



2

“Is it safe?” Ella peeked out from behind the desk as Kari took her place again.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Kari nudged her with a foot. “It was you?”

“Yes. But in my defense, I had no idea he was walking by when I rushed through the door.” Ella rose up enough to peek over the counter. “Is he gone?”

“He’s gone.” Kari shook her head. “Though why you’d avoid Chaz is beyond me.”

“Chaz?”

“Chaz Prince. Jake’s best friend.” Kari typed something on the computer.

“Prince? As in, the Prince Art Gallery?”

Kari finally glanced her way. “Yes. Why?”

Ella let her head fall back and bang against the wall. “So much for that dream.”

“Wait. You want to get your artwork in the Prince Gallery?” Kari turned around.

“What artist around here doesn’t wish for that?” Ella shook her head. “But it doesn’t matter. I’m not good enough.”

“Not good enough? Are you kidding me right now?”

“Kari, I’ve never even finished school. Maybe if I took those last few classes ... or at least had more instruction.” Ella spread her fingers, noticing a few of them were smudged with pencil lead. “I mean, watercolors elude me.”

“And who says you have to use watercolors? Don’t you prefer pencils and oils anyway?”

“I do, but I think it’s because I’ve never learned watercolors. Can you imagine the sunrise I could paint with them?”

“Everything I’ve seen of your work has been awesome. I don’t know why you can’t recognize it too.”

“Who are you talking to?” Jake’s head appeared over the counter. “Oh, hey, Ella. What are you doing down there?”

“She was hiding from Chaz.” Kari blabbed the secret before Ella could stop her.

“Chaz? Why?”

“She’s the one who bumped into him upstairs.” Kari pointed to the ceiling.

“Really?” Jake frowned. “What were you doing upstairs, Ella?”

Kari scrambled to straighten some papers. Up to this point, she’d kept Ella’s secret. Would Jake disapprove of Ella using the rooms for her art?

“I sent her up for something. She was rushing to bring it to me. No big deal.” Kari slapped the stack of credit card receipts down on the counter and smiled at her brother.

Jake narrowed his eyes, glancing between the two of them. He shook his head and muttered, “Whatever. I’m running to the hardware store. That toilet in 422 is running again.”

“Sure.” Kari waved him off.

Ella rose to her feet. “Is he going to be mad if he finds out about our arrangement?”

“Probably not.” Kari shrugged. “I mean, he doesn’t like the

deer, but they're not actually hurting anything. Honestly, knowing you draw them several days a week might make them look better in his eyes."

"Will he tell Chaz it was me who ran into him this morning?" Ella pressed a hand to her forehead. "I hate to think I ruined all my chances because of a simple mishap."

"Nah. Probably won't even think about it." Kari glanced at her watch. "But if you don't scoot, Jake won't be the only one you'll be in trouble with."

"Oh, man!" Ella squeezed her friend in a quick hug. "Thanks, Kari." She darted outside toward her old truck.

She turned the key in the ignition, and nothing happened. "Come on, Humphrey. Don't die on me now." Why her father had given the truck such an old-fashioned name, she had no idea, but she couldn't bear to quit using it.

After a few sputtering coughs, the engine roared to life. Ella breathed easier and drove out of the parking lot. Goodbye, Starbright Hotel—hello reality.

Too bad Ella had ended up living the rotten part of the Cinderella story. Angela was the closest thing to an evil stepmother who existed in the real world. She even came with an evil stepsister. Though thus far, Bellamy was more annoying than evil.

If Ella didn't arrive at the flea market before it opened, and Angela found out, her evil would be unleashed. The flea market booth was Angela's way of purging all of Ella's mom's old things. One day at a time, Ella was losing every last piece of the mother who'd passed thirteen years ago.

A few cars already sat in the flea market lot. It was open only three days a week, but this town seemed to pull in shoppers from all over West Virginia and beyond, so they stayed busy.

"Morning, Ella." Sam waved from booth ten. He

straightened a few cowboy hats then moved on to his baseball cap collection.

“Ella, you don’t happen to have any butter dishes, do you?” Marjorie from booth fourteen leaned over an old rolltop desk.

“Nope. Fresh out. But if you need a gravy boat, I saw a few of those.” Ella withheld the fact that they’d once belonged to her grandmother from England. No need to rub more salt in those wounds.

“Thanks, dearie. But I need a butter dish.”

Finally, Ella made it back to booth twenty.

Bellamy lay sprawled across Daddy’s old wingback chair, filing her nails. “Bout time you got here.”

“The market doesn’t open for five more minutes.” Ella slid her bag behind the register stand.

“You know Mama wants you here at least ten minutes early.” Bellamy cocked an eyebrow.

“I had some trouble getting my truck to start.” Not a lie, though not the complete truth, either.

“Interesting. Especially since you were gone long before I left this morning.” Bellamy leaned forward and perched her chin on her fist. “Wonder where you were.”

No way was Ella about to go down that road. Bellamy was one of the last people on earth Ella wanted to share her artwork with. Bad enough she already had to share the house.

“I didn’t realize you were working here today. No classes?” Ella straightened a stack of her mom’s dinner plates so she wouldn’t have to meet her stepsister’s eyes.

“None I felt like attending.” Bellamy tucked her file into a sparkly bag and leaned back, crossing her legs. “Figured I might as well contribute to the family business.” Her laugh grated on Ella’s nerves worse than her truck’s brakes on a mountain road.

So many things were wrong with that statement. Bellamy had what Ella desired most—the ability to work toward a degree. Instead, Bellamy flaked out and skipped classes as if they weren't worth more than gold. And in some cases, they were. Because the “family business,” as Bellamy called it, was no longer in existence.

Daddy's coal company had long ago been sold for a profit. The money received from that sale, however, was no longer around. Angela and Bellamy had no money-management skills or any compunction about running around and buying whatever they wanted when they wanted it. If Ella hadn't stashed her bit away in an account Angela couldn't access, she would be completely destitute. As it was, she needed a job with an actual income ... and soon.

* * *

Chaz straightened his spine before heading into the gallery. Time to beard the lion. Or was he a dragon? Either way, there he went again, comparing his dad to a beast. Jake was right—not the best approach.

After strolling through three of the rooms, he found Dad tucked away in the back, sorting through canvases in a storage closet. Strange. Dad didn't usually do menial work.

“Dad?”

The older man straightened, still moving his gaze back and forth between two paintings. “What do you think? This one with more golden hues or the other with more blues? I need something for that empty spot in the front room.”

Chaz couldn't resist raising an eyebrow. Dad was asking his opinion. Better get this right. Maybe it was the opening he'd been praying for.

The one on the right showed a forest path bathed in

afternoon sunlight. Nothing moved among the trees, but it was warm and welcoming.

The left one included more of a swamp area, with cypress roots and Spanish moss. While it didn't emit coldness, it also wasn't as welcoming. Not somewhere you'd want to go stroll.

"Let's do the gold." Chaz nodded to emphasize his decision.

His dad studied them both for another minute, then set the blue one back in the closet. "I think you're right. It's what I reached for initially, but sometimes I second-guess myself. They're both good."

"They are. But this one is a place I'd actually like to visit."

Dad's lips twitched behind his goatee. "That thought hadn't even run through my mind, but I see what you're saying."

Chaz followed his father back through the rooms of artwork. Many of the paintings hanging around them were of the same style, though others were more modern and simplistic. Did he really have anything to offer that Dad wasn't already doing here? What was he thinking, wanting a bigger role?

As Dad hung the painting in the bare spot, Chaz offered up yet another prayer. *God, I really thought this was what I wanted. Why are these doubts springing up now? Is this from You?*

Dad finally turned and focused on him. "What's on your agenda for today?"

"Actually ..." Chaz rubbed the back of his neck. "I was hoping I could talk to you for a few minutes."

Dad blinked but then held a hand out toward the offices. "Let's go."

In his dad's office, Chaz sank onto a couch, but his dad walked around to the other side of the desk, seating himself

behind the gold nameplate—Kingston Prince. Power play, or habit? Either way, it didn't make this any easier.

“What's on your mind?” Dad started to flip through his planner but then stilled and set it to the side, folding his hands on top of his blotter.

“I wanted to talk to you about stepping up and taking a bigger role here.” Chaz slipped his fingers under his legs so he wouldn't fidget.

“A larger role.” Dad leaned back in his chair. “What would that entail?”

This was good, right? Dad was willing to listen.

“I haven't hammered out all the details, but I'd love to help you in procuring new artwork—”

Dad held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks. So much for that good vibe a second before.

“New artwork? Why do we need new artwork? Our gallery is full. You saw the storage room a few minutes ago. All of our current artists seem very happy with their contracts. And our number of visitors has remained steady, if not risen, in the last few years. Why mess with a good thing?”

Why indeed.

Chaz tried to wrangle his thoughts into something he could communicate clearly, but they scrambled worse than the eggs his mom made for breakfast every morning. No discerning one from the other. He pressed a fist to his forehead.

“I need to *do* something. I need a purpose,” Chaz groaned. “This is our family business. I love it and want to see it do even better. Not for me, but for all the people in West Virginia and beyond who consider this one of the best galleries in the state. Right now, you have me doing basic admin work.”

“And do you think our gallery would still be okay and growing if we didn't have someone to do the admin work?” Dad crossed his arms over his sweater vest. “I suppose you

think you're too good to work your way up the chain like everyone else?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all." This was always how it went. Talking to his father was like picking a fight with his toddler cousin. He was never going to win.

"Well, tell you what. When you can come in here with a coherent plan instead of grandiose ideas, we can start this conversation over. Until then, I'm pretty sure you have work to do in your office."

Chaz pinched his lips together. Protesting would get him nowhere, no matter how much he wanted to argue. He was twenty-six. His father shouldn't be able to cow him so easily. And yet here he was, headed back to his tiny little office with a tiny window and no nameplate. To file some paperwork and make sure a placard was printed for the painting his father just hung.

Yes. It was necessary work.

But couldn't he do more? He needed a better plan.