

One

"You got everything?"

I slammed the back hatch on my aged-but not-so-old-it-was-actually-cool Forester and turned to face my best friend. "Yes, Mom," I drawled.

Amy wrinkled her nose in that cute way she had. "Bitch," she replied in a decidedly *not* cute voice. It's what threw people—the acid tone coming from that sweet little face and petite body. Well, the tone *and* the scary intelligence. Neither of which threw me, but mostly because we'd known each other since the playpen, so I just laughed.

"Takes one to know, etcetera, etcetera."

"Yeah, yeah." She waved her hand and made a *pfft* noise. She wasn't impressed by me either. "So seriously, Caro, do you have everything?"

I glanced again into the full, but not stuffed back of the wagon. "Pretty much. It's only a summer session, Ames."

"True," she agreed, "but you still have to have the essentials."

Holding up my hand, I began ticking off, "Laptop, iPod and portable speakers the 'rents gave me for graduation, coffee maker—"

"Books?" she broke in.

"Books," I reassured her, glancing over my shoulder at the three boxes stashed in the back of the Forester. Couldn't go anywhere without the books. "Makeup and other beauty essentials and of course, the cute summer wardrobe."

At that, she sighed.

"Don't start with me, Amy—you helped me pick out half that stuff."

"Under duress." Yeesh, but the frown looked so wrong on that cute face.

"Bite your tongue. Spending money on our dads' credit cards is *never* an 'under duress' situation."

"Well, no..." For a second the frown gave way to a smile, then melted away again.

"You're really, really going to do it—go through with this boneheaded scheme."

Here we went... again. I took a deep breath and launched into the argument I'd been perfecting over the better part of the last six months.

"Think of it as playing a part, Ames. I mean, I'm a theater major, right?" I hit a pseudo-drama queen pose which elicited another smile. Dropping down to the grass and crossing my legs, Indian-style, I waited for Amy to join me, chin on her upraised knees, same way we'd sat facing each other... forever, practically. "I mean, really, how is it any different from when Renee Zellweger and her accent went incognito at a London publishing house for *Bridget Jones*?"

"Aside from the fact that you're not getting paid a metric buttload of cash and aren't likely to score an Oscar nom?"

I stuck my tongue out at her. "Then think of it as exploring my roots."

"Oh, bullpuckey. What roots, Caro? You're basing all of this on the background of *one* relative—two generations removed."

"You're forgetting the part where she's the only relative I've ever felt a *real* connection with," I reminded her, my throat closing up at the thought of Nana Ellie.

Nearly five years she'd been gone and I still missed her so much. Her cooking and her soft perfumed hands and her stories of adventure and the constant assurances that I'd have my own when the time came. Well, dammit, it was time. I'd been patient and everything, marking

off every year until I turned eighteen, which was when she'd set out on her first adventure—and which, as it so happened, had turned out to be a total slam-dunk of an adventure. So who better to emulate, right?

"Look, I'll grant the connection is important," she admitted, "but the total truth is, your roots are in the same place mine are, Caro. Right here in Hampshire where both our families have been forever. The way you talk about it, you'd think it was a leper colony or something."

"Only if lepers are boring."

"It is *not* boring." And crank up the indignant on the tone. "It's got that whole quirky, *Pleasantville* meets *Northern Exposure* vibe going for it."

"The Spiritual Life Holistic Center sharing space with Temple Beth Shalom in the former Catholic church does not, in and of itself, a quirky vibe make."

"Oh, come *on*."

Eh, she had a small point, if I were honest. "All right, well, maybe a little."

Because while it was weird as hell watching people trying to hold Tree pose while serenely facing off with some stained-glass saint or another, I couldn't deny it did give us a uniqueness that most of the other burgs around these parts couldn't claim. Not that that was saying much—Northeast Ohio just wasn't exactly a hotbed of exotic.

"Caro, look... not that I'm trying to preach or tell you what to do—"

"Of course you are."

"Okay, maybe just a little." She stared down at her hands then back up at me. "Or maybe I'm just still trying to understand why being from Hampshire is such a bad thing. I mean, it's not like it's the only thing that's ever going to define you."

"I don't know," I answered after a long minute, shaking my head. "Right now, it's the sole basis for how everyone sees me. My whole *life*, it's been the sole basis for how everyone sees me. Caroline Darcy, sixth generation Hampshire girl, *nice* Hampshire girl, never gives her folks any trouble, a bit quiet, unless she's on the stage, then she's a pretty fair little mimic. Maybe she'll come back and help run the community theater after she's done with college."

I shook my head again. "I just feel like, if I don't look for something different, Ames, if I don't fight to get out, it'll end up being the *only* thing that defines me."

Fiddling with the beads studding her flip flops, Amy said, "I don't think you give people around here enough credit."

"Oh, yeah?" The heat started prickling along my neck and shoulders. "People around here—they *think* they know me, no matter what I do. I could dress in a grass skirt and do the hula in the Village Green in the dead of winter and the most I'd get is patted on the head and told how sweet that is and does my daddy know I'm outside without my coat?" The heat faded as I sighed and looked down the shady street towards the Village Green, just visible, two blocks away. And not far past that, on the corner of Main and 3rd, my family's pharmacy and old-fashioned soda shop that we'd owned for—guess what—six generations.

"I mean, no one here will ever see me as anyone other than Jimmy and Nancy's little girl or James' little sister." Staring down at my Keds, I added, "I want more than that."

"You know, I'm going to skip the whole 'you're already more and you should know that and that's what's really important' thing because you wouldn't believe me anyway." Amy popped up and started pacing in front of me, her flip-flops snapping against her heels in a way that made me think even *they* were annoyed. "But going off to college and pretending to be Cuban? Isn't that a little extreme in the redefinition department?"

"It's not pretending." I shrugged and pulled at the summer-dry blades of grass by my feet. "Not really."

"Caro—" She dropped back down in front of me. "One relative—one—" She held up her index finger, making sure I was getting it. "Two generations back. Even if it *was* Nana Ellie and she was the coolest, it's what? One-eighth of your background?"

"It feels right," I insisted with another shrug.

"I don't get it," she said with a sigh, dropping her chin back to her knees.

"I know."

Wasn't so sure I totally got it either, but I wasn't bullshitting her. Tapping into my Latin roots, however thin they were—reestablishing that connection to Nana Ellie—I couldn't imagine any other adventure being more exciting. Even if it didn't involve Russian dukes.

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A few hours later I cruised over the final rolling hill singing along to the Shakira blaring from the stereo as I turned through the brick and iron gates that formed the main entrance to The University of Southern Ohio. (Go, Fighting Cougars, although God knows when anyone actually saw an actual cougar around here. I'm just sayin'.)

Anyhow, it was just me making the trek to Middlebury, a little corner of hilly real estate situated in that no-man's land near the Penn and West Virginia borders. Mom and Dad had offered to come with, but I'd said, no, not necessary. I mean, not like this was the real deal or anything. Was just a summer session—not even living in the res hall I was booked into for the regular school year, so more like going off to camp for six weeks.

Dad was actually kind of relieved when I said I was good driving down by myself since summer was such a busy time at our pharmacy, what with kids out of school and all the tourists

who blew through Hampshire for the Colonial charm and obscure battlefields, and the National Park complete with rolling hills, flora and fauna for days, and tons of hiking and bike trails with which to do the getting close to Mother Earth thing. We were a prime "educational vacation" destination—the kind of place people killed a day so they could feel all virtuous before heading up to Cleveland and the Rock Hall of Fame or down to Canton and the Pro Football Hall of Fame. And since tourists had this way of getting sick and/or injured, Dad always had plenty to occupy his time. So he calmed Mom down, since she was bummed at not getting to see one of her babies settled at college, and reassured her they'd help me do the big, official freshman year move in and all that parental stuff, come fall semester.

Which would be good, since I think we'd already dealt with the worst of the "going away to school" stuff.

Because you see, just because he was cool with my being Independent Girl, didn't mean my father didn't give me a big old, "drive safe, be safe" lecture, complete with a Triple A card and a jumbo box of Trojans, spermicidal lubricant and everything.

"Honestly, you'd think I wouldn't have been so surprised seeing as he pulled the same stunt when James went off to Ohio State four years ago," I'd spluttered to Amy on the phone about ten seconds after Dad closed my bedroom door behind himself, mission accomplished.

"Yeah, but James is a guy and first-born, and all that good stuff," Amy pointed out. "Not a surprise you got sort of blindsided."

"No kidding. I mean, considering it was Mom who gave me The Talk the first time around and anyway, I thought dads had a thing about their little girls having sex."

Then again, when *your* dad happened to be the town's pharmacist... I guess it went with the turf—but honestly, I'd thought I was going to die, right there. First thought that had crossed

my mind was that he'd somehow got inside info about last summer when I went up to Interlochen for theater camp. Not quite "this one time... at band camp..." territory, but hey, teenagers, summer heat, hormones, and Michael, who'd played Bernardo to my Anita in our production of *West Side Story* had been cute in a gawky sort of way—and with this outrageous talent that lit him up, once he was on the stage. Talk about your major transformation. Hoo, mama... there was no resisting him then. But it was a classic summer thing and after a final romantic hurrah under the stars and a slightly teary-eyed goodbye, he'd gone back to Colorado Springs, I'd come back to Hampshire and that had been pretty much it. But it had been really nice. Nice enough that I wasn't about to risk ruining the memory with just *any* old guy. Not like this was a big danger in Hampshire, where every eligible guy just saw me as plain, old Caro Darcy, sixth generation Hampshire girl, etcetera, etcetera...

But if Dad didn't somehow have the inside info, I wasn't about to give it to him. *Way* too much TMI for me—and him, too, if I had to guess, Trojans notwithstanding. I did tell him not to worry, though. And thanked him for the, um... gift, even if I was blushing about forty-seven shades of red as I said it.

After finding a parking spot in the lot next to Harrison Hall and getting myself checked in, I dragged my stuff upstairs to my third floor single. Man *alive*, a shower was going to feel great, but I had one more thing to do before I could indulge. Poking through the box packed with bathroom stuff, I found the Walgreen's bag I'd thrown in there last night. I reached in and pulled out Step One in my "boneheaded scheme."

Two hours later, I stared at myself in the mirror. Whoa. And whoa again. This was even better than I'd hoped. Ames was so wrong. This was *not* boneheaded or harebrained or what was the other one? The one she'd gotten from her Granddad MacCallum? Oh, right.

Addlepat. This wasn't going to be any of those—it was going to be absolutely *fantastico*.

Digging through my backpack, I found my cell and took a quick shot. After sending it zooming to Amy's cell, I texted a quick message.

What do you think?

Caliente, right???

Ha. Bet I'd be able to hear the screech all the way down here when she checked *that* message. Pulling out my laptop, I fired it up and downloaded the picture from my phone. Bringing it up onscreen and enlarging it, I studied myself closely. Havana Brown: the new hair color for the new me. Man, it was *so* nice—even better than I'd envisioned. A bunch of shades darker and a world away from the blah, beige blonde I'd lived with my whole life. Thanks to spending every free minute I'd had since graduation at the community pool and easing back to SPF 15 from my normal 45, I also had a nice, bronze-y, tropical glow going that made my usually muted blue eyes stand out in a way they never had against my normally pale (and blah) skintone. Are we sort of sensing a theme here?

I studied the picture and twisted in my chair to look in the mirror again—definitely not beige anymore and not so blah. Not so easy to fade into the wallpaper.

Absolutely *fantastico*.