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MY KIND *of* CHRISTMAS



A VIRGIN RIVER NOVEL

Patrick Riordan always thought that nothing could match the adrenaline rush he gets from his job. But this Christmas, Patrick's pulse is really racing...

The Riordan brothers may have a reputation for being rough-and-tumble, but Patrick has always been the gentle, sweet-natured one. These days, his easygoing manner is being tested by his high-octane career as a navy pilot. But for the Riordan brothers, when the going gets tough...the tough find the love of a good woman.

Except the woman who has caught Patrick's attention is Jack Sheridan's very attractive niece.

Angie LeCroix comes to Virgin River to spend Christmas relaxing, away from her well-intentioned but hovering mother. Yet instead of freedom, she gets Jack Sheridan. If her uncle had his way, she'd never go out again. And certainly not with rugged, handsome Patrick Riordan. But Angie has her own idea of the kind of Christmas she wants—and the kind of man!

Patrick and Angie thought they wanted to be left alone this Christmas—until they meet each other. Then they want to be left alone together. But the Sheridan and Riordan families have different plans for Patrick and Angie—and for Christmas, Virgin River-style!

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appreciation and deep affection.

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One

“I think a little vacation in Virgin River is exactly what Angie needs,” Sam Sheridan announced as he looked around the table at his family, all gathered at his home for Thanksgiving dinner. Angie gave her grandfather a grateful smile, relieved to finally have someone on her side. “She’s been through quite an ordeal,” Sam continued, “and I think medical school can wait while she figures things out. A little rest and relaxation—a chance to visit with the rest of the family—it will do her worlds of good.”

“Well, I think if anyone knows what’s good for Angie, it’s me,” Donna replied sternly, glaring daggers at her father. “A visit with Jack, Mel and Brie sounds all well and good, but I’m her mother, and I’ve supported her from the day she was born. A vacation should be the furthest thing from her mind right now. The accident—” She hesitated, glancing over at Angie. “Well, let’s be honest, Angie—the accident has really...affected you. There’s nothing that needs ‘figuring out.’ You need to get back on track academically as soon as possible. That’s where your focus should be. That’s where it was before.”

Before. It seemed for Angie as though things would forever be divided into life before the accident and life afterward. While there wasn’t much that she remembered from the car accident itself, there were certainly a few moments that stuck out in her mind. She remembered how close she came to dying that cold, drizzly March evening, lying in an emergency room covered with blood, and that it was her long-dead grandmother who was attempting to help her cross to the other side. She hadn’t told anyone in her family about that little detail. Why bother? Some of them already thought she was half crazy.

On the day of the accident, Angie had been the passenger in a car with her friend. A car on the opposing interstate lane had lost control, crossed the median and hit two oncoming cars—including the one Angie had been traveling in. The crash could’ve been caused by a flat tire or from the driver’s attempt to avoid another car, but there was no clear villain, no alcohol or drugs to blame. It was truly an accident.

The driver of the other car had been killed, everyone else injured, Angie the worst. She’d suffered a couple of serious fractures for which surgery had been required. She also lost her spleen, had a collapsed lung and a titanium rod had been placed in her left femur. But the big issue had been the head injury—there had been an impressive laceration on the back of her head and, while there was no open fracture, her brain began to swell and the neurosurgeon had needed to implant a shunt to drain the edema. After her surgery, Angie had been in a coma for three days and had to fight her way back to the world through a postanesthetic and pain-med haze. Friends, family and medical experts had wondered for weeks if this bright, driven young medical student would have any mental handicaps as a result.

She did not.

However, as often happens, the experience changed Angie forever. And those changes were what had led to the current impasse between Angie and her mother, a university professor who wanted to see Angie back in med school as quickly as possible. Today, Angie was fully recovered from her accident and could have gone back to school in September, but she’d chosen not to.

“Well, maybe a brief break from school is within reason,” her father, Bob, said to Donna cautiously once the rest of the family was happily starting dessert and the three of them had offered to start the dishes in the kitchen. Angie rolled her eyes. She knew he’d remain on the fence to avoid an argument with her mother.

But Donna wasn’t nearly so reserved with her opinion. “This is completely unacceptable, Angie,” she said stiffly. “You’ve worked far too hard to reach this point in your studies, and we’ve contributed far too much for you to waste it all on a whim.”

Angie was shocked and suddenly angry. Concern was one thing, but this? She was done having her parents, mostly her mother, decide things like this for her. “I might not want to continue medical school! I might want to make macramé flower pot holders for the rest of my life! Or grow herbs! Or hitchhike across Europe! I don’t know what I want to do right now, but whatever it is, it’s going to be up to me!”

“Don’t be absurd,” Donna announced in her typically dismissive way. “You’re not yourself at all right now. It’s obvious the accident has affected your personality more than you realize, Angie. Once you get back to school, you’ll be yourself again.”

Personality change? Angie didn’t agree, except that she’d grown surprisingly stubborn. “Actually, I think I’ve finally found my personality. And you know what, Mom? I think it’s remarkably like yours.”

If the accident had any affect at all, it had been through a close-up view of how unpredictable and tenuous life could be. One minute you’re buzzing along the freeway, singing along to the radio, the next you’re looking down on yourself, watching as medical staff frantically work to save your life and you see your dead grandmother across a chasm of light.

Once she realized she had barely survived, every day dawned brighter, the air drawn into her lungs more precious, the beat of her heart lighter despite the colossal importance of what had happened. She was filled with a sense of gratitude and became contemplative, viewing the smallest detail of living with huge significance. Things she had previously taken for granted now took on a greater significance. There was no detail she was willing to miss: she stopped to have long conversations with grocery-store bag boys, corner flower peddlers, librarians, booksellers and school crossing guards. In short, life was different now for Angie, and she was enjoying every minute of it.

She’d also looked back at the life she’d lived so far and had some regrets—specifically about dedicating so much time to study that she had few friends. Many study partners, but only a few friends. She’d said no to far too many parties and dances for the sake of grades. For God’s sake, she was already twenty-three and she’d had only two boyfriends! Both pretty inadequate, come to think of it. Was life all about books? Didn’t well-rounded adults know how to play? While her few girlfriends were dating, traveling, exploring, getting engaged, what was Angie doing? Making Mama proud.

She was going to fix that if she could. “Mom, I love you, but I’ve made my decision. Medical school can wait. I’m going to Virgin River.”

* * *

Angela LaCroix pulled up to Jack’s Bar on the day after Thanksgiving and parked right next to her aunt Brie’s car. She gave a double toot of her horn before she jumped out and dashed up the steps and into the bar. There they were, waiting for her—Jack, Mel and Brie. Angie’s smile was so big she thought her face might crack.

“You made it,” Jack said. He rushed around the bar and picked her up in his embrace. Then he put

her on her feet and said, "I thought you might be bound, gagged and held prisoner in Sacramento."

"It didn't get physical," she said with a laugh. "However, Mom isn't speaking to any of you."

"That's a relief," Jack said. "Then she won't be calling five times a day."

"Come here, kitten," Brie said, edging Jack out of the way to hug Angie. Then Mel jumped off her stool and joined the hug. "It's so good to have you here," Brie said. "Your mom will come around."

"Fat chance," Jack said. "I don't know anyone who can hold a grudge longer than Donna."

"I hope I didn't cause a rift in the whole family," Angie said.

Jack walked back around behind the bar. "Sheridans," he grumbled. "We hang together pretty well in tough times, but we've been known to have a lot of differences of opinion. Bottom line is, you're welcome here anytime. You always have a place at my house."

"And mine," Brie said.

Angie chewed her lower lip for a moment. "Okay, here's the thing. I appreciate it, I do, and I plan to spend a lot of time with you, but I was wondering, hoping, that you wouldn't mind letting me use that little cabin in the woods." She took a breath. "I need some space. Honest to God."

Silence hung in the air. "Is that a fact?" Jack finally said.

Angie took a stool and her two aunts automatically framed her on their own stools. "That is a fact. Space...and I wouldn't mind a beer. And maybe some takeout. It was a long drive."

Jack served up a beer, very slowly. "There's no TV out there," he said.

"Good. But there's an internet connection, right?"

"It's slow, Ange," Mel pointed out. "Not as slow as dial-up was, but it's finicky. The internet connection in our guesthouse is much—"

"I think it's an outstanding idea," Brie said, smiling at Angie. "Try it out. If it gets a little too quiet, I have a guest room and Mel has the guesthouse."

"Thanks, Brie."

"Hey, when you're running away from home, you should at least have your choice of accommodations," Brie added.

"I'm not really running away.... Well, okay, I guess that is what I'm doing. Thanks, you guys. Seriously, thanks."

Mel laughed. "It's not exactly an original idea. Brie and I both landed here because we were running away from stuff. I'm going to go get Preacher and Paige. They've been so anxious to see you. And I'll call your folks to tell them you made it here safely."

"You had no trouble driving?" Jack asked.

"I like driving, but my dad insisted we swap cars. I have his SUV and he has my little Honda," she said. "But I wasn't nervous. Maybe because I don't remember the accident."

But Angie didn't want to dwell on what had happened. She was here to relax, to escape, to move forward with her life. Changing the subject, she asked, "And did everyone have a great Thanksgiving?"

"I might never eat again," Brie said. "How about you?"

"We were all at Grandpa's and it was good, except for a little melodrama about me leaving for a month. Between the aunts, uncles and cousins there seems to be quite a diversity of opinion on how I should live my life."

"I imagine. And what did Sam say?" Brie asked of her father.

"Grandpa thought it was an excellent idea to come up here for a little while and he reminded us all that you did that yourself, Brie."

"And you know what? He was very supportive and encouraging at the time, even though he was at

least as worried about me as your parents are about you. He had guessed I was in love. Your grandpa a pretty modern, savvy guy.”

“Yes,” Angie said quietly. She was close to Sam Sheridan and had often wished, over the past nine months, that she could tell him she had seen Grandma and that she had looked wonderful. But she wasn’t sure she hadn’t been dreaming or hallucinating, and second, Grandma had been gone such a long time. She didn’t want to stir up grief in her grandpa.

Preacher came out of the kitchen with a look of stun and awe on his face as he pulled off his apron and tossed it over the bar before grabbing Angie up in his big arms, spinning her right off her stool. “Aw, girl, girl, girl,” he said, hugging her tight. Then he held her away and looked her over. “You are beautiful!” And then he had to let go of her to wipe his eyes.

“Preach,” she said, laughing.

Paige slipped around her husband, giving Angie a warm hug. “I’m so glad you’re here,” she said softly.

“Your big scary husband is crying.”

“I know,” she said. “He’s such a softie. He’s the last person you want to meet in a dark alley, but he’s so tenderhearted. He cries at Disney movies and Hallmark commercials.”

“Yesterday I cried over football,” he said. “It was pathetic all day. I’m just so damn glad to see you Ange. Your uncle Jack was a mess while you were in the hospital, he was so worried.”

“And as you can see, all is well,” she said.

“Mel says you want a takeout. I’ll make you anything you want—you just tell me what.”

“I’ll have whatever’s on the menu and a bottle of wine. Do you have any sauvignon blanc?”

“Are you sure you’re allowed alcohol?” Jack asked.

“Yes,” she said with a laugh, holding up her glass. “Hence the beer I’m drinking. I promise not to get wasted. But, gee, some of Preacher’s dinner, a glass of wine, a fire, a book, peace and quiet... Oh Jack, there are logs out there, right?”

“You’re all set,” he said. “Do you know how to light the fire?”

She rolled her eyes. “Preacher, do you suppose I could do a little graze through your kitchen? Grab some staples—a few eggs, some milk, bread, that sort of thing? In case I wake up starving?”

“Absolutely,” he said.

Although it was soft and low, Angie heard someone clear his throat. There, at the end of the bar in the corner was a lone man in an army-green, down-padded jacket. He had dark hair, an empty beer glass and some money in his hand.

Jack turned to him, took his money and said, “Thanks, bud. See you around.”

“Have a nice reunion,” the man said, moving to leave.

He was so tall—that was what Angie noticed first. As tall as her uncle Jack. And his dark hair had some red in it. Dark auburn. She’d never seen that combination before, unless it was on a woman and had come out of a bottle. Usually red shades were found in blond or light brown hair. The stubble on his cheeks had a tinge of red, too.

As he walked toward the door, their eyes met and Angie felt her cheeks grow warm—he’d caught her staring. He had the greenest eyes she’d ever seen. They had to be contacts. He gave her a half smile and then he turned and was gone.

“Wow,” she said. “Whew. Who’s the hottie?”

Brie laughed and said, “I think our girl is fully recovered.”

Jack let go a little growl. “He’s not the one for you,” he said.

Angie looked around at all the smiling faces—Brie, Paige, Preacher... “Gee, did I ask if he was

right for me?"

Preacher chortled loudly, another thing the big cook seldom did. "Patrick Riordan," he told her. "He's here sitting out a little leave. He's Navy. I think he got hurt or something."

"Nah, he didn't get hurt," Jack clarified. "Luke said there was an accident during his last deployment and he decided to take a little leave or something. Riordans, good people, but that one's got troubles right now. You might want to give him a wide berth. I don't know all the details, but it sounds like combat issues...."

"Yeah, we wouldn't want to get mixed up with anyone with *combat issues*," Preacher joked. And Jack glared at him. Preacher put a big hand on Angie's shoulder and said, "He's been kind of quiet and grumpy while he's been in town. If you got to know him a little, you know what? I bet he wouldn't cheer you up that much."

That made Angie laugh. "Well, how about that—we both had accidents. Now, what's for dinner, Preach?"

"Big surprise, turkey soup. It'll keep you very healthy. I boiled two carcasses all day. Homemade noodles—the best. Even though it's not raining, I baked bread."

Her mouth began to water. "I'm in."

Mel came from the kitchen. "I called Donna," she said. "Your mom would like you to email her when you're settled tonight and she promises to give you a little space to find yourself. She suggests you look at your med school transcripts."

Angie rolled her eyes. "Dropping out of school was far harder on Professor LaCroix than it was on me," Angie said. "I've never felt so free in my life."

After a little more small talk, and her beer finished, soup, bread and wine packed up along with some groceries from the kitchen, sun lowering in the sky, Angie was ready to head for the cabin. They stood around outside for a minute and Jack kissed her forehead. "Do whatever you want tomorrow, pumpkin, but remember if you decide to stay in your pajamas all day you'll miss the raising of the Christmas tree."

"You're putting it up tomorrow?"

He gave a nod. "It's a tradition. A bunch of us went out and chopped it down this morning. It's loaded on one of Paul's biggest trucks. He'll meet us in town with the rest of his equipment tomorrow and we'll stand her up."

Mel gave her arm a pat. "It's not as much fun now that construction professionals are involved," she said. "It hardly ever falls and crushes whole buildings."

Brie hugged Angie hard. "I'm so glad you're here for a long visit."

Almost teary, all Angie could do was nod. Of all her aunts, she was closest to Brie. Brie had been only twelve when she was born. "Me, too," she said. "I'll be here for the tree-raising." Then she looked around at the little town, the lights shining from inside unfussy little houses, smoke curling from chimneys, folks pulling up to the bar and giving a wave to Jack, Mel and Brie as they went inside. The sky was darkening fast, gray clouds gathering and looking heavy with their burden. "Snow tonight?" she asked.

"Very likely," Brie said. "It's way overdue. Call if you need anything."

* * *

When Patrick got back to the cabin he was staying in—his brother Aiden's place on the ridge—one of his other brothers, Colin, was sitting on a chair on the deck.

“What are you doing here?”

Colin lifted a bag. “I brought you some Thanksgiving leftovers.”

Patrick sighed. “I was offered those yesterday at your house and I said no thank you.”

“Jilly figured that by now you might have changed your mind.”

“Why didn’t you just leave them in the kitchen?” he asked. “The door isn’t locked.”

Colin just shook his head. “Look, kid, I don’t pretend to understand everything that’s going on with you, but I’m not going to invade your territory. I’ll go inside when I’m invited inside.”

Patrick walked around him and opened the door. He stood back and held it open. “Please,” he said. When Colin stepped inside, Patrick said, “It’s not complicated—I’m rethinking the Navy. But after four years in the Academy and quite a few in the cockpit, it’s not an easy decision.”

“Especially coming right after Leigh stepped out of your life and Jake dies...” Colin added.

“I think they’re called life-altering events,” Patrick said. “It’s actually more complicated, though. I’m due orders. I’m going to get a squadron, and I’m not sure I want to take it. I’ve been given a little time to think about it, and not necessarily because of Jake.” But that was a lie—it was because of Jake. The Navy shrink had ordered his leave.

“You’re grieving.”

“I’m *thinking*,” Patrick returned emphatically. And then he looked away, remembering with some longing a time when he had been the least screwed up of the Riordan brothers. He had once been the least complicated, too.

“It might help to talk about it,” Colin suggested.

That idea had been suggested before—many times. If his brothers knew how much time he’d already spent with the shrink, they’d either give up on him or get a lot more invasive.

“Colin, not that long ago, we all tried to get you to open up about your issues and it pissed you off because you were feeling very private....”

“I was feeling very *secretive*,” Colin corrected. “Because after I had augured in in the Black Hawk was chewing Oxy like M&M’s and couldn’t risk letting anyone in my space.”

“Even before that,” Patrick said. “You were the brother who rarely put in an appearance at family things and, when you did you didn’t last long, so cut me some slack here. I need to be that brother for a while.” In fact, the reason Patrick had chosen to come to Virgin River was because both Luke and Colin lived here, and Sean and Aiden were not so far away. He *did* want to see his brothers, just not too much of them. And because Patrick had been scheduled to be out to sea and not in Virgin River, the entire Riordan clan was planning a Christmas holiday reunion in warm and sunny San Diego. They had rented two large condos on the beach and his mother, Maureen, with her significant other, George, would go there in their RV. But Patrick would not be going to San Diego. By Christmas, he’d be heading back to Charleston to either accept the new assignment or pack up his gear and out-process. In the meantime, this little cabin of Aiden’s—way up on top of the mountain—was sweet. And remote. And just what he wanted.

Colin put his hand on Patrick’s shoulder. “Even before the Oxy, I had turned asshole into an art form. I realize that now. It took having my life gutted to turn me into the sweetheart I am today.” Then he grinned. But he didn’t remove his hand. “But you’ve always been the best one in the family. The most stable, sensitive, settled. It was always hard to picture you as a fighter jock. And now? It’s hard to watch you in pain.”

“I’m not in pain,” Patrick said. “I’m in deep thought. Right now taking on a squadron commits me to the career path. I need some time to think about that. I’ll talk about it after I’ve sorted a few things out. And I’m not completely antisocial—I made it to Thanksgiving dinner, right? I get to town for a

beer almost every day.” He didn’t keep any alcohol at the cabin because the temptation to stay drunk for a few weeks was too strong. “I just need a little time, that’s all. There’s no reason for you to worry.”

Colin removed the hand. “Okay, then. So, since you’re not antisocial, hit town for a while tomorrow—they’re raising the tree.”

“The big tree?” he asked.

“Yep. Everyone gets into the act at some point. I’ll stop by because I’m sure they’ll need my advice. Luke will be in the thick of it. The general and Jack will compete for the boss position, but Paul Haggerty is the one in charge because he has all the heavy equipment needed to raise and anchor it. Getting it up and decorated is a two-day affair and the entire town shows up at one time or another. And then people start coming from all over this part of the state just to see it.”

“I’ll probably swing by in the next couple of days....”

“Good,” Colin said. He handed him the bag of leftovers. “Refrigerate. See you around.”

“Yeah, sure.”

After Colin left, Patrick made a phone call to Marie, Jake’s widow. He called her every day. “Hey, it’s me. How you doing today?”

“Holidays are kind of hard, but I knew they would be,” she said. “I was with my whole family yesterday and they’re a big crowd. My brother has a friend he says would like to take me to a movie, although I suspect my brother might have paid this guy.”

“Nah,” Patrick said. “Who wouldn’t want to take you out? Are you ready for that—to go out, I mean?”

“Not yet,” she said in a very quiet breath. “It hasn’t been very long....”

Just a couple of months, Patrick thought.

“And I was with Jake for a long time,” Marie added.

Six years. Patrick knew exactly how long it had been. They’d dated for two years and then four years ago Patrick was their best man. Two years ago Jake’s son, Daniel, was born and Patrick stood as a godfather. He’d been on a mission with Jake when something went wrong over Afghanistan and Jake was shot down. They weren’t the only two on that mission, but Patrick was their lead and the only one who felt responsible. Maybe it was more accurate to say Patrick had survivor guilt—why couldn’t it have been him? Jake had a family who depended on him.

“I know, but can I just say that it’s okay, Marie?” Patrick said. “Few weeks, few months, doesn’t matter. If you feel like you can do it, go out and have a little fun with a guy, it’s okay. Jake wouldn’t mind. You know that.”

“I know. When I’m ready, I will. But, Paddy, I have to get through all the special days without him first. All the holidays and birthdays and anniversaries...”

Is that what we have to do? Patrick wondered. “Did someone tell you that?”

“I’ve heard it here and there. I’ve been doing a little grief counseling with my church group and some people said that after you’ve been through all the important dates, things get a little easier. Or at least a little less terrible.”

“Listen, Marie, I have all this free time. Want me to come back there for a while...?”

“Seeing you is always good, Paddy, but I’ve been surrounded by people since I came home to Oklahoma. I think it’s better if you take care of yourself. I think you miss him as much as I do. You have things to work out, as well. Your own things.”

Patrick was silent for a moment and then said, “I’ve been thinking about giving up the plane,” he said quietly.

“Why?” she asked in a stunned whisper. “Because of Jake? Paddy, you love the plane!”

“Not because of Jake. Because in the long term...”

“And do what? Fly a desk? What?”

“Maybe not the Navy...”

“Okay, now I know you’re all screwed up—you’re more Navy than anyone I know. You’re going to be a commander next and then Joint Chiefs one day.”

Nah, he thought—never anything that elevated and political. He liked flying a fighter; he could exist commanding fighters. But after the accident, Patrick felt like everything in his life had suddenly changed and he wasn’t sure which way to move next. “It’s just something I’ve been kicking around,” he said. “I might not get out of flying, but I have been getting sick of that big, gray boat.”

“Now *that* I get,” she said. “And that little cot? And the night raids?” She laughed. “When you guys got home, Jake actually said he missed it all, if you can believe it.”

“That’s not what he told me,” Patrick said, chuckling. “He said his sleeping arrangements had improved a hundred percent.”

“Such a wild man,” she reminisced sentimentally. And then with tears in her voice she said, “I don’t think it’s possible for me to ever feel that way about another human being again.”

“It’s too soon to say that,” Patrick said. And his secret, which he didn’t speak of, was that the only way he could get through ten more years in the Navy was with a woman like Marie as a partner. That’s what had made Jake’s life right; that’s what he wanted—someone devoted to him. He was way too alone and he knew it. “We have to get through the year...”

“Paddy, are you very lonely?” she asked him as if reading his mind.

“No, I’m getting by. My brothers are here.” *The brothers I try not to spend too much time with*, he thought. Lonely wasn’t his problem; as a Navy aviator he was constantly around a lot of Navy personnel—pilots, rios, mechanics, et cetera. On an aircraft carrier the only place to get a little privacy was in the head or up in the sky and *little* was the operative word—there was always someone in the next stall or in the rear seat of the aircraft.

But like an old married couple, he and Jake had never gotten bored with each other.

When they got back to Charleston, Jake was always with his wife and Patrick was usually with Leigh when she was in town and their schedules meshed. Jake and Leigh, his two closest friends. But then Leigh broke it off after four years and, not long after that, Jake had been killed. Next thing he knew he was spending his time in port with the Navy shrink, working it out. Or not working it out—he didn’t have much to say to the doc and had never mentioned the breakup.

The shrink told his commander to give Patrick six weeks. Getting six weeks out of the Navy was pretty rare unless you’d had some horrible catastrophe like your wife dying of cancer.

Paddy was facing reassignment and he could just turn it down and walk away but his boss wanted him back; he wanted him to take a squadron. But doing that with nothing to look forward to, and without his two best friends—his girl and his buddy—was hard to imagine. He just didn’t know if he was up to it.

He still had a hard time believing they’d left him.

Two

The snow fell heavily on the Friday night after Thanksgiving and Angie was enthralled. Although she had done a little skiing in her time, she lived in a city that had to look up to the Sierras to see snow. The porch at the A-frame cottage was covered and for a little while she put on her heavy down jacket and sat out there just to watch it fall. So silent. So delicate. It was like being on the inside of a snow globe.

The fireplace in Mel and Jack's little cabin was large and warm and there was no need for any additional heat. She fed it logs and cozied up on the couch under the down comforter that had been on the bed. The sofa was soft and deep and she couldn't remember when she'd had a better night's sleep. They got a good six inches that night, and the morning dawned bright and clear with a thick, white blanket of snow on the ground and a delicious dusting on the pine boughs. It was like being on another planet—so far from that L.A. freeway where her life had been forever changed, so far from the house in Sacramento where she'd grown up, the place where she had revisited her childhood so many times during her recovery.

Yes, this was what she'd been looking for. A respite—some old-fashioned peace and quiet.

No one really understood how difficult it was to wake up from a bad dream, determined to change your life. She'd had partial memory loss for a few weeks after the accident, though she knew what she'd been doing, who her friends were, what her plans had been. This whole idea of being a doctor—she knew she could do it and do it well. She'd been groomed for this since her intellectual parents discovered her interest in science. But it was more like getting a plaque or trophy than about what it would bring to her life. After striving toward this goal for years, what was she to do with that feeling that it just wasn't enough? Perhaps after she watched falling snow, the orange sunsets, the explosion of autumn color and possibly a world-class geyser or waterfall she'd feel that enthusiasm return.

She still had the same friends, even if she hadn't seen much of them. They were busy in med school and she had a rigorous rehab schedule, plus the relocation from L.A. to her parents' Sacramento home. One friend was still missing, though—her boyfriend. Alex. They'd been together for several months before the accident—he was a med student, as well. It happened all the time. Students tended to date one another more out of convenience than anything else, because it seemed to fit well with the intensity of med school. Alex left her at some point during her rehab—after the coma, before she remembered everything and could walk again. Strangely, his actions had remarkably little effect on her except to make her think, *Wow! Who does that? Leaves a girlfriend while she's recovering from catastrophic injuries?* That thought occurred every now and then.

The phone in the cabin rang, jarring her thoughts, bringing her back to the present. She tried to ignore it. It was still quite early, but she hadn't brewed coffee and didn't feel like cooking breakfast, so she pulled her scuffed-up cowboy boots over her torn jeans and grabbed her jacket. The phone was relentless, so with a heavy sigh she picked it up. "Hello."

"You're not staying with Jack," her mother said.

"Hi, Mom. No, I'm staying in his cabin."

"But I thought we understood each other—you would stay with Jack or Brie."

“Nope. That was your expectation. I’m very interested in seeing them but not living with them. I was hoping for the cabin or, at the least, Jack’s guesthouse. I want a little time and space to myself.”

“This is exactly what I’ve been talking about. You’re not yourself at all. I’ve made an appointment with a neuropsychiatrist,” she said. “We should get to the bottom of this.”

Angie laughed. “Listen, Mom, do yourself a favor. Cancel it. You don’t need much more than an everyday counselor to figure out that my brain is fine. The problem isn’t me. I’m not doing things your way and it’s making *you* crazy. I have to go. I don’t want to be late for the raising of the tree.”

“Angie...!”

“Bye,” she said, disconnecting.

Neuropsychiatrist? Never gonna happen. Besides, she’d already seen at least one of those and no one, no matter how many degrees they had, could convince her that rejecting her mother’s plan for her life automatically signaled a personality disorder.

The phone rang again, but Angie zipped her jacket and headed out the door. She stopped on the porch to indulge in a moment of remorse. Sadness. There was bound to be friction between a firstborn daughter and her strong-willed mother. Angie had always known how to please her parents and, in fact, usually had. Her mother proclaimed her a handful to raise, and yet, she’d managed to be Donna’s pride and joy. Angie had never rebelled so thoroughly before.

Donna didn’t seem to push back on Angie’s younger sisters with the same kind of determination. When Jenna or Beth resisted their mother’s plans, Donna seemed to let go faster. Easier.

“Dr. Temple, do you think my personality has changed?”

“It’s possible. And there’s always PTSD. Catastrophic accidents and long recoveries can have that effect.”

“Do I have a disorder?”

“Disorder? I’m no expert, but I don’t get the sense of a disorder. Do you think you have a disorder?”

“You know, I just feel like I finally woke up. I feel as if I should change things. It’s filling me with a sense of relief, of second chances, but it’s upsetting my family. They’re worried and angry, especially my mother. I’m battling with her over things like school. Battling like never before.”

“Hmm. Well, have you asked yourself—do you like the new you?”

“I do. I want to be more independent. But I hate disappointing my mother. She’s had it in her head I should be a doctor for a long time.”

“I think, Angie, that you have to act on what’s in your head, not your mother’s. You’re an adult, not her little girl anymore. Maybe you two need a little space to figure things out.”

Not long after Angie had that conversation with Dr. Temple, Uncle Jack and Brie had stepped in. Jack called Donna and said, “The two of you are fighting like a couple of cats in a sack. You’re not going to get better this way. Send Angie up here for a while. A few weeks. Let her get some perspective and take a breather. This is ridiculous.”

It took a follow-up phone call from Brie, but Donna finally came around. She was persuaded to put off the head butting at least until after the first of the year.

Angie could almost hear her father breathe a sigh of relief.

* * *

When Angie arrived in town, she saw that even though the hour was early, the place was already a circus. The big flatbed with an enormous tree strapped to it blocked the street and mounted on another

truck was a giant winch. The ground had been plowed free of snow right between the bar and the church, back off the road a bit in the area where, in milder weather, there were picnic tables. That's where the tree would stand. The sound of a hydraulic post digger assaulted the morning air as meanly as a jackhammer, and a lot of people stood around watching while the tree was being attached to the lift. Cables trailed off the tree—likely to be anchored to stakes in the ground to steady it.

It was so *big*.

Someone pressed a cup of coffee into her hands and she turned to see Mike V, Brie's husband, her uncle Mike. She had forgotten her desire for caffeine. "Thank you," she said, kissing his cheek.

"How's that little cabin working out?" he asked.

"It's perfect. I'm going to get some candles from the bar—I sat on the porch last night and just watched the snow. If I'd had some candles..."

"I'm sure that can be arranged, *chica*," he said, draping an arm around her shoulders.

As they stood together in the street, watching, chains were tightened, the motor on the lift was pumping away and more and more people who had been forced to park down the street were walking toward the tree-raising. Jack and General Booth stood near Paul Haggerty, talking and pointing and gesturing, but Paul seemed to completely ignore them as he directed his team.

It took long enough that Angie's coffee was gone by the time the tree was finally lifted off the bed of the truck. Four men holding four cables maneuvered the airborne tree so that the trunk slipped into the hole that had been dug right in the ground. Then the cables were pulled tight, straightening the tree. There was a loud, collective "Ahh" in the crowd of people gathered around to watch. There was a bit of muffled applause thanks to the gloves and mittens worn by most of the spectators.

Finally Jack and the general had major roles—they were standing across the street from the tree to judge the straightness of it before the cables were secured to the ground. They were gesturing right, then left, then right...

And Angie saw him. He was standing on the porch of the bar, leaning a shoulder against a post. He was most definitely watching her. When their eyes met he did that smile thing again—half his mouth lifted. His eyes got just a little bit sleepy, but the glittering green was still overwhelming. She wanted a close-up of those eyes.

Real close.

Patrick lifted a coffee cup to his lips, but he never took his eyes off her, peering at her over the rim of the cup.

"You okay, *chica*?" Mike asked.

"That guy," she said, just taking him in. "Do you know him?"

Mike followed her eyes. "Patrick? I know his brothers. I've only met him once or twice."

"How long has he lived around here?"

"Just visiting, I hear. You okay?"

"He's staring at me," she said in a low voice, trying not to move her lips.

Mike cleared his throat. "Um, listen, if he's making you uncomfortable, I could have a word with him."

She grinned at Mike. "He's making me uncomfortable all right, but not exactly in a bad way. Don't say anything, all right? Don't make him stop. I don't think anyone has ever looked at me that way before."

Mike turned Angie toward him. His black eyes bore into her with intensity. "Ange, don't play with fire. I don't know much about Patrick except that he has some difficult situation going with the military. The Navy just gave him more leave to sit in Virgin River than they typically grant, which

usually indicates a problem of some kind. You should at least talk to Jack before you do anything young and foolish.”

She laughed at him, amused. “Wow, doesn’t that sound fun, a chat with Uncle Jack about an interesting guy. Now I was kind of young at the time, but if I remember correctly Uncle Jack thought you were a bad idea for Aunt Brie. Do I have that right?”

Mike pursed his lips as he pondered this. “We were both older than you, for one thing. We had been through some real major crises, for another, which left Jack feeling a little on the protective side. And we were careful to take it slow—know what I’m saying? I don’t know any details but I hear Patrick has had some issues—real problems. Hear me?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “Fortunately, I haven’t been through any crises or had any problems....”

“Oh, man,” Mike said. “Now you’re scaring me.”

She patted his arm. “I’ll be just fine, Uncle Mike. I know it’s hard for everyone to accept this, but I’m not a little girl anymore. I can handle this.” She turned to look again at Patrick but he wasn’t there. “Crap,” she muttered. “I hope you didn’t scare him away. I wanted to talk to him.”

“I was on the verge of suggesting you don’t talk to him.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “I think I need a refill on the coffee. Thanks. By the way, where is Brie?”

“I think she’s in the bar with Ness, but, Ange—”

“I’ll catch up with you in a while. Thanks for the coffee.” She glanced at the tree and gave it a nod. “You might want to tell Jack it’s leaning west.”

* * *

Angie scored in the bar. Brie was there with little Ness, sitting at a table with Mel and Emma, chatting it up while the little girls made an attempt at coloring. There were only a few people in the bar since the tree-raising was occupying almost everyone in town. She noticed Patrick sitting at the far end of the bar on the other side of the room, all alone, far away from her aunts.

“Ah, my favorite aunts,” she said. She leaned down to give each of them a kiss on the cheek, telling them the cabin was awesome. She immediately excused herself to go to the bar for more coffee. They might’ve expected her back at their table after she’d gone behind the bar to serve herself. Instead, she paused, took a deep breath and hopped up on a stool right next to Patrick. She imagined that Brie and Mel wouldn’t know how much courage she’d needed to do that. They knew she wasn’t particularly shy, but they couldn’t possibly know how little experience she had with men, especially a man like this—handsome, sexy and out of her age range by at least a few years.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Angie LaCroix.” She put out a hand.

He stared at the hand for a moment, then lifted his gaze to her eyes. And, oh, sweet baby Jesus, he was *beautiful*. He took her hand in his much larger one. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Just go for it, she thought. Why not? “I thought we should meet, since you look at me like you’re the big bad wolf. And you are...?”

He couldn’t seem to suppress a short laugh. “I bet you know exactly who I am.”

“Ah, yes, Patrick Riordan, the youngest brother of a clan anchored here. Do I have that right?”

“More or less. I have a couple of brothers here and another couple not too far away.”

“Right. So you’re here visiting family?”

“Not exactly. I’m here because one of my brothers has a vacation cabin here and I had some time on my hands. Since the lot of them are planning a Christmas gathering in San Diego, there won’t be a crowd of Riordans here for the holiday. That suits me fine. I wanted a quiet place to hang out for a

while. I wasn't looking for a family reunion, but it's always good to see a brother or two. Just not too much of them."

She looked perplexed. "If you want to avoid them, why would you come to their little town?"

"It's complicated. The Riordans are extremely nosy and opinionated. They gather. They swarm. If hadn't come here, they would have come looking for me. All of them. That's what happens in my family. We can leave one another alone for months at a time but then when something happens, like a brother at some kind of crossroads, accident or crisis, the troops are called in and the wagons are circled. When you're the one the wagons are circling, it sucks."

She was silent for a moment. "That's very grumpy of you."

"Well, you did ask."

"You know, we have a little something in common," she said. "I'm here for a little R and R myself and for a similar but not identical reason. I dropped out of school. I'm not sure I want to pursue my original plan and I need a break. My parents, who are both college professors, are going a little crazy on me. A little distance from them seemed like a good idea. In fact, it was Uncle Jack's idea." She grinned at him. "Though I suspect I didn't get far enough away. My uncle Jack can get a little... intrusive...protective. For example, he suggested I stay away from you."

"Me? Why? What's wrong with me?" he asked.

"Apparently you're scary and dangerous," she informed him with a sly smile.

"What? Dangerous? Me? Who said that?"

"It was implied," she admitted. "I've been advised by the older men in my life not to get involved with you, but no one has told me exactly why. So, why?"

He chuckled silently and shook his head. "Listen, I'm just here for a few weeks. Maybe you *should* stay away from me. And you look like you finished school a long time ago. You must be younger than you look."

"I finished college. It's a postgrad thing. But... How old do I seem? Because you undress me with your eyes. Skillfully. And at a great distance, too."

He leaned toward her. "How old are you?"

"Almost twenty-six," she said, straightening, sitting tall.

"How almost?" he pressed.

She took a breath. "Twenty-three."

He groaned and looked down, shaking his head. "God. You're younger than you look."

"So how old are you?" she asked. "Forty?"

"Hey," he said. "I'm thirty-three."

She leaned her head on her hand, elbow braced on the bar. "Had a hard few years or something?"

"Whoa! You're brutal!"

But Angie was really starting to enjoy this adventurous, flirty side of herself. This was certainly new territory for her, but she suddenly had the urge to explore it. "The way you look at me should at least be considered a misdemeanor. Or a proposal, I'm not sure which. But it didn't feel that bad and thought maybe if we talked..."

"What? You thought I'd ask you out on a date or something? Sweetheart, this is Virgin River. If you sit here and talk for even five more minutes, everyone in town will put us together."

"Let's take a chance," she said, amazing herself. But then, she was on a mission. She wanted to know someone who she could relate to. Who could relate to her. And it sure didn't hurt that Patrick Riordian was smokin' *hot*. "Talking isn't against the law."

"What if I don't feel like talking? You don't want to mess around with the big bad wolf."

“Do you feel like listening? Because I can always talk. And we have things in common, you and I.”

“I don’t feel like fighting off the vigilantes who’ll come down on me to protect your honor, so I think me going home right now is a better idea.”

At that, Angie smiled so big that Patrick actually leaned back slightly. “So!” she said. “You do like me!”

“How the hell would I know?” he barked at her. “I don’t even know you!”

“Then why do you watch me? Stare at me? Get mad when I suggest we spend a little time talking?”

“Because you’re a cute little sexpot, and while you might be old enough for this flirtation, I can tell you’re way too inexperienced for it, and you have a posse in town looking out for you and I don’t need any trouble! Believe me, I have enough trouble!”

She glanced down at herself. Old jeans with a torn knee, a pair of battered cowboy boots that she’d been attached to for years, khaki canvas jacket and an oversize white sweater—and no makeup.... She looked up at him and laughed. “Sexpot? Jesus! Are you serious?”

He pursed his lips and put his hands in his jacket pockets. “Serious,” he hissed.

“Well, holy shit, if this gets your motor running, I’m not going *anywhere!*”

“Angie...”

“You should see me when I get dressed up! I can look damn good.”

“Angie...”

“Patrick,” she mimicked.

Suddenly Brie was standing on the inside of the bar holding the coffeepot. She wordlessly refilled their cups without making eye contact and disappeared back to her table. Angie *knew* they were talking about her. She knew it and didn’t care.

“I have an idea,” Angie said. “Let’s just have a cup of coffee. Then we’ll reassess things. However I have to warn you, I kind of like that you find me irresistible.”

“Did I say that?” he asked, a slight tint creeping up his stubbled cheeks. “I didn’t say that! I find you completely resistible.”

“Touchy, huh? Maybe you should have something a little stronger than coffee.”

He gave her a slow look, a full appraisal that made her warm, a feeling she couldn’t remember having before, and she liked it. She was growing more bold by the minute. Then with his eyes narrowed he said, “All right, we’ll have a cup of coffee. You’ll talk. Then I’ll head home and you’ll stop looking for trouble.”

She stared at him levelly. “Do women actually find you scary?” she asked.

* * *

Patrick couldn’t remember ever treating a woman like that, rudely looking her over, trying to make her uncomfortable to scare her off, running roguish eyes up and down the length of her. Especially a sweet young thing like Angie. In fact, he had always been the complete opposite, a gentleman to the core. Present circumstances had put a rough edge on him. Plus, his instincts told him it would be practical if not wise if she just didn’t get too close. He was a wreck without much to offer. The only woman who had his attention right now was his best friend’s widow, that’s how sad his life had become.

But Angie wasn’t easily discouraged. With a cup of coffee in front of him he said, “No young woman should come on to a man she doesn’t know, especially after being warned away from him by her protectors. That sort of thing could get you hurt.”

“Oh, stop,” she said. She took a sip of her coffee. “Jack and Preacher and Mike said they know you a little bit and are friends with your brothers. They all said you were troubled by something but no one ever suggested you were dangerous—I made that up to flatter you. So guess what? I might be troubled too. You might think I’m a little nuts, but the truth is I wouldn’t mind having a friend who also has some things to sort out.”

He just stared at her. “And what might be troubling you, miss? Dropping out of some cushy college program?”

“Exactly right,” she answered. “But not because I was bored or disillusioned. I was in an accident and had to take leave. It was a medical leave.”

He was startled and it showed in his eyes. He might’ve overheard something about a hospital at the bar, but the details were vague right now. “What kind of accident?”

“The kind that means having rods and pins put in you and lands you in physical therapy for a few months.”

An image of Patrick’s brother, Colin, lying unconscious in a hospital bed, barely alive after a Black Hawk crash, came to his mind. He shuddered involuntarily. “What happened?”

“Well, I had to learn to walk, of course, but—”

“No, what kind of accident?” he asked, genuinely interested.

“Oh—a car accident. Three cars, actually. And what happened is still being disputed—the driver at fault was killed. She lost control of her car, jumped the median on the freeway and hit two oncoming cars, the one I was in and another. There was a witness who said she was cut off by a speeding car that didn’t stop. It was raining and the roads were slick. Another witness said there was no speeding car and that it looked like her car suddenly hydroplaned, like she lost control because of a flat or broken axle or something. Someone suggested she might’ve fallen asleep, but it wasn’t like she’d just come off a twelve-hour shift or anything—she was on her way out to meet a date for dinner and hadn’t driven far. I don’t remember much. I remember lights, sirens, my girlfriend crying—she had a broken ankle, a couple of broken ribs and a really badly shattered wrist, plus lots of bad bruises and cuts. They had to pry both of us out of the car. She remembers that—the sawing and crunching of metal—but I don’t.”

He was quiet for a moment, in something of a trance. “Man,” he finally said in a whisper. “One killed?”

“Yes, and the third car was a family with little kids, but thankfully they didn’t have any critical injuries. The kids were in their safety seats and they were in a big SUV. I feel terrible about the lady driver, though. There were no drugs or any alcohol involved. I think, in the end, what we have here is an accident.”

“And you were badly hurt,” he clarified.

“All banged up. I was in L.A. at the time, a student at USC, and my parents live in Sacramento so they jumped in their car right away. My dad drove like a bat out of hell so they could be there when I got out of surgery. My mom stayed with me for two months, until I could be moved home to complete my checkups and therapy. The whole time I was in L.A. there was a steady stream of aunts and uncles and cousins visiting to see how I was doing even though some of them had to travel a ways. I come from a big family and I’m the oldest grandchild. My grandpa was there several times. I don’t know if you’ve ever had the experience of looking like absolute shit and feeling even worse and having thirty or so people stare at you....”

“I’m pretty sure I haven’t,” he said.

“It sucks. And when I was back in Sacramento, there was even more checking in. I was never alone

never. So—there you have it. Well, no, you don't have it yet. The thing is, my mother is the toughest strongest, least sentimental overachiever I know. She's Uncle Jack's oldest sister and she's been pushing him around for over forty years. She's a journalism professor at Berkeley. But having her oldest child hurt and in the hospital brought her to her knees. Kicked the stuffing out of her. She took leave from the college and dedicated herself to my care, which was a wonderful thing to do, but I think she lost her mind a little bit. She's always been domineering in her way...bossy, you might say. The accident really amped that up. She was determined to get me healed and back on track. But suddenly, she wanted to bring my sister Beth home from her senior year at NAU in Flagstaff—she couldn't sleep at night thinking about her driving those mountain roads. And my littlest sister, Jenna, she wanted to keep in Sacramento at a state college even though she'd been attending UCLA."

"And what about you?" he asked.

Angie couldn't help but laugh. "She wants me to sleep in a helmet."

He laughed a little with her. "I bet you want to sleep in a helmet sometimes, too."

"Well, that's where Mom and I have had a breakdown in communication. I want to *not* be afraid. I never want to be scared to live life because of one bad experience, as terrible as it was. It's not like I could've done anything differently—I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. So—should I live the rest of my life in a padded room?"

He shook his head. "No, but you shouldn't follow strange men into bars, either. Even bars owned by your uncle. You should have yourself a nice young man who has a normal life and calls you for a date, then picks you up and takes you someplace special."

"Oh, I had one of those," Angie said with a sigh. "I had him for months before the accident and he said he loved me. He wandered off sometime during physical therapy.... Haven't heard from him since."

Patrick felt the color drain from his face. And he found himself thinking, *I was one of those nice young men who did what his woman expected, and I was left...* He couldn't believe people did that—abandoned their partner in a time of need. He'd never be so cruel as to run out on a person he'd once loved like that. Angie's experience with her former boyfriend was very close to the hurt he felt over the woman who had left him behind. Leigh had said she loved him, too. Then suddenly she told him, unemotionally, that they weren't right for each other. She had a career of her own and wanted a full partner, not some Navy flyboy. He hadn't been with another woman since then.

Yet what tore him up the most was the fact that when he'd called Leigh to tell her Jake was dead, she hadn't come to him. She hadn't comforted him beyond the telephone condolences of that one call. She hadn't come to the memorial. She'd sent Marie a card—she might have even had a card sent by one of her assistants—but she hadn't called her. That's when he realized they must never have been good together in the first place. If the tables had been turned and she'd lost someone close, he would have been there for her even if they were no longer a couple.

They'd spent so much time together, the four of them. Didn't she grieve Jake? Sympathize with Marie? Worry about Patrick's feelings? It had baffled and hurt him. He felt he had never known her at all.

He looked at Angie and said, "So he just kind of wandered off?"

"Yeah. At first he was too busy with school, then he said he just couldn't watch my struggle, it was too difficult for him. This guy wants to be a doctor! And he couldn't bear seeing me in pain? Pah! Then one of my friends said he was seeing someone else. I cried. For an hour. But something tells me I got off easy. I'm going to need a much tougher man in my life. I'll hold out for that."

He grinned suddenly. His immediate thought was, *And I'll need a much stronger woman.* Could it

really be that simple? “You should.”

“You don’t look at all scary when you smile,” she said in a rather soft voice.

“You said I didn’t look scary before.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t want you to get all bigheaded. So, Patrick Riordan, what’s got you all messed up?”

He slid back in his chair. “I thought we agreed not to talk about me?” He took a sip of coffee.

“I certainly don’t intend to insist, but when you’re sharing, you know, there’s usually a little give and take....”

“I’m a Navy pilot,” he said after a short pause. “I was on a mission and another pilot flying in the same sortie was killed. Shot down. Right beside me. We were flying cover for Marine rescue choppers near Kandahar, avoiding missiles, and then... The unexpected. A heat seeker came out of nowhere. He was my closest friend. I was his lead. He was my wingman.”

“I’m so sorry. I can understand why you didn’t want to talk about that.”

“Someone would’ve told you eventually. Jake went down and it’s time for me to get orders—a new assignment somewhere. I just feel like I need a little time to decide if I really want that life. I always thought I did. But lately I’ve been thinking that it might not fit with the other things I’d like to have—like a family, for instance. Jake left behind a wife and two-year-old son.”

“But do you love flying?” she asked him.

“I always have, but that...” His voice trailed off.

“That’s one of the things I’m struggling with, too, Patrick. But I’ve realized that there are fewer NASCAR drivers killed than girls like me who were singing along with the radio one minute and dead the next. None of those people on commercial jets on 9/11 were taking chances. Besides, if you’re doing something you believe in and are expertly trained to do... But then, you might have to ask the woman in your life before you listen to me.”

He just stared at her for a second. “There’s no woman.”

“Oh,” she said.

“And my friends call me Paddy.”

She smiled at him. “I like that.”

“What’s your next move, Angie?”

She took a deep breath. “Oh, I’ll probably end up going back to medical school eventually, but not ___”

“*Medical school?*” he asked, wide-eyed. “You mean you’re not getting some degree in basket weaving or tennis?”

She laughed lightly. “Nah. I’m a brainiac with limited social skills, as you can probably see.”

He shook his head, but his mouth was still open. He hadn’t been ready for this. “You take chances, but now I think I get it. So, you’ll go back to school?”

“Well, like you, I have to make a decision—I don’t know if I *want* to go back to med school. The second I said ‘doctor’ when I was about sixteen my parents were on the case—going over my classes my major and my transcripts, my med school applications. I missed a lot of life being the perfect student. While I was recovering, I had some great docs but there was one I was close to. Dr. Temple was never in a hurry. He talked to me. It’s possible he was simply studying me, looking for signs of brain damage, but still...” She gave a shrug, then shook her head. “I’ve been fighting with my mother a lot. She wants me back in med school before too much time passes, and I’m not sure I’m ever going back. Next for me, Paddy, is a little more balance in my life. If I’ve learned anything from what happened, it’s that you shouldn’t miss opportunities to live life. It could always be your last chance.

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