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Spring Breakdown

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“I’m sorry, Mother, but I refuse to spend *my* spring break in some disgustingly dirty third world country.” Eliza rolled her eyes dramatically for the benefit of her captive audience at the Carter House breakfast table. “It’s just peachy that you and Dad don’t mind being inoculated with all those toxic shots just so that you can use filthy outhouses, be devoured by mosquitoes, and sleep in rodent-infested tents, but count me out.”

Casey giggled and DJ glanced around to see if Grandmother was anywhere nearby. DJ knew Grandmother didn’t like for the girls to use their cell phones at the table. But exceptions were sometimes made when it was a parent — especially when it was a parent of wealth or influence, like the Wiltons.

Eliza’s forehead creased as she listened to whatever was being said on the other end of the phone. “Thanks anyway, Mother, but I’m passing. Honestly, I’d rather stay right here in boring old Crescent Cove than go with you guys to the ends of the planet. *Y’all have fun now.*” Then she snapped her cell phone shut and used a foul word.

“Eliza Wilton!” exclaimed Grandmother as she entered the dining room. “That’s no way for a well-bred Kentucky debutante to speak.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Carter.” Eliza looked slightly embarrassed. “I’m just so frustrated with my mother!”

“Well, please do control yourself.” Grandmother frowned as she sat down in her regular place at the head of the table and put her napkin in her lap. “Good morning, ladies.”

Like well-trained robots, or Stepford teens, they all chirped back “good morning.” And then Rhiannon asked the blessing. This was a relatively new development, but something that Rhiannon had volunteered to do and, when both DJ and Taylor had backed her, Grandmother had agreed and later on even acted as if it had been her own idea in the first place.

After Rhiannon said “amen,” she turned to Eliza. “So . . . where is it that your mom wants you to go for spring break anyway?”

“*Nepal*.” The way Eliza said the name of the country sounded as if she was swearing again.

“I’ve heard Nepal is an interesting place.” DJ refilled her coffee cup. “I’d love to go there someday.”

Eliza made a face. “Great, I’ll ask my parents if you can take my place.”

“The mountains there are beautiful,” Kriti said quietly.

“If I wanted to see mountains, I’d go to Switzerland,” retorted Eliza.

“I think a trip to Nepal sounds like a fun adventure.” Casey stabbed her fork into a piece of pineapple. “I’d be happy to go too.”

“Maybe you and DJ should flip a coin.” Eliza broke her toast in half. “To see which one of you can go.”

“Well, DJ would need a passport,” said Grandmother wryly. “And with only two weeks before spring break, I don’t think it’s very likely.”

“Too bad.” Eliza directed her sarcasm toward DJ. “It would’ve been fun to see you coming home covered in mosquito bites and suffering from some rare form of tropical dysentery and—”

“*Eliza?*” Grandmother’s brows arched in warning.

“Sorry, Mrs. Carter.” She made a sheepish smile. “I was just joking.”

“Well then . . . ” said Grandmother. “As it turns out, I’ve already made plans for DJ and myself anyway.”

DJ stopped with her spoonful of yogurt in midair. “Plans?”

“Yes. The general has graciously given me the use of his Palm Beach home during the week of spring break.”

“Palm Beach, Florida?” asked Eliza with interest.

“Yes, of course.”

Now DJ wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or irritated. On one hand Palm Beach might be somewhat pleasant—sunshine and sand—but on the other hand, why hadn’t Grandmother asked her *before* accepting the invitation for both of them?

Grandmother smiled at DJ. “Doesn’t that sound lovely, dear?”

“I guess so.”

“You *guess* so?”

“To be honest, you kind of took me by surprise, Grandmother.”

“But isn’t it a pleasant surprise?” Grandmother looked so hopeful that DJ forced herself just to smile and nod.

“Palm Beach sounds good to me.” Taylor glanced out the window where it was raining again. “And I’m sure you won’t miss this weather.”

“My thinking precisely.” Grandmother rubbed her wrist. “My arthritis has been acting up lately, and I thought some warmth and sunshine would be most helpful.”

“So . . . ” Eliza began slowly, directing this to DJ’s grandmother. “If you and DJ are in Palm Beach, does that mean Carter House will be vacated by everyone else that week?”

“Yes, of course.” Grandmother put a spoonful of sugar substitute into her coffee and stirred. “I couldn’t have you girls left here unsupervised.”

“No, no . . . of course not.” Eliza looked slightly miffed now, like maybe she’d planned on spending spring break in “boring old Crescent Cove.” Actually, DJ wouldn’t be surprised, since Eliza had recently developed a crush on a new guy at school. She probably hoped that she and Lane Harris would be dating by spring break. Perhaps she even imagined inviting him over to Carter House while everyone else was gone—and maybe they’d throw some huge house party and get into all kinds of trouble. Really, it wouldn’t surprise DJ a bit. It seemed that Eliza was steadily spinning out of control—like she thought someone was giving prizes for teenage girls with the most messed-up lives.

“So perhaps you’d like to rethink your decision about vacationing with your parents now.” Grandmother peered curiously at Eliza.

“No, thank you.” Eliza firmly shook her head. “I’d rather just go home to Louisville.”

“And stay there by yourself?” Grandmother looked concerned.

“The household staff would be there.”

Grandmother nodded sympathetically. “Yes, I suppose so . . . ” Now she smiled as if an idea was occurring to her. “You know, Eliza, the general’s Palm Beach house is quite roomy. Perhaps you’d like to join us for—”

“*Grandmother!*” DJ felt alarmed now. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck down in Florida with Eliza Wilton for

a whole week. And, besides, didn't Grandmother know how many things could go wrong during spring break—especially with someone like Eliza along?

“What is it, dear?”

“Don't you think you should consult me first?” DJ asked. “I thought it was just you and me going to Palm Beach and now you're inviting Eliza too.” The dining room got very quiet now and DJ could feel all eyes on her. “I mean, what if I decided to invite someone else to come without asking you first? How would you feel about that?”

“Well . . . I suppose that would be acceptable. It's a very large house after all.”

DJ looked hopefully at her other friends now. “Like what if Taylor or Casey or Rhiannon wanted to come.” Then feeling bad, she quickly added, “And Kriti too—what if they all wanted to come down to Palm Beach? Shouldn't they be included too?”

“Are you saying you want to invite *all* the Carter House girls to come with us to Palm Beach?” Grandmother looked slightly appalled and not exactly pleased. DJ thought she had her grandmother over a barrel with this idea. Surely she'd reconsider her invitation to Eliza now.

“Why not?” said DJ. “It seems only fair. I mean, we shouldn't exclude anyone, should we? That doesn't seem very *polite*, does it, Grandmother?”

“Well . . . no, I suppose it's not.” Grandmother smiled stiffly and looked around the table. “All right then . . . let's make this official. I'd like to extend an invitation to any of you who'd like to join us in Palm Beach for spring break.”

“Really?” Casey looked hopeful.

“Yes. Why not?” Grandmother's expression got serious now. “Of course, you'll need to obtain your parents' permission first.

And I'll expect you to cover your own travel expenses. And to contribute to the cost of food and entertainment while we're down there. But, DJ is right, it's only fair to invite everyone along."

"I think that sounds awesome," said Casey. "I just hope my parents will let me go."

"You could tell them that airfare to Florida will probably be cheaper than to California," DJ told her.

"Good point."

"Count me in too," said Taylor. "My mom's touring the Midwest all month, and I'm definitely not into seeing the great American bread belt."

"I don't know if I'll be able to go." Kriti looked uncertain, like maybe she wasn't sure that she was really wanted.

"Wouldn't Palm Beach be more fun than being stuck in the city?" DJ asked her. "I'd think your parents would be glad for you to have some fun, Kriti."

"That's right," added Casey. "You've been working so hard on keeping your grades up. You need a break."

"If it would help, maybe Grandmother can talk to your parents for you," suggested DJ.

"Of course, I'm happy to speak to them." Grandmother nodded as if this new plan was becoming more appealing. "And to anyone else's parents for that matter."

Suddenly it seemed that everyone was talking at once, excitedly planning for bikini shopping and flight booking and parental coaxing, before Grandmother interrupted to remind them that it was time to leave for school.

Then the girls hurried to gather their bags and coats, rushing outside and trying to avoid the rain as they ran toward the two cars. This morning Rhiannon and Kriti were riding with Eliza in her little white Porsche. The others went with DJ. But

as DJ started her car, it occurred to her that Rhiannon had been unusually quiet at breakfast. In fact, she'd never said a word, one way or the other, about joining them in Palm Beach.

DJ turned to Taylor, who was sitting in the passenger seat. "Do you think something's wrong with Rhiannon?"

"She did seem pretty quiet," said Taylor.

"I wonder if she's worried about money." Even as she said this, DJ felt pretty sure that was the problem. "I mean, she might not be able to afford Palm Beach for spring break."

"Duh." This came from Casey in the backseat.

DJ turned around to look at Casey while backing the car out of the driveway. "Okay, I know that's probably got something to do with it. But maybe that's not all. Because, now that I think about it, Rhiannon was quiet last night too. Is she okay?"

"I'm not supposed to say anything." Casey imitated zipping her lips.

"It's not something about Bradford, is it?" DJ glanced at Taylor. "I mean, he seems totally devoted to her."

"No, it's not Bradford," retorted Casey in a slightly know-it-all tone.

"Is it her mom?" asked Taylor.

Now Casey didn't say a thing.

"It is, isn't it?" persisted Taylor.

Still Casey remained silent.

DJ snickered as she drove toward school. "You're a great one for keeping a secret, Casey. You've pretty much divulged it has to do with Rhiannon's mom. Why not just tell us what's up? At least that way we can be praying for her."

"We know her mom's out of rehab," continued Taylor. "But has she fallen off the wagon already?"

"Don't say you heard it from me."

“So that’s it?” asked DJ. “Her mom’s using again?”

“That’s what Rhiannon thinks. She hasn’t heard from her mom for more than a week now. And they had been in contact almost every day before that.”

“Well, my rehab counselor said that it’s pretty common for a person in recovery to go back to their drug of choice . . . at least once.” Taylor sighed. “It kind of seals the deal.”

“Huh?” DJ was confused.

“It’s like that last painful reminder that you don’t want to go back to your old ways.” Taylor tipped down the visor mirror and touched up her lip gloss.

“But you haven’t had a drink yet, have you, Taylor?” Casey asked.

“No way.” Taylor firmly shook her head as she tossed the lip gloss back into her bag. “But that’s probably because I’m actually scared to go back to that place. I’m afraid that if I drink again, even if it’s just once . . . well, that it’ll be all over with and that I’ll never get sober again.”

“I suppose that’s a healthy fear,” admitted DJ. “But you’re a strong person, Taylor. I’ll bet you’d get it back together—even if you did slip up.”

“Maybe . . . but I just don’t want to go there.” Taylor was counting something on her fingers now. “Do you realize that I’m almost up to seventy-five days of sobriety now?”

“Congratulations!” DJ smiled at her. “We should throw you a party.”

“No, thanks. I’ll pass.”

“Back to Rhiannon,” said Casey. “What should we do?”

“I don’t know what we *can* do.” DJ pulled into the school parking lot, snagging a spot not too far from the main entrance. “I mean, besides praying and being understanding.”

“I know something we can do,” said Taylor as they got out of the car. “We can all help get some money together for Rhiannon to go to Palm Beach with us. That might help distract her from her mom’s messes.”

“Yeah, she could focus on our messes instead,” teased Casey.

“Actually, that’s a great idea,” said DJ as they hurried across the street. “I’m willing to contribute whatever I can for her.”

“I wish I could help too,” said Casey. “But I’ll be doing good if I can get my parents to agree to pay my way.”

Just then Taylor pointed to where Eliza and the others were going into the building ahead of them. “Maybe we can get Ms. Eliza Wilton to pitch in for Rhiannon. We all know she can afford it.”

“We know she *can* afford it,” said DJ. “But the big question is will she willingly fork it over?”

Taylor chuckled like she knew a secret. “Oh, I think we might be able to come up with some ways to influence her.”

“But what if Rhiannon won’t accept charity?” asked Casey as they jogged up the steps to the door. “She can be pretty sensitive about that kind of thing.”

“Somehow, we’ll figure it out,” DJ assured them. “Somehow, *all* of the Carter House girls are going to make it to Palm Beach for spring break.” Of course, even as she said this, she had some serious doubts. Was it really a good idea for all of them to be down in Florida together? What if things got out of hand? Even worse, what if Taylor fell off the wagon? Suddenly DJ envisioned the Carter House girls starring in a bad episode of *Girls Gone Wild*, with her grandmother having a major meltdown, and everything just totally falling apart. But then she realized how ridiculous that image was and she couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Casey shook the rain off of her jacket.

“I was just imagining spring break turning into spring breakdown.” DJ chuckled.

“And what would be surprising about that?” asked Taylor.

As DJ hurried to first class, she had to wonder . . . what *would* be so surprising about that?