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# FOR MY SISTER, HOPE

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# — ONE —

There should have been some sort of warning. An ominous bird screeching across the sky or a strange animal howling in the distance. At the very least, it should have been a gloomy day. Better yet, it could have begun on an eerie night, under a full moon, near St. Peter's Square.

But it didn't.

It started on a typical blue-sky day in Rome, a day that looked like it had been peeled from the folds of one of the brochures for my school. It was that time of year when there was still a crispness in the air, but the days themselves were growing warmer with the promise of summer.

I unzipped my leather jacket and leaned against the bottom of the Bernini-like fountain that welcomed visitors to our campus. Daily living had washed away most of the novelty of having moved to Rome, though there was still something about the contrast of bright, pastel-hued Vespas zipping past the Colosseum that captured my imagination. Perhaps it was the fact that old and modern could blend together so effortlessly here, a feeling that this place transcended time. *"Everything is part of the same painting,"* as my dad liked to say. *"But we are each the artist of our own life. We choose what colors to use."*

I yawned, bored with my own thoughts. The problem was that in my life's painting there were only different tones of

gray. It didn't matter what college town my dad moved us to, it all felt the same. Always the same classes, the same rules.

But this was Rome, the Eternal City. This wasn't Madison or St. Louis or Tallahassee. I had no excuse. No girl should be bored in this place.

I glanced over at the massive main gate. It remained closed to traffic, but a door next to it was unlocked so that the high schoolers could go out for lunch.

Maybe I could just walk out. Pretend to be a freshman. Who'd know? I'd been here less than a year and the words *eighth grader* were only stamped on my student ID, not my face. I could add some color to my life. Be more adventurous and explore the city a little bit.

*Just do it, Cassie,* I said to myself.

A bubbling sense of excitement filled me. I grabbed my small yellow messenger bag and slipped the strap across my body.

Casually, I strolled along the perimeter of the campus, making my way to the front gate. The smell of car exhaust from the Rome traffic drifted up the driveway toward me. I could see Via Tarsia through the fence's wrought-iron bars and imagined myself blending in with the other pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists heading back to work—or, in my case, play. I'd get to see the real Rome, not the supervised one my father insisted on showing me. I would head out and go . . .

I stopped dead in my tracks.

Where *would* I go? I had no real plan. I could get in big

trouble and for what? I'd probably just waste my time drinking sodas at the small *osteria* down the street until it was time for my dad to pick me up from school. No, this was a stupid idea. I turned back around to face the school.

"Going somewhere, Miss Arroyo?" It was Professor Latchke, the most dreaded teacher in school.

"Um, no. Just getting some fresh air," I said, giving him my most innocent smile—the one where my brown eyes looked like they belonged to a cute little puppy. It always worked on my dad.

"Hmpf." His demeanor didn't change as he checked his watch. "You know, you really should consider spending a little more time studying for my class and a little less time daydreaming about leaving school."

"No, I mean, I wasn't daydreaming. It's lunchtime and I was just walking." What did this bald-headed, bow-tie-wearing, tweed-jacket-loving teacher have against me? I might not be a great student in his World History class, but I got good grades in my other classes. "It's not against the rules to wander around, is it?" My eyes met his.

"Of course not, Miss Arroyo. But like I've discussed with your father, you're not meeting your potential. You need to work harder."

A sinking feeling washed over me. He had called my dad? Because of a stupid C minus in his class?

"Today is a perfect example." He shook his head. "There was a review session for the upcoming test and instead of

attending, you decided to spend your time staring at the gates. I believe your father has higher expectations of you. I'm sure he won't be pleased."

I bit my tongue. He was so wrong. My dad wasn't like that. We were a team. Papi always stressed that he had my back on everything. Even against mean, nasty teachers. He'd understand once I explained what was really going on.

"Time for you to take some responsibility for your academic career."

I shuffled my feet. "Uh-huh."

"That's 'yes, sir,' Miss Arroyo."

I looked down at the ground and mumbled, "Yes, sir."

He stood there for another few seconds, then slowly walked away.

I wanted to scream. Without a doubt, he was the worst thing about living in Rome.

I trudged over to a statue of Charlemagne riding into battle and plopped myself next to it. The shadow of the horse as it reared up on its hind legs cast an unusual image on the grass. It looked like a monster's mouth, gaping open with two large teeth about to chomp down. I imagined Professor Latchke being the monster's lunch. It made me feel a little better.

"Not eating today, Miss Arroyo?" The accent, the low-pitched voice, and the disappointment etched behind every syllable of my name sent a new wave of venom coursing through my veins.

*No way. Was Professor Latchke going to torment me all day? Now he wanted me to eat lunch?*

I slowly turned around. “Yes, sir. I already—” I stopped when I saw Simone holding back a smile. Her blonde, almost invisible eyebrows twitched with amusement. “Simone!” I exclaimed, throwing out a kick, which purposely missed the mark. “I hate when you do that!”

Simone let out a giggly, contagious laugh. “You love it when I prank *other* people.” She paused and cleared her throat. “Isn’t that ta-rue, Cah-sahn-drah?” This time she sounded exactly like our headmistress, Ms. Flemming.

I shook my head. “You, my friend, are an official freak of nature.”

“Well, this freak is now completely done with her make-up quizzes.” Simone did a little happy dance—one that was completely uncoordinated and made her tall, slender frame look like it was having convulsions. “Only bad thing is that it took up most of the lunch break.”

“Serves you right for being sick all last week and leaving me here to fend for myself with all these *annoying americanis*,” I said in my best impression of an Italian, pointing to all the other American expat students scattered around in little clusters.

Simone grimaced. “That doesn’t even sound close to an Italian accent.”

“We can’t all—”

“Hold on,” she interrupted. “Here it comes. Just to make sure I don’t have time to eat.” She lifted her finger to the sky. “Wait for it. In three . . . two . . .”

The clanging sound drowned out her last word, and

students responded to the bell by moving across the large lawn like cattle going to the slaughterhouse. Except this slaughterhouse was disguised as an old Tuscan villa.

“Do we really have to go?” I tilted my head back, enjoying the feeling of my hair draping down my spine. “Latchke already hates me . . . I should at least do something to earn it.”

“He doesn’t hate you.” Simone’s eyes twinkled. “But what are you thinking?”

“I don’t know.” I gave her a sheepish grin. “Maybe tomorrow we make a run for it? Go explore Rome together?”

“Cassie Arroyo! Skipping class? That is not like you!” She put her fists on her hips, pretending to be shocked. She gave me a wink. “It sounds more like me. I must be rubbing off on you!”

I laughed. “Being me isn’t exactly thrilling.”

Simone let out a long, exaggerated sigh. “You’ve seen my life up close. Don’t think you’d really want it.” She gave me her hand. “C’mon, Miss Troublemaker. We’ll be late to class if we don’t hurry.” She tried in vain to pull me up. “Really?” Simone let go of my arm. “You’re just not going to go to class?” She took a step back. “What’s with you?”

“Ugh.” I rolled my eyes and stood. “I’m so tired of school. I can’t wait for it to be over.”

“Me too.” She shrugged. “We’ll do something fun this weekend—”

“CASSIE!” The frantic yell from across the field made Simone stop talking. There was no imitating that voice. I

turned to see my father walking . . . no, running . . . no . . . *sprinting* toward us.

“It can’t be,” I muttered.

Simone turned to look, as did half the school.

“CASSIE!” he shouted again before stopping to put his hands on his knees and catch his breath. Apparently, the jog from wherever he had parked was as much exercise as any overweight forty-five-year-old art historian ever got. He stood again and motioned for me to come toward him.

“Latchke *called* him?” I shook my head in disbelief.

“Maybe it’s something else,” Simone said.

I sighed.

“NOW!” my dad commanded, unhappy with my delay.

“Never mind.” Simone ran a finger across her throat. “You’re dead.”

I weaved around a few students and hurried over. “Papi, I can explain,” I said. “Latchke’s crazy intense, but I’m going to study for the test over the weekend.”

I was prepared for almost any reaction—except for the one I got. My father lunged toward me and hugged me as tightly as he could. “*No importa*,” he muttered in Spanish. “I don’t care.”

“Papi?” I pulled away to look at him. He was wearing his normal work uniform—a dark-blue suit with a white shirt—but his hair was completely disheveled. It was rare to see him with even one hair out of place unless he was worried about something, and this was a whole head of worry. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You know I love you, *m’ija*, right?” As he spoke, his eyes darted over to the Italian cypress trees that lined the school’s boundary.

“I love you, too, but what’s going on?”

“We have to go.” He took my hand and started pulling me toward the main gate. “I’ll explain in the car.”

“Hold on.” I quickened my step to keep up with him. “We’re leaving? Don’t you have to sign me out at the office?”

He didn’t answer, just dragged me along as the last group of students rushed past us.

“Did something happen?” I asked, knowing he’d tell me the truth. After all, our policy was to never keep secrets. Even when I was young and he lost his job at the museum in Baltimore, he told me right away.

He put a hand on my back and ushered me past the tall gates and out to the street where our red Fiat was parked a few feet away. “Hurry up.” He opened the car door and motioned for me to get in. “It’s not safe here.”

“Safe?” I tugged the seat belt across my shoulder as he rushed around the car and jumped into the driver’s seat. “What do you mean? Should I get Simone?”

Before he could answer, a loud bang caused us both to duck for cover.

“STAY DOWN!” he ordered, peeling out and leaving a cloud of smoke behind us.

Doing exactly the opposite, I bolted upright and turned to see an old man, smothered in our car’s exhaust smoke, standing on the sidewalk shouting obscenities at us in Italian.

“Papi, I think that was just a car backfiring somewhere,” I said, although my heart was beating so hard that it felt like it was going to pop right through my T-shirt and jacket.

“Maybe.” He sped down the avenue, weaving between cars and zipping through two yellow lights.

I’d never seen him like this. He was usually so careful. Always driving five miles below the speed limit and complaining every time I begged him to let me drive for a little bit along the desolate country roads.

I grabbed the armrest as we made a sudden right turn instead of stopping at a light.

This was crazy.

At the next corner we made a last-minute left that sent me slamming against the door.

“SLOW DOWN!” I yelled, rubbing my upper arm. “You’re going to get us killed!”

Papi glanced at the rearview mirror and took a deep breath. His shoulders dropped, and he eased off the gas. “Sorry,” he mumbled and tried to turn the grimace on his face into a smile.

“What’s going on?” I asked again. “We don’t keep secrets from each other, remember?”

He stopped at the next red light and turned to face me, but didn’t say anything. He just stared. Stared as if he could telepathically relay all sorts of information to me.

“Are you in some sort of trouble?”

“No, they won’t hurt us if I—”

“Hurt us?” I interrupted. “Who would hurt us? What are you talking about?”

He took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. “Don’t worry . . . I’m going to fix things,” he said in a voice barely above a whisper.

My stomach felt queasy. “Papi, I don’t know what you’ve done, but you have to call the police . . . or the embassy.” I pulled my cell phone out of my bag.

“No!” He snatched the phone and threw it on the floor.

I was shocked into silence.

“I’m sorry, Cassie,” he said in a calmer voice. “We can’t contact anyone. They have people everywhere.” He shook his head. “I’d planned on talking to you about this since you were little.” He paused for a moment. “It just never seemed like the right time. Gregorio was right.”

“Since I was little? What are you saying? Who’s Gregorio?”

“There’s so much to tell you,” he muttered.

He wasn’t making any sense. “Papi, you’re acting like you’re about to say something crazy, like we’re in the witness protection program or—” I paused. My by-the-book father was not a criminal, but he was certainly capable of having testified against one. “Is that it? Did you rat someone out? Is this something from when you lived in Cuba?”

BEEEEEP! BEEEEEP!

Startled, I glared at the man in the tiny two-seater car behind us. The light had just changed to green a fraction of a second earlier.

“HOLD ON!” I shouted back at him.

The response I got was another long BEEEEEEEEEP!

“Face forward and don’t make eye contact, Cassie . . . with anyone.” We were already crossing the intersection, blending in with the average insanity of Rome drivers. In the distance I could see the dome of the Vatican, but I had no idea where we were headed.

I gripped the sides of my seat as we swerved across several lanes and cut in front of a small delivery truck, making a sharp left onto Ponte Garibaldi to cross the Tiber River.

“Everything will be fine, Cassie.” My dad kept his focus on the road, with only occasional glances in the rearview mirror. “Don’t worry. I’m taking care of things. It’s just very complicated.”

“So un-complicate it!” I shouted, losing my patience.

“It’s a long story.” He shook his head and started to mumble to himself. “I just didn’t think they’d trace the calls back to me. I thought I’d been careful. I only needed a little more time to find it . . .” He checked the rearview mirror again. “Okay, I guess it’s time you knew. It starts with the Hastati.” My father slowed the car and veered into a narrow cobblestoned alleyway that was lined with boarded-up apartment buildings.

“The what? You’re not making sense.”

“The Hastati. They’re a secret organization.” He abruptly stopped the car in front of a building tagged with graffiti and checkered with peeling posters for concerts that had come to Rome months earlier. “But I’ll explain it all as soon as I’m done here. Just stay in the car.”

“Stay here? What are we doing?”

"I'm getting us out of Italy. I just need to pick up some passports."

"We already have passports! Papi, this is crazy!"

"Listen." He grabbed me by the shoulders. "This is serious. I need you to stay down and out of sight until I get back." As my father slid out of the car, he lifted the back of his suit jacket and pulled out a gun.

"What the—?" I stared at the weapon as he placed it on the seat. "Have you gone completely insane?"

"You're safer in the car. Stay put and don't use the gun unless you absolutely have to. I'll be back in less than five minutes."

"No way!" I grabbed his sleeve before he could fully get out of the car. There was no chance I'd touch that gun, and since when did my dad even own one? "You tell me right now what's going on!"

My father scanned the empty alley. "Cassie, *m'ija*, we don't have time."

"I don't care. Either you tell me what you did or I'm . . . I'm . . ."

He pried my fingers off his sleeve. "I swear to you that I didn't do anything. Just lock the doors and stay out of sight."

My eyes jumped from him to the gun. Everything I knew about my father completely evaporated. "Someone's after you, and there has to be a reason for it. Tell me!"

"It's not me, Cass." He rubbed his face before giving me a look filled with dread. "It's you," he sighed. "Cassie, the *Hastati* are after you."