

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FERN
MICHAELS

Sleigh Bells



Other Books by Fern Michaels

Fearless

Spirit of the Season

Deep Harbor

Fate & Fortune

Sweet Vengeance

Holly and Ivy

Fancy Dancer

No Safe Secret

Wishes for Christmas

About Face

Perfect Match

A Family Affair

Forget me Not

The Blossom Sisters

Balancing Act

Tuesday's Child

Betrayal

Southern Comfort

To Taste the Wine

Sins of the Flesh

Sins of Omission

Return to Sender

Mr. and Miss Anonymous

Up Close and Personal

Fool Me Once

Picture Perfect

The Future Scrolls

Kentucky Sunrise

Kentucky Heat

Kentucky Rich

Plain Jane

Charming Lily
What You Wish For
The Guest List
Listen to Your Heart
Celebration
Yesterday
Finders Keepers
Annie's Rainbow
Sara's Song
Vegas Sunrise
Vegas Heat
Vegas Rich
Whitefire
Wish List
Dear Emily
Christmas at Timberwoods

The Godmothers Series
Far and Away
Classified
Breaking News
Deadline
Late Edition
Exclusive
The Scoop

The Sisterhood Novels
Biller Pill
Truth and Justice
Cut and Run
Safe and Sound
Need to Know
Crash and Burn
Point Blank
In Plain Sight
Eyes Only
Kiss and Tell

Blindsided
Gotcha!
Home Free
Déjà Vu
Cross Roads
Game Over
Deadly Deals
Vanishing Act
Razor Sharp
Under the Radar
Final Justice
Collateral Damage
Fast Track
Hokus Pokus
Hide and Seek
Free Fall
Lethal Justice
Sweet Revenge
The Jury
Vendetta
Payback
Weekend Warriors

The Men of the Sisterhood Novels:

Hot Shot
Truth or Dare
High Stakes
Fast and Loose
Double Down

E-Book Exclusives:

Desperate Measures
Seasons of Her Life
To Have and to Hold
Serendipity
Captive Innocence
Captive Embraces

Captive Passions
Captive Secrets
Captive Splendors
Cinders to Satin
Texas Heat
Texas Rich
Texas Fury
Texas Sunrise

Anthologies
Home Sweet Home
A Snowy Little Christmas
Coming Home for Christmas
A Season to Celebrate
Mistletoe Magic
Winter Wishes
The Most Wonderful Time
When the Snow Falls
Secret Santa
A Winter Wonderland
I'll be Home for Christmas
Making Spirits Bright
Holiday Magic
Snow Angels
Silver Bells
Comfort and Joy
Sugar and Spice
Let It Snow
A Gift of Joy
Five Golden Rings
Deck the Halls
Jingle All the Way

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation

Sleigh Bells

FERN MICHAELS



ZEBRA BOOKS
KENSINGTON PUBLISHING CORP.

<http://www.kensingtonbooks.com>



All copyrighted material within is Attributor Protected.

Table of Contents

[Other Books by Fern Michaels](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Sleigh Bells](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

Sleigh Bells

Chapter One

Angel Mary Clare Bradford, Angie to her friends, looked over at her assistant, who was stacking rolls of colored ribbon onto spindles. Satisfied that the rolls of ribbon were aligned to match the spindles of wrapping paper, she turned away to survey her domain.

The thirty-foot-by-thirty-foot room with its own lavatory was neat as a pin because Angie Bradford was a tidy person. The room she and her assistant, Bess Kelly, were standing in was known as the Eagle Department Store gift wrap department.

Eva Bradford, Angie's mother, had a lifetime lease on this very room, thanks to retired owner Angus Eagle, something that rankled the current young department store head, Josh Eagle, Angus's heir.

Angie and Josh had gone to the mat via the legal system on several occasions. Josh wanted the lease canceled so he could open a safari clothing department. He claimed the paltry, three-hundred-dollar-a-month rent Angie paid for the gift wrap space was depriving the Eagle Department Store of serious revenue. Another set of legal papers claimed his father had not been of sound mind when he signed the ridiculous lifetime lease.

Angie countered with a startling video of Angus playing tennis and being interviewed by the *New York Times* talking about politics and his philanthropic endeavors on the very day he signed the lifetime lease. In a separate filing, Angie charged Josh Eagle was a bully, and presented sworn testimony that he repeatedly turned off the electricity in the gift shop as well as the water in the lavatory just to harass her. On occasion the heat and air conditioning were also turned off. Usually on the coldest and hottest days of the year.

Josh retaliated by saying Angie should pay for the electricity, water, heat, and air-conditioning. He said there were no free lunches in the Eagle Department Store in Woodbridge, New Jersey.

Judge Atkins had glared at the two adversaries and barked his decision: Josh Eagle was not to step within 150 feet of the gift wrap department. Angie was to pay an additional thirty-dollars-a-month rent for the utilities, and a new heating unit was to be installed at Eagle's expense.

At that point the Eagle-Bradford war escalated to an all-time high, with both sides doing double-time to outwit the other. The present score was zip-zip.

"So, are you going to the store meeting or not?" Bess asked as she gathered up her purse and jacket.

"Nope. I don't work for Josh Eagle or this store. I work for my mother. I'm just renting space from Eagle's. It was toasty in here today, wasn't it?" Angie asked. It had been unseasonably cool for September.

Bess eyed her young employer and laughed. She'd worked for Eva Bradford for twelve years before Eva turned the business over to her daughter, 110 pounds of energy who was full of spit and vinegar, five years ago. Angie had jumped right into the business, played David to Josh's Goliath, and come out a winner. At least in Bess's eyes. With the Christmas season fast approaching, Bess knew in her gut that Josh Eagle would pull out all his big guns to try to get under Angie's skin and make her life so miserable she would give up and move out. She laughed silently. Josh Eagle didn't know the Angie Bradford she knew.

“Come on, boss, I’ll walk you out to the parking lot. How’s Eva today?”

Angie slipped into her jacket and hung her purse on her shoulder before she turned off the lights. She pressed a switch, and a colorful corrugated blind came down, totally covering the entrance to the gift wrap department. She waited a moment until she heard the sound of the lock slipping into place. She’d installed the sliding panel at her own expense, much to Josh Eagle’s chagrin. She then locked the walkthrough door to the gift wrap department. Not just any old lock, this was a special lock that Josh Eagle couldn’t open with the store’s master keys. She’d also installed her own security system with the ADT firm. Josh had taken her to court on that one, too, and lost, with the judge saying Angie was protecting her investment and as long as she wasn’t asking him to pay for her security, there was no problem. Back then the score had been one-zip.

“Uh-oh, look who’s standing by that big red X you painted on the floor!”

Angie looked ahead of her to see Josh Eagle glaring at her. “You’re late!”

He was good-looking, she had to give him that. And he had dimples. Right now his dark brown eyes were spewing sparks. He was dressed in a power suit and tie, his shirt so blinding white, it had to be new. It was all about image with Josh Eagle.

Angie looked down at her watch. “Actually, I’m leaving right on time, Mr. Eagle. My lights are off, the heat has been turned down, the security system locked and loaded, and my door is locked. It’s one minute past six. The store closes at six.”

“I called a meeting for six-fifteen for all department heads. That means you’re supposed to be in the conference room promptly at six-ten. You’re still standing here, Ms. Bradford. What’s wrong with this picture? Well?”

Angie sighed. “How many times do I have to tell you, Mr. Eagle? I do not work for you. Judge Atkins sent you papers to that effect. I have copies

in case you lost yours. What part of I-am-not-one-of-your-employees don't you understand?"

Josh Eagle looked like he was about to say something, then changed his mind. Angie started walking again, and when she got to Josh and he didn't move, she stiff-armed him.

"You touched my person," Josh said dramatically as he pretended to back away.

"Will you get off it already! Do you sit up there in your ivory tower and dream up ways to torment me? I did not touch you. I put my arm out so *you* wouldn't touch *me*. In case your vision is impaired, I have a witness. Now, I suggest you get out of my way and don't come down here again with your silly demands. This shop is off-limits to you!"

"Just a damn minute, Ms. Bradford. If you want to go to court again, I'm your man. I want to know what you're going to do about wrapping my customers' Christmas gifts this year. That's the main topic to be discussed at tonight's meeting."

"We've had this same discussion every September for the past five years. You had the same discussion with my mother for the five years prior to my arrival, and the outcome has always been the same. This year is no different. Pay me to wrap your customers' gifts, and we're in business. If you don't pay me, I cannot help you. I'm in business to make money just the way you are. Try to wrap your feeble brain around that fact, then get back to me or have your lawyer call my lawyer. Good night, Mr. Eagle."

Outside in the cool evening air, Angie dusted her hands together. "I thought that went rather well." She sniffed the air. "Someone's burning leaves. Oh, I just love that smell."

Bess opened her car door. "I think you enjoy tormenting that man. I agree he's sorely lacking in the charm department, but my mother always

told me you can get more flies with honey than vinegar. The guy's a *hottie*, that's for sure."

"Ha! Eye candy. The man has no substance, he's all veneer. On top of that, he's greedy and obnoxious. With all that going against him, I wonder how he manages to charm that string of women he parades around all the time," Angie sniffed.

"His money charms them. Josh Eagle is considered a good catch. You know, Angie, you could throw your line in the pond. You reel him in, and all this," Bess said, extending her arms to indicate the huge parking lot and the department store, "could be yours!"

Angie started to laugh and couldn't stop. "Not in this life time. See you tomorrow, Bess."

"Tell your mother I said hello."

"Will do," Angie called over her shoulder.

Angie sat in her car for ten minutes while she played the scene that had just transpired back in the store over and over in her mind. Would Josh Eagle drag her into court again? Probably. The man had a hate on for her that was so over-the-top she could no longer comprehend it. In the beginning she'd handled it the way she handled every challenge that came her way: fairly and honestly. She fought to win, and so far she'd won every round. Remembering the look on Josh Eagle's face, she wondered if her luck was about to change.

Well, she would think about it later. Right now she had to stop for pizza and go to the rehab center on New Durham Road, where her mother was waiting for her.

Angie reached for her cell phone to call Tony's Pizza on Oak Tree Road. She ordered three large pepperoni pies and was told they would be ready in ten minutes. That was good, the pies would still be hot when she delivered them to Eva and the other patients at the rehab center.

On the ride to the pizza parlor Angie thought about her mother. A gutsy lady who had worked part time to help with the family bills. Back when she was young, with a family to help support, she'd worked three days a week for Angus Eagle, a man her own age whose wife deplored housework. Her mother had cooked and cleaned for Angus, and in doing so they had forged a friendship that eventually resulted, one Christmas morning, in his turning over the gift wrap department at his store to her with a lifetime lease.

Her mother never tired of telling her the story of that particular Christmas that changed her life, even though Angie, who was fifteen at the time, remembered it very well. Angus's wife hadn't wanted to be bothered wrapping presents for Josh and her husband, so she'd turned the job over to Eva. Each time her mother told the story, she would laugh and laugh and say how impressed Angus had been at her flair for gift wrapping.

It was always at times like this, when Angie grew melancholy, that she thought about her own life and why she was doing what she was doing with it. She'd gone to work on Wall Street as a financial planner, but five years of early mornings, late nights, and the long commute was all she could take. Then she taught school for a couple of years but couldn't decide whether or not teaching was a career to which she wanted to commit herself. Five years ago, she'd happily given it up without a second thought when, after her aunt Peggy got into a serious automobile accident in Florida, her mother suggested that Angie take over the gift-wrapping business. Eva had rushed down to care for Peggy, knowing she was leaving her little business in good hands, and was gone four years.

After her aunt's passing, Eva had remained to take care of her sister's estate, returning to New Jersey only a year ago.

It was nice having her mother home again, in the big old house on Rose Street.

Angie giggled when she thought about all the young guys, the sons of friends her mother had invited to dinner on Sunday in the hopes one of them would be suitable for Angie. So far, she'd made a lot of new male friends, but none of them was what she considered blow-my-socks-off material.

As always, when she got to this point in her reverie, Angie's thoughts turned to her beloved father and his passing. It had been so sudden, so shocking, so mind-bending, it had taken her years to come to terms with her loss. How she missed the big, jolly man who had carried her on his shoulders when she was little, the same man who taught her to ride her first bike, then to drive her clunker of a car. He'd hooted and hollered at her high school graduation, beamed with pride at her college graduation, and could hardly wait to show her the brand-new car he'd bought her. It was all wrapped up in a red satin ribbon. Oh, how she'd cried when she'd seen that little silver Volkswagen Jetta convertible. These days she drove a bright red Honda Civic, but the Jetta was still up on blocks in the garage on Rose Street. She planned to keep it forever and ever.

Angie dabbed at her eyes. It was all so long ago.

Twenty miles away, Eva Bradford sat in the sunroom of the Durham Rehab Center, waiting for her daughter. The television was on, but she wasn't listening to the evening news. Nor was she paying attention to the other patients, who were talking in polite, low tones so others could hear the news. Her thoughts were somewhere else, and she wasn't happy with where they were taking her.

Eva looked up when the evening nurse approached her with a fresh bag of frozen peas to place on her knee. She was young like Angie with a ready smile. "You know the drill, Eva, thirty minutes on and thirty minutes off." The nurse, whose name was Betsy, reached for the thawed-out bag of peas Eva handed her.

Eva wondered if she'd ever dance again. Not that she danced a lot, but still, if the occasion warranted it, she wanted to be able to get up and trip the light fantastic. Knee replacements at her age were so common it was mind-boggling. She looked around the sunroom and counted nine patients with knee replacements, one a double knee, four hip jobs, and two back surgeries. Of all of them, she thought she was progressing the best. Another few days and she was certain she would be discharged with home health

aides to help her out a few hours every day. She could hardly wait to return to the house on Rose Street in Metuchen.

Eva turned away from the cluster of patients who looked to be in a heated discussion over something that was going on in the Middle East. She did her best to slide down into the chair she was sitting on so she wouldn't have to look at Angus Eagle who, according to Betsy, had just been transferred from the hospital to receive therapy for a hip replacement he'd had a month ago. She knew the jig would be up when Angie arrived with their nightly pizza. At this moment she simply didn't want to go down Memory Lane with Angus or be put in a position where she had to defend her daughter's business dealings.

She hadn't seen Angus for a long time. At least five years—she really couldn't remember. She tried to come up with the exact year. In the end she thought it was five years ago, the same year her older sister, Peggy, a childless widow, had been in that bad car accident. She'd gone to Florida and stayed on for four years because her sister's health had deteriorated, and with no children to help out, it was up to her to see to her sister's comfort. Then, she'd stayed to handle all the legal matters, sell the house, the furnishings, and the car. She'd been home for a year now. She swiped at the tears that threatened to overflow.

Would Angie take care of her the way she'd taken care of Peggy? Of course she would. Angie had a heart of gold and loved her. She couldn't help but wonder who was going to take care of Angus Eagle. Not that hard-as-nails son whose mission in life was to make Angie give up the gift wrap department. Well, Angus could certainly afford in-home health care around the clock.

Eva looked up to see her daughter standing in the doorway holding three large pizza boxes, one for the two of them and two for the other patients. Angie was so kind. She watched as Angie handed two of the pizza boxes to Betsy and moved across the room to join her mother. Angie hugged and kissed her.

“How'd it go today, Mom?”

“Not too bad. I think I’ll be out of here in a few days. Honey, Angus Eagle arrived today for additional therapy. He had a hip replacement a month ago, according to Betsy. He’s sitting over there between Cyrus and Harriet. Don’t look now.”

“And this means...what?” Angie asked as she sprinkled hot peppers on the pizza, then handed her mother a huge slice. She chomped down on her own as she casually looked around. She had no trouble locating the elegant-looking Angus Eagle. At seventy years of age, he still looked dashing, with his snow-white hair, trim body, and tanned complexion. It had been a few years since she’d seen him in the courtroom alongside his son. How angry he’d looked that day. Today he looked like he was in pain. A lot of pain.

“Well...I don’t know. I’m sure he hates us both. He’s probably regretting giving me that lifetime lease. You know that old saying, blood is thicker than water. Josh is his son, so it’s natural for him to side... whatever,” Eva dithered as she bit down into her slice of pizza.

“Business is business, Mom. Isn’t that what you always told me? Sometimes people make deals that go sour. As long as it’s done legally, the way your deal was done legally, you live with it and go on. Josh and I had a rather heated exchange as I was leaving the store this evening. By the way, it’s cold out in case you’re interested. I think today was the first day that shop felt warm.”

“What happened? Wait, look—is *he* eating *your* pizza?”

“Oh, yeah, and he looks like he’s enjoying it. What happened? Well, Josh thought he could dictate to me. He called a meeting for six-fifteen for all department heads. I’m sure you remember he does that every September. He wants me to gift wrap his customers’ packages. For *free*. I told him if he paid me, I would. It was a standoff. I have an idea. Want to hear it?”

Eva smiled at the excitement in her daughter’s voice. She leaned forward to hear what she just knew was going to be a smashing idea. “What’s he doing now?”

“Watching us. I am going to decorate the shop like a fairy land. Gossamer, angels, Santas, sleighs, Santa sacks. I’m going to gift wrap Santa sacks for the kids. I already ordered the red and green burlap. Colored raffia ties for around the sacks. I’m going to suspend some reindeer from the ceiling with wires. Bess said her husband will make us a wooden sled and paint it. The best part is the room is big enough to do all this. We’ll get some publicity with the local paper. Parents will bring their kids to see it and, hopefully, shop. Extra business for Eagle’s, but Josh won’t see it that way, would be my guess. This is the part you might have a problem with, Mom, but hear me out, okay? I’m going to, for a price, agree to wrap purchases from other stores. On a drop-off, pick-up-later basis. I’ll hire a few extra people, and we’ll do it after hours, when the store is closed. Josh won’t have a comeback because I pay my own utilities.”

“Can you do that, Angie?”

“My lawyer said I could, so that’s good enough for me. Josh will fight me, but that’s publicity for me. I’m looking at it as win-win. You look worried, Mom. Are you seeing something I’m not seeing?”

“Well...You know me, I’m just a born worrier. If your lawyer says it’s okay, then I guess it’s okay.”

Angie frowned. What was wrong with her mother? Normally, she’d be up for anything to make the shop prosper. She risked a glance in the direction of Angus Eagle. Caught staring, she offered up a wide smile. To her delight, Angus winked at her. *Now that’s something I’ll have to think about later.*

“How’s that new company doing with your special order?” Eva asked.

“Mom, you won’t believe it, but they came through royally, and the price is unbelievable. One-of-a-kind baubles, artificial greenery that looks better than the real stuff, and it’s been sprayed, so it even has a balsam scent. I ordered tons of stuff. Their ribbon is satin. Real satin, all widths. Our Christmas packages are going to be over the moon. And it’s just a little cottage industry in a small town called Hastings, in Pennsylvania. They’re going to start shipping the merchandise to the house next week.”

Mother and daughter spent the next hour discussing a real tree versus artificial, paper wrap versus foil wrap, and other unusual ways to wrap gifts.

A bell sounded in the hallway. Betsy appeared to take away the frozen peas. She chatted for a moment, asked Eva if she wanted to return to her room or stay to watch television. “Five minutes, ladies.”

“I guess I better get going, Mom. I’ll be back in the morning with the order from Dunkin’ Donuts. Two dozen donuts, right? Same number on the coffees?”

Eva smiled. “Plus one more for Angus.”

Angie picked up her jacket and purse before she hugged and kissed her mother good night. She was almost to the door when she saw Josh Eagle standing in the doorway staring at her. She was about to move past him when a devil perched itself on her shoulder. “Spying on me, Mr. Eagle? Or are you *stalking* me? Shame on you!” She said it loud enough so everyone in the room could hear.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Ms. Bradford. I’m here to see my father.”

Angie whirled around and pointed to the clock. “Well, that figures! You have three minutes to visit. Oh, is that a gift for your father? A Hershey’s bar! How kind of you. Money-hungry jerk,” she hissed, before she sailed through the doorway and down the hall.

“Witch!” Josh hissed back, but loud enough to be heard by the patients. “Hey, wait a minute, you forgot your broom!”

Angie stopped in her tracks and turned around. “What did you just call me, you pompous, money-hungry, no-good pissant?” Venom dripped from Angie’s lips as sparks flew from her eyes.

Josh Eagle immediately regretted his words, but he couldn’t back down now. “I called you a witch and said you forgot your broom. You called me a money-hungry jerk. So now I’m a pissant. Well, it takes a pissant to know a pissant.”

The captive audience gasped as they watched the scene unfold in front of them. Even Betsy, mouth hanging open, could only stare at the two hissing enemies.

“I called you that because I was too polite to call you what you really are. Now, if you don’t get out of my way, you are going to be minus a very important part of your anatomy.” To her chagrin, Angie realized her voice had risen several decibels. Stricken, she looked around at the patients staring at her. All she could think of to do was wave.

As one, the rapt audience gasped. They returned her wave, even Angus.

The final bell for visitation rang.

“Looks like you have to leave now, Mr. Eagle. You better stay 150 feet away from me, or I’ll have you arrested,” Angie said coldly.

“Oh, yeah?” Josh blustered.

“Yeah!” Angie shot back. She flipped him the bird before turning on her heel and marching down the hall.

The audience gasped again.

“I’m afraid you have to leave now, Mr. Eagle,” Betsy said. “Try to come a little earlier tomorrow. You better wait a minute—Miss Bradford did say 150 feet. She looked to me like she meant business. It won’t look good for the center if she calls the police.” Betsy eyeballed the distance down the hall. “Okay, you can go now.” She reached out to take the Hershey’s bar, but Josh shoved it into his pocket.

Eva did her best not to laugh out loud. She turned around when she heard something that sounded like hysterical laughter. Angus Eagle was laughing so hard one of the aides was clapping him on the back. She was stunned to hear him shout, “You got yourself a spitfire there, Eva!” She wished he would have said something she didn’t already know.

The score for this round, if anyone was counting, was one-*zip*, with the point going to Angie.

Chapter Two

Josh Eagle, his shoulders slumping, entered the house through the kitchen. Delectable aromas wafted about the kitchen, thanks to Dolores, the day lady who had been with his family for the past twenty years. He knew his dinner was warming in the oven, but for some reason he wasn't hungry. The fact of the matter was he was too damn mad to eat.

As he yanked at his tie with one hand, he opened the oven door with the other and set his dinner plate on the kitchen counter. Maybe he'd eat later. First he needed a beer, and he needed to calm down. He carried a beer from the fridge and swigged at it as he made his way to the second floor. He stripped down. Within minutes he was in sweats and slippers. It took him a minute to realize he was cold. He marched out to the hall to turn the thermostat to eighty before he made his way downstairs to grab another beer.

Heat gushed from the two vents in the kitchen. At least he would be warm while he drowned himself in ice-cold beer.

Josh sat down at the kitchen table and propped his feet on a chair as he swigged from the bottle in his hand. Who in the damn hell did that female think she was? He answered himself by saying she was the female who had

him over a barrel. He stretched out a long arm to snag a chicken leg off his dinner plate and was just about to bite down into the succulent-looking piece of chicken when the phone rang.

Josh eyed the phone suspiciously. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew it was his father on the other end of the line. He might as well get it over with. He was a small boy again when he picked up, knowing full well his father was going to have something very profound to say. Something he wasn't going to like.

Josh looked at the caller ID. He squared his shoulders, clicked the ON button, and said, "Hi, Dad."

"Good evening, son. I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to talk this evening. I was looking forward to a long chat."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I had a meeting. I'll come earlier tomorrow. Do you need anything?"

"No, I don't need anything, Josh. Is there anything you want to talk to me about?"

Well, hell, yes, there were at least two dozen things he wanted to talk to his father about, but the old man only pretended to listen to anything he had to say. Josh threw caution to the winds and said, "Since when do you ever listen to anything I have to say? So, the short answer is, no. Is there something you want, Dad? Like maybe my hide, a pint of blood? Name it, and it's yours." His voice was so bitter that Josh could hardly believe it was his own. He heard his father sigh. He always sighed when Josh let loose with his feelings.

"You were pretty hard on that little gal, weren't you?"

"If you say so, Dad. Is there anything else? If not, I'm going to turn in early."

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, son."

“Actually, no, I won’t be stopping by. If you need something I can have someone from the store drop it off. But now that you’ve brought it up, there is something I’ve been meaning to say. I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you that I’ll be leaving the first of the year. I’m moving to London. I got a job at Harrods. I leave New Year’s Day. You can have Eagle’s back. I guess I’m not really giving it back to you since you never really relinquished your interest in the store to me the way you agreed to. The way I figure it is this: you’ll probably have a week in January before you have to close Eagle’s doors for good. Good night, Dad.”

Josh tossed his beer bottles into a wire basket in the laundry room. As he made his way up the stairs he could hear the phone ringing. He knew it was his father calling back because he was in shock over his son’s cold announcement. “It’s been a long time in coming, Dad,” Josh muttered as he settled himself in his small home office. He clicked on the computer and ran some stats. Nothing had changed since earlier in the day. Eagle’s was still at the bottom of the list. Just a few months until Eagle’s would have to close their doors. Well, come the first of the year, Eagle’s Department Store would no longer be his problem. He was sick and tired of battling his father, sick and tired of batting his head against a stone wall. Eventually he would get over the shame of failing. He had a job waiting for him at the prestigious Harrods in London, where his expertise would be appreciated.

The phone at the end of the long second-floor hallway continued to ring. “Give it up, Dad, I have nothing more to say.”

Josh climbed into bed and pulled up the covers. Then he climbed back out of bed to turn the thermostat down to sixty degrees. Back in bed, his last conscious thought before drifting off to sleep was that he had to apologize in the morning to the witch with the broom.

Eva knew that Angus was coming up behind her. She could hear his walker on the tile floor. Then again, they were the only two patients in the sunroom, so who else could it be? She steeled herself for Angus’s sharp tongue and whatever he was about to say. She clicked the OFF button on the remote control. What was left of the evening news report disappeared.

“Do you mind if I sit down, Eva?”

“Not at all. It’s nice to see you again, Angus. It’s been a long time, five years if I’m not mistaken. How strange that we should meet up like this after so long.”

Because she was a nurturer by nature, Eva wanted to get up to help Angus ease himself into the chair across from her, but these days it was a production to get herself up and moving. “Are you in pain, Angus?”

“A bit. How about you?”

“At times. I try to ignore the pain and just use the frozen bags of peas. They really do help. Other than the hip replacement, how are things?”

“Are you asking to be polite or do you really want to know?” Angus asked.

Eva thought she’d never heard a sadder voice. “Is there anything I can do, Angus?”

“Not unless you have a magic potion that will turn my son into a charming young prince. What was that all about earlier?”

Eva decided not to pretend she didn’t know what her old friend was talking about. “Rivalry would be my guess. Two strong, bullheaded people pushing each other’s buttons. How is the store doing, Angus?”

“According to my son, not well at all. He blames me. Says I’m an old fuddy-duddy. He says I have no foresight. He claims I’m locked in the past. He said the last time I had an idea was the day, almost twenty years ago, when I gave you the lifetime lease on the gift wrap department, and from that day on, it was all downhill. He doesn’t like me much, Eva. Yesterday he called me a meddler.”

Eva threw her hands in the air. “What did you do? Or should I be asking what *didn’t* you do? Josh was always such a wonderful young man. How did it all go wrong? I don’t understand any of this, Angus.”

Angus leaned forward. “Look at me, Eva. I have something to tell you that is going to affect you as well as your daughter. My son just told me a few minutes ago when I called him that he’s leaving the store the first of the year. He’s accepted a job at Harrods in London. That means the store will be closing. He’s been telling me that for the past year but I...I just blamed him for not knowing what he was doing. I was...I was cruel about it, saying things like I made a mistake when I turned things over to him, that he wasn’t up to the job.”

“Oh, Angus, how could you do something like that?” How was she going to tell her daughter they would both be out of a job after the holidays with only her Social Security coming in?

“Because I’m a horse’s patoot, that’s how. Josh has been telling me for years that we had to streamline the store, we had to keep up with marketing trends. He wanted to hire new buyers, be more mainstream. I fought him every step of the way. He wanted to restructure everything. That meant layoffs. I didn’t want to deal with it. One time he actually called me a dried-up old fart and told me I deserved whatever happened with the store. He was right and I was wrong. And I’m not going to lie to you, Eva, but the gift-wrapping shop was always a thorn in Josh’s side. He thought, and I’m sure he still thinks, that you and I had an affair that is ongoing. I think that’s another reason he keeps going to the mat with your daughter.”

Eva’s thoughts were all over the place as she stared at her old friend. “I thought the store was doing well. How could I have been so wrong? What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? Josh’s mind is made up—he’s leaving because he’s fed up. I have to admire his spunk. He gave it his best shot, and I just kept fouling up everything he did. Now all my chickens are coming home to roost.”

“For heaven’s sake, Angus, Josh is your son. You can’t let him leave under these conditions. You have to make this right. There’s nothing in this world more important than family. If you don’t take a stand now, you’ll never get Josh back. What’s so hard about saying you’re sorry, that you made mistakes? You can’t just let Eagle’s close their doors. Eagle’s is an

institution in this town. Shame on you, Angus Eagle. I'm going to bed now. I don't want to talk about this anymore. I have therapy at seven o'clock."

"Eva, wait. Help me out here."

"Oh, no. It doesn't work that way. You're the only one who can make this right. I'm willing to cancel that lifetime lease and renegotiate a new one. In fact, I insist. I'll call my lawyer in the morning."

"That's a drop in the bucket, Eva. The gift-wrapping shop was never about money. In the beginning it was a courtesy to our customers. You're the one who turned it into a money-maker. Then Josh wanted to use the gift wrap department space to outfit a safari department. He said it was the 'in' thing. I'm ashamed to admit I laughed at him. Two days later, I heard a group of men on the golf course talking about all the gear they'd just purchased because they were going on safari. One of the men poked my arm and said Eagle's didn't even know what a safari was. Even then, I couldn't see it. I guess I *am* a dried-up old fart, just like Josh said I was."

"Yes, Angus, I guess you are just one big gas bubble. I certainly don't envy you."

Eva struggled to her feet as she leaned heavily on her cane. She knew she'd been sitting too long. She could hardly wait to get to her room so she could ring the nurse to ask for a bag of frozen peas. She moved off as she tried to figure out how she was going to tell her daughter what Angus had just shared with her.

Christmas this year was going to be bittersweet, she thought.

When Eva woke the following morning the first thing she saw was Angus Eagle standing in the open doorway. "How long have you been standing there, Angus?" she gasped.

"About an hour. You snore. I thought only men snored. Can I come in and sit down? I didn't sleep all night. I've been walking up and down the halls and I'm getting tired."

“For heaven’s sake, come in and sit down. For your information, everyone snores, even children.” Eva pushed the button on the remote to raise her bed. She wished she had a cup of coffee.

“I asked a nurse to bring us some coffee. I hope that was okay. Listen, Eva, you were always so grounded. I assume you still are. That’s one of the things I always admired about you. I need your help and I’m not ashamed to be asking, either. For me to give in now, to give up total control when we’re just months from closing our doors seems a bit silly to me. Josh won’t buy into it. You know that old saying—too little, too late. You know as well as I do that the Christmas season revenues can carry a store for a whole year. We depend on that revenue. What should I do?”

“Angus, I know nothing about the retail business. My only claim to fame is I know how to gift wrap packages. I think you should talk to my daughter. She seems to have an eye and ear to the business. In the past she spent hours and hours telling me all the things wrong with the store. And I know for a fact she dropped dozens of suggestions in Eagle’s suggestion box on the second floor because she thought if you had more foot traffic, she would have more gifts to wrap. We had a really bad summer, everyone was buying from the discount houses. That’s something else you didn’t take into consideration. They popped up all over town like mushrooms. For the record, all of Angie’s suggestions were ignored.”

Angus’s voice was desperate when he asked, “Will your daughter talk to me?”

“Of course she’ll talk to you. What kind of child do you think I raised? It’s your son she won’t talk to. But when I tell her he really isn’t her enemy, that you are, well, I don’t know for sure. There’s no doubt about it, Angus, you’re standing knee-deep in a mess. Of your own making, I might add.”

“I know that, Eva. Help me out here.”

“Put yourself in your son’s shoes. What would you like your father to do? How would you handle it?”

Angus shrugged. “Josh said I never listened to him. It’s true. All of a sudden, I’m going to listen now, when it’s too late? Maybe there’s a way to help him without him knowing I’m helping.”

“Spit it out, Angus. How? I suspect you have some groveling to do first, my friend. Call him at the store. Ask him to come here to see you. That’s a first step. By the way, Angus, how long are you here for?”

Angus grimaced. “Today or tomorrow. I’ve been here a week but I stayed in my room because I didn’t want anyone to know I was here. I simply didn’t want to socialize. I wish I had known you were here, Eva. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow, I think. I’ll have a home health aide for two weeks. She’ll come by three times a week and help with my therapy. The rest is up to me. We can talk on the phone if you like.”

“I’d like that. I really would.”

“How are you going to get home, Angus?”

“I’ll call a car service. I don’t want to bother Josh. I’m surprised he hasn’t moved out of the house. I’ll have to stay out of his way.”

“This is not right, Angus. Angie is going to come by this morning with donuts and coffee. She does that every morning. She can give you a ride home if they discharge you today. You can talk to her then.”

Eva almost felt sorry for her old friend as he made his way to the door. Almost. Angus looked back, his face filled with pain. For some reason Eva thought the pain was more mental than physical. Once, this wonderful man had literally saved her financial life. Maybe with the help of her daughter, she could return the favor. How that would come about, she had no clue. *Well, she thought briskly, I can think about that while I’m having my therapy. Perhaps thinking about Angus will help to alleviate the pain of therapy.*

By nine o'clock Eva had finished her therapy, eaten a light breakfast, and showered before she slowly made her way to the sunroom, where she flopped down on a chair, her forehead beaded with perspiration from her efforts. She could hardly wait for Angie and the delicious coffee she was addicted to. Not to mention the donuts.

Eva looked around, acknowledging the other patients who were waiting for their turn in the therapy room. There was no sign of Angus. She didn't know if that was a good thing or not. She leaned back and closed her eyes, her thoughts going in all directions.

Fifteen minutes later, Eva's eyes popped open when she felt a light touch to her shoulder. "Morning, Mom. Did you have a good night?"

"I did have a good night. Angie, I need to talk to you. Pass out your donuts and coffee and hurry back here." Seeing the alarm on her daughter's face, she hastened to add, "It's not about me. I'm fine. Hurry, Angie."

A few minutes later, worry lines were etched on Angie's face as she settled herself next to her mother. She shook her head when her mother offered her a jelly-filled donut. "What? Tell me, Mom."

"It's the store, Angie. Angus and I spoke last night after you left. When I woke up this morning, he was standing in my doorway waiting for me to wake up. It's not good, Angie. Let me tell it all to you the way Angus told it to me. Don't interrupt me, either."

Angie listened, her facial expressions going from anger to disbelief to sadness. When her mother finished, the only thing she could think of to say was, "We can't let that happen, Mom. Eagle's is an institution. We can renegotiate the lease. Oh, God, I need to think about this. I thought Angus Eagle was a nice man. How could he have sabotaged his son like that? I feel terrible about the way I treated Josh. I need to give Mr. Eagle a piece of my mind."

"You need to do no such thing. What you will do is give Angus a ride home. He's finished with his therapy today and was going to call a car

service. I volunteered your services, dear. You can talk to him on the way home.”

“Mommmmm!”

“Sweetie, we’re all in this together. I don’t want Angus to lose his son, and that’s what will happen. Both of them have too much pride to admit when they’re wrong. Because we’re women, we can fix that. At least I think we can. All right, we’re going to *try* to fix things. All those wonderful suggestions you had over the years might come in handy now. All you have to do is get Josh to think they’re his ideas.”

“Mom, you can’t undo years of being in the red in a few short months. Yes, profits are greater during the holiday season, but that alone can’t ward off the inevitable.”

“I’ll settle for a reprieve. For now, the gift wrap department belongs to Eagle’s. We’ll take 20 percent and the store takes 80 percent. This is just for now. I’ll call our lawyer today to discuss it. We have two short months to turn things around before the shopping season begins.”

Angie offered up a bitter laugh. “Mom, Eagle’s merchandise is archaic. Where can they get new stuff in two months?”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Think about something people can’t do without. Then stock up on that. Fire sales, get rid of the junk they’re stuck with or donate it somewhere. Get some glitter and sparkle in there. I know you’ll come up with something, dear.”

“Mom! When was the last time you experienced a miracle? That’s what it’s going to take to get Eagle’s to soar again. I’m not...I don’t think...”

“I don’t want to hear anything negative. From here on in, we think positive. I know we can at least get it off the ground. If we can do that, then it’s up to Josh to follow through. Now run along and pick up Angus and take him home. He is a nice man, Angie. He just didn’t know how to let go, and he didn’t trust his son enough to let him run with the ball. Unlike me,

who trusted you completely. Angus is a man,” Eva said, as if that was the only explanation needed.

Angie bit down on her lip. “Okay, Mom. I’ll do what I can. I’ll see you tonight. What do you want me to bring?”

“A hoagie would be nice.”

“You got it.” A moment later, Angie was gone. Eva closed her eyes and sighed mightily. She couldn’t help but wonder if there was a miracle in Eagle’s future.

Chapter Three

The following morning, Angie dressed with care. It was still cool, so she decked out in warm clothes—a plum-colored suit, sensible heels, and a crisp white blouse. Light makeup that her mother said she didn't need, a spritz of perfume and she was ready to go toe to toe with Josh Eagle.

There was no point in kidding herself. She was nervous about the confrontation. More so since driving Angus Eagle home yesterday, a drive that had been made virtually in silence. Twice she'd bitten down on her tongue so she wouldn't say something her mother wouldn't approve of. Back in the recesses of her mind Angie wondered, and not for the first time, if Angus and her mother had ever had an affair. Lifetime leases didn't happen for no reason. No one was that kind, that good-hearted. Or, were they? Well, it was none of her business, so she needed to stop thinking about it. Easier said than done.

Angie ran her fingers through what she called her wash-and-go hairdo. A month ago her mother had finally convinced her to cut off her long, curly hair in favor of a more stylish cut. Her mother said the new hairdo was becoming, and mothers never lied. Well, almost never. After two weeks of staring at herself in the mirror, she agreed with Eva's assessment.

Angie realized she was postponing the moment when she had to leave and get on with the day. For all she knew, without an appointment to see Josh Eagle, all this anxiety she was experiencing might be for naught. For naught—such an old-fashioned term. One her mother or Angus Eagle would use.

On the ten-minute ride down Route 1, Angie thought about her own precarious position at Eagle's. If the store closed, she would be out of a job. It might be months before she found another one. Being self-employed, she wouldn't be able to collect unemployment insurance. Her mother would have to start pinching pennies because the medical bills would be coming in shortly. Even with Medicare, her mother would be paying them off for months. With only Social Security coming in, their meager savings would be gone in the blink of an eye. Well, she couldn't let that happen. She'd always been an idea person, according to her mother. If there was ever a time to come up with a dynamite idea, now was it.

Angie slowed for a traffic light, then made a right onto Woodbridge Ave. She drove down to the mall lot, left her car, and entered Eagle's through one of the back doors next to the loading platform. Instead of going straight to her shop, she walked the floor. There were no customers in the store that she could see. The sales help were standing around chatting with one another. She wondered what happened to the rule of look busy even if you aren't. She winced again as she surveyed the merchandise, which looked like it had been hanging on the racks forever. Hopelessly outdated.

Was it too late to save this store? She glanced around again and nodded to herself. Well, she'd never been a quitter. But, as Bess would say, there's a first time for everything.

Angie walked back to the end of the store to the gift wrap department, rolled up the corrugated shield, unlocked the door, and turned up the heat. In the little alcove at the far end of the room, out of sight, was a little station where she kept a coffeepot. She filled it and waited for the hot water to drip into the little red pot. She couldn't do anything until she had a cup of coffee. Coffee fortified her, made her brain cells do double-time. The moment she finished her second cup, she would march herself to Josh Eagle's office on the second floor. She had no clue what she was going to

do or say when she got there. She'd always been pretty good at winging it. There was a lot to be said for spontaneity. She didn't believe it for a minute.

At the same time as Angie was waiting for the coffee to brew, Josh Eagle was pacing the confines of his office. He hated that he had to go down to the first floor and apologize to the witch with the broom. She looked like the type who might take a swing at him. His stomach started to curdle at the thought. Still, there was no reason for him to behave the way he had at the rehab center the other night. He should have sloughed it off and ignored the young woman with the sparks in her eyes. And, she was pretty. He told himself she could be pretty and still be a witch.

Josh diddled around for another twenty minutes before he squared his shoulders, straightened his tie, and shook down the cuffs of his shirt. Now he was ready. His heart was beating way too fast. His mouth felt dry.

His cell phone rang, jarring him from what he was feeling. He looked down at the caller ID and saw that it was his father, who had come home yesterday and was asleep when Josh got home. He'd said everything he had to say to his father the night before. It was much too late to hear his repeated apologies of *I'm sorry, son. I didn't know, son*. Then a few more I'm sorries. No sense beating a dead horse. He ignored the insistent ringing and left his office.

He met her a foot away from the huge red X. He'd gone ballistic the day he'd seen that red X for the first time. The witch's biting words at the time still rang in his ears to this day. *Step one foot over that X, and I'll have you arrested!* He knew she meant every word of it. And that was three years ago. To date, he'd never stepped beyond the X. How childish was all this? Damn childish.

Josh took the initiative. "Ms. Bradford, I came down here to apologize to you for my rude behavior the other night. Not that I'm defending my rude behavior, but I have a lot on my plate right now."

“I know you do. I was on my way to your office to apologize to you. Would you like to...uh...go out to the food court and get a cup of coffee? Neutral ground, so to speak. If you’re busy...”

Josh stared at the young woman. Did she just invite him for coffee? “Sure,” was all he could think of to say. How brilliant was that?

They walked around the corner, down one of the long halls until they reached the food court, which was virtually empty this early in the morning. Neither said a word on the short journey.

“How do you take your coffee?” Josh asked.

“Black. It’s not coffee if you doctor it up with cream and sugar.”

“I feel the same way. Take a seat, I’ll get the coffee.” A black-coffee drinker like himself. Who knew?

The moment Josh sat down, Angie leaned forward and said, “We’re going to cancel the lease. We can renegotiate it again after the first of the year if the store is still open. Until then, Eagle’s gets 80 percent of the take, we get 20 percent. Look, let me finish what I have to say before I lose my nerve. My mother told me what you told your father. You’re leaving the first of the year. I guess I more or less understand that. Speaking strictly for myself, I’ve never been a quitter, but that’s me and, like you said, you have a lot on your plate.

“Your father...well, he’s been wrong. Older people have a hard time... What they do is give generously and then they realize they lost their control. It’s hard for them to accept the aging...Help me out here, Mr. Eagle.”

“First things first, let’s stop with the Mr. and Ms. I’m Josh, and you’re Angie. Okay?”

Angie smiled. Josh suddenly felt his world rock. “I...I know what you’re saying. For the last ten years I’ve battled my father. He’s stubborn as a mule. I had so many plans for the store, but he shot me down each and

every time I presented something. I finally got to the end of my rope. There's nothing more I can do."

Angie sipped at the scalding-hot coffee. "Sure there is. Where are all the suggestions that were in the suggestion box? I used to slip one in that box once a week."

"You're the one who...I still have them all in my office. They were good suggestions. I ran each and every one of them by my father, but he vetoed all of them. I'm being kind when I say he's in a time warp."

"I know. I drove him home from the rehab center yesterday. He didn't say much to me, but he did open up to my mother, who in turn passed it all on to me, and I am now telling you. What a round-robin. Why can't people just say what's in their minds and hearts?"

"Why are you telling me all this?" Josh asked, suspicion ringing in his voice. "I thought you hated my guts."

Angie looked genuinely puzzled at his remark. "I don't hate you personally. I don't even know you. I hate what you did. I guess I should say I hate what you didn't do, but I didn't understand what was going on. I have ideas," she said quietly.

"It's too late, Angie. The store needs mega revenues for the Christmas season or the doors close in January. Dad..."

"You scared the devil out of your father, according to my mother. He's onboard now. You have carte blanche to do whatever you want. I have ideas," she repeated.

In spite of himself, Josh was intrigued. "It's the middle of September, Angie."

"That's almost two months until the Christmas season kicks off. If we hunker down, with no interference, I think we might be able to make this a banner season. I'm game if you are." Angie waited, hardly daring to breathe, waiting for Josh's answer.

“I guess I owe my old man one more shot at it. If nothing else but to prove I wasn’t a know-it-all. If, and it’s a big *if*, we pull it off, I’m still leaving for London after the first of the year. I committed, and I never go back on my word.”

“That’s your decision, Josh. I, for one, would never try to talk you out of something if your mind is made up. I guess that’s a holdover kind of thing from when I was a kid. I have a ton of stuff to do today. How do you feel about getting some Chinese at the Jade Pagoda this evening after the store closes? We could talk in detail and make a plan. That’s if you’re serious. If you are, check all those suggestions I bombarded you with. There’s a game plan in there.”

Josh propped his elbows on the table. “Did you just ask me to dinner? A date?”

Angie laughed. “Well, yeah,” she said. “Now that we’re...uh...friends, I thought...” She flushed a bright pink when she caught Josh smiling at her. “I never asked a guy for a date before. It’s a little embarrassing.”

Josh threw his head back and laughed, a sound that sent shivers up Angie’s back. “Now you know a guy’s worst fear. Asking a girl for a date is traumatic. I accept. I’ll meet you by the loading dock at six-ten. Does that work for you?”

“Yes. I want you to think about something today. I’d like to see you close the store for two days. Get rid of all that outdated merchandise on the floor. Close off the second floor until we can decide what we’re going to do, what we’re going to specialize in. Like I said, I have some great ideas.”

Josh felt his throat close up. “Close the store! In the middle of the week? That had never happened in the lifetime of the store. Are you sure you have a plan?”

“I do. It will work, too, as long as you don’t fight me. Look, I’m giving up the lease. It’s all yours. That alone should prove I’m on your side. Besides, I hate the thought of going job hunting. Do we have a deal?”

Josh gulped but nodded. Angie's hand shot out. He reached for it, marveling at how soft her hand was in his.

Josh smiled.

Angie smiled.

Throw your line into the pond and reel him in, Bess had said. Angie giggled all the way back to the gift wrap department, which she'd just given away.

The first thing she did when she walked behind the counter was to call her mother. "Josh said okay, but he's still leaving in January because he committed to Harrods. I'm hoping he might change his mind. We're in business, Mom. Listen, I'm going to have Bess pick you up and take you home. I have tons of stuff to do. You can work the phones when you get home. You okay with that? Okay, now listen up..." She went on to detail the outline of her plan.

"Yes, honey. It all makes sense. I just hope you can do it all in two months. The vendors aren't all that cooperative at this time of year. Is it okay to tell Angus?"

"Sure. Your job is to make sure he doesn't waffle on us. Talk it up real good, Mom."

"Okay, honey. Congratulations!"

"Bess, instead of taking me home, take me to Mr. Eagle's house. It's just a few miles out of your way since it's on the corner of Plainfield Road and Park Avenue. Angus has a ramp, so I won't have a problem with the steps. Angie can pick me up later."

Bess raised her eyebrows but only nodded. Something was going on. She wondered when Eva or Angie would confide in her. She didn't like

being kept in the dark. And now this visit to the Eagle home. Something was definitely going on.

“Just park in the back, Bess. The ramp is by the kitchen door. At least it was years ago, when Angus’s father had to use a wheelchair. No, no, don’t help me. I have to do this myself. I have my cane. Thanks for bringing me here, Bess. You’re a good friend.”

“Is there anything I can do, Eva?”

“Not right now, but very shortly there will be plenty for you to do. Have a nice day now. Go, go! I’m fine.”

At the kitchen door, Eva used her cane to rap on the glass pane. When there was no response, she opened the door and stepped into the kitchen. She took a moment to look around. She’d spent a lot of time in this kitchen, catering to Mrs. Angus Eagle. The truth was, as Angie pointed out more times than she wanted to remember, she spent more time here than she did in her own kitchen. She suspected Angie still held that against her.

It was all so long ago.

“Angus, it’s Eva,” she called out. “Are you here?”

“I’m in the den. What in the world are you doing here? Are you all right? How did you get here? Good Lord, Eva, are you sure you should be out and about? Come in, come in. Sit down.”

Eva could hardly wait to sit down. Once there she wondered how she was going to get up out of the depths of the deep, comfortable couch. She’d worry about that later. “I suppose I could have called you when I got home, but for some reason I didn’t want to be alone. I thought since I’m clumsy by nature, I might fall or something. So I decided to come here. You’re stuck with me until Angie can pick me up, which won’t be till later this evening. Or, I can take a taxi.”

“Nonsense. I’m grateful for the company. I was just sitting here thinking about how badly I’ve fouled things up. Josh still won’t take my

calls, and I was asleep when he got home last night. I've been calling him since eight this morning. My son can be very unforgiving. Is your daughter like that?"

"At times. When I was standing in your kitchen I was thinking about how angry she got when I had to cook dinner for your family. Then I would rush home and cook dinner for my own family, and it was always late. Then I had to rush back and clean up because your wife wouldn't do it. That meant Angie had to clear up my own kitchen. It's one of the reasons why she doesn't like you. She thought you took advantage of me."

Angus looked dazed. "I didn't know that, Eva. What I mean is I didn't know you went home to cook for your family, and then came back here. You should have said something. I would have cleared the dishes myself. There's no point now in me trying to make apologies to you for my wife. But I am sorry, Eva."

Eva stared at her old boss. "Angus, who did you think cooked my family's dinner those days?"

Angus threw his hands in the air. "I guess I never thought about it. You should have said something at the time. What do you want me to say?"

Eva snapped her fingers in Angus's direction. "Earth to Angus! Your wife told me if I complained to you, she would fire me. I needed the job. She was so demanding. I wanted to quit so many times, but my family needed the money I brought in."

"Eva, I am so very sorry. I didn't know. If there was a strain between you two, then why would my wife insist I turn over the gift wrap department to you? It doesn't make sense."

"She didn't want me around in the afternoon when she...when she... entertained. It was to ensure I never said anything. Fill in the blanks, Angus, and I am never going to talk about this again. Are we clear on that?"

"No, we are not clear on anything. When you imply something like that you need to...to explain *exactly* what you're saying. We're talking about

my deceased wife here. Eva?”

“How many ways are there to say your wife entertained in the afternoons while you were at the store and your son was out somewhere or away. She did not entertain women with tea parties. I only ever saw one man and that was quite by accident, so I cannot give you a name. That’s it, Angus. Now, leave it alone.”

Angus rubbed at his jaw. By the stubborn set of Eva’s chin, he knew she had said the last word on the subject. “I didn’t know. Something like that never occurred to me.”

Eva picked up her cane and waved it around. “I didn’t know, I didn’t know. That’s all you’ve been saying for several days now. What *did* you know, if anything?” she asked sourly. “Look at the mess you’re in, and now I’m in the same mess because my daughter is going to be out of a job, and I’ll be losing my share of the profits. ‘I didn’t know’ is not good enough, Angus.”

Angus felt his shoulders start to shake. He choked up and turned to Eva. “It’s my only defense. I was so obsessed with the store, keeping it going, trying to stay ahead of all the upstarts coming into town. I didn’t want to fail my father. I see now where I was wrong. I’ll be honest with you, Eva. I don’t know what to do. ‘I’m sorry’ more or less falls into the same category as ‘I didn’t know.’ Can you help me?”

Eva leaned her cane against the sofa. “Was that so hard, Angus? Asking for help? This is the same position your son finds himself in right now. With a slight difference. He had the good sense to ask you for help, but you stomped on him. He’s the one you have to talk to, not me. If you don’t, you’re going to lose him. Open your heart and your mind, and if he calls you an old fart again, suck it up. We’re supposed to be older and wiser, the ones our children come to in need. I think that little ditty just reversed itself.”

Angus forced a laugh. Eva thought it the saddest sound she’d ever heard.

“How’d you get so smart, Eva?”

“By trying not to do the things you did. I had to think about my family. We weren’t well-off like you were. We struggled for everything. More than once Angie had to wait weeks when she needed new shoes. There were a lot of things she couldn’t have when she was younger because they cost too much money. My husband worked on an assembly line. We had a mortgage payment, car payments, appliance payments. Then we had to save for college. Until you leased me the gift wrap department, we barely made ends meet. I don’t want to talk about this anymore, Angus. I want your word that you are not going to interfere with the kids when they do whatever it is they’re going to do. Your word, Angus, or I’m leaving and will walk home, at which point I will collapse and my condition will be on your conscience.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Eva. You have my word. I’m not going to like what they’re going to do, am I?”

“Not one little bit!”

“Can you give me a clue, a hint?”

“Try this one on, they’re going to close the store and get rid of all that stuff that came over with the ark.”

“The merchandise? That represents money. What...What are they going to do with it?”

“My guess is there’s going to be one heck of a supersale followed by a bonfire somewhere real soon. Like I said, Angus, get over it.”

“What the hell, okay. Want to stay for dinner? Dolores is still with me, so you know there’s something delicious waiting.”

“I’d love to stay for dinner.”

“Do we have a date, then?”

“We do indeed have a date. Speaking of dates, Angie and Josh are going out for Chinese this evening. I rather imagine the two of them will be venting to one another about the two of us,” Eva said.

“Imagine that!”

“I think the two of them think you and I had an affair years ago,” Eva said, her face taking on a rosy hue.

Eyes twinkling, Angus said, “Imagine that!”

Eva laughed. “Yes, imagine that!”

Chapter Four

The Jade Pagoda was bustling when Josh held the door for Angie. They were shown to a table into the back section of the room that was separated from the other diners by strings of silver beads—beads that tinkled as the servers walked in and out. It was a pleasant sound, as was the fountain that trickled over lava rocks in the middle of the room. A smiling Buddha holding a fortune cookie sat atop the fountain, welcoming all guests.

“I come here sometimes just to relax,” Josh said, waving his arm about. “Win Lee told me if you rub the Buddha’s belly he’ll bring you good luck. For some reason, that little fat guy never worked for me.”

Angie smiled. “Maybe it’s because you aren’t Chinese.”

“Do you think?”

“No! I just said that to have something to say.”

“Do you come here often?”

“After my father died Mom and I used to come every Friday night. When she went to Florida to help my aunt I stopped coming, mainly

because I don't like to eat alone. When Mom finally came back we just never picked up where we left off. I agree with you, though, it is soothing and peaceful in here. People seem to whisper when they're here. Then again, they might have some top-of-the-line acoustics."

Josh held a chair for Angie before he took his own seat. "My mother wasn't one of those warm, fuzzy mothers. I used to hang out at friends' houses because I liked the way they interacted with their mothers. It sounds like you and your mother had a good relationship."

"We did. Sort of. Kind of. I hated you and your family for a long time," Angie blurted. "That...That probably colored my determination to fight you on the lease."

Josh looked so shocked at her words, Angie hastened to explain. "My mother spent more time at your house than she did at her own. Every time I needed her, she was at your house. Back then I didn't understand my family's need for money. I also didn't like it that my mother cleaned your house and cooked for you. Our dinners were always late. Then my mother would go back to your house to clean up after your dinner while I was the one who cleaned up ours. I wasn't always as kind as I could have been to my mother. Of course I regret that now. My dad did his best."

Josh blinked. He struggled to find something to say. "I guess I would have felt the same way. As a kid you just more or less take things for granted. I'm ashamed to admit I never thought about Eva in terms of having a family to take care of. She was just there sometimes. I'm sorry if that hurts your feelings, Angie."

"Well, that was then, this is now. We were both kids back then. You know what they say, you can't unring the bell. Isn't it ironic that we've come together like this? Your father with his hip operation, Mom with her knee replacement. If it weren't for that, you and I would still be battling one another. I guess everything happens for a reason."

"So we have a truce. At least for now."

“Yes. We have to make it all work. I think we can. Did you look over the suggestions I put in the box?”

“I did. Most of them are really good. I particularly like your idea to turn the gift wrap department into a Christmas wonderland. But the retail side of me can’t quite accept the idea that for a fee you’re willing to gift wrap merchandise from other stores.”

“The idea, Josh, is, those customers will browse the store and buy point-of-purchase merchandise with the money going into Eagle’s coffers. The gift wrapping is not going to be cheap, I can tell you that. Most of that money will now go into your coffers, too.”

Josh nodded as he motioned to the waitress. He told her that they were ready for some green tea. “I sent out memos today. We’ll close the store this weekend for two days. Three if we need an extra day. I also made arrangements for everything on both floors that has been marked down twice to go to Goodwill. Everything else will be sold below cut-rate to two different discount stores. This will get underway Friday night after the store closes. You might want to walk through the store to see if you think there’s anything we can salvage.”

“Get rid of it all. We’re starting fresh. No holdovers. You also need to get an electrician to install some better lighting. A nice new, shiny tile floor will work wonders.”

“I’m not a miracle worker, Angie. Two days, even three, it’s a monumental task.”

“Offer a bonus. Tap into your workforce. The salespeople have spouses who might like to make some extra money. Your new motto from here on in is, ‘The Eagle Soars.’ Start running ads in the local newspaper. Get some flyers made up. Hire some kid to put them on the windshields of the cars in the parking lot. Have a raffle every day. All entries have to have a sales receipt attached. That kind of thing. In order to make money, you have to spend money. You might need to close for two *weeks*.”

Josh brought the little cup of tea to his lips. His gaze locked with Angie's. "Two weeks! Young lady, you're scary!"

"I'm going to take that as a compliment. A scary compliment. What did you do about laying off your staff?"

Josh leaned back in his chair. "It was hard, but I did it. I think a lot of the staff were more or less relieved. I laid everyone off for three weeks except for a few I knew we would need. I don't know why, but I thought some, if not most of them, welcomed the decision. Some of the staff are my father's age. Past retirement age, but Dad wouldn't let me lay them off. I checked all their files, and none of them are in dire need of money. They work to have something to do. I can't fault them for that."

"You might be able to use the grandmothers to man the day care I want to put in on the second floor. Think about it, Josh. Mothers dropping off their children so they can shop! At thirty dollars a day with lunch and snacks, it would be a bargain. Of course you'd have some moms who just might want a few hours at a time. We'd work out a reasonable fee. I can see you taking in a couple of thousand bucks a day. The more activities you have for the kids, the more demand for the service. The kids would get a day with a real grandma who will read them stories, sing songs with them, rock the babies. Your dad and my mom will be perfect if we can get them to agree and at the same time still be in the loop. I already earmarked all the things on the floor that could go into the day care. I have a lot of friends whose kids have outgrown many of their things. I can ask to borrow them. Next year, if this all works, we could really do a bang-up job, but for now, I think this will work."

"My father is going to go nuclear!" Josh laughed. "Day care! Never in a million years would I have come up with that idea. You're right, you are an idea person!"

"Thank you, sir!"

The waitress showed up to take their order. Angie ordered a dish called Volcano Shrimp, while Josh ordered a sizzling seafood platter. Both now crunched down on hard noodles, a bit more relaxed with one another.

As Angie munched, she asked, “What did you think about my idea of having a really huge live Christmas tree in the middle of the floor? And the Santa with his sack of toys?”

“Great idea, but it will seriously deplete floor space. I’m still waiting to see what kind of merchandise we’re going to be selling. Not to mention where we’re going to get that merchandise. Vendors are notoriously cranky and in no hurry to get the deliveries to you during the year. They’re worse over the holidays. I hesitate to ask this, but is there a Plan B lurking anywhere?”

“Plan B? More or less. Incentives. Cash on delivery. If the merchandise angle falls short of my expectations, I think we could more than make up for the revenues with services, like cooking lessons, knitting lessons, all kinds of hourly lessons. Kind of like the YMCA. I think I’d like some Chinese beer now.”

“You like Chinese beer! Imagine that! I like it myself.” Josh signaled the waitress and placed the order. When it arrived, he held up his bottle to clink it against Angie’s. “What should we drink to?”

“To success, what else?”

Angie drank from the bottle, ignoring the glass sitting on the table. Josh seemed mesmerized by his dinner companion as she kept upending the bottle. He’d never dated a girl who really liked beer, much less drank it from the bottle. He grinned from ear to ear. He took a moment to wonder what it would be like to kiss those full red lips. He just knew in his gut he’d soar like an eagle.

Angie and Josh were the last to leave the Jade Pagoda. With way too much Chinese beer under their belts, Josh called for a taxi. “We can pick our cars up in the morning.”

“What time is it?” Angie mumbled as she looked at the array of beer bottles on the table.

Josh peered at his watch. He knew he was snookered when he couldn't read the numbers. "Late," he said triumphantly. "Do you have to be home before...before...the moon comes out?" Damn, he was witty tonight. And charming.

"I was...I think I was supposed to...Maybe I wasn't...Where is my mother, do you know?"

Angie was looking at him like he had the answer at his fingertips. He didn't want to disappoint his new friend. "I'm not sure. I'll help you look for her."

"That's wonderful. Thank you. I think she might be...you know, pissed that I forgot about her."

Josh pulled himself up to his full six-foot-two-inch height and said, "We were busy."

"Yes, we were. Why don't we walk home, Josh? We might see them on the way. Oh, I remember now, my mother is keeping your father company. That's not good. Oh, shit! My cell phone is off."

Josh burst out laughing and couldn't stop. Suddenly this peppery young woman he'd dined with, drunk with, was all too human. "How many times did she call?"

"Well, guess what, Josh? I can't really see those itty-bitsy little numbers. A lot. And who's paying for this taxi?" Angie asked as it pulled up.

Josh stepped up to the plate. "Eagle's," he said smartly.

"Tell him to take us to your house. Then he can take me and my mother home. She is going to be so...so..."

"Pissed?" Josh asked, howling with laughter. "My old man is going to go through the roof. I need to move out and get my own place. I think he

needs me, and that's why he likes me living with him. I bet your mother feels the same way. They're old. Old people think like that."

They got into the cab and Josh gave the driver his address.

"Nah, it's all a game to keep us in line. Those two are more independent than either one of us. If you had your own place, I could visit you."

Whoa. Josh leaned over and kissed her ruby-red lips. At least he thought they were ruby red. He didn't care if they were ruby red or purple.

"You're a good kisser," Angie said a long time later. "I think the driver wants you to pay him. Are we at your house? Time does fly when you're having fun, doesn't it? Yesireee, you are a good kisser."

"Damn straight I am. A good kisser. Not because I had...have a lot of practice," Josh said, handing the driver a twenty-dollar bill for the five-minute ride. "Keep the change," he said magnanimously.

"Wait for me, mister, I have to pick up my mother."

Walking up the driveway, Josh stopped and reached for Angie's arm. "Should we have a story? You know, why we're so uncaring, so negligent, so..."

"Drunk?"

"Egg-zactly," Josh said, roaring with laughter.

"No defense is the best defense. I don't really care. Do you care, Josh?"

"I don't think I do. Tomorrow I might."

Josh was about to open the kitchen door when it swung open. He looked up to see Eva Bradford glaring at him. His father's face defied description. A sappy expression on his face, Josh said, "Good evening, everybody." He made a low, sweeping bow. Not to be outdone, Angie did the same thing and almost fell on her face.

“They’re both drunk,” Angus said.

Josh straightened his jacket and looked over at Angie. “They’re worried about us while they’ve been here...noodling...canoodling...Oh, shit, messing around. Hrumph!” he sniffed. “Your chariot awaits, Mrs. Bradford. It’s a taxi.”

“Mom!” Angie looked properly horrified. “I knew it! I knew it! You two...You lied to me. You were doing what he said...noodling around,” she said, pointing to Josh.

“We were not. You’re inebriated, Angie. Shame on you!”

“Joshua, go to your room.”

“Why should I? No! I’m moving out and Angie is going to come and visit me. When I move to England, she’s coming to visit me there, too. So, Pop, what do you have to say to that?”

“Talk to me when you’re sober, and I will have plenty to say. These ladies need to go home right now. You need to go to bed, Joshua.”

Josh looked over at Angie and said, “He only calls me Joshua when he’s really mad. Come along, fair lady, I always see my dates home. Do you want me to stay with you until I find an apartment?”

“Sure,” Angie said agreeably. “Mom can stay here. Win-win. Works for everybody. I think I’m going to be sick.”

Eva fixed her angry gaze on Josh, and said, “Young man, I am holding you personally responsible for my daughter’s condition. Do something!”

Josh stepped up to the plate for the second time that evening. “And I and I alone accept that responsibility.” He offered up a second sweeping bow and fell over, toppling one of the kitchen chairs. “The meter is running,” he said as Angie bolted for the kitchen door.

“Do something, Angus!” Eva hissed.

“It’s your daughter who’s...Well, she’s...”

“Your son got my daughter drunk. Don’t deny it.”

From his position on the floor Josh said, “No, no, she got that way all by herself. She had so many ideas.” A moment later he was sound asleep on the kitchen floor.

Angus shrugged. Eva did her best not to laugh.

Angie came back and looked down at Josh. “He’s not...dead, is he?”

“I’m thinking tomorrow morning he might wish he was,” Angus said.

Angie sat down on the floor next to Josh. “Oh, I had so many ideas. Josh liked all my ideas.” She untangled herself and laid her head on Josh’s stomach.

“I say we just leave them here,” Eva said. “I’ll let the taxi driver go. You get some blankets and pillows.”

“Then what?” Angus asked.

“Do you want me to draw you a map, Angus? Do you want to make your son out to be a liar? We’re going to canoodle.”

“Oh!” Angus wondered if Eva picked up on the anxiety in his voice.

And then she was back in the kitchen, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

Chapter Five

The sun was just making its way to the horizon when Josh stirred on the kitchen floor. He felt like a ton of bricks was sitting on top of his chest. Somehow, he managed to crank open one eye. A nanosecond later, his other eye flew open. He gasped. The woman wrapped around his torso stirred and mumbled something he couldn't quite hear. Josh moved. Then the woman moved and rolled over onto the floor. She was awake in an instant, looking around as she tried to figure out where she was and why she was lying on a strange kitchen floor. A tortured groan escaped her lips.

Josh groaned in sync as he struggled to sit up. His eyes were as wild-looking as his hair, which was standing on end. Angie didn't look much better.

"Ah, did we...? What I mean is...Do you remember?" he finished lamely.

Angie rubbed her temples in an attempt to ease the pounding in her head. "No, I don't think, and...No, I don't know," she said just as lamely.

"Why are we...? We slept on the floor?" Josh asked this as though sleeping on the floor was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. "Why did

we do that?” he asked as he got to his feet. He stretched out a long arm to pull Angie to her feet.

“Maybe because we were drunk?” It was a question and a statement.

Josh looked down at the floor to see the pillows and blankets. He cursed under his breath as he pointed them out to Angie. She looked away in embarrassment. “Are you sure we didn’t...?”

“I think I would remember *that*,” Josh said, walking over to the coffeepot. He thought his head was going to pound right off his neck. He filled the pot, measured coffee, and pressed a button. “Do you want some orange juice?”

“I didn’t even brush my teeth. It feels like something is growing in my mouth,” Angie said. “No on the orange juice. Oh, God, we left our cars at the Jade Pagoda. Now I have to walk there to get it. Damn. I look like someone who just...”

“Had a wild night of sex?” Josh asked.

“Stop saying that. We didn’t...I’m almost...No, I’m sure we didn’t. We never should have had that plum wine after drinking beer. This is all your fault, Josh. You said we couldn’t insult Mr. Win Lee by refusing the complimentary wine.”

“You guzzled half that carafe all by yourself. You even got sick. I did not get sick. I only pretended to drink the wine.”

“Ha! My mother...Your father...They saw us. They covered us up. Where’s my mother?”

“How should I know? You’re her daughter, you should know where your mother is at all times. What kind of daughter are you, anyway?”

“The kind that doesn’t know where her mother is. I bet your father...I bet he took unfair advantage of her with her new knee. My mother is naive

and not the least bit worldly. Your father is a shark. Just like you.” Oh, God, did she just say that?

“Are you accusing my father of attacking your mother? My father, who can barely walk, who just had a hip replacement? That father?” Damn, his head was pounding so bad he could hardly stand it. A shark! Damn.

“Ha! Your father’s new hip and my mother’s new knee are those *titanium* joint things. That probably makes them almost bionic. They can *walk*. If they can walk, they can do *other* things.”

“My father would never...”

“Yeah, well, neither would my mother. Your father is a lot bigger than my little mother. She only weighs a hundred pounds. Your father must weigh two hundred. I rest my case. Oh, please give me some of that coffee before my head explodes. This kitchen hurts my eyes.”

Josh poured coffee. “Do you always complain like this so early in the morning? What’s wrong with this kitchen?” Josh asked, looking around the ancient kitchen.

“It’s outdated for one thing, just like the store. I never saw a stove with legs. What the heck is that funky-looking round thing on top of your refrigerator? I don’t see a dishwasher. Not that it’s any of your business, but the only time I complain this early in the morning is when I’m hungover, which is almost never, and when my mother goes missing. Have you noticed we’re fighting?”

“Everything works. We’re not fighting, I’m discussing things and you’re... Well, what you’re doing is complaining.”

Josh gulped from his coffee cup. Angie did the same. The word noodling came to Josh’s mind. Wouldn’t it be a hoot if his old man had more action going for him than he did? He started to laugh at the thought. He shared his thought with Angie, who, despite her pounding head, also started to laugh. Sometimes he was so damn witty he couldn’t stand himself.

Behind the kitchen door Eva and Angus listened to their offsprings' mating call. At least that's what Eva told Angus it was. Angus just shook his head. "She's right about your kitchen, it's a disgrace. You need to get with the program, Angus."

Angus nudged the door open a sliver and let his gaze roam around the kitchen. "I like things I'm comfortable with, and I'm comfortable with this kitchen. Everything works just fine." Then, tongue in cheek, he said, "Your daughter doesn't really know anything about you, does she, Eva? You are not naive, and you're as worldly as they come, if last night was any sort of indicator. Does your daughter know how good you are at improvisation?"

Eva giggled. "That will be enough of that, Angus. What are they doing now?"

"My son is whispering in your daughter's ear. That could mean any number of things. I suggest we go back to our chairs and let them find us. Pretend to be asleep."

Twenty minutes later, Eva reared up from her chair. "I don't think it's going to happen, Angus. They aren't going to find us," she said, limping over to the doorway. They're gone. What time does your day lady come in? Do you think she can give me a ride home?"

"She's due right now. Of course she can take you home. Will you come back, or should I have her bring me to your house later on? Better yet, why don't I call a car service so we can have a driver at our disposal. Will that work for you, Eva?"

"Yes, I think it will. You have my cell phone number. Call me when your day gets under way."

Thirty minutes later Eva entered her own house. She stopped at the refrigerator for a bag of frozen peas, then made her way into the family room, where she settled herself in her favorite chair. She sighed with relief when the cold from the frozen peas seeped into her swollen knee. With the

three Advil she'd just taken, she knew she would feel better in a little while. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Overhead she could hear the water gurgling in the pipes; Angie washing away the night's activities.

Soon after, Eva's eyes snapped open when she felt a presence near her chair. "Did you have anything to eat, dear?"

"No, but that's okay, I'm not hungry. I'll get a bagel or something in the food court later on. What are you going to do today, Mom?"

"Well, Angus said he was going to hire a driver and come over later. We're going to do our best to pitch in and help Josh with the store. I worry that Eagle's will go under. If that happens, Angus will be destroyed. Did Josh...Is he still planning on going to England after New Year's? Did he say?"

Angie perched herself on the arm of the sofa and stared at her mother. "He's still going. Mom, the guy tried for ten years to get Eagle's off the ground. I think I'd pack it in after ten years myself. His father is a selfish old man. You can tell him I said that, too. You stayed there all night, didn't you?" Her tone was so accusatory, Eva flinched.

Eva brushed at the hair falling over her forehead and adjusted the bag of peas on her knee. "I think I'm a little past the stage where I have to account to you for my whereabouts, Angie. Where I was or wasn't last night has nothing to do with our current situation. I'm sure you noticed I didn't say anything to you about how you spent your night or the condition you were in. Because, my daughter, you are old enough to make your own decisions, and you are accountable for your actions. Now, run along so you aren't late."

Angie bit down on her lower lip. She debated presenting an argument but didn't think she could possibly win any war of words with her mother. "Mom, where are all those cottage-industry magazines you subscribe to?"

"In the basement in the cabinet over the washing machine. Why?"

“I’m going to contact some of them. Everything for the most part is homemade. Small businesses like that have a hard time marketing their wares. I’m thinking...Now, this is just a thought...But maybe we can make this Christmas season a homemade, down-home Christmas. People love to buy things that are made by hand. If any of those little businesses have inventory, that will help us. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea. I really do. I worry that vendors won’t be able to get merchandise to you in time for the holidays. It might be too late, dear.”

Angie stamped her foot. “No negative thinking, remember? Anyway, we won’t know if we don’t try. Josh wants to go off knowing he did the best he could. Failure isn’t an option at this point.” Angie pointed a finger at her mother and said, “Since you seem to have the inside track with Angus Eagle, it’s your job to keep him out of our hair so we can make it happen. The minute he sticks his nose into this venture, I’m outta there, and I feel confident in saying Josh will flip him the bird and leave on the spot. Do you think you can convey all that to Mr. Eagle? While you’re at it you should get him to work on that kitchen of his. In case, you know, you ever want to move in there.”

A minute later, Eva could hear her daughter stomping her way to the basement. She made three trips carrying the boxes out to her car. One of the things she loved about her daughter was that she always followed through on things. If there was a way to make Eagle’s Department Store soar, Angie was the one to make it happen.

The second Eva heard Angie drive off, she picked up the phone to call Angus. “I’m ready, Angus. Have your driver pick me up; we’re going to take a trip. And, Angus, bring your check book. Where are we going? To the Amish country, where we’re going to buy everything they have that’s for sale. We’re going to eat homemade bread, homemade soup and homemade pie for lunch. I’m excited, Angus. Almost as excited as I was last night. Like I said, I’m ready. I’ll be waiting on the porch. I don’t like to be kept waiting, Angus.” A low, throaty, intimate laugh erupted when she heard Angus’s reply.

Josh Eagle happened to be on the loading dock when Angie arrived. He was dressed in jeans, a UCLA sweatshirt, and battered high-top sneakers. *Toss your line in the pond and reel him in.* He looked good enough to make a girl's head spin. Not that hers was spinning. Well, maybe it was revolving just a tiny bit. "Hi," she said brightly, as he reached out to take the box of magazines from her. She went back out to her car to get the other two boxes and they headed to her shop.

"What are you going to do with these?" Josh asked when he set the last box on the counter in the gift wrap department. Angie explained. She liked the sudden twinkle she saw in Josh's eyes. "Do you think it will work?" His voice was beyond anxious-sounding.

"A homemade, down-home Christmas! Isn't that what Christmas is all about? I'm almost certain it will work. I really am. But we need a campaign to go with it. I think you might have to call an advertising agency to get it off the ground. We're just two people, Josh, we're going to need help. I'm determined that you are going to go out of here with a bang. Along with your father's respect." Now it was her turn to sound anxious. "Are you having second thoughts about leaving?"

"No, not at all," he lied with a straight face. Suddenly the allure of the prestigious Harrods and going to England were losing their appeal.

"I know this is none of my business, but do you have an operating account to draw from? Do I have to run everything by you, or do you trust me to order things without your approval? How do you want me to arrange payment?"

"Yes, no, and just charge everything to the store. I'll give you a corporate card. And, yes, I trust you. I have phone calls to make and several meetings with some of the old staff. The discount people are here to start moving all the merchandise. Alma Bennett is in charge of all that. The minute everything is out of the store, an electrician is coming in. And then the painters, who promised to do their work at night. A cleaning crew will be right on their tails to clean and polish the new floor. That's more or less

behind-the-scenes stuff. Our real challenge is to get merchandise to fill the space. I'll call an advertising agency at some point this morning to get that going. You'll have to sit in on that meeting. How about lunch?"

"I'd love to have lunch with you. How about twelve thirty in the food court?"

"Works for me." His hands jammed into his jean pockets, Josh started to whistle as he made his way to the second floor. He could hardly wait for lunch.

"Are those stars I see in your eyes, Angie?" Bess asked.

"Nope. Just new contact lenses."

"Yeah, right. Okay, what's up? What do you want me to do?"

Angie quickly outlined her plans, then told Bess everything that had transpired since she'd seen her last.

"Wow! Can we do it all in time? What about the vendors? They promise everything and give you zip."

"I know, I know, so we're going to insist on penalty clauses. We're also not really going to count on them. We're going to make this a down-home Christmas and try...I said *try*, to get up and running with the cottage-industry merchandise. Today you and I are going to scour these books, call the little companies, and see what we can get here in time. We won't have to worry about gift wrapping today since the store is closed. Everything is on target with your husband and the decorations, right?"

"John is on it. He loves woodworking. He's made prototypes and is working off them. It will all be done in plenty of time. So tell me what's responsible for the sparks in your eyes. Is it Josh Eagle? *Wooeee*, you're blushing, Angie."

“I am not. It’s . . . It’s really warm in here. Now, let’s make some coffee and hit these magazines.”

The morning passed quickly as the women consumed two pots of coffee while earmarking pages for further discussion. By noon, Angie’s yellow legal pad was full of telephone numbers and notes on which merchandise she was interested in.

With one box of magazines to go, Angie washed her hands, fluffed up her hair, and checked her lipstick, ready to meet Josh for lunch. “Do you want me to bring you something for lunch, Bess?”

“No, I brought my lunch. You do remember how to flirt, don’t you, Angie?”

Angie stuck out her tongue in Bess’s general direction, but in the end she had to laugh. “Do I look okay?”

“You look good enough to go fishing. Remember what I told you about tossing your line in the pond. Play it cool, and he’s all yours. That’s assuming you want him. From where I’m sitting, the guy is one heck of a catch. Go already. It’s not nice to keep the boss waiting.”

“Jeez, he is my boss, isn’t he? That’s going to take some getting used to. Are you sure I look okay, Bess?”

“You look fine, now go. Just remember to smile a lot. Pretend you’re interested in what he has to say. You don’t always have to be a know-it-all.”

On the way to the food court Angie wondered how many women were waiting in the wings for Josh Eagle. She just knew he went for the long-legged modeling types with their glossy smiles, sun-streaked hair and designer clothes. And, according to Bess, who was up on all things Josh Eagle, if any of them had a brain, they’d be dangerous. Angie sniffed. Bess didn’t know everything even though she said she did.

Josh was waiting for her by the Philly Cheese Steak booth, which probably meant that's what he intended to eat for lunch. He was holding a twin to the legal pad she was carrying. Ah, a business lunch. She smiled.

Josh waved the yellow pad. "Guess this means we're going to work through our lunch. I had a pretty good morning. How about you?"

"Bess and I made some progress. I want to run it all by you before I make some calls this afternoon. I just want half a sandwich and a cup of coffee. And a brownie." She smiled. And smiled.

"Are you happy about something? You keep smiling. Is it anything you want to share?"

Angie made a mental note to slap Bess upon her return to the gift wrap shop. "Actually, I am. Happy, that is. I can see light at the end of the tunnel, believe it or not. How about you?"

"You look pretty when you smile. You should do it more often. But to answer your question, I certainly feel a lot more positive than I did yesterday morning."

Angie didn't know what else to do because her heart was beating so fast, so she smiled. And smiled. Then she smiled some more. *I'm still going to slap you, Bess.*

Chapter Six

It was midafternoon when Angie pushed herself away from her tiny desk where she'd been making call after call in the hopes of saving Eagle's Department Store from closing its doors.

"How about a nice, cold soda pop?" Bess asked as she peered into the minifridge in the alcove where the coffeepot was located. Angie nodded.

Bess pulled over a stool and sat down next to Angie. She looked pointedly at the canvas bag at Angie's feet. Poking at the colorful bag with her foot, she asked, "You haven't told Eva, have you? Or Josh?"

Angie bit down on her lower lip. "I meant to tell Mom. I had it all planned, and then she up and decided to have her knee done. I didn't want to upset her. I don't...What I mean is, I don't think I owe Josh an explanation. As soon as Mom is in high gear again, I'll tell her. She knew this was not a forever job for me. I agreed to help out when my aunt died, then things went south. It's time for me to do what I do best, and this isn't it. Besides, she has you, Bess. It will all work out." Her tone was so defensive, Bess winced.

"Did you sign the contract yet?" Bess asked.

The contract Bess was referring to was an employment contract between Angie and the Sunnyvale, California Board of Education for Angie to teach the third grade starting next year.

“I have three more weeks before I have to submit the contract. I can overnight it. I know, I know, I will tell my mother before the three weeks are up. Don’t go getting your panties in a wad, Bess. I know what I’m doing.”

Bess pushed her granny glasses farther up on her nose. “I don’t think it’s so much that you’ll be leaving as where you’re going. Why couldn’t you take a job around here? Why do you have to go all the way to California?”

Angie jumped off her chair. “See! See! You sound just like my mother. I’m thirty-five years old. It’s time for me to do what I want. I stayed here after my dad died so Mom wouldn’t be alone. I still live at home, for God’s sake. What thirty-five-year-old do you know who still lives at home with their parents?”

“Josh Eagle,” Bess said smartly. “I think he’s thirty-seven, though.”

“Well, he’s leaving, too. I guess that makes us both late bloomers.”

Bess mumbled something that sounded like, “*You just tossed your line in the pond, now you’re going to let it sink to the bottom.*” Angie ignored her and picked up the phone again to make another call.

Standing outside of both women’s line of sight, Josh Eagle turned on his heel and left as silently as when he arrived. His shoulders were slumped, and he was dragging his feet.

Why should he care if Angie Bradford was leaving in January? He was leaving, too, so he wouldn’t miss her. Would he?

The thought was so disturbing, Josh stopped in the middle of the main floor where all kinds of activity was going on. He felt like one of the

mannequins as he watched the merchandise being wheeled out of the store on dollies.

The urge to throw his hands in the air and run as far and as fast as his sneakered feet would take him was so strong, Josh reached out to grasp the edge of one of the counters to hold himself in check.

Damn it to hell, he liked Angie Bradford. *Really* liked Angie Bradford. For some strange reason he suddenly felt like she'd betrayed him.

Josh made his way to his secret haven, the stairwell that led to the second floor. This was where he always went when things went sour with his father, or when he needed to get a handle on something. He sat down on the steps and looked at the hole in his sneaker over his big toe. He looked around at the gray stone walls that suddenly seemed as gloomy as his thoughts.

Josh knew what he should do, but did he have the guts to do it? For the first two years of his tenure at Eagle's, he'd spent a lot of time out here in the stairwell trying to decide if he should go toe to toe with his father. Out of respect, he'd never done that, and now here he was. He needed to go to Angie, tell her he'd overheard her conversation, and ask her point-blank what her intentions were. She'd probably tell him it was none of his business, and he'd have to agree with her. But...And there was always a but...He liked her, *really* liked her. That's exactly what he should do. No doubt about it. Oh, yeah. So what if she told him it was none of his business? He was a big boy, he could handle a put-down.

Before he could change his mind, Josh banged open the door leading to the main floor of the store, where he retraced his steps.

As soon as he hit the small entryway to the gift department, Josh called Angie's name. Bess took one look at his face and excused herself.

"What's up?" Angie looked up from the notes she was making on her pad.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were planning on leaving?” His voice was so cold, so gruff-sounding, Angie felt her heart kick up a beat. She immediately swung into her defense mode, crossed her arms over her chest, and glared at the tall, good-looking man towering over her. “What?”

“You heard me. I came down here to talk to you, but you were talking to Bess and I didn’t want to intrude so I waited...”

“And listened to a private conversation. That’s pretty sneaky in my opinion. I don’t think it’s any of your business, Josh. Which brings me to my next question. Why do you care what I do or when I do it as long as it doesn’t interfere with the store?”

Josh hated the stubborn look he was seeing. He was all too familiar with that look. He’d seen it every time they met in court. He advanced a step and sat down on the stool Bess had vacated. He hooked his feet in the rungs and rocked back and forth. “I shouldn’t care, but I do. I’m not sure why that is. I really didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I’m sorry about that. And, you’re right, Angie, what you do come January is none of my business. I guess I thought...When I told you about leaving, I guess I thought you should have told me about your plans, too. You really should tell your mother. Don’t do what I did with my old man.”

Somewhat mollified, Angie unfolded her arms and stared at the man sitting on the stool. She licked her lips. “I thought about telling you, but there was so much going on. I didn’t want to add to your angst. I know I should have told my mother. If you were listening, then you know I didn’t sign the contract yet. Maybe I’m dragging my feet. Maybe it’s a mistake. Maybe a lot of things. For some reason I haven’t been able to do that. I love the idea of going back to teaching. I love the kids. Working here was great, too, but Mom and I both knew it was temporary.

“You’re leaving in January, so why should you care if I stay or go? For all either one of us knows, this little...plan we have might not work, and your father ends up having to close the store. It’s all one big crapshoot, Josh.”

“I like you!” Josh blurted. *Shit, did he just say that?* “I was hoping we could get to know each other better.”

Angie’s head bobbed up and down. She couldn’t believe the words that popped out of her mouth. “I like you, too. I don’t want to fight with you, Josh. I’m sick and tired of walking on eggshells. I do enough of that with my mother, and I’m sure you do the same thing with your father. Let’s just get through the next few months and make decisions later on.”

“But you said you had to sign the contract in three weeks.”

Angie smiled and Josh’s world tilted. “There will be other contracts, other jobs. I’m a good teacher. I’ve had other offers. The California one was just to get me on another coast. Truce?” she asked, holding out her hand.

Josh grinned as he grasped her hand. “Truce. How about dinner tonight?”

“Okay. You’re going to come to my house, ring the bell with flowers in hand, a real date. Or is this business?”

“Nope, a real date. Flowers, eh? I think I can handle that. Does seven thirty work for you?”

“Yes, it works for me, but I was joking about the flowers.”

The conversation was over but Josh didn’t want to leave. “You should see what’s going on out there on the main floor. I’m glad my father isn’t here to see this. He hasn’t called me today. That’s not like him.”

Angie started to laugh and couldn’t stop. “My mother just called a little while ago. Seems your father hired a driver and, as we speak, the two of them are in the Amish country, where they are buying up all the quilts and whatever else the people are willing to sell. They rode from shop to shop in a buggy.”

Josh sucked in his breath and for the life of him couldn’t think of anything to say other than, “Uh-huh.”

Eva settled herself in the town car, her legs extended. She flinched at how swollen and red her knee was. There was no doubt about it, she'd overdone it today. She could hardly wait to put the bag of crushed ice on her knee. They'd picked it up at a 7-Eleven store when they left the Amish country.

"How bad is the pain, Eva?" Angus asked, his voice full of concern.

"Probably as bad as yours. We're two old fools, Angus. At least I am. I didn't think this little trip through. I didn't realize we'd have to get in and out of the buggy so many times. I don't know what I thought. I'm sorry. Do you want some of my Advil?"

Angus held out his hand. He swallowed two of the tablets while Eva took three with the soda pop they'd also bought at the 7-Eleven.

"As soon as the ice and Advil kick in, we'll feel better. You have five weeks on me, Angus. I'm just eight days from surgery. Did you have trouble getting used to the pronged cane?" Eva asked, in the hopes that talking would take her mind off the pain in her knee.

Angus leaned back and closed his eyes. "Not at all. I had trouble with the walker. I felt like I was ninety years old. Tell me this damn trip was worth it, Eva. Just tell me that."

"It was worth it. Five hundred quilts! And all those jams and jellies. Even with all that *horse-trading* you did with the elders, I suspect we might have overpaid a little. The kids will have to mark them up considerably. Everyone wants a homemade quilt."

Angus opened his eyes, then reached for Eva's hand. "What's bothering you, Eva?"

Eva patted Angus's hand. "What makes you think something is bothering me?"

“Because I see something in your eyes. Sometimes if you talk about it, it helps a little. I’m a good listener, Eva.”

“It’s Angie. She thinks I don’t know, but she’s planning on leaving in January just the way your son is leaving. I was looking for something, and for some reason I thought it might be in her book bag. I wasn’t spying. There was a teaching contract that she hasn’t signed as yet. For a school in Sunnyvale, California. If you want the whole ball of wax, I need to work. If the store closes, I don’t know what I’ll do. My Social Security isn’t all that much. My house is paid off, but the taxes are now more than the mortgage payment was. Angie wasn’t really taking a salary, just money as she needed it. We have to pay Bess a regular salary. I’m sure that by January, if the store closes, my knee will be okay. I’ll just have to find a job where I can sit part of the time. I just wish I had known about the store’s difficulties before I had the operation. I would have put it off. The worst-case scenario is I’ll sell the house and move into one of those garden apartments. I don’t think apartment living will be too bad. Most of those apartments come with a little terrace. I might even get a cat for my golden years.” Eva wound down like a pricked balloon.

Angus digested this information as his brain whirled and twirled. “You could move in with me, Eva.”

“No, Angus, I cannot move in with you. Now, are you sorry you asked me what’s wrong?”

“No, not at all. Good friends always share their problems. If there’s a way for my pigheaded folly where the store is concerned can be corrected, Josh will do it. I have so many regrets, Eva. I don’t think Josh is ever going to forgive me.”

“You don’t know that for sure, Angus. This is no time for negative thoughts. Parents are allowed to make mistakes. It’s human and it’s normal. You do your best at the time. However, once our children come of age, there’s no more room for mistakes. At least that’s how I look at it. In many ways we’ve both been lucky. Your son stayed with you the way Angie stayed with me. That has to mean something. We can’t be selfish now. Do you agree?”

“Yes, I agree. Maybe our answer is to just close the store in January.” He watched as Eva nodded her head. For some reason he felt disappointed.

Eva’s eyes opened wide. “So, what you’re saying is we’re quitters. You and I. You said if there was a way to turn things around, Josh would find it.”

“I did say that. I don’t know if it can happen or not. I’m trying to convince myself that Eagle’s won’t be closing its doors.”

“Let’s give them a chance, Angus. But only from the sidelines. All we’ll do is offer encouragement and compliments. I think we can do that.”

Angus squeezed Eva’s hand. “I think so, too. How’s the pain?”

“It’s easing up. How’s your pain?”

“I feel wonderful,” Angus lied.

Bess covered her ears when Angie let out a shriek that almost split her eardrums. “What? What, Angie?”

But Angie was out the door calling Josh’s name as she ran through the ground floor of the store. People turned to stare as they tried to figure out why the young woman was shrieking her lungs out. Josh appeared out of nowhere. Like Bess, he shouted. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Wrong? Nothing’s wrong. I have news. Good news! Wonderful news!”

“Come with me, my dear,” Josh said leading Angie to his private sanctuary in the stairwell. “This,” he said, pointing to the steps as though they were His and Hers thrones, “is where I come to think and plan. Good place for good news, I’m thinking. What, what?” he all but shouted, his excitement palpable.

“Okay, okay,” Angie said, sitting down on the second step from the bottom. She was aware Josh was holding her hand. She squeezed it. “I found this woolen mill in Portland, Oregon, that’s going out of business. We

can buy up their entire inventory. Their entire inventory, Josh! You can go online to see what I'm talking about. It's up to us to truck it here. The mill and the manufacturing end of it is all family-owned. The last surviving member of the family just sold out to a developer for big bucks. He was almost giddy that he could unload his warehouse in one swoop. All he wants to do is take his money and go. You need to call them right away and make an offer. They're expecting your call. Here's the number. The man's name is Samuel Eikenberry. Hurry, before he changes his mind, Josh."

"Stay right here. I have to go to the office for my cell phone. Wait for me. I want to make this deal in my...here on the steps. Will you wait?"

"Of course." A nanosecond later, Angie felt his lips brush hers.

"I promise to do better next time," Josh grinned.

"I'll hold you to it." *Oh, Bess, my line has a nibble.* Angie clapped her hands in glee at what had just transpired.

Twenty minutes later, Josh snapped the phone shut. His clenched fist shot in the air. "We have a deal and Mr. Eikenberry is going to truck it here at my expense. I snapped up the offer. The latest styles, the best of the best and all wool. He asked if I wanted the blankets, and I said yes."

Josh's excitement was contagious. "You can never have enough blankets."

Then she was being kissed like she'd never been kissed in her life. Her world rocked, righted itself, and then rocked again. "You didn't lie. You did do better. Wanna try for perfection?"

Josh was about to give her his definition of perfection when his cell phone rang. Thinking it might be Mr. Eikenberry, he answered it. His father's voice boomed over the wire. All he heard was five hundred handmade quilts, tons of jams, jellies, preserves and two thousand Amish cookbooks. He laid the phone on the step and proceeded to show Angie his version of perfection.

When the couple came up for air they could hear Angus and Eva talking.

“I don’t know what it is, Angus. It sounds like two cats fighting with each other. Of course, my hearing isn’t what it used to be. What does it sound like to you?”

“Like someone is in pain and is moaning and groaning. Must be a bad connection.”

Angie clapped her hands over her mouth so she wouldn’t laugh out loud. Josh snapped the phone shut and reached for her again.

I’ve got the fish on the line, Bess.

Chapter Seven

Eva and Angus rocked contentedly in the rockers in what would be the temporary day care center for Eagle's Department Store.

"Isn't it amazing, Angus, how this all came together in three weeks? Angie did a wonderful job with all the vibrant colors, the mobiles, and the colorful play tables and chairs. She got everything secondhand and just spruced it up. Speaking of my daughter, have you seen her?"

"You mean that harried, overworked young lady who is burning the candle at both ends? That daughter?"

"Yes, that one."

"She said she had to talk to Josh about an important matter. Something about Halloween items for this little center. I think I heard her say they were supposed to be delivered this morning and they didn't arrive. We lost three weeks of revenue, Eva. That's how long the store has been closed," Angus said, changing the subject. "It was supposed to be two days, then five days, then a week. Three weeks!"

“I know that, Angus. When the store opens next week, you’ll make it up.” Eva’s voice turned anxious when she said, “You didn’t say anything to Josh, did you?”

“No. I think he’s waiting for me to lambaste him. I know, I know. Not a word. He knows what he’s doing. At least that’s what he’s telling me a dozen times a day.”

“Then believe it,” Eva snapped. “Where is that daughter of mine? Stay here, Angus, I’m going to see if I can find her.”

Angus waved her off and continued to rock in the new chair he had come to love. He wondered what it would feel like to rock a baby. Eva said he was going to love the feeling. Eva seemed to be right about most things, he thought happily. In a short period of time he’d come to trust her judgment completely.

Eva walked out to the main section of the second floor. Her startled gaze took in two things instantaneously. Her daughter looked like she was frozen in time as she stared at Josh Eagle and a tall woman who was kissing him. She blinked, and then pinched her arm as she walked up to her daughter to place a motherly hand on Angie’s shoulder. She could see tears in the corners of her eyes. *This is not good, this is not good, this is not good. A mind’s eye picture in real time will never go away.*

“I’m sure it’s not what it looks like, Angie. She’s probably someone he used to know. You young people tend to kiss hello, good-bye, and everything in between. She probably just stopped in to see what’s going on. Everyone in town wants to see what’s going on. Come along, dear,” Eva babbled.

Eva thought it was magical how her daughter could talk without her lips moving. “Really, Mom! How do you think she got in here when all the doors are locked? She called Josh ‘darling’ and was reminding him that they had a date for the Harvest Ball on Saturday. She pinched his cheek and was so cutesy cute she made my hair stand on end. Josh...Josh just smiled. He smiled, Mom. You’re right, let’s get out of here.”

Josh took that moment to look in their direction. He looked so guilty even Eva had a hard time defending his actions.

Together, mother and daughter marched off, Josh calling their names. “Walk slower, Angie. I cannot run. And if you run, he’ll know you’re upset.”

“Damn it, Mom, I *am* upset. I’m here busting my butt, working round the clock for that jerk so he can prove to his father that he knows what he’s doing. We have a date on Saturday. Won’t it be interesting to see how he wiggles out of it. I was starting to trust that jerk! Did you hear me, Mom?”

“Sweetie, I think the whole store can hear you.”

“Guess what, Mom, I don’t care! I’m going home. Don’t worry, I’ll be back at some point. If that Halloween stuff I ordered arrives, just unpack it. I’ll see you later.”

“Angie, I don’t think going home...”

“Don’t say it, Mom. Don’t call me, either. I’m going to try and catch a few hours of sleep. I was here all night.”

Eva, her heart heavy, watched her daughter as she made her way down the dim hallway that led to the Eagle’s, loading dock. She looked behind her to see if Josh was anywhere in sight. He wasn’t.

Angus had only to look at Eva’s face to know something was wrong. “Do you want to tell me about it, or are you going to wear a hole in this new carpet?”

“Your son! He’s a cad! He’s out there on the floor kissing some long-legged woman who looks like she’s been varnished, then shellacked. It seems he has a faulty memory. He has...I guess I should say, *had*, a date with Angie for Saturday evening, and that shellacked person stopped by to confirm her date with *your son* for the Harvest Ball on Saturday. I’m going

home. You can have *your son* take you home. I don't know if I'll be back or not."

"Eva...wait!"

"Don't talk to me right now, Angus. Talk to that son of yours."

Angus heaved himself out of the rocker. He wondered how in a few short moments things could go from wonderful to terrible. He looked up to see the terrible end of things approaching at breakneck speed, a look of pure panic on his face. For some unexplained reason, the panicked expression on his son's face pleased Angus.

"Where's Angie, Dad? Did you see her? Is Eva here?"

"Is something wrong, son?" Angus asked.

"Hell yes, something is wrong. Angie caught—saw Vickie Summers kissing me. At least I think that's what she saw. Don't even ask me how Vickie got into the store. That woman can do anything she sets her mind to. I don't know how long Angie...What I mean is I don't know what she heard...She wanted...She thinks...I'm not doing it...She won't take no... Where the hell is Angie? I know her mother said something to you. You two are joined at the hip these days. What'd she say, Dad?"

A devil perched itself on Angus's shoulder. "You don't want to know, son. It will only upset you. You can't dangle two women on a string, Joshua. I think I told you that when you were sixteen, and girls were throwing themselves at you. You should have listened to me back then. Sit down, Joshua."

Josh recognized the iron command. In no way was it an invitation. He sat down in one of the rockers. "What? I think I'm a little old for a lesson on romance. Where did Angie go, Dad? She was pissed off, wasn't she?"

"No, son, she was hurt and humiliated. If the situation were reversed, how do you think you would feel?"

“Okay, okay, I get the point. Look, I didn’t invite Vickie here. Like I said, I don’t have a clue how she got into the store. I haven’t seen her in... months. Actually, the last time I spoke to her was back in April. I did not invite her to the Harvest Ball. I didn’t, Dad. That’s the truth. Before I knew what was happening, she planted a lip-lock on me and I had a hell of a time pushing her away. That’s when I saw Angie watching. If you know where Angie is, you better tell me, Dad, or I’m walking out of here and never coming back. I’m serious. She’s my girl! I want to get to know her better. Hell, I think I want to marry her. I can’t pull this off,” he said, waving his arms about, “without her. Will you help me out already for God’s sake?” Josh pleaded.

Lip-lock? It must be a new term for kissing. The devil on Angus’s shoulder started a lively dance. Marriage. Maybe he’d get to rock in a chair with his very own grandchild. He just knew he was going to make a wonderful grandfather. Then he remembered the look on Eva’s face and the way she’d said, *your son*, like he was the Devil incarnate.

Angus pulled his pipe out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. He chewed on the stem, his eyes on his son. “I’m too old to be offering advice. You’re on your own, son!”

“That’s it? I’m dying here, and you’re telling me I’m on my own? What’s wrong with this picture? Thanks for nothing, Dad.”

Angus removed the pipe clenched between his teeth, and stared at it. “In my day, which was a lifetime ago, a fella would crawl on his knees, flowers in hand and the truth on his lips. If that didn’t work, then the fella would throw a pebble at her bedroom window at night, and when she opened the window he’d sing her a song. Doesn’t matter if the fella sounds like a frog. It’s the thought that counts.”

Josh was listening intently. “Yeah, yeah, what else would that fella do?”

Angus shrugged. “I never got beyond the singing part.” He watched his son out of the corner of his eye and was pleased at what he was seeing.

“How far did you have to crawl?”

Angus wanted to laugh out loud, but he didn't. "Up the walkway, up the steps, across the porch, and into the foyer. She kicked me out. I got two holes in my trousers for my efforts."

Josh looked down at his jeans. They were sturdy. *What's a few holes? I can always buy another pair.* "Thanks, Dad! I knew I could count on you. Take care of things, okay? I don't know when I'll be back."

Angus was so pleased with himself he made his way out to the loading dock, where he fired up his pipe and smoked contentedly. There was a lot to be said for experience.

Eva opened the front door. How quiet the house was. The first thing she saw was the brown envelope on the foyer table. It had enough stamps on it to go around the world at least three times. Eva's heart fluttered when she looked down at the address on the envelope. In a few minutes the mailman would be here to deliver the mail.

"Angie!"

"I'm up here, Mom. Do me a favor," she called down. "I see the mailman coming up the street. Give him the envelope on the table."

"Sure, honey." Eva picked up the envelope and slid it into the drawer of the table. The only way Angie could see the mailman was if she was sitting on the window seat in her room. Crying, from the way she sounded. Carrying out her charade, Eva opened the door a few moments later to accept the mail. She commented on the weather for a minute, then closed the door.

She called upstairs. "Angie, come down and talk to me. You know I can't do the stairs comfortably. Please."

Eva was right, she saw as Angie descended the stairs and stood next to her—her daughter had been crying. "How about a nice cup of hot tea? Tea always makes things better. At least that's what my mother always said."

She wrapped her arm around her daughter's shoulder and led her into the kitchen.

"I don't want to talk about this, Mom."

As Eva bustled about the kitchen, she said, "Well, I for one can certainly understand that. Men are so callow. They don't have the same feelings women have. I guess that might be a good thing. I think I would be remiss as a mother if I didn't point out to you that there are two sides to everything. You should ask yourself how that young woman got into the store. If she came uninvited, then you can't blame Josh for that. Ask yourself if Josh acted like he was enjoying the meeting. He looked kind of stiff to me, like he didn't want her there, but that's just this old lady's opinion. I didn't see him return her kiss. He just stood there. That's the way I saw it. You only heard the young woman say they had a date for the Harvest Ball. You didn't hear Josh agree, now, did you?"

"Whose side are you on, Mom?" Angie sniffed.

"The right side. I happen to think Josh is a stand-up kind of guy. He didn't beat around the bush the day he eavesdropped on you. He fessed right up, didn't he? It's when things fester that the problem gets out of hand. In short, my dear, I think you saw something you never should have seen. Having said that, it probably meant nothing. That's why you shouldn't have seen it—because you reacted without giving Josh a chance to explain or defend his actions. Now, drink your tea."

Angie picked at the fringe on the green-checkered placemat. "So what you're saying is I should go back to the store and wait for Josh to come to me and...explain what I saw."

"See! Now you're getting it! Yes, in my opinion, that's what you should do. If you don't, you'll always wonder what he would have said. You did tell me you really liked Josh. You told me you dream about him. He might be *the one*, Angie."

"She kissed him. You saw her. Kissing is...Kissing is..."

“Quite wonderful, depending on who is doing the kissing. I did not see Josh returning the kiss in question. There was no passion there that I could see. No reciprocity. That’s about all I have to say, Angie. Think this all through, and don’t throw away something on a jealous whim that could otherwise turn out to be wonderful.”

The doorbell rang, cutting off whatever Angie’s response was going to be.

“I’ll get it, and then I’m going back to the store,” Eva said. “Finish your tea. By the way, I won’t be home for dinner this evening. Angus and I are going out for Japanese. He loves the knife show the chefs provide.”

Outside, after Josh Eagle had run up to the Bradfords’ front porch and rung the bell, he ran down the steps and out to the walkway, where he dropped to his knees. He sucked in his breath and proceeded to knee-walk his way to the Bradford front porch the moment the front door opened.

“Angie! Angie! Come quick! Hurry, dear!”

Thinking her mother fell or banged her knee, Angie barreled to the foyer. She almost screamed in relief when she saw that Eva was all right. She turned and looked where her mother was pointing. Her jaw dropped at what she was seeing. Josh waved. Angie, more or less, wiggled her index finger as she watched the man’s progress. She could tell it was slow going for the tall man on his knees.

Eva tactfully withdrew and left by the kitchen door. She peeked around the corner of the house. He was still crawling. She laughed all the way to her car.

Angie walked out to the porch, her arms across her chest to ward off the October chill. By the time Josh reached the steps, Angie took pity on him and motioned for him to get up. “Do you mind telling me what you’re doing?” There was a bit of frost in her tone that did not go unnoticed by Josh.

Josh struggled to his feet. “Angie, look, what you saw...It wasn’t...It isn’t what you think. Vickie is someone I used to know. And I didn’t know her that well. I haven’t seen or spoken to her since way back in April. She was looking for an escort to take her to the Harvest Ball. I have to assume I was a last resort because I never pretended to be anything other than a distant friend. She kisses everyone. I just found out that she bribed one of the workers with twenty bucks to let her into the store. If you hadn’t turned tail and run, you would have heard me tell her I was seeing someone and had other plans for Saturday evening. So, are you okay with this? Please tell me you’re okay with this so I don’t have to do that singing thing under your window tonight.” Josh wondered if he looked as exhausted as he felt. Would Angie take pity on him? Childishly, he crossed his fingers.

He was seeing someone and had other plans. That almost makes us a couple. It sounds like we are a couple. “I didn’t know you could sing. Do you want a cup of tea or a beer? I can make some coffee.”

“I’ll take a beer and I can’t sing. My father...”

“Offered you advice. Yeah, my mother stepped in and offered some, too. Okay, you’re off the hook.”

“Thank God! I’m going to have to guzzle that beer and get back to the store. Are you staying home?”

“No. I just got...miffed and came home. I did...I think I did something I might come to regret. I reacted and I...I signed that damn contract and it went off in the mail. The mailman came a little while ago, and Mom gave it to him.”

Josh looked at her as though she’d sprouted a second head. “You were that angry? Damn, now what are you going to do? Are you sorry you sent it off?”

“Yes. Yes, a hundred times yes. I was going to call tomorrow and explain that I wouldn’t be accepting the position. I never did tell my mother.”

“Get your coat. Maybe we can catch the mailman. Do you know in which direction he goes when he finishes up your street? Never mind, you go one way and I’ll go the other. It’s still early so he won’t be returning to the post office. If I find him first, he won’t give it to me, so I’ll call you on your cell. If you find him first, call me and I’ll meet up with you.”

Thirty minutes later the couple sat down on Angie’s front steps. “He said Mom never gave him any mail. That has to mean she knows and kept the envelope or hid it. Parents are so devious,” Angie grouched.

“Oh, I don’t know, sometimes they’re pretty smart. Your mother saved your butt by not mailing that contract. My father gave me some shitty advice, but here we are with a better understanding of what’s going on.” Josh reached for Angie’s hand and squeezed it.

“I think your father and my mother are going to end up together. They get along so well. And, they’re great company for one another. Tonight they’re going out for Japanese food. I’m okay with it, are you?”

“Yeah, you bet. My father is a different man these days. He hasn’t given me one moment of grief as the bills come in. I think it’s all due to your mother.” This last was said so shyly, Angie smiled.

Angie held up her hand palm out and high-fived Josh. “To our parents!”

“To our parents and to *us*.”

A red ring of heat popped up on Angie’s neck. Then it crept up to her cheeks. She didn’t know what else to do, so she smiled.

Chapter Eight

On a cold, blustery November day, everything Eagle swung into high gear. Announcers on the local airwaves invited shoppers to soar with the Eagle and avail themselves of the hospitality that was being offered by the Eagle family to all the families the store had served in the last hundred years.

Flyers and giveaways were handed out at all the mall entrances and parking lot to entice people into the store. There were flyers for the day care unit, flyers for the knitting and cooking classes. Flyers for sale after sale on just about every item in the store.

When the doors opened at ten o'clock, Josh, attired in a power suit and tie, stood next to his father to welcome and greet old and new customers alike.

Standing on the sidelines, Eva and Angie sighed with relief as shoppers flooded the main floor. They watched for a while, amazed and delighted that all their hard work was paying off with cash register activity. "I think we did okay, Mom. Now, if the merchandise keeps flowing in, and no one screws up, we just might make it through the holiday season and, if we're

lucky, pay the bills and maybe show a tiny profit. If we're lucky," she repeated.

"Honey, we agreed, no negative thoughts. I have to get back to the second floor. We have a good crew to help with the kids. I'll see you later."

Angie meandered over to the cosmetics counter. She was pleased to see the free Vera Wang samples going like hotcakes and being followed up by sales. She looked around and realized the salesgirl had been right. Too much variety and people can't decide, so they walk away. Her advice had been to go with three manufacturers, and it now looked like she was right.

Josh had taken the salesgirl's advice to heart and instructed the few new buyers he'd hired to do the same thing. It looked like the strategy was working throughout the store.

Angie was so pleased with the way things were going, she gave herself a mental pat on the back as she walked the floor, hoping to hear comments or criticisms she could relay to Josh. She moved over closer to the door to better observe Josh and his father. How tired they both looked. But it seemed to her like a happy kind of tiredness.

Angie crossed her fingers that things would continue through the end of the year. Her eyes were everywhere as she continued to meander around, then made her way back to the front door, where she leaned up to whisper in Josh's ear. "Your father needs to get off his feet. Tell him to go up to the day care so he can sit down in one of the rockers. I can take his place if you like."

"I like. How's it going?"

"I think it's going very well. The big fishbowl for the nine o'clock drawing is almost filled. When school lets out, the kids will be here in droves in the hopes of winning the iPod. The safari department appears to be doing a brisk business. Cruise wear is beyond brisk. It's happening, Josh. How much longer are you going to do this meet and greet?"

“Not a minute longer. I want to check the stockroom. What’s on your schedule?”

“I’m going to float around, check on Mom and your dad, that kind of thing. If Bess needs me in gift wrap, I’ll help out. It’s really working, Josh,” she whispered.

“Because of you,” Josh whispered in return. “When you’re done, why don’t you meet me in the stockroom?”

Angie wiggled her eyebrows. “That’s one of the nicest invitations I’ve ever gotten. I’ll be there. Wait for me.”

Angie thought her heart would leap right out of her chest when she heard him say, “Forever if I have to.”

Angie flew to the second floor. She skidded to a stop at the small desk to take in the scene in front of her. Angus and Eva rocking chubby babies, who were gurgling and cooing as Eva sang a lullaby. Angus looked so contented and peaceful, she felt a lump rise in her throat. Toddlers crawled through a maze of colored plastic tunnels, giggling and laughing. Infants in swings, their eyes following the mobiles overhead. Juice and cookies were being laid out on the play tables, after which it would be nap time. When she left the area her only thought was that the day care was going to net a profit. She couldn’t wait to share her thoughts with Josh.

To the right and around the corner of the day care unit, a senior citizen was teaching six young mothers how to knit, her students paying rapt attention. The cooking class was all done via video and a large corkboard. The lesson today was how to bake a turkey for Thanksgiving. All was well there, too.

Now she could head for the stockroom. There was a bounce to her step that showed her excitement.

Angie opened a door that said NO ADMITTANCE and, underneath, EMPLOYEES ONLY. From far back in the room she could hear voices. Josh and

a strange male voice. She didn't know why, but she tiptoed in the direction the voices were coming from. She peeked around a stack of sweater boxes. Bob McAllister, the general manager of Saks. What's he doing here in the stockroom? she wondered. As much as she wanted to spy and hear what was going on, she couldn't do it. "Josh!"

"Over here, Angie. Meet Bob McAllister."

Angie held out her hand. "Hello. We've met before. What's up?"

Josh laughed. "I just convinced Bob to take my job at Harrods. For obvious reasons, he doesn't want anyone to know until he can give his notice. That's why we had this meeting here in the stockroom."

Angie's head bobbed up and down. Josh wasn't leaving. He was staying. *Oh, thank you, God!*

"You guys did a hell of a job," Bob told her. "When Josh first told me his plan, I told him he could never pull it off. I'm happy to see I was wrong. If it means anything, you have the bulk of customers in the mall. Good prices, too. Great idea with only three choices per item. I've been trying to sell that idea to my people, but they won't buy into it. See you around, guys. Let's have a drink before I leave, Josh."

"You got it."

And then they were alone. Josh reached for Angie and she stepped into his arms. "I love you, Angie Bradford. We're a team. This store is in my blood the way it was in Dad's blood. When I saw him writing out all those checks I knew he was investing in me, Josh Eagle, his son, not Eagle's Department Store. He finally moved beyond the store. These last few weeks he's turned into a real father."

"You should sneak up to the day care to see him rocking the babies. He looks so peaceful, so happy. Mom, too. I suspect they'll both make wonderful grandparents. We did good, Josh."

“We had a lot of help along the way. Eagle’s is never going to be a Saks or a Neiman Marcus, and that’s okay. We never aspired to be anything other than what we are—a family store where families come to buy merchandise because they trust us. Those families who shop at Eagle’s grew up with us. We got off the track there for a little while, but we’re back in business now. But, I can’t do it without you, Angie. I’m not too proud to admit it, either. I want to marry you,” he blurted.

Whoa. For the first time in her life, Angie was speechless. Because she couldn’t make her tongue work, she simply nodded, her eyes glistening with happiness.

“If I kiss you, it’s all over. You know that, right?”

Angie found her tongue. “Right.”

“So...Want to help me open these boxes?”

“Sure.”

The young couple worked in happy sync as salesperson after salesperson bounded into the store room to ask for more merchandise.

And before they knew it, the first announcement came over the loudspeaker that the drawing was about to be held for the winner of the iPod. They both ran out to the main floor just as Angus reached into the fishbowl to draw the winning number. “Annette Profit!” he said, holding up the winning entry. Annette Profit of Chez J’s La Perfect Salon stepped up smartly and accepted the iPod. Angus hugged her and thanked her for shopping at Eagle’s.

Five minutes later, when the last of the crowd disappeared, Josh locked the doors. The Eagles and the Bradfords walked back to the gift wrap department, where Angie handed out soft drinks.

“It was a hell of a day, son! I’m proud of you!” Angus beamed.

“No, Dad, you need to thank Angie and Eva and all those people who worked the floor. We aren’t home free yet, but if we can keep up the kind of momentum we had today, I think we might coast right into the New Year in the black. By the way, I’m not going to England and I asked Angie to marry me.”

“Wise man,” Angus chuckled.

“Good choice,” Eva said.

“It’s time for us to leave,” Angus said, getting to his feet. Eva followed him, leaving Josh and Angie alone. They looked at one another and then groaned because they knew they had three or four more hours of work before they could leave.

“I’m starved, Josh. Let’s go out for a pizza and a beer and come back. We can both use a break. I haven’t been outside all day. We can walk to the pizza parlor and clear the cobwebs.”

Outside in the brisk air, Josh reached for Angie’s hand. “Are we officially engaged or are we ‘keeping company,’ as Dad would say? I’m not really up on all the protocol on things like this. I never told anyone I loved her, and I sure never asked anyone to marry me before...Are you *ever* going to say something?”

“I’m thinking. I like being engaged. That pretty much makes it official. No one ever told me they loved me except my mom and dad. For sure no one ever asked me to marry him. I guess we’re starting off even. I was a little disappointed in our parents’ reaction.”

Josh laughed. “My father can be a sly old fox sometimes. He told me if I didn’t act quickly, you were going to move on. He sounded so convincing I figured he and Eva planned it all out, and I had better pay attention. I was never the first guy out of the gate.”

Angie stepped aside as Josh opened the door of the pizza parlor. “At least you got out of the gate; I never did. Let’s get the works on the pizza. I

want one of those apple dumplings, too.”

“Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

Angie could hardly wait to call Bess to tell her what she’d pulled in on her line. She laughed to herself as she imagined what Bess would say. “*You pulled in the Big Kahuna! Way to go, Angie.*”

Chapter Nine

Two days before Christmas, Angie woke at four thirty AM, more tired than when she'd gone to bed. *Just let me get through today. And tomorrow, she pleaded. Don't let me fall asleep standing up.* If she could just sleep five more minutes. Just five. She'd settle for three, but she knew she had to get up even though it was still dark outside. It had been Josh's decision to open the store at seven and close at midnight. Then there were two hours of getting things ready for the next day, the trip home, and two hours' sleep. Still, she shouldn't complain, it was all working out perfectly.

Today was special, though. Bob McAllister had stopped by the gift wrap department late last night to whisper in her ear. It was her job to get to the store at six, open the doors and lead Josh to the food court, where all the general managers in the mall were holding their traditional private Christmas breakfast.

In the bathroom, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, Angie looked out the window as she waited for the shower to start steaming. As she raised the window she screamed, and then screamed again. "Snow!" She stuck her neck out the window to see if she could see what kind of accumulation

there was down below. Her heart fluttered. Snow was every merchant's nightmare. Especially during the last week of Christmas shopping.

It was the shortest shower in history. In less than ten minutes, Angie was showered, dressed, and tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for the coffee to run through the filter. "Snow!" The minute there was enough coffee in the pot, Angie poured, and then turned it off. She was out of the house a minute later and in her car. While it warmed up, she climbed back out to clear the snow off her windshield and back window. The little Honda was a marvel in snow and rain, so she had no worries about getting to the mall. She might even have a bit of an edge, traffic-wise, since it was just five o'clock. Another hour, and it would be a different story. As she made her way to Route 1, she listened to the local weather on the radio. Snow at Christmas was the kiss of death to every retailer. She wondered if Josh was up and had seen the snow. She wondered if she should call him, but she hated using a cell phone while she was driving. He would see it soon enough.

Twenty minutes later, when Angie blew into the mall on a strong gust of wind and swirling snow, Josh was waiting for her. The first words out of his mouth were, "This is going to kill us. The weatherman is saying six to eight inches. They're closing the schools. We need these last two shopping days like we need air to breathe. Damn! No one is here yet, so I made some coffee."

Josh reached for her hand. "I need to tell you again how grateful I am. I could never in a million years have pulled this off without your help."

"We'll find a way to make this work, Josh. It's the season of miracles. Come on, let's go get that coffee. Maybe we'll be able to think more clearly with some serious caffeine under our belts."

"There was no snow in the forecast. How'd this happen?" Josh demanded.

“It just happened, and we have to deal with it. Did you go home last night?”

“I went to the Best Western, got an hour’s sleep, and took a shower. I snatched a clean shirt off one of the sale tables, and here I am. I don’t know when I’ve ever been this tired.” Josh reached for Angie’s hand and squeezed it. “I wonder if the managers’ breakfast is still on.”

“Trust me, it’s still on. It’s a tradition. We’re low on merchandise, Josh.”

“I know. Your cottage people promised a delivery for early this morning. They were going to truck it in overnight. Then we have to unpack, log it all in. If it even gets here. I’m thinking I might have to blow off that breakfast.”

Angie reared up and spilled her coffee in the process. “Absolutely not! That breakfast is part of the way things are done around here. We’re going to follow the rules and hope for the best. C’mon, let’s go check the loading dock. For all we know, we could have merchandise piled to the rafters just waiting for us to unpack.”

There was no erasing the doom and gloom Josh felt. “My father is going to pitch a fit. Somehow he’s going to find a way to blame me for this snow. He knows how important these two days are. I know it. I feel it in my gut.”

There was nothing for Angie to say, so she remained quiet. Somehow, though, she didn’t think the elder Eagle would blame his only son for a snowstorm. At least she hoped not. And if he did, she knew she would have a few choice words for such an action.

Three miles away Angus Eagle was pacing back and forth in his old-fashioned kitchen, where Eva was calming mixing pancake batter.

“Calm down, Angus, you can’t control the weather. Something else is bothering you. Don’t deny it, Angus. You’re pulling on your ear, and you

only do that when something is bothering you. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes, I guess I do want to talk about it. I’m almost broke, Eva. If I had stayed on top of things these past years I wouldn’t be in this mess. It’s all my fault for being so pigheaded. I didn’t want Josh to start the year off in debt. So I’ve paid for everything as the bills came in. My personal funds are just about depleted. I wanted...It was...I can’t ask you to marry me when I have nothing to offer. I thought...If I sell this old house and you sell yours, we could buy a smaller house or a condo. I think we could manage nicely and, if we’re careful, we can live out our lives without...without depending on the kids. It was my intention to give the store to the kids if they got married.

“Now, with this snow, we’re going to lose more revenue. I’ll have to tap into the remains of my portfolio. I’m not complaining, Eva, I just want you to know where I stand. Can you see yourself roughing it with this old man?”

“Oh, Angus, is that why you’ve been so cranky these past few weeks? I’m all right with everything. How nice and yet how silly of you to be worried about me. It’s the Christmas season, so let’s get ready for a miracle, and if that was a proposal, I accept. Now, sit down before you wear out what’s left of this horrible linoleum. How many pancakes?”

“Four!” Angus said smartly. “I have an idea.”

“Let’s hear your idea, Big Popper,” Eva said as she slid a stack of pancakes on a plate.

Angus burst out laughing. “Promise me you will never call me that in front of the kids. I don’t think they’d...uh...understand.”

Eva’s eyes popped wide when Angus leaned across the table to share his idea. “Oh, Angus, can you make that happen? That will surely be the miracle we need.” She pointed to the seven-inch television on the counter and said, “Now they’re saying twelve inches of snow. Never mind those pancakes, Angus, I’ll eat yours. Get on the phone and work some magic.”

The traditional Managers' Holiday Breakfast was already in progress when Josh and Angie made their way to the food court. Croissants, coffee, and juice were being passed around as Bob McAllister, the president of the association, started to speak.

"We're going to make this short and sweet because we all have things to do to combat the weather none of us expected. As you all know, I'll be leaving the first of the year. I want to take a minute to thank all of you for your support over the years and to wish you all the best in the coming year. I'm turning the reins over to Josh Eagle, who I know will do the same fine job I've done in the past...That was a joke, people.

"Moving right along here, all of us sitting here today want to congratulate Josh Eagle and Eagle's Department Store. We've been rooting for you every step of the way. You had us all chewing our nails wondering if you could turn the store around, and you did. Each and every one of us is proud of you and wish you and Eagle's every success. Did I also say we're all slightly jealous? We are. Utilizing the cottage industry was a stroke of genius and I for one applaud you."

Josh flushed at the round of applause.

"Having said that, Abrams' Trophies in the west wing made this up for you," Bob said, holding up a small bronze plaque. "It says, 'TO EAGLE'S DEPARTMENT STORE: THE MOST INNOVATIVE STORE OF 2007.' There's a card to go with it that every store owner signed. Congratulations, Josh!"

Josh stood, walked to the front of the gathering, and reached for the plaque. "I don't know what to say other than thank you. Maybe someday I'll be able to tell all of you what this means to me. Not right now, though."

He looked to the back of the room to see Angie waving her cell phone at him, an ear-to-ear grin splitting her features. She walked to the front of the room to hand the phone to Josh, who listened, his jaw dropping almost to his chest.

“People! People, wait a minute! That was my father. Maybe we aren’t dead in the water after all. My dad called down to Edison and Piscataway and asked all his friends who have horse farms if they’d get their wagons out and hitch them up and bring them our way to transport shoppers. Eva Bradford called all the radio stations to announce our wagon train shopping solution. It’s a plan, and it’s under way. We’re going to lose a few early-morning hours, but my suggestion is we all stay open around the clock. Good luck, everybody.”

Josh whirled around to hug Angie. “Now where in the hell do you think my old man came up with this idea? Oh, who cares! Let’s just hope it works.”

“Oh, it’s going to work. All people have to do is get to the central points and leave the rest up to us. Your dad saved the day, Josh.”

Josh’s eyes misted over. “Yeah, he did, didn’t he,” he said softly.

“Mr. Eagle! Mr. Eagle! Annette Profit here. I have the salon in the east wing.” She held out her hand and smiled. “I just want a minute to tell you my mother used to bring me to Eagle’s when I was little. It was always such a special treat. Especially when it was time to go back to school. Your dad always stood at the door and gave each one of us kids a free box of crayons and a tablet. On the Fourth of July he’d give us a gift certificate for a free ice-cream cone. At Easter it was a chocolate egg, and at Christmas it was a silver bell to ring so Santa would know where we lived. They were wonderful memories. Eagle’s was a tradition. I’m glad you were able to turn the store around. Good luck, Mr. Eagle.”

Josh was so choked up he couldn’t get his tongue to work. He reached out to hug the young woman and smiled. He finally managed to choke out the words, “I’ll bring that tradition back next year if you promise to bring your kids.”

“Count on it, Mr. Eagle.”

Angie linked her arm with Josh’s as they turned to go back to the store. “That was so nice. I vaguely remember Mom talking about it, but the store

was too expensive for us to shop. Mom did that discount thing. If it wasn't on sale, we didn't buy it. It's all about goodwill and family."

"These last few months have certainly been an eye-opener," Josh said. "I learned things about my father I never knew, I found the love of my life, and I now know I can run this store."

Angie laughed. "I think I'm going to go back to the food court and find out if one of the vendors will be willing to honor hot chocolate vouchers for our customers. And those big fat sugar cookies for the kids. If Bess isn't busy, ask her to make up some vouchers and run them off. See if you can find someone to go over to the south wing where that huge candy store is. Buy up all the candy canes and hand them out at the door to the kids."

"Super idea! Where *do* you come up with these ideas? I think I'm going to be marrying a genius."

"I'm thinking you're right." Angie laughed again and waved her hand as she headed back to the food court.

It was the noon hour when Josh flipped on the television in his office. As local television cameras caught the wagon train heading for the mall he watched the unfolding scene with his mouth hanging open. Even the anchor seemed to be beside himself, his words running together. Josh turned when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Dad! How'd you get here?"

"I came on the first wagon. Eva is down in gift wrap. What do you want me to do?"

The lump in Josh's throat was so big he thought he was going to choke to death. "What you do best, Dad. What you did for years and years. Stand by the door and hand out treats—we have candy canes and vouchers for hot chocolate and cookies at the food court. Bundle up, Dad."

"You remembered I used to do that?"

Josh felt shame river through him. “No, Dad. Some lady came up to me and told me how you used to do that. She told me it was an event for her when she was a kid. I’m going to do that again. Want a job?”

Angus swung his scarf around his neck. “Depends on how much the job pays,” he said craftily.

“I was hoping you’d do it for free.”

“Sounds about right to me. You got yourself a new employee, son. See you later,” Angus said, picking up the stack of vouchers. “Where are the candy canes?”

“In a big barrel by the front door. The candy people just delivered them.”

Josh leaned against the door when it closed behind his father. His eyes were so wet he knew in a second that tears were going to roll down his cheeks. *It’s not a bad thing*, he told himself. He knuckled his eyes before he opened the door, knowing in his heart that he was blessed. Maybe all this that was happening was the miracle everyone talked about during the Christmas season.

By four o’clock the mall was so busy that people were bumping into each other. Camera crews, photographers, and reporters from all the local news channels contributed to the gala that seemed to be going on. Everyone was being interviewed. Only smiles and camaraderie could be seen.

The food vendors worked at breakneck speed to prepare food to be given to the drivers of the wagon trains. The coffee shop was almost out of coffee they were brewing by the gallon. And, one reporter put it, everything was free.

The primary channels ran with the story on the six o’clock news, referring to the event—the wagon train, the freebies the mall was giving out, along with the camaraderie of the shoppers—as Marketing 101 at it’s best. By the time the eleven o’clock news came on, they were calling the

wagon train a phenomenon. Within seconds the story flashed around the world via the Internet.

It was midnight when Josh walked to the front door to relieve his father. When he saw Angus being interviewed by CBS News he stepped back to listen. He knew he was eavesdropping, but he didn't care. The interview would play out in real time instantaneously.

“Now, you listen to me, young fella. What you're seeing out there is not about money or the bottom line. This is about people coming together to help each other. Those farmers and their wagons aren't getting a penny for all their hard work. They've been out there bringing shoppers back and forth since early this morning. It's Christmas, son, a time when people help each other. Every merchant in this mall is my friend and my competitor. I want to help them as much as I want to help myself. But more important, we don't want to disappoint anyone and we want everyone to have a wonderful Christmas, especially the children.

“Mother Nature served us a hard blow today, but we all pitched in and did whatever we could to save the holiday. There aren't any shining stars here today. Everything is a group effort as you can see. You want a candy cane or a voucher for hot chocolate, young fella? It's time for my break now, so I'll be seeing you tomorrow. I don't want to be interviewed anymore.”

And that was the end of that.

Josh grinned. “Guess you set them straight, huh?”

“Son, I didn't say anything but the truth. Now, if you don't mind, I'm heading upstairs to that rocking chair that has my name on it.”

“Dad...I...I need...”

“No, you don't need to say anything. We need to talk more, son. Here!” Angus said, shoving a candy cane into his son's hand.

Eva wrapped an afghan around Angus's shoulders as he lowered himself gently into the padded rocking chair. A cup of hot chocolate found its way to his hand. "It's been a heck of a day, Big Popper. I just saw your interview on TV. You were wonderful." When he didn't answer Eva realized Angus was already sound asleep, so she removed the cup of hot chocolate and drank it herself. As she rocked silently, she realized she had never felt more peaceful, more happy than she was feeling at that precise moment. She reached over to pat the Big Popper's shoulder.

Life was wonderful.

Curled together with Josh in sleep in the gift wrap department, Angie stirred and bolted upright. "Josh, wake up! What about the horses?"

"What? What about the horses? What time is it?"

"They've been out there all day and night. That's cruel. It's six o'clock."

"No, no, no!" Josh said, sitting up. "Dad got the armory to donate the space. They've been rotating the horses. It's warm in there. This is no Mickey Mouse operation, you know. My old man covered all the bases. Relax. Damn, my mouth feels like Dad's pipe smells. Turn on the radio, Angie. I want to know how much snow is out there." He knew he was babbling but couldn't seem to stop.

"Eighteen inches," Angie said as she filled the coffeepot. "And it's still snowing."

"I'm going out to the main floor to check on things, and I want to see how my father's doing. I won't be long. Do you want me to get you anything from the food court?"

"A sticky bun would be nice, and a toothbrush."

Josh laughed as he unfolded his tired bones. Satisfied that his father and Eva were sound asleep in the rockers, he made his way to his office, where

he went online to check out the headline news. He was astounded to see that the mall had made the front page of just about every newspaper in the country.

The tiredness that seemed to have invaded Josh's body suddenly washed away. His step was light, his mood upbeat as he made his way out to the mall. He picked up two toothbrushes, some toothpaste, four oven-hot sticky buns and four cups of coffee.

Christmas Eve.

Josh realized he no longer cared if the bottom line at closing was red or black. All that mattered were his neighbors, his business associates, all the volunteers, and, of course his family. He thanked God for all the people who had come to his aid.

Singing "Jingle Bells" at the top of his lungs, Josh made his way to the second floor, where he handed out sticky buns and coffee to his father and Eva. He didn't miss a beat as he turned around and headed back downstairs to see the love of his life.

No doubt about it, Angie was the wind beneath his wings.

His mouth full of toothpaste in the small lavatory off the gift wrap department, Josh bellowed, "Angie, the cottage people came through. We have to unpack the merchandise. I guarantee we're going to be sold out before six tonight. We've been sending customers to other stores. All in the spirit of Christmas."

"I've been wrapping gifts for free. I hope you don't mind."

"Not one little bit," Josh said, biting into the still-warm sticky bun. "We better get our tails in gear, there are people waiting in line for their packages to be gift wrapped. It's just all so glorious. By the way, we made the front page of every newspaper in the country. We're even on the pop-up when you turn on the computer."

"That's great! Did they plow the parking lot?"

“They tried but gave up. It’s still snowing, too. I have this suspicion we are going to be celebrating Christmas right here in the store.”

Josh’s suspicions turned out to be on the money.

The crowds at the mall started to thin out around four o’clock. By five there were just a few stragglers waiting to be picked up by one of the wagons.

At five thirty the loud speaker in the mall exploded into sound. “Promptly at six thirty, cocktails, compliments of Stephens’ Liquors, will be served in the food court, followed by dinner, compliments of the vendors in the food court. One and all are invited to go caroling up and down the halls of the mall at eight o’clock. A silent midnight service will be held promptly at midnight. Sorry, folks,” the tinny baritone said, “there will be no gift exchange because there’s nothing left in the stores to exchange. Merry Christmas to one and all.”

Holding hands, Josh and Angie walked to the front door of Eagle’s, where Angus was operating the mechanism that would secure the store for the night. Josh thought he had never seen his father so happy.

“No more candy canes. Merry Christmas, son.”

The pesky lump in his throat Josh thought was becoming permanent found its way to block his vocal cords once again. He wrapped his arms around his father and whispered. “Thanks for being my father. Merry Christmas, Dad.”

Standing in front of the huge Christmas tree that dominated the middle of the floor was Eva, who held her arms out to her little family. “Merry Christmas!”

Together, the Eagles and Bradfords walked out to the food court to a chorus of “Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!”

ZEBRA BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
850 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Copyright © 2020 by Kensington Publishing Corp.

Comfort and Joy copyright © 2020 by Fern Michaels

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

Zebra and the Z logo Reg. U.S. Pat. & TM Off.

ISBN: 978-1-4201-5291-3