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Present day

Ella Renders stepped into the lobby of the Starbright Hotel. The light here was bright compared to outside, where the sun had barely crested the horizon. She strode straight to Kari White, who held out a key card before Ella could even ask.

“I could only get you as high as the third floor today. Room 312.” Kari glanced up from her computer. “Hopefully that’s still okay.”

“That should be perfect, actually.” Ella saluted her with the card. “You’re the best.”

She crossed the marble floor and stepped onto the elevator, her messenger bag bumping her hip with each step. The hotel was only five stories but still tall enough for what she needed. When it was originally built, the contractors carved out the mountain only enough to expose the flat land needed for the structure. They left the rest intact, which made for a nice view from the upper stories on the rear side. And this time of day, several deer liked to roam the edge of the man-made bluff for breakfast.

Ella slid the key into the door and slipped inside before she drew too much attention to herself. Now, to see if the deer would cooperate today or not. Slowly, she raised the curtains and studied the still-dim view before her.

“Come on. Come on.”

There.

Movement to her right. Squinting, she made out three—no, four—deer stepping carefully through the trees a few feet away. A breath slipped from her lips, and she quickly pulled out her sketch pad and several pencils.

Maybe if she had a fancy camera, she could simply capture the animals to study later, when things weren't so rushed. But her phone was a bottom-of-the-line, hand-me-down piece of junk. Anything she tried to shoot through this window would come out blurry and useless. Sketching was the next best thing. Good thing Kari didn't mind her borrowing a room several days a week.

Every now and then, all the upper-story rooms were booked and she didn't get this chance. But when she did, she grabbed it.

Ella climbed up on the little table next to the window and crisscrossed her legs. *Okay, deer. How will you pose for me today?*

The graceful creatures didn't realize they were the object of an artist trying to capture their images. Their focus remained on the tender grass at the base of the trees and a few choice leaves. The sun rose higher, casting everything in a golden glow and sending coral streaks across the sky.

“This is beautiful, God,” Ella whispered in reverence. “Thank You for sharing Your creativity. You knew I needed this sliver of peace, didn't You?”

As if in reply, a buck wandered into view directly across from Ella. She sucked in a breath and quickly worked on his

outline. Majestic. She traced his antlers with her gaze and tried to mimic its crooked angles and points on her paper.

Flipping to a new page, she started another set, this time with several deer together. But a sound somewhere outside startled the animals. They all raised their heads, stiffening, before turning and leaping back into the shelter of the woods.

Her fingers loosened around her pencil. "Time's up."

Ella sighed, then rose and stretched. She'd been able to work for half an hour this morning. Not terrible, all things considered. But had she created anything worthy? Sure, it was always good to practice her sketching and work on new things. But eventually, she needed her artwork to bring in actual income. Because if she had to live with her stepmother, Angela, much longer ... well, she wasn't sure what she would do, but nothing that would end well.

She stashed her paper and pencils back in her bag. Time to face reality. Who knew the next time she'd be able to steal another moment like this?

"God, grant me peace and strength today. And please help me not to say anything I'll live to regret."

Another glimpse of the room proved she'd put everything back to rights. Okay. On to the next task on her list.

Pulling the door closed, she spun and her messenger bag slammed into something, throwing her off-center.

Make that *someone*.

"I am so sorry." She brushed her hair out of her eyes. The impact had flipped it every which way. "Are you okay?"

Her gaze moved up to the face of the person with whom she'd collided. Hazel eyes. Light-brown hair, the perfect length for running fingers through. Five o'clock shadow ... which was ridiculous, because it wasn't even eight in the morning. And what was she doing? Taking inventory? Though he did look familiar.

“I’m fine.” His voice was mellow and sounded slightly amused. “Are you okay? I think you’re more impacted than I am.”

“How silly is that? I mean, you’re the one who got whacked by my bag.” If only she could bury her own head in that bag now. Why couldn’t she shut up? So much for God keeping her from saying anything she’d regret.

“True enough.” He grinned, and a dimple appeared in one cheek. As if all the assets she’d noticed before weren’t enough. “But I’ve been hit with worse. No worries.”

“Okay, then.” She backed up several steps. “Um, have a good day.” She offered a little wave, spun on the heel of her Converse, and hoofed it out of there. Could that have been any more embarrassing?

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“What are you staring at?” Jake stepped into the hallway, where Chaz remained fixed in place after being run over by the vivacious blonde.

“I’m not sure.” Chaz scratched his head.

“I don’t think I know what that means.” Jake nudged his friend. “But you’re going to be late if we don’t get a move on.”

“Right. Sorry. I was walking down the hall when a woman with blonde hair slammed into me. She wasn’t very big, but she must’ve been carrying an anvil in that bag. It packed a wallop.”

“A blonde, huh?” Jake rolled his eyes. “Oh boy.”

“No, seriously. I’ve never seen a girl like her before. She was all flustered—”

“You’ve seen plenty of girls flustered before.” Jake shoved him as they exited the elevator. “Usually over you.”

“Not like that. Not flustered because she was meeting me. I

think she was embarrassed. And I don't think she recognized me."

"Not recognize the great and mighty Chaz Prince?" Jake stepped back, pressing a hand to his heart. "What is the world coming to?"

"Stop already." Chaz made a beeline for the coffee machines on the other side of the lobby. "It was sort of nice, actually. Except she rushed away before I could find out anything about her."

"Your day really has started badly, hasn't it?" Jake stirred a big dollop of creamer into his own coffee. "You got hit by a bag, weren't recognized, and then you were abandoned." He *tsked*. "Maybe you should go back to bed instead of sticking to your original plans."

"Remind me again why we're friends?" Chaz perched on a stool with a Danish.

"Because I let you use my hotel for a major friend discount when you and your dad are at odds." Jake sat across from him.

"And because we turn the other way when you come in here for breakfast even if you haven't spent the night." Kari nudged him as she walked past.

"Surely there's more to it than that." Chaz tapped his chin.

"Because we understand each other?" Jake shook his head. "No, that can't be it. *Hmm*. Let me think some more."

"Don't think too hard. You might hurt something."

"Ain't that the truth?" Kari joined them, her own cup of coffee in hand. "What are you trying to figure out?"

"A girl ran into me upstairs, but I didn't recognize her." Chaz ducked his head. "Which makes sense, considering this is a hotel and guests come from all over. She's probably from out of town."

Kari slowly lowered her cup. "Were you on the third floor last night?"

“His favorite.” Jake propped his feet up on the one unused stool. “Though I can’t figure out why. The suites are on the fifth floor.”

“I’m not using one of your suites without paying, and you won’t let me pay you anything when you have open rooms.” Chaz shook his head. “Besides, I like seeing the deer in the mornings.”

“They’re such a nuisance. Isn’t it almost hunting season?” Jake tapped the table.

“Don’t you dare.” Kari punched her brother.

“Good grief! What’s with you?” Jake rubbed his shoulder.

“There’s no reason to kill those deer. They aren’t causing any trouble with the hotel. They’re probably one of the unsung perks, honestly.”

“There you go.” Chaz finished off his last few drops of coffee. “Okay. Time to face the beast.”

Jake lifted an eyebrow. “Probably not a good idea to refer to your dad as an animal. Especially when you’re about to ask him for a promotion.”

Kari shoved her brother. “Good grief, Jake. Can’t you be the least bit serious?”

“Only when I have to be.”

Chaz shook his head. “I’ll see you both later. Hopefully without me having to move in permanently.”

“You’ve got this, Chaz.” Kari stood too. “Guess I better get back to the desk in case anyone comes in wanting a room.”

Chaz waved to his friends and headed out into the chilly morning. Autumn had arrived overnight, it seemed. He should’ve grabbed a sweater before coming here last night. But he’d needed time away from his dad to figure out what to say today. Because it was past time to face the issue. Time to assert some independence and prove he had what it took.

As much as Jake joked, Chaz’s dad could be a bit gruff,

especially when it came to business matters. He hadn't built the most popular art gallery in the area by being lazy, that was for sure. But hadn't he also raised Chaz to know everything there was about the Prince Gallery? Surely it wouldn't be that big of a step to let him take on more.

Chaz cranked the engine and put his Jeep in gear.

Only one way to find out.