

The PROS of CONS

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CHAPTER ONE

CALLIE

There were two ostriches, a water buffalo, and a flock of wild turkeys between me and the registration desk.

“Dad, can you scoot the turkeys over a little?” I asked. “We’re blocking the door.” I was careful to keep my voice upbeat and positive, even though I was tired and stiff from the twelve-hour drive to Orlando. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with how that drive had gone, either; instead of talking to me, Dad had spent most of the time making calls about his latest restoration project while I listened to podcasts.

Then again, I hadn’t expected him to invite me to the World Taxidermy Championships at all, and the fact that he’d brought me to this place he loved felt like a step in the right direction. Maybe after we settled in a little, the good memories would kick in and soften him up, and then we could do some real bonding for the first time in forever. We still had five whole days together, and if he was ready and willing to act like a family again, I was on board.

The turkeys stared up at me with their reproachful glass eyes, as

if to say *Good luck with that*. “Shut up,” I murmured to them, then glanced around to make sure nobody had heard. I was *not* going to become one of those people who talked to dead animals.

My dad pushed the luggage dolly holding the turkeys a little farther into the convention center, but it rolled forward faster than expected, and a guy crossing in front of us had to dodge out of the way. He had a scraggly ponytail and deer tracks tattooed up his forearms, and he was carrying a bundle of blankets with a scaly tail poking out one end and a pair of toothy jaws protruding from the other. “Watch it, buddy!” he snapped.

“Excuse me, I’m so sorry,” my dad said. He peered at the bundle. “Black caiman? That’s a beautiful specimen.”

The guy smiled, and he suddenly looked a lot less menacing. “Yup,” he said. “Good eye. And those are some fine-looking turkeys, man.”

“Thank you,” my dad said, all puffed up with pride. He’d brought an ibex and a pair of cerulean warblers for the competition as well, but the turkeys were his babies.

Caiman Dude reached out a beefy arm and clapped my dad hard on the shoulder. “Good luck,” he said, and he took off.

Two doors down, there was a flurry of excitement—my dad’s archrival, Harley Stuyvesant, had just pushed an enormous musk ox in from the parking lot on a rolling cart. As his fans and colleagues crowded around to admire his new mount, he pulled a comb out of his pocket and started grooming the musk ox’s flanks in this showy way, even though judging didn’t start until tomorrow evening.

I nudged my dad with my elbow. “There’s your favorite person,” I muttered. If there was one thing we could definitely bond over, it was that Harley was a complete douchenozzle. “Remember two years ago when he ran over that woman’s foot with his rhino, and Mom had to drive her to the hospital because—”

“Yes, I remember,” Dad said, but his voice was sharp and final, like that topic was off-limits. I should’ve known better; bringing up Mom was probably the worst thing I could do if I wanted to get on his good side.

“I’ll go get our badges from registration,” I said. “Will you watch my stuff?” I put my purple duffel bag down next to the traveling crates and leather tool bags that held the supplies for my dad’s “Mounting a Strutting Turkey” demonstration.

“Sure,” he said, a little gentler this time. “Thanks, Callie.”

I navigated around an articulated snake skeleton and a flock of penguins and got in line under the welcome banner. The lobby was a sea of camo, denim, fur, and testosterone as far as the eye could see. It was impossible not to *think* about Mom, even if I wasn’t allowed to talk about her; I’d never been to this convention without her, and she had always made me feel less out of place. While Dad was in his sessions, she and I used to dig through the bins of glass eyes on the trade show floor and people-watch in the lobby, guessing what animal each attendee had brought for judging. Dad would join us when he was done for the day, and we’d all squish together on one of the big hotel beds, watch a dumb comedy, and order burgers from room service.

Of course, that was before Dad started getting really

high-profile museum work and he and Mom started screaming at each other every night about how he spent way more time with his dead animals than he did with us.

I heard a high-pitched giggle and turned to see a group of girls my own age. For half a second, I felt a little flare of hope, but it immediately became clear that these girls weren't here for the taxidermy. Even though it was May, they looked like they were on the way to a Halloween party—one wore a jumpsuit and carried a Chinese parasol, one was in full body armor, and the third wore wings and a gold spandex bodysuit. Another girl in normal clothes followed several paces behind. When she turned to stare at someone's leopard, I saw that her shirt said *I <3 Harry Potter* in yellow puffy paint, and I realized the gold girl was probably supposed to be a Snitch. There must've been a different convention going on in another wing.

"Next?" called the woman behind the conference registration table.

I stepped forward and handed her my confirmation email. "Hi. I'm picking up two badges for Hamish Buchannan."

The woman's eyes widened. "The turkey man? Oh my god, do you work with him?"

"Yes." It was true, but it made me a little sad to hear her say it. Even at home, I usually felt more like his assistant than his daughter.

"Tell him how much I love his work, okay? I'm signed up for his seminar on Saturday. Do you think he'd autograph his book for me?"