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Holiday Magic



Holiday Magic

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Holiday Magic

FERN MICHAELS



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“Holiday Magic”

FERN MICHAELS

*I'd like to dedicate this novella
to all the "snow bunnies" in my life*

Chapter 1

Telluride, Colorado
November 26, 2010
Black Friday

Stephanie glanced at her watch again, making sure she wasn't running behind her self-imposed schedule: 5:50 A.M. They were opening the doors at seven o'clock sharp as today would be the busiest day of the year at Maximum Glide's ski shop, Snow Zone, where Stephanie had been working as manager for almost two years.

With an hour to go before the doors opened, she adjusted the volume on the hidden stereo filling the ski shop with the soulful sounds of Michael Bolton singing "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas." She took four large cinnamon-scented candles from beneath the counter, grabbed a pack of matches, then lit and placed each candle in a secure place where it couldn't be knocked over by a customer reaching for something or an accidental bump from a ski. Though there were signs posted at the main entrance and throughout the shop stating NO SKIS ALLOWED INSIDE, that didn't mean that customers always paid attention to the posted rules. She'd brewed coffee and heated water for hot chocolate and bought several dozen donuts for the early risers. Judging by the amount of sugar consumed, shopping must be hard work.

Stephanie smiled, thinking about the upcoming Christmas season. For the next four weeks, Maximum Glide would be packed with vacationers from every part of the world, and, of course, the locals, who came in droves on the weekends. Scanning the shelves one last time, she refolded three bright red sweaters with matching scarves and toboggan caps. The many styles of ski boots on sale were stamped with bright orange stickers. Last season's waterproof gloves were placed next to this season's newest designs. People could decide for themselves if the price difference was worth purchasing the latest style. Personally, Stephanie thought they were pretty much the same except that the current style had a zippered pocket for an extra set of hand

warmers.

She adjusted the Spyder jackets and the North Face ski pants, making sure they were evenly spaced on the racks. These were the biggest-selling items in the shop. She'd ordered more than she had last year, not wanting to risk running out before the holidays were over. Last year, the general manager of Maximum Glide, Edward Patrick Joseph O'Brien, who preferred to be called Patrick though privately she always thought of him as Eddie, like that cute kid on *Leave It to Beaver*, insisted that she place the order on her own. After checking her inventory, Stephanie had decided they had enough ski pants and jackets in stock for two seasons. What she didn't know then was that the famous ski shop, part of a resort owned by an Olympic gold medalist, attracted skiers with bushels and barrels of money to spend. She'd ended up placing another order, then had to spend hundreds of the ski shop's dollars for an overnight delivery. A lesson learned. More secure in her position this year, she'd placed her order with confidence, knowing she'd be lucky to have anything left after the holidays. For the moment, Stephanie was sure she'd ordered enough to get them through the busy holiday season. She wouldn't get a day off until after New Year's, but she didn't mind. She needed the extra money this year. With all of the overtime pay, plus her Christmas bonus, she would finally be able to afford the down payment on her very own home, a first for her and her two daughters, Ashley, ten going on twenty, and Amanda, an adorable seven-year-old. She'd been searching the paper for months and had finally found a perfect three-bedroom, two-bath ranch-style house that she adored and could afford.

Last week she'd made a special trip into town to Rollins Realty, who'd listed the property. Jessica Rollins, a smartly dressed woman in her mid-fifties, took her to the house, and Stephanie was immediately smitten. She'd practically salivated when she saw the deep garden tub in the master bath, a luxury she hadn't counted on. When Jessica saw her reaction, she explained that the former owners were avid skiers. Stephanie figured that covered about three-quarters of Colorado's population but knew a good soak in a tub of hot water was considered a necessity after a day on the slopes. After she viewed the house of her dreams, one she could actually afford, she had made a silent promise to herself and her girls: They would have a home of their very own, and unbeknownst to the girls, she planned to surprise them with a new puppy sired by Ice-D, Max's Siberian husky. She intended to keep both promises no matter how hard she had to work.

Placerville was her home now. She'd hated leaving Gypsum, but she was only a twenty-minute drive from Telluride. Grace and Max often made the four-hour drive to visit the resort. They always stopped at the shop to see her, and, of course, Grace wouldn't dream of missing a chance to see the girls. Grace was like the sister and best friend Stephanie had never had.

For nearly two years, Stephanie and the girls had been living in a one-bedroom garage apartment that Grace had found for her when they left Hope House, a shelter for battered and abused women. Grace, along with her new husband, Olympic skier Max Jorgenson, who just happened to own the ski resort where Stephanie worked, had announced yesterday during the Thanksgiving dinner they'd shared that they were expecting their first child. Grace had made jokes about her age, and Max had insisted she didn't look a day over twenty-one. Almost forty, and finally Grace's dream of having a child was about to come true. Funny, how it had all come together. If anyone had told her two years ago she and the girls would be on their own, *happily* on their own, she would have told that person he was out of his mind. Women like her couldn't support two young girls on their own, certainly not without financial help or a husband.

Well think again, buster!

So far she'd proved herself wrong, and she intended to keep doing so. She'd escaped from her abusive husband, high school-sweetheart Glenn Marshall, who was now serving eight years at the State Penitentiary in Canon City, Colorado, a maximum-security prison, for escaping the minimum-security prison he had been sent to when he'd originally been jailed for abuse. Stephanie cringed as she remembered how he'd managed to escape while being transported to another minimum-security facility.

It had been her first week at Hope House, just a few days before Christmas. She'd allowed Grace to take the girls to see *The Nutcracker* at Eagle Valley High School. On her way back to Hope House, Grace had to take another route because roadblocks had been set up along I-70 in an attempt to catch the escaped convict. She'd gotten lost with the girls, wound up searching for help at the first house she'd located, which just happened to be the home of Max Jorgenson, the famous gold medalist Olympic skier. Stephanie recalled the horror-filled night she'd spent when Grace did not return to Hope House with her girls. Fortunately, Grace and the girls had found Max's log cabin on Blow Out Hill and remained there until the roads could be cleared, but not before Glenn, lost and on the run, also found Max's

cabin and the girls. When Max found Grace tied up and the girls frightened to death, he'd made quick work of returning Glenn to the deputies who'd lost him in the first place, but not before delivering a few choice knocks that shattered Glenn's nose. Stephanie detested violence, but secretly she'd been delighted when she heard that Glenn had received what he'd dished out to her on a daily basis. And as they say, the rest is history. Almost two years later, Max and Grace were married and expecting their first child. Stephanie couldn't think of a better gift for the couple. They were made for one another.

Unlike her and Glenn.

Two years ago had found her beaten down and afraid to do anything to change her life. With no immediate family, and no close friends to speak of, Stephanie had resigned herself to a life of misery until she'd read an article on battered women. She remembered the part that convinced her she had to make a change, and she'd best make it fast.

It wasn't uncommon for the abuser to turn his anger on his children....

Stephanie knew then she had to get away from Glenn no matter how difficult it proved to be. Two police officers had escorted her and the girls to Hope House immediately after Glenn's arrest. Since they'd been living with Glenn's best friend and drinking buddy, Stephanie had nowhere to go. Shamed, hopeless, and frightened for her children, she'd swallowed what little pride she had and allowed the officers to whisk them away in the middle of the night. Grace had greeted her and the girls like old friends, made them feel welcome, made Stephanie feel as though she was more than just another woman who'd remained in a bad marriage for the sake of the kids. Grace had set Stephanie on a path that had changed her life, and the girls' lives, too.

No longer did she feel worthless and afraid. The girls were resilient, just as Grace had predicted. Though Stephanie knew they were well aware of Glenn's violent behavior, she didn't allow them to dwell on it. Instead, with Grace's effective therapy, they'd acknowledged that some men hit women, and those that did needed to be punished by the proper authorities. Though Glenn wasn't eligible for early parole, Stephanie knew the day would come when he would be released. Until that day arrived, she would continue to work hard to provide a safe and happy home for Ashley and Amanda.

Melanie McLaughlin, her landlord's daughter, had just finished her last year of college when she answered Stephanie's ad for a sitter, explaining that she wanted to take a break before she headed out into the business world. Stephanie was delighted, and the girls adored her. Two mornings a week,

Stephanie had to open the shop early for deliveries, so she'd needed someone to see the girls to the bus stop and be there when they returned. Melanie had been a godsend the past two years. She'd started a computer graphics business from her new apartment, which allowed her to continue caring for the girls. This week, they were out of school for Thanksgiving break. Melanie, ever the trouper, was bringing the girls to Maximum Glide later in the day to spend the afternoon on the slopes.

That night was the official lighting of the resort's main Christmas tree. Stephanie had promised the girls they could attend. It would be a long day for all of them, but fun. And she would see Patrick. He'd asked her out several times when she first started working at the shop, but she'd always told him no, saying she wasn't going to date until her divorce from Glenn was final. He'd said he respected that and would ask again. The day her divorce was final, she called to tell Grace, who informed Max, who then let Patrick know. That evening, he'd arrived on her doorstep with flowers for her, two Disney movies for the girls, and a piping-hot cheese pizza for all. She hadn't the heart to turn him away. They'd been out three times since then.

On their last date, they'd gone to the movies. She remembered the movie was a romantic comedy about a couple who each had six kids and married in spite of the antics the kids pulled hoping to keep the couple apart. As expected, the movie ended happily. Stephanie had enjoyed the movie immensely and remarked to Patrick how wonderful it was that the children finally accepted their new stepparents in spite of their earlier misgivings. He hadn't called since. Something was up with him, though she hadn't known what it could be and didn't ask. He was her boss, and she wasn't going to jeopardize her job by asking him why he hadn't called again. If she were completely honest with herself, she would admit it'd hurt her feelings when he hadn't bothered to call or offer an explanation for his sudden lack of interest in her. Even worse, Amanda and Ashley continued to ask when Patrick was coming over again. She'd put them off, telling them it was the busy season at the resort. They'd accepted her answer, but Stephanie knew it was more than that.

Putting all thoughts of her personal life aside, she inspected the store one last time. Everything seemed to be in place. Last but not least, Stephanie plugged the extension cord into the outlet, filling the small shop with bright twinkling lights on the eight-foot blue spruce. Candy Lee Primrose, a bright and witty high school senior and part-time employee, had spent the day

before Thanksgiving decorating the tree. Tiny sets of skis, tiny snowboards, miniature sets of ski poles, scarves, brightly colored mittens, and hats hung from its branches. Fresh pine perfumed the air, reminding Stephanie of the giant pines that flanked her favorite blue run, Gracie's Way.

Glancing at her watch for the umpteenth time, Stephanie booted up the computer, clicked a few keys to record the time, then counted out the cash drawer. The credit card machine was up and running for a change. She replaced the white spool of paper with a brand-new one, then went to the alarm panel and punched in the security code to turn off the alarm.

Twenty minutes later, Candy Lee raced through the back door. "Smells wonderful in here," she said as she removed her snow boots and replaced them with a pair of tan Uggs.

"It does, doesn't it?" Stephanie said as she took in the shop, decorated in all its Christmas finery.

She took a deep, cleansing breath.

Here we go, she thought, let the season begin.

Chapter 2

Edward Patrick Joseph O'Brien, Patrick to his friends and family, placed a gloved hand on the dash of his most beloved possession, his bright shiny black Hummer. The love of his life. His passion, his reason for getting up in the morning.

Shit!

He was losing it. Too much cold weather had warped his brain, he figured, as he cranked the engine over. He'd become obsessed with Hummers ever since he purchased this baby two years ago. Couldn't get enough of them. He knew just about everything there was to know about the vehicle. If asked, he could tell you there were six different styles; they were originally designed for the military; some were equipped with caterpillar tracks for use in heavy snow and were nicknamed the Snow-Vee. He could go on and on, and did when asked, but mostly he appreciated their performance in the often harsh Colorado winters.

He adjusted the rear-window defroster, then clicked on the fog lights as he maneuvered the Hummer out of the narrow drive at the base of the mountain where he lived in a newly constructed log home. Today was usually one of the busiest days of the season at Maximum Glide, where he was the general manager. He wanted to get an early start before he was bombarded with lost skiers, missing skis, snowboarders monopolizing the slopes, and the broken bones that were sure to happen to some poor unlucky souls. Glancing in his rearview mirror, he caught a glimpse of himself. His coal black hair was in need of a trim, big-time. His dark blue eyes were shadowed with gray half-moons. He'd spent too many late nights carousing with the guys. But what the hell? He was a single guy. What else was there to do after-hours? Currently, there was no special female in his life, no woman for whom he really cared. Not really, or at least no one that he would admit to. He'd been out with Stephanie Casolino-Marshall, the manager of Snow Zone, a few times, but he'd put a stop to that going anywhere real quick-like. Not that he would admit this either, but that woman had touched a part of him that had remained *untouched* for all of his thirty-nine years. He wasn't about to

involve himself with a woman whose past was as dark as his black Hummer. No way. Women like her did nothing but cause pain and heartache. At least that was what he believed. He'd seen too many of his best buds go down that path. A woman with kids and an ex was pure trouble with a capital *T*.

That last evening he'd spent with Stephanie had sent him running. That damned movie with all those kids and that Brady Bunch happily-ever-after stuff was definitely *not* for him. He'd never asked her out again, and she'd never questioned it. She probably knew she wasn't prime meat on the for-sale market, but hey, that was her problem. She'd been sweet, and in spite of all that she'd been through, there seemed to be a hint of innocence about her. That part had touched him. Before he allowed himself to explore exactly what that meant, he'd boogied his way right back to his old tried-and-true rule. If he hadn't slept with the woman by the third date, she was history. He'd been on four dates with Stephanie and hadn't even kissed her. Definitely time to move on. A vision of dark eyes and long brown hair caused him to veer off the road. And those two girls of hers, well they were absolutely adorable, but kids were totally off-limits for him. No way. His sisters' three boys and one girl were enough kids for an overprotective uncle. Besides, he'd seen what had happened to his sister Colleen. Kids were not on his life list.

"See! This female/kid crap is for the birds," he said. "I'll wreck the Hum if I keep thinking along those lines." He shifted into low gear before turning onto the winding road that led to Maximum Glide. It was still early; the lifts didn't start running until nine. As it was one of the busiest days of the year at the ski shop, he wanted to check in early, make sure Stephanie and Candy Lee had things under control. He didn't want another episode like last year. He'd thought Stephanie had been ready to take over all the duties at the ski shop. Patrick had insisted she order all the stock for the upcoming season. She'd been doubtful, but said she would do her best. And dammit, her best had cost the resort big bucks. Her order was modest, not near enough to cover them for the month of December. He hadn't been too hard on her because she was so damned...well, she was so kind and apologetic. He hadn't the heart to scream and yell at her as he was known to do when things didn't run smoothly. Patrick simply wanted to do the best job possible. As general manager, it was his responsibility to make sure his employees knew exactly what their jobs entailed; otherwise, it was his ass on the line. Max Jorgenson and Patrick, or "Eddie" as Max still insisted on calling him, had been friends

since they were in their early twenties. While Max was busying making Olympic history, Patrick had immersed himself in college at the University of Colorado, where he'd also received his master's degree in political science, thinking someday he would change the world. Like all young men, he'd had an idealistic view of the world's potential for change, and felt it was up to him to contribute to that change. So after he'd graduated, he went to work for the State Senate. Eight years of dirty politics destroyed his idealistic vision of making a difference. He'd had his fill of self-interested liars, cheaters, and backstabbers who had anything but the interests of their constituents at heart. Leaving a successful career, Patrick spent that first winter out of politics doing absolutely nothing except hitting the slopes. He reconnected with Max. They'd bummed around for a while, then Max married Kayla and hired him to run the resort. For two years after Kayla's tragic death, his good friend had sat on the sidelines, but now he was happily married to Grace, who Patrick thought was the best of the best. A good egg.

Coming from a large Irish family, with four older brothers and three younger sisters, had made him extra protective of women but guarded, too. He knew what little sneaks they were most of the time. Growing up, he'd been the best big brother he knew how to be. Which in his family meant he'd been to six proms, three of them with his youngest sister, Claire, who'd explained she simply needed him to act as her date because the guys in high school were just "totally immature." Which was a crock of crap. Claire had been trying to hook him up with her best friend Lisa Grimes since the first time Claire brought her home to meet the family her freshman year of high school. Patrick was flattered, but she was too young, and she was like a kid sister to him.

Then there was Megan, a year older than Claire. Megan was the family dreamer. She sailed through school without any problems but didn't have much of a social life. Patrick worried about her and told her so. Shocked that he'd felt that way, she revealed that she'd been dating a college man since her sophomore year. When he'd asked why she hadn't brought him home, Megan had clammed up. After much screaming and many threats, Megan had finally told Patrick why she hadn't brought her boyfriend home to meet the rest of the brood. He was married. Patrick wanted to find the son of a bitch and kick his butt, but Megan refused to reveal his name. She'd made Patrick swear he wouldn't tell their parents. He'd reluctantly agreed. Megan reminded him that she didn't pry into his love life, and he should grant her the same respect.

She'd had him on that one, but he'd always kept an extra close eye on her.

Three years after Megan graduated from high school, her married lover divorced his wife and made an honest woman out of her. Patrick didn't care much for the guy, now a high school math teacher. He treated his sister and their three boys, Joseph, eight, Ryan, six, and Eric, who'd just celebrated his fourth birthday, extremely well. As long as Nathan continued to do so, Patrick would accept him as his brother-in-law, though not without reservations. Patrick took Megan aside once and told her if Nathan cheated on his first wife, the odds were good he'd cheat on her. They'd been married for twelve years. As far as Patrick knew, Nathan hadn't strayed.

Finally, there was Colleen, only a year younger than Patrick. Married to her high school sweetheart as soon as she'd graduated high school, she didn't bother with college. She'd always made it very clear to the entire family that becoming a mother was her life's desire. And she had. Almost one year to the day after she'd married Mark Cunningham, she delivered a healthy baby girl, Shannon Margaret. Eighteen months later, Abigail Caitlin came along. Colleen couldn't have been happier. Mark had accepted a job with Apple, and they had moved to Seattle. Their life together had been almost perfect until Shannon Margaret became ill. At seventeen, Shannon was in her senior year of high school doing all the exciting things seniors do. Mark and Colleen planned to surprise her with a bright red Hummer as a graduation gift. Shannon had been as much in love with Hummers as he was. A week before graduation, Shannon had complained about being extremely tired and short of breath. Colleen had laughed, telling Shannon her endless pre-graduation activities would wear out a triathlete. Shannon continued to complain over the next few days, but no one really paid much attention. Three nights before Shannon was due to graduate, Colleen found her in a heap on the bathroom floor, almost comatose. She'd called 911, and they'd rushed her to the hospital, where doctors were mystified until the results of her blood work came back from the lab. Shannon suffered from a rare and oftentimes deadly blood disorder, Thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura. The doctors shortened it to TTP. Her platelet count had dropped to eight thousand, and her red blood count was so low, they'd had to give her red blood cells intravenously. A hematologist was called in. He'd explained to Colleen and Mark exactly what was happening inside Shannon's body. Something had gone wrong with her blood's ability to clot. Patrick was so shocked when he heard she was in the ICU, he didn't really remember the details. Suffice it to

say, Shannon died on the very day she should have graduated from high school.

Patrick went through hell for several months, but it was nothing compared to what Colleen, Mark, and Abigail were still going through. No way could he ever withstand that kind of personal loss, hence his desire to stay single and kid-free. He knuckled away an unshed tear and parked the Hummer in his assigned parking place. He slid out of the driver's seat into the bitter early-morning air and jammed his hands in his pockets. His heavy boots crunched against the slush and ice as he walked across the parking lot to the employee entrance of Snow Zone. *Damn it's cold!*

Heavy snow was in the forecast for the weekend. He smiled. Fresh white powder would have skiers waiting in the lift lines for hours. The resort would be especially jam-packed that night as well. It was the night for the Christmas tree-lighting extravaganza. Patrick usually got a big kick out of it, but this year his heart wasn't really into the holiday spirit. His thoughts always returned to Colleen and Shannon. This would be the second year without her.

His parents had retired to Florida after Shannon's death. Claire remained in California, unmarried, a workaholic. She had a successful law firm that took up her every waking moment. She'd flown in for Shannon's memorial service and left immediately after. The rest of the family living in Colorado had gathered at the oldest sibling's house. Last Christmas, his four brothers, Connor, Aidan, Ronan, and Michael, all of whom had married only within the last ten years, and their wives and kids had made a half-hearted attempt at a celebration, for the sake of the kids, but none of their hearts were into the holidays either. Since they were an extremely close-knit Irish family, Shannon's loss had devastated them all. Shannon had been the first grandchild, the first niece. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Patrick pushed all thoughts of sadness aside. There would be time for those memories later. Before opening the employee door, he scraped the ice and brown slush from his boots on the boot scraper beside the door. He could have gone in through the store's public entrance; he had keys and knew the security code, but he wanted to make a surprise visit. It was his way of checking up on his employees. They never knew when to expect him, kept them on their toes. Max didn't approve of this tactic but allowed it since Patrick ran the entire operation. He'd already spied dozens of early birds waiting patiently in their heated vehicles in the parking lot. Patrick hoped Candy Lee and Stephanie were prepared for the rush.

Entering through the back door, he was greeted by the pleasing scent of coffee and a hint of cinnamon. Before Stephanie or Candy Lee saw him, he made his way up and down the aisles, inspecting the shelves piled high with sweaters, hats, scarves, and a dozen other varieties of clothing that promised to keep their wearers warm. Personally, he never hit the slopes without wearing his Hot Chillys, long johns that truly stood up to the test. He saw that the Hot Chillys display was stocked in all colors and sizes for men, women, and children. Satisfied that there was enough stock to keep the shoppers shopping, Patrick weaved his way through the narrow aisles to the front of the shop. Stephanie and Candy Lee were both sipping from forest green mugs and munching on donuts. Damn, what did they think this was? Snack time? They should be...working, not smiling and eating.

C'mon, Patrick, they have to eat!

He shook his head, hoping to clear his thoughts of any negativity. Today called for a positive attitude. Optimism, his mother always advised, when faced with negativity. Growing up, she'd taught him and his brothers and sisters that they were the masters of their lives, and always had the power to choose between optimism or pessimism. Since Shannon's death, more often than not, he'd chosen pessimism. Maybe it was time to turn over a new leaf? Wasn't Christmastime considered to be a time of goodwill and charity? With his mood suddenly shifting to buoyant while he watched Stephanie laugh as she conversed with Candy Lee, he decided he would choose to be optimistic that day. And it had nothing to do with the image in front of him either. At least that's what he wanted to believe. But deep down, he couldn't deny the simple joy just being in her presence gave him. He felt warm all over as he continued to watch and, yes, admire her. Any man would admire those long legs encased in tight black ski pants that accentuated every curve of her body. A moss-colored Hot Chillys thermal turtleneck clung attractively to her petite frame. She definitely had curves in all the right places. Add the warm brown eyes and hair the color of nutmeg, and Patrick couldn't find a single thing he didn't like about her physical appearance. Hell, he couldn't think of anything he didn't like about her period except for the fact that she was the mother of two young daughters. Amanda and Ashley were as sweet as sugarplums, too. They'd pounced all over him when Stephanie had introduced them. They were very much in need of a father, but he was *not* willing to play that role.

Before he had a chance to make his presence known, Stephanie spied him lingering in the center aisle opposite the front registers.

“Patrick, I had no idea you were coming in this early. Come and have some coffee and donuts before they’re all gone. Candy Lee and I concluded that shopping makes you extremely hungry.” She smiled at him as though he were the greatest thing since sliced bread. His heart flip-flopped, then did a backward somersault.

“No thanks. I’m only here for a minute. Just wanted to make sure you were prepared for the onslaught.” Patrick crammed his hands in his pockets for fear he’d reach out to smooth the unruly curl that clung to Stephanie’s peach-colored cheek.

Stephanie placed her mug on the counter and wiped her mouth with a paper napkin covered with snowmen and reindeer. “I think we’re more than ready. Between the two of us, we should be able to handle the rush. If we get too swamped, Melanie said she would help out. She’s bringing the girls over to ski today.”

Patrick wasn’t sure how to reply, so he just nodded. Damn this woman. She made him feel like an inexperienced teenager. All clumsy and unsure of himself. He hated the loss of control.

Stephanie stared at him, the smile leaving her face. “Is that all right? If not, I can tell her to forget it. She said she would stop in before they hit the slopes.”

Patrick heard the words, but couldn’t have repeated what they were if his life depended on it.

“Patrick! Are you listening to anything she’s saying?” Candy Lee asked, her voice several octaves higher than normal.

He blinked his eyes, then shook his head. “Uh, yes, I was thinking.”

Candy Lee, never one to mince words with Patrick and always getting away with it because she was not much younger than the age Shannon would’ve been had she lived, came out from behind the counter to stand beside him. She cupped his elbow in her small hand, guiding him to a stool behind the counter. She put a small finger to his lips. She poured coffee, a large portion of Half and Half, and three scoops of sugar into a white mug decorated with Santas. She plated three donuts from the box beneath the counter. A chocolate-covered glazed, a cream-filled, and a French cruller. “Get some sugar and caffeine into your system. You sound really stupid, Patrick. And I don’t believe you were thinking either,” she added, squinting her bright blue eyes into slits.

Patrick took a sip of the hot coffee, then took a huge bite of the

chocolate-covered confection. Damn, maybe Candy Lee was onto something. This was decadent, almost pure bliss. “Stupid, huh?” he said, then finished off the rest of the donut.

“Well, yes. You have that *off* look on your face, you know, like you’re *off* in another world or something,” Candy Lee explained.

Patrick took a sip of coffee, then bit into the French cruller. He finished it off in three bites before attacking the cream-filled donut. He would have to spend hours on the slopes burning off all the sugary carbs he’d just consumed. When he finished, he wiped his mouth with one of the snowmen-and-reindeer napkins placed next to the pot of coffee. “Thanks for the compliment and the calories, kid. Stephanie, if you get in a bind, call my cell number. I’ll send a Maximum Glide employee from the ski school to help out. I can’t risk Melanie’s getting hurt or injuring someone else.”

Stephanie started to speak, but before she could utter a single word, Patrick spoke up. “It’s company policy. Sorry.”

“Of course, I understand, it’s just that Melanie offered. I told her to stop by just in case.” Stephanie swatted at the hair clinging to her cheek. “I doubt we’ll need the extra help, but of course I will call you if we do.” She swallowed, lifted her chin a notch higher, and met his gaze.

Avoiding her direct stare, Patrick glanced at the display of flavored lip balm on the counter for fear he’d give his feelings away.

Feelings? He wasn’t going there. No how, no way!

Absorbed in a sudden rush of unwanted emotions, new and *unwanted* emotions, Patrick gave her a disparaging look. After all, she was nothing more than an employee. “I’ll expect nothing less. Maximum Glide can’t afford another costly mistake.”

Much to his surprise, she showed no reaction to his comment. She simply turned her back to him as though he’d said nothing.

He hurried toward the door without another word said. Feeling like the idiot that he was, he started to return and offer an apology, then decided against it. He didn’t want her to think he was sorry for his comment. He truly meant it. Maximum Glide was in the red. If he didn’t pull off a financial miracle this year, they would all be out of jobs.

Chapter 3

Expert at hiding her emotions, Stephanie was too stunned to reply to Patrick's hateful comment. She'd spent years deflecting Glenn's insults. One would've thought she would be used to such verbal abuse. Too stunned to cry, not to mention how humiliated she was to have Candy Lee witness her being reprimanded, she swallowed back any thought of an outburst.

She tossed her Christmas napkin in the garbage can and downed the last of her now-cold coffee before turning to Candy Lee. It was all she could do to keep from commenting on what a jerk Patrick had acted like, but she knew it was best just to forget about it. And him. He was right. Sort of. She *had* cost the shop loads of money last year. There was no way she would repeat that mistake again this season. With a new sense of determination, Stephanie set out to prove just how wrong he was about her. She was quite capable of working as many hours as needed to see that Snow Zone turned a profit. She didn't care if she had to peddle their wares on the slopes.

As soon as the back door closed, alerting them to Patrick's departure, Candy Lee voiced her opinion. "He can be such a nitwit. I don't know why you let him talk to you like that. You need to speak up for yourself." She sprayed window cleaner on the glass-top counters. "If he doesn't think we're capable of doing the work, he should tell us straight up."

Stephanie thought he just had, but didn't bother saying so to Candy Lee. They had a busy day ahead of them. Whining and arguing would only put them both in a negative frame of mind. She was sure this was the last thing the Christmas shoppers wanted to encounter on the busiest day of the year. They wanted *holly-jolly-ho-ho-ho*, and she would give them *holly-jolly-ho-ho-ho* no matter what.

Wanting to discourage further talk of Patrick's behavior, Stephanie cleared her throat. "He's just doing his job. Forget about it because I intend to this very second."

Candy Lee shook her head. "Well, then you're a nicer person than I am. I don't even know why I work here; well, I need the extra cash but still...I was in the storage room the other day and overheard two guys that work the lifts

talking about him. I guess Mr. O'Brien chewed them out after four people fell when they were getting off the lift at their checkpoints, which we all know isn't really anyone's fault," Candy Lee stated as she vigorously polished the glass-topped counters. "I'm pretty good on a pair of skis myself, and I still suck ice every now and then."

"Suck ice?" Stephanie inquired.

"Fall down, you know, suck ice," Candy Lee informed her.

Stephanie laughed. "No, I hadn't heard that term, but do me a favor and try not to use it in front of the girls." They'd seen enough in their short lives. Stephanie was trying her best to make up for what they'd witnessed. She wanted to keep them innocent as long as possible.

"Sure," Candy Lee said. "Though they'll hear it soon enough on the slopes. Especially from the snowboarders. They always cuss and spit. It's so gross."

Stephanie gave a small laugh. "I've heard them more than once myself. I just want to keep the girls away from anything...off-color, at least for a while. Now"—Stephanie glanced at her watch—"let's lower the drawbridge and prepare for battle."

At precisely seven o'clock, Stephanie unlocked the main door, where a line of shoppers anxiously waited to spend their money. Stephanie said hello to those she knew, greeted others she didn't, then headed to the register, where she spent the next four hours ringing up ski jackets, ski pants, mittens, hats, and ski boots. It was almost lunchtime before they had a chance to take a break. Tallying up the morning sales in her head, Stephanie figured if this was any indication of how busy the season would be, not only would she be working overtime, she'd prove just how wrong Patrick was about her ability to manage the shop and turn a profit. Plus, she'd have a bit of extra cash, even after putting the down payment on her dream house in Placerville. She would use the extra money to purchase a new bedroom set for the girls.

They'd been without the basic comforts for most of their lives, and for this reason they were appreciative of any gift they received, no matter how large or small. They were good girls, and Stephanie found herself visualizing tucking them into a brand-spanking-new white-canopied bed in their new home. Plus she couldn't wait to see the look on their faces when she announced they would be adopting one of the pups sired by Ice-D. They'd begged for a pet for the past two years, but Stephanie knew it wouldn't be fair to the girls or an animal if she were to bring a pet home to the small

garage apartment. There was barely enough room for the three of them as it was. As the girls grew older, she knew they would want and need their privacy. A new home with three bedrooms, not to mention two bathrooms, would be pure heaven for the three of them and a pet. Angry that she'd wasted so much valuable time with Glenn, Stephanie figured she had to make it up to the girls, and a home of their own would be a good place for new beginnings.

Cheered by her thoughts, Stephanie felt a renewed sense of purpose. She could manage her life at last, but this time around it would be on her own terms. She didn't need a man to take care of her. Look at where that had gotten her. Actually, Glenn's jailbreak was the catalyst that had sent her in search of a better life. Stephanie had learned at an early age that life wasn't always easy, but at thirty-two, she felt as though she'd learned enough about life not to repeat the mistake of allowing a man to have complete and total control of her life. After her mother flew the coop to parts unknown, when Stephanie was three, she'd been sent to live with her mother's older sister, Aunt Evelyn, who'd loved her like her own daughter. While they hadn't had much in the way of material things, Stephanie knew she was loved. Sadly, her aunt had passed away the year she graduated from high school. While grieving for the only mother figure she'd ever known, Stephanie had allowed Glenn to step in and control her every move. At first she'd enjoyed her newfound lack of responsibility as she'd spent most of her life caring for Aunt Evelyn, who'd been severely crippled with rheumatoid arthritis. However, her independence was short-lived. She and Glenn married right after graduation; he started drinking, and within a year turned into an angry, bitter, controlling man. Having no outlet for his anger, he made Stephanie into his punching bag. And as they say, the rest is history. Though this time around, Stephanie was writing her own story.

Stephanie had a job to do in the here and now, so she pushed all negative thoughts of her past to that little dark corner of her mind, where they remained dormant most of the time.

"Why don't you take your lunch break now. We're staying open until seven tonight. This might be the only chance you'll have. Once the lifts are closed, I expect we'll be swamped."

Candy Lee looked at the Minnie Mouse watch on her wrist. "Okay. You want me to bring you something back? You have to eat, too," Candy Lee informed her in that all-knowing teenage way.

“Yes, that’s why I brought my lunch with me. I knew I wouldn’t have time to go to The Lodge for lunch today. Now, go on and get back here,” Stephanie said, using her mothering tone.

Candy Lee grabbed her purse from beneath the counter, gave a quick salute, and raced out the back door. Stephanie watched her as she tore through the icy parking lot. Had she ever been that young and carefree? If she had, she couldn’t pull up the memory. She had new memories to make, and this time around they’d be the kind she’d always dreamed of.

Wouldn’t they?

Chapter 4

Melanie held a mitten-clad hand in each of hers. The slopes were always dangerously crowded the first day after Thanksgiving. If she let go of Ashley or Amanda, it would be very easy to lose sight of them. Stephanie had made sure to tell the girls to dress in their neon yellow ski suits; that way they would be easy to spot. Melanie glanced around her, seeing at least a dozen other young children dressed in the same neon yellow suits that her charges wore. *So much for sticking out like a sore thumb*, she thought. Melanie wouldn't let the girls get too far from her sight no matter what.

"Auntie M," Ashley said. Melanie laughed when Ashley called her by the new nickname they'd christened her with after she'd allowed them to watch *The Wizard of Oz* four times last week. "Can we ski on the blue trails today? *Please?* Uncle Max says we're as good as most of the older kids, and their parents let them ski the blue runs."

"*Puhleeze*," Amanda echoed.

"I guess so, but not by yourselves. I'll go with you," Melanie stated firmly. "There are a lot of skiers out today, so we have to be extra careful."

"Yeah, or we'll get hurt, right? And then Mommy will have to take us to the hospital, and we'll have to stay there cause she won't have enough money to pay the hospital bill, *right*, Auntie M?" Amanda crooned in a squeaky voice.

At five-foot-nine, Melanie had to stoop in order to be at eye level with both girls. She wanted to wrap them both in her arms and tell them she would never allow that to happen. And she had the resources to keep that pledge, having inherited millions from her grandparents. Nor would her wealthy parents allow it. But Melanie knew how badly Stephanie wanted to make her way in the world on her own, so Melanie had carefully refrained from even hinting at her own financial situation.

Stephanie had told her more than once about her life with Glenn. Determined to provide for her children, Stephanie had rules she'd explained to Melanie when she'd first taken the job, and one of those rules was no financial help, no loans, no expensive gifts. Two years ago, Melanie's

parents, longtime supporters of Grace's work with battered women at Hope House, had reduced the rent to something that Stephanie could afford. And to the best of Melanie's knowledge, no one, including Grace, had ever breathed a word of this to Stephanie.

Melanie smiled at both girls. "Well, we won't have to worry about that because you're both such good little skiers, I can't even imagine either of you falling down, let alone getting hurt so badly that you would have to go to the hospital. So let's not even think about that. How about the three of us take the lift up to Sugar Hill, ski to Snow Zone where we'll stop in and see your mom, then maybe grab a cup of hot chocolate at The Lodge?"

Both girls nodded in agreement.

They were both worrywarts, something Melanie wished she could change, but time more than anything else would help to ease the fear and anxiety both girls tended to feel. Again, given their start in life, it was a miracle they hadn't suffered anything more than becoming overly cautious where their mother was concerned. Melanie wasn't sure she would've been able to cope at such a young age had her life been as tragic as theirs had been.

"Are you taking us to the Christmas tree lighting tonight, too?" Amanda asked. "Mommy says it's the highlight of the start of the holiday season. What's that mean?"

Ashley looked at Melanie with a knowing smile. "You want me to tell her?"

"Absolutely," Melanie said, bending over to tighten the hooks on her ski boots.

Ashley pursed her lips, moved them from side to side as though she were contemplating the best answer. "Well, it's kinda like the first day of school when the teacher tells the class what she wants us to learn that year, only the Christmas season is short and a lot more fun." She looked at Melanie for confirmation.

Grinning at the complete and total simplicity of Ashley's explanation, Melanie stated, "I couldn't have said it better myself."

"It's sorta like a new beginning, right, Auntie M?" Ashley said.

She continued to be amazed by the girls' perception. They were both exceptionally intelligent for their ages. Melanie knew Stephanie took great pride in her children's education. Many times Melanie had stopped by their apartment only to find the three of them gathered at the kitchen table with a pile of books in front of them studying anything and everything, ranging from

science to geography.

“That’s exactly what it is,” Melanie agreed.

“Then let’s go. I wanna ride the lift now. Can I sit in the middle?”

Amanda asked.

Melanie stood up to her full height, gazed to her left, where she saw that the lift lines were getting longer by the minute. If they were lucky, they’d have just enough time for one run before stopping in to see Stephanie. “Let’s do our safety check first.” Melanie had spent most of her life on the slopes but never took her skill or that of the girls for granted. A loose boot buckle or a stray article of clothing could cause a lifetime disability. Melanie wasn’t going to allow the girls to get hurt on her watch. No way. They went through their usual routine.

First, they checked to make sure they had all the basics covered. Skis and boots were fastened properly. Pole straps were checked. Helmets and goggles were secure. Gloves were on properly. Since the season was predicted to be one of the coldest on record, Melanie had given the girls foot and hand warmers to place inside their gloves and boots, plus she now put an extra set of each in the inside zippered pocket of their ski jackets. Each of them had a tube of cherry-flavored lip balm in her pocket, along with a granola bar. As an added precaution, Melanie always made sure Ashley kept a pack of waterproof matches inside her jacket. One never knew. At ten, Ashley had been taught a few basic survival skills. Melanie was sure Ashley would never need them as long as she was around, but that was part of being prepared. One must always prepare for the unexpected.

“Sunscreen on our faces, and we’re good to go,” Melanie said, removing a small tube of sunscreen from her pocket. She made quick work of slathering their faces with the cream before readjusting their helmets and goggles. “Now remember, I’m in the rear, and you two always stay in front of me. If you need to stop and rest, just stop at the side of the run that faces away from the mountain, okay?”

“Okay,” the girls parroted.

Melanie followed close behind the girls as they skied to the long lift lines. Dozens of skiers dressed in every color of the rainbow swished in and out of the lanes, racing to get to the front of the lift line. Melanie kept her eyes on the girls as they carefully maneuvered toward the chairlifts. They were moving surprisingly fast today considering it was the first official day of the Christmas season. Throngs of skiers dotted the mountainside, like the lofty

evergreens that flanked the trails.

Above, the skies were heavy with slate gray clouds. The wind was frigid, the conditions perfect for a snowstorm. Melanie wanted to take the girls up for at least one run since the weather might not cooperate later in the day. The forecast called for snow, a necessity for all skiers and snowboarders, but Melanie didn't like the looks of the clouds looming above the mountaintops. Since the snowfall wasn't predicted until later in the afternoon, she reasoned they should have time for at least one decent run.

When it was their turn at the chairlift, the trio slid into position directly behind the bold red line, and gripped their ski poles in their left hands as they'd been taught while looking behind them to see the chairlift as it slowed to allow them to take a seat. Once seated with the safety bar down, Melanie commented, "You two are really getting to be pros at this. It took me forever to learn how to load up without falling."

Since they were going on the blue runs, their ride was longer than normal. It took almost seven minutes for the ski lift to arrive at their designated stop. During the ride up, both girls chatted nonstop, telling her what they hoped Santa would bring them for Christmas. They'd told her about the wall plaques they had made for their mom in art class, and last but not least, they said that their "Aunt Grace" wanted to introduce Melanie to her brother, Bryce.

She couldn't help but blush. She'd seen Bryce at Maximum Glide on more than one occasion. He was the epitome of a true hunk. Melanie thought he fit the image of a ski bum more so than that of a college professor. Lucky for her, they arrived at their stop in time to provide her with an excuse not to answer. But she knew these little mischief makers, and this wouldn't be the last of that conversation. They were relentless when it came to questioning why she wasn't married and didn't have children of her own.

Both girls exited the lift chair with ease, skiing away as fast as possible so as not to block the next group of skiers preparing to exit the lift.

The particular area on the mountain where Melanie was taking them had an elevation closer to thirteen thousand than twelve thousand feet. The air was thin at that altitude, making one almost gasp for oxygen. The temperature was several degrees lower than at the base of the mountain. Wind gusts at this height caused the majestic towering evergreen tops to sway from side to side, their movements producing a soft whisper, a slow dance, with the bone-chilling winds supplying a soft whistle as their music.

Melanie skied to where the girls were waiting. “Are you both ready?” she asked.

Again, they nodded their helmet-covered heads.

Melanie motioned with her gloved hand for them to begin their descent. They pushed off like two little thoroughbreds, traversing downward without getting too close to the edge of the mountainside. Melanie trailed behind them for several minutes before the run led to a bowl of intersections leading to three different areas on the mountain. One ski lift would take them to the very top of the mountain, where they would find the double black diamond runs. The second lift would take them to the opposite side of the mountain, where the terrain park allowed freestylers and snowboarders to hone their acrobatic skills on half-pipes, rails, ramps, and tables. The third lift led to the mogul runs, for those hardy souls brave enough to tackle the minimounds of packed snow that dipped to the bottom of the mountain at a ninety-degree angle. The girls knew that they were supposed to wait for her at the big blue sign directing them back to lift number one at the base of the mountain.

She weaved in and out of the groups of skiers, passed a friend who was on the ski patrol. When she reached the intersection, she searched for the two neon yellow ski suits. Seeing a small group gathered at their appointed sign, Melanie made quick work of poling over to get the girls. When she arrived, she was a bit surprised to find that neither of the two kids wearing yellow neon ski suits was Ashley or Amanda. She pushed off and circled the bowl. Seeing that there were no pint-sized girls wearing yellow suits, she stopped once again and scanned the area around her. Then she skied slowly around the perimeter of the bowl once again, and she thoroughly searched the sides of the run, where a grove of evergreens flanked the trail. Maybe they’d fallen, hit a small snowdrift, or something, she thought.

Melanie jammed her poles into the snow behind her, trying to pick up speed on the flat terrain. She went from side to side, looking in every possible direction, every gully, and even went off trail, thinking one of the girls might have gone to the woods looking for a bit of privacy in order to use the restroom. They’d done this before, and while Melanie didn’t approve of it, sometimes Mother Nature’s call had to be answered no matter what. After searching for fifteen minutes, Melanie had a sneaky feeling the girls had decided to go off on their own. This was not good. Not at all. If she didn’t locate the girls at the end of the run, she’d have to contact the ski patrol and explain the situation.

What was even worse, she'd have to explain to Stephanie that she'd lost her children.

Chapter 5

Candy Lee returned from lunch in the nick of time. Stephanie had managed to eat a few bites of her turkey sandwich between customers. She'd thought the lunch hour would be quiet, but she'd been wrong again. She'd been so bombarded with customers, she hadn't had time to think. Good thing Patrick wasn't there to witness her poor planning. She took a deep breath, exhaled, and smiled at a young mother waiting in line with two small children clinging to her legs. Amanda still did that at times. Stephanie didn't mind, as she wanted to keep the girls sheltered for as long as she could given that the first years of their lives had been plagued by violence and fear.

She looked at her watch. It was almost one o'clock. Melanie had promised to bring the girls by. Stephanie felt a shiver of alarm run up her spine but remembered this was Black Friday. The lift lines were probably as busy as she was. If they weren't here in half an hour or so, she'd call Melanie's cell to check on them. Both girls were natural-born skiers, and Stephanie knew from experience that once they were out on the slopes, it was quite a task to get them to stop for anything. Poor Melanie. She'd take her to dinner and a movie when the holidays were over. Just the two of them. They needed a girls' night out anyway. Maybe she'd invite Grace to join them.

So caught up with the customers coming in and out purchasing everything from lip balm to ski boots, Stephanie glanced at her watch again and was shocked to see that it was already after two o'clock. Worry caused her brow to furrow, but if there was a problem, Melanie knew to call her at the shop. Stephanie continued to ring up sales while Candy Lee restocked and refolded the pile of sweaters on the half-price table. If sales kept up like this, Stephanie might have to call Patrick and take advantage of his offer to send another Maximum Glide employee to her rescue. It was the last thing she wanted to do, but she and Candy Lee could only stretch themselves so thin. Dreading the thought, she looked up as Melanie entered the shop and hurried to the back of the store. Her cheeks were reddened from the wind, her long blond braid hung haphazardly down her back, and her normal cheerful smile was nowhere to be seen. *Emergency potty break*, Stephanie thought as she

walked to the back of the store.

“I wondered what happened to you girls. I was about to worry,” Stephanie said. “Where are the girls? I bet they’re freezing.” As Stephanie was about to turn around and head for the entrance to tell her daughters to come inside and warm up, Melanie grabbed her arm and prevented her from taking another step.

“Melanie!” Stephanie shrieked. “What’s wrong? Where are the girls?”

Melanie looked down at the floor, where puddles of water had pooled around her ski boots. She shook her head from side to side, then looked Stephanie squarely in the face. “I was hoping they would be here with you. I’ve spent the past two hours looking for them.”

Stephanie felt her heart plummet to her feet and back, then lodge in the back of her throat. She tried to speak but was unable to utter a single word. She shook her head, hoping she’d just imagined what Melanie had said, but the look on her babysitter’s face told her she’d heard correctly.

Glenn? It couldn’t be!

Melanie must have read her mind. “They’re on this mountain somewhere skiing, I’m sure of it; no way did their dad bust out of jail. They were so excited about going on the blue run, I think they simply forgot to wait for me at the appointed area. I saw them ski all the way down, then I lost sight of them for what couldn’t have been more than two or three minutes. By the time I got to the meeting point, they were nowhere to be found.”

Stephanie felt as though she would simply die. Just die and be done with it. But she wasn’t a quitter, especially where her children were concerned. She’d been this route before and would do whatever she had to do to protect her daughters. She wanted to strangle Melanie, but her anger would have to wait. She had to find her children before it was too late. Just minutes ago, she’d heard a snow report, and it didn’t sound good. She’d heard a few customers saying they’d heard the lifts were going to close early if the snow report held true.

Springing into action, Stephanie raced to the office, where she grabbed her old skis, poles, and boots. She knew this mountain like the back of her hand. If her girls were lost, she wasn’t going to wait around. She was going to find them no matter how long it took. She raced out of the office, shouting to Candy Lee over her shoulder. “There’s an emergency. Call Patrick and tell him to send someone over to help you. The girls are lost on the mountain!”

Melanie raced after her. “Stephanie, you can’t go out in this weather. The

storm is moving in faster than the forecasters anticipated. I've contacted the ski patrol, and they're all out searching for them. They'll need their mother once they're found."

As Stephanie raced out the back door to the snowy parking area, she stopped to lay her skis down on the crusted snow on the path that would lead her to the lifts. She shot a quick glance at Melanie and saw thick tears streaming down her face and knew she was as concerned for the girls' safety as she was. She leaned in to give her a quick hug. "I can't *not* search for them, Melanie. They're all I have," Stephanie said as she buckled her ski boots and slid her boots into the skis' binding. After she heard the required click letting her know her boots were fitted securely into her skis, she pushed away from Melanie, heading to the lift. She poled as fast as she could through the clumps of ice and brown slush. An injury was the last thing she needed.

Arriving at lift number one, Stephanie practically soared to the chair, where she was met by a young boy of no more than eighteen. She'd seen him around but couldn't recall his name.

"We're closing the lifts. Sorry," he said as he stood in front of the chair Stephanie was preparing to get on.

She shook her head. "No, I have to get up there. My girls are lost. The ski patrol is looking for them now." Stephanie saw the look of indecision on the boy's face. "Look, I won't tell anyone you let me ride up to the mountain in these conditions. I have to get up there, please!" Stephanie shouted. Giant flakes of snow scattered across her cheeks as she stared at the boy. Apparently he decided her request was worth the risk because he went inside his minibooth, and the chair began to move slowly.

A million thoughts went through her mind as the lift made its climb to the top of the mountain. What if they couldn't find the girls in time? With the weather conditions worsening by the minute, they wouldn't last long in this cold. Stephanie knew Ashley understood basic survival skills, as she'd insisted that Ashley take a junior mountain-survival class last year when the child had pleaded with her, telling Stephanie she was old enough to ski the green runs alone. They'd compromised. Ashley took the class and was allowed to ski certain green runs, but she had to take Stephanie's cell phone with her. Why hadn't she thought to get the girls phones of their own? They could have called for help. The reception on the mountain was excellent, so there wasn't an issue about lack of coverage. Why in the world hadn't she provided both girls with such a necessity? She remembered when she first

arrived at Hope House. Grace had insisted she take a cell phone, saying she gave them to all the women at Hope House just in case they needed to dial 911. Why, why, *why* had she been so irresponsible? Money, she thought as she shivered in the bone-chilling air. She'd been so intent on giving the girls a home of their own, she'd lost sight of their other wants and needs. Ashley had asked for a cell phone months ago, and Stephanie had dismissed it, telling her she was too young for a phone of her own, saying it was an added expense that she didn't need. How she wished she'd given in! As they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty. Little good it did her to dwell on what she should've done. Now all she wanted was to find both of her daughters safe and sound. She gave a silent prayer. *Please let them be safe. I'll equip them both with GPS if I find them safe and unharmed.*

The lift came to a slow stop at the top of the mountain. Stephanie practically jumped out of the chair. She whipped down the trail, making the twists and turns from memory, as the snow was coming down heavier by the minute. She wiped her hand across her goggles just in time to get a decent look at the bowl where Melanie had last seen the girls. She knew the girls would never attempt to ski a black diamond trail, so she followed Melanie's route, hoping and *praying* that she would magically find her girls hiding behind a snowdrift, visible only to her. She'd bring them back to the Snow Zone, where they'd sip hot chocolate, warm their hands with the chemical hand warmers they sold at the shop, all the while relaying to Candy Lee how brave they had been. If only, Stephanie thought as she traversed down the last quarter mile of the run, with still no sign of her children. She stopped every few minutes to call out their names, only to have her voice drowned out by the turbulent sound of the wind as it whipped through the towering evergreens.

Tears stung her eyes, freezing against her wind-burned cheeks as she continued to ski in areas that she knew were off-limits for the girls, but at this point she'd have skied down Mount Everest blindfolded if she thought it would bring her girls back. The late-afternoon sky was overcast, the light flat and indistinct, the snowfall heavy and thick, making visibility almost nil. These were blizzard conditions, Stephanie thought. Why hadn't she paid closer attention to the weather forecast? Why had she even allowed the girls on the slopes, knowing how packed they would be? She was stupid, her skill as a parent equivalent to that of a teenage babysitter. Her throat was dry, and her heart pounded in her chest as she used every ounce of energy she had left

to pole her way back to the lift. She'd seen the chairs as they hung suspended from the heavy-duty cables, empty of passengers. Knowing the lifts were closed wasn't going to stop her. She'd borrow a snowmobile from the ski patrol. She was not leaving this mountain until she found Amanda and Ashley.

Alive. The word skittered through her brain. *Alive. Alive. Alive.* From out of nowhere, Stephanie was filled with a complete and utter sense of peace and well-being. Without knowing why, she suddenly knew her girls were alive. And not only were they alive, but they were fine.

Somewhat shocked by the epiphany she'd just experienced, she debated her next move. With the temperature dropping into negative numbers, Stephanie stopped in the middle of the storm, took a deep breath, and prayed for a higher power to guide her in the right direction. As though controlled by an outside force, she pointed her ski tips in the direction of Snow Zone, where she saw a crowd gathered outside its doors. Briefly, she wondered how anyone could possibly shop when her girls were missing, but then common sense took over. These people had no idea where her children were. For that matter, Stephanie was sure they didn't have a clue about her or her life. And why should they? She was nothing more than a shop manager who couldn't seem to keep tabs on two small children.

Beyond cold and knowing she needed to check in with the ski patrol, Stephanie skied as far as the snow allowed before she stopped to remove her skis, leaving them in the middle of the parking lot. Not wanting to disturb the crowd gathered at the front door, she used the employee entrance. Inside, she hurried to her office, where she dialed the emergency number for the ski patrol. The line rang a dozen times before a recorded message told her to dial 911 if this was a true emergency. What the heck? Wasn't someone supposed to be there manning the phones in case of an emergency? Wasn't that the entire point of having a ski patrol? Were they out searching for the girls? She hit the END button on the phone, then saw her black leather, fur lined boots, which she'd tossed under her desk. She quickly pulled off her ski boots, changed out of her damp socks into a dry pair, and crammed her feet into her warm boots before heading to the front of the store, where dozens of people stood in a semicircle. She would ask Candy Lee if she'd heard anything, then she would go to the ski patrol office to see if there was anyone there with any news of the girls. This was beyond a nightmare. The girls should be enjoying their Christmas vacation. They'd been so excited about tonight's tree-lighting

ceremony. How could a day that started out so perfect turn into one so horrid? It actually caused her physical pain to think beyond the *what ifs* and the *if onlys*. She couldn't even imagine life without her children.

She wouldn't go there! *She couldn't.*

Stephanie hurried to the front of the store, where she found Candy Lee and Melanie...*smiling.*

How could they even think about smiling at a time like this? She was about to ask that very question when she saw what or rather whom they were smiling at.

Her girls.

Sipping cups of hot chocolate.

Chapter 6

Stephanie was momentarily stunned when she saw Amanda and Ashley seated behind the counter. “Thank goodness you’re both okay! What happened? Where, who?” Stephanie cried out. She glanced around her, only to discover Patrick, along with several Maximum Glide employees, grinning from ear to ear. Apparently the two mischief makers had a story to tell.

Overwhelmed by the sheer relief of seeing her daughters safe and sound, Stephanie forced her way behind the counter. Not caring that she was being watched by several dozen strangers, she wrapped an arm around each of her daughters. Tears of relief streamed down her face, and her heart sang with delight as she breathed in the scent she knew and loved so well. The sweet smell of Johnson’s Baby Shampoo clung to their long, dark hair. Stephanie gloried in the moment as she recalled her vision of her daughters being alive and well. It had happened exactly as she knew it would. She would leave it at that. After all, it was Christmas, and she still believed in miracles.

Candy Lee handed her a wad of tissues along with a piping-hot mug of cocoa. “You’re gonna need this,” she said.

Stephanie wiped the tears from her eyes, then took a sip of her drink. “Okay, now I think it’s time I heard exactly what happened out on that mountain today.”

“Patrick saved us, Mommy! He really did, then he cried,” Amanda said. “Right, Ashley?”

Those were the last words Stephanie expected to hear. She caught Patrick’s gaze across the group that had gathered around the girls. He smiled. Sort of. Joy bubbled up inside her like an overflowing fountain. She smiled back.

“I don’t think he was crying. I think it was just the cold air,” Ashley stated matter-of-factly in the way that only a ten-year-old can.

Patrick edged through the crowd, stopping when he reached the girls. “Why don’t you tell your mother what happened out on that mountain today. I think she’ll be very proud of you two,” he added. “And it might help to keep you both out of trouble,” he went on, grinning from ear to ear.

Amanda spoke up, "Are we in trouble? I sure hope not 'cause I still want to go to that tree-lighting thing. We can still go, right, Mommy?"

Using a firm-yet-gentle tone, Stephanie explained, "A lot of people were worried about you two today. Right now, I want to know what happened, then we will think about the Christmas tree lighting."

Ashley started to speak, then hesitated as the crowd gathered closer. Suddenly, she seemed bashful, almost as though she were afraid.

Patrick observed her hesitancy. In a boisterous voice, he spoke directly to the group. "I think Ashley feels a bit overwhelmed. If you're not here to shop, why don't we give the little lady a few minutes with her mother. As most of you know, these children have been through quite an ordeal." Patrick paused as he waited for the crowd to disperse. At least two dozen people left the shop, but not before wishing the girls good luck and congratulating them on a job well-done. The remaining few were Maximum Glide employees. Patrick turned to Stephanie. "If you don't mind, a few of my employees would like to stay and hear the rest of the story since they were part of the search party."

Stephanie looked at Ashley. "Only if you're okay with this?" If she didn't find out soon what her daughters had been involved in, she would take them to her office, where they could have a few moments of privacy.

"I'm okay with it, Mom," Ashley replied.

"Then spill the beans because I don't think I can wait another minute. I've been beside myself with worry the past hour," Stephanie said, in hopes that this would hurry along what was becoming quite a lengthy process.

"We were waiting for Melanie at the sign, but then me and Amanda heard this really loud crying sound. It was by that building where they keep those giant machines that smooth out the snow." Ashley smiled. "Then we just followed the crying. It was inside the building, so we weren't really cold, but Amanda had to use the potty in the corner."

"And there wasn't anyplace to wash my hands either, so I just...didn't," Amanda offered.

Laughter pealed from the employees as they listened.

"Go on," Stephanie encouraged.

"We heard where the crying noise came from." Ashley looked at Patrick. "She's gonna be okay, right?"

"Thanks to you and your sister she is," Patrick said. "Now don't keep your mom waiting any longer."

“Once we were inside the building, we just followed the cries. And that’s when we found the mommy dog. She was so sad, her eyes had that look you know? So we just waited for her to stop crying, but then I saw a little baby puppy, and there was another one that was trying to...get out of the mommy’s belly. That’s why she was crying ’cause it was hurting her so bad. Amanda covered the baby pup up with her ski jacket.”

“And I rubbed her head, too,” Amanda informed them.

Ashley laughed at her little sister. “And the puppy was fine. But the mommy was still crying, and that’s when I helped her out, sort of.”

Stephanie wasn’t sure what was coming next, but something told her it was about to make her day.

“I watched those little tiger cubs on Animal Planet. That man helped take the cubs out with his hands, so I just did what he did, and another puppy came out, and the mommy stopped crying. She licked the puppy, and we gave her our granola bars. Amanda and me melted some snow and gave it to her to drink. So once the mommy had both of her pups, she just licked ’em, then she fed ’em. We put our jackets on them, so they wouldn’t freeze. I wanted to leave to find Melanie so she could help us with the dogs, but when I peeked out of the shed, I didn’t see her anywhere. The snow was really pouring out of the sky by then. And I remembered what I learned in my survival class. They taught us to stay where there was shelter, and, well, that’s what we did.” Ashley told the story as if it were something a ten and seven-year-old did every day.

The employees applauded loudly, some calling out to Ashley “Way to go!” “You’re a hero!” “You can ski with me anytime!”

Ashley appeared surprised by all the attention, so she just smiled as some of the employees stopped to give her a hug before they left. Stephanie watched in amazement as her daughter accepted their thanks in stride as though this were a normal, everyday event. Stephanie wasn’t sure exactly what to think right then. How was it possible that her ten-year-old daughter had delivered a puppy? And not only that, she remembered what to do in an emergency situation while in a snowstorm. Tears pooled once again. She was extremely proud of both girls for using their heads in this situation when most children their age wouldn’t have had a clue as to what to do. And where and how did Patrick fit into the picture?

“I can’t tell you how proud I am of you both. I’m sure the dog was grateful you two showed up when you did, but that still doesn’t get either of

you off the hook for not waiting for Melanie. She was worried about you, and so was I. You both know how I feel about knowing where you are at all times, right?"

The girls nodded in unison.

"But what about helping others? Didn't you tell us that's what good, decent people do?" Ashley asked, a puzzled look on her face.

Oh boy. Stephanie didn't think now was the time to get into the moral of this lesson. She would wait until they were home, where they could discuss this in private. For the moment, she was simply relieved that they were alive and didn't seem to be fazed in the least by their experience.

Stephanie needed to know Patrick's role in finding her daughters. Since it didn't appear as though he wanted to tell his side of the story, she turned to face him. For a second, she was flustered. He was so sexy, with his windblown raven black hair just a shade too long. And those blue eyes. Well she knew she could drown in them if given the opportunity, but it wasn't the time. "How did you find the girls? And before you say anything, let me say thank you."

Patrick chuckled. "It was by sheer luck, trust me. When Candy Lee called me and told me they were missing, and with the storm worsening by the minute, I didn't want to take a chance on using the snow-mobiles. I took the lift up to the garage, where we store the Snow Cats. I found them there caring for the dogs. I loaded the pups and the girls into the cab, and brought them here before dropping the dogs off with a friend of mine who's a veterinarian. I stopped back by to make sure you'd found them. End of story."

"I can't thank you enough. I was beside myself with worry," Stephanie said, then stopped. "I know you don't have children, so you probably haven't a clue what it feels like knowing you might not see them again, so thanks, Patrick. You can't imagine how much this means to me."

"As long as you don't get any funny ideas about the future," he said.

Shock at his remark yielded quickly to anger. Not caring that he was her boss, and not caring that he was the man who'd just saved her daughters from being stuck out in a blizzard, Stephanie found she was practically breathless with rage. How dare he? And in front of her daughters, Candy Lee, and Melanie! She swallowed the vile words she wanted to sling at him before she made a fool of herself. Taking a breath, as much as she was able to, Stephanie spoke, letting her eyes convey the outrage and fury she felt. "Mr. O'Brien, trust me, any 'funny ideas' I may have had about you have been

completely erased from my memory. If you don't mind, I'm going to take my girls home so they can change their clothes, then we're going to the Christmas tree lighting." She walked to the front of the store, where she flipped the OPEN sign to CLOSED.

"You can't do that! We've got two more hours before it's time to close up shop. In spite of what you may think, there are people still out there who might want to visit the shop before they call it a day. You can't just leave. There is money to be made, and I expect you to stay here and do your job. Or else," he added.

Knowing Patrick had about as much tact as a rattlesnake didn't excuse his smart-ass comments, and for once in her life, Stephanie refused to allow a man to browbeat her into submitting to his demands. Without giving it another thought, she shot back, "Or else what?"

She knew her remark caught him off guard just by looking at him. His nostrils flared like those of an angry stallion. She was familiar with Patrick's reputation as a tough and demanding boss, but that didn't prepare her for the words that spewed from his mouth.

He rubbed the dark stubble on his chin and lowered his voice. Standing as close to her as possible, he said, "Or else this. How about you take the next four weeks off work. Spend some quality time with your children."

Stephanie felt the blood rush to her head, settling in her temples only to pound like a jackhammer.

Before she even had a chance to respond, Patrick leaned next to her, and whispered in her ear, "Without pay."

Chapter 7

As though she were on autopilot, Stephanie hastily took her daughters' hands and practically pulled them off the stools they were sitting on as she raced to her office. Rage consumed her, then the feeling left as quickly as it came, humiliation coming in its stead. She'd lost all her wind, all of her spark, in less than a few seconds. Like a deflating hot air balloon, every emotion, every word, every thought drifted out with each exhalation.

She removed her purse from a bottom drawer and grabbed her car keys from a hook on the wall. She quickly scanned the small space, searching for anything of value she might be leaving behind. Fortunately, her pride was visible only to her.

"What just happened out there?" Melanie whispered.

Stephanie shook her head. "Not now. I have to get out of here."

"You want me to take the girls?" Melanie asked. Realizing the enormity behind the innocent comment, Melanie swallowed. "I mean I can take them to the Christmas tree lighting with you, help out."

"Thanks, but I'd like to spend the evening with just the girls. I'm sorry, it's not you, it's..." She looked down the hall at the front of the store, where Patrick could be seen bossing Candy Lee around.

Melanie followed her gaze. "I see. Then I'll just go on. You call if you need me for anything, no matter what, okay?"

Melanie's words jolted her back to reality, the reality that she really did need a friend right now. "No, don't, I mean don't go off by yourself. Come with us to the Christmas tree lighting. I think I might need a friend tonight." There, she'd said it. She'd actually taken Grace's advice. When you need help, a friend, a hug, ask for it.

Melanie instantly brightened. "I was hoping you'd say that. I don't want you and the girls to be all alone tonight."

Stephanie nodded, then walked to the employee exit, Amanda and Ashley trailing behind. "You want to ride with us?" Stephanie asked as she stepped out into the frigid evening air. Snowflakes swirled in the bluish glow beneath the lights in the parking lot. Icy wind whipped the ends of her hair as she

walked across the almost empty lot to her car, a car in such pitiful condition, it almost made her smile. She'd scrimped and saved for three long months so that she could have a car of her own. She and the girls used the public bus system, but the buses didn't take them through the drive-thru at McDonald's, nor would a bus be there when they had the sudden urge to go out for ice cream. She'd been so proud of herself when she bought the car, her first major purchase with money she'd earned on her own. But as she fumbled through her pockets for the keys she'd placed there minutes ago, she saw the vehicle for what it really was. An almost-twenty-year-old hunk of junk just barely making it. Sort of like me, she thought as she unlocked the back door for the girls.

Surprisingly, neither girl had uttered a word since they'd witnessed Patrick whisper those harsh words to her. Then it hit her! They weren't talking because they were *afraid!* Even though they hadn't actually heard his words, they knew their import from the way in which she was behaving. How could she be so blind? They'd spent so many years living on pins and needles with their father that it was second nature for them to behave this way when they saw a man and a woman together who didn't appear to be on the best of terms!

For this, she was mad. Madder than she'd been in a very, very long time. Anger pulsed through her veins, throbbing with each thought that raced through her head. Thankful no one could read her mind, she took another deep breath before getting behind the wheel. It wouldn't do for her to be distracted in this weather, especially with the girls in the car. She looked in her rearview mirror. "Are your seat belts fastened?"

They nodded.

Melanie slid into the passenger seat, and Stephanie was glad she'd invited her, or rather that she'd accepted Melanie's offer to come along. The younger woman reached across the seat and clasped Stephanie's cold hand with her gloved hand. "We can talk later," Melanie said.

Stephanie gave a slight nod.

"Let's get these future veterinarians home so they can change clothes. Then I think we should all go out for pizza after the Christmas tree lighting." Stephanie glanced in the rearview mirror again. Both girls were smiling, and in that very second all was right in her world.

As she pulled out of the parking lot, Stephanie's thoughts drifted to the enormity of what had just taken place at Snow Zone. This was the worst time

in the world for it to happen, but she'd try and put it out of her mind for the rest of the evening. She owed it to the girls to at least try to act as though everything were normal. It wouldn't be hard, as she was an expert at that type of behavior.

Amanda was the one who broke the silence. "Mommy, can we go to Burger King instead of having pizza?"

Kids, Stephanie thought as she carefully guided her old Ford down the narrow road that led off the mountain. "I think you should ask your sister."

"So do ya?" Amanda asked Ashley.

"Mommy, tell her she needs to speak in complete sentences. When you're in fourth grade, Mrs. Yost won't allow you to speak that way if you're in her class. Right, Mom?"

"I suppose that's true. But you didn't answer Amanda's question," Stephanie said in a teasing tone, amazed that she could still banter back and forth with her girls given the dire situation Patrick O'Brien had just put her in.

"Burger King is fine, but the only reason Amanda wants to go there is so she can get that Dora the Explorer toy they're putting in the kids' meals," Ashley explained. "She's too big for that stuff."

"And you're too big to sleep with that crummy old rabbit that you've had forever. Right, Mommy?" Amanda asked. She was at the age where she needed her mother's approval for almost everything she said. Most of the time, it was funny, but at that moment, Stephanie was trying to drive carefully in near-blizzard conditions, and it wasn't funny.

Melanie leaned over the front seat. "Let's allow your mom to concentrate on her driving. Okay, girls? The roads are very slippery right now."

"Is that right, Mommy?" Amanda asked.

Stephanie couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, Melanie is right. How about we play the quiet game until we get home. Whoever wins gets a double-dipped chocolate-covered ice-cream cone."

She was met with silence. She smiled at Melanie. "Both of them always win this game," Stephanie explained.

She knew the girls wanted to talk, but they were also very competitive. They'd bite their tongues if they had to.

The rest of the drive to the garage apartment was made in silence. Stephanie wanted to enjoy her night with the girls because, from the look of things, it might be a while before she had a free night. Since she was out of a

job, she would have to hustle to find something so late in the season. While she had her savings for her down payment on the house, she didn't want to dip into them unless she absolutely had to. She still had high hopes of giving the girls a home of their own for Christmas. She might have to sacrifice the white canopied bed, but that would be okay, as long as they had a home of their own.

Stephanie parked the Ford Taurus next to the outside stairs that led up to their apartment. The girls knew the rules of the quiet game. Once they were inside the house, they could talk all they wanted. Both shot up the stairs like bolts of lightning.

"I think the quiet game is about to officially end," Melanie said as she waited for Stephanie to unlock the door. Both girls barreled through the door.

"I am not too big to sleep with my bunny rabbit. Mommy said she slept with a stuffed Tasmanian Devil until she was fourteen, so there!" Ashley said in a huff.

"Well, then, it's okay if I want the Dora Explorer prize in the kids' meal."

In response, Ashley rubbed Amanda's shoulder. "I guess it's okay. I was just teasin' with you anyway. I like Dora, too, just don't tell anyone at school. Pinkie promise?" Ashley asked.

Both girls locked their pinkies together, then shook their hands. "Okay, so let's go change. I want to see the tree, but first I want something to eat. We never had lunch today," Ashley explained to her mother.

"I'm sorry. We'll make up for it at dinner, now both of you change into something warm and brush your teeth and comb your hair before we leave. You've got ten minutes, or we'll miss the Christmas tree lighting."

They ran inside their bedroom, slamming the door behind them.

Out in the galley kitchen Stephanie poured glasses of Coke for her and Melanie.

"Want to tell me what sent you racing out of Snow Zone today? I know that conceited idiot said something to anger you," Melanie said before taking a sip of her Coke.

Stephanie debated not telling her, but she needed a friend. Even though the girls had managed to get away from her today, she trusted Melanie to the nth degree. "He told me to take the next four weeks off. Said I needed to spend the time with my kids. Then he added that my extended leave of absence would be without pay."

Melanie's mouth opened and closed several times before she was actually

able to form words. “That sneaky, low-life creep! How could he?”

“He’s the boss, something he seems to like to remind me of all the time, that’s how.” Stephanie took a long pull from her glass of Coke. “I used to think he was a really nice guy, just a little rough around the edges. Now I think he’s a mean, hateful SOB who needs to get a life.”

“I can’t believe he would do that to you, especially this time of year. Not only is the Snow Zone going to be swamped, but you have two children to buy Christmas gifts for.”

“Yes, your thoughts mirror my own. But you know what angered me more than anything?”

“You’re gonna tell me,” Melanie stated.

“The girls were afraid. They knew that I was upset after speaking to that self-important jackass. It was like old times. When their father started ranting and raving, they would always clam up, hoping not to anger him. That’s the exact way they acted today when Mr. Patrick O’Brien got up on his high horse and gave me the boot. He can fire me, give me a leave of absence, whatever he wants. He’s the boss. But what he can’t do is frighten my girls! I won’t allow it, and I don’t care if he fires me for leaving early today. They’ve seen enough already.”

“Do you think you should bring Max in on this? After all, he is your real boss, and Patrick’s, too. He *owns* Maximum Glide, and I bet Grace would have a thing or two to say about Patrick’s pissy managerial skills, not to mention his treatment of you.”

“No, I don’t want to do that. Besides, I think this is personal. You know Patrick and I went out a few times; it didn’t work out for whatever reason, and it’s as though he’s had it in for me ever since. I don’t want to involve Max, and certainly not Grace, in her condition. I will handle this, but thanks for offering. It’s nice to have a friend go to bat for me.” Stephanie put a finger to her lips, stopping further conversation. The girls were waiting at the front door.

“We brushed our teeth and our hair just like you said,” Amanda informed her.

Stephanie bent over to give each of the girls a kiss on top of their shiny brown, nicely combed hair. “You’re good girls,” she added. And they were. Other than an occasional disagreement over something inconsequential, the girls got along remarkably well.

“Then I say it’s time we go to see that giant evergreen that is going to

light up Maximum Glide. Are you two ready?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Ashley cried as she stomped down the stairs.

“Be careful, those steps are slick,” Melanie said, then took Amanda by the hand and walked with her to the bottom of the stairs before she slipped and fell. That was the last thing Stephanie needed at this stage of the game.

Once they were loaded back in the Taurus and the girls were safely buckled in their seats, Stephanie relaxed. She knew how much the girls had been looking forward to that night. No matter what issues she had to deal with after the day’s events, she was a mother first. A fun night out with the girls would make what she knew she had to do much easier.

Chapter 8

Patrick sent Candy Lee on her way along with the rest of the Maximum Glide employees. He'd already been there for over an hour, and from the looks of things, it appeared that the weather had driven away whatever onslaught of customers he had expected. Stephanie had been right about closing Snow Zone even though her reasons for doing so weren't. She couldn't just take off whenever she felt like it. She had a responsibility to Maximum Glide and to him. While it wasn't he who signed her paychecks, without him she wouldn't have such a cushy position at the resort. It usually took an employee years to be promoted to a management position. And because she was good at her job, he'd given her the benefit of the doubt, and after last year's screwup, he hadn't demoted her. She was loyal to a fault, always on time, and never complained when he asked her to do things that normally a stock boy or girl would do. She did an excellent job no matter what he asked of her. She even cleaned the employee bathrooms every evening before she left.

He was still kicking his own rear end for the comment he'd made about her getting any "funny ideas" about their future. Where the hell that had come from he didn't know, but he'd kick his own butt a hundred times if he could take back those words. Stephanie hadn't even hinted that she wanted anything to do with him after their last movie date. It was *he* who'd decided she wasn't top-quality pickings on the meat market. Patrick sighed. If his mother or his three sisters even had an inkling that he'd referred to a woman as meat on the market, all four of them would string him up like cattle, then use a cattle prod on him. He didn't really think of women as "meat." It was just something the guys said when they were trying to be macho. And he always wanted to blend in when he was with the guys. Max was the only one who really knew him, knew that he was more than the image he presented to the world. He was educated and quite brilliant, but that didn't always work on the slopes, though he had to admit it had been a blessing dealing with suppliers and a few angry guests. He knew what worked financially and what didn't. Max trusted his judgment, but he knew Max would be mad as a hatter

if word of how Patrick had treated Stephanie got back to him. As much as he hated to eat crow, he was going to have to serve himself a very large portion and swallow every bite as though it were the rarest of caviar.

He hadn't planned on attending the Christmas tree lighting, but knowing that Max and Grace would be there, not to mention Stephanie and her two kids, he figured it wouldn't look good if the manager of the resort didn't put in an appearance for what was widely billed as the kickoff to the Christmas season at Telluride. Plus, he didn't want to give Stephanie the opportunity to corner Max and Grace, not before he had a chance to explain to them what had happened.

Knowing another hour wouldn't make or break the day's sales, he quickly went about the business of closing the shop. Candy Lee had restocked all the shelves before she left, telling him that someone had to do it if Stephanie wasn't there. She went on to tell him what a great manager Stephanie was and that she wouldn't blame her one little bit if she just up and quit. Someday he was going to tell that kid to keep her thoughts to herself. But he liked her, she reminded him of Shannon back in the day. Candy Lee had...*moxie*, and he liked that about her. He secretly wished some of it would rub off on the store's manager. She was just a little too compliant at times. Not that he would admit it, but today she'd really surprised him when she walked out in the middle of her shift. Took a lot of guts for her to do that. He probably would've done the same thing had he been in her position. Which he reminded himself he wasn't. He'd had a job to do, and he did it. He could've left out that part about the future, but it had just rolled off his tongue. Why it had rolled off his tongue was something he did not want to think about. No how, no way. He liked his life as it was. No complications, no children to complicate the complications, certainly no children to break his heart into a million tiny pieces the way Shannon's death had left Colleen, Mark, and Abby. That was just too much pain for one man to tolerate.

He turned off the computer systems, did a batch report on the credit card machine, and counted out the cash, checks, and traveler's checks. After that was finished, he tallied up the day's total sales and was extremely impressed. Stephanie usually made a bank deposit on her way home from work. He'd do it because he felt he owed it to her. Once he had all the required checks stamped with the account numbers on the back of them and deposit slips made out, he stuffed them into the bank bag.

Since all the normal closing duties were finished for the day, Patrick

walked back to the office just to make sure there wasn't anything there that needed his attention. He opened the door, peered in, and saw nothing out of the way. He ran his hand along the length of the wall searching for the light switch when the flashing green button on the answering machine caught his eye. Dammit, he couldn't leave without listening to the messages. They might be important, and with Stephanie not there to take them, he'd have to intercept them in case there was something that needed his immediate attention. He pushed the PLAY button. A monotone female voice said, "You have fifteen messages."

"What the hell?" He hit the forward button several times as most were calls from suppliers, customers, and other departments at Maximum Glide. He was about to click the STOP button when he heard a soft, but businesslike voice speak as though the woman were in the room.

"Hi, Stephanie, it's Jessica Rollins. I have some good news. I'm pretty sure the owners on the Placerville property are going to accept your offer. If Lady Luck stays on your back, I might be able to close this deal before the end of the year. Call me as soon as you can. I think you and your daughters just might have a Merry Christmas after all. Oh, before I forget, the bank wants to verify your employment. Talk s—"

The machine stopped.

Patrick flicked the light switch back on. He opened a drawer in search of something to write on when he was completely taken by surprise. In the top drawer was a pile of gold ribbon, and a movie ticket stub. He picked it up to read the title of the movie. He let the soft gold silk run between his fingers, then dropped the two items back in the drawer where they belonged. This wasn't good at all. Really it wasn't. Though he broke out into a grin as wide as the bunny run. She'd kept the ribbon from the box of candy he'd bought her, and the tickets from the movie they'd attended on their last date. It was *that* movie that sent him running for cover. She'd probably put these things in the drawer the next day and forgotten about them. Women did that. Saved things that had no meaning or value whatsoever. Stephanie must have forgotten she'd left them there. Should he take them to her, or should he just leave well enough alone? He didn't want her to think he'd been prying through her desk drawers, but he'd needed something to write on so he could remember Jessica Rollins's message. He found a blank Post-it. He played the message once more, wrote it down as best he could, then crammed the paper in his pocket. This Jessica hadn't left a number, but Patrick figured if

Stephanie had been dealing with her, then she already knew her phone number. He closed the drawer again, turned off the light, and left through the employee exit.

He'd left his jacket in the Snow Cat; hopefully, one of the guys would remember it belonged to him and return it. Those Spyder jackets cost big bucks. The parking lot was completely covered in snow. What he wouldn't give for a snow tube just right then. He'd sail across the parking lot like a bat out of hell. He had a quick flash of two little girls in bright yellow ski jackets and wondered if they'd ever experienced the pure joy of sliding in a parking lot on fresh-fallen snow. Something told him they hadn't had much fun in their lives. It caused a lump to form in the back of his throat. *Damn! I'm not cut out for this.*

Yeah, those girls were as sweet as hot cocoa laced with the finest whipped cream. When he'd heard they were missing, he about jumped out of his skin though he didn't tell that to anyone. Riding the lift up to where the Snow Cats were stored had been his first priority. He knew if he took a Snow Cat out, first he would be in an all-terrain vehicle that would take him to any part of the mountain, double black diamonds and all. Also, it was equipped with bright lights and had a kick-ass heater. Lucky for him and the girls, and the dogs—he couldn't forget the mother and her pups—he hadn't had to go far. And now it seemed all was as it should be.

He jumped into the Hummer, cranked the heat up as high as it would go, then carefully made his way out of the parking lot. The snow was still falling, but it wasn't nearly as thick as it had been earlier that afternoon. He needed to go home for a quick shower and a change of clothes. He'd make sure to give Stephanie the message from her realtor friend, then he would apologize, tell her how sorry he was for being such an...a dope, then he'd tell her she could come back to work first thing in the morning. Once that was out of the way, he could breathe freely again. Hell, he might even ask Stephanie and the girls out to a movie. There were all kinds of G-rated movies out at Christmas. Maybe he would take Megan's boys along. One big happy family.

He shook his head as he traveled down the salt-covered road.

One big happy family!

He couldn't believe a thought like that had even entered his head! *What the heck is going on here?* It must be the holidays. Maybe he was supposed to enjoy them this year. It was just so hard without Shannon. When his family was together, it was so obvious a link was missing. Shannon was the first

grandchild, the first niece. She was just the first. And, sadly, she was the first to die.

Tears filled Patrick's eyes, blurring the road in front of him. *Damn!* He wanted to be happy; he just didn't want all the pain that came with it. Knowing he couldn't have one without the other, Patrick figured he would always be the uncle, the good friend of a friend. He didn't have what it took to be a father figure. To anyone's child. He didn't know a diaper bag from a baby bottle. Well, yes he did, but it wasn't something he wanted in his daily life. That was all. Or was it? And was he just afraid to take the leap?

Chapter 9

The crowd gathered smack-dab in the middle of Maximum Glide. Hundreds of people had faced the cold weather to attend the Christmas tree lighting. A thirty-foot evergreen was placed directly in front of the main offices, the site of most of the day's comings and goings. Ski lessons could be arranged in the building to the right of the giant tree. To the left, children under the age of three could be left in the capable hands of Bunnies and Babies, the day care offered by the resort. North of the tree was The Lodge, where one could eat breakfast or lunch, or simply sit by the raging fire that never seemed to burn out in the giant fireplace. South of the tree were the ski lifts that took men, women, and children to the other forty-six lifts that covered the mountain. Tonight was like a scene from a Charles Dickens novel. Snow twirled like tiny ballerinas in the chilled night air. Mock gaslights wearing bright red bows flanked the main street on both sides. The shops stayed open, all displaying brightly colored lights and Christmas trees decked out in all the finery of the holiday season. The odor of mulled cider emanated from several of the shops, along with the earthy smell of burning wood.

Stephanie held her daughters' hands in hers as the three of them walked through the festive village that made up Maximum Glide. Melanie walked alongside them. The four were silent as each took in the fairy-tale-like images that lit up the resort like something right out of a magical storybook.

As expected, it was Amanda who spoke first. "Mommy, this is the most beautiful place in the whole wide world! I never want to leave here. I bet when Santa comes here, he doesn't want to leave either, right?"

They all laughed.

"I'm sure he doesn't, but he has many places to go all over the world. Still, I'm sure it hurts him just a tiny bit to leave this very special place," Stephanie said, as they continued their leisurely stroll down the main street, taking in all the brightly decorated windows and people dressed in their warmest, most colorful outdoor wear. It really was beautiful, Stephanie thought. It would be equally beautiful in its raw form, too. No lights, no

flashy decorations, just the tall trees with the scent of evergreen perfuming the air, along with the clean freshly falling snow. Yes, she mused, that would be just as beautiful.

“What time do they light the tree?” Ashley asked excitedly. “I can’t wait. I know it’s just a tree, but it’s so big!”

Stephanie and Melanie looked at one another over the girls’ toboggan cap-covered heads. They laughed. “Seven o’clock, right on the dot. And it’s ten minutes till, so we’d best hurry over so we can get in as close as possible. I don’t want you two to miss anything.”

“We don’t want to either, Mommy. Right, Ashley?” Amanda singsonged.

“*Right*, Amanda. You know what I’m going to wish for when they light up the tree?” Ashley asked in a firm voice.

“I haven’t the first clue,” Stephanie said. “Why don’t you tell us.”

“I’m going to wish that Amanda would stop saying, ‘right, Mommy,’ ‘right, Ashley,’ ‘right, Melanie’ all the time.”

Stephanie looked at Melanie, who could barely contain her laughter. Amanda, on the other hand, looked as if she was about to cry.

“It’s okay, honey. Your sister is just doing what big sisters do.” Stephanie fluffed the ball on top of her toboggan cap, hoping this wouldn’t turn into an all-out verbal war between the two.

“Santa Claus doesn’t tell me what to say, right, Mommy?” Amanda asked in her squeaky-I’m-about-to-cry-voice.

“Of course not. You’re the only one who can decide what words come out of that sweet little mouth of yours. Look”—Stephanie pointed to the tree a few yards ahead of them, hoping to distract her younger daughter—“they’re about to light the tree. Come on, let’s hurry.”

Without another word, the quartet weaved their way through the throngs of people clustered around the giant tree’s perimeter. They were able to find a spot about six feet away. Stephanie figured that was as close as they could get without actually trampling on toes, strollers, and, looking down, the largest boot she had ever seen. Her eyes followed the boot to the calf, then the knee, all the way to the thigh. Why did this look familiar to her? Before she knew what was happening, the boot man snatched Amanda right out of her grip and hoisted her on top of his very broad shoulders.

Patrick!

“If you’ll follow me, I’ve got the perfect place to view the tree,” he said.

Stephanie was about to tell him to back off when Melanie shook her head

and pointed to the girls. They were so excited, the sparkle in their eyes could light up half the giant tree if needed. She mouthed okay and inched behind Patrick, with Ashley sandwiched between her and Melanie.

Patrick guided them through the crowd without too much pushing and shoving. On the opposite side of the street, Stephanie spied what she knew to be a giant boom lift, or a cherry picker as some referred to it. She couldn't help but grin. She glanced behind her at Melanie, who wore a grin as big as the tree. Ashley hadn't said a word since Patrick had come in and literally swooped Amanda onto his shoulders. Not that she could've been heard through the sounds of excitement coming from the groups gathered around the center of the resort.

"Let's hurry, we have about two minutes to climb up in this thing," Patrick said.

"This will hold our weight?" Stephanie asked cautiously. Up close, the machine didn't look that big or steady.

"I'm one hundred percent sure," Patrick attested. "I wouldn't risk it if I wasn't."

Was that supposed to be a dig of sorts, she wondered, as Patrick opened the glass door. Did he think she'd taken too big a risk when she'd allowed Melanie to take her girls skiing on the mountain? She figured if he had, too bad. It wasn't his concern how she raised her children. She told herself if he really knew her, he would know the last thing she would do would be to place her children in danger. A small voice reminded her that was exactly what she'd done when she'd remained married to an abuser. *But that's for another time. Tonight, I simply want to enjoy being with my daughters and Melanie.*

Trusting he knew what he was doing, Stephanie allowed Patrick to lift Amanda inside the boom. Ashley wasn't nearly as excited as her sister about climbing into the small bucket.

"Mommy, is this safe?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Stephanie replied in her most reassuring voice. "I would not allow you inside if I thought otherwise," she added.

"Well, okay then," Ashley said, allowing Patrick to assist her.

Patrick placed Ashley next to Amanda on a small seat. He grabbed Stephanie's hand to help her take the giant step leading to the inside of the bucket. Sparks shot up and down the length of her arm as he held her for what she thought was a minute too long. She felt out of sorts for a few

seconds. She stood behind the girls, then Melanie climbed in. Once they were all securely in position, Patrick spoke up.

“I’m going to be operating this thing. It’ll only take a minute to reach the height you’ll need to view the lights. Just try not to jump around too much, okay?” Patrick said.

“You’re not gonna watch the lights with us?” Amanda asked.

“I’ll see them from below, kiddo. Now let me close this door and get all of you ladies up in the air,” Patrick said. He gave Stephanie a small smile before closing the door.

She wondered if this was his way of making up to her for the way he’d talked to her at Snow Zone. She wasn’t sure, but again, for the girls’ sake, she wouldn’t question it, at least not just then. There would be plenty of time later for her to think about and rehash the day’s events.

Before any of them could utter a word, they were lifted in one giant swoop. Patrick had positioned the boom so that they were able to view the tree at its midpoint. They could look up and down, yet they weren’t so close that they couldn’t see the people below them, too.

“Oh, Mommy, this is the best fun ever,” Amanda said.

“Okay, let’s watch,” Stephanie said.

Within a matter of a few seconds, the giant evergreen lit up...just like the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center!

Hundreds of red, green, blue, and white lights clung to the tree’s branches, illuminating the entire perimeter around the tree. From somewhere there was a drumroll, then a giant silver star as big as a car tire sparkled, completing the ceremony.

“Wow,” Ashley said. “This is so way cool from up here.”

“And I’m not even scared, right, Mommy?” Amanda informed them.

“See, she’s doing it again!” Ashley pointed out.

“Girls, now isn’t the time. Let’s just enjoy the view before Patrick puts us down.”

A few minutes later, Patrick lowered the boom to the ground. Once they stopped, he stepped out of the cab, opened the door, and let them out into the frigid night air.

“That was the coolest thing ever, thanks,” Ashley said.

“Yep, it sure was. Mommy thinks so, too, right?”

“Amanda,” Stephanie chastened, “it was wonderful. Now, what do you girls say to Mr. O’Brien?”

Quizzingly, Amanda said, “That we want to do it again.”

They all burst out laughing, even Stephanie.

“That’s not what I had in mind,” she said as an afterthought. Her girls knew their manners. Or at least she thought they did. Apparently tonight, that knowledge had taken a leave of absence.

“Thank you, Mr. O’Brien. That was very thoughtful of you to think of us,” Ashley said in her most prim and proper voice.

Again, the adults laughed.

“You two are very welcome. That tree sure is a sight to behold, huh?” Patrick said as he gazed up at the rainbow of colors.

“Do you wanna go to Burger King with us?” Amanda asked. “We didn’t have lunch today when we were with the pups. I am starving, and Mommy says we both can have double-dipped ice-cream cones because we didn’t talk on the ride home.”

If there had been a giant hole somewhere, Stephanie wished it would swallow her up right then and there. She was really going to have to start explaining to Amanda exactly what social manners were. She realized her daughter was only seven, but she had to learn sometime, and it might as well be now, before she totally humiliated Stephanie.

For once, Patrick saved her from Amanda’s eagerness. “I’d love to, but I need to go to Claude’s to see how the pups are doing.”

“Oh, I want to go with you,” Ashley said. “I’ve been so worried about them. Can I go with Patrick, Mom? Please?”

Stephanie wasn’t sure exactly what had gotten into her girls, but she was really going to have to sit them both down and discuss manners with them.

“No, you may not. And please don’t assume that Mr. O’Brien has to invite you just because you want to go. That is very rude.”

“I tell you what I’ll do if it’s okay with your mom,” Patrick said to both girls. “As soon as I leave Claude’s, I will call your mom with a pup report. Maybe later this week, if it’s all right with your mom, I can take both of you girls to see the pups.” Patrick looked at Stephanie, shot her one of his killer smiles, and her heart turned to mush, but only for a second. She remembered just how hateful he had been to her that afternoon.

“I’ll think about it. I’ll certainly have enough time on my hands to do so,” Stephanie said directly to Patrick.

Patrick looked at his big brown boots. “About what I said today—”

“What’s done is done, Mr. O’Brien. Thank you for offering the pup

update. You can call my cell as soon as you have word of their condition.”

With that, Stephanie took both girls by the hand and led them away from Patrick, his promises, and whatever it was he had been about to say.

Chapter 10

Two weeks later...

“Well, I for one think he owes you at least a bit of loyalty. You’ve worked your rear off at that place for two years, and this is what you get? Laid off during the holidays?” Melanie took a sip of her coffee. “I still think you should have told Max and Grace at the tree lighting.”

“I know you do. It stinks, but it is what it is. I didn’t want to spoil their evening. I’ll be fine as long as the deal on the house goes through. I’ve already filled out all the paperwork; the deposit is being held in escrow; now all I’m waiting on is the bank. And you know how banks are. They take their good old easy time. Jessica said if I was lucky, I’d be moved in before the end of the year, but I don’t see that happening. Not with the holidays coming up.”

Stephanie and Melanie had just returned from walking the girls to the bus stop. Since her forced leave of absence had begun, they had spent almost every day together. If anything good had come out of her layoff, it was her close friendship with Melanie. They’d taken the girls to the movies twice, three times to McDonald’s, and once they’d gone out for pizza at a new pizza parlor in town called Izzy’s. Melanie wanted to take them to see a Christmas play in Denver this weekend, but Stephanie really couldn’t afford the tickets. Melanie had told Stephanie it was her treat, but Stephanie, who had no idea just how well-off her friend was, said that was too much. Instead, the four of them were planning to see *A Christmas Carol* at the high school in Placerville. It was free to anyone, and Stephanie knew the girls would get a kick out of it. Ever since Grace had taken them to see *The Nutcracker* at Eagle Valley High, they’d fallen in love with live performance of any kind.

“I know you can’t wait to get out of this little place, but I think I will miss it when you and the girls leave,” Melanie said as she gazed around the three-room garage apartment.

“Then you should ask your parents to rent it to you,” Stephanie teased. “I’m sure they would give you a decent rate. Not that they haven’t given me a

good rate. I didn't mean to imply that they hadn't. I know what they could really get out of this place if they wanted to rent it as vacation property."

"I don't see that happening. They've loved having you and the girls here. I don't think the place has ever looked quite as homey."

Stephanie had tried her best to make the small, cramped area into a home. She'd painted the walls a warm butter color and sewn cream-colored drapes to cover the large picture window in the living area. She'd spent two weekends putting new tile in the one and only bathroom. She'd been quite proud of herself, too. She'd taken a course on installing ceramic tile offered at the local hardware store and found it really wasn't all that hard to do. She'd borrowed the wet saw and cutters from Max, and the tiles she'd chosen, a creamy beige, were on sale. She'd asked permission first, and, of course, she'd been given complete and total discretion over the apartment. She was told to make it her own, and that was exactly what she'd done.

The kitchen wasn't much bigger than a closet, but Stephanie had left her mark there, too. She'd wall-papered the one wall with tiny butterflies, bought an inexpensive set of pale yellow canisters at a discount store, and added a sheer yellow curtain over the window above the sink. The table had been there when she moved in. Stephanie now knew that it had been a tenth-anniversary gift from Melanie's father to her mother many years ago. Solid hard rock maple with four matching chairs. She'd purchased yellow checkered cushions and matching place mats after she'd polished the deep honey-colored wood to a mellow shine. It was homey, just as Melanie said.

Stephanie had been hesitant about putting up a tree that year, hoping by some sheer force of magic that she would be in the new house, and they would have Christmas there, but she hadn't told the girls about the house, so she'd had to decorate the small artificial tree she'd purchased the first year they lived there. The apartment couldn't hold much more than that, but she and the girls had decorated wherever possible. They'd tied red and green ribbons on all the door-knobs, and on the handles on the kitchen cabinets. They'd strung cranberries and popcorn on thread and draped it on top of the curtain rod in the living room. Baskets of pinecones they had gathered covered every available surface. Amanda had cut out shapes of stars and Christmas trees from red and green construction paper and taped them all over the walls. Not to be out-done, Ashley had used all the aluminum foil in the house making angels and taping them to the ceiling. That had been quite the task, but they'd all enjoyed themselves. And now their little place

sparkled and shone, ready for the holidays.

Though it was expensive and not in her budget, Stephanie had bought the girls each a cell phone for Christmas. Remembering those few hours of fear on Black Friday had left her shaken, more so than she'd let on. She'd purchased cards with a limited number of minutes and would instruct the girls that the phones were only to be used in case of an emergency, but she didn't see that happening, at least not with Ashley. She was starting to talk on the phone with her school friends, and Stephanie knew she would want to fit in with the rest of her classmates by texting and talking on her new cell phone. When Grace and Max had asked what they could give the girls for Christmas, she'd told them to buy them minutes for their phones.

"Thanks, we love it here, it's just not big enough. You know what it's like when three girls share a bathroom?" Stephanie teased.

"I've witnessed it with my very own eyes," Melanie informed her.

"Yes, I suppose you have. I'm just lucky they're still young. Can you imagine what it would be like if they were teenagers?"

Melanie laughed. "I don't even want to think about it."

They chatted for a few more minutes. As Melanie was getting ready to leave, the phone rang. Stephanie hoped the girls were all right. She still didn't feel one hundred percent secure when they were out of her sight.

She raised her index finger to Melanie, indicating for her to wait a minute.

Melanie stood by the door.

"Hello," Stephanie said into the phone, her voice tinged with a bit a fear. "Jessica! It's great to hear from you." Stephanie paused, then nodded to Jessica, who, of course, couldn't see her. As though she were moving in slow motion, she sat down on the kitchen chair.

"That's not true," she cried vehemently. "I don't understand," she trailed off, her voice laced with disappointment. "Yes, of course. I don't know what to say except it's simply not true. I'll have to call you back," Stephanie said as she tossed the phone on the table.

Melanie walked across the small living room back to the kitchen. She sat down in the chair she'd just vacated. "You don't look so hot. Are the girls okay?"

"I hope so. That was Jessica Rollins on the phone. She said she just got off the phone with the bank." Her eyes pooled with unshed tears. "They've denied my loan."

Melanie reached across the table for Stephanie's hand. "How can that be? Jessica said the hard part was over. I thought they'd already approved the loan, that it was simply a matter of signing the final papers at the closing." Melanie appeared to be as dumbfounded as Stephanie. "Did they offer an explanation? Did Jessica say what happened to change their minds?"

Crestfallen, Stephanie nodded. "Jessica said banks don't give loans to people who are unemployed."

Chapter 11

“Out of a job? What is she talking about? You’re not out of a job,” Melanie said again, as though saying it would make it so, at least as far as Jessica Rollins and the bank were concerned. “I don’t know where they got their information, but I sure hope you find out.”

Depleted of whatever energy she’d had, Stephanie got out of her chair and stood at the sink looking out the window that overlooked the long, winding driveway leading to her apartment. She cleared her throat and wiped her eyes on a tea towel. “I know where it came from. It’s obvious.”

“You think Patrick is behind this?” Melanie stated the obvious.

Stephanie turned around to face her. “Who else would stoop so low to do something like this? I think he’s still upset at me for not allowing the girls to go to Claude’s with him to see the puppies.”

“I don’t think he’s that vindictive, or juvenile. I know he’s not the most classy guy in the world, but I really don’t believe he would stoop to this sea urchin level.”

Stephanie sniffled into the tea towel, not caring that she’d painstakingly embroidered the butterflies on it late one night when she’d had a hard time going to sleep. “You don’t get it, Melanie. The guy has it in for me. He thinks women like me are nothing but trash. I know what I’m talking about, trust me.”

“Well, I never trust anyone who says ‘trust me,’ but I can tell you this; whatever makes you think you’re trash and whatever ‘women like me’ are, I would be honored to walk in your shadow, Stephanie Casolino-Marshall. What you are is a decent hardworking woman who wants nothing more than a better life for her two daughters than she had. What you are is a loving, giving, caring mother and friend. Now I know you’re not going to like this, but in this instance I’m going to tell you, too bad. I’m calling Max myself. This childish behavior from his manager, and I use that word loosely, has to stop.” Melanie reached for the phone in the center of the table.

Stephanie placed her hand on top of Melanie’s. “I really don’t want you to call Max or Grace. It will seem as though I’m taking advantage of their

friendship. And thanks for saying all those nice things about me. You're a good friend, you know that, right?"

"Yes, I know that, and thanks. But friends don't sit by and allow their best friends to get kicked in the butt when they're already down." Melanie held her hand up as if to ward off any further comments from Stephanie. "Go take a shower, wash your hair, and put on some makeup. Not that you need it with that peaches-and-cream complexion, but do it anyway. Then when you're finished, get that black pant suit out of the back of your closet. The one you wore when you applied for your mortgage. No, on second thought forget that. Get the tightest, sexiest pair of jeans you own and top them with that bright red sweater I gave you." Melanie was on a roll. "Don't say another word because I'm not listening. Go on, get in the shower. You have one hour to sexy up."

"Sexy up? That's a new one," Stephanie said.

"Yes it is. And that's because I just made it up. It's mine, an original, so don't think I'm going to let you take credit for it. Now get in the shower, or I will toss you in there myself."

"I'm not sure if I like you this way. Bossy and all."

"If you don't get out of here and get in that shower, I will show you what bossy is. Now *git*, and I don't mean perhaps. Now! Remember, you've got exactly one hour."

Stephanie gave up. "Okay. I guess I need to shower, but for the record, I want you to know that I will be okay with this."

Melanie shot her arm out like an arrow pointing toward the bathroom.

"Okay, okay," Stephanie whined before locking herself in the bathroom.

Melanie waited until she heard the shower running before she picked up the phone. She knew that Stephanie's pride was on the line, but right then she didn't care. What she cared about was that someone had caused her dear friend to lose out on her dream. Whether it was intentional or not didn't really matter at that point. It only mattered that Stephanie had worked harder than anyone she knew just to save a few thousand dollars for a down payment on a home for her and her children. In today's fast world of give or I'll take, Stephanie was a rare breed. And what was a huge sum to Stephanie was chump change for Melanie, who had way more than enough to make a real difference. For the first time in her twenty-four years, Melanie felt like this opportunity, to do something really, really special for people she loved, was a gift to herself, not the other way around.

She hit *69 on the phone to get the last incoming number. She scribbled it down on a magnetic pad stuck on the front of the refrigerator.

“Jessica Rollins, please,” she said when a young woman picked up the phone. “And tell her it’s a matter of life and death.”

“Oh my gosh,” the young woman said, “I’ll take this call to her myself.”

Melanie thought the girl deserved a raise.

“Thank you,” she said.

A minute later, Melanie had Jessica Rollins on the phone. She made quick work of telling her what she needed and when she needed it. The woman was more than willing to jump through a few hoops to make her wishes come true. When they finalized their plans, Melanie dialed the number to the office at Maximum Glide.

A voice she didn’t recognize answered the phone. Melanie wasn’t sure if it was a male or a female either.

“Mr. Edward Patrick Joseph O’Brien, please. Tell him it’s a matter of life and death.” Melanie liked this new role of taking charge, sort of like kicking ass and taking names later.

Two seconds later, the man himself was on the phone. “This is Patrick.”

Melanie rolled her eyes. She was sure the man deliberately downplayed his intelligence.

“Patrick, this is Melanie, and we have a problem.” Just for meanness, she waited a few seconds before continuing. Let him wiggle in his britches.

“Is it Stephanie, or the girls?” he asked.

More meanness. “All of them.”

“Tell me where they’re at, and I can be there in minutes,” he replied anxiously.

Again, she let him stew. She knew it was mean, but it was her way of getting even over his putting Stephanie on that unpaid leave of absence.

“Melanie, tell me what’s wrong. Please!” He shouted so loud she had to hold the phone away from her ear.

“I need you to listen, and I don’t want you to interrupt me. Is that clear?”

She heard an intake of breath over the phone line. “Okay. I’m listening.”

Melanie made fast work of telling him what she wanted and when she wanted it. He complied as fast as Jessica Rollins had. *Maybe graphic design isn’t my calling after all.*

Thirty minutes later, Stephanie was showered, dressed, and looking like a million bucks.

“Now, I want you to get in my car. We’re going out for lunch.”

“Melanie, I know you’re trying to cheer me up, and I really do appreciate it, but I have to be here when the girls get home.” She looked at the clock on the stove. “And that’s in two hours. I don’t see how we can go out to lunch and actually enjoy ourselves in such a short period of time.”

“Did I say we were going to enjoy ourselves? Hmm, I don’t believe I did. Now go.”

“Well, I hope you know I feel like a fool, all dressed up, looking so silly, just to eat lunch. And we’ll have to go to a fast-food place because that’s all I have time for. And I won’t take no for an answer, not where my girls are concerned,” Stephanie said adamantly.

“I’ve arranged for my mother to be here when they get home.” She really hadn’t, but she would. “You have way too much blusher on. Go wipe some off before we leave. You look like Ronald McDonald.”

“I *really* don’t like this side of you.”

“Tough. Go wipe your cheeks. Now.”

Stephanie turned around and headed for the bathroom.

Melanie called her mother and explained the situation. She was more than willing to help out. She said she would be waiting at the bus stop for the girls and from there she would take them to Chuck E. Cheese, if Stephanie didn’t mind, of course. Melanie assured her she wouldn’t but reminded her mother not to forget to take her cell phone, because Melanie knew Stephanie would want to call and check on the girls.

Stephanie came out of the bathroom as soon as Melanie hung up the phone.

“If I didn’t know better, I would think you were up to something. But I don’t know better, at least not today. So let’s just have lunch and enjoy ourselves before the girls come home. It might be fun just the two of us for a change. We can order junk food.”

“Yes, and we will as soon as you get in the car.” Melanie practically shoved her out the door. “I told you my mother would be here just in case we ran a little late, and you’re going to have to trust me on this one.”

“And you want me to trust someone who says she doesn’t trust people who say trust me?”

“Did I say that?” Melanie asked, as they loaded into her Lincoln Navigator.

“Yes, you did.”

“Well, I’m telling you now that you have to trust me. You don’t have to like me, just trust me.”

Stephanie took a deep breath. “Turn the heat on, it’s freezing. I really wish you would tell me what’s going on. I don’t like surprises.”

“Tough,” Melanie said as she maneuvered down the long, winding drive. Evergreens topped with a heavy layer of snow flanked the sides of the drive. It never failed to remind her just how beautiful Colorado really was.

Exactly twenty minutes later, they pulled into the main parking lot at Maximum Glide.

Stephanie looked as though she were ready to do battle. “What are we doing here? This is the last place I want to be right now.”

“Tough. It’s where you need to be. There is someone here who wants to talk to you. Now get out, or I will carry you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes.”

“I’m not sure I want the girls to see you like this. It might scare them,” Stephanie teased.

“Right! They love me any way I am, and we both know that.”

“Yes, they do.”

As they trudged across the parking lot, snow crunched against their boots, the sound barely audible over the crowds on the mountain. The previous week’s blizzard conditions were long gone. In their place the sun was as bright as butter, the sky as blue as a robin’s egg, and the snow as white and clean as freshly beaten cream.

They hurried inside the main offices because even though the sun was out, the temperatures were still in the teens.

“We’re having lunch in Patrick’s office. I told him to order in from The Lodge,” Melanie explained.

“I don’t know why I agreed to this, but remind me when we leave to wring your neck.”

Melanie tapped on Patrick’s door, then opened it before he had a chance to tell them to come inside.

Just as she had commanded, there was a table set for *two*, an exquisite crystal vase with one single yellow rose, and a bottle of Cristal chilling in a bucket of ice.

Stephanie glanced at Patrick, then back at her friend turned harridan. “Tell me this isn’t what I think it is.”

“It isn’t,” Melanie said. “Enjoy lunch.”

She hurried out of the office before Stephanie even had a chance to ask what was going on. She saw the table, the rose, and the champagne.

“Please, come in and have a seat.” Patrick motioned to the chairs, which Stephanie recognized from The Lodge.

“Just so you know, I’m not here because I want to be. Melanie seems to think this is...I don’t know what she thinks, but let’s just get this over with.”

“You sound like you’re headed for the guillotine.”

“It’s probably not as bad,” she responded, then sat down in the chair Patrick pulled out for her. Surprise, surprise. She didn’t know he had manners.

“You can tell me that when I’m finished with what I have to say. I took the liberty of telling Jack to wait on our food. You might not want to be in the same room with me when I say what I need to say, something I should’ve said a long time ago, and I would have if I’d had the guts to admit it to myself. But better late than never, so here it is.”

“Look, if it’s about my job, I probably shouldn’t have walked out the way I did. I was just so worried about Amanda and Ashley, then you made that comment about...well, you know what you said. I was embarrassed and just wanted to leave. So if you’re going to apologize, then fine. I accept.”

“Actually, this isn’t about your job at all. As a matter of fact, it has nothing to do with this place.” He took a deep breath, raked his hand through his dark locks, then took another deep breath. “I come from a very large Irish family. I have three younger sisters and four older brothers, and my sisters have three sons and two, uh, one daughter. My brothers have a number of children also, but this is about my sisters and their children and me. About how it’s my job to protect them.”

“Okayyy,” Stephanie said, still unsure what this was all about.

“This is hard, okay?”

“Sorry.”

“Two years ago, my sister and her husband lost their daughter, Shannon.”

“I’m so sorry, Patrick, I had no idea.” Stephanie still didn’t know where this was leading, but she was calmer, knowing it had something to do with his family. Family she could handle.

“She was seventeen.... She had this rare blood thing called TTP. She died the day she was supposed to graduate from high school. Our family hasn’t been the same since. *I* haven’t been the same since. It’s been a nightmare for my sister, and their younger daughter, Abby. It took about a year before the

shock wore off. I...This isn't coming out the way I want it to."

Patrick reached for her hand, and her first thought was to pull hers away, but when she saw the look in his blue eyes, she stopped herself. Sadness blanketed his face.

"I swore that I would never allow myself to get in a situation that would make me suffer a loss as great as Shannon's death. I saw what my sister went through, what she'll go through for the rest of her life, what I couldn't protect her and my oldest niece, my parents' oldest grandchild from, and I decided that wasn't the life for me. If I didn't get too close to anyone, I wouldn't get hurt. Typical cliché, but true. Then you and your girls came along. I tried not to like you, I tried not to like your daughters, but that's impossible. I've been trying to figure out a way to tell you this without putting my foot in my mouth, or ticking you off, and as luck would have it, Melanie called and told me what I knew but wouldn't admit to."

"When did Melanie become such an authority on everyone?"

"She's observant, and she's smart. A little mouthier than usual, but I'm glad she chose me to use as an example. What I'm trying to say is I have very, very strong feelings for you, and your girls. Do you think it would be possible to give me another chance to do things the right way?"

This was the last conversation she'd ever expected to have that day. And with Patrick, of all people. So there was a heart beating inside that massive chest after all. Stephanie grinned.

"I suppose I could, but there would have to be conditions."

"Anything you say," Patrick agreed, then squeezed her hand.

"Anything?" Stephanie asked.

"Whatever it takes," he said, his eyes boring into her as though it were the first time he'd actually looked at her.

"Let's hit the double black diamonds, first," Stephanie said, feeling more lighthearted than she had in years. She actually felt like having fun for a change. She didn't worry about the girls because she did trust Melanie even though she had told her she shouldn't. That day Stephanie was simply going to enjoy being in the company of a man she thought was the sexiest boss alive.

Patrick stood up, pulled out her chair, then took her in his arms. "I haven't even kissed you."

"Then let's not waste another minute," Stephanie said just before his lips met hers.

Epilogue

Christmas Eve

The knock at the door sent both girls racing to answer it. Melanie was stopping by to bring them their gifts. They'd been acting like two Mexican jumping beans ever since she told them.

"Girls, let's remember our manners," Stephanie said.

Both girls slowed down and opened the door.

"You're not Melanie," Amanda said.

"Amanda, that's rude!" Ashley said, stepping aside to allow Patrick to come in out of the cold. "We're trying to teach her manners, but I think it's going to take a long time."

"I'm still learning myself. It just takes some people longer than others," Patrick replied.

"Patrick, I thought you were Melanie," Stephanie said, though she wasn't unhappy that it was him. They'd been out four times in less than two weeks. He wasn't the man she'd thought; he was more. Loving, funny, and kind. He had the patience of a saint where the girls were concerned. She'd never been happier.

"Yeah, speaking of Melanie, she called me and told me she couldn't make it until later, something about her car. Said she wanted me to give you this." Patrick reached inside his leather jacket and pulled out a thick manila envelope.

"Oh, that must be the gift she wanted to give to the girls."

"I'm sure of it. Why don't you open it?" Patrick asked as he invited himself to sit at the small table in the tiny kitchen.

"Well, it's not for me," Stephanie said. She was surprised that Melanie hadn't wrapped the girls' gifts since she knew how much they loved shiny paper and fancy ribbons. But maybe she hadn't had time.

"Actually, Melanie said it was for you *and* the girls, so I think it's okay to go ahead and open it."

By that time both girls were hanging all over Patrick. He lifted Amanda

onto his right knee and Ashley onto his left. “Go on, Mommy, open it!” Amanda said.

“Oh, all right, but I wish she hadn’t...Well, okay, I’ll just open it.” Stephanie had knitted a sweater and matching scarf for Melanie and a hat and gloves for Patrick. She had been hesitant to dip into the deposit money, which had been returned to her after the purchase of the house fell through, so gifts from her this Christmas were handmade.

She used a fingernail to open the top of the envelope. She pulled out several official-looking papers. She skimmed through them, looked over at Patrick, who had her girls sitting on his lap as though they’d been doing that their entire life.

She looked at the papers again. And again. Then it finally hit her.

Melanie’s gift to her. Tears filled her eyes and coursed down her cheeks like a waterfall. She could hardly speak. She thought she must be dreaming. But it was what it was. She didn’t know how it was possible, but somehow, some way, Melanie’s gift to her and the girls was the deed to an unencumbered piece of property, the little house in Placerville.

“This is the best present we’ve ever gotten, right, Patrick?” Amanda asked.

They all laughed as the girls told their mother about Melanie’s surprise and how it was possible. And how Melanie had said that, for the first time in her life, she knew the true joy of Christmas giving.

And a surprise it was, a complete and utter surprise.

For the first time in her life, Stephanie and the girls would truly have a home of their own, thanks to the incredible generosity of a loving friend.

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