

KEELIA CLARKSON

Chapter  
One  
Again

A NOVEL



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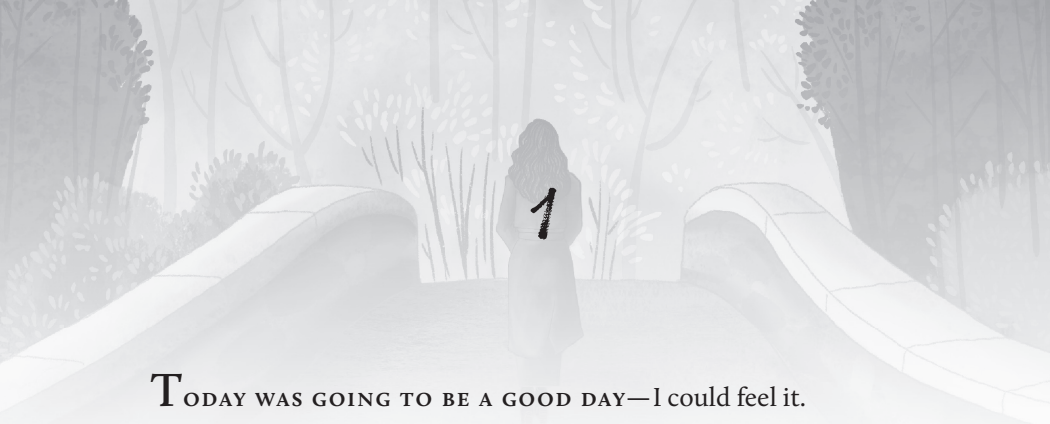
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**T**ODAY WAS GOING TO BE A GOOD DAY—I could feel it.

The crisp November air danced across my cheeks as I stepped out of my building and onto West 72nd Street. It was a clear autumn day in New York City. Not a single threatening cloud hovered in the brilliant, periwinkle-blue sky above. A few bright yellow leaves greeted me as they fluttered through the air, as if they'd waited until my daily morning doorstep appearance to begin their descent to the street below. I breathed in deep, letting the air touch every inch of my lungs.

I turned left and headed toward Central Park West, my normal spot for hailing a cab, like a dancer falling into formation on a busy stage. The undeniable hustle and bustle of the city was something I didn't tire of, even after a decade.

My taxi ride to work never took too long—twenty minutes or so. Today was no different. Central Park, boasting an army of golden trees, zipped by on my left as we made our way downtown. Soon, the park disappeared in favor of art deco-inspired office buildings, busy breakfast spots, and teensy bodegas.

Before I knew it, we'd pulled up to a quiet corner of the West Village, an avenue block away from It's A Grind, my regular coffee shop and my very favorite street to walk down.

"This is good here," I told the driver.

I emerged from the cab and began down the secluded street lined with an assortment of well-maintained brownstones, each complete with potted flowers hanging below every window. I sneakily peeked in as I walked by, curious about the fortunate souls who got to have their own homey slice of Manhattan away from the craziness of the city, yet right in the middle of it all the same.

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*One day*, I thought wistfully.

The moment I flung the door open to the coffee shop, the scent of strong espresso, freshly baked croissants, and ground cinnamon hit me. As did a smile from the barista who happened to look quite a bit like James Dean.

“Jane,” he sang.

“Hey, Declan,” I replied, a wave of warmth spreading across my cheeks. I could never tell if he was flirting or if he was just being friendly—mostly because in my twenty-nine years on the planet, I’d never been one to receive much attention from guys. Seeing as how my nose had been firmly planted in a book throughout my teen years, flirting was still somewhat of a foreign language for me. But maybe after all these years, New York had finally molded me into the kind of girl baristas flirted with.

“The usual?” he asked.

I nodded.

“You look nice today. You do something different with your hair?”

I reached up to pet my mocha-brown, shoulder-length hair, self-conscious and flattered all at once. *Certainly* this counted as flirting . . . right?

“Looks nice.” He glanced back down at his computer, then said, “You’re good.”

“What do you mean?”

He winked. “It’s on the house today.”

“Wow . . . thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Have a good one.” He flashed that movie-star smile again.

I stepped out and continued my journey to the office with a hop in my step. I was, after all, not only in the greatest city in the world but the city that *made* greatness. Being here meant that your life was bound to amount to something great.

This was the belief I’d held on to in my years since arriving, the belief that many other transplants who had moved to the city with a



suitcase and a dream ascribed to. Like the finance guy who stood next to me on the corner of Greenwich Street, no doubt on his way to an important meeting down in FiDi. Or like the young, wide-eyed college student on her way to class, who crossed the street with the same uncertainty and wonder that I had at her age. Or like the barista who'd just served me, who probably had an audition after his shift, having moved to the city to chase stardom.

Or like me, the small-town girl who couldn't wait to leave her hometown, who was on her way to the job that wasn't just a dream job anymore.

Yes, today was going to be a good day.



Carmichael Publishing House sat in the heart of the Village on Seventh Avenue, its bright red bricks and sparkling clean arched windows standing out as a beacon of ambition. Carmichael was known for its slew of *New York Times* bestsellers, for its ability to produce authors whose careers spanned multiple decades, and for its growing collection of celebrity memoirs. It was *the* publisher to work for, and I was one of the lucky ones who belonged there—my keycard made it official.

I whirled through the lobby and pushed the elevator button for the top floor, the fifteenth, where I'd be meeting with my editor, Alexandria, and Olivia Carter, a twenty-five-year-old pop sensation known for her incredibly catchy music and quickly expanding romantic history with a succession of actors—famous enough that she was simply referred to by the public as Liv. In the last couple of years, Liv had easily become *the* It Girl to watch, a new kid on the block who had caught the attention of the entire country seemingly overnight, and I'd been entrusted with ghostwriting a book for her.

This was hardly my first job of the sort. Throughout the seven years I'd been working as a freelance writer for Carmichael since graduating

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from Hamilton College, a tiny, private university at the northern tip of the city that I had been lucky enough to get a full scholarship to, I'd become their go-to ghostwriter, working on my fair share of memoirs for their celebrity clients. But Liv was undoubtedly my most high-profile client yet.

My heart beat faster as I made my way to the corner office—the one with the impressive windows where we held our meetings with celebrity clients. I shrugged off my trench coat, smoothed my ivory silk blouse down, took a deep breath, and entered the room.

Liv was perhaps even more stunning in person than she was in the paparazzi photos that splashed across most tabloid covers and her carefully curated Instagram feed. Her sleek, warm copper-red hair cascaded down her back and framed her heart-shaped face and catlike bright green eyes.

This Grammy Award-winning singer sat across from me, a real flesh-and-blood human being, and I could hardly comprehend it. She stared at me, offering her famous smile. “It’s lovely to meet you . . .”

I helped her out. “Jane,” I said.

“Jane,” she repeated. I rubbed my palm on my leg before extending my still-clammy hand. She took it, her small, delicate hand almost totally enveloped by my average-sized one.

“You’ll be working with Jane over the coming months as you two craft your book,” Alexandria said. “It’s important to us here at Carmichael that we capture your voice and tell your story the way you want it to be told. And I have to say, you’re in great hands with Jane.”

Liv simply smiled. An awkward silence swept through the room. Normally, the celebrities we met with were a bit more vocal.

Before I could jump in, Alexandria did. “So, Liv—it’s okay if I call you that?”

“Course.” She shrugged genially. “It’s my name.”

I grinned. For all the attention thrown at her over the past couple of years, she was still likable—kind, even.



“Great,” Alexandria said. “So, let me ask you something. What story do you want to tell, Liv?”

Liv’s chin jerked back ever so slightly as her smile dropped, as if caught off-guard by the question. She bit her lip and stared blankly at Alexandria before shifting her eyes toward the ceiling. “My story . . .” she said slowly, as if wondering if she’d give the right answer.

“Right,” Alexandria said, “and Jane will assist you in getting that story onto paper. But let’s talk about the themes your book will explore. What do you want to say with this book?”

Liv stared up again at the same spot on the ceiling. I uncrossed my legs and switched them. Alexandria’s gaze flitted to me for a split second, so quickly that I couldn’t quite decipher what her eyes had intended to say.

“Well . . .” Liv started. Alexandria and I leaned in simultaneously. “I guess I want to say that . . .” The ensuing pause felt like the moment between the end of one episode that ended on a cliffhanger and the beginning of the next one. We sat there, eyes fixed on the beautiful young pop star in front of us, awaiting her next word.

“I guess I want to say that, um, finding your purpose is important.” With a little smile she tore her gaze away from her spot on the ceiling.

“Okay, good.” Alexandria nodded. “That’s good.”

“You know,” Liv continued, “I found what makes me happy. And I think that everyone should do what makes them happy.”

“That’s an incredible thought, Liv,” Alexandria said. She darted a look at me, beckoning me to join in.

“Yes, that’s so needed,” I said. “Thank you so much for sharing that, Liv.”

It wasn’t the deepest answer, but that was okay. I’d find a way to add depth to it. I’d make her thoughts sound more fleshed out, lengthy, inspiring—that was my job, after all.

Liv beamed and shrugged, humbly accepting our praise.

“So, when do you start writing it?” she asked.

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Alexandria launched into her speech, the one I'd heard delivered to every client I'd worked with before. Liv and I would have regular video calls over the next couple of weeks. I would come with questions prepared, record the conversation, and craft her words into a fifty-thousand-word raw, authentic memoir. The design team would soon begin the process of cover design, and the marketing team would waste no time putting together an extensive plan. And voilà—Liv would not only be a singer and a songwriter but also an author in no time.

I tuned out while Alexandria and Liv covered the next steps of the project, smiling and nodding every now and then but allowing my mind to wander elsewhere.

I was used to writing books for people who either didn't want to write their own book or didn't have the skills or the time to. I was used to working behind the scenes. But somehow, everything felt different today. Liv seemed lovely by all accounts, but I couldn't ignore the odd feeling taking root in my chest. What was it? Annoyance? No, it was more than that. Disillusionment?

Just a couple of years ago, it would have felt like the opportunity of a lifetime to rub shoulders with and write for someone of Liv's caliber. Why wasn't I ecstatic about writing a book for one of the most famous pop singers in the country? What had changed between just an hour ago and now?

I caught hold of one of the thoughts racing through my mind, inspecting it. It had nothing to do with Liv or what she'd said. I would gladly locate the central themes and explore them with, or for, Liv. I would mold her thoughts into the best words possible and lend some of my own when necessary. Nothing I hadn't done before.

But here I was, writing a book for someone else, *again*. My name wouldn't be on it, and the ideas I was truly passionate about wouldn't be in it.

I took a sip of my drink. The coffee warmed my chest, bringing me back to the present, back to what was happening right in front of me.



I had signed up for this. It couldn't matter to me whose name would be on the book when it hit shelves a year from now, the remarkably speedy turnaround time I had grown used to working with for celebrity memoirs, or when it inevitably hit every bestseller list, all thanks to Liv's notoriety. What had to matter was that, in the loosest sense, *my* words were being read by countless people, even if they didn't know it. Even if they never knew my name at all. I had to be okay with that.

The meeting wrapped up, and we walked Liv to the elevator to say our goodbyes.

"Thanks, ladies!" Liv waved. "I can't wait to get started on it." The moment she vanished, Alexandria strutted off toward her office.

"Hey, Alexan—"

She spun around. "Yep?"

My heart crept its way up to my throat. I swallowed it down just as quickly. I wouldn't let this moment pass. "Did you get a chance to look at my manuscript?" I'd floated the idea of publishing a novel a few times in my years working with Carmichael. It wasn't typical for publishers to take a novel from an employee, which, despite technically being a freelance writer, I wasn't far from with how frequently they'd used me. But Alexandria had hinted a few times that I might be the exception to the rule.

"I sent it to you last Monday," I reminded her.

Her eyes flickered from me to Liv's contract in her hands and back up to me. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"You know, for my novel . . ." The words tasted of embarrassment as they came out. My cheeks burned, no doubt stained bright red.

"Right," she said, her eyebrows flashing up. "It's been the *craziest* few days, Jane, but I promise I'll get to it by the end of next week."

Before I could get another word out, Alexandria disappeared into her office and shut the door.

I allowed a few moments to pass before summoning an elevator to take me to the bottom floor common work area with a café, potted

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plants, and leather armchairs. Freelancing meant I didn't have my own office at Carmichael, so the city was my office. I'd refused to work in my apartment ever since the pandemic ended and coffee shops, my preferred workspace, opened back up.

I settled at my favorite chair in the corner by the window, popping in my earbuds and pulling out my laptop. I'd spent many an afternoon gazing out at passersby as my mind searched for the *perfect* word. The city street just beyond the glass had acted as a never-ending source of inspiration.

Today, though, the window wasn't working its magic. My chest was tight, my stomach upset. Everything felt . . . different. Off. Wrong.

I was living the life I'd always dreamed of. The one I'd yearned for as I lay night after night in my twin bed back in Colorado, wondering if I would ever matter. I'd gotten exactly what I wanted too—the life I envisioned that meant *my* life meant something. I'd left Avila Falls, the tiny mountain town with a population size to match, for a city where I would matter. I wrote books for a living. My words were read by more people than I could possibly imagine, and I was getting paid for it.

So now that I had it, why didn't it feel like I'd thought it would? Why wasn't I satisfied?

*Quit sulking, Jane. Any other girl would be elated.*

I flipped open my laptop. It flickered to life, revealing the last tab I'd visited yesterday: my manuscript. The coming-of-age novel I'd poured every second of my spare time into for the last year. All fifty thousand words of it.

I closed the tab. My phone buzzed. Agnes.

*Hey! Are you still coming out for drinks tonight?*

I'd completely forgotten that I'd promised to meet up with Agnes and Mara, the two friends I still had from my Hamilton College days.

Everything in me wanted to say no, to dash home as soon as I'd finished researching Liv, jotting down notes, and responding to emails, and to spend the evening safe within the confines of my

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apartment. But I knew that would mean being all alone with my thoughts. And that was the last thing I needed. Getting out would be good for me . . . right?

*Yeah! I'll see you then.*



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