

The
Christmas
Wager



Holly Cassidy

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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To Love-

May it find each and every one of us, and
may we hold on to it forever



To Rob-

The love of my life and my very own hunky electrician



*Rivalry adds so much to the charms
of one's conquests.*

—Louisa May Alcott



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Friday,
December 17





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-