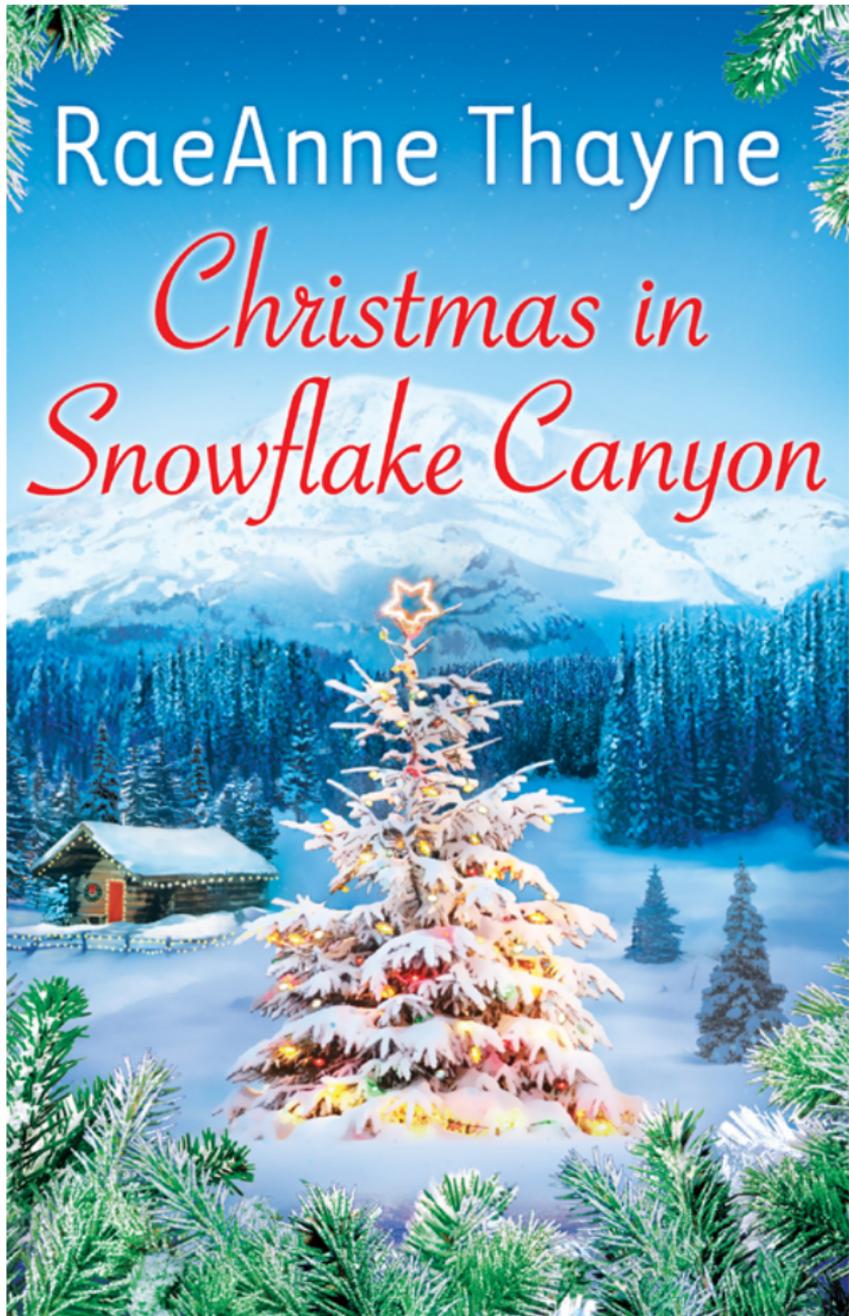


RaeAnne Thayne

*Christmas in
Snowflake Canyon*



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Аннотация

Holiday gifts don't always come in expected packages... especially in the town of Hope's Crossing! No one has ever felt sorry for Genevieve Beaumont. After all, she has everything money can buy. That is, until she discovers her fiancé has been two-timing her and she's left with two choices: marry the philanderer to please her controlling father or be disinherited and find a means to support herself. Genevieve's salvation appears in the most unlikely of prospects: Dylan Caine, a sexy, wounded war vet whose life is as messy as hers. Dylan's struggling to adjust after his time in Afghanistan and the last thing he needs is a spoiled socialite learning about the real world for the first time. True, she may have unexpected depths and beauty to match. But he knows he could never be the man she needs... and she knows he could never be the man she thinks she wants. So why are they each hoping that a Christmas miracle will prove them both wrong? Reading these stories of small-town life engages the reader's heart and emotions, inspiring hope and the belief that miracles are possible' —No.1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

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Praise for RaeAnne Thayne's

Hope's Crossing series

"A heartfelt tale of sorrow, redemption and new beginnings that will touch readers."

—RT Book Reviews on Sweet Laurel Falls

"Plenty of tenderness and Colorado sunshine flavor this pleasant escape."

—Publishers Weekly on Woodrose Mountain

"Thayne, once again, delivers a heartfelt story of a caring community and a caring romance between adults who have

triumphed over tragedies.”

—Booklist on Woodrose Mountain

“Readers will love this novel for the cast of characters and its endearing plotline... a thoroughly enjoyable read.”

—RT Book Reviews on Woodrose Mountain

“Thayne’s series starter introduces the Colorado town of Hope’s Crossing in what can be described as a cozy romance... [a] gentle, easy read.”

—Publishers Weekly on Blackberry Summer

“Thayne’s depiction of a small Colorado mountain town is subtle but evocative. Readers who love romance but not explicit sexual details will delight in this heartfelt tale of healing and hope.”

—Booklist on Blackberry Summer

Christmas in Snowflake Canyon

RaeAnne Thayne



Dear Reader,

I don't think any of you who regularly reads my books will be surprised to learn I love the holidays. I've written many stories centered around this time of year, when family and friends draw closer to share traditions, memories, music, food.

Despite all the glittery magic and shining joy, I'm sure I don't have to tell you the holidays can be chaotic and stressful, too—a time of unreasonable expectations and unrealized potential. Nothing will ever be as ideal as we imagine and for some of us (me!) that can be as hard to swallow as last year's peppermints.

But how boring is perfection, really? It is our flaws and our failings—and the dignity and grace with which we strive to overcome them—that make each of us beautifully human. This is the lesson both Dylan Caine and Genevieve Beaumont, the hero and heroine of Christmas in Snowflake Canyon, must learn.

This year I'm resolved to give myself a break. My tree can be a little lopsided, each ribbon doesn't have to be precisely measured and curled, nobody but me will know if I use store-bought cookie dough in my gifts to neighbors. Instead, I intend to take every occasion to pause, to breathe, to remind myself to savor the tiny joys of each day. It's my wish that you might do the same.

All my very best,

RaeAnne

A deep and loving thank-you to my parents,
Elden and RaNae Robinson, for making each of
my childhood holidays wonderful. Also, special thanks

to a dear octogenarian aunt Betty Grace Hall—
who constantly urges me to write faster so she can
live long enough to see what happens to all my people.

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CHAPTER ONE

IF HE HAD to listen to “The Little Drummer Boy” one more

time, he was going to ba-rum-bum-bum-bum somebody right in the gut.

Dylan Caine huddled over a whiskey at the crowded bar of The Speckled Lizard, about two seconds and one more damn Christmas carol away from yanking the jukebox plug out of the wall. Some idiot had just played three versions of the same song. If another one flipped, he was going to knock a few heads and then take off.

His brother was now—he checked his watch—ten minutes late. The way Dylan figured, it would serve Jamie right if he bailed. He hadn't wanted to meet at the bar in the first place, and he certainly wasn't in any mood to sit here by himself listening to a bad version of a song he'd never liked much in the first place.

On this, the evening of Black Friday, the Liz was hopping. A popular local band was supposed to be playing, but from the buzz he'd heard around the bar, apparently the bass player and the lead singer—married to each other—had shared a bad Thanksgiving tofurkey the day before and were too busy yakking it up to entertain the masses.

Those masses were now growing restless. He no longer liked crowds under the best of circumstances, and a bar filled with holiday-edgy, disappointed music fans with liberal access to alcohol struck him as an unpleasant combination.

Somebody jostled him from behind and he could tell without turning around it was a woman. The curves pressing into his shoulder were a good giveaway, along with a delectable scent of

cinnamon and vanilla that made him think of crisp, rich cookies.

His mouth watered. He'd been a hell of a long time without...cookies.

“Pat, where’s my mojito? Come on. I’ve been waiting forever.”

The woman with the husky voice squeezed past him to lean against the bar, and from the side, he caught only an equally sexy sleek fall of blond hair. She was wearing a white sweater that was about half an inch too short, and when she leaned over, just a strip of pale skin showed above the waistline of a pair of jeans that highlighted a shapely ass.

The longtime Lizard bartender frowned, his wind-chapped face wrinkling around the mouth. “It’s coming. I’m shorthanded. Stupid me, I figured when the band canceled, nobody would show up. Give me a sec. Have some pretzels or something.”

“I don’t want pretzels. I want another mojito.”

She had obviously already had a mojito or three, judging by the careful precision of her words. The peremptory tone struck a chord. He looked closer and suddenly recognized the alluring handful: Genevieve Beaumont, spoiled and precious daughter of the Hope’s Crossing mayor.

She was quite a bit younger than he was, maybe six years or so. He didn’t know her well, only by reputation, which wasn’t great. He had always figured her for a prissy little society belle—the kind of vapid, boring woman who wasted her life on a solemn quest for the perfect manicure.

She didn’t look it now. Instead, she looked a little tousled,

slightly buzzed and oddly delicious.

“If somebody plays another damn Christmas carol, I swear, I am going to scream. This is a freaking bar, not Sunday school.”

“Hear, hear,” he murmured, unable to hold back his wholehearted agreement.

She finally deigned to pay attention to anything but herself. She shifted her gaze and in her heavily lashed blue eyes he saw a quick, familiar reaction—a mangle of pity and something akin to fascinated repugnance.

Yeah, he hated crowds.

To her credit, she quickly hid her response and instead offered a stiff smile. “Dylan Caine. I didn’t see you there.”

He gave her a polite smile in return. Completely out of unwarranted malevolence, he lifted what remained of his left arm in a caricature of a wave. “Most of me, anyway.”

She swallowed and blinked but didn’t lose that stiff smile. If anything, it seemed to beam unnaturally, like a blinking string of Christmas lights. “Er, nice to see you again,” she said.

He couldn’t remember ever having a conversation with the woman in his life. If he had, he certainly would have recalled that husky voice that thrummed through him, as rich and heady as his Johnnie Walker.

“Same,” he said, which wasn’t completely a lie. He did enjoy that little strip of bare skin and a pair of tight jeans.

“Are you visiting your family for the holidays?” she asked, polite conversation apparently drilled into her along with proper

posture and perfect accessory coordination, even when she was slightly drunk.

“Nope.” He took a sip of his whiskey. “I moved back in the spring. I’ve got a place up Snowflake Canyon.”

“Oh. I hadn’t heard.” She focused on a point somewhere just above his right ear, though he noticed her gaze flicking briefly, almost against her will, to the eye patch that concealed a web of scar tissue before she jerked it away.

He fought the urge to check his watch again—or, to hell with Jamie, toss a bill on the bar for his tab and take off.

Though they certainly weren’t society-conscious people like the Beaumonts, Dermot and Margaret Caine had drilled proper manners in him, too. Every once in a while he even used them. “Don’t think I’ve seen you around town since I’ve been back. Where are you living these days?”

Her mouth tightened, and he noticed her lipstick had smeared ever so slightly on her lower lip. “Until three days ago, I was living in a beautiful fifth-floor flat in Le Marais in Paris.”

Ooh là là. Le Marais. Like that was supposed to mean anything to him.

“Somebody should really do something about that music,” she complained to Pat before Dylan could answer. “Why would you put so many freaking versions of the same song on the jukebox?”

The bartender looked frazzled as he pulled another beer from the tap. “I had to spring for that stupid digital jukebox. Worst business decision of my life. It’s completely ruined the place.

It's like karaoke every night. Here's a little secret you might not know. We have a crapload of people in Hope's Crossing with lousy taste in music."

"You could always take it out," Dylan suggested.

"Believe me, I'm tempted every night. But I paid a fortune for the thing. Usually I just end up forking over some of my tips and picking my own damn songs."

He finally set a pink mojito in front of Genevieve. She picked it up and took a healthy sip.

"Thank you," she said, her sexy voice incongruously prim, then gave Dylan that polite, empty smile. "Excuse me."

He watched her head in the direction of the gleaming jukebox, wondering what sort of music she would pick. Probably something artsy and annoying. It better not be anything with an accordion.

He checked his watch, which he really hated wearing on his right arm after a lifetime of it on the left. Jamie was now fifteen minutes late. That was about his limit.

Just as he was reaching into his pocket for his wallet, his phone buzzed with an incoming text.

As he expected, it was from Jamie, crisp and succinct:

Sorry. Got held up. On my way. Stay there!

His just-older brother knew him well. Jamie must have guessed that after all these months of solitude, the jostling crowd

and discordant voices at The Speckled Lizard would be driving him crazy.

He typed a quick response with one thumb—a pain in the ass but not as bad as finger-pecking an email.

You've got five.

He meant it. If Jamie wasn't here by then, his brother could drive up to Snowflake Canyon to share a beer for his last night in town before returning to his base.

The digital jukebox Pat hated switched to “Jingle Bell Rock,” a song he disliked even more than “The Little Drummer Boy.”

“Sorry,” the bartender said as he passed by on his way to hand a couple of fruity-looking drinks to a tourist pair a few stools down.

Dylan glanced over at the flashing lights of the jukebox just in time to see Genevieve Beaumont head in that direction, mojito in hand.

Uh-oh.

More intrigued by a woman than he had been in a long time, he watched as she said something impassioned to the professionally dressed couple who seemed to be hogging all the music choices.

He couldn't hear what she said over the loud conversation and clinking glasses wrapping around him, but he almost laughed at her dramatic, agitated gestures. So much for the prissy, buttoned-up debutante. Her arms flung wide as she pointed at the jukebox

and then back at the couple. From a little impromptu lipreading, he caught the words bar, idiot and Christmas carols.

The female half of the couple—a pretty redhead wearing a steel-gray power suit and double strand of olive-sized pearls—didn't seem as amused as Dylan by Genevieve's freely given opinion. She said something in response that seemed as sharp as her shoes, judging by Genevieve's quick intake of breath.

The woman brandished a credit card as if it was an AK-47 and hurried toward the digital piece of crap, probably to put in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing "Away in a Manger" or something else equally inappropriate for the setting.

Dylan chuckled when, after a quick, startled second, the mayor's genteel daughter rushed forward like a Broncos tackle, her drink spilling a little as she darted ahead, her body blocking the woman from accessing the jukebox.

"Move your bony ass," he heard the woman say, quite unfairly, in the personal opinion of a man who had just had ample evidence that particular piece of Ms. Beaumont wasn't anything of the sort.

"Make me," Gen snarled.

At that line-in-the-sand declaration, Dylan did a quick ninety-degree swivel on his barstool to watch the unfolding action and he realized he wasn't the only one. The little altercation was beginning to draw the interest of other patrons in the bar.

Nothing like a good girl fight to get the guys' attention.

"I have the right to listen to whatever I want," Madame Power

Suit declared.

“Nobody else wants to listen to Christmas music. Am I right?”

A few nearby patrons offered vocal agreement and the color rose in the redhead’s cheeks. “I do,” she declared defiantly.

“Next time, bring your iPod and earbuds,” Genevieve snapped.

“Next time be the first one to the jukebox and you can pick the music,” the woman retorted, trying to sneak past Genevieve.

She shoved at Genevieve but couldn’t budge her, again to Dylan’s amusement—until the man who had been sitting with the carol-lover approached. He wore a dress shirt and loosened tie but no jacket and was a few years older than his companion. While he carried an air of authority, he also struck Dylan as similar to the bullies in the military who had no trouble pushing their weight around to get their way.

“Come on. That’s enough, girls. What’s the harm in a few Christmas carols? It’s the day after Thanksgiving, after all.”

“I believe this is between me and your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. She’s my associate.”

“I don’t care if she’s Mrs. Santa Claus. She has lousy taste in music and everybody in the place has had enough.”

The other woman tried again to charge past Genevieve with her credit card but Genevieve blocked access with her own body.

“Do you have any idea who you’re messing with?” He advanced on her, his very bulk making him threatening.

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

He loomed over her, but Genevieve didn't back down. She was just full of surprises. On face value, he wouldn't have taken her for anybody with an ounce of pluck.

"She happens to be an assistant district attorney. We both are."

Oh, crap.

Genevieve apparently meant it when she said she didn't care. "I hate attorneys. My ex-fiancé was an attorney," she snapped.

The guy smirked. "What's his name? I'd like to call the man and buy him a drink for being smart enough to drop-kick a psycho like you."

Genevieve seemed to deflate a little, looking for a moment lost and uncertain, before she bristled. "I drop-kicked him, for your information, and I haven't missed him for a minute. In my experience, most attorneys will do anything necessary to get their way."

"Damn straight," the woman said. She planted her spiked heel on Genevieve's foot hard and when the effort achieved its desired result—Genevieve shrieked in surprise and started to stumble—the woman tried to dart around her. But the former head cheerleader of Hope's Crossing High School still apparently had a few moves. She jostled with the woman and managed to slap away her hand still gripping the credit card before she could swipe it.

"That's assault!" the woman declared. "You saw that, didn't you, Larry? The stupid bitch just hit me."

"That wasn't a hit. That was a slap. Anyway, you started it."

“True story.” A helpful bystander backed her up.

The woman turned even more red in the face.

“Okay, this is ridiculous. Let her pass. Now.” Larry the Jerk reached for Genevieve’s arm to yank her away from the jukebox. At the sight of that big hand on her white sweater, Dylan rose, his barstool squeaking as he shoved it back.

“Sit down, Caine,” Pat urged, a pleading note in his voice. Dylan ignored him, adrenaline pumping through him like pure scotch whiskey. He didn’t necessarily like Genevieve Beaumont, but he hated bullies more.

And she did have a nice ass.

“You’re going to want to back down now,” he said, in his hardest former-army-ranger voice.

The guy didn’t release Genevieve’s arm as he looked Dylan up and down, black eye patch and all. “Aye, matey. Or what? You’ll sic your parrot on me?”

Dylan was vaguely aware of an audible hiss around him from locals who knew him.

“Something like that,” he answered calmly.

He reached out and even with only one hand he was able to deftly extricate Genevieve’s arm from the man’s hold and twist his fingers back.

“Thank you,” she answered in surprise, straightening her sweater.

“You’re welcome.” He released the man’s hand. “I suggest we all go back to our drinks now.”

"I'm calling the police," the woman blustered. "You're crazy. Both of you."

"Oh, shut up," Genevieve snapped.

"You shut up. You're both going to face assault charges."

"I might not be a lawyer but I'm pretty sure that wasn't assault," Genevieve responded sharply. "This is."

Dylan hissed in a breath when Genevieve drew back a fist and smacked the woman dead center in her face.

Blood immediately spurted from the woman's nose, and she jerked her hands up, shrieking. "I think you just broke my nose!"

The contact of flesh on flesh seemed to shock Genevieve back to some semblance of sobriety. She blinked at the pair of them. "Wow. I had no idea I could do that. I guess all those years of Pilates weren't completely wasted."

The words were barely out of her mouth when the woman dropped her hands from her nose and lunged at her, and suddenly the two of them were seriously going at it, kicking, punching, pulling hair.

Why did they always have to pull hair?

Dylan, with only one arm and skewed vision, was at a disadvantage as he reached into the squirming, tangled pair of women to try breaking things up. Larry, without a similar limitation, reached in from the other side but the women jostled into him and he stumbled backward, crashing into a big, tough-looking dude who fell to the floor and came up swinging.

Everybody's nerves were apparently on edge tonight, what

with dysfunctional family dinners, early-morning shopping misery, puking-sick musicians. Before he knew it, the guy's friends had entered into the fray and what started as a minor altercation over Christmas carols erupted into a full-fledged, down-and-dirty bar fight involving tourists and locals alike.

Dylan did his best to hold his own but it was harder than he expected, much to his frustration.

At one point, he found himself on the ground, just a few feet from the conveniently located jukebox power cord. He did everybody a favor and yanked it out before leaping to his feet again, just in time to see his brother wading into the middle of the fray, along with Pat and the three-hundred-fifty-pound Speckled Lizard cook, Frankie Beltran, wielding a frying pan over her head.

"I can't leave you alone for a minute." Jamie grabbed him by the shirt and threw him away from the fight that was already abating.

His own adrenaline surge had spiked, apparently, leaving him achy and a little nauseous from the residual pain. He wiped at his mouth where one of the tourists—a big dude with dreads and a couple of tattoos—had thrown a punch that landed hard.

There was another new discovery that sucked. A guy had a tough time blocking with his left when he didn't have one.

"If you'd been here on time, you could have joined in," he answered.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, hitting a wounded

war hero!” The woman who had started the whole thing had apparently turned her ire to the tourist who had punched him. Even though Pat tried to restrain Genevieve, she leveraged her weight back against the bartender to kick out at the dreadlocked snowboarder.

He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about Genevieve Beaumont trying to protect him.

“How the hell was I supposed to know he was a wounded hero?” the snowboarder complained. “All I saw was some asshole throwing punches at my friends.”

A commotion by the door to the tavern announced the arrival of two of Hope’s Crossing’s finest. The crowd parted for the uniformed officers, and Dylan’s already-queasy stomach took another turn.

Two people he did not need to see. Oh, this wasn’t going to end well.

He had dated Officer Rachel Olivarez in high school a few times. If he remembered the details correctly, he’d broken up with her to date her sister. Not one of his finer moments.

If that wasn’t enough, her partner, Pete Redmond, had lost his girlfriend to Dylan’s older brother Drew. He doubted either one of them had a soft spot for the Caines.

He should have remembered that particular joy of small-town life before he moved back. Everywhere a guy turned, he stumbled over hot, steaming piles of history.

Rachel spoke first. “What’s our problem here, folks?”

“Just a little misunderstanding.” Jamie gave his most charming smile, still holding tight to Dylan. Predictably, like anything without a Y chromosome, her lips parted and she seemed to melt a little in the face of all of Jamie’s helicopter-pilot mojo for just a moment before she went all stern cop again.

“They always are,” she answered. “Genevieve. Didn’t expect to see you here. You’re bleeding.”

She said the last without a trace of sympathy, which didn’t really surprise Dylan. Genevieve didn’t have many friends in Hope’s Crossing.

“Oh.” For all her bravado earlier, her voice came out small, breathless. Rachel handed her a napkin off a nearby table and Genevieve dabbed at her cheek, and her delicate skin seemed to turn as pale as the snowflakes he could see drifting past the open doorway.

Rachel turned to him. “You’re bleeding, too,” she said, with no more sympathy.

“Oh, I think I’ve had worse,” he said, unable to keep the dry note from his voice.

“This is all just a misunderstanding, right?” Jamie aimed a hopeful charmer of a grin at Rachel. “No harm done, right?”

“No harm done?” The woman holding a wad of napkins to her still-streaming nose practically screamed the words. She held up a hank of red hair Genevieve had pulled out from the roots, and for some strange reason, Dylan found that the most hilarious thing he’d seen in a long time.

“What do you mean, no harm done? I’ve got a court date Monday. How am I supposed to prosecute a case with a broken nose and half my hair missing?”

“Why don’t you shave the rest?” Genevieve suggested. “It can only be an improvement. It will save you a fortune on hair spray.”

“Can you really be as stupid as you look?” Larry shook his head. “We’re district attorneys. Do you have any idea what that means? We decide who faces criminal charges. Officers, I insist you arrest both of these people.”

Rachel didn’t look thrilled about being ordered around. “On what charges, Mr. Kirk?”

“Assault, disturbing the peace, drunk and disorderly. How’s that for starters?”

“It was just a bar fight,” Jamie protested. “The same thing happens a couple times a week here at the Lizard. Isn’t that right, Pat?”

“Don’t bring me into this,” the bartender protested.

“So are you pressing charges, Ms. Turner?” Officer Redmond asked.

“Look at my nose! You’re damn right I’m pressing charges.”

“Pat?”

The bartender looked around. “Well, somebody needs to pay for these damages. It might as well be Mayor Beaumont.”

“Oh! That’s so unfair!” Genevieve exclaimed. “If you hadn’t bought that stupid digital jukebox, none of this would have happened.”

“You probably want to keep your mouth shut right about now,” Dylan suggested. “I’ll pay for the damages.”

He ignored Jamie’s rumble of protest.

“That’s all I care about,” Pat answered, reaching out and shaking Dylan’s hand firmly, the deal done. “Caine is right. We have bar fights in here a couple times a week. As long as somebody replaces those broken tables, I won’t press charges.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you press charges or not. You still have to arrest and book them for assault,” the prick of an assistant district attorney said.

“Sorry, Dylan, Ms. Beaumont, but I’m going to have to take you in.” Despite her words, Rachel didn’t sound at all apologetic.

“You can’t do that!” Genevieve exclaimed.

Rachel tapped the badge on her chest. “This sort of says I can.”

The officer reached around and started handcuffing Genevieve. With all her blond hair, silky white sweater and that little stream of blood trickling down her cheek, she looked like a fallen Christmas angel.

“Stop this. Right now,” she said, all but stamping her foot in frustration. “You can’t arrest me! My father will never allow it!”

“Believe it or not, there are still a few things around Hope’s Crossing William Beaumont can’t control.”

Like most of the rest of the town, it sounded as if Rachel had had a run-in or two with Mayor Beaumont, who tended to think he owned the town.

“Why aren’t you arresting her?” she demanded with a gesture

to the assistant district attorney. “She’s the one who wouldn’t stop playing the stupid songs on the jukebox. And I think she broke my foot with that hideous shoe.”

Rachel seemed unaffected as she turned her around and started reciting her Miranda rights. Her partner turned his attention to Dylan.

“Turn around and place your hands behind your back,” Pete ordered.

“I’ll do my best, Officer,” Dylan answered. He twisted his right arm behind his back and twisted his left, with the empty sleeve, as far as he could.

“Dylan,” Jamie chided.

Redmond apparently realized the challenge. “Um, Olivarez, what am I supposed to do here?”

Rachel paused in mid-Miranda and looked at her partner in annoyance that quickly shifted to more of that damn pity when she looked at Dylan.

“You could always let me go,” he suggested, fighting down the urge to punch something all over again. “I was only coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress. What’s the harm in that?”

“Or not,” she snapped, and before he realized what she intended, she reached for the cuff on Gen’s left wrist and fastened the other side onto his right.

Oh, joy. Shackled to Genevieve Beaumont. Could he stoop any lower?

“You can’t do this!” she exclaimed again. “I’ve never been

arrested before. I can't believe this is happening, all because of some stupid Christmas carols."

"I like Christmas carols," Rachel said.

"So do I," Genevieve answered hotly. "Believe me, I do. But not on a Friday night when I only wanted a few drinks and some good music."

"You can explain that to the judge, I'm sure. Come on. Let's go."

She headed for the door, pushing her still-protesting prisoner ahead of her. Dylan, by default, had to go with them.

When she opened the door, a blast of wind and snow whirled inside, harsh and mean.

He was aware of Genevieve's sudden shiver beside him and some latent protective instinct bubbled up out of nowhere. "It's freezing out there. At least let the woman put on her coat."

Rachel raised an eyebrow at him, as surprised as he was by the solicitude. Genevieve apparently didn't even notice.

"That's right. I can't leave without my coat. And my purse. Where's my purse?"

"I'll get them," Jamie offered.

"Where are they?" Pete asked.

"I was sitting over there." She gestured toward her table. It seemed a lifetime ago that she had pressed her chest against his shoulder so she could bug Pat about her mojito. "My coat should be hanging on the rack. It's Dior. You can't miss it."

Jamie found the coat and purse quickly and handed them over.

“I can’t say this is how I expected to spend my last night of leave.”

“Sorry.”

“No worries. I’ll call Andrew. He’ll have you out in an hour or two.”

The only thing worse than the lecture in store for him from Pop would be the similar one their older brother would likely deliver.

“If they send me to the big house, take care of Tucker for me, will you?”

Jamie threw him a look of disgust. “This isn’t a joke, damn it. You’re under arrest. These are serious charges.”

“It was just a bar fight. Drew can handle that in his sleep. On second thought, Charlotte can take care of Tuck. He likes it at her place.”

His brother shook his head. “You’re insane.”

He must be. Despite the indignity of being shackled to Genevieve Beaumont and hauled out through the biting snow to the waiting patrol car, Dylan was astonished to discover he was enjoying himself more than he had in a long, long time.

CHAPTER TWO

THIS WAS A DISASTER. A complete, unmitigated catastrophe.

The rush that had carried her through the altercation—had she really punched a woman in the nose?—was beginning to ebb, replaced by hard, terrifying reality.

Her father was going to kill her.

Her mother was going to pop a couple of veins and then kill her.

She slumped into the seat, wondering just how her life had descended into this misery. A week ago, she had been blissfully happy in Paris. Long lunches with her friends at their favorite cafés, evenings spent at Place Vendôme, afternoon shopping on the Rue de Rivoli.

Okay, maybe, just maybe, she should have been looking for work during some of those long lunches. Maybe she should have tried a little harder to turn her two internships into something a little more permanent.

She had always figured she had plenty of time to settle down. For now, she only wanted to grab as much fun as she could. What else was she supposed to do after her plans for her life disintegrated into dust like old Christmas wrapping paper?

She had been in a bit of a financial hole. She would be the first to admit it. She liked nice things around her. She would eventually have climbed her way out of it.

How was she supposed to do that now, with a record? She slumped farther back into the seat, vaguely queasy from the scent of stale coffee and flop sweat that had probably seeped into the cheap leather upholstery along with God knows what else.

Her father would see her arrest as just more proof that he needed to tighten the reins.

She burned from the humiliation that had seethed and curled around in her stomach since that afternoon. Her parents were

treating her as if she were twelve years old. She was basically being sent to her room without supper in a grand sort of way.

She should have known something was up when they sent her a plane ticket and demanded she come back to Hope's Crossing, ostensibly for Thanksgiving with them and her brother, Charlie. Stupid her. She hadn't suspected a thing, even though she had picked up weird vibes since she arrived home Wednesday.

Thanksgiving dinner had been a grand social affair, as usual. Her parents had invited several of their friends over and Genevieve had endured as best she could and escaped to her room at the earliest opportunity.

Then this morning after breakfast, William had asked her to come into his study. Her mother had been there, looking pale and drawn. As usual, sobriety wasn't agreeing with Laura.

It certainly hadn't agreed with Genevieve as she had sat, sober as a nun, while William outlined the financial mess she was in and then proceeded to give her the horrifying news.

He was closing her credit accounts, all of them, and withdrawing her access to her trust fund.

"I've been patient long enough." His grim words still rang in her ears, hours later. "For nearly two years, I've let you have your way, do what you wanted. I told myself you were healing from a broken heart and deserved a little fun, but this is becoming ridiculous. It stops today. You're twenty-six years old. You graduated from college four years ago and haven't done a damn thing of value since then."

Her father had thrown her one miserable bone. Her grandmother Pearl had left her hideous house to her only son when she died in the spring. If Genevieve could take the house, fix it and sell it at value within three months, she could take the earnings back to Paris to seed the interior-design business she had been talking about for years.

And if she could turn a profit within the first year of her business, her father would release the rest of her trust fund permanently.

William had been resolute, despite her best efforts to cajole, plead or guilt him into changing his mind. She was stuck here in Hope's Crossing—this armpit of a town where everyone hated her—throughout the winter.

Furious with all of them, she had packed her suitcase, grabbed the key to Pearl's house and left her parents' grand home in Silver Strike Canyon—the second biggest in town, after Harry Lange's.

Yet another big mistake. Pearl's house was far, far worse than she had expected. Was it any wonder she had gone to the Lizard with the intention of getting good and drunk?

True to form, she had taken a lousy situation and made it about ten times worse. She could only blame it on mental duress brought on by hideous pink porcelain tubs and acres and acres of wallpaper.

That was really no excuse. What had she been thinking? She didn't pick fights, take on annoying people, punch someone, for heaven's sake! She had just been so angry sitting there in the Liz,

feeling her life spiral out of control, certain that she would have to spend the next several months in this town where everybody snickered at her behind their hands.

Now she was sitting in the backseat of a police squad car, handcuffed to Dylan Caine, of all people.

He shifted in the seat and she was painfully aware of him, though she couldn't seem to look at him. He used to be gorgeous like all the Caine brothers—tough, muscular, rugged. They all had that silky brown hair, the same blue eyes, deep creases in their cheeks when they smiled. Keep-an-eye-on-your-daughters kind of sexy.

He was still compelling but in a disreputable, keep-an-eye-on-your-wallet kind of way. He hadn't shaved in at least three or four days and his hair was badly in need of a trim. Add to that the scars radiating out around his eye patch and the missing hand and he made a pretty scary package.

Each time she looked at him tonight—damaged and disfigured—sadness had trickled through her, as if she had just watched someone take a beautiful painting by an Italian master and rip a seam through the middle.

Yes, that probably made her shallow. She couldn't help herself.

He did smell good, though. When he shifted again, through the sordid scents of the police car, she caught the subtle notes of some kind of outdoorsy scent—sandalwood and cedar and perhaps bergamot, with a little whiskey chaser thrown in.

“I’m sorry you were arrested, but it’s your own fault.”

He scoffed in the darkness. “My fault. How do you figure that, Ms. Beaumont?”

“We are handcuffed together,” she pointed out. “I think you could probably call me Genevieve.”

“Genevieve.” He mocked the way she had pronounced her own name, as her Parisian friends had for the past two years—Jahn-vi-ev, instead of the way her family and everyone she knew here had always said it, Jen-a-vive—and she felt ridiculously pretentious.

“You didn’t have to come riding to my rescue like some kind of cowboy stud trying to waste his Friday-night paycheck. I was handling things.”

He snorted. “Last I checked, Genevieve, that bitch looked like she was ready to take out your eyeball with her claws. Trust me. You would have missed it.”

Like he missed being able to see out of two eyes? She wanted to ask but didn’t dare.

“You wouldn’t be here if you had just minded your own business.”

“It’s a bad habit of mine. I don’t like to watch little cream puffs get splattered.”

It annoyed her that he, like everybody else she knew, thought so little of her.

“I’m not a cream puff.”

“Oh, sorry. I suppose it would be éclair.”

He said the word with the same exaggerated French accent he had used on her name, and she frowned, though she was aware of a completely inappropriate bubble of laughter in her throat. It must be the lingering effect of those stupid mojitos.

“I believe the word you’re looking for is profiterole. An éclair is oval and the filling is piped in while a profiterole, or cream puff, is round and the pastry is cut in half then some is scraped away before the rest is filled with whipped cream.”

It was one of those inane, obscure details she couldn’t help spouting when she was nervous.

He snorted. “Wow. You are quite a font of information, Genevieve. This evening is turning into all kinds of interesting.”

She couldn’t see his features well through the snow-dimmed streetlights but she was quite certain he was laughing at her. She hated it when people laughed at her—one of the biggest reasons she hated being here in Hope’s Crossing.

Before she could respond, the vehicle stopped and she saw the solid, somehow intimidating shape of the police station outside the ice-etched window.

A moment later, the door on her side of the vehicle opened and Pete Redmond loomed over her. “You two having fun back here?”

Dylan didn’t answer, making her wonder if he had been having fun.

“What do you think?” Genevieve tried for her frostiest tone. Pete had tried to ask her out once when she was home for the

summer, before her engagement to Sawyer.

“I think you’re in a pickle, Ms. Beaumont,” he answered.

Oh, she could think of a few stronger words than that.

“I think we all need to suit up for the you-know-what to hit the fan after Mayor Beaumont gets that phone call,” the female police officer with the split ends and the improper lipstick shade said as she helped pull Genevieve out of the backseat and Dylan, by default, after her.

Her stomach cramped again, just picturing her father’s stern disapproval. What if he decided her latest screw-up was too much? What if he decided not to give her the chance to sell Pearl’s house as her escape out of town?

She might be stuck here forever, having to look for excitement at a dive like The Speckled Lizard.

A sudden burst of wind gusted through, flailing snow at them, rattling the bare branches of a tree in front of the station. Gen shivered.

“Let’s get you two inside,” the female officer said. “This is shaping up to be a nasty one. We’re going to be dealing with slide-offs all night.”

Despite the nerves crawling through her, the warmth of the building seemed almost welcoming.

She had never been inside a police station. Somehow she expected it to be...grittier. Instead, it looked just like any other boring office. Cubicles, fluorescent lighting, computer monitors. It could be a bland, dreary insurance office somewhere.

She was aware of a small, ridiculous pang of disappointment that her walk on the wild side had led her to this. On the other hand, she was still shackled to the scruffy, sexy-smelling, damaged Dylan Caine.

The officers led them not to some cold interrogation room with a single lightbulb and a straight-backed chair but to what looked like a standard break room, with a microwave, refrigerator, coffee maker.

Yet another illusion shattered.

“Have a seat,” Pete said.

“Can you take these off now?” Dylan raised their joined arms.

The female officer seemed to find the whole situation highly amusing, for reasons Gen didn’t quite understand.

“I don’t know about that,” she said slowly. “We wouldn’t want the two of you starting any more fights. Maybe we should leave it on a few more minutes, until we give Chief McKnight time to assess the situation.”

Genevieve drew in a breath. The McKnights. She couldn’t escape them anywhere in this cursed town.

“What about our phone calls?” Dylan said. “I need to call my attorney, who also happens to be my brother Andrew. I’m sure Ms. Beaumont wants to call her father.”

“You don’t speak for me,” she said quickly. “I don’t need to call my father.”

“But you’re going to need an attorney.”

She was exhausted suddenly after the ordeal of the evening

and the cut on her cheek burned. Her brain felt scrambled, but she said the first thing that came to her mind. “I’ll use yours. Andrew Caine is my attorney, too.”

Her father would find out about this, of course. She couldn’t hide it. For all she knew, somebody had already told him his only daughter had been scrapping in a bar like some kind of Roller Derby queen. But she couldn’t endure more of his disappointment tonight, the heavy, inescapable weight of her own failure.

“Seriously?” Officer Olivarez—now, there was a mouthful—looked skeptical. “You’re sure you don’t want to call Daddy to bail you out?”

“Positive.” She looked at the two officers and at Dylan. “I think we can all agree, the last thing any of us needs tonight is for my father to come down here. Am I right?”

“I doubt anything you do will stop that,” Dylan drawled.

He was right. Someone at the Lizard had probably already dropped a dime on her. Wasn’t that the appropriate lingo? William was probably already on his way over but she wasn’t going to be the one to call him.

“Andrew Caine is my attorney. End of story,” she declared. “Now will you please take these things off?”

After a pause, the female officer pulled out a key to the handcuffs and freed them. Instead of elation, Genevieve fought down an odd disappointment as she rubbed the achy hand that had been cuffed with her other one.

“You can call your brother over there.” Officer Olivarez gestured with a flip of her braid to a corded phone hanging on the wall.

Dylan headed over and picked up the phone receiver, and after an awkward moment where he tried to figure out what to do with it, he draped it over his shoulder so he could punch the numbers with his remaining hand.

Poor guy. Even something as simple as making a phone call must be a challenge with only one hand.

The two officers started talking about a sporting event Genevieve didn't know or care anything about. She couldn't hear Dylan's conversation with his brother, but judging by the way his expression grew increasingly remote, it wasn't pleasant. After a few minutes, he hung up.

“Well? Is he coming to get us out?”

“He'll be here. He wanted to know if we had been booked yet.”

The two officers exchanged glances. “Chief McKnight wants us to hang on until he gets here. It's kind of a sticky situation, what with the district attorney's office being involved.”

“What does that mean?”

“Once we book you, you have to go into the system,” Pete Redmond explained, not unkindly, and she was a little sorry she hadn't agreed to go out with him all those years ago. “That means your arrest will always be on record, even if you're not charged.”

“The police chief is on the phone with the district attorney, trying to iron things out.”

“How long will that take?” she asked.

“Who knows?” Pete said.

He started to explain the judicial system to her but she tuned him out. He was saying something about bail hearings when she heard a commotion through the open doorway.

“Where the hell is my daughter?”

Merde. Any alcohol that hadn’t been absorbed into her system by now seemed to well up in her gut.

Dylan gave her a careful look and shoved a garbage can over with his foot. “You’re not going to puke on me now, are you?”

She willed down the gurge in her throat. “I’m fine. I won’t be sick.”

She was almost positive that was true, anyway.

“Good. Because I have to say, that would just about make this the perfect date.”

An inelegant snort escaped before she could help it. Again, she blamed the mojitos, but her father walked in just in time to catch it.

He stood in the doorway and glowered at her, and she was filled with such a tangle of emotions, she didn’t know what to do with them—anger and hurt and an aching sort of shame that she was always a disappointment.

“Genevieve Marie Beaumont. Look at you. You’ve been back in town less than forty-eight hours and where do I find you but in the police station, associating with all manner of disreputable characters.”

Beside her, Dylan gave a little wave. “Hey there, Mayor Beaumont.”

Some of her father’s stiff disapproval seemed to shift to an uncertain chagrin for a moment and it took her a moment to realize why. She had heard enough in her infrequent visits home to know that Dylan was considered a hero around town, someone who had sacrificed above and beyond for his country.

“I didn’t, er, necessarily mean you by that general statement.”

“I’m sure,” Dylan said coolly.

“Yes, well.” Her father cleared his throat and turned back to Genevieve. “I’m doing what I can to get you out of here. I’ve already been on the phone with the district attorney to see if we can work things out with his people before this goes any further. I’m quite outraged that no one called me first. That includes you, young lady. I realize you haven’t been in trouble with the law before but surely you know the first thing you should always do is call your attorney.”

“You’re not my attorney.” Her words came out small, and, as usual, her father didn’t pay her any mind.

He went on about his plan for extricating her from the mess as if she had said nothing.

“You’re not my attorney,” she said in a louder voice. “Andrew Caine is.”

Her father didn’t roll his eyes, but it was a close thing. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I’ll represent you.”

“I thought attorneys weren’t supposed to represent family

members.”

“That’s people in the medical profession, my dear,” he said indulgently, as if she were five years old. “Attorneys have no such stricture. If you would prefer, I can call one of my associates to represent you. Either way, we’ll have these ridiculous charges thrown out and pretend this never happened.”

She could just cave. It would be easy. Her father would take care of everything, as he had been doing all her life—as she had let him do, especially the past two years.

He couldn’t have it both ways, though. He couldn’t one moment tell her he was cutting her off financially to fend for herself and then still try to control the rest of her life.

“I have an attorney,” she said, a little more firmly. “Andrew Caine.”

Her father gave her a conciliatory smile that made her want to scream. “You’re overwrought, my dear. I’m sure this has been an upsetting evening for you. You’re not thinking clearly. Mr. Caine is a fine attorney, but how would it look if you had someone else represent you?”

As if she had finally found a little backbone?

She was spared from having to answer by the arrival of the police chief of Hope’s Crossing, Riley McKnight.

William spotted him at the same time. “Finally!” he exclaimed and headed out to apprehend the police chief, leaving her and Dylan alone.

An awkward silence seemed to settle around them like the

cold snow falling outside. “Wow. Your dad...”

“Is incredibly obstinate. Either that or he has selective hearing loss,” she finished for him.

“I was going to say he’s concerned about you. But those work, too.”

She could feel her face heat. “He’s tired of cleaning up my messes. Can you tell?”

“Caught a hint or two. What kind of messes, Genevieve?”

Oddly, she didn’t mind his exaggerated French pronunciation of her name this time. It was actually kind of...sexy. “It’s a very long and boring story.” One she didn’t feel like rehashing right now. “Listen, I am sorry you were messed up in this whole thing. I had a bit too much to drink and I guess I went a little...crazy.”

“I would describe it as completely bat-shit, but that’s just me.”

“I did, didn’t I?” It wasn’t a completely unpleasant realization.

“I wish I’d thought to shoot some video of you punching that woman. I haven’t enjoyed anything that much in...a long time.”

She was glad, suddenly, that she’d given him something to find amusing.

“Thank you for trying to protect me.”

He shrugged, looking embarrassed. “I would say anytime but I’m afraid you might take me up on that,” he answered, just as Andrew Caine walked in.

“Take you up on what?”

“Nothing. Never mind. What the hell took you so long? Did you stop off for Thanksgiving leftovers at Pop’s on the way?”

Andrew Caine looked very much like she remembered Dylan looking before his accident. Gorgeous. Brown hair, blue eyes, chiseled features.

Tonight, Andrew's short brown hair was ruffled a little on one side and she wondered if Dylan's call had caught him in bed, or at least dozing on the couch while a basketball game played or something. His blue dress shirt was tailored and elegant but a little wrinkled, as if he had yanked it out of the laundry hamper at the last minute.

"Tell me why I never get calls about you during business hours. I ought to leave your ass in here overnight. Hell, I should leave you here all weekend. It would serve you right."

"Guess it's my turn for the annoying family lectures," Dylan murmured in an aside to her.

A little laugh bubbled out of her; she couldn't help it, and he gazed at her mouth for a moment before jerking his gaze back to his brother.

"A bar fight at the Lizard. Really. Couldn't you try for something a little more original?"

Dylan shrugged and aimed his thumb at Genevieve. "She started it."

"Tell me you weren't fighting with Genevieve Beaumont." Andrew narrowed his gaze. "Pop is seriously going to kill you. And then Mayor Beaumont will scrape up what's left of you and finish you off."

"That's not what I meant." Annoyance flickered across his

expression. “I haven’t sunk that low.”

“It was all my fault,” Genevieve said. “I...lost my head and your brother stepped in to try to calm the situation.”

“It obviously didn’t work.”

“Well, no,” she admitted.

“What’s this I hear about you scalping a county prosecutor and breaking her nose?”

She had actually physically attacked another human being. She flushed, hardly able to believe she had actually done that. She didn’t know how to respond. Fortunately, Dylan’s brother didn’t seem to require a response.

“Never mind,” he said. “I’m sure your father will fix things for you. Where is he?”

She gestured to the back of the police station. “He’s talking to Chief McKnight. But he’s not my attorney. You are.”

The man’s eyebrows rose just about to his hairline. “Since when?”

“Now. I want to hire you.” Of course, she didn’t have much money to pay him right now but she would figure something out.

“You really think your father will go for that?”

“I’m twenty-six years old. I make my own decisions.” Most of them had been poor the past few years but she decided not to mention that. “I would like to hire you to represent my interests. That’s all that really matters, isn’t it?”

He studied her for a long moment and then shook his head. “Sure. Far be it from me to turn away business, especially when

it's guaranteed to piss off William Beaumont. No offense."

"None taken," she assured him.

"I'm going to assume I'm entitled to some kind of referral bonus for steering new clientele your way," Dylan said.

Her new attorney frowned at his brother. "You can assume you're entitled to shut your pie hole and let me see if I can get you and your new friend here out of this mess."

CHAPTER THREE

"THAT'S IT? We're really free to go?"

An hour later, Jahn-Vi-Ev Beaumont looked at Andrew as if he had just rescued a busload of puppies from a burning building.

Dylan wasn't quite sure why that made him want to punch something again.

"For now. Between your father and me, we were able to work the system a little to get you both out of here tonight. You're still facing charges for felony assault. It's a very serious accusation."

"But at least I don't have to spend the night in jail. I couldn't have done that." She shuddered. "I don't even have any moisturizer in my purse!"

Dylan just refrained from rolling his eyes. He noticed Andrew was trying hard to avoid his gaze. "Maybe you should think of that next time before you start barroom fights," his brother suggested mildly.

"I won't be starting any more fights. You can be sure of that. I never want to walk into the Lizard again."

"Good idea. I can't guarantee you're not going to serve any

jail time for this. Felony assault is a very serious charge, Ms. Beaumont.”

To Dylan, this seemed like a lot of wasted energy over a couple of punches.

“I know.”

“Your father says he can give you a ride home.”

She looked through the glass doors to where Mayor Beaumont waited, all but tapping his foot with impatience. “Do I have to go with him?” she asked, her voice small.

“No law says you do.”

“Can’t you give me a ride to my car? I’m parked behind the bar.”

Did she really think her attorney’s obligation extended to giving his clients rides after a night in the slammer? And why was she so antagonistic toward her family? It didn’t make sense to him. Seemed to him, the Beaumonts were the sort who tended to stick together. Just them against the poor, the hungry, the huddled masses.

“How much did you have to drink tonight? Maybe you’d better catch a ride all the way.”

“Three—no, three and a half—mojitos. But that was hours ago. If you want the truth, I’m feeling more sober than I ever have in my life.”

He had a feeling she would want nothing so much as a stiff drink if she could see herself right now, her hair a mess, dried blood on her cheek from the cut, her sweater fraying at the

shoulder where the district attorney must have grabbed a handful.

“Maybe you’d be better off catching a ride with your father.”

“Would you want your father to give you a ride home from the police station right now?” she demanded of Dylan. When he didn’t answer, she nodded. “That’s what I thought. I won’t drive, then. You can just give me a ride to my grandmother’s house. Either that or I’ll sneak out the back and walk.”

Andrew sighed. “I’ll take you to your grandmother’s house. I have to drop my idiot brother off, too. But you can’t just ditch your father. You have to go out there and tell him.”

So much for his puppy-saving lawyer brother. Now she looked at Andrew as if he were making her pull the wings off butterflies. Dylan didn’t have a whole lot of sympathy for her. Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time, sister.

“Fine,” she said and tromped out of the room in sexy boots that had somehow lost a heel in the ruckus.

The minute she left, Andrew turned on him. “Gen Beaumont. Seriously? I do believe you’ve hit a personal low.”

“Knock it off,” he growled. Funny. While he might have said—at least thought—the same thing, he didn’t like the derision in his brother’s voice when he said her name.

“What were you thinking, messing with Gen Beaumont?”

“I was not messing with her.” He didn’t want to defend himself, but he also didn’t want to listen to his brother dis her, for reasons he wasn’t quite ready to explore.

“Yeah, I should have stepped back. It was stupid to get

involved, but I could see that if I didn't, somebody would end up seriously hurt. Probably her."

"She's a walking disaster. You know that, right? From what I hear, she's been leaving a swath of credit-card receipts across Europe, embroiled in one financial mess after another."

His family was going to make him crazy. For months they had been nagging him to get out of his house in Snowflake Canyon, to socialize a little more, maybe think about talking to somebody once in a while besides his black-and-tan hound dog. But the minute he ventured into social waters, they felt compelled to yank him back as though he were a three-year-old about to head into a school of barracudas.

"Relax, would you? I'm not going to get tangled up with her. I know just what Genevieve Beaumont is—a stuck-up snob with more fashion sense than brains, who wouldn't be caught dead in public with someone like me. Someone less than perfect."

He heard a small, strangled sound behind him and Andrew's expression shifted from skepticism to rueful dismay. Dylan didn't need to look around to realize Gen must have overheard.

Shoot.

He turned, more than a little amazed at the urge to apologize to her.

"Gen."

She lifted her slim, perfect nose a little higher. "I'm ready to go whenever you are. I finally persuaded my father I didn't need a ride," she said to Andrew before turning a cool look in

Dylan's direction. "I'll wait by the door. That way I don't have to be around someone like you any longer than necessary."

With one last disdainful glance she picked up her purse and her Dior coat and walked back out of the office with her spine straight and her head up.

"There you go. See?" Dylan said after she had left, shoving down the ridiculous urge to chase after her and apologize. "Nothing to worry about. Now she won't be speaking to me anyway."

"And isn't that going to make for a fun ride home?" Andrew muttered, shrugging into his own coat.

* * *

SHE REFUSED TO look at Dylan Caine as his brother drove through the dark, snowy streets of Hope's Crossing. Since Thanksgiving had come and gone, apparently everybody was in a festive mood. Just about every house had some kind of light display, from the single-strand, single-color window wrap to a more elaborate blinking show that was probably choreographed to music.

"I'm living in my grandmother's house," she reminded Andrew from her spot in the second row of his big SUV that had a Disneyland sticker in the back window and smelled of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

"Got it."

"You know where that is?"

"Everybody knows where Pearl lived."

Genevieve looked out the window as they passed a house with an inflatable snow globe on the lawn featuring penguins and elves apparently hanging out in some kind of wintry playground. She thought it hideous but Grandma Pearl would have loved that kind of thing. She felt a pang of sorrow for the woman who had taught her to sew and could curse like a teamster, especially when she knew it would irritate her only son.

Gen had flown home for her funeral in April, wishing the whole time that she had taken time to call her grandmother once in a while.

Grandma Pearl's house squatted near the mouth of Snowflake Canyon on a wooded lot that drew mule deer out of the mountains. It was just as ugly as she remembered, a personality-less rambler covered in nondescript tan siding.

"You have the key?" Dylan asked.

"Yes," she answered, just as curtly.

He opened his door on the passenger side of the front seat. "You don't have to get out," she said quickly. "I don't want to be seen with you, remember?"

He ignored her and climbed out of the SUV and held her door open in a gesture that seemed completely uncharacteristic. She thought about being childish and sliding out the other side, but she figured she had already filled her Acts of Stupidity quota for the day.

Aware of his brother waiting in the car, she marched up the sidewalk to the front door, where she at least had had the foresight

to leave a porch light burning before leaving for the bar.

“I’m good. Thanks. You can go now.”

“Genevieve. I’m sorry you heard that.”

“But not sorry you said it.”

“That, too,” he said.

She still burned with humiliation, though she wasn’t sure why. Everyone saw her that way. Why did it bother her so much that he did, too?

“Forget it,” she said. “I have. Do you think I really care about your opinion of me? After tonight, we won’t have anything to do with each other. We don’t exactly move in the same social circles.”

“Praise the Lord,” he said in an impassioned undertone, and she almost smiled, until she remembered he despised her.

“Good night, Dylan.”

“Yeah. Next time, try to have a little self-restraint.”

She nodded and quickly unlocked the door, hurried inside and closed it shut behind her.

She had to will herself not to watch him walk back to his brother’s waiting vehicle. Instead, she forced herself to focus on the challenge ahead of her—the horrible green shag carpeting, dark-paneled walls, tiny windows.

She was so tired. Exhaustion pulled at her, and she felt as if her arms weighed about a hundred pounds each. Mental note: lingering jet lag and adrenaline crashes didn’t mix well.

She headed straight for the hideous pink bathroom and

managed to wrestle her clothes off with those giant, tired arms then stepped into the shower.

At least she had hot water. Always a plus. Actually, the house had a few things going for it—decent bones and a fantastic location at the mouth of the canyon, to start. The half-acre lot alone was worth at least a couple hundred thousand. If she could transform the house into a decent condition, anything else would be a bonus.

She stood under the hot spray until the water finally ran out, then toweled off, changed into her favorite pair of silk pajamas and climbed into the bed, grateful for the sheets she had thought to bring down from her parents' house.

She could do this. Yes, it was overwhelming, especially on an extremely limited budget. Difficult, but not impossible.

If she pulled this off, she might be able to leave Hope's Crossing with a nice chunk of cash, at the very least, and maybe pick up a little hard-earned pride along the way.

She supposed it was too much to hope that she might even earn her family's respect—or anything but contempt from a tough, hardened ex-soldier like Dylan Caine.

* * *

OVER THE WEEKEND, Dylan tried not to give Genevieve Beaumont much thought. He was surprised at how difficult he found that particular task.

He would think of her at the oddest times. While he cleared snow off his long, winding driveway in Snowflake Canyon with

the thirty-year-old John Deere he had fixed up. While he went through the painstaking effort of chopping wood for the fireplace one-handed and carried it into the house—also one-handed. While he was sitting by said fire with a book on his lap and Tucker curled up at his feet.

Monday morning his cell phone rang early, yanking him out of a vaguely disturbing but undeniably heated dream of her wearing a demure, lacy veil that rippled down to a naughty porn-star version of a wedding gown made out of see-through lace.

His phone rang a second time while he was trying to clear that vaguely disturbing image out of his head.

“Yeah?” he growled.

“Cheerful this morning, aren’t we?” His father’s Ireland-sprinkled accent greeted him. “I suppose I might be a mite cranky, too, if I had spent my weekend on the wrong side of the law.”

Dermot made it sound as if his youngest son had been riding the range holding up trains and robbing banks. Dylan imagined his father viewed the transgressions the same.

“Not the whole weekend,” he answered, sitting up in bed and rubbing a little at the phantom pains in his arm. His now-narrowed world slowly came into focus. “Only Friday night. I spent the rest of the time shoveling snow. How about you?”

“You didn’t come to dinner last night.”

Dermot threw a grand Sunday dinner each week for any of Dylan’s six siblings who could make it and their families. The

combined force of all those busybodies was more than he could usually stand.

“I came to dinner on Thanksgiving, didn’t I? I figured that would be sufficient. Anyway, it took me a couple hours to clear the snow and by then I figured you’d be eating dessert.”

“Nothing wrong with coming just for the dessert. It was a delicious one. Erin brought that candy-bar cake you like so much and we had leftover pie from Thanksgiving.”

His stomach rumbled at the mention of the signature recipe Andrew’s wife made. “Sorry I missed that.”

“She left a piece especially for you as she knows how you favor it. You can stop by the house when you’re in town next.”

That was an order, not really a suggestion, and Dylan made a face he was quite glad his pop couldn’t see.

“I’m to give you an important message from your brother.”

“Which one? I have a fair few.”

“Andrew. He tried to call you earlier but couldn’t get through. He said the call went straight to your voice mail, and he left orders for me to try again.”

Dylan hadn’t heard his phone but sometimes the cell-tower coverage up here could be sketchy. He checked his call log and saw he had three voice-mail messages, no doubt from Andrew.

“What’s the message?”

“You’re to meet him at the district attorney’s office at noon. Don’t be late and wear a tie if you can find one.”

Now, that sounded ominous. He had always hated dressing

up, something Pop and all five of his brothers knew. A lifelong healthy dislike had become infinitely more intense over the past year.

“A tie.” Another of his many nemeses. He defied anybody to knot a damn Windsor one-handed.

“Do you have one?” Dermot asked when he didn’t respond. “If you don’t, I can run one of mine up to you.”

“I can find one. You don’t need to drive all the way up here.” He didn’t know whether to be touched or guilty that his father was willing to leave the Center of Hope Café during the breakfast rush to bring his helpless son a necktie.

“Did Andrew tell you why I’m supposed to meet him wearing a tie?”

“Nary a word. All I know is he was heading into court and ordered me to make sure I personally delivered the message. If you didn’t answer your phone this morning, I was under orders to drive up Snowflake Canyon to drag you down. You’ll be there, right?”

“I’m not five years old, Pop. I’ll be there.”

A guy might have thought multiple tours in Afghanistan would be enough to convince his family he could take care of himself.

Then again, since he had come home half-dead, they could possibly have room for doubt.

“See that you are,” Dermot said. He paused for a moment, long enough for Dylan to accurately predict a lecture coming on.

“I’m disappointed in you, son. Surely you know better than to

find yourself in a fight at a place like The Speckled Lizard, no matter the provocation.”

“Yes. I’ve heard the lecture now from both Jamie and Andrew, thanks, Pop.”

“What were you thinking to drag that pretty young Genevieve Beaumont into your troubles?”

He snorted at the blatant unfairness of that. “Who dragged whom? You obviously didn’t hear the whole story. I was minding my own business, waiting to share a drink with my brother. I can’t help it if the woman is bat-shit.”

“Watch your mouth,” Dermot said sharply. “That’s a young lady you’re talking about.”

He shuddered to think what Pop would say if he knew the kind of semipervy dreams Dylan was having about that particular young lady, crazy or not.

“Right. A young lady with a particular aversion to Christmas carols and a right hook that needs a little work.”

“Ah, well. She’s a troubled girl who could use a few friends in town. You treat her kindly, you hear me?”

When Dermot was riled, the Irish brogue he’d left behind on the shores of Galway when he was just a lad of six peeped out like clover in July.

“I hear you.”

“Now you had best be hurrying along if you’re to make it to meet your brother on time.”

“Yeah. Message received. I’m up. I’ll be there. I’m heading

into the shower right now.”

“See that you are.” Dermot’s voice was stern but he tempered it to add, “And I’ll expect to see both of my sons here afterward for a bite and any news from court.”

He hung up with his father and slid out of bed. After letting Tucker out with a quick check to make sure he didn’t have to plow again in order to make it down to the main canyon road, he hurried into the shower, trying to pretend he wasn’t wondering whether Genevieve would be there.

* * *

“NO. HELL NO. Are you freaking kidding me? That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. Absolutely not.”

Through her own shock at the proposal Andrew Caine had just laid out for the two of them, Genevieve found Dylan’s reaction fascinating.

“Geez, Dyl. Don’t hold back,” his brother said with a raised eyebrow. “Seriously, why don’t you tell us how you really feel?”

“You want to know how I really feel? I feel like I’ve just been steamrolled.”

“Come on. It’s a hundred hours of community service. It’s not like you’re being sentenced to hard labor on the chain gang. I hope I don’t need to tell you how far I’ve had to bend over in the last forty-eight hours to make this deal happen. You’re lucky you’re not serving hard time for assaulting two officers of the court.”

Beside her, she was aware of Dylan’s hand clenching on his

thigh. Despite the evidence of his frustration, she couldn't help thinking he looked quite different from the disreputable hellion who had brawled at The Speckled Lizard just a few nights earlier. Though his hair still needed a trim, he had shaved off the stubble that had made him look so dangerous, and he wore tan slacks, a light blue dress shirt and a shiny hammered silver bolo tie that gleamed in the fluorescent lights.

She wouldn't have taken him for the cowboy sort but the look somehow worked.

"I'll do the community service," he growled to his brother. "I've got no problem with that. Just not there. This is a damn setup, isn't it? They got to you, didn't they?"

Andrew Caine looked slightly bored. "Who's they?"

"Charlotte and Smoke Gregory. Since the moment the two of them hooked up, they've been trying to drag me into this stupid Warrior's Hope business. I won't do it. Have the judge throw me in jail for contempt if you have to, but I'm not going out there."

"What's the problem?" Genevieve asked. "I think it's a fantastic deal! My father has been calling me all weekend to warn me I could be going to prison if I didn't let him take over my defense. I'm really glad I didn't listen to him."

"Thank you. It's always nice to hear from a client who appreciates all my hard work."

"You're welcome."

From what she understood, Andrew had worked some kind of attorney magic. They only had to plead guilty to misdemeanor

assault and disturbing the peace charges and they would in turn be sentenced to a hundred hours of community service. If they were able to finish the hours before the New Year, their guilty pleas would be set aside and nothing would remain on their records.

“I’m not doing it,” Dylan said, his jaw set.

“Don’t be an asshat,” his brother said. “How hard can it be? It’s basically two weeks’ effort to keep from going to jail. Only an idiot would refuse a sweet deal like this.”

“I don’t want to work at A Warrior’s Hope,” he said through clenched teeth. “Charlotte and Spence know that.”

Genevieve didn’t know much about the organization, though she had heard it started up this summer while she had been in Paris.

When she arrived at the airport before Thanksgiving, she had been surprised to find Charlotte Caine, Dylan’s once-fat sister, at the baggage claim along with the town’s disgraced hero, former baseball star Spencer Gregory, helping a guy in a wheelchair in a Navy cap pick up his luggage.

She wasn’t sure what she found more stunning: how much weight Charlotte had lost or that she was apparently hooking up with Smokin’ Hot Spence Gregory, at least judging by the way they held hands like a couple of teenagers at the movies and even shared a quick kiss in a quiet moment.

Her parents had treated Charlotte and Spence with stiff politeness, not bothering to hide their disapproval. She thought

it was because of Spence's past but quickly found out otherwise. Spence had apparently been exonerated of all charges, something else she hadn't heard about in Paris. Instead, her father had spent the first ten minutes in the backseat of the car service grouching about A Warrior's Hope.

From their complaints, she figured out Charlotte and Spence had started the organization to provide recreational therapy to wounded veterans. Her father seemed to think Harry Lange was crazy to condone and even encourage it, which was one of the few times she had ever heard William complain about Harry.

She wasn't necessarily looking forward to helping out with the charity but it beat multiple alternatives she could think of, not the least of which was scrubbing toilets at the visitors' center.

"You don't have a lot of options here, Dylan," Andrew Caine went on. "The assistant district attorneys are pushing hard for jail time, especially since this isn't your first brush with the law in Hope's Crossing. Because I happen to be damn good at my job, I was able to talk them down off the ledge. Wounded war hero, bad press, yadda yadda yadda. This is a good deal. As your attorney and as your big brother, I have to advise you to take it. Both of you. You would be stupid to walk away."

"I'm taking it," Genevieve assured him quickly, before she could change her mind. Both of the Caine brothers shifted their gazes to her and she couldn't help compare the two. Even though he had cleaned up, Dylan still looked dangerous and rough, probably because of the eye patch, while Andrew had an

expensive haircut and wore a well-cut suit.

He was just the kind of guy she should find attractive—well, except for the wedding ring, the reportedly happy marriage and the two kids.

Somehow she found Dylan far more compelling, though she was quite sure all either Caine saw when they looked at her was a ditzy socialite.

I know just what Genevieve Beaumont is—a stuck-up snob with more fashion sense than brains, who wouldn't be caught dead in public with someone like me. Someone less than perfect.

She pushed the memory away. “Do you, er, have any idea what kind of things we might be required to do?” she asked Andrew.

She didn't have a lot of experience with people with disabilities or, for that matter, with warriors of any sort. Unless one counted women fighting over the sales rack at her favorite department store in Paris, which she doubted anyone would.

“You'll have to work that out with Spence and his staff. From what I understand, they have another group arriving for a session in a few days, and because of the holidays, they are in need of volunteers.”

“Sure. Why not,” Dylan said shortly. “Might as well waste the time and money of everybody in town.”

“You might think it's a waste of effort, but not everybody agrees with you,” Andrew answered. “Most people in Hope's Crossing think it's a great program. They are jumping at the chance to help make a difference in the lives of people who have

sacrificed for the sake of their country.”

The attorney’s voice had softened as he said the last part, Gen noted. He was watching his brother with an emotion that made her throat feel tight. Dylan looked down at the hand clenched on his leg.

“I don’t claim to be as smart as you. I don’t have a couple fancy degrees hanging on my wall. But be honest, Andrew. Do you really think a week in the mountains can make any kind of difference for guys whose lives are ruined?”

Was that how Dylan saw his own war injuries? Andrew’s jaw tightened, and she knew he was thinking the same thing.

“A hundred hours,” the attorney said instead. “You can finish that in a few weeks and put this whole thing behind you. Or,” he went on, “you can stand by your belief it’s a big waste of time and choose jail time instead. Before you do that, ask yourself if you really want to break Pop’s heart by spending the first Christmas in a decade when you haven’t been in the desert or the hospital, not with your family but in a jail cell.”

For just a brief moment, she caught a tangle of emotions in Dylan’s expression before he turned stoic once more.

“At least tell me the truth.” His voice was low, heated. “This was Charlotte’s idea, wasn’t it? She and Spence won’t back off. They’ve been riding me about this for weeks.”

“Neither of them had anything to do with it,” Andrew assured him. “If you want the truth, Pop suggested it. When he mentioned it, I thought it was a good idea and brought it up with the D.A.

They ran with it.”

“Remind me to take you off my Christmas list for the next twenty years or so,” Dylan growled.

“Like it or not, you’re in a unique position to help here,” Andrew said quietly. “Charlotte, Spence...everybody can give lip service about what it takes to walk that journey to healing but you’re right in the middle of it. You understand better than anyone.”

Genevieve’s face and neck felt hot as the sincerity of the words seemed to arrow straight to her stomach.

She thought she enjoyed such a cosmopolitan life, but she suddenly realized she knew nothing about the world. She hadn’t given men like Dylan a thought while she had been in Paris.

It made her feel small and selfish and stupid. He might think A Warrior’s Hope was a waste of time, but she resolved in that moment on a hard chair in her attorney’s office that she would do her best, even if the concept filled her with anxiety.

“Stand on your principles if you want,” Andrew went on when his brother remained silent. “What do I care? I get paid either way, though I will point out that I’ll be the one to get crap from Pop if you’re enjoying the county jail’s hospitality over the holidays.”

“Yeah, boo hoo.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “Right. Or you can just yank up your skivvies, suck it up and keep in mind it’s only for a few weeks. Lord knows, you’ve endured a hell of a lot worse than this.”

That hand clenched again on his thigh, then he slowly straightened long fingers. She was certain he would stick to his guns and refuse to agree to the plea agreement and she didn't want him to. She hated the idea of him spending time in jail, especially when she knew the whole thing was her fault.

"What's the big deal?" she said quickly. "Like your brother said, it's only a few weeks. It might even be fun."

"There you go," Andrew said dryly. "Listen to the woman. Lord knows, you could use a little fun."

She knew he was mocking her, that he probably thought she was some useless sorority girl out to have a good time, but in that moment she didn't care. Not if it meant Dylan Caine wouldn't have to spend Christmas in jail because of her.

The silence stretched out among the three of them like a string of too-taut Christmas lights, crackly and brittle, but after a long moment Dylan's shoulder brushed hers as he shrugged.

"Fine," he bit out. "A hundred hours and not a minute more."

The attorney exhaled heavily, and she realized he had been as anxious as she was. He had just been better at hiding it. "Excellent." Blue eyes like Dylan's gleamed with triumph. "I'll run these over to the courthouse and let the district attorney and the judge know you've both agreed. The paper work should be in order by Wednesday and you should be able to start the day after."

"Great. Can't wait for all that fun to begin," Dylan said.

"Someone from A Warrior's Hope will be in touch to let you

know details about what time to show up.”

“Thank you,” Genevieve said. “I appreciate your hard work.”

A small part of her had to wonder if her father or someone else in his firm might have been able to get all the charges dismissed, but she wasn't going to let herself second-guess her decision to have Andrew represent her.

“I've got some papers I'll need you to sign. Give me just a moment.”

He walked out of the office, and she shifted, nervous suddenly to be alone with Dylan. The events of Friday night seemed surreal, distant, as if they had happened to someone else. Had she really been handcuffed to the man in the backseat of a police car?

He was the first to break the silence. “I have to admit, I didn't really expect to see you here.”

“Why not? Did you think I would have preferred jail? I've heard it's horrible. My roommate in college was arrested after a nightclub bust for underage drinking. She said the food was a nightmare and her skin was never the same after the scratchy towels.”

“I guess taking the plea agreement was the right thing to do,” he drawled. “I wouldn't want to ruin my skin.”

He almost smiled. She could see one hovering there, just at the corner of his mouth, but at the last minute, he straightened his lips back into a thin line. It was too late. She had seen it. He did have a sense of humor, even if she had to pretend to be a ditzy socialite to bring it out.

“What I meant,” he went on, “was that I figured you would have second thoughts and go with your own in-house counsel. I can’t imagine the mayor is thrilled you’re letting a Caine represent you.”

An understatement. She had finally resorted to keeping her phone turned off over the weekend so she didn’t have to be on the receiving end of the incessant calls and texts.

“He didn’t have a choice, did he? I’m an adult. He might think he can dictate every single decision I make, but he’s wrong. He might be forcing me to stay in Hope’s Crossing but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let him strong-arm me in everything.”

“He’s forcing you to stay home? How did he do that? Cut off your credit cards?”

Right in one. Her mouth tightened at the accuracy of his guess. She was angry suddenly, at her parents for trying to manipulate her, at herself for finding herself in this predicament, even at Dylan. He had a huge, boisterous family that loved him. Even more, they seemed to respect him. She had witnessed both of his brothers trying to watch out for him while he only pushed them away.

She and Charlie hardly spoke anymore, both wrapped up in their separate worlds.

“None of your business,” she answered rudely. “Spending an evening handcuffed together doesn’t automatically make us best friends. Anyway, I’m still mad at you for what you said about me to your brother.”

Again that smile teased his mouth. “As you should be. If you remember, I did apologize.”

She made a huffing noise but didn’t have the chance to say anything else after his brother returned.

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, the deed was done.

“So that’s it?”

“On the judicial end. Now we turn you both over to Spence and his team at A Warrior’s Hope. You only need to fill your community-service hours. They’ll give the judge regular updates on the work you do there and whether it meets the conditions of the plea agreement.”

That wasn’t so bad, she supposed. It could have been much worse. She could only imagine her father coming in and trying to browbeat the judge, who happened to be one of few people in town who stood up to William, into throwing out all the charges.

“Thank you,” she said again to Andrew. “Dylan, I guess I’ll see you Thursday at A Warrior’s Hope.”

He made a face. “Can’t wait.”

With an odd feeling of anticlimax, she shrugged into her coat and gathered up her purse.

“Wait. I’ll walk out with you,” Dylan said.

She and Andrew both gave him surprised looks. “Okay,” she said.

Outside the courthouse, leaden clouds hung low overhead, dark and forbidding. They turned everything that same sullen

gray. In the dreary afternoon light, Hope's Crossing looked small, provincial, unappealing.

She could have been spending Christmas in the City of Lights, wandering through her favorite shops, enjoying musical performances, having long lunches with friends at their favorite cafés.

Paris at Christmas was magical. She had loved every minute of it the year before and had been anticipating another season with great excitement.

Instead, she was stuck in her grandmother's horrible, dark house, surrounded by people who disliked her. Now she had to spend the weeks leading up to Christmas trying to interact with wounded veterans. If they were all as grim-faced and churlish as Dylan Caine, she was in for a miserable time.

"Where are you parked? I'll walk you to your car."

She blinked in surprise at the unexpected courtesy. "That midblock lot over by the bike shop."

"I'm close to that, too."

They walked in silence for a moment, past the decorated windows of storefronts. She would have liked to window-shop but she didn't have any money to buy anything, so she couldn't see much point in it.

"Your brother did a good job," she finally said, just as they passed Dog-Eared Books & Brew, the bookstore and coffee shop owned by Maura McKnight. "We got off easier than I expected. We could have been assigned to pick up roadside trash

or something.”

“Is it too late for me to sign up for that?” he answered.

She made a face. “What’s the big deal? Why don’t you really want to help out at the recreation center? Your brother’s right. You understand better than anybody some of the challenges wounded veterans have to face.”

The clouds began to spit a light snowfall—hard, mean pellets that stung her exposed skin.

He was silent for a long moment, snow beginning to speckle his hair, and she didn’t think he would answer. She was just about to say goodbye and head for her car when he finally spoke. “I believe Spence and Charlotte had good intentions when they started the program.”

“But?”

“Nobody else on the outside understands what it’s like to have to completely reassess everything you do, everything you thought you were. I hate bolo ties.”

She blinked at the rapid shift in topic. “O-kay.”

“I hate bolo ties but here I am.” He aimed his thumb at his open coat, where she could see the string hanging around his collar, with that intricate silverwork disk at the center. “Andrew ordered me to wear a tie for the hearing. I can’t tie a damn tie anymore. After trying for a half hour, I finally just stopped at that new men’s store over on Front Street and bought this. It was either that or a clip-on, and I’m not quite there yet.”

She didn’t know what to say, especially as she could tell by his

expression that he was regretting saying anything at all to her.

She decided to go back to the fashionista ditz he called her. “Personally, I like bolo ties. They’re just retro enough to be cool without being ostentatious. Kind of rockabilly-hip.”

He snorted. “Yeah. That was the look I was going for. The point is, a couple of days playing in the mountains wouldn’t have a lot of practical value when the real challenges are these endless day-to-day moments when I have to deal with how everything is different now.”

She couldn’t even imagine. “I guess I can see that. But don’t you think there could be value in something that’s strictly for fun?”

“I don’t find too many things fun anymore,” he said, his tone as dark as those clouds as they walked.

“Maybe a couple days of playing in the mountains are exactly what you need,” she answered.

“Maybe.”

He didn’t elaborate and they walked in silence for another few moments. As they walked past one of her favorite boutiques, the door opened with a subtle chime and a few laughing women walked out, arms heavy with bags.

She didn’t recognize the blonde with the paisley scarf and the really great-looking boots, but the other one was an old friend.

“Natalie! Hello.”

The other woman stopped her conversation and her eyes went wide when she spotted her. “Gen! Hi.”

They air-kissed and then Natalie Summerville stepped back, giving a strange look to Dylan, who looked big and dangerous and still rather scruffy, despite his efforts to clean up for court.

“How are you?” Natalie asked. “I saw your mom at the spa the other day and she told me you were coming back for Thanksgiving.”

Yet you haven’t bothered to call me, have you?

Natalie had been a good friend once, close enough—she thought, anyway—that Genevieve had included her in her flock of seven bridesmaids. They had been on the cheerleading squad together in high school, had double-dated often at college, had even shared a hotel room in Mazatlán for spring break after junior year.

When she had been engaged, preparing to become Mrs. Sawyer Danforth of the Denver Danforths, Natalie had loved being her friend.

After Gen ended the engagement, she felt as if she had broken off with many of her friends, as well. Natalie and a few others had made it clear they didn’t understand her position. She and Sawyer weren’t married yet. Why couldn’t he have his fun while he still could? She had overheard Natalie say at a party that Genevieve was crazy for not just ignoring his infidelity and marrying him anyway.

Sometimes she wished she had.

“Are you heading back to Paris soon?”

“I’ll be here for a month or so. At least through Christmas.”

She imagined word would trickle out in their social circle about her parents' mandate and her enforced poverty, if it hadn't already. Her mother was not known for her discretion.

"Great. Good for you."

"We should do lunch sometime," Genevieve suggested. "I hear there are a few new restaurants in town since I've been gone."

"Yeah. Of course. Lunch would be...great." Genevieve didn't miss that Natalie had on her fake voice, the one she used at nightclubs when undesirable men tried to pick her up.

"I'll call you," Natalie said, with that same patently insincere smile.

"Or I can always call you."

"My schedule's kind of crazy right now. I don't know if you heard but I'm getting married in February. I think you know my fiancé. Stanton Manning."

He had been one of Sawyer's friends and cut from the same impeccably tailored cloth. "Of course. Stan the Man."

Her face felt frozen from far more than the ice crystals flailing into her. Natalie had been one of her bridesmaids, for heaven's sake, but hadn't bothered to even let Genevieve know she was engaged.

If she were fair, she would have to acknowledge that she hadn't been her best self during the humiliation of her marriage plans falling apart. She had been the one to drop all her friends first and flee Colorado as quickly as possible.

"I hadn't heard," she said now. "Congratulations."

“Thanks. I’m counting down the days. You know how that is.”

Natalie’s friend poked her and she flushed. “We’re honeymooning in Italy. He has an uncle who owns a palazzo on the Grand Canal in Venice with stunning views. It’s going to be unbelievable. Oh, and we’ve already bought a house together in Cherry Creek. You’ll have to see it next time you’re in Denver. Stunning. Just stunning. Six bedrooms, five bathrooms. It’s perfect for entertaining.”

“I’m very happy for you,” she said stiffly.

Okay, so Natalie was living the life she had expected, the one she had dreamed. Italian honeymoons, showplace houses, beautiful friends. She refused to let envy eat at her.

She gave Natalie another hug. “Seriously, I’m really happy for you. Be sure to tell Stanton congratulations from me, won’t you?”

“Definitely.” Natalie avoided her gaze and definitely didn’t risk any glances in Dylan’s direction. Her friend nudged her again and she gave that well-practiced smile again. “Well, we’d better go. We’re meeting people at Brazen. See you, Genevieve.”

“Bye,” she murmured.

Only after they walked away did she realize she hadn’t introduced Dylan. Despite the cold wind that seeped beneath her jacket and whipped her hair around, Genevieve could feel her face heat. A lousy mood was no excuse for poor manners.

He was gazing at her with an expression she couldn’t decipher but one that made her squirm. “Oh. You’re still here.”

“So they tell me.”

“You didn’t need to wait. I can find my own way to my car.”

As if to illustrate, she set off at a brisk pace toward the parking lot, still a few hundred yards away. She had only made it past one more storefront when her heel caught on a patch of ice and she started to flounder.

In a blink, he reached out to block her fall with his arm and his body. Instead of tumbling to the sidewalk, she fell against him and for a moment she could only stare up at him, that strong, handsome face now dominated by the black eye patch. He was still gorgeous, she realized, a little surprised. And he smelled delicious, clean and masculine.

A slow shock of heat seemed to sizzle inside her, and she couldn’t seem to make her limbs cooperate for a long moment. He gazed down at her, too, until a car passed by on Main Street, splattering snow, and she remembered where they were.

What was wrong with her? She couldn’t be attracted to Dylan Caine. She wouldn’t allow it. Genevieve jerked away from him, her face burning, and made a point to move as far away on the sidewalk as she could manage.

He watched her out of that unreadable gaze for a long moment. “Let’s get out of this snow.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way, until she reached the cute little silver BMW SUV her parents had given her when she graduated from college. At least they hadn’t taken that away, too.

At her SUV, she unlocked the door and he held it open for her.

Just as she was sliding in, Mr. Taciturn finally found his voice.

“Can I offer a little friendly advice?”

Her stomach tightened. “In my experience, when someone says that, a person usually can’t do much to shut them up.”

And the advice was rarely friendly, either, but she didn’t add that.

“Don’t I know it. I was just going to suggest that you might endure your hundred hours of service a little easier if you can get over being chickenshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know. The whole disgusted, freaking-out thing if one of the guys looks at you or, heaven forbid, dares to touch you only to keep you from falling on your ass.”

Her face heated all over again. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said stiffly.

She certainly couldn’t tell him she had freaked out because of her own inconvenient attraction.

“Goodbye. I’ll see you Thursday,” she said, then slammed her door shut, turned the key in the engine and sped out of the parking lot without looking back.

CHAPTER FOUR

THREE MORNINGS LATER, Genevieve was still annoyed with Dylan, with Natalie, with her parents—with the world in general—as she dressed carefully for her first day at A Warrior’s Hope. She really had no idea what to expect or what she might be asked to do, which made it difficult to determine appropriate

attire.

She finally selected black slacks and a delicious peach cashmere turtleneck she'd picked up at a favorite little boutique in Le Marais. Probably overkill, but she knew the color flattered her hair and eyes.

Or at least it usually did. Unfortunately, it clashed terribly with the overabundance of Pepto-Bismol-pink in Grandma Pearl's hideous bathroom.

This was her least favorite room in the house. How was she supposed to apply makeup when this washed her out so terribly? If she could afford it, she would renovate the entire room, but she doubted her budget would stretch to cover new bathroom fixtures.

She was just finishing her second coat of mascara with one eye on her watch when chimes rang out the refrain of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." Grandma Pearl's ghastly doorbell. She shoved the wand back into the tube and hurried through the house, curious and a little alarmed at who might be calling on her this early in the morning.

"Good. You are home." Her mother beamed at her as soon as Genevieve opened the door.

"Mother! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, that awful doorbell! Why haven't you changed it yet?"

"I'm still trying to figure out how. Seriously, why are you here?"

"I'm on my way to the salon. When you were at the house

the other day, I couldn't help noticing your nails. Horrible shape, darling. I thought I would treat you to a mani. I've already made the appointment with Clarissa. She had a tight schedule but managed to find room first thing this morning. Won't that be fun?"

Her mother gave her a hopeful look and Genevieve scrambled for a response. Since the end of her engagement—and the subsequent death of all Laura Beaumont's thinly veiled ambitions to push them both into the higher echelons of Denver society—Genevieve's interactions with her mother had been laced with heavy sighs, wistful looks, not-so-subtle comments about this gathering, that event.

Being married to one of the most financially and politically powerful men in small Hope's Crossing wasn't enough for Laura. She had always wanted more. When she was engaged to Sawyer and she and Laura worked together to create the wedding of the century, Genevieve had finally felt close to her mother.

She had missed that closeness far more than she missed Sawyer.

"I can't," she said regretfully. "I'm starting my community service today."

Laura gave a dismissive wave of pink-tipped fingers that looked perfectly fine to Genevieve. "Oh, that. Well, you can just start tomorrow, can't you? I'm sure they won't mind. I'll have your father give them a call."

This was her family in a nutshell. Her mother didn't

understand anything that interfered with her own plans, and when she encountered an obstacle, she expected William Beaumont to step in and fix everything.

When Gen's younger brother, Charlie, had been arrested for driving under the influence in an accident that had actually resulted in the death of one of his friends, William had been unable to prevent him from pleading guilty. Charlie had served several months at a youth corrections facility, and Laura hadn't spoken to her husband for weeks.

Now both of their children had been embroiled in legal difficulties. She imagined Laura found it much easier to pretend the whole thing hadn't happened.

"I don't believe it's that simple, Mother," Gen said. "It's court-mandated. I have to show up or I could go to jail."

Laura pouted. "Well, what am I supposed to tell Clarissa? She's expecting us."

How about the truth? That you see the world only the way you want to see it?

"Tell her I have another obligation I couldn't escape. I'm sure she'll understand."

Laura gave a frustrated little huff. "I was looking so forward to finding a moment to catch up with you. We hardly talk when you call from France. I can't say I agreed with your father's decision to cut you off financially. I tried my best to talk him out of it. I told him you were having a wonderful time in Paris, that you needed this time and why shouldn't you take it? As usual, he

wouldn't listen to me. You know how he can be when he's in a mood. Still, I told myself at least this would give me the chance to spend a little more time with you, darling."

Her parents drove her crazy sometimes...she couldn't deny that. These past two years away had helped her see their failings more clearly, but she still loved them.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could go," she said, not untruthfully.

"I understand. You have to do what you must. I'll see if I can reschedule for tomorrow."

"Mother, I'll be going to the center tomorrow, too. And the day after that."

"Every day?"

Laura obviously didn't quite grasp the concept of a commuted sentence. "I have a hundred hours of community service to complete in only a few weeks. Yes, I'll probably be going every day between now and Christmas."

"This is what happens when you decided not to have your father represent you. He could have had the whole misunderstanding thrown out."

Like Charlie's little "misunderstanding" that had killed one girl and severely injured another? William had been helpless to fix that situation. Charlie had taken full responsibility for his actions and had come out of his time in youth corrections a different young man, no longer sullen and angry.

"It's done now," she said. "I'm sorry, Mother, but I really need to go or I'll be late for my first day."

“Well, will you come back to the house instead of staying in this horrible place? Then I would at least have a chance to catch up with you in the evenings.”

Again, her mother saw what she wanted to.

“I can’t. My evenings will be spent here, trying to do what I can to prepare this house for sale. Dad didn’t give me any other choice.”

“He has your best interests at heart, my dear. You know that, don’t you?”

“He might have thought he did. We have differing opinions on what the best thing for me might be.”

Not that anything was new there. Her father had notoriously found her lacking in just about every arena. He thought she had been wasting her time to obtain a degree in interior design, nor could he see any point in the sewing she had always loved or the riding lessons she tolerated.

The only time either of her parents seemed to approve of her had been during her engagement.

“Will you at least go to dinner with us this weekend? With Charlie back in California for his finals week, the house is too quiet.”

“I’ll try,” she promised. She ushered her mother out with a kiss on the cheek and firmly closed the door, practically in her face.

After Laura drove away, Genevieve hurriedly grabbed one of the totes she loved to make and headed out the door, fighting down a whirl of butterflies in her stomach.

For two days, she had been having second—and third and fourth and sixtieth—thoughts about this community-service assignment with A Warrior’s Hope. She couldn’t think of a job less suited to her limited skill set than helping wounded veterans. What did she know about their world? Next to nothing. Most likely, she would end up saying something stupid and offensive and none of them would want anything to do with her.

A hundred hours could turn into a lifetime if she screwed this up.

By the time she drove into the parking lot of the Hope’s Crossing Recreation Center in Silver Strike Canyon, the butterflies were in full-fledged stampede mode.

She was five minutes early, she saw with relief as she climbed out of her SUV and walked into the building.

Construction on the recreation center had been under way during her last visit home for Pearl’s funeral. The building was really quite lovely, designed by world-renowned architect Jackson Lange. Created of stone, cedar planks and plenty of glass, the sprawling structure complemented the mountainous setting well for being so large.

It also appeared to be busy. The parking lot was filled with several dozen cars, which she considered quite impressive for a weekday morning in December.

She wasn’t exactly sure how A Warrior’s Hope fit into the picture, but she supposed she had a hundred hours to figure that out.

The butterflies went into swarm-mode as she walked through the front doors into a lobby that wouldn't have looked out of place in one of the hotels at the ski resort.

She stood for a moment just inside the sliding glass doors, hating these nerves zinging through her. Spying a sign that read A Warrior's Hope at one desk, she drew in a steady breath in an effort to conceal her anxiety and approached.

The woman seated behind the computer was younger than Genevieve and busy on a phone call that seemed to revolve around airline arrangements. She held up a finger in a universal bid for patience and finished her call.

"Sorry," she said when she replaced the phone receiver on the cradle. "I've been trying to reach the airline for days to make sure they know we need special arrangements to transport some medical equipment when our new guys arrive next week."

"Ah." Gen wasn't quite sure what else to say. "I'm Genevieve Beaumont. I believe you were expecting me."

The woman looked blank for a moment then her face lit up. "Oh! You're one of the community-service people. Spence said you were coming today. Our computers have been down. No internet, no email, and wouldn't you know, our IT guy is on vacation. I've been so crazy trying to track down somebody else to help I forgot you were coming. I'm Chelsea Palmer. I'm the administrative assistant to Eden Davis, the director of A Warrior's Hope."

"Hi, Chelsea."

She didn't recognize the young woman and couldn't see any evidence Chelsea knew her—or of her—either.

“I don't suppose you know anything about computers, do you?” the woman asked hopefully.

Gen gave a short laugh. “On a good day, I can usually figure out how to turn them on but that's the extent of my technical abilities. And sometimes I can't even do that.”

Chelsea gave her a friendly smile. She was quite pretty, though she wore a particularly unattractive shade of yellow. She could also use a little more subtlety in her makeup.

Gen certainly wasn't going to tell her that. Instead, she would relish the promise of that friendly smile. Around Hope's Crossing, she found it refreshing when people didn't know who she was. Here, many saw her as snobbish and cold. She had no idea how to thaw those perceptions.

She had loved that about living in Paris, where her friends didn't care about her family, her connections, her past.

“Thanks anyway,” Chelsea said. “I'll figure something out. My ex-boyfriend works in IT up at the resort. He agreed to come take a look at things.”

“Even though he's an ex?” She hadn't spoken with Sawyer since the day she threw his ring back at him.

“I know, right? But we left things on pretty good terms. He's not a bad guy.... He was only a little more interested in his video games than me, you know? I decided that wasn't for me.”

“Understandable.”

Chelsea's gaze shifted over Gen's shoulder and her face lit up. "Hey, Dylan! Eden said you would be stopping in this morning."

"And here I am. Hi. Chelsea, right?"

"One two-second conversation in line at the grocery store and you remembered my name."

Gen didn't like the way all her warm feelings toward the other woman trickled away. Friends weren't that easy to come by here in Hope's Crossing. She certainly couldn't throw one away because she was feeling unreasonably territorial toward Dylan, even if she had been the one shackled to the man.

She didn't blame Chelsea for that little moment of flirtatiousness. Dylan still needed a haircut. Regardless, he looked quite delicious. Even the black eye patch only made him more attractive somehow, probably because the eye not concealed behind it looked strikingly blue in contrast.

She thought of that moment when she had nearly fallen on the ice a few days earlier, when he had caught her and held her against his chest for a heartbeat.

And then the humiliation of his words, basically accusing her of being so shallow she recoiled in disgust when he touched her, which was so not true.

"Genevieve." He again said her name as her Parisian friends did and for some strange reason she found the musical syllables incredibly sexy spoken in that gruff voice.

"Is that how you say your name?" Chelsea asked in surprise. "I thought it was Gen-e-vieve."

She managed to tamp down the inappropriate reaction to the man. “Either way works,” she said to Chelsea. “Or you could simply call me Gen.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that.”

The young woman turned her attention back to Dylan. She tucked her hair behind her ear—her pointy ear, Gen thought, before she chided herself for her childishness in noticing. She was a horrid person, as superficial as everyone thought.

“We’re all so excited you’re finally coming to help us,” Chelsea said. “Eden has been over the moon since she heard about your, er, little brush with the law.”

“Good to know I could make everybody’s day,” he said dryly, but Chelsea didn’t appear to notice.

“It’s going to be perfect,” she exclaimed. “You’re going to be great! Exactly what we need.”

She had said nothing of the sort to Genevieve, yet another piece of evidence in what she was beginning to suspect—that her presence was superfluous here, an unnecessary addendum. The organizers of the program wanted Dylan to help out at A Warrior’s Hope because of his own perspective and experience. She, on the other hand, was little more than collateral damage.

“Where is Eden?” she finally interjected.

“She’s at the pool with Spence and our new program coordinator, Mac Scanlan.”

“I thought Eden was in charge,” Genevieve said.

“Technically, she is. She’s the executive director, in charge of

fundraising, planning, coordinating events etc. We just hired a new person to actually run the activities. He's spending the day familiarizing himself with the facilities. She told me to send you to the pool the minute you both arrive."

Which had been several minutes earlier, but who was counting?

"Thanks," Genevieve said.

"I'm supposed to make you ID badges first, but we'll have to do that later, when my system is back in action. You know where to go, right? Through the main doors there and down the first hall."

Dylan seemed reluctant to move. Apparently Genevieve would have to take the lead. She followed Chelsea's directions, aware of him coming up behind her.

"You made it," she said to Dylan as they entered the hallway.

"You didn't think I'd show?"

"Given your general reluctance to this whole idea, I guess I wouldn't have been surprised if you had decided you'd rather go to jail."

"I'm still not discounting that possibility."

She smiled a little. "I don't even know what I'm doing here. Chelsea's right. You are in a far better position than anybody else, especially me."

"So everybody says. I'm not seeing it."

"You know what it's like to be injured in battle, to have to rebuild your life."

“Right. I’m doing a hell of a job, aren’t I?”

Genevieve flashed him a quick look. “Better than I would in your situation,” she answered truthfully.

“You would probably start designing a fashion line for one-armed pirate wannabes and go on to make millions of dollars.”

She laughed. “The only one-armed pirate wannabe I know doesn’t seem particularly interested in fashion.”

He gave her a mock offended look. “What do you mean? I wore a bolo, didn’t I? I thought I was going for the hipster look.”

“Or something,” she answered.

He snorted but said nothing as they moved toward the door at the end of the hall where she could see the flickering blue of water.

“You were wrong the other day,” she said when they nearly reached it.

He paused and gave her a curious look. “You’ll have to be more specific. I’m wrong about a lot of things.”

She fiercely wished she hadn’t said anything but she couldn’t figure out a way to back down now.

“Er, you implied I flinched away when you touched me—that I was, I don’t know, disgusted or something because you’re, er, missing your arm. That wasn’t it. You just...” Her voice trailed off.

“I just...” he prodded.

“You make me nervous,” she said in a rush. “It has nothing to do with any eye patch or...or missing hand. It’s just...you.”

His eyebrow rose and he studied her for a long moment, so long she could feel herself flush. “How refreshingly honest of you, Ms. Beaumont.”

“I just didn’t want you to think I’m— What’s the word you used? Er, chickenshit.”

He laughed as she pushed open the door to the pool area and the sound echoed through the cavernous space.

Several people congregating beside the pool looked over at the sound and Genevieve recognized Spence Gregory and Dylan’s sister, Charlotte, as well as a man in a wheelchair and another woman she didn’t know.

“I wasn’t sure you would make it,” Spence said to Dylan when they reached them, holding out his hand. After a slight pause, Dylan took it.

“Why does everybody keep saying that?” he asked.

“No reason.” Charlotte hugged him and he gave her an awkward sort of pat with his right arm.

“I’m so glad you agreed to do this,” his sister said.

“You made it impossible for me to refuse, didn’t you?”

“Don’t blame me. It was all Pop’s idea, and Andrew’s the one who ran with it. Though I probably should confess that Spence might have mentioned to Harry Lange how much we’d like to have you volunteer here and I believe Harry might have mentioned it to Judge Richards during one of their poker games.”

Charlotte stepped away from her brother and gave Genevieve a cool smile. “Hello, Genevieve. We’re glad you agreed to help,

too. We have a strong core of volunteers already, but we're always glad for more."

Genevieve had enough experience with polite falsehoods to recognize one when she heard it. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. Charlotte probably blamed her for her brother's troubles in the first place.

"I'm happy to help." She was an old hand at polite falsehoods herself.

Spencer Gregory stepped up. "Good to see you again. I didn't have the chance to say hello when we saw you at the airport last week."

He really was gorgeous up close. She didn't follow baseball but she knew Smokin' Hot Spence Gregory was a nickname given only in part for the man's fastball. Oddly, despite those long lashes and that particularly charming smile, he didn't make her nerves flutter at all, unlike others in the room she could mention.

"My father loved to tell business associates from out of town how you used to be our paper boy."

"I hope I was a good one."

"The best, according to my father."

Spence smiled and gestured to the other two people. "Dylan, Genevieve, this is Eden Davis, our executive director, and Mac Scanlan, who just started this week as our program coordinator."

"What is your role at A Warrior's Hope?" Genevieve asked, trying to keep things straight in her head.

"I'm the director of the entire recreation center. A Warrior's

Hope is only one part of what we do here.”

“But it was his idea and he’s the fundraising genius behind it.” Charlotte smiled with far more warmth than she had shown Genevieve. Spence aimed that charmer of a grin down at her, and even if she hadn’t seen them together at the airport, she would have easily picked up that the two of them were together.

The once-fat-and-frumpy Charlotte Caine was involved with Smokin’ Hot Spence Gregory. She still couldn’t quite believe it.

“It’s become Charlotte’s baby, too. She organizes all the volunteers.”

“What do you think we’ll be doing?” she asked. “I’m really good at filing, correspondence, that kind of thing. And I’ve had a little experience with fundraising for a few charities my family supports.”

“Just for the record, I’m not good at any of those things,” Dylan offered.

Charlotte gave her brother a sly smile. “I’ve got just the project for both of you. Yesterday Sam Delgado, our contractor, and his crew put the finishing touches on several cabins for our guests. The first group to use them will be coming in first thing Monday morning. Before they arrive, we need to decorate the cabins for Christmas. That’s where you two come in.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THIS WAS HIS version of hell.

Yeah, he had spent a combined total of six of the past ten years in the Middle East through his various deployments, four

of those in direct combat. He was a trained army ranger, sent in to dangerous hot spots for difficult missions.

He had seen and done things that kept him up nights—and had spent months in rehab, a very special kind of misery.

He would rather go back to living in a tent where the sand seeped into every available crevice, wearing seventy-five pounds of gear in a-hundred-twenty-degree weather without showering for weeks, than endure this torture his wicked sister had planned for him.

He stood in a large storage room in a back corner of the recreation center surrounded by boxes and crates.

“Isn’t there something else I could be doing right now?” he asked, with more than a little desperation.

“I can’t think of a thing,” Charlotte said cheerfully. “We want these cabins to be perfect, a home away from home for these guys—and one woman—while they’re here. We want to make this a perfect holiday.”

He wanted to tell his sister she was wasting her time, but he had already tooted that particular horn enough.

“We’ll do a fabulous job. Don’t worry.” Genevieve beamed with excitement. Why shouldn’t she? This was probably right up her alley. Hang some lights, put up a few ornaments. Nothing so uncomfortable as actually talking to any wounded veterans—present company excluded.

He remembered what she had said earlier—that he made her nervous and it had nothing to do with his physical disfigurements.

He didn't believe her. Not really. How could he? She was a perfect, pampered little princess and he was scarred and ugly. They were Beauty and the Beast, only this particular beast couldn't be twinkled back into his old self, the one without missing parts.

"I'm sure you will, Genevieve," Charlotte was saying. "You have such an instinctive sense of style. When I heard about your little, uh, legal trouble, I knew you would be perfect to help us get the cabins ready for their first guests."

Genevieve looked surprised and flattered at Charlotte's words. "I graduated with a degree in interior design," she said. "Eventually I hope to open my own design firm."

"Then you really are perfect."

"I'll do my best. I saw some really beautiful lights in Paris. They had these little twinkly snowflakes and each one was unique. They were stunning. You don't have anything like that, do you?"

Charlotte pressed her lips together to keep in the smile he could see forming there. "We didn't buy our lights in Paris this year," she said with a dryness he wasn't sure Gen would catch. "You'll have to be content with the cheap ones from the big box store."

"I suppose we can make those work," she answered.

"You'll have to, I'm afraid."

"What about the trees?"

"Also from a big box store. But they're all prelit, which is a

big plus.”

“We’ll make it wonderful. You’ll see. Won’t we, Dylan?”

“Wonderful,” he repeated. Why did he suddenly feel as if he’d been dragged by a couple of high-school cheerleaders to help decorate for a homecoming dance?

He could really use a beer right about now.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?” he asked Charlotte, mostly to change the subject from snowflakes and Christmas trees. “Who’s running Sugar Rush while you’re here bossing around the reprobate help?”

Her haughty look rivaled anything Genevieve Beaumont might deliver.

“I have a staff, you know. They’re very qualified to run the place without me.”

“Even at Christmas, the busiest time of year?”

“Even then. I took today and Monday off so I can help Eden and Spence get everything ready for the group coming in next week.”

She glowed whenever she talked about the things she loved: their family, her gourmet candy store in town, A Warrior’s Hope...and Spencer Gregory and his daughter, Peyton.

He still wasn’t sure how he felt about Spence and Charlotte together. When they were growing up, the man had been one of his closest friends. They had gone on camping trips together, played ball, even double-dated a time or two.

Their lives had taken very different paths in the years since

Spence's mom used to work at Pop's café, Dylan's to the military and Spence's to a life of fame and riches—and eventual scandal—in Major League Baseball. Dylan still wasn't convinced the guy was good enough for his baby sister but it was obvious the two were crazy in love.

“I hope this doesn't sound rude,” Genevieve said, “but I have to say it. You look completely amazing.”

Charlotte looked startled. “Thank you. Why would that be rude?”

“Just because...you know. How you were before.”

Charlotte had always been amazing, as far as Dylan was concerned. Kind and funny and generous. Trust Genevieve not to be able to see past a few extra pounds.

“I just think it's fantastic. It must have been so difficult to lose all that weight when you spend all day surrounded by all those empty calories at your store,” she went on. “How did you do it?”

Charlotte looked a little disconcerted by the blunt question. “Willpower, I suppose.” Her gaze flickered to Dylan then back to Gen.

“The truth is, when Dylan almost died last year, I realized how off track my own life had become. While he lay in a hospital bed fighting to survive, I realized my own unhealthy habits were slowly killing me. I had been given the precious gift of life and I was wasting it. Dylan's challenges had been thrust upon him, but I was choosing mine every day. It was pretty sobering.”

How had this become about him? Dylan shifted, wishing he

could still tell his sister to shut up—though even when they were kids, if Pop had heard him, he would have had to scrub dishes at the café for a week.

He didn't like to think about that miserable time when antibiotic-resistant infections had ravaged his system and left him as weak as a baby—and he especially didn't like Charlotte giving Genevieve one more reason to see him as an object of pity.

He jumped up. "I'm going to start hauling some of these boxes down to the cabins."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Charlotte said. "I can grab a couple of the guys who work at the recreation center to help."

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