

— 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?