

**Crystal Coast Craving**

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## Chapter One

Caroline sat on top of the old suitcase she'd borrowed from her parents, forcing the ugly mustard-yellow thing closed long enough for her to fasten the latches. Once they clicked, she hopped off and put the bag with the other four she'd packed. After ten months of teaching history to seventh graders, she couldn't wait to get out of town even if it wasn't exactly going to be a vacation. Comparatively, working at her aunt's bar and grill would be a piece of cake.

The doorbell's chime told her she needed to get her butt into gear. Ryan would not be pleased if he had to wait around too long, and he could be a snippy bitch when he got irritated. Caroline took one last look around the room to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything she would need.

Her mother's sing-song Southern voice rang out like a chirping bird. "Caroline, honey, Ryan is here for you."

Caroline rolled one of her suitcases out of her room while using her free hand to tote a duffel bag by its handles. "Help me out, Ryan, please."

Ryan started to take the duffel, but Caroline shook her head. "No—there are two more in my room."

"Now Caroline, you know it's not appropriate for Ryan to be in your bedroom." Caroline's mother was a true Southern belle raised with Southern manners by an even stricter Southern belle.

Caroline and Ryan exchanged a knowing look. "How about I go ahead and take these two and you drag the others beyond the threshold of your bedroom while I put them in the truck?"

"Thanks, Ryan." Caroline handed over the black duffel bag and green rolling suitcase before hightailing it back to her room.

While she reached down to grab another bag, her long brown hair hung in her face. *This mess is going to drive me crazy on the trip down to the coast.*

She dug a scrunchie out of her purse and quickly pulled her hair up into a loose bun on top of her head before snatching up both of her bags and walking out of her room. Ryan met her halfway down the hallway, taking the bags from her and turning to go back out to the truck.

As Ryan walked out the door, Caroline's mother called out to him, "Thanks for always being such a gentleman, Ryan."

"My pleasure, Missus Butler." He didn't miss a beat, turning to blow her a kiss before hoofing it to the Bronco.

"Well, you have a good summer, Caroline, and don't forget to call your mother every now and again."

"I won't forget." Caroline made a heart-crossing motion with one hand as she opened her other arm for a hug. Her mom gave her a tight squeeze, not letting go until Ryan was back and opening the glass storm door.

"Ready?" he asked, giving Caroline a grin.

"Now you two behave yourself. In my day an unmarried couple didn't go off on vacation together, but you're a grown woman, so—"

Caroline cut her mother off. "We're not a couple and it's not a vacation. We'll both be working. God knows we need summer jobs to supplement our pitiful take-home pay."

"Teaching is a noble profession." Mrs. Butler smoothed a lock of her short brown hair back behind her ear.

"I promise not to lay a hand on your daughter." Ryan held up two fingers. "Scouts' honor."

"I trust you, Ryan. Have a good summer."

"You too, Mrs. Butler." The two shared a hug and Caroline beelined for the door, holding it open for Ryan to exit first.

Once they were in Ryan's burgundy sports utility vehicle, heading down the road away from her house, Caroline finally breathed a sigh of relief. Ryan stopped for a red light, and she glanced his way. Their gazes met, and they both burst out laughing.

"When is she going to figure it out?" His hazel eyes lit up with mischief.

"Probably never. Denial *ain't* just a river in Egypt. I'm less disturbed by the fact she doesn't realize you're gay than I am that she thinks I'd just pine away for someone who was unwilling to make a long-term commitment to me for seven years."

"Your mom is very old-school." Ryan made a right turn to get out on the highway.

"That would be why I'm a twenty-eight-year-old woman still living with my parents." She shook her head while scooting around in her seat to get comfortable.

"I told you about that crazy shit a long time ago. You need to get out of there or you're going to go nuts."

Caroline pretended to clutch invisible pearls and mustered up her best imitation of her mother's below-the-Mason-Dixon-Line accent. "But a young woman is just not safe living alone. Why, she shouldn't even go out after dark at all."

Ryan snickered as he adjusted his cruise control. "This whole town is in a little bit of a time warp. If it weren't so close to the Triad, I would never have moved here. I don't mind a thirty-minute drive to go out and get my freak on. Plus, putting a little distance between me and the school means I don't have to worry too much about running into any of my students' parents."

"If your students' parents are at any of the clubs you like to frequent, I seriously doubt they're going to be in any position to call you out on it." Caroline pulled down the visor and checked her look in the attached mirror. She needed color. She pinched her cheeks before unzipping her tan purse, fishing out some coral lipstick, and painting her lips.

"At least your mom cooled it with the *whuppin's* a few years back." Ryan laughed, taking the opportunity to playfully nudge her with his elbow as he reminded her of the embarrassingly long amount of time she had been subject to her mother's spankings.

"Only because I told her I'd move out if she didn't back off with the 'my house, my rules' crap. God knows she couldn't have me running off to live a harlot's life in a God-forsaken apartment." She sighed and shook her head. "God help me."

Ryan howled with laughter, but then his expression grew serious. "So your aunt...is she going to be all up in our business?" He gave her a sideways look.

"Nah, Aunt Britt isn't like Mom. She's a reformed hell-raiser." Caroline tilted her head and raised an eyebrow at him.

His face fell. "Oh shit! Those '*I done found Jesus and changed my life*' types are the worst."

"She never lost Jesus, so to speak. She was raised exactly like Mama but was the rebellious one. She just kind of grew out of partying, settled down, got married, but...I mean, she still runs a bar."

"True." Ryan seemed more at ease. "Good, because I definitely intend to get some booze, sun, sand, and dick this summer and not necessarily in that order. You could use some too."

Caroline smacked his arm lightly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you've been looking a little uptight and worn out lately—you need something to bring back the sparkle in those chestnut eyes and the spring in your step."

“We’ll see.” Caroline couldn’t deny there was some truth in what her best buddy was saying but she wasn’t going to just spread her legs for any old guy that came along. She had standards.

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