

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES (BOOK #5)

LOVE
LIKE
YOURS

SOPHIE LOVE

The Romance Chronicles

Sophie Love

Love Like Yours

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2018

Love S.

Love Like Yours / S. Love — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
2018 — (The Romance Chronicles)

ISBN 978-1-64-029357-1

“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 YOURS (The Romance Chronicles— Book #5) is book #5 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, finds herself spending a magical Christmas with new her new boyfriend and his family in Sweden. How will their relationship end? Keira returns to New York to discover, to her shock, that she has started a new trend in dating that is sweeping across the country—“Scandinavian romance”—and to find herself becoming a celebrity. Even more confusing, her sister gets engaged, and gives Keira constant advice. Overwhelmed, Keira takes solace when Christiano calls, and surprises herself when she agrees to take a week off and meet him on neutral ground: in Greece. Her magazine is thrilled, and they want this to be her new assignment: can love work the second time around, in a different time and place, if you give it one more chance? Greece is spectacular, filled with sun, ocean, ruins and romance. It is one of the most beautiful places she has ever been. But nothing can prepare Keira for her encounter with Cristiano—and the surprise that follows on its heels. A wholesome romantic comedy that is as profound as it is funny, LOVE LIKE YOURS is book #5 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 #6 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)

ISBN 978-1-64-029357-1

© Love S., 2018
© Lukeman Literary Management
Ltd, 2018

Содержание

Chapter one	8
Chapter two	14
Chapter three	18
Chapter four	21
Chapter five	24
Chapter six	28
Chapter seven	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

Sophie Love

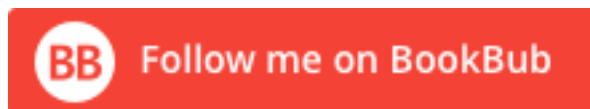
Love Like Yours The Romance Chronicles—Book #5

Sophie Love

#1 bestselling author Sophie Love is author of the romantic comedy series, THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR, which includes eight books, 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 includes 5 books (and counting), and 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!



Copyright © 2018 by Sophie Love. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Jacket image Copyright vvita, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

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)
LOVE LIKE YOURS (Book #5)

Chapter one

Keira sniffed. Ham. She could definitely smell ham.

She opened her eyes, taking a moment to adjust to the bright daylight bouncing off the powder blue walls. Milo's bedroom. She smiled to herself.

Another waft of cooking food caught her nostrils. Yolanta and Nils, Milo's parents, were probably preparing Christmas dishes down in the kitchen. Her mouth flooded with saliva in response.

Keira rolled over and looked at Milo's sleeping form. The last few days in Sweden with him had been wonderful. Magical. The snow had come, covering the mountain cottages in a thick blanket of white, and they'd spent the days hiking, ice fishing, and skating on the frozen lake. It had felt dreamlike to Keira, as if she were the heroine in a fantasy film. The beautiful scenery was made better when the evening drew in and the Northern Lights started to undulate in the sky.

Keira wished it didn't have to end. But she knew she couldn't stay in Sweden forever. Tomorrow she had a flight booked home to New York City. It made her sad to think about leaving this place, leaving Milo and his family. The whole experience had been refreshing for her. Rejuvenating.

The relationship, too, had felt like the most welcome relief from the stress of her last romantic endeavors. It was the first time Keira had really felt able to live in the moment, knowing that neither she nor Milo had any expectations, no unrealistic, overambitious plans for a future together (as she'd had with Shane), no marriage pressures (as she'd had with Cristiano). She realized this was the first time her thoughts of leaving weren't gut-wrenching. They were merely sad, like the whole world and her whole heart were not dependent on the outcome of this relationship.

Just then, Milo woke up. He looked over at her and smiled. "Happy Christmas."

Keira leaned down and kissed him softly. "Happy Christmas."

Milo lay back against the pillow, his eyelids fluttering several times, as though he wasn't yet fully awake.

"I smell ham," he said sleepily.

Keira giggled. "Me too. I'm guessing your parents are in the kitchen."

"Of course," he said, yawning. "Swedish Christmas is a time for excess. They'll be cooking all day."

"We should help them," Keira suggested.

Milo shook his head. His eyes were shut again. He clearly wasn't ready to be fully awake yet.

Keira gazed at his face, so handsome and serene. She was going to miss this, the closeness, the easiness of it all. Never before had things felt so right between her and a man, so devoid of friction or fraught with insecurity.

Milo opened a single eye. "What are you looking at?" he asked with a smirk.

Keira sighed. "Just your gorgeous face."

He frowned and reached out to gently touch her arm. "Why so melancholy?" He smiled softly, reassuringly. "No one is allowed to be sad on Christmas."

Keira laughed but felt her stomach twist. "You know why," she said in an exhalation.

Milo pushed himself up onto his elbows, the covers sliding down to reveal his honed torso. "You're thinking about tomorrow," he stated. "About leaving. And about the future. About what comes next."

She nodded, her gaze falling to the bed sheets.

Milo reached for her, wrapping his arms about her and pulling her into his warm chest.

"It's going to be okay," he told her. "We can't predict the future, but whatever happens, we will be okay. Every relationship, romantic or otherwise, teaches you something. About love, friendship, the human psyche, *yourself*. No moment is wasted if you allow yourself to be fully immersed in it.

And you've done that. You spent Christmas in a foreign country away from your family for the first time in your life. The future, path, it's nothing to worry about. You've got this."

Keira felt him press a kiss into the crown of her head. His positive approach to life and relationships was reassuring, and she was glad he hadn't said anything overblown like her exes would have. There was no pretense, no promise, just now.

She committed to immersing herself in the day, just as Milo had suggested.

"Come on," she said, moving from his warm, strong arms. "Let's see what your folks are cooking up. I want to learn some more crazy Swedish recipes."

Milo chuckled. "Homemade liver pâté? Really think you're ready?"

Keira grinned and flexed her muscles. "I was born ready!"

*

Down in the kitchen, they found Milo's parents, Nils and Yolanta, and his sister, Regina, all buzzing around in an organizing frenzy. Unlike at her own home, the Nilson family seemed to love being busy. Had this been her mom's kitchen, with Mallory and Bryn inside, there'd be at least one spilled pan on the floor, one dry, overcooked ham smoldering in the oven, and a discarded dish towel starting to burn on the stove's open flame.

"Good morning!" Nils exclaimed, in his bouncy, lilting Swedish accent.

"Are you here to help cook?" Regina asked. Of all the family, she was the least chill, Keira thought. She seemed to enjoy reveling in stress and bossing everyone around, whereas her parents were far more lighthearted about it all.

"Oh, Regina, leave them alone," Yolanta said. "Keira's our guest, must I remind you. And besides, we only have her for one more day. There's no way she's lifting a finger."

Keira smiled at the sweet comment, but she felt her melancholy growing. Yolanta had brought up the fact that they were nearing the end of the countdown, that her time here was soon over.

"Milo still needs to help," Regina said.

"I'd love to, dear sister," he joked, slinging an arm around her. "What can I do to help?"

"You could start on the liver pâté," she said, gesturing him to a chopping board set up on one of the counters. Beside it sat a lump of terrifying-looking meat. Keira felt her stomach churn.

Milo turned and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Told you so."

The family settled into their cooking, and Keira's attempts to join in were constantly thwarted. In the end, she busied herself setting the table for breakfast, making it exceptionally neat. She adjusted the gaudy reindeer print tablecloth and laid out the elaborate silver candlesticks and Santa figurines. Then she moved on to tidying the room and straightening all the pictures. They'd previously spent a joyful evening decorating the whole house in Christmas-themed art – strange images depicting winter woodland nymphs – and she'd been assured this was a traditional Swedish thing to do.

From helping decorate their tall, densely branched tree with Swedish flags, tinsel, colored baubles, and electric lights, Christmas time in Sweden, Keira had learned, was a fun, lively, and often bizarre affair. But it wasn't all strange. There was the usual excess of good food – the classic glazed ham served alongside more Swedish delicacies such as egg and anchovy mixture, herring (pickled, patéd, *and* in salad form), rye bread, potatoes, meatballs, beetroot salad, liver pâté, and a fish dish called lutfisk. And though the daylight hours were short, the skies had been blue, the sun shining, and the snow underfoot glistening and bright. When the long, dark evenings drew in, Yolanta lit the candles and their warming glow was comforting. Fresh hyacinths were ever present, filling the home with their powerful scent.

Just then, Keira heard clattering from behind and turned to see the family entering, their arms laden with dishes and trays which they began to place on the table. The excess of food for Christmas

breakfast was even more mouth-watering than the last few days had been. Keira licked her lips in anticipation.

Everyone sat and began dishing out the food. Keira filled her plate with breads and cheeses, and gratefully accepted a cup of exceptionally strong, fresh brewed coffee.

“Do you know what your next assignment is going to be, Keira?” Yolanta asked, as she passed over a bowl of sliced tomatoes.

Keira took it and began heaping slices onto her plate. “Not yet,” she said. Then she confessed, “I technically haven’t finished the one I’m working on yet.”

“You’ve not?” Nils asked.

Keira shook her head. She didn’t like to think of the work still to be done hanging over her. But things with *Viatorum*, the magazine she wrote for, had become somewhat tense, and the ending they demanded was not the one she’d delivered. She was still negotiating with them how much freedom she deserved with her own work. But she also knew that she was pushing it all out, wanting to savor the moment instead of worrying about her job. That savoring would come to an abrupt end on her return to New York City.

“I hope next time you go somewhere warm,” Nils commented. “You should negotiate the Bahamas. Or New Zealand. It’s a beautiful place.”

Keira smiled, recalling how well traveled Milo’s father was. The complete opposite of his son, in fact. Milo had confessed to rarely leaving his home country due to a fear of flying and bouts of terrible homesickness.

“We need to toast,” Yolanta said suddenly, holding up her coffee mug. “To Christmas!”

Laughing, Keira raised her own mug, clinking it in turn with each of the family members and wishing them each a Merry Christmas as she did so.

As she looked around the table at the family, Keira felt a swell of love for them all. She really had loved the time she’d spent with them and would cherish it forever. It wasn’t every day that she got the opportunity to meet such a warm, friendly, caring family and have them open their arms and heart to her over the Christmas season. She was going to miss them desperately after leaving Sweden.

“Can we open presents now?” Regina asked as soon as the plates were empty.

Nils chuckled. “She is still a seven-year-old at heart. At least we get her to sit through breakfast these days. Back then we used to have to negotiate with her to let us sleep in beyond five a.m.!”

Yolanta laughed. “Let’s go sit around the tree.”

Everyone stood, leaving the table mess for later, and went into the living room.

“I can’t wait to give Keira her gift,” Yolanta said as they went. “It’s extra special.”

Keira felt touched to know Milo’s family had gone to so much effort for her. Before she’d agreed to stay for Christmas, they’d given her gifts to take back to New York and she’d been overwhelmed with gratitude enough. But when it turned out she was staying, the gifts had multiplied beneath the tree, almost to a level that embarrassed Keira. She didn’t feel like she deserved so much kindness. Compared to Christmases at home, she felt thoroughly spoiled.

“I have something special for Keira too,” Milo said.

She blushed. Out the corner of her mouth, she muttered, “You know I haven’t had time to buy anything.”

Milo laughed. “We know. No one minds. You don’t give gifts expecting them in return. That defeats the point of gifts.”

“I know,” Keira said, “but I feel so guilty. Everyone’s been absurdly accommodating.”

“Stop worrying.” Milo chuckled. “Your presence is our present!”

Keira rolled her eyes at his cheesy line, but she did feel a little better.

They entered the living room and all took their seats. Nils positioned himself on the floor, preparing to hand the gifts out. He picked up the first, which was wrapped in gorgeous sparkly silver paper.

“This is for Keira,” he said, reading the snowflake-shaped tag. “It’s from Yolanta.”

He passed it first to Yolanta, who then passed it on to Keira, clearly in some kind of family ritual. Keira took the large rectangular box, still feeling residual guilt about having nothing to give in return.

Carefully, so as not to rip the gorgeous paper, Keira peeled back the tape and unwrapped her gift. The box contained within it was white with a Swedish brand name written across it that Keira couldn’t read. But the rest of the family all made a noise that seemed to suggest they knew exactly what was inside.

Keira lifted the lid and folded back the white tissue paper inside. To her shock and delight, inside was a full snow suit. Keira pulled it out, holding it up, and laughing along with the rest of them. So far, she’d been borrowing a spare suit of Yolanta’s that was far too big for her, not to mention bright red. This one was dark, sleekly designed, and the appropriate size.

“Amazing,” Keira said. “This looks so comfortable. I’m going to get so much use out of it.”

But she felt her chest hitch then, as it dawned on her that she potentially was not. Her days in Sweden were almost over.

“For when you next visit,” Yolanta reassured her, as if intuitively picking up on the subtle change in Keira’s mood.

“Thank you,” Keira said with deep gratitude.

From the tree, Nils had handed a gift to Milo, via Regina, and he opened up a new watch.

“Thanks, sis,” he said, admiring it on his wrist.

“The next gift,” Nils continued from his place on the floor, surrounded by pine needles, “is for... Keira. From Milo.”

He handed the flat, rectangular gift to Milo, who passed it on to Keira.

Keira raised an eyebrow. She had no clue what it might be.

She began to unwrap it, realizing as she did that it was some kind of painting. She pulled the rest of the paper off hurriedly and spun the rectangle around so it was facing the right way. Then she gasped at what she saw. The landscape painting depicted the scene of a frozen lake, with dogs sledding over it. It was beautiful, and so incredibly thoughtful.

“That’s the same lake we went ice fishing on,” Milo explained. “It’s painted by a famous Swedish painter. I thought it would help you remember Sweden.”

Keira felt herself well up, so touched by the gesture. She threw her arms around Milo. “It’s wonderful!” she exclaimed, pressing kisses onto his cheek.

Nils continued his present sharing, handing one to Yolanta for Regina, and another to Regina to hand straight back to him.

“What I really wanted to get you,” Milo said in Keira’s ear as his family busied themselves with their gifts, “was an actual dog sled ride.”

Keira laughed.

“Sadly, we didn’t have enough time,” he continued. “So I got you this instead.”

He pulled something out from behind him. Keira gasped from the shock of there being yet another gift for her, and for the fact it had not gone through the official Nilson family channels.

“A secret gift?” she said, in a joke conspiratorial voice.

Milo nodded. “Open it,” he said eagerly.

Beyond touched, Keira carefully removed the paper. She was holding a small black rectangular box, and already recognized the packaging as jewelry. She snapped it open and gasped. Inside was a necklace of white gold and pale sapphire.

“Oh, Milo, it’s gorgeous,” she said, breathless.

She reached in and pulled the necklace up to her neck, laying the delicate thing across her collarbones.

“Let me,” he offered.

She turned, swiping her hair over one shoulder, and Milo fastened the latch. His fingers felt warm against her skin, making her tingle all over.

“Even though we will be hundreds of miles apart,” he whispered in her ear, “you now have something from me, and Sweden, that can be with you always.”

Keira turned to him, beyond touched. “I’ll treasure it,” she said, gazing into his eyes. “Thank you for making this the best Christmas ever.”

“No, thank you,” Milo said with deep meaning.

Then he laughed and pulled her into his arms as the family continued their present opening around them.

*

The rest of the day was a busy and joyous affair, though it was with a pang of relief that Keira found herself on the porch late at night, with the entirety of Milo’s family in bed, and just Milo for company. As much as she adored his family, having a few more precious moments just the two of them felt necessary.

They sat side by side, silently sharing a bottle of warming spirits, overlooking the mountains for what would be, for Keira, the last time. How sad that their first moment alone all day would also be their last moment alone for an undetermined time.

The North Star was shining brightly above them, and thanks to the thickness of the snow, it appeared as if all the cottages dotted around the mountains were nestled into it. At the edge of the forest Keira saw the dark fir trees, looking majestic in their most natural habitat of deep, deep snow.

Milo reached for Keira’s hand then. She looked over at him, the sight of his face just as breathtakingly beautiful as the scene she’d just torn her eyes from. She felt his warm fingers squeezing hers.

“I never thought I could fall in love with someone so quickly,” he said, in his usual open way. “Honestly, I thought the whole love at first sight thing was a myth. That people were confusing love and lust.”

Keira blushed. She had certainly been guilty of that. But she’d also, in her journey of self-discovery, accepted that lust at first sight was just as valid an experience as its cousin love. Not every relationship was meant to last, but that wasn’t a reason in itself to turn your back on the opportunities life presented you with.

“You’ve proved that wrong,” Milo continued. “It is real. It has happened to me.”

She smiled at him tenderly, and nodded in agreement. Not to mean that he’d changed her mind about falling in love – she knew very well that she’d fallen in love very easily in the past – but in agreement with his assessment that love at first sight was indeed real.

The thought reminded her, suddenly, that even though she felt like Milo was the one, in this moment, experience had taught that that could easily be proven to be wrong. And that thought leapfrogged her to another one. For the first time, Keira was actually looking forward to going home, to being independent in her new apartment. As much as she had loved being in Sweden and being with Milo, she knew this moment in her life needed to come to an end.

Just then, Keira realized Milo was looking at her expectantly. She’d been silent for too long. He’d confessed his love for her and all she’d done was nod!

“What are you thinking?” he asked, his expression a little crestfallen.

“Honestly, I’m thinking about tomorrow,” she admitted. “About the fact I’m leaving.”

He exhaled. “I thought you might be.”

She squeezed his fingers, which were still entwined with hers. “I’m sorry if that disappoints you.”

“No,” Milo said rather quickly, looking intently into her eyes. “I would never try and make you feel guilty for leaving, or for wanting to. I know this must end too. It’s just that it’s been such a magical experience. You’ve taught me so much about love, about myself.”

Keira leaned in and kissed him tenderly. “I feel the exact same way.”

Chapter two

A shrill, unwanted alarm woke Keira the next morning. She pulled her pillow over her head, trying to ignore it, but soon felt Milo gently shaking her elbow. Slowly, she inched the pillow from her face and peeped out. Dawn had hardly broken. Milo smiled down at her, but there was sorrow in his eyes.

“It’s time,” he said.

With a groan of resignation, Keira fully removed the pillow and sat up. She discovered that Milo was dressed. Beside her on the bedside table was a tray of coffee and breakfast.

“You made me this?” she asked, touched.

“I didn’t want you going hungry on the plane,” he said with a shy shrug.

Keira reached for him, stroking his stubbled cheek. She kissed him tenderly. “Thank you,” she said with deep affection.

The pang of grief she’d been nurturing since yesterday returned. She felt knots of emotion in her stomach as the realization sunk in that today really was the end for them. Quickly, she shoved off the duvet, not wanting to break down in front of Milo, and busied herself by collecting strewn clothes off the floor.

“Keira,” she heard Milo say in a kind, cautious tone.

“What?” she replied, not looking at him, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Your breakfast.”

Keira grabbed some toiletries from the chest and hurriedly slung them into her case. “I have to pack.”

“You don’t need to rush,” he said. His voice was measured as usual, which was at complete odds with how Keira herself felt. “There’s time to sit and drink coffee.”

“I’d prefer to get this done first,” Keira replied, hearing the strain in her voice.

From behind, she heard Milo stand. He came over and took her by the shoulders. She tensed, not feeling able to handle any kindness in her emotionally vulnerable state. But it was too late. Just the sensation of him behind her made her facade crack. Tears began to trickle from her eyes.

She turned and folded into Milo’s embrace. They stood that way for a long time, as Keira let the pent-up emotion out. To her surprise, just allowing herself to be vulnerable and let out the tears seemed enough to lessen their power. She quickly collected herself, much quicker than she usually would, and felt significantly better.

“Coffee?” she said, moving from Milo’s embrace.

He nodded, and they sat together on his bed, sharing their last coffee together. The tears on Keira cheeks dried.

“I’m not looking forward to saying goodbye to the family,” she confessed between sips. “I mean, you all feel like *my* family now. I’m going to be a blubbering idiot.”

Milo’s lips quirked. “It’ll be fine. It’s not like it’s forever. Or at least it doesn’t have to be.”

Keira stayed silent, her mind mulling things over. She wasn’t sure yet what she wanted from this, or how their story would progress, whether there even was a story for the two of them.

Milo must have noticed her hesitation.

“But we don’t have to talk about that now,” he said, his gaze drifting away.

They finished their coffee and breakfast, and then Keira washed and dressed in preparation for the long flight ahead. Usually she dreaded journeys, but she’d become so used to it now it hardly fazed her. How quickly she’d grown accustomed to her new jet-setting lifestyle. And, she remembered with a little spark of excitement, she had a new apartment waiting for her in New York City; her first real step toward complete independence.

With her bags fully packed, she and Milo headed downstairs. The family was gathered in the kitchen, all mid-breakfast themselves. Keira knew they'd made the effort to wake up early just to say goodbye, and was touched by the gesture.

Regina was the first to stand. She came over and hugged Keira tightly, her usual stern expression greatly softened.

"I'm going to miss having another woman about the place," she said. "It was nice having a sister for a week."

"I'm just the other end of the phone," Keira reminded her.

Nils took Regina's place, towering above Keira with his six-foot-something frame. He patted her shoulder firmly.

"You are welcome back anytime," he said. "Anytime at all."

"Thank you," Keira replied.

Then he pulled her into an awkward half-embrace. Keira felt like a child enveloped in his large arms.

She moved from the embrace and turned her attention to Yolanta. She'd grown closest to Milo's mother during the vacation, and it would be the hardest to be parted from her out of the three of them.

Yolanta cupped Keira's face in a very motherly gesture.

"Beautiful, talented girl," she said. "You'll be back to see us, won't you?"

Keira blushed. "I will."

Yolanta nodded, satisfied, then the two hugged tightly.

"We'd better go," Milo said from behind.

Keira disengaged from Yolanta's arms and looked back over her shoulder at him, standing by the door with all her luggage at his feet. Then she glanced back at the family.

"I guess this is it," she said, with a heavy sigh. "I'll miss you. Thank you for your hospitality. It's been the best Christmas I've ever had. I'll cherish these memories forever."

"It's been a delight to have you," Nils said.

"Come back anytime," Regina added.

"We'll see you *soon*," Yolanta said, emphasizing the final word.

Keira nodded. Then she turned away from them and joined Milo, collecting one of her bags from the pile. Milo opened the door and a cold blast of Swedish winter air rushed at her, making her shiver. Milo headed out into the chilly day, heading for the car. Keira swallowed the lump in her throat as she waved behind at the family one last time.

"Goodbye!" everyone said in unison.

Then Keira followed after Milo, shutting the door gently behind her. She stepped down the snowy garden path, drinking in the sight of the mountains one last time, trying to take a picture for her memory. She never wanted to forget this view, this place, or this family. She wanted every detail seared into her mind.

She added her bag to the trunk, then got in the passenger side of Milo's little car. He gunned it to life.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," she replied with a nod of finality.

As he pulled away, she looked back over her shoulder, taking one last photograph with her mind.

Just as the house disappeared from sight, Keira heard her cell phone ping. She fished it from her purse and saw that she'd received a text from Elliot. She frowned. It wasn't like Elliot to text her; he usually kept everything between them quite formal.

She opened the text and read it.

Merry Christmas, Keira! Hope you had your happy ending...

She smiled, touched that Elliot would send her a personal message. But then she scrolled down and read the rest:

Just a reminder that the deadline for your article is tomorrow. You've already had one extension, so this is final.

She groaned. Elliot knew when her plane was leaving today and yet he'd chosen to contact her now, through the most direct and personal means he could, rather than an email like usual. He was trying to take what little time she had left with Milo away from her. She turned her phone off and slung it back in her purse.

"Everything okay?" Milo asked.

"Yes," Keira said with a breezy smile.

But really, she felt reality come back to her in a sudden flash. Her fantasy trip was over. It was time to get back to the real world.

*

Keira and Milo stood side by side, hand in hand, in front of the gate for her flight. The board gate number flashed up onto the screen, just as a voice came over the PA:

"This is a boarding call for flight Swedish Air one forty-five from Sweden to New York. Please could all passengers make their way to gate ten."

Keira turned to Milo. "That's me," she said.

He nodded. His expression was more morose than ever as he leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"Good luck with everything, Keira," he said.

"That sounds so final," she murmured in reply.

"Sorry," Milo replied. "I've been getting vibes off you all morning, that once you leave, it will be over."

Keira raised her eyebrows. For straight-talking Milo to be guided by her *vibes* seemed a bit out of character. Except, he wasn't wrong.

She sighed.

"It's a practical thing," she said. "You know that, right? You don't want to fly or leave Sweden, and I don't want to move away from New York. It's just how it is. I don't mean to be so cold about it."

"No, it's okay," Milo said with a nod. "You know how much I appreciate honesty. It's just a shame. We've had a lot of fun together."

"I don't mean to make it sound like we'll never talk again," Keira said, offering a tentative smile. "We can still be friends."

Milo's troubled expression lessened somewhat. "Okay. Yes. I'd like that."

"Good," Keira replied with a relieved sigh. She couldn't bear the thought of him being completely gone from her life, even if she did understand they had to romantically untangle themselves.

She offered her arms for a hug, and Milo took up the offer. They held each other for a long time. It was only the voice coming over the PA a second time asking passengers to board that made them break apart.

"I'd better go," Keira said. She gazed deeply into his eyes. "Goodbye, Milo."

He held on to her hand, lingering, drawing out the time. "I know this is a strange thing to say... but thank you. I feel very lucky to have met you."

Keira smiled. "I feel the same."

"Goodbye, Keira."

As her hand fell from Milo's, Keira turned and walked away. When she reached the gate and handed her boarding pass and passport over to the man, she looked back one last time. Milo was still standing there where she'd left him. She waved, feeling a sad pang in her chest. He waved back.

"There you go, Miss Swanson," the man at the desk replied, handing her back her documents.

“Thank you,” she said, taking them.
She didn’t look back again.

*

Keira found her seat on the plane. Though she felt somewhat sad about ending things with Milo, she also felt energized. Her whole experience in Sweden had felt like preparation for her newfound independence.

She looked around at the other people on the plane. On the seats to her left were a couple kissing, and a little further ahead was a family with kids bouncing around as the parents tried to get them into their seats. For the first time, Keira didn’t feel envious. Instead, she felt a newfound freedom and solace in her independence. Her journey was different from all of these other people’s, and she wouldn’t want it any other way.

Feeling emboldened, Keira took her laptop from her hand luggage and began to work on her article. She used a different approach than she had in her past articles, writing about the freedom of no attachments.

From now on, when I do love, I will love the Scandinavian way.

Chapter three

The next morning, Keira woke with backache. She blinked and looked around, disoriented. It took her a long time to work out where she was. Not Milo's, nor her room at her mom's, but her brand new apartment. Unfortunately, the only thing she currently had inside of it was a mattress. She didn't even have a bed frame; hence, the backache.

Keira managed to heave herself out of bed. The only clothes in the new apartment were the ones in her case. Luckily, Yolanta had insisted on washing all her stuff for her during the Christmas vacation, so at the very least she had clean clothes to wear. She chose her most work-like outfit from the selection of wool skirts and comfortable jeans, then headed out onto the streets of New York City.

The moment her shoes hit the sidewalk, she felt a surge inside her at being home. Even the smell of pollution comforted her, despite being in complete contrast to the crisp, clean mountain air she'd been breathing in Sweden.

She went to a coffee truck at the side of the road, joining the queue of bleary-eyed workers glued to their phones.

"I'll have a double espresso," she told the man when she reached the front. Then she paused. She'd been drinking the extra-strong Swedish coffee for weeks. Perhaps it was time for a change. "Actually, can I have a caramel macchiato with cream?"

The man shot her a tired, unimpressed expression, and Keira grinned.

"I'm just back from vacation. I want my coffee to taste of home."

"Good for you," he said in a dry, deadpan voice.

As she waited for her coffee, the people who'd been milling around at the other side of the truck adding sugars to their coffee moved away. For the first time, Keira noticed there was a stand of newspapers and magazines, and amongst them was the latest issue of *Viatorum*. Just as Nina had explained, the cover had been changed and it was now one of the original shots of the model they'd been planning to use in the first place. It was a relief to know she'd been listened to, but she still felt a swirl of anxiety knowing that today she was going to hand in her Norwegian article. She had no idea how Elliot would react to the ending.

Once Keira had her caffeine fix, she headed to the subway. Luckily her new apartment was well located for the office and it wasn't a very long journey at all, so being pressed up so close to so many people didn't concern her as much as it did when traveling in from her mom's.

She made it out the other end and began the short walk to the *Viatorum* HQ. Just as it came into view, Keira heard her phone ping with a message. She checked and saw that it was from Bryn.

Can you come to dinner tonight at mom's? Felix and I have some news to share.

Keira's jaw dropped as her mind went straight to marriage. Surely her sister wouldn't be settling down with Felix so soon? They'd literally only just moved in together!

Keira quickly typed back her response, saying she would be there. She put her phone away – along with all thoughts of what Bryn's announcement might be – and headed into the office.

It was already very busy inside. Since Lance had gone on a hiring spree and added a load of plucky new college grads and interns – something Elliot had not been particularly thrilled by – the office had become increasingly busy. And since it was located in a large open-plan converted warehouse, the noise was amplified tenfold.

"Hey, Keira," someone called, and she looked over to see Meredith waving.

Keira hadn't forgotten about Meredith's underhanded attempt to steal her last assignment from her, so she greeted her with a somewhat frosty, "Good morning."

She scanned the faces before her, searching for someone familiar, and saw Nina. But before she had a chance to beeline for her old friend, Elliot came hurrying out of his office. He was wearing a bright red suit, and he was frowning deeply.

“Finally!” he yelled, coming right up to Keira and taking her by the elbow.

The whole office craned their heads to watch as Keira was marched toward Elliot’s office, her cheeks burning as red as his suit.

“Finally what?” Keira asked out of the corner of her mouth as she was half-dragged through the aisle.

“Finally you’re here!” Elliot exclaimed.

They made it to his office and he slammed the door shut.

“What happened to the open-door policy?” Keira quipped. It had been one of many fluffy policies Lance had imposed on the office when he’d bought the magazine.

“Trust me, you’ll be glad I closed the door,” Elliot huffed.

“Am I in some kind of trouble?” Keira asked, folding her arms. She didn’t enjoy being frog-marched through the office like that, and she definitely didn’t appreciate the tone Elliot was taking with her.

He faced her, arms folded. “I told you the deadline was final. Yet still, you’re pushing it. Are you trying to give me a pulmonary embolism?”

“Pushing it? What do you mean?” Keira replied, confused. “You gave me until today. And unless it’s somehow unclear, today is today!”

Elliot’s frown grew even deeper. “Don’t get smart with me, Keira. You know full well the printers need the article by nine a.m. at the latest. It’s eight forty-five.”

Keira let out a silent gasp. She hadn’t realized Elliot meant final deadline as in straight-to-print! Usually her articles went through at least a couple of rounds of edits with Nina before making it to the page.

“I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I misunderstood.”

Elliot glowered. He was having none of it. He held his hand out, palm up. “Hand it over then. This had better be good. Because it’s all on you, Keira. One hundred percent your words. One hundred percent your responsibility.”

She gulped as the weight of that sunk in. Could she be fired off the back of a bad article? Could the magazine fold because of her?

Quickly, Keira rummaged in her bag and pulled out the hard copy of her article, along with the thumb drive she’d saved the original to. Elliot snatched the paper copy and sat heavily in his chair. Keira watched on nervously as he read her words.

Time seemed to stretch on for eternity. Keira peered back over her shoulder to see the rest of the office watching her; some stealing tentative glances from their desks, others more brazenly gawping at the entire proceedings. Her stomach swilled.

In his office chair, one leg folded stiffly over the other, his eyebrows drawn together, Elliot turned to the last page. This was the part no eyes other than Keira’s had ever seen, the section she’d worked on during the flight back from Sweden. As Elliot’s eyes scanned from left to right, Keira’s unease grew more and more, and Elliot’s jaw grew tighter and tighter.

Finally, he looked up, nostrils flared. “What the hell is this!”

Keira recoiled. She couldn’t have anticipated a worse thing for him to say.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asked, racking her brains for any obvious errors. Had she accidentally used the wrong country name; Switzerland, perhaps, instead of Sweden?

“What’s wrong?” Elliot repeated, growing more and more irate. “What’s wrong is that you’re a romance writer who can’t write a goddamn romantic ending! Juliet didn’t dump Romeo! Lizzy Bennet didn’t leave Mr. Darcy at the airport! And Catherine didn’t just let it fizzle out with Heathcliff!”

“To be fair, none of those are particularly healthy examples of romanti – ”

“I don’t care!” Elliot snapped, cutting her off. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but romance isn’t exactly my forte. But even I know that the two leads don’t just maturely decide to break up!”

Shane had the whole dead dad thing. Gold! Cristiano was the spurned lothario. Magic! But Milo? Milo just... what... drifts away?"

Keira swallowed hard. She couldn't exactly defend herself. "I don't know what to tell you. It's the truth, and I think my readers appreciate that. I couldn't lie about how the Scandinavians approach relationships or about what I learned while I was there."

Elliot shook the paper. "You've literally said here that what you shared with Milo can't be labeled! Keira, your whole purpose is to write about *relationships* and you won't even call it what it is!" He took a deep breath and sunk his head into his hands. "The readers are going to hate this."

"I disagree," Keira replied boldly. "I've met my readers all over the globe. They want the truth. They respect my honesty."

But Elliot wasn't listening. "There's no time for a rewrite. We're doomed."

"I know my readers," Keira said more insistently. "You have to trust me."

And seeing that Elliot was still muttering to himself and not paying her any attention, she slammed her fist against his desktop. He jerked up, startled.

"Trust me," Keira said again, sternly, through her teeth. "I know what I'm doing."

Elliot glared at her silently for a long time. Finally, he spoke. "You'd better be right."

Chapter four

Later that evening, Keira rang the bell to her mom's apartment. A moment later, the door was opened. But it wasn't Mallory standing there. Instead, it was Bryn.

"I'm ENGAGED!" Bryn screamed.

Keira blinked as her sister held up her left hand, showing off an enormous sparkling diamond ring. Her grin was bigger than ever as she waited expectantly for Keira to say something. But still, Keira just blinked.

"Oh," was all she managed.

Bryn's expression began to change from elation to hurt, when the door was opened fully by Felix coming up behind her. He rolled his eyes.

"She was supposed to announce that when we sat down for dinner," he said, smiling at Bryn in an affectionate but paternally stern way.

"I couldn't help myself," Bryn replied, turning her goo-goo eyes up to him.

Keira grimaced.

Felix turned his attention back to Keira. "Welcome back," he said. "Come in out of the cold."

Keira stepped inside. From the kitchen, she could hear Mallory call out, "Is that Keira?"

"YES!" Bryn shouted over her shoulder before immediately turning back to face her sister. "So? Aren't you going to say anything?" she demanded, testily. "Congratulations, for example?"

"Of course," Keira said, shaking herself from her stunned reverie. "Congratulations. To you both." She kissed them each in turn. "I was just shocked. It's so... sudden."

Bryn narrowed her eyes. "Says the girl who falls in love every month."

"Be nice," Felix warned her. Then to Keira, he added, "I know it seems like a big rush, but I'm not getting any younger."

You can say that again, Keira thought.

Just then, Mallory came out of the kitchen, holding a casserole dish. Her hair was a frizzy mess and she looked as flustered as ever.

"Dinner," she exclaimed. "Everyone take a seat."

Keira quickly shucked off her jacket and took her place at the table. Mallory shoved a plate of macaroni and cheese, salad, and garlic bread toward her.

"Thanks, Mom," Keira said, taking the plate. "And hi."

"Yes, yes, hello, darling," Mallory replied, her attention already shifting to dishing up a portion of food for Felix. "Big news, huh? I never thought your sister would settle down first."

"MOM!" both Swanson sisters exclaimed in unison.

"Well, you can't blame me," Mallory replied, continuing in her usual abrupt, tactless way. "Keira was always more of the homely type and she'd been settled with Zach long enough. I thought you'd been put off marriage, Bryn, because of what happened with me and your dad."

"Oh, Mother, please," Bryn snapped, taking the plate Mallory offered her. "We are not turning my engagement announcement dinner into a pity party about your divorce."

Mallory let out a woeful sigh.

"I think what Bryn is trying to say," Felix said in his calm, grandfatherly way, "is that we're very happy to be celebrating with you both, and that we hope you'll share in our joy and excitement."

Keira couldn't help but let out a derisive snort. She didn't mind Felix as a person, but the fact he was dating – no, *marrying*—her sister, who was half his age, definitely lowered her impression of him. Adding Bryn's very obvious daddy issues into the mix made it even more ick-inducing for Keira.

"Yes," Bryn agreed, turning her attention to Keira. "And I was hoping that you'd be my maid of honor."

Keira almost choked on her cucumber. "Really?"

“Who else would I ask?” Bryn replied.

Keira was genuinely touched that her sister would want her to be the maid of honor. She decided to put her own judgments out of her mind, and be happy for Bryn. It was her life, after all. If she wanted to spend it married to a sixty-plus-year-old father-substitute, then really that was her own business.

“I’d love to,” Keira told her. “Thank you.”

Bryn smiled, clearly happy that Keira had accepted. Then she immediately switched to bossy mode. “So you’ll have to tell work you can’t travel for any more assignments. I can’t have you jetting out of the country every five minutes. I need my maid of honor for dress fittings and cake tasting and venue booking. I won’t have you ruining my wedding.”

She winked, but Keira knew she was only half joking.

“Speaking of assignments,” Mallory said, “how was your last trip? Your Swedish Christmas?”

Keira noted the hint of discontent in her mom’s voice. She must have been more stung about Keira spending Christmas abroad than she’d let on.

“It was really great,” Keira told her. “I had an awesome time.”

“Well, he must be The One, then, if he can keep you apart from your poor mom on Christmas day,” Mallory said, in her woe-is-me voice.

Keira prodded her food with her fork. “Actually... we broke up.”

“What?” Mallory said, stunned. “But I thought... But you were...” Finally, she put her fork down. It clattered against the chinaware. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, Keira. When are you going to stop all this silliness?”

“Excuse me?” Keira asked, surprised.

“I just want you to find someone already,” Mallory replied. “You keep meeting all these fantastic men but it’s never quite right. Never quite enough. When are you going to just settle? It’s what everyone does after all.”

Keira shook her head. Her divorced mom wasn’t the best person to take relationship advice from.

But Mallory’s little tirade wasn’t over yet. She turned to Felix.

“Do you have any single friends for my daughter?” she asked. “Since it worked out so well with you two.”

“MOM!” Keira cried, almost spitting out her mouthful.

“My best man is single,” Felix said, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “We’ve been friends since high school.”

It was clear to Keira that he was just winding her up, playing into Mallory’s suggestion for the fun of it, but she still couldn’t help but be appalled at the thought.

“Since high school?” she repeated. “So for the last hundred years, give or take?”

Felix took the jibe lightheartedly, and let out a chuckle. From the other side of the table, Bryn’s cell phone flashed. Keira looked over.

“Did you just take a photo of me?” she demanded.

“You look good,” Bryn replied, shrugging. “Thought I could send it to Nathan, Felix’s best man.”

“Don’t you dare!” Keira yelled, leaping up from the table to grab Bryn’s cell phone. But her sister shielded her from getting it with her body, leaving Keira flailing. “I’m not going on a date with a grandpa!”

The lighthearted moment ended with Keira’s words.

Bryn cleared her throat, looking unimpressed. “I was only teasing.”

Mallory shifted awkwardly in her seat. From the other side of the table, Felix failed to hide the look of offense on his features.

“I’m sorry,” Keira said, sinking back into her seat. “That went too far. I don’t mean that. I’m just a bit touchy about people trying to orchestrate my love life.”

She thought of Elliot and his overt disapproval of the way she’d ended things with Milo, not to mention Mallory’s bizarre outburst earlier at dinner. It saddened her that her mom was so concerned about her settling down, and that Elliot seemed convinced her readers would hate how things fizzled with Milo. She’d been so certain and confident in her own actions, but everyone else’s opinions were starting to shake her. She reminded herself that every relationship was different, and everyone’s love journey looked different.

The table was silent for an awkwardly long time, with everyone prodding at their dinner glumly.

“How’s the apartment?” Bryn asked finally.

Keira was grateful for the lifeline she was giving her. “Empowering,” she replied. “Actually, empty would be more accurate. I only managed to get a mattress delivered while I was abroad. The rest of my boxes and clothes are here.”

“Do you need furniture?” Bryn asked. “I’m an expert furniture shopper now, so I’d be happy to assist.”

“You would?” Keira asked, grateful that Bryn wasn’t holding any grudges. She seemed to be letting her off very lightly considering, and Keira wondered if she was planning some future dressing down. “I’d really like that.”

“Cool. Let’s go to a store after work tomorrow,” Bryn said.

Keira nodded. “Thanks, sis.”

“No problem,” Bryn replied. “And don’t worry, my taste is very modern. Very young. Nothing *vintage*. Nothing *old*. There’s nothing even remotely *grandpa* about my taste.”

Keira sucked in her cheeks and took a deep breath. Of course. This was Bryn. She was never going to let Keira live her grandpa comment down.

Chapter five

Rather than her alarm waking her the next morning, it was Keira's cell phone ringing incessantly that pulled her from her slumber. She rolled over on her mattress and grabbed her phone from where it was lying on the floor, plugged into the socket beside her. Elliot's name was flashing up at her. It was another personal call; not coming from the *Viatorum* office line but his own number.

Keira groaned when she saw that it wasn't even six a.m. She was used to early starts for work, particularly when traveling was involved, but Elliot seemed to be crossing professional boundaries more and more often.

Keira hit the green button.

"Have you been online yet today?" Elliot asked immediately, before Keira had even had a chance to speak.

"I haven't even opened my curtains," Keira replied a little drily, "so, no, not yet. Why?"

Elliot's voice came through the other line, fast and somewhat manic. "It's your article, Keira. The online version went live at midnight. It's a hit! What do people say these days... it's gone *viral*."

Keira sat bolt upright, completely awake now. "Really?"

"I should never have doubted you," Elliot continued. "You do know your readers. I suppose the heterosexual female twenty-five-plus demographic isn't as straightforward these days as it used to be."

Keira held herself back from saying "Told you so." Even if she'd wanted to she wouldn't have gotten the chance; Elliot was still speaking a mile a minute.

"I'm going to need you to commit to slightly longer hours. We have a really demanding schedule. Don't worry, I'll compensate you generously. We can talk raises once things have settled down a little, but for now we're going to have to ride the wave, okay?"

"What wave?" Keira asked, frowning.

"The media have gotten hold of the story. They love the Romance Guru. Everyone wants to meet the real person behind the stories. The phone hasn't stopped ringing with talk shows wanting to book you, hence me being on my personal line; I didn't want to clog up the office number."

Keira shook her head and rubbed the frown from between her eyes. "Are you serious?" she asked. Typically, her first instinct was fear. Where Elliot saw an opportunity, she saw spotlights and scrutiny.

"When it comes to *Viatorum*, I never joke," Elliot replied. "Can you get in ASAP? We have so much to get through. Heather's organizing the press tour as we speak."

Keira was stunned speechless. It didn't seem like she had much choice in the matter, and maybe that was for the best. If her instinct was telling her to run for the hills, then she ought to challenge it. There wasn't a better way to gain independence than to stand solo in front of the world with her story! Besides, if she ever wanted to step away from the company and go it alone, she'd get far more success with a large fan base and exposure than she ever would by simply quitting.

And, Keira thought, a little slyly, she could certainly use this as leverage to increase her salary going forward.

"I'm on my way," she told Elliot.

She hung up and jumped off the mattress, hurrying over to the suitcase that still contained all her clothing. Without drawers or a closet to put anything in, Keira had opted not to bring any of her stuff back from Mallory's last night, instead deciding it could wait until after her shopping trip with Bryn. But she was regretting that a little now. She didn't have anything particularly businesslike to wear. Even if she was just going to her usual office and usual desk with her usual colleagues today, she wanted to present herself a little better than usual. Maybe she'd get some new outfits with Bryn this evening as well as furniture.

Once she'd dressed, she hurried for the door. As she went, her phone began pinging with text messages from friends and family. They must have started getting up for the day and noticed that she was splashed all over social media.

When did u get famous? came a text from Shelby.

Sis, you're a celeb!! Bryn sent. Followed by: *You'd better not upstage me at my wedding!!*

Keira smiled to herself as the messages poured in.

So that's where I've been going wrong? I should've been approaching it the "Scandinavian way"?

Maxine texted her.

Scandinavian love sounds great and all, but I do want grandchildren someday, darling, so there are going to have to be some strings attached, Mallory wrote.

Keira rolled her eyes and laughed to herself.

Even Felix sent messages of support, although Keira suspected he didn't have any social media profiles and had just been prompted by Bryn to do so.

She smiled to herself as she dashed out of the apartment and hurried toward the subway.

"Hey! Romance Guru!" someone shouted.

She turned to see the coffee seller in his little truck.

"I got your drink ready for you! Caramel macchiato with cream!"

He waved an extra-large cup of coffee at her. Keira grinned and went over to take it.

"Thanks," she laughed, reaching in her pocket for some cash.

"On the house," he said with a wink. "Just tell everyone you get your coffee from Bobby's, okay?"

"I will," Keira said, taking the coffee.

If there was only one perk to come out of the exposure, free coffee wasn't one to be scoffed at.

Keira strode away, coffee in hand, and headed down to the subway. Finally she got the chance to check her phone and see for herself what everyone else was reading about her. On all her social feeds there were positive mentions of her article, with thousands upon thousands of comments below from women who'd been inspired and empowered by her stories. Women who'd been ridiculed for breaking off engagements, ones who'd lost lovers due to jobs, due to distance, due to clashes over money and careers. She'd had no idea so many people felt so isolated because of their bad luck in love, and that she'd inadvertently created a community where they felt able to reach out and share their stories.

When she checked her work emails, she was shocked to see that some journalists had managed to get directly through to her, rather than going via Heather or the receptionist, and she had numerous requests for appearances and advice.

Coming up, over and over again, was this term: The Scandinavian Way. Everyone was acting like she'd invented the light bulb, and she didn't want to claim credit for something she'd merely observed. She'd never meant to start a trend or to get famous.

As the train jostled her about, Keira could hardly believe what she was reading, or what was happening. She was touched and overwhelmed by it all.

And as if to make everything more emotional than it already was, a message came through on her phone from Milo. She didn't even hesitate before opening it.

Great article! So proud of you!

Keira grinned to herself. Not for making Milo proud, although she was glad he'd enjoyed her piece, but because for the first time after meeting a guy and breaking up, she didn't feel her heart sink when reading his text.

Quickly, she wrote back, *Thank you! Busy atm, but catch up soon.*

Then she rode the rest of the way to work, her mind spinning with excitement.

*

Keira entered the office to find it in a frenzy. The phone was ringing off the hook and people were dashing about all over the place. Elliot immediately came out of his office, grinning, and whisked Keira into the conference room before she had a chance to catch her breath.

She walked in and saw the room was full of people, all unfamiliar.

“Uh... hello,” she said, tentatively, as Elliot pulled a chair for her.

“Keira, so great to meet you,” a man with dark auburn hair said. “I’m Rick, your new publicist. This is Sally.” He gestured to a woman with thick curls and bright red lips sitting beside him. “She’s my assistant and will handle your timetable.”

“Nice to meet you,” Keira said, shaking each of their hands in turn. “And the rest of you guys?”

“The new editorial team!” Elliot beamed, throwing his arms wide.

“*Team?*” Keira asked. So far, Nina had been the editor of *Viatorum*, then as things had picked up she’d been given a group of interns to assist her, but nothing like this, nothing professional. Keira realized then that Nina wasn’t sitting around the table with the editorial team. “Where’s Nina?”

“At her desk,” Elliot said, simply, as though it were a bizarre question to ask.

“She’s still editor, isn’t she?” Keira asked. The thought of her friend being demoted because of her success sat uncomfortably with her.

“Of course,” Elliot said. “She’s editor of the *print* part of the magazine. Which now accounts for approximately ten percent of our sales. It’s all about the Internet team now, the only subscription model, the social media bite-sized articles. That’s what the new team will be handling from now on.”

Keira looked around at all the unfamiliar faces. It felt odd that Elliot hadn’t thought to promote any of the people they currently had in the office, or to have Nina oversee the online editing. It didn’t seem fair. She understood that Elliot would want the best and brightest money could afford, but she’d never have gotten to where she had if no one had taken a risk on her.

Rick cleared his throat then. “Shall we get down to business? Sally, can you give Keira the low-down on her publicity appearances?”

Sally seemed like an even more efficient version of Heather, if such a person could exist, because she appeared to have preempted Rick’s question and turned her attention to a neat notebook sitting in front of her.

“Breakfast New York, News 24, Daily Roundup, Good Morning USA, Helen & Phil In the Morning, Katie & Joe In the Evening...”

As she listened to Sally reel them off, Keira mind boggled. All these talk shows and new organizations wanted her on their shows? She started to feel sick with nerves.

“Are you good at press work?” Rick asked, once Sally was finally finished listing TV shows.

“I have no idea,” Keira told him. “I’ve never been on TV.”

“That’s fine,” Rick said in his no-nonsense business tone. “I’ll train you. Sally, book Keira onto Helen and Phil In the Morning for tomorrow. That’s a great teething show. The interviews are short and quite informal. And importantly, prerecorded. So it’s a win-win. We’ll move onto live once we’ve seen how you perform there, so Sally, get some afternoon slots lined up as well.”

Sally didn’t even waste a second. Her cell phone was up to her ear immediately, and within moments she was talking rapidly into it. Keira could hardly get her head around how quickly everything was moving. She looked over at Elliot, who was grinning like a Cheshire cat, clearly loving the sudden increase in pace and pressure. Unlike Keira, he thrived on this kind of stuff. But Keira couldn’t help but feel a bit like some kind of pawn in a game. She’d always felt like that with *Viatorum*, even when it had just been Elliot and Nina calling the shots. But now with this whole team of people scheduling her life it felt even worse.

“We’d better get to work on the training,” Rick said then, folding up his papers and standing.

“I have to leave at five tonight,” Keira suddenly blurted. “I have a shopping trip with my sister.” Everyone stopped and looked at her suspiciously.

“Uh, yes, of course,” Rick said, smoothing his jacket down.

Keira could tell immediately that they’d been expecting her to give up all her free time, that they hadn’t even given a second thought to what she wanted. They’d all just assumed she’d go with the flow, follow their demands and have no input of her own.

Rick looked at Sally. “Make sure everything winds down by five.”

Sally nodded.

With the meeting adjourned, the new editorial team rose to leave the conference room. Keira was about to leave when Elliot addressed her.

“Can I have a moment of your time, Keira? Privately?”

Keira looked at Rick, who seemed to be the person calling the shots these days.

“Of course,” he said, even more stiffly than when she’d asked to leave at five.

Everyone left the room and it was just Elliot and Keira left.

“What’s up?” she asked him.

“I know this is all a bit much,” Elliot began. “Your article has caused a stir.”

“Among the staff?”

“Oh, I don’t care about that,” Elliot said. “Jealousy can be a great motivator. No, a stir amongst advertisers.”

“Oh,” Keira said, a little confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean they’re willing to pay vast sums more to appear in *Viatorum* than they used to. I mean there’s a bidding war going on for advertising space in our next issue and on our website. We’re getting a lot of attention.”

“That’s great,” Keira said. “What’s that got to do with me?”

Elliot laughed. “You’re not very business savvy, are you, Keira?”

She shrugged. “There’s a reason I became a writer.”

“Good point.” He chuckled again. “Keira, I’m saying you’re bringing increased revenue into the company. So you deserve a reward.”

It began to sink in then. “You mean like a bonus?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper, then slid it across the glass table top to Keira.

She picked it up. It was a check. Keira read the sum.

“Five hundred dollars? Thanks, that’ll pay for my new furniture.”

Elliot frowned. “No, Keira. It’s five thousand dollars.”

Keira almost choked. She did a double take at the check. Indeed, the figure was five *thousand*, not five *hundred*.

“Wow. Well... I don’t know what to say. Thanks so much.”

Elliot nodded. “If you keep this up, Keira, there’ll be plenty more where that came from.”

Feeling triumphant, Keira folded the check and put it in her pocket. Maybe going viral wasn’t all bad. Though the thought of being on TV terrified her, the check in her pocket certainly went some way to make up for it.

Chapter six

The rest of the day was a blur for Keira. From interview practice with Rick and Sally (which felt more like interrogations), introductions to plucky new editorial staff whose names Keira forgot the moment she was told them, and back-to-back meetings, she didn't even get a lunch break, or a chance to speak to Nina.

As soon as five o'clock arrived, Keira was out the door and heading home. She still couldn't quite believe everything that was happening and her mind was a blur. Never in her life had she anticipated her writing career to take her in this direction. As she rode the subway home to her new apartment, it was with a sense of irony that she realized she hadn't actually written a single word all day.

It was only once she was back in her new, bare apartment that Keira got the chance to really breathe. Even the darkness caused by her complete lack of lamps was something of a relief, as it helped dull the pounding headache her busy day had induced.

She kicked off her shoes and rubbed her sore ankles, then rested her head against the back of her front door. She let her eyelids close down and drifted into an exhaustion-induced half-awake state.

She was still pressed against the front door when the bell beside her buzzed. She jerked back to consciousness, remembering she had plans to see Bryn. Plans after work had never been an issue before, but Keira's body was heavy and tired after the long day and she cursed herself for having made them in the first place.

She turned and opened the door to Bryn. Her sister was holding a plant in a vase.

"Housewarming gift!" Bryn exclaimed.

Keira smiled. "Come on in," she said, beckoning.

It was her sister's first time seeing the apartment. Bryn stepped inside and looked about her a little cautiously.

"Oh, it's very... cute," she commented, placing the plant onto the countertop.

Keira knew she was holding back from saying *tiny*, but at least it was a step in the right direction for Bryn to even hold her tongue. Knowing Bryn, she probably thought the place was a complete dump. She was trying to be nice, which, in itself, was a huge thing for Bryn!

"Wow, you have a view over Central Park," Bryn added, walking up to the window and gazing out.

"Just about," Keira replied.

"It's a great view," Bryn said with a nod.

At least that was truthful, Keira thought.

Bryn turned from the window then. "Right, we'd better get started," she said. She dumped her purse on the floor, then bent down and fished out a measuring tape from inside. She pulled the tape and held it up. "We'll need to measure everything. Walls. Windows. Everything."

Keira raised an eyebrow. "That's kind of thorough, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," Bryn replied. "I want this place to be as perfect as can be. I have a vision already. You know I love to decorate."

Keira laughed aloud. "That's fine. But remember this is *my* apartment, so don't go too crazy."

But there was no telling Bryn. She was already off with her measuring tape, humming to herself, a woman on a mission.

*

Once Bryn had gotten all the detailed measurements she felt necessary, they headed out in Bryn's car to a furniture store. Bryn waltzed in ahead of Keira, clearly in heaven as she perused the aisles. They started in the dining room section.

"I forgot to ask," Bryn said as they walked between the rows of tables and chair sets. "What's your budget for the new place?"

Keira thought of the check from Elliot, which was still in her pocket. If he really meant there was more to come, then she could theoretically blow the whole lot. But Keira was far too sensible for that. Besides, she was so used to the rug being pulled out from beneath her feet that she could never let herself get that comfortable. The last time she'd had any large sum of money it had all been wasted on Shane's canceled trip to New York City.

"Um, I have some savings," Keira said, opting for a half truth. "But I'd prefer not to use too much of it. Let's just keep it sensible."

"Sure," Bryn said, absent-mindedly, her attention already taken by a sleek glass bistro table and two matching glass and metal chairs. Clearly, Keira's budget wasn't at the forefront of Bryn's mind.

"Isn't this gorgeous?" Bryn said, turning to Keira with a big grin. "And it's the perfect dimensions for the window. Imagine looking out at your view, a glass of wine in hand."

Keira stuck her tongue out and grimaced. "That sounds more like you than me. It's a bit too modern for my taste. You know I like vintage."

"Just think, this *will* be vintage one day," Bryn cajoled. "Eventually."

Keira chuckled. "That's not how it works and you know it. I'd prefer a chair with an ottoman in the window, covered in a checkered blanket and mismatched floral cushions. Somewhere I can sit and read, not somewhere to quaff wine."

Now it was Bryn's turn to grimace. "This is why I'm the one designing the place. If you were left to your own devices you'd probably cover the walls in fabric, stick a ton of cushions on the floor, and call it a day."

Keira rolled her eyes at Bryn's over exaggerated vision.

"Come on, sis. I have this all worked out," Bryn continued. "And this table is absolutely perfect for my vision." She rested her hands on the glass table top. "It speaks to me. You have to get it."

Keira shook her head and let out a sigh. Shopping with Bryn was going to be a lot tougher than she'd expected.

Just then, a woman from the other end of the aisle approached them. She had an eager expression on her face. Keira's first instinct was that she was a salesperson paid solely on commission, about to tell her all about a fantastic deal she just couldn't miss out on. But the woman said something that threw Keira completely off kilter.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but are you Keira from *Viatorum*?" she asked.

Keira stared at her, shocked. Though she'd been recognized before in public, it had usually been while abroad. Something about it happening in her own neighborhood, while she was doing something as mundane as shopping, made it even more jarring.

"Yes, I am," she said, feeling the blush rise in her cheeks.

"I'm a huge fan," the woman gushed. "Would you mind if I took a picture?"

Keira looked at Bryn, who was grinning widely. Finally Keira shrugged. "I guess. Sure."

"I'll take it," Bryn offered without missing a beat. "Then you can be in it too."

The woman thanked her, then slung her arm around Keira's shoulders and pressed her cheek against Keira's for the shot. It was uncomfortably close and familiar and Keira felt very awkward.

"Can you sign my copy of *Viatorum*?" the woman added. "I have the old one before they changed the cover."

Keira did her best to hide the grimace, but it always stung when she was confronted with the image of her and Cristiano, in movie-star black-and-white, kissing on the rooftops of Paris.

Quickly, she scrawled her name across the magazine, obscuring part of her features in the process.

“Amazing, thank you,” the woman said. “I only came here for some new bath towels. My friends are going to be so jealous!”

She scurried away, leaving Keira facing Bryn awkwardly.

“Oh. My. Goodness,” Bryn said. “You are literally a superstar now.”

Keira rolled her eyes. “Hardly. A few people recognize me, that’s all.” She thought about her scheduled TV appearance the next morning. After that, a whole load more people would recognize her. If she’d had as much recognition from just the black-and-white image on the cover, it was only going to get worse once she appeared in full color on people’s breakfast TV.

“You look worried,” Bryn said, taking her arm. They started strolling along the aisles.

“It’s just that a lot is changing with work,” Keira said. “My career isn’t going where I thought it would.”

“Because you get to be on TV?” Bryn asked incredulously.

“I never said it was bad,” Keira corrected. “Just different. I mean, I’m quiet and bookish. You’re the loud, confident one. If either of us should be on TV, it should be you.”

Bryn made a pfft noise. “You’re ridiculous. Just go with the flow, sis. Enjoy the journey.”

They turned into the living room section, where the aisles were filled with couches.

“I’m trying,” Keira told her. “You know how stressed I get. How tightly wound I can be. Relaxing doesn’t come easy to me.”

“You’d relax more easily if you bought this delightful two-seater,” Bryn said, gesturing to a bright red velvet couch.

Keira laughed. “Absolutely not!”

Bryn just sighed. “You don’t understand my vision,” she said theatrically.

She looped arms with Keira again and they strolled onward.

“Do you really believe that stuff you wrote?” Bryn asked Keira as they went. “Your theory about love and not having strings attached? Being independent?”

Keira wondered if she was asking in relation to her recent engagement. Just as Keira had worked out that love didn’t have to mean the entangling of two lives into a single entity, Bryn had flipped her own style on its head in order to settle down.

“You used to think it,” Keira reminded her.

Bryn shrugged. “I know. But it’s a lonely way to be. I always envied what you had with Zach.”

This was news to Keira.

“You did?” she asked. “But you teased me relentlessly. Said I was old before my time.”

“I thought I had all the answers,” Bryn explained. “But really I was just scared of commitment. As much as I hate to admit it, our mom is right, about how her divorce put me off marriage. I didn’t want to rely on anyone because I saw what happened to her. But now I can see how great it is having a guy around, having someone to come home to, to rely on. This whole Scandinavian trend you’ve started seems so lonely to me. Too casual. Like, where’s the security?”

Keira was surprised to hear so much musing coming from Bryn. Her sister was more of a doer than a thinker, and it shocked her to hear how deeply she’d thought this through.

They made it to the lighting section. Bryn held her hand up to a crystal chandelier, the light making her ring sparkle.

“I want you to have this feeling too,” Bryn said to Keira. “I’m so happy.”

Keira’s initial thought was, *Who is this woman?* Her sister had changed so much in such a short space of time, it was enough to give her a headache. But overall, she was just glad to see her content.

“I’m happy for you,” Keira told her. “We just have different journeys. If I’d settled with Zach, I would never have had what I did with Shane. Without Shane, there’d have been no Cristiano, no Milo. All those relationships were important to me. I’d hate to have missed out on any of them.”

Even as she said it, she couldn’t help thinking of the ring Cristiano had pulled out when he’d proposed. A wave of loneliness crashed over her. She could have so easily settled with him. She could have chosen him then and there. But then what? She would never have met Milo, never have written the article on Scandinavia that was about to change her life. Everything happened for a reason. She was a firm believer of that. If any of the men she’d been with so far was one she should be with, the universe would give her some kind of sign.

“Okay, sis, I’ve got it!” Bryn exclaimed, breaking her from her reverie.

Keira looked up to see her sister standing by a beautiful writing bureau and stool. There was a banker’s lamp on it, and a little shelf attached for books. It even had a shallow drawer for pens. For once, Bryn had chosen right.

“That’s perfect,” Keira gushed.

She ran over to her sister and touched her fingertips to the gorgeous table.

“See?” Bryn said. “I told you. I have a vision. You just have to trust me.”

Keira laughed. “Fine. I give myself over to the Bryn process fully. Do your worst!”

Chapter seven

Two hours later, and two thousand dollars poorer, Keira arrived back home. Unleashing Bryn in a furniture store had perhaps not been the most sensible idea, but she'd been too tired to fight it and in the end, there was some relief that came with giving up control. The real downside of the shopping trip was that Keira would have to wait for most of the larger items to be delivered, which meant she still had no couch, no bed, and no writing desk. All they'd been able to take home with them were some lamps, bedding sets, and a DIY tool kit complete with hammer and screwdrivers that Bryn insisted she own now that she was independent.

As Keira emptied the contents of her bags onto the counter, she realized that her DIY set could be put to immediate use. She still had the painting Milo had gifted her for Christmas in her case. She hurried to it now and pulled out on the clothes resting on top. As she did, she noticed the little black box, recalling the beautiful necklace Milo had bought her for the specific purpose of not forgetting about him. She hadn't worn it since returning to New York City, and mused on the reason why. She couldn't put her finger on it. For some reason, it just didn't feel right to her, to have this memento of a prior relationship hanging around her neck.

She shook the thoughts and continued searching for the painting. She had the perfect place to hang it; just above where her new writing desk would go once it was delivered.

Once she'd found it, she hurried back into the living area and fetched her new tool kit. It was the first time she'd actually done any DIY, and though nerve-racking, it felt really good to wield a hammer. Bashing a nail into the wall was also very cathartic. She could certainly get used to this independence thing!

With the nail in place, Keira hung the painting and stepped back to admire it. It was such an inspiring image, reminding her of the wonderful Christmas she'd had in Sweden. At once, she wished she could be back there, back where things were calm and relaxed. Back to a time before all the craziness had begun.

Just to the right of the painting was the large window with its view over New York City. It couldn't have been a greater contrast; the serenity of Sweden with the business of New York. And the incongruity of how lonely the picture looked when her time in Sweden had been anything but, yet how full New York City appeared from her window when she was completely alone within it.

She felt a strong urge to call Milo then, but remembered that she had homework; prepping for tomorrow morning's television appearance. It was going to be a very early start – she was needed in makeup at six a.m. – so there'd be no time to practice Rick's advice in the morning. Though her segment was prerecorded, it still had to be done in time for the early slot on the show.

She headed into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror on the cabinet. Rick had advised her to practice her "natural" smile, which was as paradoxical as it was impossible. Every time she attempted to smile it looked forced, bordering on manic. He would not be pleased with her at all.

Then she said some of her pre-prepared lines. Even though she'd written them herself, they sounded fake in her voice. Too rehearsed. Too unnatural.

She sighed. This was the problem that no one had envisioned. Keira was only good with words when she wrote them down, not when she produced them from her mouth! She was going to make a fool of herself tomorrow, she could just tell.

She heard her phone ping in the other room. Relieved to get a break from the strained practice, she headed out into the living room and retrieved her phone from her purse. She was expecting Bryn or Mallory. But the name on her screen took her by complete surprise. Cristiano.

Heart hammering, Keira opened the message.

I read your article. It's great. Don't forget me when you're famous. I'm always thinking of you.

Keira blinked, stunned. She had no idea what to reply, if, indeed, she should reply anything. Things with Cristiano had soured. She hadn't expected to hear from him ever again. And for him to write to her in relation to an article she'd written about her rebound from him made it even stranger. Cristiano's jealous streak had been a real issue in their short-lived relationship. Maybe he was trying to prove that he was above it.

Whatever his reasoning, Keira wasn't yet ready to handle it, or process it. There was too much going on for her to even devote an ounce of energy to Cristiano. She put her phone away and went back into the bathroom to resume her strained smiling practice.

*

Keira arrived at the office the next morning before the sun had even risen. She felt awful. Sleeping on just a mattress was doing her no good at all, and waking up at five a.m. had felt like hell. Her coffee stall guy hadn't even opened yet, so she'd not even had a chance for a caffeine fix.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.