

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES (BOOK #3)

LOVE
LIKE
OURS

SOPHIE LOVE

The Romance Chronicles

Sophie Love

Love Like Ours

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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Love S.

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Keira Swanson, 28, returns to New York City, this time with Cristiano in tow. Having him in New York, and having him meet her family, is culture shock for them both. Keira is soon assigned a new article, her most important yet: a 30 day trip to Paris - with Cristiano in tow. Her assignment: to find out if their love can last in a foreign country, on new ground for them both. As Keira and Cristiano take the romantic trip of a lifetime to Paris, they find their love tested in unexpected ways. When a surprise twist comes their way, everything changes. Can their love withstand it? A whirlwind romantic comedy that is as profound as it is funny, LOVE LIKE OURS is book #3 in a dazzling new romance series that will make you laugh, cry, and will keep you turning pages late into the night - and will make you fall in love with romance all over again.

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Sophie Love

Love Like Ours

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Sophie Love

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

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

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

BOOKS BY SOPHIE LOVE

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR

FOR NOW AND FOREVER (Book #1)
FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS (Book #2)
FOREVER, WITH YOU (Book #3)
IF ONLY FOREVER (Book #4)
FOREVER AND A DAY (Book #5)
FOREVER, PLUS ONE (Book #6)
FOR YOU, FOREVER (Book #7)
CHRISTMAS FOREVER (Book #8)

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES

LOVE LIKE THIS (Book #1)
LOVE LIKE THAT (Book #2)
LOVE LIKE OURS (Book #3)
LOVE LIKE THEIRS (Book #4)

Chapter One

Keira looked over at Cristiano in the airplane seat beside her. Despite the long, wearying journey, he looked as beautiful as ever; with his dark hair, olive skin, and chiseled jawline. In fact, Keira thought he looked even more beautiful than normal, if such a thing were possible, because of the way his eyes were huge and sparkling with excitement. Through the window, far below them, the lights of New York City at night glistened.

“The roads are so straight,” Cristiano murmured, his expression one of awe. “Like a grid. But what is that gap?”

She glanced down at the large, dark rectangle he was pointing at. “That’s Central Park.”

Cristiano looked awed. “Oh, I get it. Central. Because it’s in the center.”

Keira laughed at his childlike wonder. “Pretty much.”

As the plane continued to shed altitude, Cristiano went back to gazing out the window.

“The buildings are so high,” he murmured aloud.

Keira giggled and ran her thumb across the back of his hand. Their hands had been interlinked throughout the entire flight, all the way from Verona, Italy, to New York City, and Keira had zero intention of letting go anytime soon.

As the plane descended further through the clouds, their view of the magnificent city below grew sharper. Everything began zooming into focus as they got closer and closer to touch down; until they could make out individual taxis speeding along the roads, then the street lamps glowing yellow in the darkness, then the brighter lights of the airport. Finally, with a thud and squeal of tires, the plane was on the runway, juddering along whilst shedding speed until it was slow enough to taxi towards the terminal.

“We’re here,” Keira beamed to Cristiano.

He nodded, his expression eager. “I cannot quite believe it,” he muttered.

“Honestly, neither can I!” Keira replied.

Her last minute decision to invite Cristiano home with her had been, well, slightly ludicrous. But at no point throughout the flight had she felt as if she’d made the wrong decision, or acted in haste. It felt so right to have Cristiano beside her.

At last the aircraft slowed to a halt and the seatbelt sign flicked off. They stood in unison, Cristiano collecting his small leather satchel from beneath his seat; the only bag he’d brought with him. Keira picked up her purse, then they filed off the aircraft with the rest of the passengers.

Keira revelled in the sensation of stretching her legs properly for the first time in hours. Spending the best part of day on an airplane was becoming far too regular an occurrence for her, though she wouldn’t trade her job for the world. How many people would kill to spend three weeks touring Italy for work? She knew she was lucky to be a travel writer, and *Viatorum*, the magazine she wrote for, was becoming so much more than just a job to her. She had friends there – like Nina, the editor, and Elliot, her boss – not to mention a purpose. The opportunities *Viatorum* had given her were like dreams come true.

But it was during the last trip to Italy that she had gained much more than just another published piece to her name. There, she had found love with Cristiano.

As they waited at the baggage claim for her large traveling case, she could feel Cristiano’s eagerness to get out of the airport and start exploring the city. She could appreciate his impatience. She felt it too.

Finally, her case appeared on the carousel. Like the gentleman he always was, Cristiano took it upon himself to collect it, then insisted on wheeling it on her behalf.

They exited the airport in a hurry, filled with anticipation and excitement.

They took the subway to the part of town where Bryn's apartment was located, and headed up the steps towards the exit. The air was very cold, and Keira could feel a blast of icy air swirl down towards them. Cristiano heaved her case up the steps for her, then stopped on the sidewalk, placing the case beside her. Keira had never felt so excited at the prospect of doing laundry before, but the thought of cleaning and unpacking her luggage seemed suddenly very appealing!

The sidewalks pulsed with energy, filled with busy people hurrying through life. Cristiano looked bemused by the sight, as though he simply could not understand why anyone needed to walk so fast.

As they began to walk the couple of streets between the subway station and Bryn's apartment, Cristiano looked around himself, wide-eyed with wonder. Keira found his childlike enthusiasm charming, and wondered whether she had made it look quite so endearing when they'd been on their whistle-stop tour of Italy.

"There is so much of it," he said to Keira. "Building after building after building! It is enormous!" But then he began to shiver and his teeth chattered as he spoke. "Is it always this cold?"

Cristiano was dressed in one of his swanky Italian suits, gorgeous but entirely impractical. He started rubbing his arms. She rubbed them too, trying to warm him up through the thin fabric.

"Only at this time of year," she told him. "We ought to buy you a better coat." She gestured to the closest high street clothes store. It was a big outlet store selling cut price, end of line stock. "We can find something for you from here."

By Cristiano's expression, Keira could tell he was less than impressed with her choice!

"I would rather wait and find a proper store," he explained. "I can cope with being cold for a little while longer."

"You'd prefer to freeze than appear even temporarily unstylish?" Keira mocked him.

"Of course," Cristiano replied, with a smirk.

But no sooner had the words left his mouth than a large gust of icy November wind rushed past them. Keira shivered, folding her arms tightly about her, then looked at Cristiano.

"Poor thing," she said, laughing. "You're not in Italy anymore!"

Cristiano relented quickly, and she steered him into the brightly lit store. He perused the racks of garishly colored wind breakers looking less than thrilled. So much for their days of fine Italian designer clothes shopping, Keira thought.

Finally, he found a quilted black jacket – a cheap knock off version of the sort of thing a fashionable Italian man *might* wear – and purchased that.

"Ten dollars," he said, shaking his head. "It will fall apart within a week."

"It only needs to last you until we find the nearest Gucci," she joked.

They continued on, turning the corner onto Bryn's street and walking its length before drawing to a halt outside the shabby brownstone apartment. It was boasting fresh graffiti, recently broken railings and numerous dead plants.

"So this is it?" Cristiano asked, looking up at the tall apartment block ahead of him.

To say he looked unimpressed was an understatement. His expectations must have been dashed by the shabby neighborhood Bryn lived in. He was probably feeling similar to how she had when she found herself in Naples.

She hoped he wasn't too disappointed, because things were only going to get weirder from this point onwards.

"My sister's a bit... well... let's just say crazy," she warned him. "You might want to brace yourself."

Cristiano laughed, clearly thinking she was making another one of her jokes.

'Poor boy,' Keira thought. *'He has no idea what he's in for!'*

Chapter Two

That Bryn had completely forgotten Keira would be returning today was immediately apparent the moment they stepped inside her apartment.

It was a state. There were clothes and shoes strewn everywhere, a collection of stained wine glasses on the kitchen counter, and empty chips and dip containers covering the coffee table, which was also coated in a layer of crumbs. Keira winced at the sight of it. What would Cristiano think?

To complete the picture of utter disarray, Bryn herself was lying on the couch snoring loudly. Makeup was smeared all over her face. Her sparkly sequined dress was barely covering her. Her red-lipped mouth hung-open.

Keira grimaced and looked at her watch. It wasn't even that late. Bryn must have had one of her marathon Saturday drinking sessions, starting at midday before bar hopping around town until she returned home and passed out on the couch.

Just behind her, Keira could feel Cristiano lingering, hesitating. She was too filled with dread to turn around and assess his expression. Yes, she may have told him to brace himself, but this was worse than even she had anticipated!

Keira slung her purse onto the floor and Bryn jolted awake at the noise. She sat up with a startled snore. Swaying, she touched the mess of knotted hair on top of her head. Then she peered at Keira through squinted eyes.

"You're home?" she asked.

"Yup," Keira replied tersely. "You forgot I was coming back today, didn't you? And you forgot I was bringing a guest."

She said the last statement between her teeth, as a prompt to Bryn that they had company, something else she had seemingly failed to notice.

Bryn squinched her eyes, looking past Keira to Cristiano. With a few blinks of disbelief, she suddenly sprung to life.

"Oh hi," she said, sounding awake and alert for the first time. "I'm Bryn. You must be Cristiano."

For the first time since entering the apartment, Keira turned to see Cristiano's reaction to the chaos she had brought him into. Far from looking appalled, he seemed to be wearing an amused expression. Even whilst Keira cringed at Bryn wobbling to her feet and staggering towards him, Cristiano seemed to be taking the whole thing light-heartedly.

"Wow, you *are* gorgeous," Bryn said as she drew up close to Cristiano and embraced him. "I thought Keira was just exaggerating to make me jealous."

Keira got a waft of alcohol mixed with too much perfume.

"Thank you, I guess," Cristiano replied, sounding uncertain but chuckling nonetheless. "Both you and your sister have inherited very beautiful genes."

Bryn raised her eyebrows at Keira, making no attempt to hide her swooning. Keira was struck by a sudden fear. Her sister was considered by most people the more attractive of the pair. She was also an outrageous flirt. What if Cristiano fell for her charms? For her more exuberant personality? It was impossible to tell by studying Cristiano's behavior what he truly thought of Bryn since he acted in the same charming way to every pretty woman he met.

"Do you guys want something to drink?" Bryn said, her gaze fixed upon Cristiano's perfect features. "Beer. Wine. Prosecco?"

"Is that a good idea?" Keira asked, raising an eyebrow at her sister's dishevelled appearance.

Bryn rolled her eyes and looked over at Cristiano again. "Was she like this the whole time in Italy too? Keira can be such a square."

"Hey!" Keira protested.

“Not at all,” Cristiano said. He seemed to be taking this all in good humor, even if Keira herself felt extremely awkward. “We spent many evenings drinking fine wine, didn’t we my dear?” He flashed his gorgeous eyes in her direction and grinned in that way that made her feel like she was the only woman in the world.

“Yes,” she murmured dreamily.

Bryn interrupted in her usual brash way. “Well, you must have rubbed off on her, Cris, because getting her out the house for the evening can be like trying to get blood from a stone.”

Keira shook her head at Bryn’s teasing.

“Just pour the drinks please,” she muttered.

Bryn grinned wickedly at Keira, clearly enjoying the process of winding her up, then smiled sweetly at Cristiano. “What’s your poison, Cris?”

Keira grimaced. She already hated the way Bryn had bestowed him with a nickname. It was far too familiar. Keira herself hadn’t yet called him anything other than Cristiano! If anyone should be giving her a pet name it should be her!

“Wine, red,” Cristiano replied. “A New Zealand Shiraz if you have it.”

Bryn giggled loudly, in her usual flirtatious way. “I’ll see what I can do,” she purred. Then she looked over at Keira. “Can you tidy the place up a bit?” she asked, waving her hand in the general direction of the messy room.

Keira grit her teeth. She could feel the heat rising into her cheeks.

As she stomped around the apartment collecting debris, she could overhear Bryn and Cristiano chatting at the kitchen island.

“So how long are you in town for, Cris?” Bryn was asking.

Keira stopped what she was doing and glanced over her shoulder. She and Cristiano had not discussed that yet. In fact, their relationship had been such a whirlwind since day one they had planned very little. She hadn’t even thought about the fact there was only one bed in Bryn’s home! Where were they even going to sleep?

“I don’t know yet,” Cristiano replied. “We’re living for the moment. Taking each minute as it comes.”

Keira exhaled. It was a reassuring answer.

She finished tidying everything up quickly then went over to the kitchenette to supervise her sister and Cristiano’s interaction. Bryn poured an extra glass of wine.

“I think I should let you guys sleep in the bed,” she said, as she slid the wine glass across the table. “There’s no way you’ll both fit on the couch.”

“Really?” Keira asked, surprised by her generosity. It wasn’t like Bryn to think of other people. “But what about you?”

Bryn gestured to the couch. “Most nights I just pass out in front of the TV anyway. If I’m home that is.”

She raised her eyebrows and wiggled them. Keira groaned; thinking about Bryn’s frequent and numerous conquests made her feel more than a little icky.

“That’s very kind of you,” Cristiano said, clearly oblivious to undertone.

“Sorting out an apartment is at the top of my priority list,” Keira added. “I promise we’ll be out of your hair asap.”

In the seat beside her, Cristiano became suddenly straight backed. He sipped his wine, his gaze averted. Was he tensing? And if so, what in her comment had made him do so?

A sudden terror struck Keira then. Did Cristiano think she was suggesting they get an apartment *together*?

Awkwardness swelled inside of her. Keira hunkered down in her seat. That had not been what she was implying at all! It would be absurdly presumptuous of her to expect Cristiano to want to move in with her immediately, especially since they had not discussed anything. Especially since she

herself had no idea how long she wanted him around for. There was a whole spectrum between the present day and forever!

Suddenly, their throwing caution to the wind in a giddy haze of romance felt a little rash. It had felt amazing on the airplane but now they were on her home turf it felt different. It felt *real*. At some point she would need to summon the courage to have an actual conversation with him about all the practicalities of how to negotiate their long distance relationship, but the last thing she wanted to do was scare him away.

Keira fell silent, lost in her thoughts, taking small sips of wine. She became a spectator rather than a participant to the conversation, watching on as Bryn giggled at Cristiano and commented on his lovely accent, gazing at him with adoring eyes. When she reached across the kitchen island and lightly touched his arm, Keira snapped back to attention. It was time for an exit strategy. She let out a loud yawn.

Bryn flinched with surprise, as though she had completely forgotten Keira was even there.

“Are you tired?” she asked. “Don’t feel like you need to stay up on my account. You’ve only got one day before you have to go back to work and you don’t want to be exhausted for it.”

Usually, Keira found Bryn’s mother-hen impersonation irritating, but this time she welcomed the invitation of getting an early night. And getting away from her sister.

She stood. “Sorry, I’m just so exhausted from all the traveling. Let’s catch up properly tomorrow. I have a gift for you.”

Bryn grinned. “Awesome. I can’t wait.”

She stood too, and the sisters hugged. Then Keira looked at Cristiano, who was still seated.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

He looked surprised, as though it hadn’t crossed his mind that Keira expected him to come to bed with her.

“Ah, yeah, sure,” he replied, sounding anything but certain.

“You don’t have to,” Bryn said hurriedly. “If you’re not tired, feel free to stay up with me and chat. I have more New Zealand Shiraz.”

Keira narrowed her eyes at Bryn. Cristiano looked from one sister to the other as though caught between something he didn’t fully understand. Finally, he stood, clearly deciding to follow Keira. She nodded decisively in acknowledgement of her win.

“Tomorrow,” Cristiano said to Bryn. “Thank you for the wine.”

Keira noticed he hadn’t finished his glass. She felt bad for spooking him away, but she knew Bryn better than he did. Leaving her alone with him would be potentially dangerous!

“Good night,” Keira called back to Bryn, as she dragged her suitcase into the bedroom.

Cristiano entered after her. As soon as he was inside, Keira shut the door behind him. She leaned against it and took a deep breath.

“I’m so sorry about her,” she said.

Cristiano looked bemused. “I don’t understand. She seemed very nice.”

“She was flirting with you!” Keira replied, shaking her head.

Cristiano didn’t seem concerned at all. “I don’t mind.”

“Well, I do,” Keira told him. “She’s my sister. It’s rude.”

Cristiano just shrugged. He came over and wrapped his arms around Keira. “You know I only have eyes for you,” he told her, squeezing her body closely to his.

“It’s not you I’m worried about,” Keira replied, relaxing into him. “It’s every other hot blooded woman in the world.”

She was hit by a sudden realization then. In Italy, Cristiano, though undoubtedly handsome, was one among many. Here, in New York City, he was an exotic creature, a real Italian man, a model come to life from the pages of a fashion catalogue. Her home city posed a whole new set of challenges to their relationship that she had not yet even considered.

There was only one solution. She would have to keep Cristiano completely occupied from dawn 'til dusk, supervised morning, noon and night!

“We should get an early start tomorrow,” she said, moving from his embrace. She began undressing for bed. “Only one day of the weekend to enjoy before I’m back at work. We have a lot of sightseeing to do.”

Cristiano grinned. “I can’t wait. But we’re not going straight to sleep are we?” He gave her one of his suggestive looks. “I’ve been cooped up on an airplane for hours. There’s a lot of pent up energy inside of me.”

Keira’s smile quirked up. She reached for the lightswitch. “Whatever you desire,” she murmured, then she flicked it off, plunging them into darkness.

Chapter Three

Keira woke to the shrill sound of her alarm clock. It read seven a.m, but thanks to the jetlag and the relatively small proportion of time she and Cristiano had used the bed for *sleeping*, her body felt like it was still the middle of the night. She felt groggy, like she'd had a very badly timed nap in the middle of the day.

But despite the physical discomfort, mentally she was incredibly excited for the day ahead. She leaped straight out of bed, powered by excitement and exhaustion-induced adrenaline.

She looked back at Cristiano. He was still sleeping soundly.

"Wake up," she said, leaning over him and kissing his forehead.

His eyes fluttered open. "Do I have to?" he said, yawning. "That long flight exhausted me."

"It was the *flight* that exhausted you, huh?" Keira said suggestively, with a wink.

But she realized Cristiano had fallen straight back to sleep!

She decided to leave him to rest and went to freshen up for the day.

She crept into the living area. It was dark and Bryn was snoring loudly. Careful to be as quiet as possible and not waking the sleeping beast, she tiptoed past her sister and took a quick shower, cleaning away the airplane residue and last remnants of Italy from her skin.

When she made it back to the bedroom, she saw that Cristiano was still in a deep, peaceful sleep. She sighed and decided she may as well take her dirty clothes down to the laundrette on the corner. No point wasting this time, since she was back in the office tomorrow.

She quickly emptied her case and collected last night's strewn clothes, adding them to the bundle before hurrying out of the apartment, along the corridor, down the steps, and onto the streets.

It was an exceptionally chilly morning, and she felt a wonderful sense of nostalgia. She had spent next to no time in New York over the last two months and it felt really great to be home; the familiar sound of traffic, the familiar smell of fumes. It made her think of Thanksgiving, and she smiled to herself knowing she didn't have too long to wait until her favorite holiday. This year would be extra special with Cristiano there to enjoy it with them. If he stayed that long, anyway.

It was empty inside the laundrette, and Keira loaded several weeks worth of dirty clothes into the machine, filled the drawer with detergent, and added some quarters. She only had enough change on her for a quick wash – she'd not yet had time to get any local currency – but a thirty minute spin was better than nothing.

Once the machine was spinning, she scurried back out, wanting to get back to Cristiano, to wake him and usher him from Bryn's apartment (and claws) as soon as possible.

But once back in the bedroom, she discovered that Cristiano was still in a very deep sleep. She kissed him again to try and wake him.

"Sleeping beauty" she said, more brightly this time, her voice a little louder, more obnoxiously demanded. "We have to get up and get going!"

Cristiano groaned. "Can't we have a lazy day in bed?" he moaned. "We've been on the go for weeks. We deserve to relax for one morning, don't we?"

Keira shook her head, thinking of Bryn in the other room. They had to make their escape before she woke up.

"Nope," she replied. "The whole of New York is waiting for us!"

Cristiano yawned, turning away from her loud voice. "And it will still be there in the afternoon after breakfast."

"But it's best enjoyed in the morning," Keira contested, heaving the covers off of him. "Take it from a local."

Cristiano gave up arguing, and, shivering, got out of bed.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" he moaned.

“Because there’s so much to do!” she replied, quickly pulling on a pair of Bryn’s winter boots. All her winter footwear was stored in a box somewhere, her stuff from Zach’s apartment strewn in various locations from her room in her mom’s house, to Shelby and David’s attic, to Bryn’s closet. There was even a sneaky box under her desk at *Viatorum*.

“Can I have a shower at least?” Cristiano asked.

Keira chewed her lip. Every minute wasted was another minute closer to Bryn waking up and attempting to get her talons into Cristiano. But Keira couldn’t deny him his basic human needs.

“Of course,” she said, brightly, feigning calmness. She went over to Bryn’s closet and pulled out a fluffy towel. “Here,” she said, handing it to him along with some shampoo and shower gel from her luggage. “The shower is just down the hall.”

He kissed her in thanks and disappeared from the room. Keira slumped to sitting on the bed, already exhausted. This was not going to be easy. She would need to find a new apartment as soon as possible. Like yesterday.

But that relied on getting her deposit back from Zach for their old apartment. She didn’t really want to initiate contact but it was clearly the lesser of two evils in this particular situation. She grabbed her cellphone and fired off a text.

Any news on the deposit? K

Against her better judgment, she added a x on the end. Buttering Zachary up wasn’t something she enjoyed doing, but if it meant she got her deposit back then it was worth it.

She peeked out the bedroom door into the living area. The blinds were still down and the room was black. The only sounds were the shower from the other end of the corridor and Bryn’s loud snoring. Luckily Cristiano hadn’t woken her on his way past either.

But she began to grow impatient. Cristiano was sure taking his time! She checked her watch and saw that her clothes in the laundrette would soon be reaching the end of their cycle. She decided to fetch them, rather than run the risk of some local stealing them the moment the lock clicked open on the machine’s door. Even at seven thirty on a Sunday morning you could never be too careful!

She left the apartment again and hurried to the laundrette. There were a couple of people in there now, both organized-looking middle aged women clearly attempting to beat the queues. Keira collected her warm, damp clothes. She didn’t have enough change for the drier so would have to hang them up around Bryn’s apartment.

She left, heading back along the street towards Bryn’s. It felt really good to do normal chores again, to be a normal person again rather than a travel writer in an exciting foreign land. There really was such a thing as too much of a good thing, it turned out.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket just as she began climbing the stairs up to Bryn’s apartment. It was a text from Zach. She bit her lip with anticipation then read what he’d written.

Bon jour Keira! I’m in France for work. A week long conference event starting tomorrow! Can we chat about \$ when I’m back?

She sighed with frustration. It would be another week before they could speak about it, not that she could even understand what there was to speak about! It should be a simple case of transferring her share of the money into her bank but of course he wasn’t going to make this easy on her.

Her eyes still on her cell phone, Keira went into Bryn’s apartment. She was immediately surprised by the sound of laughter, and looked up.

Everything had changed. The blinds were open, the lights on, the coffee machine bubbling away, and there was Bryn in the kitchen, looking far more awake than someone who had spent the last day drinking ought to. Perched with his back against the counter was Cristiano, his bare torso glistening with water droplets, nothing but a towel tied around his waist to protect his modesty.

“What’s going on?” Keira cried, startled.

Bryn looked over at her, and frowned, amused by Keira's paranoid tone. "I'm making coffee," she said, stating the obvious. "Where have you been?"

"I went to the laundrette," Keira said, holding up her heavy bag of damp clothes. "I was only gone two minutes."

Two minutes, clearly, was all it took for Bryn to take the opportunity to feast her eyes upon Cristiano's well honed body.

"Babe," Keira said forcefully, looking at him. "We'd better get *dressed*. We have to go."

"We have time for a coffee don't we?" he asked. "While you're hanging your clothes up to dry?"

Keira dropped the bag on the floor, nonchalantly, and tried to sound light-hearted as she went over and steered him by his shoulders towards the bedroom.

"But I want to take you to the best coffee place in the whole of New York," she said. "Small batch. Freshly ground. Much nicer than Bryn's machine made coffee."

"Oh... oh, okay..." Cristiano said, putting up no resistance. "But... your clothes?"

As she ushered him into the safety of the bedroom, Keira glanced over her shoulder at Bryn. She was watching, smirking, clearly amused by her sister's flustered haste. Keira gave her a stern expression, a warning look to leave Cristiano alone.

"I can hang your clothes," Bryn said with a sweet, knowing smile.

"Thank you," Keira replied, tersely.

She went to shut the door but Bryn wasn't done.

"Hun, if you think I'm bad," she chuckled, "Wait until you get him out there." She pointed to the window. "You're going to find a whole lot worse than me. Trust me."

Her body tense all over, Keira shut the door.

Chapter Four

Their first stop was the Upper West Side where they grabbed bagels and coffee to eat on the move. It was a far cry from the long, lazy meals they had shared in Italy, but Keira wanted Cristiano to really get a feel for what life was like in New York City.

“So this is the best coffee in New York, is it?” Cristiano asked, sipping from the paper cup with careful consideration. He didn’t look convinced.

“Oh, yeah, the best,” Keira told him, remembering the lie she’d blurted out this morning. It was good but it wasn’t the small batch, freshly ground coffee she had promised. “In my opinion, anyway.”

Cristiano just shrugged.

They strolled along the sidewalk hand in hand towards the Hudson River. Keira was acutely aware of the amounts of stares Cristiano garnered. She knew there was a discrepancy between their respective attractiveness, but she felt even more like the plain Jane back in New York, because here Cristiano was more than just a catch, he was a rare beast. Bryn had been right. There were far worse than her in the city. Having him here was going to be exhausting.

“What do you think about my sister?” she asked.

Cristiano laughed. “She’s interesting.”

“Interesting how?”

There was a pause, during which Cristiano was clearly trying to choose his words carefully. Finally he settled on; “Pazza.”

“What does that mean?” Keira asked, her mind conjuring up all kinds of options; beautiful, wonderful, alluring, mesmerizing.

“Crazy,” Cristiano said.

Keira laughed. It was a relief to hear him say as much. Unless he had a secret thing for crazy, she was probably safe. From Bryn, at least. There was still the rest of the female population of New York City to contend with.

They walked through Riverside Park, looking at the beautiful river, then headed towards Central Park. Since Cristiano had noticed it from the air as their plane had flown over, Keira deduced that he would also appreciate seeing it from ground level.

“This is so amazing,” he said, looking at the distant skyscrapers that surrounded them. “It doesn’t seem real.”

Keira smiled, remembering how she had said very similar things to him about Italy. It was cool to see him so entranced by her hometown, to see him marvel at things she had long ago forgotten to be inspired by.

They headed eastward, towards the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The culture in Italy had been astounding but Keira was competitive by nature and didn’t want Cristiano to think that his ancient European country had more going for it than New York City did! But there was so much to pack in to the day, they were only inside for an hour or so before Cristiano asked to see more of the actual city.

They took a subway to fifth avenue so Keira could show him Times Square, then headed to eleventh avenue for a stroll along the High Line so he could really take in the sights of the Manhattan skyline. They bought more coffee from one of the vendors along the bridge.

As the afternoon drew on, Keira took Cristiano to SoHo where they grabbed some lunch in one of the cafes. Cristiano seemed to especially like this part of the city, particularly all the fashionistas and interesting clothes shops. In fact, he fit right in in his Italian clothes, and found himself a new jacket that looked remarkably similar to the cut-price one they’d bought from the outlet beside the airport, the main difference being that this one cost fifty dollars instead of ten.

While they were eating lunch, Keira's phone started ringing. Her first instinct was Bryn trying to find some way to lure them back to the apartment. But when Keira looked at her phone, she saw it was her mom calling. She answered the call.

"Darling, I've just been speaking to your sister," her mom announced. "You have to bring Cristiano around tonight for dinner."

"No, mom," Keira said with a wince. "We want to spend the day together. We've planned everything out."

"But I've already been to the store," Mallory replied with a sad whine to her voice. "I've bought everything to make lasagne."

"Why?" Keira hissed. "You didn't even ask me."

She knew why. If her mom had asked her first she'd have no leverage, no way to bargain and nothing to guilt trip Keira with. This way, she had the upper hand. Keira's refusal made her look spoiled and ungrateful.

From across the table, Cristiano looked concerned. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

Keira nodded, trying to play it cool. She spoke again into the phone. "Mom, I have to go now. We'll do dinner another time."

Her mom sighed loudly. "Have you even asked Cristiano if he'd like to meet me? Because it doesn't sound like you've given him the choice."

Keira grit her teeth. Rolling her eyes, she looked up at Cristiano. "My mom wants us to go around there for dinner tonight. But we were planning on going to that meatball restaurant, weren't we? So I'm just telling her we'll take a rain check."

But rather than the response she was hoping to get from him, Cristiano looked thrilled by the prospect of meeting Keira's mom.

"We can get meatballs anytime," he said with a shrug. "If your mom wants to cook for us, we should really let her. I'd love to meet her."

Keira let her head drop into her hands. With a sigh, she relented.

"Fine," she said into the phone. "You win, mom. We'll be round at eight."

"Seven," her mom corrected.

"Seven," Keira repeated glumly.

"Oh how wonderful!" her mom gushed. But Keira cut the call off before she'd even finished speaking. She looked up at Cristiano. "You don't need to be so polite, you know."

He laughed. "Politeness isn't my motivation, Keira. I'd very much like to meet your mom."

"She's cooking lasagne," Keira added in a dry voice. "I can only assume because you're Italian."

"Well that's perfect," he replied. "Because I love lasagne."

Keira sighed. Cristiano may be ready to meet more of her *pazza* family members but she certainly wasn't. Having him here was becoming more and more stressful for her by the second.

Chapter Five

Mallory Swanson still lived in the same apartment where she'd raised her two daughters. Keira always felt a strange sense of nostalgia whenever she returned home. Though her childhood had been filled with love and laughter, the absence of her father was always present. That he'd lived in that house with Bryn and her mom before she had been born was always at the back of her mind, because shortly after she'd been born, he'd left the family. She'd always grown up feeling like his shadows lurked in the house, like things just weren't quite at they were supposed to be.

She and Cristiano took a cab straight from town. Keira hadn't wanted to return to Bryn's apartment first and have to endure the journey with all three of them in the cramped conditions, so had told her sister just to meet them there. At least Bryn's ability to keep time was useless so they'd have a bit of breathing space on arrival.

They walked up the steps to the red brick apartment building. The basement apartment was owned by the same old woman who had been living there for her whole life. Her numerous cats lay out on the sidewalk or sat perched on the railings meowing at them.

Keira rang the bell and a moment later, her mom appeared at the door. She was wearing a stained apron over her clothes and her hair was in disarray.

"There she is! My wandering nomad of a daughter!" Mallory cried. She flung her arms around Keira and squeezed tightly. Then she released her and looked at Cristiano. "Well, aren't you handsome?" she gushed. She hugged him too. "Now, quick, everyone inside. I left the lasagne in the oven and I don't want it to burn."

She ushered them inside. Keira walked up the dingy staircase that led to the first floor apartment. It seemed narrower than usual, the dark green walls more stained than she remembered. It didn't help that most of the bulbs in the corridor had blown. It gave the corridor a horror film vibe.

They made it into the apartment and were immediately assaulted by heat radiating from the oven. The smell of strong cheese permeated the air.

"So this is where you grew up?" Cristiano asked, looking politely around Mallory's modest apartment.

Keira nodded. It was a far cry from his parent's villa in the hillsides of Florence. There wasn't a single piece of furniture in the house that looked like it belonged on the pages of a designer furniture magazine. It couldn't even be claimed that the house was shabby-chic. It was just shabby.

Keira felt the weight of embarrassment pressing down on her. She had worked so hard at school and college specifically to leave this sort of life behind. She worried that the impression Cristiano was getting of her must be a million miles away from what he'd been expecting when he first agreed to get on that plane with her. So much for the high flying reporter from New York City. There was no way of hiding that she'd come from humble beginnings now.

"Why don't you take a seat?" Mallory yelled over her shoulder as she busied herself in the kitchen.

Keira gestured to the table. Her mom had covered it in a weird vinyl table cloth. Cristiano sat in one of the chairs. Keira noticed it wobbling beneath him but of course he was too polite to say anything.

Mallory came over with a steaming dish and placed it on the table. The lasagne was a mess to look at, the tomato sauce bubbling up through the pasta, the cheese burned to a crisp at the edges. It was probably a world away from what Cristiano was used to eating back home in Italy!

"What are those?" Keira asked, pointing at small, round balls on the top.

"Hazelnuts," Mallory said.

"On a lasagne?" Keira asked, frowning.

"I read it in a magazine," Mallory replied ambivalently.

Keira felt her body growing heavier and heavier.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Bryn?” she asked her mom.

“I told her seven,” Mallory replied. “She can read a clock. It’s her fault if she’s not here on time.” She grinned at Cristiano and poured a glass of wine for him. “I hope you like rosé.”

Keira hunkered in her seat, remembering how much of a wine connoisseur Cristiano was, how he knew what wine to have with what dish. You didn’t need to be a connoisseur to know that rosé didn’t compliment anything!

Politely, he picked up his glass of pink colored wine.

“To our handsome guest,” Mallory announced, and they all clinked glasses.

Keira was so embarrassed she wanted to disappear.

The door opened then and in waltzed Bryn. Any signs of the hangover she ought to be sufferings were completely gone. Her eyes were bright, her hair clean and glowing, and she’d dressed to impress.

Keira couldn’t help the jealousy she sometimes felt over her beautiful older sister. She had years of memories of boys swooning over Bryn to back it up. The only saving grace was that her sister was a bit on the unstable side. You just wouldn’t know it to look at her. To look at her, you’d think she was a supermodel, all grace and poise.

Bryn sat down at the table with flourish and helped herself to a large portion of lasagne.

“I did an hour and a half in the gym today,” she boasted. “I’m allowed to treat myself.”

Keira couldn’t remember the last time she herself had been to the gym. In fact, the last two months had been a blur of eating and drinking. From all the Guinness and fried breakfasts in Ireland, to the pastas and gelatos of Italy, she was quite frankly surprised to have not yet become obese. It was only thanks to all those hills in Italy and muddy walks in Ireland that she’d managed to stay in any kind of shape at all.

“Do you work out a lot?” Cristiano asked Bryn. He seemed interested rather than suggestive, which relieved Keira, although she couldn’t understand why he’d want to know.

Bryn nodded. “Spinning is my main thing. Oh, and climbing. They have a great wall at my local.”

Cristiano looked excited. “I love to climb!”

“You do?” Keira asked, surprised. Somehow that had never come up in conversation.

“Yes,” he said, nodding excitedly before turning his attention back to Bryn. “You will have to take me sometime.”

“I’d love to,” Bryn replied.

Keira cringed. This whole conversation was putting her on edge. She wanted to put as much distance between her sister and Cristiano as possible.

Mallory seemed suitably impressed by Cristiano’s climbing background. “What else can you do, then?” she asked. “Physically?”

“Mom,” Keira groaned. “What kind of a question is that?”

“I like to swim,” Cristiano replied. Then with a wink at Keira, he added, “And dance the night away.”

“Really?” Mallory asked. “Do you Flamenco?”

“That’s Spanish, mom!” Keira cried.

Cristiano burst out laughing. Bryn chuckled too. Even Mallory seemed to find her error amusing. Keira was the only one who didn’t. Maybe Bryn was right about her being uptight?

“So how was your Italian adventure?” Mallory asked Keira, leaning over the table to pat her hand. “Another success?” Her eyes darted to Cristiano.

Keira felt the blush rise in her cheeks. “It was beautiful,” she said, trying to steer the conversation away from the fact she’d instigated *another* romance and towards the country itself. “The scenery is out of this world. The food is incredible. And the culture!”

“Don’t forget the men,” Bryn added, wiggling her eyebrows.

Keira shot her a look. “Yes, the *people* are wonderful too. Cristiano took me to meet his parents in Florence. They were super friendly.”

Mallory looked over at Cristiano, impressed. “You’re close with your family?”

He smiled and nodded. “Very. Apart from when I’m working out of town, I see them at least once a week.”

“That’s so nice,” Mallory said, looking down contemplatively at her lasagne. “My girls are always too busy to see me. I’m only a cab ride away but I may as well live in Canada.”

Bryn rolled her eyes. “We’re modern women, mom. We work.”

“I’ve spent about forty eight hours in New York City in the last two months!” Keira added.

Mallory just shrugged, keeping the wounded expression on her face for maximum effect. Bryn seemed immune to that sort of thing, but it always irked Keira. She felt like her relationship with her mom was pretty good. She certainly spoke to her on the phone a lot, and visited her frequently. And it was hardly like Mallory was a lonely old woman sitting at home all day! She may be retired now but she had friends a plenty and all kinds of hobbies to occupy herself with.

“How’s your lasagne?” Mallory asked Cristiano then. “I suppose it doesn’t compare to your super mom’s recipe, does it?”

Bryn just laughed at her mom’s forlorn tone. Keira wasn’t in the mood to mollycoddle her. She responded before Cristiano even had the chance to, attempting to relieve him of an awkward social encounter.

“Of course it doesn’t,” she said. “Our food is completely different. Most of it is imported. I mean the Italian ingredients are so fresh and nutritious.” She prodded her rubbery pasta with her fork. “Even the tomatoes taste different in Italy.”

“But American food is good too,” Cristiano added diplomatically. “Keira and I had bagels for breakfast this morning. It was very exciting.”

Bryn made a face that indicated she found Cristiano's bagel excitement adorable. Keira couldn’t stand the way she was looking at Cristiano like he was a cute puppy.

“And how long are you staying in New York?” Mallory asked.

‘Great,’ Keira thought. ‘That question again.’

“I don’t know yet,” Cristiano replied. “I have no reason to rush off though.”

A small furrow appeared on Mallory’s forehead. “No? Don’t you have a job at home to get back to?”

Cristiano shook his head nonchalantly. “I only do casual work and most of that is during the summer. Tour guiding. Waiting tables. That sort of thing.”

Keira noted the way the furrow on her mom’s forehead deepened.

“Casual work?” she repeated, the tone in her voice betraying her distaste.

“Things are different over there,” Keira explained. “The culture is different. People aren’t clamoring over each other for promotions like they are here.”

“But he’s not a kid anymore,” Mallory said with exasperation to Keira. “Shouldn’t he have some idea what he wants to do with his life?”

“Mom!” Keira cried.

Cristiano just laughed, somehow finding humor in the situation. “I’ll find my path one day, Mallory,” he reassured her. “I’m not in a hurry.”

He turned his serene gaze down to his lasagne. Over his head, Mallory shot Keira a pained expression. If she thought Keira was leaving it late to settle down and have kids, what on earth must she think about the fact Cristiano hadn’t found a career path yet?

With their plates empty, Mallory went to fetch dessert. Ice-cream. Keira had eaten so much gelato in Italy it was the last thing she wanted, especially the poor American substitute her mom bought. But Cristiano was as polite as ever and made all the appropriate noises as he ate.

“Are you all squeezed into Bryn’s apartment at the moment?” Mallory asked.

“I’m letting them have the bed,” Bryn said, looking proud of herself for actually putting someone else’s needs before her own for possibly the first time in her life.

“Why don’t you stay here?” Mallory suggested. “Keira’s has her own bedroom.”

“You do?” Cristiano asked, frowning slightly as though he couldn’t understand why Keira had chosen her sister’s couch over her own room.

Keira shook her head. “It’s not a good idea,” she told him under her breath. “The commute to work from here is such a pain.”

“What’s she saying?” Mallory asked Cristiano in a loud voice. “Let me guess. The commute. It’s always the commute. When she moved out of her apartment with Zach she went straight to Bryn’s! As if I didn’t even exist. And when I ask why, oh, it’s the commute.”

“Mom, it takes me over an hour to get to work from here,” Keira told her for what must have been the millionth time.

“An hour is standard,” Bryn replied. “You were just lucky before with where your apartment was. And that’s only because Zach paid for most of it.”

“Bryn!” Keira scolded her. Then, folding her arms stubbornly, she added in a quieter voice, “It belonged to his cousin. We both got cheap rent.”

Cristiano looked very confused. “Who is Zach?”

“No one,” Keira told him. She cast appealing glances at her mom and sister, willing them to keep their big mouths shut for once.

Mallory smiled at Cristiano. “You’d like to stay here for a bit, wouldn’t you, hun? I can show you around the local areas tomorrow.”

Keira’s eyes widened. “No way, mom. Cristiano has better things to do with his time.” The thought of her mom having him for the whole day filled her with dread.

“What things?” Bryn challenged her with a laugh. “Someone has to show him around. Keep him entertained. You know I could always do it.” She crossed one of her lean legs over the other.

“No!” Keira said more forcefully. She did not trust either of them around Cristiano!

“Actually, I’d like to explore by myself,” Cristiano said, finally getting a chance to get his own voice heard. “When I’m in a new city, anyway. Is that okay, Mallory?”

“Of course,” she chuckled. Then with a grin, she added to no one in particular, “He is *so* polite.”

“But I do think it would be nice to take up your offer of us staying here,” he added. “Keira got to see my home and I would love to see her old room too.”

Keira buried her head in her hands. This was about the last thing she wanted to happen! But then she thought about the complete lack of privacy they had at Bryn’s. Even with her offering up her bed to them it was still very crowded. Not to mention messy and noisy. At least here Mallory would go to bed early and they’d get a bit of space and privacy.

“Fine,” Keira finally replied. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept over at her mom’s. But thanks to Cristiano it was about to happen for the first time in years. “We’ll stay.”

“Wonderful!” Mallory cried, and she topped up everyone’s wine glasses with more sickly pink wine.

* * *

Keira and Cristiano shared a cab with Bryn to her apartment so they could collect some things. Cristiano stuffed his clothes into his satchel, and Keira collected toiletries, fresh underwear, her makeup, perfume, and an outfit for work, including heels, something she’d not worn for the entire time she’d been in Italy!

When they left, Keira was relieved that it was just the two of them again.

“I’m sorry about today,” Keira told Cristiano as she curled up beside him in the back of the cab.

“Sorry?” he asked. “What for?”

“For my family. They’re nuts.”

He laughed. “I actually really like them.”

Keira pondered over whether he just meant he liked *Bryn* but tried not to dwell on it.

“And are you sure you’re going to be okay on your own tomorrow?” she added. “I could see whether one of my friends might be around to meet up with you?”

As she said it, she thought of Shelby who was very safely engaged. But Shelby would definitely be at work. Maxine would be free, but she was single. Keira just didn’t trust this relationship enough yet to loosen the reins.

“I’m very sure,” Cristiano told her decisively. “I already said I like to explore. I made it my job, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” Keira admitted, “But New York City is kind of different to Italy.”

Cristiano pressed a hand to his heart. “I am a big boy,” he told her. “I can look after myself. Even in New York City.” He kissed her lightly.

They reached Mallory’s apartment, and, after paying the cab driver, went inside, settling down for a quiet evening on the couch watching TV. A little after nine pm, Keira’s plan paid off – Mallory did indeed retire to bed.

Then for the first time in ages, Keira felt herself finally relax. She’d been pretty on edge ever since landing back home. Between Bryn’s craziness, her mom’s craziness, and a whistle-stop tour of the city, she felt like she had hardly had time to catch her breath. At last she could really take stock of things, of Cristiano and the fact he had traveled halfway across the world to be with her.

She kissed him, savoring the taste of him. There was something different now in their kisses. A greater intensity. Now she was on home turf, everything had become very real. He’d made something of a commitment and that changed things for the better.

“I suppose you’ll be wanting to see my room soon?” she asked, using her sultry voice.

Cristiano picked up her tone immediately, raising his eyebrows in excited anticipation. “I definitely would.”

She stood from the couch and reached down, offering her hand.

“Then you’d better follow me,” she purred.

Looking like the cat who caught the cream, Cristiano did exactly as she said.

Chapter Six

Keira woke the next morning feeling groggy. But the moment she rolled over and caught sight of Cristiano's gorgeous face, she sighed with content. Last night had been wonderful, and put all her fears to rest. It was just a shame that she would have to leave him and go to work!

She slid out of bed, careful not to wake him, and headed out into the corridor. Everything was very dark as she padded across the floor towards the bathroom.

Showering at her mom's felt so strange. Keira couldn't remember the last time she'd had cause to stay the night here. It certainly hadn't happened in the last two years because she'd been living with Zachary.

As warm water ran over her skin, Keira wondered if her mom was right. Maybe she didn't pay her as much attention as she ought to. Cristiano's relationship with his parents was admirable. It was only the fact Keira put her career at the forefront of everything she did that she didn't share a similar relationship with her own mom. There was a lot she could learn from him, she realized.

She finished showering quickly and emerged with sopping wet hair, then wrapped herself up in one of her mom's bamboo towels before heading back out into the hall. As she shuffled through the apartment, a noise caught her attention, coming from the kitchen. Curious, she walked over and peered her head around the door.

"Mom?" she asked, when she saw her mother standing there in her robe.

Her mother yawned. "Morning, darling. Coffee?"

Keira smiled at her mom. "Did you wake up early just to make me coffee?" she asked, touched. She'd just been planning on grabbing one on the way to work.

"It's not every day I get the chance," Mallory replied.

Keira went into the kitchen and kissed her mom on the cheek. "That would be great. Thank you," she said.

Mallory looked surprised. "I think Cristiano is a good influence on you," she said.

"I think you're right," Keira replied.

She went back into her room and dressed in the darkness as the smell of coffee began to seep in from beneath the door. As she emerged back out, daylight was just beginning to break.

"Is he still sleeping?" Mallory asked as Keira came back into the kitchen.

"Yes," she confirmed, taking the coffee her mom offered her. She took a sip. It was a bit bitter but she could hardly expect her mom to make a perfect cup at this time of the morning! "You won't bombard him with questions when he wakes up will you?"

Mallory made a *tsk* noise. "Darling, we need to know who he is. You can't just declare your love for a new man every month and expect us not to be a little bit suspicious."

Keira sighed, a little exasperated. "Okay, mom. I get it. I'm acting all crazy lately. Just don't scare him away." She downed her coffee then kissed her mom on the cheek again. "I love you. Thanks for dinner."

Then she hurried off to get the subway to work.

* * *

An hour on the subway was never the best way to start the day. When Keira finally disembarked, she felt grubby, as greasy as if she had not even showered that morning. And her clothes were creased. It wasn't the sort of impression she wanted to give off on her first day back at the office.

But when she walked in through the large glass doors of *Viatorum* she needn't have worried about her appearance at all. Her colleagues leapt up from their seats at the sight of her and hurried over.

"Keira!" Denise cried, hugging her tightly. "You did it."

"Did what?" Keira asked.

"Saved all of our jobs!" Denise replied. "Now we're turning a good profit, Lance doesn't think we need to change anything. No advice columns or recipe pages." She grimaced.

"Well that's great," Keira replied, smiling, not really certain her one article could be held entirely accountable for that.

"When do we get to meet him, then?" Denise asked sounding eager and excited.

"Him?" Keira asked.

"Cristiano!" Denise cried.

Keira noticed the way she swooned as she said it.

"Well, I wasn't planning on bringing him to the office," she quipped, a little bemused.

Denise frowned. "But you have to. You can't make us fall in love with the guy and then not let us meet him! I mean, from your description he sounds gorgeous. Is he gorgeous?"

"Well, yes, but..." Keira began.

"Then you *have* to let us meet him!" Denise continued. "Please, Keira!"

Keira frowned. Cristiano wasn't just some prop for her article. He was her real life lover. She felt like Denise had blurred fact and fiction. Had Keira accidentally turned Cristiano into some kind of romance protagonist?

Just then, she noticed Nina at her desk, tapping away at her keyboard, and waved. Nina finished what she was doing and came over. They embraced.

"Nice work of the article, Keira," Nina said. "Again."

Keira blushed. "Thanks."

"It's nice to have you back."

"It's nice to be back," Keira grinned. "It's been so long I even enjoyed doing my laundry."

She went to head towards her office but Nina took hold of her arm, stopping her in her tracks.

"Not so fast," she said. "Elliot wants to see you."

"Oh?" Keira asked, glancing towards the open door to his office. She couldn't help but feel anxious. Even though she and Elliot were on good speaking terms, he was still an imposing figure, thanks in no small part to his huge six foot something frame. "Now?"

"Yup, now," Nina said, smiling.

There was something in her eye, a secret she was keeping from Keira. It only increased Keira's feelings of trepidation.

Taking a breath, she changed course and headed for Elliot's office.

When she entered through the door, he looked up. To Keira's surprise, he stood and opened his arms to hug her. Keira awkwardly moved into his embrace, feeling like a kid hugging a distant uncle. Friendliness didn't suit him.

"My hero returns," Elliot said, taking his seat again. "I'm sure you've heard the news?"

"What news exactly?" Keira asked.

"About the subscription increase."

"No..." Keira admitted.

Elliot continued. "They're soaring. Lance is thrilled. He said as long as we can keep this up he'll have no need to intervene in the magazine's direction at all. Everything can stay exactly as it is. As long as you keep doing what you're doing."

Keira wasn't entirely sure how to interpret that. "In what way?"

"The love articles," Elliot said. "The Romance Guru."

Keira felt a sudden heaviness in her chest. Hadn't Elliot actually read her last article? She was in love now. Genuine love with a real human man who wanted to be with her. Not like Shane who had other priorities. This time, Cristiano had traveled across the world for her, leaving his home, his family, his work and his country behind. There was no more Romance Guru, not if it required her falling in love again!

"I'm sorry," Keira began, "Are you saying that you want me to write another Romance Guru article?"

"Of course," Elliot replied, looking confused. "It's all anyone wants. Our readers. They love it. Can't get enough. Insatiable. And we need to keep up the momentum. So we'll have to send you away again immediately."

Keira's heaviness turned to panic. "No," she gasped. "You can't. I've only been back two nights!"

How long would it take for Bryn to get her claws into Cristiano? For Maxine to start sniffing around? For her mom to terrify him into leaving? She couldn't up and go again!

Elliot looked confused. "Keira, everything's planned," he said flatly. "Heather has got the flights booked already. Paris, Keira. PARIS. This is the best assignment yet and we're handing it to you on a plate. The rest of the staff out there would kill for this."

"I'm sorry..." Keira stammered. "But I can't. I truly love Cristiano. This isn't a game for me. I don't want to leave him. And I don't want to go somewhere else and try to find love." She took a deep breath. "If that's what you need me to do, I'd rather quit."

Elliot was shaking his head, his eyes averted. To Keira's surprise, his shoulders began to shake. Was he crying? She knew how close things had come at the magazine to imploding, and she knew how much Elliot had given up for *Viatorum*, how much it meant to him. But this was her life as well. Surely someone else could take up the Romance Guru mantel? They could even pretend to be her for all she cared! What would it matter to the readers after all?

But then she realized his shaking shoulders were not tears, but laughter. She frowned, annoyed, unable to understand what could be so amusing to him.

"Keira," Elliot finally said. "I'm not asking you to leave Cristiano. I want you to go together."

Keira paused, stunned by the revelation. "Together?"

"Yes!" Elliot cried. "Our readers *love* him. People are painting pictures of him and putting them on the internet! He's all anyone can talk about on the forums."

"Forums?" Keira repeated.

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Had her descriptions really painted such a good picture of her Italian tour guide that she'd inadvertently made him into some kind of hero?

"I don't get it," she said. "You want us to go together?"

"Your love story is a hit, Keira," Elliot told her. "People want to know how it works out. Hashtag Team Shane or Hashtag Team Cristiano. Who will she marry?"

"MARRY?" Keira cried. "What is going on? I think you're all getting a bit ahead of yourselves. I've only known Cristiano for a few weeks. I'm not thinking about marriage. And he isn't either!" She folded her arms, feeling defensive, like some kind of spectacle.

Elliot softened his voice, clearly picking up on her distress at last. "Keira, what we want to see is more of you and him. What would it look like in Paris? Can your love last in a new place? Of course in Italy, on his home turf, it worked. And back here when you're surrounded by your creature comforts it works. But somewhere new? What about that? Neutral, equal ground. Can love last in a foreign place?"

Keira blinked at him, stunned into silence. "You want to... put my relationship under stress to see if it breaks?"

Elliot tipped his head to the side. He clearly hadn't thought about it that way. "Well, I mean, I wasn't *expecting* it to break you up. Just curious."

“Curious,” Keira repeated, feeling more and more put out. “This is my life, Elliot. My real, actual life. I’m not a lab rat.”

Elliot shook his head. “I’m saying this all wrong,” he said. “Look, the whole idea is that you guys get to spend a month in Paris. You do the travel thing, the love thing. Write it all up. The readers are happy. You two are happy. I’m happy. Period. The End.”

“Except it’s not the end, is it?” Keira challenged. “Because you want some kind of conflict. You want the stakes to be raised.”

“It’s just the best angle,” Elliot told her calmly. “To see if you can come back with your love just as strong.”

Keira had no doubt that a month in Paris wouldn’t break her relationship. It would stay strong, she was certain. What she objected to was the way that Elliot talked about it. Like she was part of an experiment or a story book, rather than a real person with real emotions.

Elliot leaned his arms on the table in a more open stance. “Keira, what does your New York City life look like at the moment? No apartment of your own. Staying at mom’s.”

“How do you know about that?” Keira stammered.

“I have my ways” he said, shrugging.

She remembered the time her mom had called her in Italy to convince her to stay on the magazine. Elliot had prompted that call.

“Have you been speaking to my mom?” she asked suspiciously.

He looked guilty but replied innocently enough. “Mallory and I chat occasionally.”

Keira took a sharp inhalation of breath. Why did her mom feel the need to interfere so much in her life?

“So,” Elliot continued, sweeping it under the carpet. “Really, being in Paris would give you the privacy you need. A whole month just the two of you. No sister in the way, no mom interfering.”

It did sound good, Keira thought. What difference would it make if they embarked on their relationship in New York City or Paris? Other than the fact that here they were crowded with people all eager to meet Cristiano. At least in Paris it would just be them. They’d be anonymous again.

“After this article,” Elliot added. “I might be able to loosen the reins a bit here at *Viatorum*. Promote you. Then you can pick your own assignments. If this works, and we get the angle right for the Romance Guru, I’ll let you take control of the whole thing. No more last minute postings. No more Antonio’s.”

Keira grimaced as she remembered the first tour guide she’d been paired with in Italy, the pot bellied, cheese-smelling, perpetually-gruff Antonio.

“You really mean that?” she asked. “One more assignment, with Cristiano, and then I’ll be able to set the path for the Romance Guru as I choose to?”

“As long as you’re still going abroad and writing travel articles,” Elliot said, “I don’t care where you do it.”

Keira wanted to test this theory a little. “Australia?” she asked.

“Why not?”

“China?”

“If you so desire.”

“*Antarctica?*”

“As long as you’re in love while you do it, that’s all I care about. All the readers care about. And who knows, perhaps afterwards we can collect all your pieces and turn them into a book?”

Keira sat back, mulling over the prospect properly for the first time. If she could nail this, things would be significantly easier for her going forward. One more assignment under Elliot’s control then she’d be free-wheeling. And becoming the author of a book was a real draw! She and Cristiano could tour the world together. No more gimmicks about matchmaking or testing love. She could really write their love story.

Besides, things in New York City were a bit strained anyway, with their options either Bryn's apartment or her old childhood bedroom. There was nothing romantic about either setting. But Paris. Paris! For the first time, she felt a tingle of excitement at the thought of she and Cristiano in the world's most romantic city. She pictured French windows and billowing lace curtains, kissing under the Eiffel tower, rain splattered sidewalks, croissants in ancient cafes overlooking the Seine, museums, art, culture, architecture. And then a mental picture forced its way into her mind with sudden ferocity: Cristiano down on one knee, a beautiful sparkling ring held out to her.

She hadn't thought of marriage until Elliot mentioned it. But what if a month in Paris ended with a ring? It certainly couldn't hurt.

"Okay," she said, at last. "I'll do it."

Chapter Seven

As soon as her meeting with Elliot was over, Keira grabbed her cell phone and hurried outside to call Cristiano. The streets were as busy with traffic and people as they ever were. The thought of leaving it all behind made Keira excited.

She rang his number and after a moment he answered.

“I have some news,” she announced.

“Oh?” he asked. “You’re not pregnant are you?”

“No!” Keira cried, laughing. “We’re going to Paris!”

“We are?” He sounded thrilled.

“Yup. My new assignment. Turns out the readers love you so much they want you to come along. What do you think?”

“I think that’s amazing!” he replied. “I can’t wait. When do we go?”

“Tomorrow.”

She bit her lip, worried about his response. She needn’t have been concerned.

“Wow!” Cristiano cried. “Amazing!”

In the background, she heard the sound of honking horns and ambulance sirens.

“How is your solo tour of New York City going?” she asked him.

“It’s great,” he replied with childish enthusiasm. “I rode the subway to a few different places, walked around some parks. Now I’m besides a place called Teardrop Park.”

Keira was stunned. “You’re right around the corner from my office!”

“I am?” Cristiano asked, surprised.

“Yes! You should come and see me,” she added, thinking of how everyone at the magazine wanted to meet him. “I could introduce you to some people.”

“I’d love that,” he replied.

Keira gave him directions to walk the short distance to where her office was located. Several minutes later, she saw him in the distance rounding the corner. His beauty stunned her, making her heart flutter.

When he reached her, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Then she took his hand and led him inside.

“Guys,” she announced. “This is Cristiano.”

Everyone rushed to meet him. Denise looked like she’d come face to face with a celebrity. Lisa looked like she might faint. For the first time, Keira felt the thrill of being with someone everyone adored, rather than the fear of him being stolen from her.

Elliot came out of his office, sizing Cristiano up with his eyes. He clearly approved of what he saw and came over to shake Cristiano’s hand.

“Has Keira told you the news?” he asked.

“About Paris?” Cristiano replied with a nod. “Yes, and I can’t wait. Thanks so much for arranging for me to go as well. It’s a dream come true to travel the world with the woman I love.”

He hugged Keira tightly against him. Denise and Lisa visibly swooned.

Nina came over next to meet Cristiano. At least she was respectful enough not to drop her jaw to the floor. She just shook his hand cordially. But there was a brightness behind her eyes that made Keira suspicious.

“Did you know that Stella’s coming in today?” she asked Keira.

“Stella the cover designer?” Keira replied. “No. Why?”

Nina’s gaze was focused intently on Cristiano, like she was sizing him up. “I’m just wondering about getting a profile picture of you two. One we can put in the byline.”

Keira frowned. At the moment, it was her face and bio in the byline. She was the writer after all. They were her words, not Cristiano's.

"I don't know about that," she said, sounding a little stilted.

"You're right," Nina nodded. "The byline is too small. You two should be the cover stars."

Elliot started clapping, thrilled by the prospect.

"Wait one minute," Keira cried, her eyes widening with shock. She looked at Cristiano. "We can't be on the cover."

Cristiano clearly wasn't experiencing the same dread over it as Keira was. He didn't seem fazed in the slightest by the suggestion.

Nina and Elliot ignored her protests, too busy talking to one another, going over the details, tapping their chins as they looked at Cristiano like he was one of the models Stella hired for her shoots.

"Guys!" Keira cried, trying to get their attention. "We're not doing it."

Elliot turned to her at last and frowned. "Your articles are the most popular. It's why the majority of our readers subscribe to *Viatorum*."

He said it simply, like it was nothing more than a logical business decision.

"Nina, maybe we should show her the graph from the market research?" he added.

"I don't need to see a graph to make my decision," Keira stammered. "I don't want to be on the cover, period. I'm not attractive enough. You know there's a reason some people chose to spend their days hiding behind a laptop!"

"Don't be silly, Keira!" Cristiano cried. "You're beautiful. You just don't see it. Maybe a professional photoshoot would be just the thing to boost your confidence."

Keira shook her head, stunned, shocked. This couldn't be happening. This was her nightmare, stepping out from behind the scenes and taking the limelight. She thought of Bryn, the actually beautiful one. She wouldn't look plain standing next to Cristiano like Keira would.

Just then, the doors opened then and Stella came in, her large black camera case slung over her shoulder. It looked so intimidating to Keira.

Nina waved her over.

"We were just telling Keira and Cristiano about the cover shot," she said to Stella. "Do you have time to do it today?"

"Absolutely," Stella said, her gaze fixed on Cristiano approvingly.

Keira felt even worse. He was all anyone wanted to see, not her. She'd just ruin the photos.

"Come on my love," Cristiano said to her gently. "It's just a bit of fun. A memory we can look back on. Something to show our parents. And our children, one day."

Keira couldn't help but let his gentle cajoling sooth her fears. If Cristiano was thinking of future children then he was at least hoping to be in this for the long haul. Maybe capturing some images of their love while they were young and wrinkle free wasn't the worst idea in the world.

"What would I have to do?" she asked Stella, relenting just a smidgen.

"It's France," Stella said. "So we're doing a black and white romantic movie theme. Rooftops. Skyline with the Eiffel Tower backdrop. Pretty dress. A romantic kiss."

"A kiss?" Keira groaned, her anxiety returning.

"But black and white," Cristiano said, grinning. "Everyone looks perfect in black and white."

He took her hand and gently tugged her. She let him guide her over to the photoshoot area, where there were bright lights pointing at a large white screen, two similar screens either side to make a sort of three-walled box. There was also a makeup artist there, working on a beautiful model, and a rack of clothes.

"Oh God," Keira muttered.

Stella went over and spoke to the makeup artist. Their conversation was out of earshot for Keira, but they were both looking at her. Of course she'd need to be made up for the shot, unlike Cristiano who pretty much woke up camera ready.

The artist spoke to the model, who then stood and went over to the couch, looking a bit put out that she'd been interrupted halfway through her makeover. Keira watched her go, looking at her incredible figure and long lean legs. She was so tall, unlike Keira whose height was a little below average.

Stella whisked over and took Keira's hand.

"Free professional makeover," Cristiano said, shrugging. "It's worth it just for that."

Keira clenched her teeth and allowed Stella to pull her to the makeup chair.

"I won't need to do much," the artist told Keira. "This shot is all about looking classic. Black and white movie style. Just some mascara and lipstick really."

Keira felt no choice but to go along with it. After getting her makeup and hair done, she put on a pretty blue dress of billowing lace.

"It's too long for me," Keira said, looking at the piles of fabric by her feet.

"It's fine," Stella said. "We're having you stand on this."

Keira looked over then and saw that there was a prop chimney top protruding from the prop rooftops. So in this shot they were going to be kissing on the roofs of Paris. It just got more and more intimidating by the moment.

Keira was reunited with Cristiano, who'd been dressed in dark trousers and a striped top, his hair swept to one side in an old movie-star style. He looked stunning, as usual. If there was any good to be taken from his whole ordeal, it was that mental picture of Cristiano!

They stepped onto the set and listened to Stella's instructions. Keira was to stand on the chimney top, one leg bent, kissing Cristiano.

The whole thing was mortifying for her. She felt so self conscious as she twisted her body into the uncomfortable position, kissing on demand. Cristiano on the other hand seemed to be loving it.

"How are you enjoying this so much?" she asked him.

"I get to kiss you over and over again," he said. "What's not to love?"

An audience of admiring women swooned as they watched on. The thought of getting out of New York couldn't come soon enough for Keira. She wanted everything back to how it had been before, when it was just the two of them, instead of everyone trying to get a piece of Cristiano.

At last, the flashing lights stopped.

"I think we've got it," Stella said.

Cristiano helped her down from the chimney step and they went over to see the digital pictures on Stella's camera reel.

"Imagine the Paris skyline," Stella said. "We're photoshopping that in."

If Keira hadn't been in the photo, she'd probably love it. It was romantic, and the chemistry between her and Cristiano was very real. Even though she'd felt nothing but awkward during the whole shot, Stella had somehow managed to capture one perfect moment. But the problem was that it was her in the image. Not just Cristiano, who looked like the French movie star he was portraying.

"Don't you just love it?" Stella said. "You'll be celebrities in no time!"

Maybe Cristiano would, Keira thought. He was clearly the star of the shoot, and the star of the article by the sounds of it. What if he found someone better as a result of all this? She couldn't help wondering what would happen if they broke up. These photos would be a horrible reminder. And awkward, for her to be on the front of a magazine declaring her love with a guy who had left her for someone better.

Elliot took Keira to one side then.

"I've been thinking about what you said in my office," he said. "About this being your life. I think that maybe we've given you a schedule that's been a bit gruelling. Why don't you take the rest of the day off? There's no need for you to be in the office and it would be better to have some time to get your ducks in a row, say goodbye to your family, that sort of thing."

“You’re just worried I’ll get home sick again and want to quit,” Keira said, seeing straight through Elliot’s intentions.

“I just want you to be happy and relaxed,” he said, unconvincingly.

But Keira wasn’t about to argue. She’d had about as much of people swanning around Cristiano as she could handle. She went over to where he was surrounded by a group of writers swooning over the photo, and took him by the arm.

“We have the rest of the day to ourselves,” she told him. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Oh, okay,” Cristiano said, giving in to her gentle tug. He waved at the *Viatorum* staff. “I guess I’ll see you all another time. Nice to have met you! Bye!”

They watched him all the way out the doors.

As soon as they were outside, Keira took a deep breath. That whole thing had been so stressful, she felt like she needed the rest of the day just to recover.

They headed for the subway. But they’d barely made it down one street before Keira received the first of what was to become a succession of emails, some from Nina, some from Elliot, others from Heather with the Paris itinerary, flight times, boarding pass code, hotel details. So much for having the rest of the day off!

They’d just reached the stairs and were about to head down into the subway when Keira’s phone pinged again, this time with a text message. To Keira’s surprise, it was from Zachary. For one brief second she allowed herself to feel excited that it may be confirmation that he’d returned her money, but those hopes were immediately dashed when she read it.

Hey K. Bad news. My cousin said there’s a ton of renovation work to do on our old apartment so he’s going to have to keep the deposit. Sorry. Let’s go for a drink when I’m back in NYC, ok?

Keira fumed as she read the message. The cheek of it! She was relying on that money to sort out a new apartment and Zach knew it. There was no way they had caused thousands of dollars worth of damage to the apartment; either Zach was lying or his cousin was conning them. Plus the way he so casually told her she wasn’t getting any of it back, like it was just a bit of an inconvenience. And then to ask her out for a drink after!

Irate, Keira typed out a quick, harsh reply.

A drink with you is the last thing I want. Get out of my life.

A moment later, Zachary responded.

You don’t have to be such a bitch about it. Should have known the only thing that mattered to you was the \$.

Keira slung her cell phone in her purse, furious.

“What is wrong?” Cristiano asked her, sounding concerned.

“Nothing. Just my bastard of an ex.”

“Zachary?” he asked.

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“Did he do something to hurt you? Do you need me to punch him?”

“God, no!” Keira cried. “I don’t want to talk about him. Or think about him.”

In fact, all she wanted now was to get out of this city – no, this whole goddamn country – and have Cristiano to herself all over again!

Chapter Eight

Cristiano and Keira spent the rest of the day cramming in as much as they could of New York City before heading back to Bryn's apartment to pack up their belongings. Luckily, Bryn was still at work when they got back and so they had the run of the place.

For Cristiano, packing was relatively quick and easy. He only had one satchel, after all, plus one jacket he'd purchased on reaching New York and discovering how much colder than Italy it was and an almost identical designer version.

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