017

Love S.

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“LOVE LIKE THIS creates a world of emotions and turmoil, describing superbly the mind of a young lady (Keira) and her struggles to balance her social life and her career. Sophie Love is a natural storyteller. LOVE LIKE THIS is very well written and edited, and I highly recommend it to the permanent library of all readers that appreciate a romance that can be savored during a weekend.” --Books and Movie Reviews (Roberto Mattos) LOVE LIKE THEIRS (The Romance Chronicles—Book #4) is book #4 in a new, sweet romance series by #1 bestselling author Sophie Love. The series begins with LOVE LIKE THIS (Book #1), a free download! Keira Swanson, 28, has sworn off of love. With her heart still hurting from her breakups with Cristiano and Shane, she will not allow her magazine to use her for another love experiment. Which is fine by them, because they want to send her off on a different kind of trip: to prove that someone suffering from a breakup can avoid a knee-jerk rebound affair and manage NOT to fall in love. To emphasize the point, they will NOT assign her a new tour guide. Instead, Keira will take a cruise to the Scandinavian countries and have to navigate herself. Keira is thrilled to accept the assignment. There is nothing she wants more than to be alone, and go to the Northern climes, where she can cool her head, and where surely she will not find love. But Keira does not anticipate the beauty of Copenhagen and of Stockholm (“the Paris of the North”) or the stunning hospitality of the Scandinavians. With Christmas on the way, resisting a new love may be harder than she thinks... A wholesome romantic comedy that is as profound as it is funny, LOVE LIKE THEIRS is book #4 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. Book #5 will be published soon! “Sophie Love's ability to impart magic to her readers is exquisitely wrought in powerfully evocative phrases and descriptions.... the perfect romance or beach read, with a difference: its enthusiasm and beautiful descriptions offer an unexpected attention

to the complexity of not just evolving love, but evolving psyches. It's a delightful recommendation for romance readers looking for a touch more complexity from their romance reads.” --Midwest Book Review (Diane Donovan re: For Now and Forever)

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Sophie Love
LOVE LIKE THEIRS

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)

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THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES

LOVE LIKE THIS (Book #1)

LOVE LIKE THAT (Book #2)

LOVE LIKE OURS (Book #3)

LOVE LIKE THEIRS (Book #4)

LOVE LIKE YOURS (Book #5)

CHAPTER ONE

Keira opened one eye. As her mind transitioned from sleep to consciousness, it dawned on her where she was. Bryn's couch. Again. Just like yesterday and the day before and the day before that.

She groaned, squeezing her eyes shut again, willing herself to go back to sleep. When she was asleep all that stuff with Cristiano disappeared. She could pretend she'd never broken his heart, that she'd never walked away from possibly the best love of her life. In her dreams, she could also pretend she'd sorted herself out, that she wasn't still sleeping on Bryn's couch, wasting her days watching reality TV, avoiding all her friends' calls, and constantly delaying her boss Elliot's request for her to choose a location for her next overseas assignment.

The room was dark in the weak early December light. As she lay on the couch, staring up at the shadows on the ceiling, Keira became aware of the sound of running water. The shower. Bryn must already be awake, which was unusual considering it was a Saturday morning and Bryn had been hungover every Saturday morning of her adult life.

Confused, Keira sat up, the old couch creaking beneath her, and heard the gurgle of the coffee machine. She sniffed and the aroma filled her nostrils. Bryn was up *and* making coffee? That wasn't like her sister at all! Something was up. Bryn was the slob of the pair, but these days it was Keira who lay around all day getting nothing done. But she couldn't help it. After everything that had happened with Cristiano, she just wasn't ready to face the world.

Keira heard the click of the bathroom lock, then the sound of Bryn's heavy footsteps as she bounded down the corridor. Keira could hear her whistling a toneless tune. She came into view, wrapped in a yellow towel, with another wrapped around her head.

"Oh, you're awake," Bryn said, stopping in her tracks and smiling broadly. "I made coffee. Want some?"

Keira frowned suspiciously. "Why are you in such a good mood? It's Saturday morning. Come to mention it, why are you even up?"

Bryn laughed. "I had a quiet night in. Turns out when your liver isn't busy trying to filter poison out of your body, you feel kinda good."

"I've been trying to tell you that for years," Keira mumbled. She sunk back onto the couch, resuming her position looking up at the ceiling. A second later, Bryn's face appeared over her. Water dripped from stray tendrils of hair onto Keira's face.

"You do a very convincing impression of a corpse," Bryn told her.

Keira scoffed and folded her arms across her chest, looking away from her sister.

"That's even better!" Bryn joked.

Keira just ignored her. She heard Bryn move away, heading back to her bedroom to get ready for the day. Keira felt bad for being so snappy with her sister, especially considering the huge favor Bryn was doing her by allowing her to live in her apartment rent free. But then she remembered the myriad times Bryn had been snappy and ungrateful with her and decided that a little bit of role reversal wasn't so bad.

She heard Bryn pad back into the living area. "I'm pouring you coffee," she announced.

Keira sighed and sat up. "I don't want coffee," she said. "I don't want anything that will interrupt my sleep. I just want to sleep forever."

She looked over as Bryn ignored her request, pouring her a coffee into the biggest mug in the house. She came over and handed it to Keira.

"I'm not letting you waste another day on that couch watching Netflix and feeling sorry for yourself," she said, handing her the cup. "Drink this. Wake up. When was the last time you showered?"

Keira frowned as she took the steaming mug. "Thursday evening."

Bryn rolled her eyes. She whirled back to the kitchen counter and poured herself a mug.

“Why are you up so early anyway?” Keira muttered, taking a little sip of the coffee. It was scalding hot. She placed it down on the side table.

“Because...” Bryn sung, reaching onto her tiptoes to fetch a new bottle of her favorite caramel syrup. “Felix and I have plans.” She landed back on her heels, syrup in hand, and grinned at Keira triumphantly.

Felix. Felix. Felix. That was all Bryn ever talked about these days. She’d gone from being a serial man-eater to a committed girlfriend. In any usual circumstances, Keira would have been thrilled for her sister finally settling into a steady relationship, but Felix was the same age as their *mother* and Keira couldn’t help getting a bit creeped out. It felt a bit too Daddy-Issues for her liking. The fact their own father had abandoned them when they were infants only added credence to her theory.

“What kind of plans?” Keira asked.

She saw a distinct blush creep up Bryn’s neck. She shrugged in what Keira instantly recognized as an attempt to look nonchalant. “Oh, just a bit of home decor shopping.”

Keira narrowed her eyes. Why would that be making Bryn blush? Perhaps because it was the kind of thing an *adult* did, and that was something Bryn, much like Peter Pan, had sworn against ever becoming. Or perhaps because her party-loving sister was embarrassed to admit she could have as much fun choosing lamps with her lover as she once did raving all night in a New York City nightclub. Or...

“When you say home decor you don’t mean an ornamental cat for the mantel, do you?” Keira asked, swiveling to get a better look at Bryn’s face.

“No,” Bryn replied in her same sing-songy voice. “I mean more like furniture.”

Keira gasped. “Why are you picking out furniture with Felix?”

Bryn instantly flushed a deeper shade of red. “He has a new apartment, that’s all. It doesn’t *mean* anything. Stop looking at me like that!”

“Are you moving in with him?” Keira demanded, firing another quick question at her floundering sister.

“I don’t know,” Bryn laughed. “Who knows?” She buried her head in her coffee mug, attempting to hide her grin with it but failing miserably. There wasn’t a coffee cup in the world wide enough to conceal the wideness of Bryn’s smile.

Keira was stunned. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Her sister had finally been tamed. The drama was worthy of one of her articles!

“Anyway, stop trying to change the subject,” Bryn said, suddenly. “We were talking about *you* and how you’re turning into a couch potato. You can’t spend another weekend at home. Please, get out and do something. It’s really not good for you to sit around inside all day.”

“It’s cold out,” Keira moaned.

“So?” Bryn replied. “Wear a hat! You’re born and bred New York City, you can handle the cold!”

Keira chewed her lip. She remembered a text that had come through from Shelby last night. She hadn’t responded yet, but her friend had invited her to a party Saturday evening, which was tonight.

“Actually, I’m going out this evening,” Keira told Bryn, sounding smug.

“You are?” Bryn asked, arching an eyebrow in obvious disbelief.

“Yes,” Keira replied bluntly. “I’m going to a party. I was going to ask you to come along.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But I can’t. Felix and I are having an early night.”

Keira laughed loudly. “Who are you?”

Bryn laughed. With a little shrug she said, “People change.”

When Keira gave little more than a grunt in response, Bryn sat down beside her and rubbed her back. It was very unusual for Bryn to be so caring.

“I know you’re hurting,” she said in a soothing, maternal voice. “But dwelling on the pain does not help you heal. You need to get up and face the day. A shower would be good for you.”

“Fine,” Keira grumbled. “I can take the hint.”

She got up from the couch, her muscles aching as she did. The crick in her neck was becoming a permanent feature now.

“I’ll be gone by the time you’re done,” Bryn said.

“Okay, have a nice time,” Keira replied. “Send my hellos to Felix.”

Bryn blushed immediately.

Keira went into the bathroom, shaking her head at the complete transformation of Bryn. It was amazing how much the love of a man had changed her sister, she thought, as she peeled off her grubby pajamas and turned on the water. She stepped inside the cubicle, closing it behind her.

As the water ran over her hair and skin, Keira marveled at the role reversal she and Bryn were going through. As much as Bryn had changed for the better, Keira felt that she herself had changed for the worst. The end of her relationship with Cristiano had hit her like a freight train. It was even affecting her work. Elliot was eager to send her abroad again for another assignment, but they’d had three meetings about it now and each time Keira had found an excuse not to commit to a location. When he pushed, she’d remind him of how he’d promised her more creative freedom after the last assignment, and that would shut him up temporarily. But it couldn’t last forever, she knew that. Just like how living in Bryn’s apartment and sleeping on her couch couldn’t. Keira would have to pull herself together sooner or later.

She washed the lather from her hair, realizing as she did so that Bryn had been right. A shower was just what she needed to rejuvenate her mind. Perhaps going to a party this evening would be good for her, even if she didn’t feel like it. Sometimes what you want and what you need are different things, Keira reminded herself. Those words had become her personal catch phrase whenever she found herself beating herself up over what happened with Cristiano. Just because she’d wanted him, didn’t mean he was right for her. Still, sometimes it was easier to believe her own words than those of others.

She stepped out of the shower, wrapping herself up in fresh towels, and went back to the living room to find some clean clothes for the day. All her stuff was still in boxes and suitcases, but she’d become so accustomed to this way of life now she knew where to find most things. The top she was after would be in the shoe box under the coffee table. She crouched down to reach it. As she did, her gaze fell to her cell phone. She fought the familiar compulsion to check and see whether Cristiano had been in touch, instead grabbing the box and rummaging through it for the top she wanted. As she pulled it out, she remembered the last time she’d worn it: Paris, during one of their romantic strolls through the rain-soaked city. Her heart ached immediately, and she dropped the top, grasping instead for her phone, her willpower suddenly gone.

She had no notifications but checked every app individually just in case he’d decided to get in touch through some slightly more obtuse means than text or email; a “like” on one of her photos, for example, or posting a link to a relevant news story on her wall. But with a sad sigh, Keira realized there was nothing. Cristiano had made no attempt to reach out to her, even subtly, since she’d ended things in Charles de Gaulle Airport.

The uncomfortable sensation in Keira’s chest made her realize how much she needed to see her friends tonight. A party might not be the best environment for her right now, but being with Maxine and Shelby would be. For the first time in a long time, she found herself looking forward to human company.

*

Keira hurried up the steps of Shelby and David’s house. It was freezing, and she was dressed in a barely there black dress. She shivered on the step as she pressed the bell over and over, impatient for the door to be opened.

At last it swung open, letting light, music, and chatter pour out at Keira. She rubbed her arms and looked up to see Rob, David's brother, at the door.

"Hey," he said, looking her up and down. Then an amused frown appeared between his eyebrows. "Keira Swanson? Is that really you?"

"Yup," Keira replied. "Can I come in? I'm freezing!"

"Of course!" Rob replied, moving out of the way. Keira hurried past him, out of the darkness and into the brightly lit corridor. He closed the door behind her. "I didn't recognize you. You've changed."

"I'm not twenty-one anymore, if that's what you mean," Keira replied, shirking off her jacket.

Rob took it from her, hanging it on a spare peg. "Was that the last time I saw you?"

Keira nodded. "Yup. Graduation from college." The heat from the apartment began to warm her and she stopped rubbing her arms quite so vigorously. "So, how are you?" she asked Rob, attempting to make polite small talk.

"I'm great," he replied, beaming. "Yeah. All good." He scratched his head, looking lost for words. "Um, why don't you come in?"

"Sure," Keira replied.

He gestured for her to go further inside the apartment. Keira did, following the noises toward the kitchen. David and Shelby had a nice house, considering no one else Keira's age had been able to afford to buy their own home yet. Hell, Keira couldn't even get together the money for a deposit on an apartment to *rent*!

She found everyone in the kitchen, Shelby perching beside the large kitchen island chatting with some people Keira didn't know. Work colleagues, she presumed. They looked pretty put together, with neat hair, trendy outfits, and confident smiles. Keira felt suddenly very uncomfortable in the presence of these apparently calm, collected other friends of Shelby's.

"Keira!" Shelby exclaimed, noticing her then. "You came!" She placed her glass heavily onto the counter and wobbled toward her friend, clearly already a little tipsy. "Oh my God, I never thought I'd see you again," she wailed, throwing her arms around Keira's neck and squeezing.

Keira patted the arm that choked her. "Don't be silly," she squeaked. "I've just been taking a bit of off time."

Shelby moved out of the vise-like embrace and looked her up and down. "Wow, you look gorgeous!" She plucked the fabric of Keira's dress in her fingertips, making it spring back against Keira's hips. Then she turned her head to address the room. "Look how gorgeous my friend Keira is!" she cried. "AND she's SINGLE!"

Keira blushed immediately. "Please, Shelby," she muttered out the corner of her mouth. She felt less than attractive, no thanks to the extra pounds she'd gained recently.

"What?" Shelby giggled. "You're back on the market and I have some very handsome friends. And girl, your ass is looking fine."

"There's a difference between fine and fat," Keira muttered. "And I'm not ready to date yet. This is literally my first evening out of Mope Mood in two weeks."

"Okay, okay," Shelby replied, rolling her eyes. "I won't push it. But I will give you some wine." She grinned devilishly.

"No!" Keira protested. She knew far too well what a sloppy drunk she could be, and how easily she drank too much when she was feeling emotional. Alcohol was the last thing she needed right now.

But it was too late. An overfilled glass of white wine was thrust through the crowd toward her. She took it from the extended, bodyless hand, peering through the crack between people's heads to see who was offering it.

"MAX!" Keira cried, when she realized, finally, it was her other best friend.

Max wedged herself through a small gap between two tall, immovable-looking guys, and hugged Keira.

“Hi, stranger,” she said. “It’s so good to see you.” They drew apart and Maxine smiled at her, her dark eyes glittering with kindness. “I was so worried about you I even texted your sister.”

Keira’s eyebrows shot up. Maxine and Bryn hated each other. Some inexplicable feud neither could remember the origins of made their relationship frosty at best.

“She didn’t tell me,” Keira said.

“Of course she didn’t,” Maxine replied, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here now. Now I can tell you face to face that you’re a strong, powerful, wonderful woman who’s not defined by a man.”

Keira laughed. It felt like the first genuine smile she’d cracked in days.

“Thanks, Max,” she said, nudging her friend.

Feeling a little happier, Keira took a sip of the wine. It was nice, with a delicate, light flavor. Instantly she could imagine Cristiano’s voice in her head, telling her it would pair wonderfully with seafood. She felt a pang of loss.

“Have you noticed that Rob is staring at you?” Maxine asked suddenly, breaking into her thoughts.

“No,” Keira said, looking over to where he was leaning against the fridge. He looked away immediately.

“You should talk to him,” Maxine urged. “He clearly likes you.”

Keira shook her head. “I’m not in the right place to be *liked* right now. Cristiano was a rebound from Shane, remember. And look how badly that went.”

“Shane was a rebound from Zach,” Maxine reminded her. “And it was the best decision you’d made for yourself in a long time.”

Keira shook her head again. She lowered her voice. “Please can I just have one night without thinking about relationships?”

Maxine let out a reluctant sigh. “Fine. But on one condition.” She grabbed Keira’s hand. “You dance with me all night!”

Keira exhaled loudly but didn’t put up much resistance as Maxine tugged her into the middle of the living room. The couches had been pushed back, the coffee table moved to the side, and there were a few other people already dancing in the space. Standing right in the middle of the room like that certainly wasn’t Keira’s first idea of fun, but anything was better than being forced into flirting.

Shelby bounded over then, throwing her arms around both Keira and Maxine.

“My faves!” she cried. “Have I told you two recently how much I love you?”

Keira laughed.

“Someone’s drunk,” Maxine commented.

“Yup!” Shelby confirmed. Then she raised her voice and yelled over the music. “And it feels awesome!”

They began dancing together to the track, pulling silly, overly enthusiastic dance moves. Keira let herself relax into the moment. She drank more from her glass of wine, giving herself permission to enjoy herself and let her hair down just a little bit. With her best girlfriends she could loosen the reins a bit.

Her glass was empty when Shelby suddenly exclaimed loudly, “Oh my God! When was the last time we did shots together?”

She grabbed both their hands, looking from one to the other with expectant excitement, like she’d had the best idea in the world.

“No way,” Keira said, shaking her head. She was already one extremely large glass of wine down. Adding a shot to the mix would be dangerous.

“Come on!” Shelby said, pouting. She bounced up and down, her expression and tiny frame making her look like a petulant pixie. “We have tequila!”

Keira recalled how the three of them had always had tequila shots back at college parties, almost ritualistically on a night out, and just how much fun it had been.

“For old times’ sake?” Maxine said, nudging her.

Maybe one wouldn’t hurt, Keira thought.

“Okay, okay,” she said finally, giving in to peer pressure for the umpteenth time that night.

Taking Keira by the shoulders, Shelby steered her over to the kitchen counter, Maxine following behind like a conga line. David was there talking to a group of his male friends, Rob included.

“Babe, we’re doing tequila,” Shelby slurred, reaching an arm around his shoulders and planting a sloppy kiss on his cheek. Her engagement ring sparkled under the bright lights.

David gave her one of his adoring looks and Keira looked away, feeling a pang of jealousy deep in the pit of her stomach. As she averted her gaze, she inadvertently looked straight into Rob’s. He seemed to have a matching expression to her own, like he was holding back envy. She wondered whether he was currently riding the wave of a breakup like she was.

“Of course, my darling,” David told Shelby, kissing her nose.

She unslung her arms from around his neck, and he went over to the cupboards, collecting the things they’d need – tequila bottle, salt, and shot glasses.

“Rob, can you get the limes?” Shelby instructed, pointing at the fridge his back was against.

Keira watched him fish a bag of limes out from inside the refrigerator. He came over to the counter and placed them down.

“I’ll have one of those, too,” he said, nodding to the row of shot glasses David was lining up.

“HELL YEAH!” Shelby cried.

She reached for a knife to begin cutting limes and promptly had it removed from her hand by Maxine.

“Let me do that, okay, hon?” Max said with a giggle.

Shelby nodded.

Once everything was ready and the shot glasses filled, David, Rob, Keira, Maxine, and Shelby took their positions in front of them. They salted their hands and each picked up a shot glass, readying themselves for the countdown.

“Three, two, one!” Shelby cried.

Keira necked the shot back. The liquor burned her throat immediately. The taste was intense and she swallowed quickly, feeling heat race down her gullet. Wincing, she licked the salt quickly, then grabbed a lime wedge and sucked on it.

With watering eyes, she looked over at her friends. Shelby pulled her own lime out of her mouth and threw it onto the countertop, before suddenly retching. Then she turned and threw up violently in the sink.

David burst out laughing, and hurried over to comfort her. Maxine followed suit, discarding her lime and giggling loudly.

Keira was left just with Rob. She looked over at him. He was laughing, his lime still wedged in his mouth.

“Shelby is such a lightweight,” he said, taking it out finally.

Keira took her own lime out of her mouth. The tequila reached her stomach, and warmth spread all through her.

“It’s not her fault,” she said, smiling. “There aren’t many five-foot-nothing, hundred-pound women who can hold their liquor.”

“You’re doing okay,” he commented.

Keira patted her newly rounded stomach as if it were an explanation.

“So, anyway,” she said. “What did you think of your shot?”

“It was all right,” Rob replied, shrugging nonchalantly. “But I’ve gotta admit, I’m more of a beer guy. Thought I’d give it a try.”

“I commend you,” Keira replied.

She could feel her cheeks getting warm from the mixture of wine and liquor. For the first time in days, she felt willing and able to have a conversation.

“So Rob, what have you been up to for the last...” She counted in her head. “...seven years?”

“Regenerating every cell in my body,” he said.

Keira frowned with confusion. “Huh?”

“Seven years. That’s how long it takes for every cell in your body to have regenerated,” he explained. “There’s a theory that it’s why people get a seven-year itch in relationships.”

“Oh,” Keira said. “I don’t think I’ll ever reach seven years in a relationship.”

Rob laughed. “No. Me neither. I can do one. Sometimes two. But anything beyond that is unknown territory.”

“Same,” Keira replied. She could tell the alcohol had already loosened her tongue somewhat. It felt nice to enjoy communicating again. She reached for the tequila. “Another?”

Rob raised his eyebrows. “Sure.”

Keira poured them each another shot. They took it in turn to salt their hands, and then this time, she counted them in. “Three, two, one!”

They took the shot in unison, slamming their glasses down at the same time, licking their salted hands and reaching for the lime slices. They both went for the same piece, and Keira playfully batted Rob’s hand away, snatching it up from him. She sucked it, laughing, then took it from her lips.

“That was funn – ” she began, but her words were cut off when Rob suddenly lunged in and kissed her. Keira pushed him away, horrified. “HEY!” she shouted. “What the hell was that?”

Rob looked stunned. “What do you mean?” he demanded. “You were flirting with me.”

“NO I wasn’t!” Keira said back. Worse than having someone’s lips on hers without consent was the accusation that she’d given him some kind of green light to do it when she most definitely hadn’t.

“Oh, please,” Rob replied, looking incensed. “Why did you keep looking at me then? Why did you offer me another drink?”

“Since when was looking akin to flirting?” Keira replied.

“Um, ever since our species evolved distinct male and female parts?” Rob shot back.

He looked furious. Keira realized then that he was actually inebriated. He’d been holding it well before, but with those two shots of tequila in quick succession, he’d clearly crossed over the line of what his body could handle, and he was suddenly looking very disheveled.

Keira turned away, not prepared to have a discussion with a drunken idiot over the nuances of flirting. But as she walked away she was stunned by Rob grabbing her arm, attempting to hold her back.

“Hey,” he said. “You should apologize.”

“What?” she demanded, the tequila swilling in her stomach giving her confidence. “YOU should apologize. I haven’t done anything.”

“You led me on!”

Keira felt rage take over. “You’re a pig!” she cried out, reaching for the closest glass of alcohol. She found a discarded, full wine glass and threw its contents into Rob’s face.

She hurried away, grabbing her coat and scurrying from the house before anyone had a chance to stop her. She didn’t want Maxine or Shelby tailing her, trying to comfort her. She just wanted to go home.

Luckily, as she rushed down the street, a cab was coming her way, its light on. She hailed it.

It slowed at the curb and she leapt inside, telling the driver Bryn’s address. As she sped away, she saw Maxine and Shelby hurrying onto the doorstep, looking for her. She waved meekly at them from the back of the cab as it passed, then hunkered down in her seat. Humiliation made her cheeks burn. She rummaged in her purse, grabbing her cell phone to text Shelby an apology. But instead of messaging her friend, she found herself sending a message to Cristiano instead. Three simple words.

I miss you.

CHAPTER TWO

When Keira woke the next day, a feeling of mortification struck her. Memories of the party came flooding back, of the tequila shots with her friends and the whole unpleasant experience with Rob kissing her, and her throwing a drink in his face. But that wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing that had happened was that she'd texted Cristiano.

She heaved back the covers, getting tangled in them in her haste to find her cell phone and falling flat on her ass. From the hard floor, she groaned and reached up to the coffee table, getting hold of it.

Once the phone was in her hands, Keira became too terrified to look. She hesitated, her thumb hovering over the button, before finally swallowing her anguish and pressing down.

Immediately, she saw she'd received several text notifications. Her heart leapt into her throat. Could one be from Cristiano? She clicked on the icon.

The first was Maxine asking if she was okay. The next; Maxine, again, asking her to let her know she got home okay. Then several from Shelby writing a stream of unconnected words spelled incorrectly, another from Maxine from earlier this morning stating that if Keira didn't get in touch by midday she'd call the police, and finally one from her mom asking if she'd ever tried coconut milk in her latte. But nothing from Cristiano.

Her stomach sank. Disappointment settled deeply in her chest. But it was quickly replaced by a new sensation: relief. She'd taken the first step, broken the wall of silence between them, and Cristiano had chosen not to communicate in return. At least now she knew where she stood. She didn't need to wonder anymore. As difficult as it was to know things were truly over, she was glad at least for some certainty.

She looked back at Maxine's messages, no longer distracted by thoughts of Cristiano and able to pay them the attention they deserved.

Are you okay, hon? So sorry about Rob! What a jerk. I know you well enough to know you're probably embarrassed about it, but you're literally my hero right now.

She smiled to herself, her mortification of having made a spectacle of herself dissipating slightly. She typed a response.

Sorry for being silent. I must've fallen asleep as soon as I got home. Of course I'm embarrassed, but at least you're proud of me.

She sent the message and went to put her phone away, then on second thought sent a text to her mom, Mallory. *Yes. And it's yummy.*

She heard the sound of a key in the door then and jumped with surprise. As she turned to look over her shoulder, she saw Bryn enter the apartment, dressed in workout gear, her cheeks pink, hairline sweaty, and face grinning widely. Keira realized then that she was not alone. Felix was in tow. For an older gentleman he certainly looked all right in workout gear. He reminded her a little of the before model from an ad for male hair dye.

"You're up," Bryn said to Keira with a smile. "How was the party?"

"Could've been better," Keira murmured in reply. "Where have you two been?"

Bryn went over to the sink to fill up her empty water bottle. It was Felix who answered Keira's question.

"We just went for a jog," he said.

Keira had to stop herself from exclaiming, "At your age?" Instead, she managed to censor herself and instead asked, "At this time of the morning?"

"Best time for it," Felix replied. He raised one of his legs, resting it on a kitchen stool and stretching to touch his toes.

He was fitter than Keira, that much was evident. She'd let everything deteriorate in that department and her waistline was starting to suffer for it. It was all well and good eating and drinking to her heart's content when she was hiking up Italian mountainsides, but now that her evenings consisted of binge-watching TV and eating pretzels, it wasn't so great. She poked her stomach. It was definitely squishier than it used to be. She'd have to do something about that soon.

Bryn turned back from the sink and took a long swig from her bottle. "Have you heard from Mom?"

"Just some random text about coconut milk latte," Keira replied.

Bryn laughed. "She's losing her mind. She was supposed to let you know about dinner tonight."

"Oh," Keira replied.

"Well?" Bryn probed. "What do you say? Swanson ladies dinner date?"

"Isn't Felix invited?" Keira asked, curiously. Mallory seemed to love Felix; either that or she was just very relieved that Bryn had finally started a stable relationship.

Felix switched to stretching his other leg. He glanced at Keira, his hands outstretched clasping the toe of his sneaker. "I've got plans with my own family tonight. It's my parents' wedding anniversary."

Once again, Keira had to bite her tongue to stop from blurting out something rude. But she really was surprised that Felix's parents were alive and kicking. They must be well into their eighties, the age Keira's grandparents would have been had either still been alive.

"That's lovely," she managed to say.

"What shall I tell Mom?" Bryn asked.

"Tell her okay," Keira replied.

Maybe some mollycoddling could help kick-start her out of her funk. There really was nothing like Mallory's maternal cloying to remind Keira how important her independence was.

Bryn and Felix exchanged a nod and then headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Keira asked.

"Second five K," Bryn replied.

"Ten before breakfast has always been my motto," Felix added.

They waved and swirled out the door. Keira blinked at it. It was hard to believe that *anyone* could be that physically active, let alone a sixty-something man. She wondered how long it took someone to train to run 10k and realized it wouldn't take that long at all. Certainly less than a year. Felix could have started his fitness regime on his sixtieth birthday for all she knew. It was never too late to make a change.

She realized, suddenly, that she needed to stop sitting around feeling sorry for herself. Overcome by a surge of motivation, Keira grasped her work bag and pulled out her notebook. She quickly wrote a list of all the things she needed to change in her life, including losing a couple of extra pounds and getting her roots touched up. She scanned the list and realized there was one very important change she needed to make to get her life back on track, and that was getting herself into her own apartment. The longer she stayed sleeping on Bryn's couch, the harder it was becoming to ever imagine herself being independent, standing on her own two feet again.

She fetched her laptop and went onto a real estate website. She hadn't checked apartment prices for at least a couple of years, having been settled with Zach for so long, and the prices made her eyes water. But if she added up her work bonuses and the several grand she'd saved just from not having to pay rent or for any of her food for the last few months, she might just be able to scrape together enough to put down a deposit. On paper she looked like a safe bet, since she had a steady job with a decent income. She started to feel the first glimmer of hope in days.

She scrolled through all the apartments, looking for one to rent within her price range. Most of them looked a little worse for wear, but she liked DIY and didn't mind having a fixer-upper. She

just wanted something that was her own, somewhere she could call home after spending weeks on end in hotel rooms.

At last, an apartment caught her eye. A one-bed, one-bath condo farther west from Manhattan than she usually went. From the photos it looked like it had been a sad divorcé's downsizer, but Keira could see past the drab, unloved decor. The windows were huge, the ceilings high. Without the graying carpet it would look even more spacious. The building had laundry facilities in the basement, and it was less than a mile from a subway station.

It felt like fate.

Keira grabbed her phone and punched in the agent's number. After a few rings, a croaky voice answered, an older woman with a decades-developed smoker's rasp.

"I'm inquiring about the apartment on your website," she said, explaining which specific one she was interested in.

"Oh yeah, that one's a beaut," the woman replied. "Great location. How tall are you?"

Keira was taken aback by the question. "Why?"

"Cause the last two guys I showed it to were the size of basketball players and wanted more space. Waste of everyone's time. And time is money, kiddo. So? How tall?"

"Five two," Keira said.

"Perfect," the woman rasped. "When d'ya wanna look?"

Keira thought of her job, of the long hours she often had to work at *Viatorum*. "A weekend would be better."

"Whatcha doin' today?" came the woman's response. "I had a cancellation so could fit you in."

"Today?" Keira repeated, surprised. It wasn't like she had anything else to do. "Okay, yes. Today is fine!"

They made the necessary arrangements and Keira hung up the call, feeling a little dazed from the speed with which it had all happened. It really did feel like fate.

*

Keira left the subway, finding herself in an unfamiliar but rather pleasant part of New York. It was one of the things about the city she loved so much, how it changed, evolved, and developed so constantly it was always reinventing itself. Not that long ago this area must have been a bit rundown and the public hadn't yet caught on, because there was no way she'd be able to afford to rent a place here otherwise!

She hurried along the sidewalk, scanning the door numbers as she went, searching for the correct building. As she drew closer to the correct number, she noticed a woman standing ahead in a fuchsia pink two-piece and matching heels, smoking a cigarette. That must be the real estate agent she spoke to on the phone.

The woman turned, presumably at the sound of Keira's footsteps, and threw her cigarette to the ground. She put it out with the toe of her shoe and headed toward the door, gesturing for Keira to follow her, blowing smoke from the side of her lips as she went.

"Let's get inside," she called out when Keira was still a few paces away. "I'm freezing my butt off out here."

Keira blinked in surprise at how rapidly things continued to move. Without even introductions, she followed the woman inside the apartment building.

Inside, it was as dingy as Keira had expected, but the staircase was in one piece and the elevator smelled fine. They went up to the thirteenth floor and Keira was pleased to see there was no graffiti anywhere in the corridor they emerged into.

The real estate agent put a key in the lock of a plain white door and then pushed it open.

The smell of dust wafted out. It smelled like the condo hadn't been vacuumed for years. They stepped inside.

"The landlord lived here for a bit before moving to another place and renting this out. He's a bachelor," the agent said, wiping her fingers across the balustrade and picking up dust. "You can probably tell."

But Keira didn't care about the layer of dust. She didn't even care about how much smaller the apartment was in real life compared to the pictures, or how the wallpaper was covered in smudgy handprints. She could see past all of that. The condo to her meant freedom, independence, the beginning of her life. A reboot. An anchor.

"I love it!" she cried, clapping her hands.

The agent didn't seem moved by her gushing. "Good," she said simply. "Bedroom's through there. That's the reason it's cheap. Not enough room for a proper double, just one of those European-sized ones. But you're short so you'll fit fine."

Keira peered into the bedroom. It was indeed little more than a closet. But what else did she need from a bedroom than a place to sleep? It wasn't like she had a partner to share her bed with, it would just be her. Her and maybe a cat...

"Looks big enough for me," she said. "I don't actually own a bed so it will just be a case of getting something that fits."

The real estate agent nodded in her characteristic lackluster way. "Great. Wanna rent it?"

Keira needed a moment to think. This was happening too fast. She ducked back out of the bedroom into the living area and walked over to the large windows, looking out at the view. She could see Central Park from here.

Suddenly she could imagine herself sitting by this window, gazing out at the streets, drinking coffee, writing. It was like her own Paris hotel window. Perfect for her. She didn't need anything fancy, not when she was abroad for work so often. She just needed somewhere to call her own. A fresh start.

She swirled to face the fuchsia-clad real estate agent. "Yes. I'll take it."

CHAPTER THREE

Mallory leaned across the table and filled Keira's now empty glass with more rosé. Keira grimaced. She didn't care for the sickly sweet pink wine her mother favored, but there wasn't much she could do about it. When it came to Mallory Swanson, refusal was futile.

Bryn caught Keira's eye from across the table and smirked. She hated the pink wine just as much as Keira did. At least it provided them with a private joke they could share.

"So Keira," Mallory said, addressing her youngest daughter.

Keira broke her gaze from Bryn to regard Mallory. She could tell by the way her mother's eyes were slightly narrowed, and the way her wine glass was askew in her hands, that she was slightly tipsy. Which meant that she was about to ask something very personal, as was her way when she'd had a glass or two.

Keira braced herself. "Yes, Mother?"

"Have you heard from Cristiano?"

There it was. The gut punch.

Before Keira had a chance to even groan, Mallory flinched and flashed angry eyes at Bryn.

"Don't kick me, young lady!" she exclaimed. "If I don't ask she doesn't tell. How else am I supposed to know what's going on in my daughter's life? One minute he was Mr. Right and then he was Mr. Gone. I want to know what happened."

Petulance was another one of Mallory's tipsy habits.

Keira sighed. "It's okay. It's about time I talked about what happened." She put her wine glass down. At least if she was the one commanding the conversation she'd have an excuse not to drink any more rosé. "I haven't heard from him since I broke it off. I really thought we'd be friends. It felt like a mature separation, you know? Like we could both tell it wasn't right. But then he disappeared off the face of the earth. No communication whatsoever. I mean, am I an idiot for ever thinking you can be friends with an ex? The same thing happened with Shane."

"Oh, darling, I'm not the one to ask," Mallory replied. "You know too well how disastrous my love life has been."

If Keira had a bingo card for things her mom discussed when she was drinking, she'd probably have ticked all the boxes by now. Career. Tick. Painful broken heart. Tick. And now, the real kicker: Dad.

Keira knew the story all too well, but that didn't stop Mallory from bringing it up constantly. He was her one true love, they were young but thought it would work, he couldn't handle the responsibility of children, he'd left her destitute in a big city with two young kids. Though she'd never met her dad, Keira was absolutely certain his absence played a role in her own inability to sustain a happy relationship. And he was *definitely* the reason Bryn was setting up house with an old man.

Mallory waved her glass in front of her face, sloshing some pink liquid onto the table in front of her. "I will say this though. Broken hearts, like broken bones, are stronger once they're repaired."

Keira quirked an eyebrow. That was actually quite insightful coming from Mallory.

"Who are you quoting that from, Mom?" Bryn piped up. "Oprah Winfrey?"

"I don't remember who," Mallory snapped. "It might have been in a fortune cookie. It doesn't matter. The point is, you will get over this and you will learn something and you will heal and your heart will go on."

"Ooh, I know that one. That one's Celine Dion," Bryn said.

Mallory frowned at her. "Will you stop with your jokes, Bryn! I'm trying to make Keira feel better."

"You are, Mom," Keira said meaningfully, speaking for the first time in ages. "You're actually helping a ton. Bryn is too, in her own way." She smiled at her sister. Bryn had put up with a lot

from Keira over the last few weeks, from her moping around all day in unwashed clothes to her short temper. Now felt like a good time to let them know about what had happened with the real estate agent earlier that day. “Actually, I have a bit of news. Good news.”

“Oh?” they both asked in unison.

Keira felt suddenly shy. Renting a condo was such a big step for her, for all of them really. It would mark her transition, finally, from young adult to woman. For Mallory, it would be the end of her constant worry about her youngest getting along in the world. For Bryn, it would mean the return of her own independence, the lessening of responsibility, the lightening of the burden she’d always had to carry as the older of the two sisters.

“I’ve put a deposit down to rent my own apartment.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Bryn began to whoop. Mallory broke into a wide grin.

“Darling, have you really?” she asked.

Keira smiled shyly and nodded. “Yup.”

Bryn was out of her seat suddenly. She came up around Keira and threw her arms about. “Oh THANK GOD!” she cried.

Keira laughed in her tight embrace. “Okay, okay, I know I’ve been a pain, but really!”

Bryn released her grip a little. “It’s not that you’ve been a pain,” she said. “It’s just that Felix... well, he asked me to get a place with him. I’ve been dragging my feet...”

“I knew it!” Keira exclaimed.

From the other side of the table, Mallory began to cry. “My two girls, growing up so fast.”

Of course, the last box on the bingo board could now be ticked. Cry!

*

Keira headed out into the cold evening, pulling her coat about her. The dinner with her mom and Bryn had been rejuvenating. She’d enjoyed it far more than she’d expected.

Bryn had headed off to Felix’s for the night, so Keira would have the apartment to herself. She was tired, though, and felt like going straight to bed. She’d be back in the office tomorrow and wanted to be fresh for it. She’d been a grump for the last few weeks. Hopefully her positive attitude would carry over until tomorrow.

The subway sign appeared up ahead. As she headed toward it, Keira felt a vibration in her pocket. Her cell phone. She reached inside and took it out.

To her surprise, this time it was a text from Cristiano. Her heart seemed to stop beating as she opened it up.

Whoever this is, leave Cristiano alone. He’s moved on.

Keira stared at the message, blinking in shock. It wasn’t from Cristiano at all, but from someone using his phone. A new girlfriend?

Her stomach sank. All the good work that had been done that evening seemed to suddenly unravel and spool inside of her. How could he have moved on so quickly? After all those conversations they’d had about him only wanting to date women he could imagine marrying. How many were there for him to have found a new one in such a short space of time! Being marriage material in Cristiano’s eyes clearly didn’t mean that much after all. Had Keira been duped?

She thrust her phone back into her purse. Fuming, she hurried down the subway steps and on to the waiting train. She slumped into a seat and gazed at the blackness out the window.

Her mind raced a mile a minute, picking apart all the times they’d spent together, searching for new meaning, new clues in the moments they were together.

But the more she thought, the more her anger lessened. Instead of holding on to the worst possible scenario her mind could conjure – that Cristiano had lied to her about being careful with his

heart – she managed to talk herself down to a place of reason. Sometimes the rebound relationship was the best relationship. He'd been her rebound from Shane and the time they'd spent together had been wonderful. Perhaps this new woman was just his rebound rather than his next wife. Perhaps he'd learned that from Keira, that sometimes it was okay to be with a person just because you wanted to, rather than always having some grand plan in place.

She remembered Mallory's words, about each relationship being an opportunity to learn and grow, to move onward and upward. Cristiano might indeed be going through the same thing. And Keira could feel, tangibly, that she was as well. Rather than holding on to her fury, to her bruised ego, it had only taken her the subway ride to start to let it go.

She got off the train and headed back up to street level, exiting the subway a wiser woman than she'd been when she entered. When she'd gotten on the train she was upset but as she left, she was relieved. This was the real line in the sand with her Cristiano. This was the real ending. It was time to move on, once and for all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Keira wrapped her knuckles against Elliot's office door. It was open, but she still felt the need to be polite.

"Morning, Keira," he said, turning over his shoulder to look at her. "Come in, come in."

Keira entered, taking a seat opposite him. She always felt intimidated by Elliot's office, like she was a school kid facing the principal.

"Everything okay?" he asked, tipping his gaze up to meet hers.

Keira swallowed the little lump of nerves that always formed in her throat when speaking to her boss. "Yes. I wanted to apologize, actually."

"For what?" Elliot replied, frowning.

"For the last few weeks since I got back from France. I haven't been my best." Now that she'd begun speaking, she wanted to get it all out, and her words spilled off her tongue quickly. "And I know I've been avoiding picking a location for the new assignment, I think I just needed time after Cristiano. I was worried, you know? Another assignment, another broken heart. But I should have just been honest rather than avoiding the topic, so I'm sorry." She took a deep breath, then smiled, feeling satisfied to have finally aired her worries.

"Oh," Elliot replied, a bit blankly. "To be honest, I hadn't noticed."

Keira frowned. "You hadn't? But you've emailed me pretty much every day asking where I wanted to go on my next assignment."

Elliot shrugged. "I send a lot of emails, Keira. Look, I'm writing one to you as we speak. Guess I don't need to now." He clicked some buttons and then folded his arms and looked at her.

There was a long pause. Keira blinked. "Well, what was in the email?"

"Oh yes," Elliot said, snapping back to attention. "It was about your new assignment abroad."

"My..." Keira let that sink in. She narrowed her eyes. "You mean you've decided where it is?"

They were supposed to consult her! That was the agreement they'd come to, that she'd pick her own locations from now on. Elliot had agreed to it. How could they go back on that now?

"Well, I asked for your input," Elliot replied simply. "And I didn't get it so I asked Heather to go ahead and book something anyway. This is a fast-paced environment, Keira. If people don't get back to me, I'm not going to sit around waiting forever."

He sounded completely emotionless. But Keira felt totally betrayed. Not only did they exploit her heart for entertainment, but now they were going back on their word? Frustration boiled inside of her.

"Where are you sending me?" she asked in a clipped voice.

Elliot looked at his watch. "I'll tell you in the team meeting." Then he clapped his hands. "Come on."

Keira's head spun from her talk with Elliot. It hadn't gone how she'd expected at all. She watched Elliot waltz from the room, her mind reeling. Had he forgotten their arrangement or did he just not care? And what about Nina? She, at the very least, should have known not to plow ahead without Keira's consent! She was supposed to be Keira's friend, be on her side, but as she progressed through the *Viatorum* ranks she'd started siding more and more with Elliot.

Dazed, Keira stood and followed Elliot from the room, into the adjoining conference room. Other writers had started to file in, coffees in hand, and take seats. Keira realized that there were yet more new faces among them. She'd been so cloistered in her own office for the last few weeks she hadn't even noticed or bothered to speak to any of them. She felt guilty about that now. It wasn't that long ago that she was a brand new writer here, desperate for assurance and friendship. She resolved to try harder.

“How’s everyone doing today?” she asked a group of newbies, directing her question at a young woman with long braided hair and a septum ring.

The girl blinked, as though shocked Keira was speaking to her. “Good,” she said in a high-pitched squeak. “It’s assignment day, so I’m looking forward to finding out my new assignment.”

The rest of the group just nodded. One of them even blushed. Keira had never had such an effect on people before. It was easy to forget that she was in a senior role here, that she was a writer who breezed in to meetings and then was out of the office for weeks at a time. They probably thought of her what she thought of Elliot, or of Lance once upon a time. It was the most peculiar feeling.

“I’m Keira, by the way,” she said, reaching out to shake the girl’s hand.

“Yes, I know,” the girl said. “I’m Meredith.” She had a warm smile.

Keira took a seat beside her. “You’re new, right?”

“Ish,” Meredith replied. “I started while you were in France.” She looked suddenly shy. “I loved your article, by the way.”

“Oh,” Keira said, “thanks. I’m kinda trying to move on from all that.”

“All what? You mean Romance Guru articles?” Meredith’s eyes widened. “You can’t! They’re amazing!”

Keira didn’t have time to reply because Elliot began the meeting.

She felt a pit of dread open up in her stomach. Whatever they had planned for her, she had to be strong. If she didn’t want to do it, she’d quit. It was that simple. Though of course, easier said than done.

“Let’s start with a huge round of applause for Meredith,” Elliot started. “Her New York City graffiti tour e-article was a smash hit.”

Everyone clapped and Meredith beamed. Keira felt happy for her. When she’d started at the magazine, it had been under Joshua’s command. He made everyone feel like a failure. The work environment was much better now, much more supportive.

Elliot continued. “Next, I think you’re all interested to know where our Romance Guru is off to for our special December publication.”

“Lapland?” one of the new kids said.

“See if she can seduce Santa,” a fresh-faced boy added.

Everyone laughed. Everyone but Keira.

“No,” Elliot said. “We decided on something a little different.”

This was it. Crunch time. Every muscle in Keira’s body tensed.

“We’re sending her on a cruise of Scandinavia. This time, the assignment is to prove that someone suffering from a breakup can avoid a knee-jerk rebound affair. This time, we want our Guru to *not* fall in love.”

Keira was stunned. She’d had the words *I quit* waiting on the tip of her tongue, but now she had to swallow them down.

“Impossible,” the fresh-faced joker from before said. “She’ll fall for the tour guide, and you all know it.”

He was teasing, of course, but Keira was in too much shock to pay him any attention at all.

“Which is why we’re not having a tour guide,” Elliot added. He looked at Keira. “You have fifteen days. Other than the course of the ship – which will take you through Denmark, Finland, and Sweden – the rest is up to you. You’ll be navigating yourself entirely.”

Keira was lost for words. As it began to sink in, she felt her worries melt away. She wasn’t going to be expected to bruise her heart this time! Sure, she would still have to dig deep and make her article personal, but she wouldn’t need to put herself on the line.

The joker had one last quip to make. “So, basically she’s just writing a travel article?”

Everyone laughed. But Keira only had one thing to say, only one word to describe what her mind was imagining; the Northern Lights, fjords, snow-capped mountains, and meatballs galore! Finally, she managed to untie her tongue. “Wow.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Keira was filled with excitement as she hurried into Bryn's apartment after work that evening. Her sister wasn't yet home, so there was no one to tell her news to. Instead, she rummaged beneath Bryn's bed for her trusty suitcase, surprised that she was so pleased to be packing it once again. She'd been utterly convinced she never wanted to do this again, and yet here she was, thrilled to be traveling abroad for work once more.

Her phone pinged a message then, and she looked to see it was from her mom.

What's the difference between a cortado and a flat-white?

Keira laughed and called Mallory's number. As soon as Mallory answered, she began talking about coffee, clearly assuming that to be the purpose of her daughter's call.

"I mean is it *just* the cup size? It has to be more than that, doesn't it?" she mused aloud.

"Mom, I'm going abroad again," Keira said, paying no attention to the coffee conversation.

"You are?" Mallory said, sounding surprised. "But I thought you were putting your foot down about the Romance Guru articles."

"I was," Keira said, sitting on the edge of Bryn's bed with a light sigh. "But this one is different."

"In what way?"

"The whole point is to not rebound this time. I mean, it's exactly what I need, don't you think? A chance to work on myself. To be alone. I've jumped from one guy to the next for too long now."

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow. Typical *Viatorum* can't give me more than a day's notice of anything."

There was a slight pause. "Well, I'm happy for you, darling," Mallory finally said.

Keira distinctly caught the edge in her voice. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Mallory protested. "I just said I was happy for you."

"There's a but coming..." Keira said.

"No, there isn't."

"Yes, there is. Mom, I've been your daughter for twenty-eight years. I know when there's a but coming."

Mallory sighed. "Fine. I was going to say, 'But what about Christmas?'"

"Ohh," Keira said, relieved. She'd thought Mallory was going to make some comment about how Keira would fail her assignment, how she was always destined to fall for the wrong man, never marry, never make her a grandma, all that stuff. With a chuckle, Keira assured her, "I'll be back for Christmas."

"So it's only a short trip this time?"

"Just over two weeks. You have nothing to worry about. I'll be there dutifully on Christmas Eve like always."

"Good," Mallory replied. "So back to my question. What *is* the difference between a cortado and a flat-white?"

Keira laughed. "Bye, Mom. I love you."

She ended the call and went about packing her case. She piled inside of it all her warmest clothing, sweaters and scarves, extra-thick socks and thermal-lined leggings. Then she added her makeup bag, toiletries, some waterproof boots, and a fresh supply of notebooks and pens.

The door opened then, and she heard Bryn call out, "I'm home!"

Keira jumped up and ran to meet her sister.

"Guess what?" she exclaimed, as Bryn flung her keys into the bowl by the door and kicked off her shoes.

Her sister looked up. "What?"

"I'm going to *Scandinavia!* On a cruise ship!"

Bryn's eyes widened. "Really? Wow! That's awesome."

"And I don't have to fall in love with anyone either."

"Oh good. That's exactly what you need."

She seemed genuinely thrilled for Keira, and again Keira saw a more mature side to her sister, as if the edges of her competitiveness had begun to soften.

"But what about your apartment?" Bryn asked. "Won't there be a lease to sign before you leave?"

"Good point," Keira said, feeling reality bring her back down from her fantasy land. "I'll have to call the real estate agent now and arrange it."

She went into the bedroom and fetched her cell phone, then called the number. The real estate agent answered in her raspy smoker's voice and Keira instantly recalled her fuchsia-pink suit.

"Kid, I was about to call you," she said. "I need you to make an appointment to come in and sign the lease."

Keira laughed. "That's exactly what I was calling for. I've got to go abroad for work, for fifteen days. So I'll have to get the paperwork signed before I go, or it will have to wait until I get back."

The agent sighed loudly. "Kid, you're killing me. You're telling me I've got to drop everything so I can get it sorted out for you? I usually need a week to get the paperwork arranged."

Keira felt her heart sink. She felt terrible for being an imposition, but at the same time the real estate agent was being pretty rude, making it seem like her simple request was completely unacceptable. "Maybe it would be easier to wait until I'm back, in that case?" she suggested. Then she added, slightly sarcastically, "I'd hate to put you out."

"I can speak to the landlord," the woman replied with a huge sigh. "See what he thinks. But I know he wanted to move fast with this and if you're dragging your heels..."

Keira grew even more frustrated. "I can come in now and sign the paperwork. But you said it would take a week to prepare. But fifteen days is too slow? Seems like you have a pretty inflexible schedule."

As soon as she finished speaking, Keira felt shocked with herself. It wasn't often that she was so outspoken. But if it all fell through, what were the chances of her finding another apartment like that one? The only reason she'd been able to afford the rent in the first place was because of the small bedroom. But there must be other short people out there who'd snap it up while she was away! To lose it now would be too cruel a twist of fate.

"Fine," the agent said. "I'll bust my balls to get everything ready in time for your trip abroad." Her voice dripped with disdain.

Through gritted teeth, Keira muttered, "Thank you."

She ended the call, stressed by the conversation. Then she became acutely aware of voices coming from the living area of Bryn's apartment. Someone was there. She peered out the bedroom door.

Keira's mouth dropped open. There, standing in Bryn's kitchen, was Zach. His nose was still bandaged from when Cristiano had broken it, and faded bruises were still visible beneath his eyes.

Bryn, with folded arms, was glaring at him with her fiercest overprotective-sister expression.

"She's not going to want to see you," Keira heard her say.

The bedroom door creaked then, and Zach and Bryn looked over at her. Sheepishly, Keira came into the living room.

"Zach," she said, meekly. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled at the sight of her, though his features were mostly obscured by the bandages. "What, no hug?"

Keira stood still. There would definitely be no hug for her ex-boyfriend, especially after the tricks he'd played in France and how rude he'd been with withholding her money. Bryn rolled her eyes in disdain.

Zachary let his arms drop. “Right,” he said stiffly. “Look, I won’t take up too much of your time. I just wanted to give you this.”

Keira watched him produce something from his pocket. A slip of paper, the same size and shape as a check. She wouldn’t let herself believe that it was one, though. He handed it to her.

“What is it?” she said, still not believing.

“Your half of the deposit,” he explained. Then he sighed, sounding a little strained. “Look, I spoke to my cousin, told him it wasn’t fair to take that money off you. So he agreed to give your portion back.”

“Really?” Keira said, her eyebrows rising. Finally, she took the paper and turned it in her hands so that it was the right way up. It was, indeed, the full portion of her contribution to the deposit. She looked up again at Zach. “Wow. Thank you. I really appreciate this.”

Bryn scoffed. She clearly thought Keira was being too soft on Zach. Keira herself admitted she probably was. But it was just her way. She wasn’t one to hold grudges. Once a wrong had been righted, there didn’t seem much point in doing so. Just a whole lot of wasted energy. Like Bryn and Maxine; no one had any clue how that animosity had started but neither was ever going to let it go.

“I also wanted to say sorry,” Zach continued. “I know what happened in France was crazy. I spoke to my mom and Ruth and my cousin and Shelby and David and my therapist, and there’s unanimous agreement that I was acting like a lunatic.” He smiled shyly. “I’m really sorry if I creped you out.”

“Okay,” Keira replied. “I appreciate you saying that. And the nose. I’m really sorry about that.”

“God, I deserved it!” Zach laughed. “If some guy had done that while you were my girlfriend I’d have reacted the same way. I just hope it heals well. Gives me character.”

“I’m sure it will,” Keira admitted, smiling shyly.

Bryn let another noise of disgust come from the back of her throat. Her arms crossed even tighter against her chest.

“Are we done now?” she asked, coldly. “We have things to be getting on with.”

Zach flicked his gaze from Keira to Bryn. “Almost,” he told her. “Can we have a bit of privacy though? Then I’ll get out of your hair.”

Bryn looked at Keira. One of her eyebrows was raised. Her lips were pursed. Everything in her stance screamed *don’t fall for his tricks*. But she finally relented, heading into her bedroom and closing the door.

Keira looked at Zach. “So?”

“So...” Zach began. He drummed his fingers on the kitchen counter. Whatever he had to say clearly wasn’t coming easy. “Keira, I know I’ve been a jerk.”

Keira held her tongue, though she really wanted to scream out, “Finally you admit it!”

“And... the thing is... I’ve been acting that way because I care for you so deeply.” He gazed up at her, his eyes like big pools of sorrow. “When I gave you that ultimatum I really, really didn’t think you’d choose your job.”

Keira recalled, painfully, the complete misunderstanding that had resulted in her and Zach’s relationship ending. She’d never thought he’d follow through with his threat to end it with her, but sleeping with his sister’s maid of honor had really been the nail in the coffin of their relationship.

“I didn’t think you’d sleep with the first woman who’d agree to it,” Keira replied tersely.

“I know, I know,” Zach said, looking away and letting out a painful sigh. “I was hurting. That’s all I can say. I was so sad that you put something else before me that I wanted to put myself before you, put my needs first. It was... well, it was a shitty way to treat you.”

Keira just mumbled in agreement. In a few days’ time, once the dust had settled, she’d be grateful for Zach apologizing, but right now it was just stirring up a ton of feelings Keira didn’t have time to process.

“Okay, well thanks, I guess,” she finally said. “But, like Bryn said, we’ve got stuff to do.”

“Sure,” Zach said, looking over at the bedroom door that was now standing ajar. Bryn was evidently spying on them. He cast his gaze back at Keira and suddenly blurted, “Can you give me another chance?”

Keira’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. “What?”

“Please,” Zach said. “I don’t want to beg but I will. I know I don’t deserve you, especially after how I’ve behaved. But you drive me crazy because I love you. I can see that now.”

Keira was stunned. In the two years she and Zach had been together, love had never come into the equation. They’d been friends, partners, and equals, sure, but *actually* in love? She couldn’t be certain. They’d never said it, had never felt the need to speak those words. To hear him say them now touched her.

“Zach...” Keira began. “That’s sweet of you to say. But... I can’t. I’m sorry.”

She watched his chest deflate like a balloon, the hope sucked out of him with her words.

“I really blew it, huh?” he said, sounding depressed.

She shook her head. “It’s not that. I’ve been through a lot over the last few months. I’ve grown and learned and changed. I know what I want now.”

“And it’s not me,” he finished for her.

Keira nodded sadly. “I’m sorry. But no, it’s not you.”

“So no amount of begging for forgiveness will work?” Zach asked.

“No,” Keira told him, soft but firm. “It’s not about that. I’m not waiting to forgive you. I just don’t... I don’t want you like that. But we can be friends.”

“Sure,” Zach said, gazing at his feet. “We can be friends.”

Keira led a dejected Zachary from Bryn’s house. Self-pity certainly wasn’t going to help his case. She hoped he’d bounce back soon enough, and learn that he hadn’t really blown it with her, they just weren’t right, and that there’d be some other woman out there who was right for him.

As soon as she closed the door, Bryn hurried out of the bedroom.

“Sis!” she exclaimed, raising a hand for a high five. “That was awesome!”

Keira felt the edges of her lips twitch up. She clapped Bryn’s hand. “It was?”

“Yes! You totally held your own.” Bryn slung an arm around Keira’s shoulder. “You’re going to be just fine on this assignment, I know you are.”

Keira smiled, feeling filled with strength and resolve. Bryn was right. She was going to smash this assignment.

CHAPTER SIX

Bright and early the next morning, Keira received a grumpy call from the real estate agent saying the paperwork was ready for her to sign. Relieved, Keira hurried to her office and scribbled her name on the lease, before racing off for the airport.

Her head was spinning so much from having to rapidly sort things out, that it was only as she plopped herself into her seat on the airplane that it really sank in where she was and what was going on. At least this felt familiar to her now, being on a plane. It was nowhere near as intimidating as it once had been. For the first time, Keira felt much more positive about the future.

She couldn't help but recall how the last time she'd boarded a plane Cristiano had been in the seat beside her. She could still remember the thrilling excitement she'd felt as they neared New York City, and the way his eyes had widened at the sight of a million lights below. That was all gone now. All she had left now were the memories. And for the first time since she'd ended things with Cristiano, her memories of him no longer stung. The thorny layer that had been around them before, causing her pain any time she tried to touch them, had finally gone.

She thought of the text from Cristiano's new girlfriend, the one she'd been agonizing over. It felt so stupid to her now to have been that worked up over him seeing someone else. Of course it didn't mean their relationship had meant nothing to him, it just meant that he was moving on with someone new.

The plane took to the skies, and the sensation of soaring made her stomach flip. Being so high above the world made her feel so free, so bold and independent. She smiled to herself and looked in her carry-on bag for the details of the upcoming cruise.

Heather had outdone herself this time. The itinerary was *laminated*. Probably as an attempt to mitigate against Keira's tendency to spill coffee and fall off gondolas into canals. Heather had also bound the pages. It reminded Keira of something she would have produced in college, and she smirked to herself.

Keira flicked straight past the pages of important contact numbers – noting with a wry smile the empty space where a tour guide's name and number would normally be – and skipped straight to the juicy details of the cruise. She'd hardly had time to get her head around the fact she was going on a cruise, that she'd be on a huge boat in the open sea. It would be a brand new experience for her. Her stomach leapt with anticipation. She glanced through the list of locations: Copenhagen, Denmark. Helsinki, Finland. Stockholm, Sweden.

Heather wasn't one for adornment and there were no pictures included to further whet Keira's appetite —*too expensive to print in color*, she thought in Heather's voice – so she took her tablet from her bag and began to search online.

The images were stunning. Unlike the European cities she'd visited thus far, the buildings in the Scandinavian countries were different, peaked like alpine lodges. And there were vast swaths of countryside, beautiful evergreen trees, lakes of deep blue, and craggy mountains. She could hardly sit through the rest of the plane ride; she wanted to be there now!

Napping was always a good way to pass the time, so Keira settled into her airplane seat and let herself drift off to sleep.

She dreamed she was standing on the edge of a cliff, looking out at the ocean, deep blue and calm. Through the waves she saw a school of dolphins, jumping up before disappearing again. She watched, amazed, as they leaped in strange formations. It was almost like they were dancing, or performing synchronized routines for her. As though trying to impress her.

Keira noticed something peculiar about the dolphins then, about their faces. Even from this distance, she could make out their strangely human expressions, and the varying shades of their eyes. One had the same piercing blue eyes of Shane, and his crooked, cheeky smile to match. Another had

deep chocolate eyes, a softness in its expression that reminded her of Cristiano. Yet another had a lost expression, with a look of mourning and regret behind its eyes. Zachary.

No sooner had she made these connections than their graceful acrobatics transformed into something new. Not a coordinated routine anymore, but something aggressive. A display of masculinity. The Cristiano dolphin plowed headfirst into the Zachary one, busting his nose, or snout, or whatever it was called on a dolphin. The Zachary one hit back, swishing his tail at both Cristiano and Shane. Shane just stood on the back of his tail, flapping his great flippers like this was all a huge joke. Then they piled in on one another, ripping shreds from one another as she watched on horrified, the blue ocean turning red before her eyes.

She tried to call out, “Stop! It’s not a competition!” But her voice was drowned out by the winds.

Then a new danger took her focus. Racing through the waves toward the sparring dolphins was an enormous whale. She didn’t know who this whale was, a stranger, but he moved with purpose and killer determination. Her dolphin-exes were so busy attacking one another they didn’t even notice the whale approach until it was on top of them. In one huge mouthful, the whale ate all three dolphins up. Then it disappeared beneath the waves, making a whirlpool as it went, leaving nothing behind but bloody water to show anything had ever happened there.

Keira startled awake. She was sweating, and her neck was stuck in a painful position. She rubbed it, adjusting to the brightness of the cabin, to the smells and sounds of the airplane in flight around her; rustling chip packets, the merry chatter of excited vacationers, the whirr of powerful engines. Finally coming back to herself, Keira began to chuckle.

What a strange mind she had! To turn her exes into dolphins like that. But she wondered who the whale signified. Not a new boyfriend, she assured herself. That wasn’t the plan, not at all. She decided the whale signified her career, the way she was going to put it first and forget all traces of her ex-boyfriends in order to excel. There was no rebound affair on the horizon. At least, that was the plan...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Keira landed in Berlin, Germany – where the ship would be embarking from – several hours later. Her mind hadn't quite gotten over the hilariously strange dream it had shown her on the airplane, and it took a bit of concentration to switch focus to the real world.

She maneuvered through Berlin Tegel Airport, collecting her case and following the signs that she hoped were taking her to the exit. It felt good to be on her own this time. No guide to show her around, or take any of the responsibility off her shoulders. This time it was just her, and it made her feel powerful.

She made it out of the airport and hailed a cab. The driver was in his fifties or so, with graying hair and a stern expression. But his attitude was far friendlier than his fierce expression would have indicated.

"You're going on the Scandinavian cruise?" he asked in perfect English and just the smallest hint of an accent.

"I am." Keira beamed. "I'm so excited."

"I'd love to go one day," he said. "It's a bit too expensive for a taxi driver though. Do you mind me asking your profession?"

"Oh, I'm a writer," Keira told him. "This is all paid for by the company."

"You're very lucky," he said. "What do you write?"

"Travel articles. Well, sort of. They're a bit of a mixture. Travel and romance."

From the back seat, Keira saw his reflection in the rearview mirror as he raised his eyebrows.

"Travel and romance?"

"I know, it sounds strange. But it's more like personal accounts of the countries and my experiences within them, with dating and trying new things, meeting new men. It's a bit of a mishmash but I'm starting to get a loyal following."

"Weird question," he said. "You don't write for that Latin-sounding magazine, do you? Viaduct, or whatever?"

"*Viatorum*," she told him, a little surprised he'd have heard of her New York City publication all the way over in Germany. But then again, they also e-published and anyone in the world could access the content online. "Have you heard of it?"

"My wife loves it," he said, with an air of frustration. "You're the one on the cover, aren't you? I recognize your face now."

The cover. With Cristiano. Keira groaned. She'd known at the time the image would come to haunt her one day, but she'd let Nina and Elliot have their way. She regretted it now.

"Yeah, that's me," she said, hunkering down defensively.

"It's your fault I'm taking her to Paris for her birthday," he said, jovially, in spite of the complete discord with his stern face. "Great, she'll want a cruise next. You're going to bankrupt me."

"Sorry about that," Keira mumbled.

She gazed out the window, trying to switch her focus from the somewhat awkward conversation to the sight of a new, foreign city passing her by.

Berlin was stunning. Keira had heard about the city reinventing itself and moving on from its troubled history, but she hadn't expected it to be quite this vibrant and artsy. It seemed very youthful and cosmopolitan, like the quirkiest parts of New York exemplified.

Her driver must have noticed her staring, because he said, "We'll be passing by a part of the wall soon."

Keira hadn't been sure whether she'd get a glimpse of the wall that had once divided East and West Berlin, splitting families apart and cleaving the city by political affiliation. She shuddered now as it came into view, a crumbled relic that the German people had torn down with their very hands.

Mallory had watched the momentous occasion on the news, and it was a moment of triumph in history she seemed privileged to have witnessed. Keira felt humbled by the sight of it and took a photo with her cell phone in order to show Mallory when they were reunited at Christmas.

The cab carried on, drawing closer to the harbor. Keira caught sight of the ship even while they were still some distance away. It was huge, a gleaming white monstrosity. Her stomach fluttered with excitement.

Her driver pulled in to the drop-off spot. Keira took some euros from the envelope provided by Heather and handed them over his shoulder.

“Tell your wife hi from me,” she said, feeling a little strange to be saying it.

“Enjoy your cruise,” he replied in his incongruously warm voice and blank face.

Keira collected her case from the trunk and stared up at the enormous ship that was to be her home for the next fifteen days. She took a deep breath to quell her excited butterflies, then headed confidently toward it.

*

The cruise ship was so much more beautiful than Keira had expected. Inside, it was decorated in an Art Deco style, with rich colors, bold geometric shapes, and ornaments. And even better than the unexpected glitz and glamour was the lavishness of a swimming pool and Jacuzzi on deck! Keira hadn't expected such luxury. She was going to love making this ship her home.

Filled with awe, she ventured to the bow, where there was a route all the way to the tip of the ship. It was impossible not to think of Jack and Rose on the *Titanic*, although she knew there was no love story in store for her, and she prayed there would be no icebergs either!

After a whistle-stop glance at the top deck, Keira went in search of her room. She'd been expecting to venture below deck, but to her surprise, her cabin was actually on the top deck. She found the door and went inside.

There was a round window, a proper brass-rimmed one like from a movie, and the view was straight out onto the ocean. Keira had been half expecting a cheap room, a little cubbyhole near the kitchens that smelled of food and was always noisy, but this was the opposite. Quiet, cozy, luxurious.

Her bed was made of chestnut wood, varnished so that it gleamed, and there were creamy silk sheets on it. On one of the small side tables was a silver bucket filled with ice and a bottle of champagne. She wondered who at the magazine had arranged that. Elliot wouldn't think to be so kind, and Heather would hate the extra, unnecessary expense. She wondered then if Nina had had a hand in it. They hadn't been on the best of terms since the furor over the Paris trip, where Nina had become so over-focused on the outcome she'd forgotten that Keira was a person with thoughts and feelings. But then she saw that there was a small card beside the champagne bucket. She picked up the card and opened it.

Welcome aboard, Keira Swanson! May I take this opportunity to express our deepest gratitude that your magazine has chosen our cruise company for your latest article. We are huge fans of Viatorum and can't wait to be featured in your next issue.

Keira stopped reading, discarding the card. The champagne wasn't from one of her caring work colleagues at all, but from the cruise company, attempting to butter her up so she'd write good things about them. Was the whole tour some kind of promotional thing? Some corporate back-scratching?

She grabbed her phone and texted Nina.

Is the cruise company advertising with us?

Nina replied quickly.

They're funding the trip. I assumed Elliot would have told you that.

Keira sighed. So the article was just basically a huge advertisement? It would've been nice to have been told in advance. At least that explained why Elliot had just plowed ahead and booked

the trip without getting her final consultation as he'd promised last time around. Keira didn't want to sound like a spoiled brat, but *Viatorum* messed her around quite a lot. They certainly seemed to expect more from her than she did from them.

She sent another text to Nina.

How am I supposed to write about the cruise ship? A ship isn't a country.

When Nina texted back, her response shocked her.

You're not writing the next Great American Novel here. This isn't On the Road. Just say something nice so we all get paid.

Keira pouted and put her phone away. Nina was in a mood. Again. She didn't want it to spoil her enjoyment, so she pushed her irritation to the back of her mind.

Just then there was a knock on the door. Keira frowned and opened it. Standing outside was a young man dressed like a hotel bellboy. Keira immediately realized he was some kind of delegate from the cruise company, here to sweet-talk her. She really didn't feel like listening to the spiel.

"Hi, I'm Vince," he said, smiling and holding out a hand. Keira shook it despondently. "I've come to give you some brochures for our ship," he continued. "The *Revontulet*, which is the Finnish term for the Northern Lights."

Keira felt her smile return. She was excited to know in just a few days' time she'd be witnessing the infamous light display!

She took the brochures from Vince, feeling her mood improve considerably.

"Thanks. And for the champagne, too. It was a nice touch."

Vince nodded, his little hat bobbing as he did. "Your minibar is also stocked with liquors and snacks, all complimentary, of course."

Keira smirked. They were going to buy her affection through her stomach. It was quite a good strategy, she had to admit.

Vince hovered at the door. "If you'd like to be given a tour I can come back at a convenient time to show you all the facilities."

"I'm good," Keira said, declining. "I prefer to explore on my own terms." She held up the brochures he'd given her. "Besides, I've got all the info I need in here."

"Okay. If there's anything you need, just come to the information desk and ask for Vince."

"Will do," Keira said, knowing that she most definitely would not.

She shut the door and started to look through the brochure. Inside were all the details of things to do onboard the ship; there were comedy shows, live music events, karaoke, dances, even a cinema! She wouldn't be short on events to distract herself with, she thought wryly. Procrastination aboard the *Revontulet* might be hard to fight.

Then her stomach growled, reminding her that a diet of airplane food was hardly sufficient to get her through the day. She found the information on food. Dinner would be served in the main dining room. Again, she couldn't help but think of the *Titanic*.

It dawned on Keira then that she had no one to eat with. No tour guide this time, no one to discuss things with or bounce ideas off of. Eating alone had to be one of the loneliest activities in the world. She could always try video calling Bryn or one of her friends, but that would probably look a bit odd.

She decided then that instead of a lonely sit-down dinner, she'd spend the first evening aboard the *Revontulet* on the top deck, munching through some minibar snacks and drinking champagne. The company was footing the bill after all, so she ought to do what she wanted and what made her happy while she was here. It seemed like a much more enjoyable way to spend her time, she decided.

She looked through the little fridge, taking out a selection of foods, then grabbed the cool bottle of champagne. Drips ran down the sides and fell to the carpet as she left her room and headed for the deck.

On the port side of the boat were a series of sun loungers. Despite the evening weather, half of them were already occupied with lone travelers who'd had more or less the same idea as Keira. She selected one, laying her snacks out before her and placing the champagne bottle onto the table beside her.

As she settled in, the boat began to move. The sensation was bizarre, a sort of lurching undulation unlike anything her body had ever experienced before. Thinking now was as good a time as any, she grabbed her champagne bottle and popped the cork. Then, realizing she'd forgotten to take the cup from her room, she shrugged and took a swig straight from the bottle. Classy? No. But she didn't care.

She looked over her shoulder as Berlin began to grow smaller, its lights turning into little more than twinkling stars. Then she turned the other way and looked out at the blackness, at the ocean and dark sky, filled with excitement. She raised her glass to the air, toasting herself, her independence, and toasting the trip and all the new possibilities that lay ahead of her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Slightly tipsy from the champagne, Keira felt her stomach begin to complain. Minibar food and plane food might have been sufficient for sober Keira, but tipsy Keira was ravenous. Plus, the bubbles made her bolder, and so she headed toward the dining room for dinner alone.

The dining room was as opulent as the rest of the ship, Art Deco as well. There was hardly anyone here at this time of evening, since it was approaching ten p.m. now. Keira followed a server to a small table that was positioned right beside the huge glass windows, affording her a wonderful view out to the open decks and the ocean beyond. She scanned the menu, pleased that it was written in English. She didn't feel like accidentally eating anything as exotic as the things Cristiano had in France!

It did feel very strange sitting alone. She had become accustomed to looking up from her menu and seeing Cristiano's gorgeous face. But no, not now, and she refused to get upset about it. She'd toasted her future, after all. It was all about being bold and independent now.

Although... it *had* been a long time since she'd spoken to Shane. She wondered how the family was since his father had passed. There was no Cristiano to glare jealously at her anymore, or make her feel bad about caring about her other ex's tumult. Maybe she should get back in touch with him, see how he was doing...

Before she had a chance to get her cell phone out of her bag, Keira became very aware of the sensation of eyes upon her. She turned her head and saw a woman at a nearby table quickly look away. She frowned and turned back to her table. Distracted from whatever it was she'd been about to do, she began to peruse her menu again.

The server returned then, taking Keira's order of a salted beef sandwich, fries, and Coke, before heading away. Keira followed his trajectory, looking over her shoulder to see whether she was still being observed by the woman. She was.

Her heart started to hammer then. Was it because she was alone? Way to make her feel worse about it, Keira thought. Surely people did this all the time, dining alone, being brave and independent. She couldn't be the first person in the world that lady had ever seen eating dinner in her own company!

Her food arrived, and Keira ate with purpose, her ears burning from the sensation of being watched. She wondered whether everyone was looking at her with such judgment. But whenever she glanced about her at the few other diners they were all occupied with themselves, their own companions, their conversation, and their food. Only the middle-aged woman behind her seemed to be staring.

Keira grew more and more frustrated as she ate, formulating rebukes in her head for the woman along the lines of "Did no one ever teach you it's rude to stare?" As her fries diminished, she worked herself up into something of a frenzy, gearing herself up to go over and say something. When her plate was empty, she turned to discover the woman had gone. The moment had passed.

So it was with great alarm she turned back to her table and discovered the woman standing over her. Keira squealed loudly.

"Sorry!" the woman said, holding her hands up. She had a Texan accent. "I didn't mean to scare you!"

She was blond, with a heart-shaped face and delicate features.

"Where did you come from?" Keira exclaimed, looking around her, her heart racing with shock.

"I was just watching you all through dinner because I recognized your face," the woman admitted.

She was blushing suddenly. She pulled something from her purse and handed it to Keira. To Keira's surprise she was looking at an image of herself, in black and white, looking like a film star. And there was Cristiano. It was the front cover of *Viatorum*. The Paris issue.

“Oh,” Keira said, feeling a strange sense of loss over the sight of the image.

“It is you, isn’t it?” the woman asked hopefully.

“Yeah,” Keira replied, sounding glum. “That’s me.”

The woman clapped her hands. “I knew it! I knew it! None of my friends believed me.” She pointed to the bar, where the rest of her party had moved after vacating the dining table, and gave the four other women watching a thumbs-up.

The whole thing felt extremely odd to Keira. First Meredith in the office, then the taxi driver, and now this woman. She was becoming recognizable, something that, as a writer, she’d never really wanted to be! She knew she shouldn’t have taken the cover image. It was so mortifying to be recognized from that silly, fantastical image rather than the more sensible one in her by-line!

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