

The
Christmas
Wager

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Friday,
December 17



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Bella

Bella, what did you *do*?” Luisa groaned as she leaned across her desk toward me, her voice so low I almost couldn’t hear. Her knack for the dramatic made me grin. In the time we’d worked and lived together, I’d got used to my best friend being a little over-the-top. Somehow she always expected the worst and was more shocked than surprised when whatever life-altering catastrophe she’d envisioned didn’t materialize.

“I didn’t do anything,” I said, before hesitating a little. “I don’t *think* so, anyway.”

Maybe Luisa’s instincts were spot-on, and I had messed up because at Dillon & Prescott, being summoned to my boss’s office at 8:32 a.m. on a Friday was rarely good news. Valerie Johansen probably hadn’t had her second cup of coffee yet, which meant she’d be more direct, our internal code for “blunt,” than usual. Although whether that was possible had often been subject to intense debate.

“Are you sure?” Luisa didn’t need to whisper, considering Valerie’s envy-inducing, freshly remodeled corner office was one floor above ours. As mid-level minions—something I’d been working hard to fix—Luisa and I had a cubicle that was dead center of the building, devoid of most natural light. Even though Dillon & Prescott designed and built ex-

clusive mansions and commercial structures, this floor of the national headquarters in Los Angeles left a lot more planning to be desired. Considering we were always among the first to arrive and last to leave, it was a wonder we didn't need three pairs of sunglasses when we stepped into the California sun.

Luisa nibbled the tip of her pen, her full, glossy lips in a semi-pout and hazel eyes flashing with concern. "I wonder what you did to make her mad."

"Nothing, honest, but if there was anything, I'm sure I can handle it."

I tried hard not to appear flustered as I got up, which didn't work because in my haste I knocked over my pen cup, sending my ruler, scissors, and pencils flying. A few of our colleagues turned their heads in our direction, including Miles Serpico, whom I'd ignored as much as humanly possible for the last few months. He craned his neck, no doubt trying to eavesdrop on our conversation and gather any bit of information he could use to get ahead. I shot him a piercing stare, wishing there was some truth in the saying *if looks could kill*.

I turned back to Luisa and lowered my voice. "I handed in the quarterly reports before they were due, and put the brochure for the McClellan building together, exactly how Valerie asked."

"Did you though?" Luisa joined me in giving Miles another glare. She didn't care for him either. "You added more about the amenities and swapped out the fitness studio photos."

"Yeah, because they were better."

"Agreed, but maybe she didn't approve of the initiative."

"I guess I'll find out."

As I gathered my notepad and pen, I gave the desk I'd worked at for nearly three years a lingering glance in case I

never saw it again. Maybe I'd picked up Luisa's habit of projecting potential disaster, but employees from our floor who were ordered upstairs on such short notice generally didn't return. The thought filled me with fear. I loved my job, had worked so hard to heave myself a rung or two up the corporate ladder one late night at a time. I didn't want to slide back down because I'd made an impulsive decision.

"If anyone from security shows up to pack my stuff, will you message me?" I whispered. When Luisa gave me a nod and wished me good luck, I returned the gestures with what felt like a grimace before dashing for the stairs.

My pulse quickened when I pushed the heavy gray metal door open. Two seconds after slamming shut behind me with a solid clunk, it opened again. When I turned, Miles stood at the bottom step, one of the typical snide grins he usually sent my way plastered across his face. He was a handsome guy. Tall, square jaw, great head of hair, but he was pompous and ruthless. Something I'd learned the hard way.

"Trouble in paradise?" he said.

Instead of a reply, I gave him his third withering look of the day, which wasn't even a record, and continued upward, telling myself to keep calm and not let him get to me. Considering our history, it was easier said than done, and getting more difficult with each passing day.

Another flight of stairs later, and it was as if I'd arrived in a different world. Up here, instead of the splotchy coffee-stained, faded green carpet from my office, the floors were thick planks of polished oak. The kind where you fretted over leaving dusty prints in your wake, no matter how many times you'd wiped your shoes.

A sleek Christmas tree stood in one corner, covered with gold baubles and fancy crystal candy canes. This sophisticated Fraser fir looked nothing like the fake, sad, second-

hand one on our level, which Luisa insisted we yank from the broom closet every December and decorate with yards of popcorn garland to hide the missing branches.

She'd gone all out with her side of our cubicle this year, too, with red tinsel and sparkly silver star ornaments, a giant plaid stocking, and a set of white pom-pom string lights. Last week, she'd added a motion-activated foot-high Santa, who wiggled his hips and sang "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" every time we moved until the batteries *mysteriously* disappeared. In contrast, my desk, which was the kind of run-down, chipped brown laminate relic from the '70s everyone had on our floor, was almost bare.

Unlike Luisa, I didn't care for the holidays. Not since my dad walked out on Mom and me three weeks before Christmas when I was ten. Things had never been the same between us since. Or between me and Mom. I couldn't wait to get the whole season over with for another year.

I pressed on. The scent of freshly brewed coffee from expensive chrome machines filled the air while I hurried past gleaming wooden desks and an array of conference rooms complete with bespoke oval tables, designer leather chairs, and sweeping views of the city. Only a couple of the rooms were already occupied. Unlike the staff downstairs, who always reminded me of manic bees buzzing around a huge hive, the employees on this level were permitted to arrive by a leisurely 10:00 a.m., oozing a serene professionalism. They waltzed into the foyer wearing expensive suits and starched shift dresses, and I felt self-conscious in my Target and H&M combos.

I only glimpsed this upper floor a handful of times a year, whenever I'd drop off reports for Valerie or attend the rare meeting, and each time I'd dream of being transferred up here on a permanent basis. It would certainly wipe the

perma-smirk off Miles's face, although I refused to imagine his victorious sneer if Valerie fired me today.

It was no secret that I was ambitious and driven. I wouldn't celebrate my thirtieth birthday until the summer, but I'd set my sights on a high-flying career before graduating from high school in the tiny town of Bart's Hollow in Ontario, Canada. I'd escaped one of the most frigid places on earth as soon as I could, trying to leave behind the memories of my father's abandonment and the arguments with my mother that ensued thereafter, heading to Toronto to study business and work for a few years, and then on to L.A. I'd applied for jobs in California well before I'd received my U.S. passport, an uncomplicated task thanks to Dad originally hailing from Seattle, and the offer from Dillon & Prescott had been too good to refuse.

I hadn't been *home* in almost four years. Truth was, Bart's Hollow hadn't felt like home for ages before then, and I still didn't like small towns where everyone knew everybody's business and insisted on mixing in. Dad had always raved about the West Coast, and I'd dreamed of living in L.A. since I'd watched the first episode of *Million Dollar Listing* in my living room in Bart's Hollow during a snowstorm. In *April*. Couldn't believe it when I saw Luisa's ad for a roommate in a coffee shop the day after I got here. We hit it off immediately, and when a job opened up on my team, I helped get her an interview. I loved living in L.A. with Luisa, the sprawling city never short on new things and places to discover, which she'd often introduced me to as she'd arrived here from New Mexico a few years before I had.

Some people felt sick at the prospect of moving to a new town alone whereas all I'd ever seen was opportunity. After this, I could never go back to somewhere like Bart's Hollow. No, I needed things to work out at Dillon & Prescott.

Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself that whatever Valerie said today, things would be all right. The ground beneath me would eventually steady itself. Wouldn't it?

When I rounded the corner, Blaise, Valerie's assistant, who was twice my age, made big eyes at me over his round glasses. He covered the mouthpiece of his headset and in his slight French accent said, "Where have you been?" Not waiting for my reply, he pointed to the door marked **VALERIE JOHANSEN, VP OF WEST COAST & CENTRAL SALES** and shrugged. "Don't ask me what she wants, just go. Make sure you knock."

I wiped my clammy palms on my black-and-white pencil skirt, and gave my shirt a tug, hoping my cheeks weren't about to match its shade of pink. Hearing Blaise whisper a harried, "Vas-y! Go, go," I took another step and knocked on the opaque door, which immediately turned clear. Privacy glass was reserved for the elite, something else I'd added to my future-office wish list. I wanted to be in the big leagues, swim with the big fish, and all those other clichés. Maybe run my own company one day when I felt I'd gained enough corporate experience. That was the ultimate dream.

As soon as Valerie saw me, she raised a hand and gestured for me to step inside. My boss was in her early forties and wore black slacks and tailored tops. There never seemed a strand out of place on her short blond pixie cut, which accentuated a set of perfect cheekbones. A solitaire engagement ring and platinum wedding band glinted on one of her manicured fingers and I spotted the latest fitness tracker on her slender wrist. Rumor had it she wouldn't sleep until she'd reached her daily goal of twenty-five thousand steps. I bet sometimes she did those before lunch.

Judging by the photographs on the sleek charcoal desk, her life was perfect. Valerie had a doting husband and two

cherubic kids under the age of six. Whoever said women couldn't have it all had never met my boss.

"Bella, good to see you," she said, her voice smooth. "Have a seat."

Inviting me to sit had to be a good thing. I glanced at the phone in my hand. Luisa hadn't messaged, and the image of my things being shoved into a cardboard box was quickly fading.

"How long have you been with our company?" Valerie asked once I'd settled in.

"A little under three years."

"How are you enjoying your career with us?"

"Fantastic. I love what I do."

Valerie put her elbows on the desk and steepled her fingers underneath her chin. "Let's try that again. Tell me what you *really* think, not what you presume I want to hear."

Half expecting quicksand or a trapdoor to appear beneath me, I shifted my body as I attempted to come up with whatever answer she was angling for. I meant what I'd said. I liked the company, for the most part, and had no intention of jeopardizing what I had. Then again, some things bugged me, and she *had* asked. Impulsiveness gave me a shove.

"I wish my career would advance at a faster pace."

"You went from marketing assistant to team lead in record time," Valerie said. "You leapfrogged everybody, including those who joined before you."

"True, but I work hard, and seniority isn't necessarily the best performance indicator."

"Fair. You applied internally for your current job six months ago. I recall you specifically wanted to report to me because of the exposure you'd get in sales so you could become an associate." She sat back, waited a few beats before

continuing. “The competition between you and Miles Serpico was fierce. You both put up a good fight.”

I forced myself not to grimace at Miles’s name as I brushed away the thought of him putting up a very *bad* fight. “I’m thankful for the opportunity you gave me.”

“The best person won. Plus, you and Luisa are a good combo.” Valerie paused, crossing one slim leg over the other.

Catching a glimpse of her red-soled shoes, I tried not to stare. I wanted a pair of those power heels someday. Preferably in the not-too-distant future. Time to be a little more assertive and direct, like my boss. “I can offer the company more than it’s currently allowing me to give,” I said. “A lot more.”

“I agree.”

“Yes, and . . . Wait, you *do*?”

“Handy hint, Bella.” Valerie lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Learn how to take a compliment. You can’t seem incredulous, particularly when you’ve sung your own praises.”

“Yes, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” She tapped an index finger on her desk. “I’ve watched you the past few months and you’re good at what you do. You take initiative. The input you gave during the meeting about the Carey project was impressive. Your research and insights into her vision pretty much sealed the deal. She still asks about you, apparently.”

Mariah Carey asked about me? That was *huge*. I sat up straighter. “Thank you. I appreciate your recognition. I’d love to work with her again one day.”

“I’d say the feeling’s mutual. Also, I liked your changes to the McClellan brochure. Far better than the original.”

“I agree.”

Valerie chuckled. “Two for two. You’re a fast learner, which is also why I wanted to see you. Bella, I’m about to give you the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“Oh?” The word came out all breathy and high, and I planted my heels into the floor to stop myself from trembling hard enough to break open the San Andreas Fault.

“As you know, we’re opening a branch in Denver to help take on our growing clientele. I’m thinking of suggesting you be the one to build and lead both the sales and marketing teams there. You’d have full autonomy, and a considerable raise to match the new job title, Associate Vice President of West Coast & Central Sales.”

Associate VP? I opened my mouth, ready to pepper her with a plethora of questions like *Are you sure? Why me?* Or simply *Huh?* And hold on a second . . .

“You want me to move to Colorado?”

“I’d mentor you from here until you get your footing, and you’d continue to report to me. It’s a fantastic prospect. A huge promotion.”

Valerie was right. This was the role of my dreams, but I loved my life in L.A. Running the sales and marketing teams of a new branch was an incredible opportunity though, just like she said. I’d be one of the youngest associate VPs in the history of the firm. It might put me on the fast track to becoming a shareholder. Perhaps I could return to California and take Valerie’s place when she got promoted. Maybe this would finally give me the push to overcome what Luisa called my *impostor syndrome* feelings while I was at it.

“Thank you for thinking of me for this position. When will I move to Denver?”

Valerie gave me a knowing smile. “Not so fast. While I appreciate your enthusiasm, I said I’m *considering* you for the job. It’s not yours yet.”

“Oh?” I said, trying not to let my disappointment show.

“First, I’m giving you an assignment to see what else you’re capable of. Then I’ll decide.” She slid a manila folder across the desk. “Maple Falls.”

“Maple Falls? I don’t think I’ve heard of it. Is that near Denver?”

“About ninety minutes west of the airport. A small town in the mountains, quite picturesque and idyllic. There’s a property we’ve had our eye on, a building with an ancient knickknack store.” She waved a hand. “Holiday trinkets and such. It’s failing and has lost money for years. We want to transform it into a high-end duplex, and if all goes well, expand more throughout the town. Give the place some real class. Make it a high-end destination.”

“Fabulous,” I said, my smile faltering a little. She was sending me to a *small* town?

“I want you to negotiate the purchase of said property with the owner. I’ve spoken to him on the phone but he’s old-school and will only consider an offer presented in person. I can’t fit the trip into my schedule because of the shareholders’ holiday retreat.”

“You said the owner’s motivated to sell?”

“Definitely. All the details, documents, and contracts are in there. The only blank part is the placeholder for the price, which you’ll agree with the owner and within the range I’ve provided.” She paused, looked directly at me. “Not a cent more than what I’ve specified, Bella, do you hear? Frankly, you shouldn’t need to go anywhere near that high. I’d finalize this deal for the lowest amount with my eyes closed if I could do it myself. I expect you to do the same and prove you’re up for the challenge.”

“Yes, understood.” I thought about the research I’d undertake, the plans I’d draw up, not to mention the warm

clothes I'd need to buy considering I'd discarded almost all of mine since I'd left Canada. "I'll be ready first thing Monday morning."

"Try again. You leave today."

My eyebrows shot up. "On a Friday?"

"Problem?"

"No, I don't have anything planned." Not entirely true, but Luisa would understand my bailing on going to a new club she'd managed to get opening-night VIP passes for despite insisting it was impossible.

"Get me the property for a steal and you'll also receive a *very* nice bonus," Valerie said. "I want this deal wrapped up before Christmas. Blaise has made the travel arrangements for you. Your flight leaves soon, so you'd best get moving."

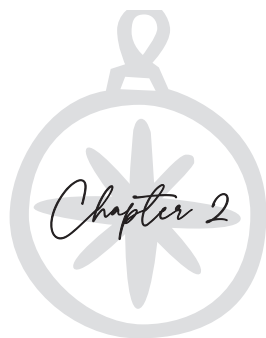
"Of course," I said, jumping up. "Thank you."

Valerie's eyes narrowed. "Show me I made the right decision by choosing you for your current role, and in telling the partners you may be the best candidate for Denver." She stared at me, and I wondered if she was assessing my cheap outfit, perhaps already on the verge of reconsidering having given the Maple Falls assignment to me. "*Do not* let me down."

"I won't," I said.

As she waved me from her office, I silently vowed that come tomorrow I'd fly back to L.A. with a signed contract under my arm. The promotion, the bonus, the life I'd always envisioned and the reassurance I needed that my career was moving in the right direction would finally be mine.

Nothing—*nobody*—could stop me.



Jesse

As the redbrick building that housed Always Noelle on Town Square came into view, I let out a contented sigh. For the past two days I'd repaired a house in the next town over, fixing, fixing the shoddy electrical work of an unlicensed fraud. With the extension cables he'd stapled to the walls, I'd wondered how the place hadn't burned down before I'd been sent to fix it. So far this Friday afternoon, I hadn't received any emergency calls from work. Good, because even my bones were tired. Before enjoying a quiet evening at home though, it was time for my daily drop-in to check on Pops. See if he needed help with anything at the store or in his apartment upstairs.

Always Noelle had been in Maple Falls and our family for generations. It was a place where I'd spent at least an hour every day after school as a kid. I'd built Christmas-pillow forts with Mom in the back room, and sipped cocoa from moose mugs, even in June. Named after my great-great-grandmother, Always Noelle, in its heyday, had had customers who traveled for miles all year round to visit the Colorado Mountains' premier holiday shop. Unfortunately, not so much anymore.

I parked my truck between two mounds of snow left over from the latest storm, got out, and pulled my shoulder

blades together to ease the tension in my back. The blast of freezing air assaulted my ears, reminding me Christmas, my favorite of all the holidays, was only a week away. Apparently, we had a harsh winter ahead of us after that, but I didn't mind. There was no shortage of things to do around here no matter the weather.

Two steps later and my phone buzzed in my hand. This was the third time Elijah had bugged me today about meeting him in Denver. By the look of things, he wasn't ready to quit.

Elijah: *Come to the city! Crash at my place.*

Me: *Not tonight. Wrecked. Tomorrow afternoon?*

Elijah: *OK Gramps*

Truth was, if my best friend still lived in Maple Falls, I'd have happily met for a few beers. However, I had no intention of making the seventy-minute trip to his place in the city after my boss, Kirk, had filled my week with hot tub installations and the rough-in of a new commercial build.

"Jeez, you *are* a gramps," I muttered to myself. I was thirty-one, not a senior, but that thought wasn't enough to change my mind about staying home.

Flipping up the collar of my thick jacket, I tried to remember if I had anything other than dog food in the fridge. If the leftover pizza had gone stale, I'd get takeout, which would do fine as I vegged in front of the TV with Buddy, my sandy-colored Belgian shepherd. I'd hop around Netflix until we both fell asleep. Compete to see who could snore the loudest.

As I crossed the street, I noticed the car parked directly in front of Pops's two-story building had an Avis sticker in the back window. Definitely an out-of-towner. As rare as they were these days, I hoped it was a tourist doing some serious holiday shopping here, which we were badly in need of.

Always Noelle had turned a profit for decades. I still remembered the day my mother took over the daily opera-

tions from my grandparents, when I was fifteen. I'd never seen her smile so bright. She loved the idea of the store being passed down generation to generation, and when I'd helped her in Always Noelle after school, she'd always told me how she could hardly wait for the day it was my turn to keep the tradition alive, whenever that might be.

Nevertheless, Mom and Dad knew I'd been more interested in becoming an electrician, and being the amazing parents they were, they supported my choice fully. I'd always been fascinated by how power was generated and used, plus I thought I had plenty of time to take over Always Noelle one day. Then everything changed nine and a half years ago when my parents died and my grandparents took back ownership of the store even though it was long past their time to do so.

More recently, interest in Always Noelle from visitors and tourists had waned. People bought most of their stuff online. Some days Pops didn't take in a single dime. I looked at the store, wishing I could quit my job or at least reduce my hours to help out more. Both were impossible. Not when I still owed money from my own failed electrical contracting company in Denver. I'd started that venture when I was twenty-eight because I still hadn't been able to face taking over Always Noelle, even if it felt like the last connection I had with my parents. The memories of them were still too present, too painful.

I'd come back to my hometown two years ago when we lost Grams to cancer, hoping everyone would assume my swift return was only because Pops was now alone and needed me, and not also because my company had crashed and burned. I'd only confessed my failure to my grandfather, my ex-girlfriend, and Elijah, and the shame of it still dug deep.

Thankfully, the one thing Maple Falls never ran low on was community spirit. About three thousand individuals called this place home. I'd grown up here. Convinced Kirk to take me on as an electrical apprentice after I'd graduated from high school, worked for him as a journeyman until I left for Denver, and he'd hired me again as soon as I'd returned. I loved this place, where I knew almost everyone, and we all looked out for one another. At times it almost felt as if our sleepy little hollow had a heartbeat of its very own.

Glancing at the out-of-towner's rental car again, a sudden thought made me frown. If this wasn't a tourist, it might be another of those company reps trying to make a fast buck. Pops already had a huge inventory of baubles, managers, and ornaments, plus enough garland to wrap around the globe at least twice. This could be the fourth time in just over a month that Pops was being accosted by another vendor either in person or on the phone. People who tried talking him into buying more Christmas inventory he couldn't return. That detail was typically buried so deep in the fine print, my grandfather wouldn't have located it with the Hubble telescope. There was no limit to the lengths some people went to grab cash from an old man. It set my blood on fire.

"*Shit*," I said, which would've earned me a stern talking-to from Grams if she were still alive, but I hoped I'd make it to the store before Pops's finances took another hit.

As I pushed the front door open, the set of brass bells hanging from a hook on the ceiling jingled, and I noticed the thick layer of dust in the window display. Something else I quickly added to my list of stuff to take care of.

Willing the visitor to be a tourist picking up a few gifts, I stepped inside. When I didn't hear the clunk of Pops's heavy oak cane coming toward me, I relaxed a little. Maybe the cli-

ent had already left, and my grandfather was napping in his frayed olive-green corduroy armchair in the back room amid a plethora of festive merchandise. Once I'd found him asleep with a set of fuzzy antlers on his head and a smile on his face.

Movement at the very far end of the store caught my eye, and I saw a woman with her back turned to me, a tumble of dark hair cascading down her shoulders. From what I could see, she had one of Pops's hand-painted ceramic baubles in her hand. She held it up as it spun in a gentle circle from the ruby ribbon she held between her fingers. My grandfather was still nowhere in sight. If this lady was undecided about her purchases thus far, it was up to me to help seal the deal.

Another two steps and the floor creaked beneath my weight. At six foot three I was near incapable of making a stealthy approach, particularly in my work boots. The woman turned and smiled, making my focus immediately snap to her heart-shaped lips, wide emerald eyes, and the smattering of freckles on her nose.

"Beautiful," I said, quickly pointing at the ornament in case she thought I meant her. She *was* beautiful, but it would've been a bit inappropriate to blurt that out. "Great choice."

"Thanks, it's for my best friend," she said. "She *loves* Christmas. I bet she'd love this store, too. Isn't the building incredible?"

"It really is."

"Have you been here before?"

"Once or twice."

"The owner's fabulous, isn't he?" she continued, eyes lighting up. "Such a gentleman."

I grinned, her enthusiasm infectious. "Someone told me it runs in the family."

"I believe it," she said with a laugh. "I bet the Harrison charm goes back multiple generations. Are you a local?"

"Guilty as charged. What brings you to town? Vacation? Or hours of shopping at the oldest and best Christmas store in Colorado?" Maybe if she was here for the holidays, she'd ask for tips on places to see or trails to explore, in which case I'd be happy to help.

"Just a bit of business," she said, and before I could ask anything else, I heard the distinctive clunk of my grandfather coming toward us with his cane.

"Ah, I see you two have met," Pops said when I turned around. "Ms. Ross, this is my grandson, Jesse Harrison. Jesse, this is Bella Ross from Dillon & Prescott."

Despite a slight look of surprise after learning my identity, Bella gifted me another of her smiles. "Pleasure to meet you."

Her expression didn't enchant me as much this time. Damn it. Seems I'd got it right after all. She *was* another of those company reps.

"How about we all go to the back and talk?" Pops said, gesturing for us to follow. "I've made plenty of cocoa for everyone."

Sure enough, when I breathed in, I detected the familiar rich chocolate-and-cinnamon scent. If my grandfather had prepared one of his legendary hot chocolates for our visitor, she couldn't be that bad. Then again, Pops was the most trusting person I knew. Someone who always saw the good in others. It wasn't necessarily a trait I'd inherited.

We made our way into the back room where Pops assured Bella she could have the ornament still clasped in her hands for free. At least she tried to refuse as he wrapped it in a box for her, but he insisted.

"That's so kind, thank you very much," Bella said as she and my grandfather sat down.

I remained standing, especially when I spotted her bag on the sideboard. Black leather, shiny silver buckle. Corporate looking. My eyes shifted to the table—first to my favorite moose mugs filled with hot chocolate, and then to the set of papers lying between them.

Any remaining goodwill disappeared. Those documents looked like a contract. More fine print tricking Pops into buying stuff he couldn't sell or return.

"Jeez, you people are relentless," I said, shaking my head, thinking sweet-smiling Ms. Ross was about to be turfed from Always Noelle faster than she could say *gift-wrapped*.

"I'm sorry?" she said. If she was taken aback by my bluntness, she didn't show it.

"Whatever you're selling, we're not interested. You can leave now."

"Please excuse my grandson," Pops said. "He can be overprotective at times. Not to mention abrupt." When I opened my mouth to contradict him, he added, "Jesse, Ms. Ross came all the way from Los Angeles."

"It really is a pleasure to meet you." She flashed me another dazzler that would've worked a few minutes ago, but now left me about as glacial as the North Pole.

"I don't care where she's from," I said. "We don't want more stock, and whatever this is"—I pointed to the papers on the table—"he's not signing. As I said, you can see yourself out."

Bella blinked. "I think there's some confusion, Jesse. I'm not selling anything."

"That's right," Pops said. "Ms. Ross is buying."

"Buying what?"

Bella gestured to my grandfather. "I'll let you share whatever you're comfortable with, Mr. Harrison. I wouldn't want to speak out of turn."

"Please, I've asked you to call me Clarence."

"Then I must insist you call me Bella."

"Can somebody please tell *me* what the hell's going on?"

I said.

My grandfather suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Ms. Ross . . . *Bella* has convinced me to sell the store. The entire property actually."

"She did *what*?"

Pops's expression tightened. "Jesse, it's time. It has been for a while."

"Don't you think we should discuss this first?" I said gently before glancing in Bella's direction. "By that, I mean privately."

"Oh, I'll leave you two in a minute." Bella slid a pen across the table, nodded at Pops. "You only have the last two pages to initial and sign, and we're done."

"Are you kidding?" I exploded, before turning to my grandfather, needing to shut this conversation down whether Bella was in the room or not. "Pops, you haven't consulted an attorney or a Realtor."

His eyes darted around the room. "Well, actually, I did this past week. It's all aboveboard. The contract is fair, and the designs are good."

"What designs? Show me."

"We've already gone over everything." Bella threw me a glare that disappeared too fast for my grandfather to notice. "Mr. Harrison was in touch with my boss on various occasions and my being here is only a formality."

I ignored her as I snatched up the pages. Pops was right,

the designs were decent. Two open-concept apartments with high-end finishings and appliances, the exterior of the building kept intact. Moving on, I scanned through the eye-watering legalese. When I spotted the purchase price scribbled in by hand, I let out a loud laugh.

“Is this a joke? It’s worth a hell of a lot more.”

“Clarence believes it’s fair,” Bella said. “We discussed the terms at length.”

“Did you now?” I scoffed. “The only way this is fair is if we traveled through a wormhole and ended up in 1985. Did you happen to drive here in a DeLorean, Ms. Ross?”

“Great Scott, I love that film,” Pops said, but judging from Bella’s blank stare the classic *Back to the Future* references went straight over her head. Not a movie buff, obviously.

“No way he’s signing this,” I said. “He and I are going to have a discussion. *Alone*.” I shoved the pen back in her direction, for the first time taking in the paper-thin coat she’d draped over the chair next to her. And what was with those heels in Maple Falls, in December? We’d had a foot of snow four days ago. A smirk tugged the corners of my lips. “You’re from L.A., huh? Figures.”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant.” She tilted her chin. “I also believe selling the property is very much up to Mr. Harrison.”

“I don’t care what you believe,” I said. “You’ve no right to—”

“That’s enough.” My grandfather’s voice was firm, a tone he rarely used but which always meant his decision was final. He rubbed his temple. “Bella, Jesse has a point. He and I need to talk.”

I almost punched the air, whereas her eyes went wide as she said, “Wait, we agreed—”

Pops held up a hand. "I'm not saying no but give me a little time. I got carried away."

She smiled, the cracks in her smooth facade almost beginning to show. "Of course, yes, for sure. How much time do you think you'll need, Clarence?"

"As much as he wants, so, for the third time"—I indicated with my head—"the exit's—"

"Jesse," Pops warned.

"Fine. The exit's over there . . . if you please." Crossing my arms, I looked down at Bella until she stood. She was half a head shorter than me despite those ridiculous shoes but didn't seem the least bit impressed by my posturing, maintaining eye contact the entire time. A small part of me begrudgingly—and *very* silently—admitted her assertiveness made her more attractive. I told myself to snap out of it as I watched her gather her things. Beautiful and confident or not, she was trouble.

Bella looked at me. "Again, it was *such* a pleasure meeting you, Jesse."

"Same to you, *Ms. Ross*."

I didn't move again, waiting until Pops and Bella had said goodbye and the front door shut behind her. Once she'd gone, I slumped into a chair. Tried to ignore the delicate floral scent of her perfume lingering in the air.

"I can't believe it," I said as soon as my grandfather returned. "Her offer was ridiculous. Why did you even consider it? Why didn't you mention any of this to me before?"

"I didn't want to trouble you. I didn't want to trouble anyone."

"With what, exactly?"

Pops stared at me for a while but didn't say a word. He hobbled to one of the many pine sideboards, slid open a

drawer, and removed a stack of envelopes tied together with a thick blue elastic band. From my vantage point I could already see the big red letters on the top one—**PAST DUE**. My heart sank.

“How much are we talking about?” I said.

He fanned the envelopes out on the table. “A lot more than I can afford.”

“I’ll get another loan.”

“No, I can’t let you do that. You still have the one from your Denver business to take care of as well as the other you took out to help me without my knowing. I won’t have you digging yourself into a bigger financial hole on my account.”

A pang of guilt hit me. “If it helps you keep the store and this property, then—”

“No, Jesse. I meant what I said. It’s time to sell.”

“Only if you absolutely have to, and not to her. Anyone but her.”

“The offer wasn’t bad.”

“Are you joking? It was daylight robbery.”

“All cash, no contingencies or inspection. I could pay you back and it would cover a chunk of the mortgage. At least the building will be the same from the outside.”

I shifted in my seat, guilt sitting heavy in my chest for not wanting to take over the store years ago. It had been too hard. The memories of my parents were still everywhere, but now we faced the prospect of losing the property altogether. My grandfather wasn’t the only person who needed a bit more time to think. Shaking my head, I reached over the table and grabbed the contracts Bella had left. Before Pops could protest, I stuffed them in my jacket pocket.

“I’ll read through them again. Listen, I’ll help you sell if it’s really what you want.”

“What I want, Jesse, is to leave more than debt for you behind.”

“Pops, don’t worry about me. Maybe we can find someone in town.”

He shook his head. “Not for the amount of money we need. You know I’ve been approached in the past and the offers were lower than Dillon & Prescott’s.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I’m still sure we can do better than the one Brinch made.”

“Brinch?”

“Bella the Grinch. *Brinch*. Seems fitting.”

Pops let out a chuckle. “You didn’t think she was delightful?”

“Absolutely not,” I muttered, trying to push any lingering thoughts about Bella from my head. “In fact, if she has any sense at all, she’s already heading back to L.A.”