

A MATTER OF TRUST

SUSAN MAY
WARREN


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Susan May Warren, *A Matter of Trust*
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Soli Deo Gloria



1

GAGE WATSON BLAMED THE TROUBLE on the bright, sunny day. A day when the sun arched high against a cloudless blue sky, and light gilded the snow-frosted, razorback mountain peaks with showers of gold.

Days like this lied to people, told them they could fly.

The air wasn't so cold as to frighten the hordes of skiers into their condominiums or the après-ski bars, nor so warm as to turn the mountain into a river of slow-moving slush. Instead, a perfect day, rich with the fragrance of white pine and cedar, the powder dusting up behind him as he shredded the fields of untarnished snow, as his board carved through the white, soundless and free.

Dangerous. Because this kind of weather seeped into the bones of the extreme skiers who dared the back bowls and mogulled faces of Blackbear Mountain and turned them . . . well, as his father would describe it, reckless.

Or, more precisely, into idiots out to get themselves and others killed.

Like the kid dressed in an inflatable T. rex costume that Gage had chased down the mountain this morning.

Once upon a time, Gage had been that reckless T. rex. Maybe

not wearing that ridiculous outfit—not when he had sponsor gear to display—but chin-deep in the lifestyle of the epic snowboarder, grinning for the cameras, basking in the limelight and cheers that came with the sport of backcountry skiing called freeriding.

Now he'd turned traitor, donning the red coat of a ski patrol and chasing down the renegades who sneaked past the roped-off areas for the run of their lives.

He stood at the edge of the perimeter of Timber Bowl, binoculars pointed to the tree-rutted, cliff-cut powder, scanning the un-designated area, just to make sure that hotshots like T. rex and his buddy hadn't returned for a late-afternoon run.

The sun glistened off snowfall so deep it could bury a man, a condition unbearably tempting for a true powder hound. Gage could hear it calling to him, the vast, crystalline fields of white, feel his board cutting through the snowpack like it might be frosting.

Never mind the deadly, concealed ledges, drop-offs, and steel-edged boulders.

Or the threat of avalanche. No one thought about death chasing them down a hill as they attacked the powder, but with the five inches of fresh, heavy snow layering the snow pack, the cornice ached to break free and rush down the hill in a lethal wave.

And if tonight's forecast was correct, he and the avalanche control team would be blasting another layer of powder off this slope come morning.

Gage had risen early with the rest of the Blackbear ski patrol, ridden the gondola up, and bombed the crust, the snow falling behind him, scarring the bowl. Then he'd skied through the layers, cutting into the pack to loosen it.

Still, it posed enough of a danger that they'd closed the slope and put up an orange safety line cordoning off the area from the early morning skiers sliding off the Timber Bowl express lift.

And that's when T. rex showed up. Gage pegged the snow-

boarder at about nineteen or twenty. His buddy was attired with the appropriate GoPro, which made their intentions clear.

Gage had caught them just as they edged near the tape.

"Dude—the bowl is closed," Gage said, keeping it easy.

T. rex gave him a face, like, *C'mon, really*, and Gage saw himself, not so long ago. So he put a growl into his reply and threatened to confiscate their tickets.

Which apparently meant nothing, because not fifteen minutes later, as he'd scanned the mountain, he'd spied the duo some two hundred feet downslope, cutting through the pristine powder, catching air off a cliff, then disappearing into the treed perimeter below.

The dinosaur had slipped out of his radar, but Gage promised himself that he'd hunt the two hotshots down and kick them off his mountain if it was the last thing he did today.

"Ski patrol, we have a downed snowboarder just below the Timber lift, tower 37."

Gage lifted the radio attached to his jacket. "Ski patrol, Watson. I'm just below the lift, on Timber Bowl."

"Roger, Watson. The lift stopped, and apparently he jumped for the pole and missed. Possible fracture. We have another hanging from the chair."

Oh, for crying out loud. "I'm en route. Watson out."

Gage clipped on his radio, then unsnapped his splitboard and pulled out his skins.

Faster to climb his way to the top and ride his board down through the trees.

He put oomph into his climb and in a few moments spied the tower through a scrim of pine trees.

"Ski patrol, Watson. I'm on slope and heading down to the victim." Gage snapped his splitboard together and shoved the skins into his backpack.

Sheesh, he could have found the boys with his eyes closed, the way they were shouting. Keep it up and the Blackbear patrols wouldn't have to set off charges to bring down the mountain.

Gage snapped into his bindings, then pushed off, cutting through the soft, albeit dangerous, treed terrain. He ducked under a branch and emerged into the free, catching air. No fancy stuff, just necessity, and he landed easily.

Two more turns and he'd reached the first victim.

The kid had fallen nearly forty feet. His screams echoed through the valley of the Timber Bowl, bouncing off the edges and back to the terrified passengers of the stalled lift who were witnesses to the carnage as he lay broken below his chair.

His buddy, clearly possessed with the same tankful of smarts, had probably tried to stop him, lunging forward and slipping off the chair. The hero now dangled half on, half off the chair, his arms wrapped around the bar, his leg hooked on the seat, his boot wedged in to the side rail to secure him. Still, the kid was perilously close to joining his buddy below in a pile of broken bones.

Gage snapped out of his gear in seconds, lifted off his goggles, and dropped beside the kid who writhed in pain in the snow, his leg brutally twisted under him.

"Ski patrol. I'm here to help," Gage said. He didn't want to move the kid or splint his leg until he could get a neck collar on him. However, blood already saturated his gray ski pants, and the protruding bulk of bone from above his knee suggested a compound fracture.

"What's your name?" Gage pulled off the kid's mitten and reached for a pulse.

"Hunter Corbin." He wore a ski helmet, and blond hair trickled out the sides and back.

"How old are you?" Gage timed the beats. A little high and thready.

"Fifteen. It's my first time out West."

"Your parents around?" Gage kept his voice even, calm.

In the meantime, Hunter's friend dangled, screaming, forty feet overhead.

Gage wanted to feel sorry for Hunter, but whatever had possessed the kid to—

"They're at the bottom." He groaned, tears filling his eyes. "My cell phone. It fell—I wanted to get it before it got lost. It's a brand-new iPhone."

Gage took out his radio. "Ski patrol, this is Watson. I have a fifteen-year-old male with what looks like a compound femur fracture. Possible neck injury. I need a dual sled, a neck collar, leg splint, and a lift rescue team." He looked up. "And fast."

"Copy, Watson. We have a team on the express lift en route."

The express lift, on the other side of the mountain. Ten minutes, at least.

Gage glanced up at the dangling victim, assessing. "What's your friend's name, Hunter?"

"Adam. He was just trying to help me."

"Right." He got up, cupping his hands over his eyes. Overhead, spectators watched in silence, two or three to a chair, probably traumatized by the tragedy that had occurred on their vacation. A few held up their phones, and he wouldn't be surprised if the event made YouTube.

Hopefully no one would recognize him, or worse, tag him.

Just when he'd put the past to rest. Or tried to. "Adam, how you doing up there?"

A stupid question, but he hoped to keep the kid calm.

"I'm gonna fall!"

"Keep holding on, we're going to get you out of this."

Gage could see the lure of the stunt—the chair had stopped parallel to the tower, a mere three feet from the lift. And, with

the rungs affixed to the side, Hunter might have landed that leap if he hadn't been wearing snowboarder boots and bulky mittens.

Or, if he were a trained mountain climber.

Gage had a lift letdown system in his pack, a weighted ball attached on one end, a sling on the other, but he strongly doubted that Adam could either catch and throw the rope over the lift cable or get the sling around his body.

"Don't let go!" Gage yelled again and grabbed his pack, retrieving the assembly. Then he headed over to the tower. "I'm coming to you, Adam." He jumped and grabbed on to the lower rung, pulled himself up to the next rung, and got his feet on the lowest bar. He began to climb.

The kid was swinging his body in an attempt to slide back onto the chair seat. The chair began to sway, moving the other chairs around it. Screams lifted from the riders.

"Stop swinging, dude!" Gage yelled, seeing in his mind the entire rig detaching and crashing to the ground, crushing Adam's already injured friend.

In fact, they might have an entire mountain full of injuries.

Gage pulled himself up parallel to the kid. He could just barely reach out and touch him when he extended himself. His grasp wasn't enough to pull the kid in, but he could help secure him.

He threw the weighted ball over the ski lift cable. It fell to the ground.

"Listen up, Adam. I'm going to put this sling over your head, and very carefully you're going to work it down under your armpits, one arm at a time. Then I'm going to climb down and secure the line to the tower. The sling will keep you from falling."

"Aren't you going to lower me down?"

He had hooked the sling over the boy's head, a little nervous at the way the kid turned to him with big, terrified eyes. Adam was a stocky kid in gray snow pants and a yellow jacket, and Gage

had to give him kudos for hanging on as long as he had. He drew back fast, however. He couldn't get any closer or Adam might grab him, pull them both down.

"Wiggle it over yourself," Gage said.

The kid put one elbow up, through the opening in the sling.

"Good job, kid," Gage said as he scrambled back down the ladder and hiked over to the weighted line.

No sign of his patrol buddies on the ridge above.

Dragging the line back over to the tower, he glanced up and saw that Adam had worked the sling under both arms.

Gage threw the line over the bottom rung and slowly began to pull it taut. It tightened around Adam's chest.

"Don't let go! This is just to catch you if you fall." He secured the line to the tower.

"Let me down!"

"Help will be here soon. I can't lower you on my own."

Well, maybe he could, if he used the tower as both leverage and an anchor. But for now, Adam wouldn't fall, and Hunter was running out of time.

Gage knelt next to Hunter and checked his pulse. Gray, clammy skin, dull eyes. A pool of blood formed under his leg, saturating the snow.

The kid could lose his life to shock long before he bled out.

He lifted the radio. "Ski patrol, Watson. Where's my sled?"

"Just getting off the lift," came the answer.

Perfect. Gage pulled his pack over to himself and pulled out scissors and a tourniquet.

He took the scissors to the boy's pants, cutting away the bloody fabric to get to the source.

The jagged edge of his femur jutted out of his skin just above the knee.

Gage searched for a radial pulse from the posterior tibial artery

and found none. The broken bone had cut off blood supply to his foot.

First, he had to stop the bleeding and then get the kid down the mountain before Hunter lost his leg.

Gage threaded the tourniquet under his leg and worried when Hunter didn't move. In fact, the kid had stopped writhing altogether.

"Hey, Hunter, stay with me here. Tell me, is that your Lib Tech board? A Snow Ape C2 BTX? One of the best power freestyle sticks on the planet. It's a dream on the snow, right?"

Hunter opened his eyes, tried to find the voice.

Gage finished the tourniquet and leaned up, meeting Hunter's eyes. So young and rife with fear. "Don't worry, I'm going to get you down the mountain. And I know this awesome doctor that will fix you right up. You'll be doing a half-cab quadruple backflip by this time next year."

"A what?" Hunter whispered.

"Google it and then come back here and I'll teach you myself."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"Ski patrol, Remington at the ridge." Ty's voice came through the walkie. "I see you, Gage. Coming down."

Gage looked up and spotted the two ski patrollers, red jackets against the glare of light and brilliant white, carving a trail through the powder. One of them guided a two-person sled.

They slowed before they reached the accident site, leaving the powder drifting safely away, and snapped off their skis. Ty reached him first. "Hey there, kid," he said to Hunter, pulling off his gloves and kneeling next to Gage. He carried the splint as the other patroller brought over the sled.

One of their rookies, Skye Doyle—Gage recognized her as she brought the sled closer. Blonde, in her early twenties, she'd joined

the patrol as a volunteer. Gage didn't ask why Ty had let her lead the sled—probably practice. But she didn't have nearly enough experience to steady it going downhill. And she'd never be able to lower Adam on her own—she'd need Ty's strength.

"Let's load him up. Then we need to get Adam off that lift." Gage reached for the splint, a high-tech, emergency fracture response system. It moved to the shape of Hunter's fractured leg, and Gage strapped it into place to keep it immobilized as Ty affixed a neck collar on him. Skye brought over the backboard, and they eased it under Hunter, sliding him onto it and strapping him in.

Ty and Gage moved Hunter to the sled and zipped him inside the emergency blanket. Skye secured the boy onto the sled as Gage and Ty returned to the problem of Adam.

"How are we going to get him down?" Ty said.

"We could use the pole as leverage, with you wearing the descender. I could lower him down while you let out the slack."

"And what about Hunter? He's looking pretty pale." This from Skye, who'd joined their conversation. "I can take him down on the sled."

"No," Ty said, as if reading Gage's mind.

Skye had the good sense not to argue.

However, "Skye, you have climbing experience, right? Can you run the rappler?" Gage asked.

She nodded.

"Ty, you lower him down, Skye can brace against the pole and make sure the slack doesn't go out too fast. I'll take Hunter down to the bottom."

Ty glanced at the sled, up to Adam. "You sure you can handle the sled alone? Technically we're above the snow guns—it's too steep. You sure you won't get yourself—and this kid—hurt?"

Maybe it was the bright blue sky, the onlookers, the taste of

adrenaline, but in Ty's question, Gage heard the past rise. Heard the voice, quiet, pleading. Female. *"Please, Gage, don't do this. You're going to get somebody hurt."*

It jarred him.

Then, Hunter groaned, and Gage came back to himself.

"Yes," he said. He hiked over to his board, glancing up at Adam. "My friends are going to get you down. Don't worry, kid!"

He happened to look at the onlookers just then. Yes, cell phones were tracking his movements.

Once upon a time, he would have waved; even now he felt the old habit stir inside him.

Then, three chairs down he spotted the T. rex.

And behind him, the buddy with the GoPro.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Ty glanced at him, but Gage shook his head. His rant would have to wait.

Skye was climbing into the belay harness when Gage snapped his boots into his board. He stepped between the brake handles of the sled, and Ty helped him out with a push.

Don't lose control. Don't overcorrect.

Don't get anyone killed.

He glanced up again at the T. rex and shook his head. "Hang in there, Hunter. We'll be down in no time."



The colder it got up here on top of the mountain, stalled on the Timber Bowl chair, the more the T. rex next to her threatened to jump.

"I could make it. The only reason that punk missed was because he didn't have enough launch."

"Are you kidding me?" Ella Blair curled her fingers into a ball inside her mittens. She already couldn't feel her toes, and she'd

snugged her nose into her neck gaiter, a film of fog covering her goggles.

Three chairs ahead, at the tower, the two ski patrollers had anchored themselves around the pole and were using a kind of belay system to lower the skier. She still couldn't believe the bravery of the first responder—climbing up four stories on the pole to fix the kid into the sling. For a second there, she thought the terrified teenager might just leap into the patrol's arms.

She turned, looking down behind her, and spied him, attached to the bright red sled, sliding through the powder and down the bowl toward the base.

His thighs had to be on fire, shredding the hill at first one angle, then the next.

Now that was the kind of hero she wanted to be—someone who actually helped people with real problems.

Not tracking down her delinquent brother.

Now her fingers had gone numb, and save for the adrenaline of watching the ski patrol lower the idiot teenager hanging from the lift, she would be a frozen, hypothermic ball.

She wanted to get off this mountain, and fast. The bright, sunny day had deceived her into believing that heading west to hijack her brother's ski vacation was a brilliant stratagem for getting him turned around and headed back to Vermont, and more specifically, his sophomore year at Middlebury. She still didn't understand why her parents seemed okay with his ski-bum sabbatical.

But the longer they sat here, the longer she despaired of having a real conversation with Oliver. After all, clearly he wasn't taking anything she said seriously. Not dressed in that ridiculous costume.

More, he hardly seemed rattled that his sister had flown across the country, tracked him down, and boarded a ski lift with him nearly out of the blue.

Not so much out of the blue, because she'd been watching him,

trying to figure out how to pin him down for a come-to-Jesus chat since arriving at their parents' resort condo this morning. No, actually since she'd gotten the semi-drunk pocket call from him three nights ago. Slurred speech and muffled raucous laughter in the bar around him, something about Montana and skiing down Heaven's Peak.

She'd yelled into the phone at the top of her lungs before finally giving up.

And booking a flight.

"No, really, it's not that far," Ollie said, clearly still fixed on his ludicrous stunt. "I can reach it."

He reached out, swinging the chair, and she screamed and grabbed the bar. "Stop! You're going to push me off."

"Look, I can almost reach the pole." He strained toward the rungs on the tower, trying to hook one.

"Stop it, Ollie!"

But he turned around in the chair and shouted to the pair behind them. "Bradley! If I make it, be sure to get it on video!"

She didn't have to look to know that his stupid friend probably gave him a thumbs-up.

"You're not—stop it." She grabbed his jacket and pulled him back, her other hand in an iron grip on the bar.

He laughed. "Calm down. I was just kidding. I just like our little game." He gave her a wink.

"That wasn't funny. I'm having a flashback of when you were six and I was—"

"Ninety-three?" Oliver glanced at her, grinning. Only his face stuck out of the hole right under the inflatable costume's head. He'd shoved the legs into his snowboarder boots.

"Can you even move in that thing?"

"Sure. It's a little tight, but I'm going to get so many hits once we post this on YouTube. I'll be nearly as famous as you."

"Funny."

Under that ridiculous costume was a good kid. He couldn't help it that he'd experienced a completely different childhood than hers. Grown up with different parents, different expectations.

Wealth and security.

"I just have to know—why the T. rex outfit?"

"Are you kidding me? T. rex videos are killing it. When we put this up—"

"Stop. I can't hear this. Let me get this straight. You dropped out of your very prestigious private college so you could become a ski bum in a Tyrannosaurus rex costume? This is why you broke your parents' hearts?"

"I didn't break their hearts." His smile dimmed. "And they're your parents too."

She'd forgotten how the wind off Blackbear could slither inside her jacket, find her bones, rattle them. "Legally. But you know they love you the best—and for good reason. Even though we were both adopted, I was just their ward. You are their *son*. You're everything to them, and now you're not only going to get hurt but you'll look ridiculous doing it."

Oliver's mouth tightened. "I won't get hurt."

"Maybe not, but what's next, Ollie? BASE jumping?"

"I dunno. Maybe I'll go to Outlaw."

She stilled. Took a breath, dug deep, and this time hung on to her inner attorney, refusing to let Ollie undo her. No, she grabbed for the woman who'd been a state senator for two years, one of the youngest in the nation. She'd stood her ground in front of tougher opponents than her kid brother.

Still, just the name—Outlaw Mountain—and the memory behind it left wounds.

"If you did, I'd know you were really stupid," she said crisply

and looked away, a little unnerved at the gloss filming her eyes. She blinked before they iced over.

The patrol had lowered the kid to the snow and pulled the rope free of the lift. He seemed unhurt but shaken.

Oliver fell silent as they watched. Then, "I'm sorry."

She nodded.

"You didn't have to come all the way out here. I know what I'm doing."

"Which is?"

"I'm not cut out for school, okay? I failed nearly every class last semester—"

"Because you were partying! Don't tell me you weren't smoking pot, Ollie. You couldn't hide it from me in high school, and you can't hide it now—"

"I wasn't high, Ella. I was . . . not smart. I studied. I went to class. I want to be—I wanted Mom and Dad to be as proud of me as they are of you."

She could hardly take him seriously in that inane costume. "Mansfield and Marj love you—"

"But they're *proud* of you." He looked down at his hands. "I'm never going to be a lawyer or . . ." He looked over at her. "A state senator."

"You might—"

"I don't want to be that. I'm sorry, sis, but your idea of fun is a bowl of popcorn and a political debate. Sorry, I know I should care, but I don't. I like powder boarding. I just need some breathing room, okay? I'll figure it out. You'll see. I'll do something amazing and it'll blow you all away. So you can pack up and go back to Vermont and save somebody else."

And, with a jolt, the lift started.

"Too bad," Ollie murmured. "I could've made that jump."

She closed her eyes.

They rode in silence, and she averted her eyes as they passed the bloody smudge in the snow. The ski patrollers skied on either side of the rescued snowboarder; the kid clearly looked rattled as he rode down the bowl. She couldn't see the other patroller anymore. Maybe he'd reached the bottom.

Or fallen.

She didn't want to think about that—the danger that could occur on a mountain.

Outlaw. The name pressed in, leaving bruises. Maybe she didn't know how to have fun. Not anymore.

But really, who could blame her? She'd blown her chance at happily ever after—even self-respect—after the tragedy at Outlaw Mountain.

Or more specifically, after Gage Watson.

The top of the lift came into view.

"Life is more than fun, Ollie. And we're not done with this conversation."

The T. rex lifted his board to disembark. "Roar," he said.

"Ollie—"

"Meet you at the bottom, sis." He slid off the chair and away from her, then bent to clip his boot back into his board. She too slid off, remounted her board, and parked herself away from the lift, waiting for Brette and Bradley on the chair behind them.

Bradley rode his board over and high-fived his dinosaur friend. "Let's shred this gnar!" He adjusted his GoPro and gave his subject a thumbs-up.

Ollie, in costume, headed to the edge of the bowl. He gave her one last look, wiggled his backside, and slipped off the lip and down the hill.

Oh, for Pete's sake. But Ella couldn't help a smile. Her brother, despite everything, always knew how to make her laugh.

He disappeared from view, and her attention turned to the

brehtaking scope of Glacier National Park, the jagged horizon glistening white and glorious. Below her, miles away, she could just make out Whitefish Lake, the tiny town of Whitefish, and the run of high-end condos, including the one that belonged to her family, just off the slope.

She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the smell of pine and crisp air.

Maybe it was time she *did* have some fun. After all, she'd managed to sneak away from the maddening swarm of the press after the passing of Proposal 241, a bill she'd worn out her voice trying to defeat.

A clear indication that maybe she shouldn't run again, if 80 percent of Vermont supported the use of marijuana for recreational purposes.

Crazy.

Brette slid over, clipped her boot in, then stood up and adjusted her goggles. She glanced over at the view. "I don't know, Ella. I've never ridden powder this deep. And this is pretty steep."

Ella glanced at her. "Thanks for coming along. I know I roped you into this."

"No, I'm glad to be here. I haven't been skiing in years—since we came out that time with Sofia." Brette's wheat-white hair hung out of her helmet in two thick braids. Athletic and petite, Brette was a deceiving package of curves and brains, her journalist mind always on the hunt for a good story. Ella was glad her former housemate was, and always had been, on her side. "I'm just not sure I'm not going to end up taking my own toboggan ride down the hill. Although, if I could get that cute ski patrol to save me . . ."

Brette grinned at Ella and pulled out her phone. "I got a few close-ups." She thumbed open her app and began to scroll through the pictures. "Here's a good one. Handsome, huh?"

She handed the phone over to Ella. The glare on the phone

made it hard to see, so she took off her glasses, cupped her hand over the phone, and turned away from the sun.

Everything inside her froze. Wait—*no*. She angled for a better view. He wore his helmet, his face intense and straining as he reached out to fit the sling over the head of the dangling snowboarder. But that set of his jaw under a layer of brown whiskers, the curly brown hair peeking out of his black ski helmet . . .

It simply couldn't be. "Yeah, he's handsome," she managed, her voice barely hitching.

"I think I'm going to fall, just so he can rescue me." Brette winked at her, tucking the phone back in her jacket.

Ella offered a weak smile.

She tried to remember—had the voice sounded familiar as he called up to the boy?

Maybe.

Yes. She possessed a nearly photographic memory when it came to the regretful moments of her past, and a news article flashed in her mind: *Gage Watson, from Mercy Falls, Montana*.

He'd returned home to hide.

Or survive.

Maybe restart his life.

Whatever. It didn't matter. Really, not at all.

Except . . . She'd told herself for years that she *didn't* have to see him, track him down, talk to him.

Let her heart remember.

But she'd also told herself that someday she'd face Gage Watson and explain everything.

Maybe it wasn't him.

She wasn't going to let Brette crash and find out. "Listen, Brette, just keep your arms open and wide, like you're reading a newspaper."

"I'm sorry, what is that? A news—*what?*"

"I know, old-school term. Try this—pretend you saw, oh, I don't know, Kit Harrington at the top of the hill, riding your direction, and only you could save him."

"Kit is your type. Maybe . . . Matthew Goode?"

"Okay, *Downton Abbey*. I don't know why you always go for the fancy boys, but whatever works."

"Not anymore—I learned my lesson. No more rich party boys for me. But I do love a good English accent."

Ella grinned. "Okay, well, the key to riding powder is to hold your arms out and lean back. But not too far or you'll go over. But you want to lift your tip."

Brette held her arms out, settling her hips. "Like this?"

"You look like a duck, but yeah."

"Better than a T. rex."

Ella shook her head. "Keep an even rhythm, don't cut too hard—make a nice smooth line. And don't rush."

"Oh, fear not." Brette headed over to the edge of the bowl. "And you owe me."

Ella laughed. "I'll ski behind you."

But Brette didn't move, just kept staring at the thick, powdery snow, now bumbled and tossed by a day of skiing and shredding. But still soft, still whisper-light in the crisp air.

"How did you learn to do this? I mean, I know the M&M's have a condo here, but—"

"I spent some time in BC, at Fernie. And Whistler. And . . ." She swallowed, forced out the word. "Outlaw. Best powder on the planet."

There, she said it without flinching. And someday, she'd manage it without feeling claws inside, hollowing her out, leaving a burn where her heart should be.

"Hey, isn't that where that guy died? Your family knew him."

Brette, proving she'd done her journalistic homework.

Ella nodded. "Dylan McMahon. You ready?"

"Were you there that day?"

"I'm really cold, Brette. Sitting on that chair didn't help."

Brette's mouth closed in a tight line, and Ella hated that she'd hurt her. But she couldn't—really couldn't—talk about it.

At least not the entire story.

Not without losing her law license.

But she couldn't stand Brette's face, so, "Yeah, I was there. I saw Dylan die." And Gage Watson's brilliant future end in a devastating crash.

Brette nodded and thankfully turned back to the bowl.

"No one is going to die today," she said, and Ella could have hugged her for it.

"Let's do this!" Brette yelled. She pushed off, leaning back, arms wide as she flew down the slope.

No one is going to die today.

Ella pushed off behind her, praying her words were true.