

EPILOGUE for CRAVING A HERO

No one had dared count on Plan A...except the groom. Mid-February in Michigan's Upper Peninsula was unpredictable snowfalls and fluctuating temperatures, mostly on the low end of the thermometer. Definitely not outdoor wedding weather.

But Valentine's Day had dawned with a landscape glistening with a dusting of fresh snow beneath a cloudless, blue sky with temps in the rosy-cheek range.

In front of the intimate gathering of their families on Angel Point, Dane accepted Kelly's white-gloved hand from her father, grinning as he murmured below the hearing of those gathered to witness the nuptials, "Told you the weather would be perfect for us."

"You lead a charmed life, Dane St. John," she said, her heart bursting with joy.

"And I'm glad I do or I'd never have found you," he said, the love in his eyes making her knees go weak.

She wobbled. He slipped an arm around her, steadying her—crushing her white, velvet cloak to her. It didn't matter, that last part. Dane had taught her the importance of support, especially from a life partner...even for a strong, capable woman.

And he'd shown her his support almost from the moment they'd met—shown it most definitely the minute she'd said "yes" to his proposal nearly a month ago in the bottom bunk at the camp where they'd discovered there was nothing that could ever keep them apart.

"What kind of wedding do you want?" he'd asked.

"A justice of the peace at the courthouse will suit me just fine," she'd said.

To which he'd shaken his head. "Not good enough for you, Bright Eyes."

"I don't want some big splashy Hollywood bash," she'd shot back, terrified that's where he was heading.

He'd smiled, drawn her close, and whispered in her ear, "Neither do I. Just family. But soon. I want us married soon. Before I'm due back on set the end of February."

She'd gasped. "February! Not much time for more than a Justice at the courthouse."

He'd just brushed his lips across hers, promising her a fairytale wedding.

And here they were, Dane having arranged for a Judge to perform the ceremony at the very place where they'd fallen in love.

The official welcomed the little group gathered between the overlook of Angel Point and the cabin, then requested the happy couple join hands.

Kelly handed her fur muff off to her Maid of Honor, her sister Carrie, the two exchanging warm smiles. They'd grown close over their father's illness and closer still over Angel's birth.

Facing Dane, they took each other's hands and looked deep into each other's eyes. Whatever the Judge said about the sanctity of marriage didn't matter. The two of them already knew how precious forever love was...and how to survive the tough spots every relationship encountered.

Then it was time for them to share the vows they'd written, promises more personal and meaningful to them than any pledges a Judge could have had them recite. Kelly spoke first.

"You are good for me, Dane St. John. You showed me I was worthy of love—taught me to leave the past behind me."

Between the loving way he looked at her and how he gave her fingers a squeeze, her throat tightened.

"You taught me," she continued, her voice thick with emotion, "to believe in myself and not let the opinions of others drag me down."

Tess cleared her throat and Kelly gave her bridesmaid an acknowledging glance. She'd all but burst into tears when Tess had unzipped the over-sized garment bag and revealed the cloak with the fur trimmed hood and satin gown Dane had chosen for her. She would have worn a dress out of her closet to get married in. But he'd said he wanted something for her that would remind her of the woman he knew she was—the woman she'd too long hidden behind a DNR uniform. It had been the only moment since agreeing to marry him she'd questioned if she was the right woman for him. After all, his was a high

profile life and hers...

Thankfully, classy, sophisticated Tess had insisted the movie crowd would be green with envy over her perfect skin and fabulous bone structure. Tess, perfection personified in her crimson bridesmaid gown, had also bolstered Kelly when she'd frowned at the made-up bridal version of herself in a full-length mirror back at the house, worrying aloud she didn't look like herself.

"You look like a polished you," Tess had said, giving Kelly's shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

"But I'll need to look *polished* whenever I go out in the world with Dane. How do I accomplish that?" Kelly had demurred. "I don't want to embarrass him."

Tess had pinned Kelly's gaze in the mirror then. "You could never embarrass Dane. He loves you; and my guess is he loves the au natural you even better than the polished one. But if it will make you feel more confident, I'll teach you how to use make-up."

Kelly returned her gaze to Dane. "Though I might still need a little help on the confidence front," she continued. "But I'll always have you beside me to reassure me, if not physically then in spirit."

"Always," he crooned, his eyes full of promise.

If he kept looking at her like that, she was going to throw herself into his arms and soak the front of his wool coat with her tears, so she varied a tad from her planned vows and smiled widely. "You make me laugh."

"And cry," he said, releasing her hand long enough to wipe a tear from the corner of her eye.

"You take care of me," she pressed on.

"Hopefully as well as you have taken care of me," he said, his fingertips lingering on her cheek.

She cuffed him on the arm, good-naturedly grouching, "Stop interrupting me."

Laughter murmured from their loved ones. His grin returned tenfold. She shook her head.

"You're such a shit," she said to more laughter. "But I love that about you, too."

He wagged his eyebrows. "Good because I'm not likely to change."

"I don't want you to change," she said, totally off script. "Never change. I love you just as you are, Dane St. John. You are the man I want our daughter to grow up knowing. You are my hero."

He drew her gloved hands up and pressed his lips to the backs of her knuckles before offering her his vows.

"I promise to do everything in my power to live up to your opinion of me, Bright Eyes. Every day of the rest of my life, you will be my first thought when I wake and my last before I sleep."

She chuckled. "You have much yet to learn about fatherhood."

Snickers waffled through the gathering, none louder than Best Man Roman's. Even unattached baby brother and groomsman Renn snickered as though he understood what it was to have a baby in his life. But Dane didn't laugh.

"Thank you for my daughter," he said with such heartfelt earnestness it might have shot guilt through her. Okay, it did. But just a twinge. She'd made progress in adopting Dane's attitude of leaving the past in the past as he'd urged her to do.

"Thank you for protecting her so well through the hard times," he went on, "and for understanding my needs when I discovered her."

"For the good of Angel," she said barely above a whisper.

"For the good of *our* family," he retorted, drew a deep breath, and continued. "I love that you love me, Kelly Jackson, because I love you with every cell of my being. I love that you are the woman I need, because you are the woman I want. I pledge to be, today and forever, your hero."

And so on a sunny February morning on Angel Point overlooking a valley of frosted trees that shimmered in the sunlight like diamonds and with all their family as witness, particularly one special rosy-cheeked *angel*, Kelly Jackson married the hero of her dreams and became Kelly St. John; and Dane St. John gained his own family...a little sooner than he'd expected, but with the greatest of joy.