

Prologue:

Sophia

(Six months ago)

The full moon illuminates the beach where Iris, Mia, Chloe, and I stand barefoot around a fire. We each hold a box filled with souvenirs and handwritten notes.

We all wear wedding dresses.

I'm joyful because my best friends, three women I love and admire deeply, are here with me after a decade apart.

I'm heartbroken because one of them is in danger of dying.

"We're here tonight to make a commitment to ourselves," Chloe begins, her shoulders back, her head held high. The crashing waves serve as a white noise soundtrack for her soothing voice. "We've allowed the world to drag us into its senselessness. We've lost touch with who we really are, and now we're reclaiming control of our lives."

It started as a joke. Last year, with no boyfriend in sight, Iris bought a wedding dress from Mia's first fashion show. She decided to wear it tonight, on the eve of starting treatment, "just in case she never had a chance later on." She declared it was time she stopped searching for the love that never came and treated herself to a wedding party.

I, the incurable romantic, proposed that we three join her wearing bridesmaids' dresses. Chloe, the eternal spiritual seeker, insisted we all wear wedding dresses and make it a ceremony of self-commitment—each one of us marrying *ourselves*. Then Mia, the unstoppable woman, made it happen; after a few phone calls to designer friends, she produced three wedding dresses from thin air and, in a single afternoon, tailored them to fit us.

I still can't believe how perfectly my dress suits my personality—Mia knows me so well. Not even the extravagant gown I tried months ago, when I considered marrying my ex, came close. This ethereal design of nostalgic lace and gauze reminds me both of fairy-tale princesses and confectioners' sugar. The sweetheart neckline, the capped sleeves, the embroidered bodice, the full skirt are like me: classic (old-fashioned, some would say). There must be something magical about it because I don't feel cold despite the night breeze.

Chloe shines beautifully in her mermaid dress, its fluted sleeves lending a bohemian air that matches her style. As the ocean breeze tosses her long dark hair, she appears to me as a white-magic witch. “In our past, we thought we needed another person to complete us,” she goes on. “We gave up who we are, following a hunger for love. No more. Today we promise to be our own source of love. We promise to cherish and respect ourselves, and never again allow someone into our lives who doesn’t treat us as well as we deserve.”

Next, we burn our lists of grievances in the fire, every regret from the past that we’re willing to release. And, boy, all four of us have them.

This week has been an intense string of venting and confessions, as we catch each other up on the last decade of our lives. It took Iris’ breast cancer diagnosis to reunite us again—gosh, it’s so unfair! She’s only thirty-two! The years have also been life changing for the rest of us. Chloe faced serious professional dilemmas. Mia severed a toxic relationship and ended her modeling career.

And me? I lost my last living relative, the aunt who raised me; the loss brought back tons of memories from the parents I lost in childhood. Along with the last straw of Iris’ diagnosis a month ago, it made me reevaluate my life and break my engagement.

It’s my turn to read my list of grievances. The orange glow of the fire is barely enough to break the pitch darkness, but I’ve memorized these lines and can easily say them aloud. “I’ve never really *lived*,” I begin, and my voice cracks instantly. At once, Mia wraps her arms around me in support. She used to say those words to me when we were dorm roommates, trying to inspire me to be more daring.

Soothed by her embrace, I go on. “I’ve allowed fear to control my life. I’ve taken no risks and had no adventures. I’ve spent my life being dragged by situations, never planning ahead, never taking control.”

Mia frees me from her embrace and I have to stop to gather myself. After this weeklong retreat, seeing my story through the loving eyes of my best friends from college, I have a better perspective. I can’t condemn myself for being afraid of change when I faced senseless loss at such a young age. No wonder I’ve felt fragile all my life, since age twelve, the world has sold me the identity of powerlessness.

I resume reading. “I once saw true love; I saw it in my parents. Yet I settled for less and came close to marrying the wrong man. I will never again forget what I want.” I throw the page into the crackling fire and see it blacken, crinkle, and be consumed, disappearing from my sight.

After the four of us have read and burned our grievances, we take turns to read aloud the vows of commitment to ourselves.

“I, Sophia, promise you, Sophia, that I’ll always listen to your voice and honor your instincts. I’ll never again allow anyone to ignore you or bully you. Especially not myself.”

I can’t believe I’ve managed to finish the ceremony without sobbing. Surprisingly, the person crying the most today is Mia, the one who brags about being tough and worldly. Iris, precisely the one who should be terrified, dreading the start of her chemotherapy tomorrow, seems the most relaxed of all.

Iris’ treatment will take roughly twelve months, with an interruption in between for surgery, and we’ve decided to make it a time of introspection. We’ve taken the plan from her most recent book, *The Self-Vow*. The first month will be an intense fast from anything that distracts us from our real essence—even the Internet! We’ve all decided to take “The Ultimate Challenge,” the extreme version of the program, which includes celibacy for a whole year.

Chloe and Iris claim that releasing those distractions will create space in our lives to attract good things. To be honest, I’m not doing it for that. A childish, superstitious part of me believes that by depriving myself I’m contributing to Iris’ cure.

As the last step of our ceremony, Chloe invites us to write in the sand our dream and our cause for this year. Holding up my skirt to keep it clean, I use my finger to write my cause.

“I want Iris to live.”

I hesitate for a moment before I move on to my dream. I scribble, “I want to find the love my parents had.”

Stepping back, I watch the waves wash away the words as a symbol of surrendering those wishes into the universe.

Chapter 1

Trevor.

The Louvre museum is torture.

Call me an uncultured swine if you wish. I'm standing in a corner of the museum staring at yet another oil on canvas, *The Turkish Bath*, by some French artist. This painting is supposed to be some form of glorious art piece—but I can't get past the fact that it's a bunch of naked women.

The curvy ladies lounging around in their birthday suits haven't missed a meal. They unapologetically flaunt voluptuous hips, generous behinds, and round, soft bellies—and I'm *fine* with that. What surprises me is how little is left to the imagination. There's not even a silky drape in a strategic location, like on most statues I've seen today. Nope. There must be two dozen female bodies in this painting and they're all glaringly exposed (1).

"Don't get me wrong; I'm not a puritan by any means," I complain over Bluetooth to my cousin, Dr. Maxwell Steele, who's calling from Chicago. "But was every artist in the old times a perv? What's up with all the naked people?"

Maxwell's laughter on the other side of the phone call is the only brightness I've experienced this gray Paris day. "I guess back then no one had the Internet or *Playboy* magazines," he observes.

"Yeah! With women walking around with skirts long enough to cover their toes, if men wanted to see anything interesting, they had to get Michelangelo to paint them a ceiling."

Max laughs again.

After an entire morning of this, I need a cold shower. Heck, I needed a cold shower even before coming here. The past few weeks have been quite slow in female companionship.

I stroll down the crowded exposition halls, looking for my way out, often stumbling against people as I can't keep my eyes off the incredibly high, carved and painted ceilings—no two of them alike. (2, 3) In my opinion, the building housing the Louvre is more impressive than any art I've seen today. (4)

Why am I at the Louvre today? Well, it's actually Maxwell's fault. Why am I in Paris? In Europe? It's a long story. "Tell me again, Max, why do you nag me so hard to visit these art museums?" I ask.

"Because you can't live in Europe for a whole year and not visit at least one culturally enlightening site. Pubs don't count, you know."

I find a wide marble staircase and head down, seeking some food and hopefully a place to sit for a minute before heading home. After a morning getting lost in these labyrinths, my eyes and aching feet need a break.

"I appreciate a dose of culture," I tell Max as I follow the signs to a cafeteria. "But after the millionth room packed with white marble statues, it all starts running together."

"Hey, on another topic..." Max's tone changes slightly and a gut feeling tells me what he's about to say. "Uncle Craig called me yesterday."

Craig Lawson, aka my father. The first "Lawson" in Lawson, Collin and Lawson.

"Did he torture my whereabouts out of you?"

"No, he tried to bribe them out of me. But give the man a break. He has surprised me with his understanding."

I scoff at the word understanding. "Dad's convinced I've lost my marbles, as is everyone else at the firm and all my friends in the US."

"Can you blame them?"

No, I can't. Why else would a successful lawyer in New York City, making money faster than he can spend it, suddenly announce he was dropping out of his firm and taking a sabbatical year?

"Are you doing okay?" That's Dr. Maxwell Steele's code for, *Do you need me to overnight you a shitload of antidepressants?*

"I'm okay." It's not untrue, I haven't had the nightmares or disabling headaches for weeks. I've come a long way from the man who arrived here, walking around like a zombie, unable to feel any enthusiasm. Who cares if I'm still numb in front of the most beautiful sights? Who cares if I disgust myself a little because the deepest human interaction I've had in months is picking up strangers for hookups?

"Well, if you need anything, I'm a Skype call away."

I finally spot the café and head in that direction. Fortunately, this time in Europe has allowed me to relearn how to feel pleasure through my taste buds—at least a few minutes at a time. “I’m fine, man. Really. I’m going to get some fine Parisian coffee and pastries and ruminate on all this culturally enlightening torture you’ve put me through today.”

Max’s laughter drifts over the phone. “Go ahead. But, seriously, Trevor, I’m here if you need me.”

We disconnect the call and I pause in front of the glass door. Max is the only person in the States I’ve kept in touch with and talking to him always gets me thinking. Three more months before my sabbatical is over and I’m still trying to figure out what to do with my life.

In a way, you could say I’m on this trip looking for my future.

I push the glass doors open and step into the café. There’s no way this can be the main eating venue here. It’s mostly a long counter offering pastries, drinks, and sandwiches. Like every corner of this damn museum, it’s crowded and there’s nowhere to sit.

On the counter, next to the cashier, a sign in French announces the credit card machine is out of service, but no one seems to notice it. I can tell the lady’s patience is wearing thin from repeating the explanation.

I’m ready with my bills when she rings up my ridiculously expensive cappuccino and baguette ham sandwich. “*C’est ton jour de chance.*” Proud of my improved fluency, I address her in French. “It’s your lucky day; I rarely carry cash.” As I hand her the euros, I can’t help the reflexive flirty twinkle and wink.

She smiles back at me, eyeing me with appreciation. She’s what, maybe fifty? Like most French women, she’s slender and better preserved than many younger American women. Maybe I should widen my criteria and hit on her. Because, God, I need some.

I stow my change into my money belt under my clothes and walk away from the counter. The place has no real chairs, but a few high seats aligned in front of flimsy tables outside the café—backless and uncomfortable, to discourage people from lingering. As I settle onto one and sip my cappuccino, I scan the area for American tourists. Even with my improving language skills, I still find French women a little intimidating—too well-

dressed, too put-together. Maybe now, as spring warms up and tourists return, I'll have a better chance of getting lucky again.

“You're American, aren't you?”

The petite brunette with a pixie haircut beams at me and I return my best smile. Usually I'm the one who starts with that opening line, wiggling myself into conversation. I nod, and she sits down.

I extend my hand. “Hi, I'm Trevor. From New York.”

“I'm Chrissie, from San Francisco.” She shakes it.

Perfectly far away. No need to try to keep in touch after we hook up.

And then she turns around and gestures to some dude to come over. “And this is my husband, Luke.”

My enthusiasm deflates.

She continues, “I was just telling Luke you're too tall and well-built to be a French man, but dress too well to be an American tourist.”

I suppress a smirk at her frankness. It's true, the average French man is small-boned, and the average American tourist dresses like a slob. Since arriving here, I've almost unconsciously adopted the Paris costume of dark-colored dress clothes with a fitted jacket or trench coat.

She continues, “So, you're an American who lives in Paris?”

“Kind of,” I answer.

“We were hoping you could give us some recommendations for where to eat. Food is so expensive here!”

I sigh. Whenever I take the time to orient people about the city, I usually do it with secondary intentions; it's my way to pick up women. But the possessive arm the big guy wraps around this gal's waist announces I won't get anything back for my time and effort.

But it's okay.

I unfold her huge city map and circle my favorites places to eat, then shift into mentor mode and start sharing my pearls of wisdom about the city. “Don't waste money on taxis, the Metro and RER train systems are excellent and no harder to manage than the New York subway—just keep an eye on the news for the frequent strikes. The closer you

are to attractions, the more expensive food gets; pack some bread and cheese for a lunch picnic in one of the gardens and save your money for dinners.”

They seem like a nice couple and grateful for my advice. At the end of my crash course, Chrissie kisses Luke on the cheek and heads for the restrooms. For some reason the simple gesture makes my chest a bit heavy. Public expressions of affection are not something I saw much while growing up.

Well, neither were private ones.

As expected for the long restroom lines, she takes forever to return and Luke and I have plenty of time to bond. We chat about the coincidence that we both went to college in Connecticut—he went to Trinity, and I went to Yale—when I recognize the book next to their maps and pick it up. It’s *The Self-Vow*, by Iris Kent.

It can’t be. That stupid book is everywhere lately. “Dude, please don’t tell me you’re letting your woman read this crap!”

He shrugs. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Do you know this author is telling women to become celibate?”

“Nah, it’s not like that.” He points at some summary on the back cover. “It starts with a month of ‘fasting,’ to re-boot your life. No alcohol, tobacco, or drugs; zero sweets or junk food; no Internet and *optionally*, no sex. Then, you re-introduce one thing every month in the order of your choice.”

“And that’s supposed to make sense because...” I gesture for him to complete the sentence. I’ve never been into self-denial.

“I don’t know. I guess after not having had something for a while, having it again feels awesome?”

I stare at him blankly. “So, basically, it’s like hitting yourself on the head with a hammer because of how good it feels when you stop doing it?”

“No, it’s cleansing the palate. And you know what the celibacy part is about, don’t you?” He lowers his voice, “Sex is never steamier than when it’s forbidden. Women who had no libido yesterday can’t wait to do it if it’s taken off the table. I’ve heard everyone who tries to go on the sex fast ends up dropping that one before the month is over—and loving it.”

We snicker in complicity. Maybe I should take a second look at that book. Until now I've assumed it's just another craze, like the compulsion to leave locks on the bridges that overtook Europe in the last decade.

"Well," I add, "this ridiculous book has become such a phenomenon every woman I've talked to lately is reading it. One of my pickup phrases now is to tell women, 'I've taken the self-vow of celibacy,' to get their attention. Then, I joke, 'I've been celibate for three days and it's killing me. Want to help me break the vow?'"

Luke laughs and offers me a fist bump. "You dog. Genius way to start a conversation about sex with a stranger! Then if she gets offended, it was all a joke, right?"

He turns to the last page of the book. From a plastic sleeve on the inside of the back cover, he pulls out a thin thread bracelet, then extends it to me. "Here. Put this on."

Curious, I study the bright orange and green woven thread bracelet as I slide it onto my wrist. It looks like something a surfer would wear—not bad. "What's this?"

"The hardcover edition comes with this souvenir. If you wear it, that means you've decided to take 'The Ultimate Challenge.' Chrissie won't be taking it."

"What's the ultimate challenge?"

"In exchange for a noble cause—world peace, ceasing hunger, finding a cure for cancer—you agree to become celibate for a year."

I shoot him a dirty look and whip the bracelet off my wrist. "Very funny. No thank you." Holding the band in my palm, I try to fathom who'd be delusional enough to go for something like that.

Guffawing, Luke clasps my wrist and slides the bracelet back on. "I'm serious, dude. The moment you say you're giving up sex, opportunities will rain. It's always like that." He looks over his shoulder and whispers, "Everyone knows that wearing the bracelet is a cry for help. 'Please, someone help me break this vow!' If you ever see a woman wearing it, it's a desperate attempt to get somebody to seduce her."

I consider his words, then slant him a glare. "That's borderline creepy; are you a shrink or something?" I unwrap my baguette sandwich, realizing I'm hungrier than I thought and this will barely hold me until I make it home. "Besides, why do you have so much interest in that stupid book? You have a woman already."

He chuckles. “That’s exactly why, man. Hearing about so many people hungering for love makes me never take my luck for granted.” The amusement vanishes from his eyes. “Once, not too long ago, I was also one of those pathetic guys out there, looking for a stranger to hook up with and never see again.”

Ouch. This dude seems to forget that I *currently* happen to be one of those pathetic guys.

As if he’d read my mind, a flash of guilt crosses his expression. He pats my back with a little too much force. “I hope someday you get to see it for yourself, my friend. Finding the right woman is like having lived in the desert and moving next to a river.”

I’m not sure it’s healthy to compare anyone to drinking water, or any other item indispensable to life. People are unreliable by nature and it isn’t safe to depend on anyone in particular.

I grasp for some joke about being whipped to tease Luke. But before I come up with one, his eyes glaze and a grin stretches his mouth; Chrissie is returning from the restroom. He springs from his chair to greet her with a long kiss and my initial intention of teasing him turns into envy for his luck.

Damn it, maybe this life of freedom has its downsides.

Soon, the couple says goodbye. We don’t exchange numbers, or even last names, and I know that, just as with so many other travelers I’ve encountered, chances are I’ll never see them again.

I take my time finishing my sandwich, planning to head home and give up on proving my refinement to Maxwell. I pick up my museum map and underneath lies Chrissie’s book, forgotten on the table.

I lift my eyes, but there’s no sign of them anymore. I remember Chrissie mentioned something about going to see Canova’s *Eros and Psyche* statue next, so I check its location on my map and head to the Denon area. Maybe I can still catch up with them to return their book.

Chapter 2

Sophia.

The Louvre is my heaven.

I've been at this museum only two hours and I've already cried four times. I could kiss each marvelous painting and hug every gorgeous marble statue. I can't believe I'm staring at the masterpieces I've only seen in photographs all my life.

Right now, I'm captivated by one of the small areas between exhibit halls. Gosh, as if the amazing art weren't enough, this building itself is stunning! Multicolored marble floors; magnificent carved, vaulted ceilings, and neoclassical columns between the high, arched windows advertise this was a palace long before becoming a museum. (5)

I lower my camera lens to capture the exquisite details at my feet when someone steps near me.

"Are you taking a picture of the *floor*?" (6) The brunette with a pixie cut has such a contagious grin I don't feel criticized by the comment.

"Why yes!" I answer. "Have you ever seen such beautiful marble?" I lift my eyes and wave my hand around me. "Every inch of this place is divine! I could spend a whole day just looking at the building... And that doesn't begin to cover my fascination with the art itself!"

"You're so enthusiastic about it I want to hire you as a tour guide!" She offers me a handshake which I accept. "I'm Chrissie."

"I'm Sophia. But I'd be a lousy tour guide, it's my first time in the city, and I just arrived last night."

"Wow!" She titters. "You seriously must love art to be here through the jet lag!"

"I *adore* the Louvre. It's linked to the best memories of my childhood."

She shoots me a puzzled look. "I thought you said this was your first time in Paris."

Yep, I must sound like a crazy lady right now. How can I have a memory of the Louvre if this is the first time in my life I've come to Paris, and to Europe?

I hang my camera strap over my shoulder. It's much heavier than a cell phone, but this amazing art deserves my best effort as a photographer. "Like me, my father taught art history," I explain. "When I was growing up, he spent hours sitting with me, browsing Louvre guides, telling me stories about all the artists."

It's true. Classical art became my way to bond with my father. And remembering my parents is the reason for this trip.

You could say I'm here looking for my past.

"Oh, you're a history teacher; that explains your interest in old art," Chrissie comments as we stroll together.

I catch glimpses of splendid artwork from the corner of my eye. I wish so much Iris were here with me; soaking up all this beauty has to be good for her health. "I'm also interested in art because my hobby is painting."

"Really?" Chrissie gives me an appreciative once-over. "What type of painting?"

"Mostly oil landscapes and still life, and I also occasionally draw charcoal portraits. But don't ask me anything about that, please. After a couple of hours in this place, I feel embarrassed to ever show one of my paintings in public again."

"Are you traveling alone?"

My answer sounds surreal even to me. "Yes. It's my first time in Europe and I'm trying to figure out things all by myself."

Did I really just say that? How on earth did I end up here? Me, the woman who's never had the head to be organized. Me, the woman who's always let things happen to her instead of taking control and making things occur. I'm definitely trying to become a different person.

"Where are you staying?" Chrissie asks.

I don't know why I'm opening up like this to a stranger. Maybe it's the brain fog that comes with jet lag. Or maybe it's because Chrissie has one of those warm smiles that tricks you into thinking you've met before. "At a Hilton. But I'll only be here for a week. I'm supposed to head for the Alps after that." I omit the part that I'm not even sure where in the Alps yet, and also that I still haven't tracked down the lady I'm hoping to visit. If I don't locate her, I'll be in deep trouble. I guess I still have a long way to go before becoming organized.

"We're staying at the cutest studio you'll ever see," she says. "Everything is so damn cute around here!"

"*We*?" I ask the question with my eyes.

“I’m on my honeymoon,” she explains. And as if her words summoned him, a tall guy who resembles a football quarterback approaches and hugs her from behind, planting a kiss on her cheek.

I resist my urge to say, “Aww!”

Me, the eternal romantic.

“I’m tired, babe,” he says, without making an effort to introduce himself to me.

“Haven’t we had enough art for one day?”

She pecks him on the lips. “Okay, love. Thanks for coming, even if this wasn’t your thing.” She kisses him again and I choke up.

That glow of adoration in his eyes, and that unintended gloat of pride in her face when gazing at him is something I grew up watching. It’s amazing that in the past few years I allowed myself to forget it, to forget what real love is.

My parents are my proof that soul mates exist. And that’s why I had to break my engagement with George.

Chrissie remembers to introduce me to her man, Luke, before they say goodbye and stroll away holding hands.

I wander to the next room while checking my museum map. I couldn’t figure out that handheld video game they call the electronic guide. When I headed here, I was looking for something, but I can’t remember what. That has been my morning so far. I follow my map, searching for a masterpiece I’ve always wanted to see—the Mona Lisa, The Venus de Milo, The Winged Victory—and on the way there, I keep getting sidetracked by other equally entrancing works.

As I enter the room, a gasp escapes me and my whole skin fills with goose bumps. This is what I’ve been searching for. It’s my favorite statue in the world: Canova’s *Eros and Psyche*. The winged god of love waking up the mortal Psyche with a kiss. (7-9)

Tears slide down my cheeks again as I take in the stunning white-marble statue. The artist is so majestically talented you can see the sleepiness in Psyche’s eyes and the love in his. I used to think Eros was an angel until my father explained the story. Eros—or Cupid—accidentally struck himself with the arrow of love and fell for Psyche. After she inhaled the fumes of Aphrodite’s beauty potion and died, Eros rushed to revive her with a love arrow and a kiss.

I wish I were carrying my sketchbook and charcoal pencil to draw the statue, but I settle for second best. I sit on the wood and black leather bench against the window, grab my journal from my bag, and scribble the emotions the statue brings to me. The adoration in his eyes, the gentleness he shows in his embrace. The way her arms curve back to hold his face.

That's what I long for some day. Maybe I've spent my life sleepwalking and I need to wake up. And maybe that awakening could come from love. Real love, like the kind my parents had.

Then doubt assails me. I want to believe love exists, and I saw it in my parents, but it has been so long. What if it was a mirage? Or what if it's a rare privilege only a few mortals can achieve?

I stow my journal and rise from the bench. Iris needs to see this—she'll be delighted. I grab my camera and snap a few shots from different angles. Then, I step back, trying to absorb the essence of the masterpiece into my soul.

“That *is* a beautiful statue.”

I startle at the masculine voice behind me. Are Chrissie and Luke back? When I turn around I confirm that the man studying me is someone I've never seen before.

Because if I had, I'd remember him.

The stranger in front of me makes the god in the statue look ordinary by comparison. He's tall and shows none of Eros' slender fragility. The dark jacket he wears conceals his arm muscles but does nothing to hide his wide shoulders. His sandy hair is in need of a trim. His thin lips and straight nose carry a faint similarity to Eros, but a strong jaw, covered by faint stubble, ends the likeliness. Curiosity and approval mix in his green-hazel eyes as he studies me.

A small-town girl in a big city, I immediately raise my guard. Many friends from my hometown in Indiana warned me that a woman traveling alone has to be careful with scammers, robbers, and rapists. This man is too well-groomed to be a robber. And he's so good-looking I somehow doubt he'd need to resort to being a rapist. That leaves the scammer option.

“You're American, aren't you?”

His deep voice reaches me again and near-panic possesses me. To hell with the chance of him being a scammer. He's hot—and that's worse. During the months I've been alone, no man has made me doubt my decision to take the self-vow of celibacy. But this stranger is getting my attention in an alarming way.

"Sorry, don't you speak English?" When I don't answer, he switches to French. "*Parlez-vous francais, mademoiselle?*"

I must look like an idiot, staring at him. All I can manage is to shrug and shake my head, pretending I haven't understood either language.

And then he switches to Spanish. "*Habla español, señorita?*" Then to Italian. "*Parla Italiano?*"

A trick my friend Chloe taught me to get rid of panhandlers and pushy street merchants returns to my mind. In a loud, clear tone, I bust out the only words I know in Serbo-Croatian. "*Drago mi je da smo se upoznali.*"

That actually means "nice to meet you," but it does the trick. A flash of confusion crosses the handsome stranger's features and I take advantage of the moment to dash away.

Chapter 3

Trevor

I must have a vein of masochism, because I end up staying another hour at the Louvre. Maybe this museum is like the slot machines in casinos. I read once that they're so addictive because they only reward you once in a blue moon, as opposed to a soda machine, which rewards you every time you feed it money.

Like a slot machine paying out the elusive jackpot on my pull, the Canova statue got me hooked and kept me hoping for more. I've never considered myself a sensitive man, but there was something captivating in the plain sheer beauty of the white marble figures. I can only imagine the strength it took to chip away the marble block, and the skills required to shape it.

Too bad the cute, flaxen-haired girl admiring the sculpture spoke no English; that would've been the first time my pickup line was sincere. What a blissful expression she had! Tears in her eyes, that glow of awe and joy in her face... I can't remember the last time I felt that enthusiastic about something.

And maybe she wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, but she deserved a second look, with those big blue eyes and that soft, curvy body—better resembling the statues I've seen today, depicting real women, than anorexic models in modern magazines.

After the Eros and Psyche statue I continued wandering through the exhibits searching for another piece that would impress me like that and looking for Chrissie and Luke to return their book.

I also held on to a faint hope I might run into Cute Blonde again. Could I find a way to communicate, to test the waters with her? Sign language? Google translate?

Giving up on all three goals, I head back to the cafeteria to leave the book with the cashier. Maybe Chrissie will return there sometime, looking for it.

The moment I enter, my eyes collide with none other than Cute Blonde. She's at the front of the line trying to pay for a coffee and a bagel.

And she's speaking English. Fluently.

The cranky cashier is giving her the stink eye, shaking her head and pointing at the sign announcing the credit card machine is broken.

"Pa'd card de credit aujourd'hui, madamme." The cashier huffs with a frown.

“I’m sorry, miss. I don’t speak French.”

I have a strong suspicion that the cashier *does* speak English but just happens to be in a pissy mood and doesn’t feel like helping Cute Blonde.

Cute Blonde gets at last what the sign means. “I’m so sorry. I already took a bite of my bagel and can’t return it. But I don’t have any cash with me.”

The cashier gesticulates impatiently, asking her to surrender her food and go find an ATM. Of course, she speaks in fast French and Cute Blonde is getting even cuter from the look of complete bewilderment on her face.

On impulse, I bypass the restless line and extend a bill to the cashier asking her in French to add a croissant for me. “You must be having a hard day today,” I add in the same language, and she grunts with an eye roll, but her begrudging smile hints that she’s thankful for the acknowledgment.

She hands me my change as well as my croissant in a paper bag, then snaps her fingers at Cute Blonde to let her know she’s holding up the line. “*Bouge-toi! Bouge-toi!*”

When Cute Blonde fails to move fast enough, I place my hand on the small of her back and guide her out. She focuses on me, and the sudden rush of color to her pale cheeks betrays she remembers me. She’s trying to juggle her coffee cup, bagel, museum map, and the wallet and card she still holds from her failed transaction. All while carrying a large bag and a camera slung from her shoulder.

I stow my croissant inside the souvenir shopping bag that holds the book and my maps and loop the bag through my arm to free my hands. “Can I help you carry any of that?” When she hesitates, I add with a simper, “Too late now; I already know you do speak English.”

She blushes again and avoids my eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to shut you down back there. It’s my first time traveling internationally, and I’ve been warned to mistrust all strangers.” She finally meets my gaze and mumbles, “Thank you. If you help me find an ATM, I’ll be happy to pay you back.”

I wave her off. “How about instead you tell me your name? Mine is Trevor.”

“I’m Sophia.” She tries to shake my hand but she’s carrying too much. She glances at the backless seats and tables, all occupied. “Sitting space is at a premium here, isn’t it?”

I help her carry some of her things and gesture for her to follow me to a space against the wall. There, she consolidates her load and I lay our museum and metro maps on the floor so she can sit on them. “Here. There are few things better in the world than a picnic in a famous place where you can people-watch.”

I debate whether to take a seat next to her, but she’s still giving me the cautious look. Since I don’t want to come across as pushy, I remain standing.

“Thank you,” she repeats. “You’re very kind and I shouldn’t have been rude to you.”

Despite her words, her tight, hunched shoulders and wary eyes beg me to leave. Time to go. “Well, enjoy the rest of your visit, Sophia.”

I’m about to walk away when curiosity gets the best of me. “But before I leave, I was wondering.” I almost say *never mind*, but decide to go for it. “You seemed to be getting much more than me from that Canova statue. Can I ask what moved you so much?”

Her face lights up and her shoulders relax. “It’s one of my favorite statues in the world. I love everything about it.”

She launches into an eloquent description of the mythological story behind the sculpture that sparks my curiosity, so I open the pictures I took with my cell phone after she left. On my phone screen, she points at details I would’ve never noticed by myself. How Psyche’s arms form a frame for their faces. How the feathers on Eros’ extended wings are so finely carved, you can guess their transparency. (6) Before I know it, I’m sitting on the floor next to her studying the photos. Yes, I’m also doing it as a way of flirting, shooting to see what happens. But I don’t have to work hard to sound interested, because I am.

We arrive at the end of my photo stream and the wall comes back up. I can feel her tensing as she takes the first sip of her coffee.

“Wow!” she exclaims. “This coffee is amazing!”

I can’t help smiling. “Of course it is. You’re in Paris now, honey. They don’t serve Folgers here.”

“I’ve heard coffee is better in Europe, but I thought it couldn’t be so different.”

I snicker, moved by her naivete. “That’s like trying to compare American ice cream to French *glace* or Italian gelato. Or like comparing the inflated, tasteless dough they sell in America to a real croissant.”

“It’s not the same?”

I can’t believe her. This woman is like a virgin of European pleasures. “Oh, dear, you’re in for a big treat!” I eye her bagel. “Which leads me to ask, how come you’re buying a *bagel* in *Paris*? Everyone knows you haven’t arrived here until you have a croissant.” I search my souvenir bag, removing the book in the process, and pull out my croissant, still wrapped in a paper bag and a napkin. “Here. You have to take a bite.”

“No, thank you.” She waves a hand. “I’m fine with—”

“Uh-uh, I insist,” I interrupt, breaking off a piece by holding it with the napkin. “You’ve been sold a misrepresentation of croissants all your life.”

In a flirty move, I shove the little piece in her mouth and she has no choice but to chew.

And then a transformation occurs. As she chews the bread, she moans in pleasure; her eyes roll back before she closes them; her face transfigures to the image of ecstasy.

“Oh my God! This is unbelievable!” she mutters. “The crispy exterior, the incredibly inner softness. The buttery explosion of flavor in my mouth!” She slowly licks her lips, and a sudden restlessness invades me—heat flooding me below the belt.

Damn it. If that’s the face she makes for a bite of croissant, I’m dying to see her having sex.

Suddenly overheated, I remove my black jacket, getting down to my dark gray T-shirt. “I can’t wait to see you have your first French—real—crepe or quiche.”

Her eyes dart away from my biceps; she was totally checking me out. I’m glad I’ve kept that outrageous gym membership going. But soon her guarded posture returns. “I… I’d better go.”

She rushes to rise from the floor and I imitate her. When I stand up, Chrissie’s book falls from my lap onto the floor.

Sophia picks it up for me and when her eyes lift from it, they’re gleaming with surprise and curiosity. “I know this book!” Her eyelashes flutter.

Who doesn’t? The freaking book is everywhere. We’re about to part ways and this might be my last chance to send her an insinuation that I’m open for business.

“Yeah.” I chuckle, faking shyness, and blurt the usual joke. “I took the self-vow of celibacy.”

The shock on her face is exactly what I was going for.

I'm about to deliver the punch line, *Want to help me break it?* when she exclaims, "Oh my God, I did too!"

I freeze. This might not be the best time to make fun of that book after all. "*You did?*"

"Yes! Actually the author of this book is one of my best friends in the world!"

Yup, definitely not a good idea to dis the book.

Sophia's eyes dash to my wrist and she gasps. Shit. I'm still wearing the thread bracelet Luke put on me—the one that supposedly advertises I'm giving up sex for a year in exchange for some noble cause.

"I can't believe this coincidence! My three best friends and I started following the fast six months ago!" The bracelet on my wrist must've instantly marked me safe, because she sits back on the floor, fully relaxed. It's like me carrying this book with me—and her belief I actually read it—has instantly graduated me from potential criminal to lifelong friend.

Steering away from the topic of the book, I start asking her questions. Before I know it, we're sharing my croissant while she tells me everything about her little town in Indiana and her work as a high school history teacher. She's not only cute but also extremely likable. I almost don't mind that I painted myself into a corner and I'll never be able to hit on her.

Feeling a little guilty for nearly making fun of something she takes so seriously, I give her my finest pearls of wisdom about the city and she takes notes on her cell, delighted. In exchange, she answers my questions about other art pieces I've photographed today.

"You should specialize in 'Art for Dummies' or something like that," I offer on the way out, as we cross the French sculptures garden under high glass ceilings. (10) "If you could make *me* care about this museum, you can teach art appreciation to wild beasts."

"Actually, that's a challenge I'm about to take," she softly smiles. "I'm starting a summer project with at-risk youth, teaching them art appreciation in exchange for extra history credit in remedial summer school."

Impressed by her kind heart, I'm glad I shut up before insulting her friend and her book.

As we stroll toward the glass pyramid exit, she eyes the bag where the croissant used to be and guesses. "You're having bread and coffee again, so you must be at least in your third month of the fast. Right?"

Shit.

I hope she doesn't try to ask me any questions about the vow book. "More or less." Trying to deflect the attention from me, I ask, "What did you re-introduce first?"

"Internet and coffee—I had to. And then sweets and different foods. My most recent re-introduction was wine, but I don't care much for it."

My eyes flick to the orange and green thread bracelet on her wrist. "So you started the Ultimate Challenge *six* months ago?" My real question is, *So... six more months to go without sex?* Damn it. As likable as Sophia is, I have to rule her out for company. "Has the celibacy part been hard to keep that long?"

She turns a little pink. "I, uh, I guess I'm used to it."

Imagining all the repressed sexual energy she's been packing inside for months, ready to be unleashed, I'm turned on in the weirdest way. Is Luke right? Could it be true that she's wordlessly crying for help, begging me to free her from her own taboos and help her break that vow?

And is it true that it will then be the most mind-blowing night of our lives? That the status of forbidden is the best aphrodisiac in the world?

It's been a long time since I had a project, even longer since I've cared about one. But at this moment, as I stare into her bright blue eyes, all I can think of is having her in my bed, making the exact same face she made when she took a bite from my croissant.

I have a new project.

I have to save this woman from her vow.