

CASTLE DANGER

Chris Norbury

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Dedication

To Mom: You are the embodiment of unconditional mother's love.

To Dad: Your generous, expert feedback inspired me to believe in my writing ability.

To Sandra: You've lovingly allowed me to follow my many and varied muses since the day we were married.

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Chapter 1

Matt Lanier stood on the middle of Snowfall Lake, gasping for air, wobbling on his snowshoes. His leg muscles quivered on the verge of collapse. His pulse pounded like double-time timpani beats in his chest and temples. Each icy inhale rasped his throat. Gusts of wind threatened to knock him off balance. If he fell, he doubted he could stand again, let alone walk. Microdiamonds of snow whirled across the open expanse of white and crackled against the hood of his parka. He'd hit "the wall" many marathon runners experience after about twenty miles, except his wall was made of ice.

The last few ominous measures of Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue* echoed in his brain. His choices were unequivocal: keep walking or die.

If he'd ignored the emergency flare he'd seen and heard yesterday, he certainly wouldn't be risking his life for the stranger lying at his feet. Instead, he'd wrestled with his conscience a hundred times today about whether he should've feigned ignorance.

If he jettisoned the bleeding, unconscious trapper here in the middle of this large, oval-shaped lake in the heart of the Arrowhead region of northeast Minnesota, he would easily reach safety by himself. If wolves didn't feast on the remains, or a Forest Service plane didn't discover the body before ice out, it would sink to the bottom. No one else would ever know what had happened out here.

He looked back at the mummy-shaped load on the makeshift sled tethered to his waist. Wisps of breath vapor rose slowly through a frosted patch of the black scarf covering the mummy's face. Incredulous, Matt snorted and shook his head. "I'll be damned," he said to his cargo. "Looks like we keep walking." Even his voice sounded iced over.

The temperature felt like minus twenty Fahrenheit. The wind-chill? Too cold to compute. At his last rest stop two hours ago, he'd burned his remaining fuel. Building a fire and shelter to warm up would take time he didn't possess. His high-tech clothing couldn't protect him indefinitely from the lethal cold, and the deer hide cloaking his shoulders and torso would only buy him a few extra minutes of warmth.

Since leaving his campsite in the pre-dawn light, he'd covered approximately eight of the ten miles he needed to travel in order to reach safety. Sunlight reflecting off the crystalline snowpack stung his eyes as he gauged the angle of the impotent January sun. Mid-afternoon. He'd badly miscalculated his travel time. *Good plan, genius.* Two hours of light. Two miles to safety. Too much to ask of his body?

After dropping his ski poles, he pulled off the Gore-Tex outer mitt and the insulated inner glove from his right hand. He fumbled in the outer pocket of his parka with stiff fingers for the last of his venison jerky. The few bites of dried deer meat comprised his only energy source for this final push. Crusted ice cracked off his ski mask when he opened his mouth. Chewing the jerky was easy once it broke into small, icy meat chips. After eating the last salty but otherwise

tasteless bite, he donned his glove and mitt. A handful of snow helped him swallow the food, but numbed his mouth and his throat and did little to ease his thirst.

He glanced at the head of his human cargo. "You damn well better stay alive," he said, angry at the man for intruding on his life, "because I'll get royally pissed if I do all this work for nothing."

His unconscious passenger replied with more breathy vapors. Matt had wrapped him in all the warm layers of clothing and materials he could spare. Every piece of exposed skin was covered, but he made sure the face coverings were loose enough to allow air to get to the man.

To make the sled, Matt had cobbled together his cross-country skis, a nylon tarp, driftwood, rope, bungee cords, and straps cut from a spare Duluth pack. He pulled the sled with a rope looped around his torso. To brake the sled on down slopes, he'd fastened his ski poles to the tips of his skis with duct tape on the basket ends. He pushed backwards on the poles when he needed to stop the sled from crashing into his heels. The rig was heavy and clumsy, but worked well enough.

His passenger tended to slide off the sled when Matt dragged it across slanted terrain such as portage trails or snowdrifts. Repositioning the man several times per hour had been the main time waster and a major pain in the ass. Alone and with no gear to carry, he could've traversed anywhere in the Boundary Waters at about three miles per hour. Dragging two hundred fifty pounds of dead weight through snow-drifted lakes and across rugged, rocky portages, he traveled little more than one mile per hour.

He picked up his ski poles, checked his towrope, and found his guide point, a long narrow peninsula jutting out from the southeast shore a mile away. Once he reached the point, he'd turn southward and travel downwind to Olson's Wilderness Canoe Outfitters.

Matt tried to take a step, but the motion electrified his nerves with pained fatigue. "Damn. Don't give out now, body." A jolt of adrenaline, called up from a hidden reserve of survival instincts, steadied Matt's rubbery muscles. He breathed deeper, slower, willing oxygen to saturate his blood.

He forced his body back into work mode and groaned from the exertion. He was almost ready to give up when the sled grudgingly moved from the deep powder. He took a step, then another, and he was under way. A feeling of triumph surged through him.

He set his concentration on ignoring the fatigue, ignoring the searing pain in his muscles, ignoring their pleas to give up. To help maintain his energy and pace, he began to hum Ella Fitzgerald's smoking hot version of *How High the Moon* with Count Basie's band. With every step, he dreamed of warmth, rest, food, and gulping quarts of water instead of chewing handfuls of snow. He plodded on, fighting for balance as the raging northwest wind tried to topple him.

The wind had scoured most of the loose snow from the surface of certain spots on Snowfall Lake. Matt rejoiced when he hit those spots, because he maintained a faster, steadier pace—almost two miles per hour. The sled skimmed across the hard-packed snow and he could almost run in his clumsy snowshoes. Then he'd hit a patch of deep powder, and his spirits sank as his pace slowed.

He cleared the peninsula as the sun touched the tops of the tallest trees in the southwest sky. Shadows stretched across the snow-covered lake and deepened the green of the pines and the brown of the aspens and tamaracks, which in turn highlighted the white birches. Angling to the south, he finally got the damned wind out of his face. Although it was a huge psychological boost, the tail wind added nothing to his speed.

Matt intuitively set his course for the boat dock, still unseen through the whorls of loose,

powdery snow. He'd worked several summers for Ferdie Olson in high school and college, guided dozens of canoe trips, and knew his way back to this place as well as he knew the way back to anywhere he'd ever lived. Sweating now, he dug deep for extra energy and quickened his pace. The finish line of his marathon was in sight. A quick glance back at the injured trapper revealed he was still breathing.

Despite the sweat dampening his body, Matt couldn't remember the last time he hadn't been shivering. Rigid with numbness, his face felt like an ice mask. The wind continued to swirl microscopic snow particles into his eyes, blurring his vision. Above all, his stomach growled non-stop. He hadn't eaten a full meal since an early breakfast of walleye garnished with dried morel mushrooms he'd harvested in the fall. Since then, he'd burned thousands of calories.

Matt slogged on toward Olson's Outfitters, head down to maintain forward momentum. He estimated his remaining distance every few minutes. One thousand yards. One yard equals two steps. Two thousand steps left. He hummed Tchaikovsky's *Marche Slave* in an attempt to maintain a steady pace and because the title seemed appropriate for the situation.

A faint outline of the main building, the lodge, appeared. *Ignore the deadly cold.* He hummed louder. *Ignore the pain.* Five hundred yards left. *Rise above the agony. Balance. Breathe.*

He glanced back at his passenger. "Dying ain't allowed today, pal."

Unless what awaited Matt at Olson's was a cop with a nervous trigger finger.

Chapter 2

Matt's muscles spasmed as he inched his way toward the lakeside entrance to the lodge at Olson's Outfitters. Compared to traversing the flat lake, the gentle thirty-yard incline from the boat dock seemed like scaling a mountain. The urge to collapse onto the snow and die chilled his brain. He started to sag, but steadied himself. *No. Finish the job.* He remembered what his mother used to drum into her children's minds almost daily: *Family takes care of family. End of story.* He couldn't stop doing the right thing merely because it was too painful. The man lying on his sled wasn't family, but he was a fellow outdoorsman. Matt wanted to believe the stranger would've done the same for him if their situations were reversed.

He unleashed a long primal scream that was swallowed by the wind. Straightening, he summoned his last ounce of energy and inhaled deeply. Leaning forward, every muscle as taut as piano wire tuned to double-high C, he pulled. The pressure in his head made it feel as if it would explode. *Save this man instead of watching him die like you watched ... her... die.* He gained an inch. Then another. Then a foot. Traveling those final thirty yards to the back door took two minutes.

He collapsed against the back door, gasping. After catching his breath, he shed his backpack and snowshoes and crawled to the front of the lodge. With no load to bear, he felt weightless but was too weak to stand. He struggled up the steps and across the porch to the wooden bird feeder hanging from a bracket jutting out from a porch post. After leveraging himself up to a standing

position, he removed an outer mitt and groped the narrow space between the feeder and the post. The key to the front door hung from a nail tacked into the backside of the bird feeder just as it had ever since Ferdie Olson opened for business four decades earlier. *Good ol' slave to habit Ferdie.*

After fumbling the key off the nail with frostbitten fingers, Matt glanced at the big thermometer mounted on another post. Minus twenty-eight degrees. "Son of a bitch." Colder than he'd imagined. To keep his spirits positive during the trek, he hadn't dwelled on the temperature. The number of degrees below zero made little difference. Zero would kill a man only a few minutes slower than minus twenty-eight would.

He worked the key into the lock and opened the front door. Ferdie had lowered the heat to maintenance level for the winter to keep the pipes from freezing. Still, the blast of forty-degree air that slapped him as he entered was the equivalent of walking from a refrigerator into a hot sauna. The lodge smelled of musty pine and ancient wood smoke. He closed the door, turned on a fluorescent ceiling fixture, staggered to the back door, and dragged his human cargo inside.

Matt peeled off the scarf, towel, and ski mask with which he'd covered his passenger's face for protection. The man's skin looked ghostly white with a tinge of blue. He then removed the space blanket and tarp he'd wrapped around the man's body, which exposed the bloodstained sleeping bag. He leaned down and put his ear to the man's face. Shallow, steady breaths came every few seconds.

Tears welled up from the bottom of his gut. He sat back against the door and patted the man's shoulder, as if he'd been an equal partner in the journey.

With the trapper out of imminent danger, Matt could think more than five minutes ahead. *Heat. Call for help. Eat.* The liquid propane heating system would take too long to warm the spacious lodge, so he headed for the massive fireplace in the main room.

Built from large stones of Arrowhead granite and framed with varnished red-pine boards, the firebox stood four feet high and eight feet wide. Matt remembered the summers he'd worked here. He and his cohorts, all students, would bask in front of this fire on many chilly summer nights after they had completed the day's chores. Standard topics of discussion were nightmare trip-guiding stories, lying about trophy fish catches, and complaining about their gruff, benevolent dictator, their Lord and Master, King Ferdinand Sigurd Olson.

The wood laid across the andirons by Ferdie had enjoyed two extra months of inside drying time, so Matt got the fire crackling nicely in minutes. As the heat hit his face, tension drained from his body. He extended his palms to the warmth, wanting to curl up here and sleep for a week.

Instead, he trudged to the back room and dragged the trapper into the great room on the tarp. He muscled the trapper onto the large, rustic, leather-and-wood sofa in front of the fire. The man groaned and opened his eyes for a moment and stared blankly as Matt laid him down. He wrestled the bloody sleeping bag off the man and draped it over him.

After walking into Ferdie's office, Matt sat in the creaky wooden desk chair and picked up the phone. The dial tone hummed its one-note melody. He let out a sigh of relief and tapped three numbers into the keypad.

"Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?" The professional, reassuring male voice on the line took him aback. The moment he'd dreamed about all day, but thought would never arrive, was here.

Matt said, "I need an ambulance at Olson's Outfitters on Snowfall Lake."

"What happened, sir?"

Matt almost said, "I found an injured trapper in the Boundary Waters and brought him here," but his mind flashed danger signals and he hesitated. "Uh, yeah, I was trapping a few miles east of here and got my hand caught in a trap. Lost a lot of blood." Since his mouth and lips were still numb, he had little trouble sounding exhausted and half-frozen. He put more pain into his voice, more disorientation. "Broke ... my damn leg too. Almost ... didn't make it. Got frostbite for sure."

"Okay, sir, we'll get someone out right away. But it'll take longer than usual due to yesterday's blizzard. Need to send a plow out to lead the ambulance to Ferdie's." The access from Fernberg Road, east of Ely, to Ferdie's was about a mile long, so the delay from plowing would buy Matt several extra minutes.

"Thanks," Matt said.

"What's your name, sir?"

Matt's face flushed hot. He hadn't thought the dispatcher might ask for the trapper's name. Hadn't thought to check the man for identification. Hadn't thought about anything but surviving until now. He stalled. "Getting dizzy ... damn hand bleeding bad ... head hurts like a sumbitch."

"Stay with me, sir." The dispatcher's voice rose and tensed.

Matt dropped the phone on the desk and walked to the doorway.

"Sir? You still there?" The voice sounded muffled and tinny from across the room. "Sir? Stay on the line."

Matt softly closed the office door behind him and headed for the retail area of the lodge—a combination mini-grocery, hardware, and camping and fishing gear store. Anything a wilderness canoeist or kayaker might need at the last minute during paddling season.

He opened a package of sliced ham and another of flour tortillas from the freezer and nuked them in the microwave located in the back room kitchenette. In minutes, he'd made two large burritos flavored with frozen shredded cheese and a jar of salsa. While he wolfed down the burritos, he heated water in the microwave and found packets of instant soup and instant coffee. In two minutes, he had a bowl of hot soup and a cup of hot coffee. He took the meal to the fireplace, where he ate and drank a little slower. The hot food acted as a heater core in his gut, warming him from the inside out.

The temperature had risen enough that he couldn't see his breath as he exhaled. He added two logs to the fire. Matt's next task was to pull the ski mask off his face and head. He winced as the ice gave way, ripping out numerous beard hairs in the process. He shook out his sweat-matted hair and slicked it back, letting it hang down to his shoulders. The warmer the fire grew, the more he wished he could lie down and thaw for two days.

Energized by the simple act of eating, he checked the trapper's wounds. The bandage on his hand was blood-soaked but had slowed the rate of bleeding. Matt couldn't apply a new bandage to the puncture wounds because he didn't want the rescuers to become suspicious if they noticed a fresh bandage on an unconscious man. He did manage to give the man a few sips of warm soup broth.

After carefully exposing the trapper's lower leg, Matt studied the broken limb. The trapper's shin was a swollen, grotesque, purple, green, yellow disaster. Matt's first aid skills excluded setting broken bones, so he'd only dared to put a splint on the leg last night.

He went back to the grocery area. The fresh food was long gone, but the freezer contained remnants of last season's products. He withdrew a few pounds each of hamburger, chicken breasts, steaks, and some of Ferdie's homemade venison sausage, then piled them on the checkout counter along with an assortment of condiments, staples, and a handful of freeze-dried meals. He loaded a large Duluth pack with the groceries and set it near the back door.

Next he went to the back supply room of the outfitter section and found a sleeping bag to replace the one in which he'd wrapped the trapper. He loaded the new sleeping bag and the items he'd used to keep the trapper warm into the Duluth pack on top of the food, then topped it off with fuel canisters, matches, and several packs of flashlight and lantern batteries. Satisfied he'd gotten most of the items he needed, he cinched the pack tight and took it outside and secured it on his sled.

The wind still whooshed through the pines and tossed puffs of powdery snow across the tops of the snowdrifts. He listened for the rumble of a snowplow or the wail of an ambulance siren but heard nothing.

The western sky glowed with a fiery, purplish-red that implied a sultry summer sunset, incongruous considering the thirty-below-zero temperature. He breathed deep and let the cold air sting his nostrils and lungs. It dawned on him that it was so cold he hadn't smelled anything outdoors the entire day. In the distance, a pack of wolves serenaded the moon. Except for the whistling wind, their haunting chorus was the only sound of nature he'd heard all day.

After washing and replacing the dishes he'd used and transferring the opened packages of food he'd used for his meal to his backpack, Matt returned to Ferdie's office, moving noiselessly because the emergency dispatcher was still on the line, asking for a response. He found paper and pen in a desk drawer and wrote for a few minutes. After he folded the paper, inserted it into an envelope, and wrote "Ferdie" on the front, he placed the envelope in the middle drawer of the desk.

He returned to the great room and slid a sofa pillow under the trapper's head, then tucked the sleeping bag down behind his body to absorb more heat from the fire. He could think of nothing else to do that would help the poor unfortunate bastard.

Matt went out the front door and listened for the plow and the ambulance. Still nothing. After replacing the key on its hook behind the bird feeder, he returned to the door. With one short, sharp motion, he rammed his elbow through the window next to the door, making a jagged, six-inch-wide hole, and stepped inside. He closed the door but left it unlocked.

Matt fetched a paper towel from the kitchenette and came back to the trapper. He found a spot of wet blood on the bandages and dabbed it with the towel, then smeared blood on the door to Ferdie's office and dabbed some on the desk and phone. He tossed the paper towel into the fire and made sure it burned to ashes.

When he heard the distant growl of the plow engine, Matt stood, zipped his parka, and donned a replacement ski mask he'd borrowed from Ferdie's stock. He knelt and rested a hand on the trapper's shoulder.

The man's eyelids fluttered half-open. Matt noticed a glimmer of awareness.

"Good luck, stranger. I did the best I could for you." Matt's voice cracked not from emotion as much as full-body fatigue. "I hope it was enough." Would saving this man's life make up for the deaths he'd caused last spring? The cold emptiness in his gut indicated it hadn't yet. *Maybe someday.*

Blinking yellow and red lights through the window showed that the plow had led the ambulance almost to Olson's parking lot. He walked out the back door, strapped on his snowshoes, put on his inner gloves and outer mitts, and harnessed the sled to his waist. As the emergency personnel entered the front door of the lodge, Matt retraced his steps onto Snowfall Lake. He disappeared into the starlit darkness as a whirlwind of blowing snow enveloped him and covered his tracks.

Chapter 3

Blustery northwest winds buffeted Allyson Clifford's rickety Chevy Suburban as she white-knuckled up Highway 61 from Duluth. Returning from her weekly grocery run, the cargo area contained more than a dozen plastic bins full of fresh fruits, vegetables, poultry, meat, and as much fresh fish as she expected to sell over the weekend at her restaurant.

Her fingers hurt from choking the wheel for the past hour. She anticipated losing traction on every patch of glare ice on the road. She was grateful the road crews had quickly plowed the highway, but sand and salt were useless at subzero temperatures. At this rate, she might arrive in Castle Danger too late to prepare fully for the lunch rush.

After ten more tense minutes, she turned onto Halcyon Drive and sighed with relief. She drove the hundred yards up the narrow road and parked behind her restaurant, which was perched a safe distance from a rocky outcrop fifty feet above Lake Superior.

As she got out, Josh raced out to greet her wearing a red down jacket, red mittens, and clunky winter boots. "Mama, Mama! Did you bring me something?" He spoke with the joyous delight of an eight-year-old that always melted her heart. Josh was home from school on a weekday due to a teachers' training day.

She beamed and knelt down as he approached. Never in a million years would she get tired of her son's youthful enthusiasm for life. "As a matter of fact, Joshie, I did." She pulled a small bag from her jacket pocket and dangled it in front of him.

Josh grabbed the package and almost ripped it to shreds. "Awesome. A Hot Wheels racecar." He threw his arms around her. "Thanks, Mama. You're the best."

She hugged him tight and absorbed his love as if he were a heating pad thawing her cold limbs. Then she gave him a big, embarrassing kiss on the cheek and buried her nose in his shaggy blond hair while he squirmed to get away.

A Hot Wheels car was a slam-dunk present for Josh because his favorite play activity this year was to set up his massively long Hot Wheels racetrack and race his growing collection of cars. He invented all sorts of contests such as measuring the distances the cars flew off jumps or rolled across the restaurant's wood floor. The winner was awarded the parking place of honor on his bedside table, lit up by his nightlight.

Allyson stood. "Help with the groceries before you play." She handed him the lightest bin, and he dragged it into the restaurant's kitchen. As she lugged another bin inside she spotted Hannah Boudreaux folding napkins and wrapping them around silverware sets.

"Morning," Hannah said with a smile and far too much good cheer.

Normally, Allyson expected a sour expression and a noise akin to a grunt. This meant only one thing. She turned on her boss voice: crisp, clear, commanding, all business. "What did I tell you about letting Dean into my restaurant before we open?"

Hannah's expression flipped from a smile to a surprised frown, and her voice spiked from mature young-adult cheerful to hormonal adolescent whiny. "How did you know?"

"The Halcyon is not your personal love shack. Where is he?"

"Rest room."

Allyson shook her head. "Get him out."

"Aw." Hannah started to pout, then seemed to remember attitude never worked on her boss. Instead, she headed for the rest room.

Louder, Allyson said, "When he's completely out the door, help me with the food."

Hannah was a typically moody teenager made more mercurial by the fact she was madly in love with her sleazy boyfriend, Dean Sobolik. She took every opportunity to meet with Dean anywhere but her own house because her parents liked Dean even less than Allyson did.

Despite her questionable taste in young men, Hannah was a good waitress. She hustled, paid attention to details, and, after the first week, grudgingly stopped texting on her cell phone while working. She'd already discovered how to exploit her recently blossomed body to attract boys. Her petite figure, pleasantly naughty smile, and lilting voice paid off in good tips from her male customers. With her long brown hair tied into a ponytail, she played the girl-next-door card as well as anyone Allyson had ever seen.

When Hannah came back from shooing Dean out the door, Allyson said, "Did Josh behave?"

Hannah smiled at Josh, who was running his new Hot Wheels car across the floor and making racecar noises such as "Vroom." "Of course. He always behaves perfect for me."

"That's because he's in love with you, and thanks for watching him." In a more guarded tone, she said, "Is Gary here yet?"

"Yep."

"Sober?"

Hannah shrugged. "Maybe."

Allyson's good mood dropped a level. "Great." Maybe usually meant no.

Decent cooks were hard to find this far north due to the remoteness. She'd been lucky to land Gary Soukkala two years ago. He arrived in the area to accommodate a woman he loved around the time the chef she'd inherited from the previous owners also retired, after helping her transition for a year after she took over. Allyson read his resume, saw he was a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, worked as a sous chef at one of the top restaurants in Chicago, and hired him on the spot.

Gary slouched at the bar with his head in his hands. A glass of clear bubbly liquid Allyson hoped was a club soda sat on the bar. His black hair looked as if he'd slept on one side of his head all night. His face sported a three-day stubble. She noticed he'd worn the same clothes yesterday—fashionably torn blue jeans and a black T-shirt with the Willie Nelson song title, "Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die," screen-printed on the front.

Locked on his eyes, she searched for hints of a hangover. "Hi, Gary, ready to go?"

He looked at her too casually, and his eyes seemed to take an extra second to focus. "Aces today, boss. What's the special?" He spoke in the deliberate style of someone trying to mask a hangover.

She decided immediately. "Split-pea and ham soup with choice of Panini-grilled sandwich. There's still a few gallons in the freezer."

A soup-and-sandwich special ensured Gary would work a minimal amount with knives. He wouldn't need to chop large quantities of food in rapid sequence and risk slicing off a finger. She hoped this would avert another mini-disaster.

Gary's face reddened. His eyes avoided hers. "I'll thaw the soup."

She crossed her arms and lowered her chin. "You're teetering on the edge."

"Only had a few last night. Couldn't sleep."

Gee, he'd only used that excuse twice before this week. "Get some coffee first."

Gary poured coffee and walked unsteadily to the kitchen. Allyson went to the front host station and mulled her options for the rest of the daily specials.

Although the Halcyon didn't officially open until eleven, the locals knew the coffee pot was always on. As long as the customers sat at the bar and stayed out of the staff's way, they were welcome to stop in early and exchange the latest gossip over a hot beverage and a day-old pastry. Therefore, she wasn't surprised when the front door opened. Brent Wilner, her fulltime busboy, blew in on the wind-whipped snow.

"Hi, Ms. Clifford," Brent said with his perpetual cheeriness and a lopsided smile as he removed his jacket and headed for the kitchen.

"Hi, Brent," Allyson said in the motherly softness she always got when Brent was alone with her. Because Brent suffered from Asperger's Syndrome, strangers and narrow-minded locals subtly ostracized him. Allyson didn't care. Brent was the Halcyon's most conscientious worker. He loved bussing tables and washing dishes because the job was so finite and self-contained. Even though Josh was normal, whatever that meant, she would've been equally proud to have Brent for a son.

She was wiping off the large black chalkboard sitting on an easel near the hosting station when he came back to get his marching orders for the day. "Want to write the specials?" She held out the box of colored chalk.

Brent smiled and took the chalk from her hand. "Yes, I'd like to."

She handed him the piece of paper with the specials listed along with the prices. "You remember the rule for writing menus?"

He stared at the ceiling for a moment with an intensity that always unnerved her. "Menu items in big letters, descriptions in medium letters, prices in small numbers." He lowered his volume with each phrase, almost whispering the word prices.

She patted his shoulder. "That's right. Put some of your special flair on the board today too. A nasty day like this could use some of your sunshine, honey."

Brent blushed. He either did a task to one hundred percent of his ability or refused to try, so she knew his art would at least be colorful, maybe even weirdly eye-catching.

She glanced at the clock over the door. "Ten minutes, people," she announced. "Let's get in gear." Allyson began her pre-opening routine but pushed the pace because of her late start. The usual nervous gurgle revved in her stomach. Running a restaurant was like acting in a long-running stage play. Each day required a new performance. Each customer expected the same high-quality food and service the previous nine hundred ninety-nine had received. She flipped the switch to the gas fireplace that formed a wall between the bar and the main dining room, then checked the till, making sure it contained plenty of change and dollar bills.

Next, she turned on the background music, a smooth jazz station from satellite radio that played tunes conducive to dining and quiet conversation; the warm, cozy atmosphere for which she strived. She wanted customers who appreciated quality food and a relaxing dining experience.

Allyson went to the specials board to check Brent's work. He'd written the specials in large, neat block letters. The descriptions of the dishes underneath each item were written in a smaller, more feminine cursive. The prices were smallest of all, but still visible from a short distance. Brent's flair this time was a dozen or so snowflakes sprinkled throughout the bare spaces on the chalkboard to signify the outside weather. More astounding, each one seemed identical, but upon

close inspection, each was unique, like actual snowflakes. More of Brent's special gift—attention to detail.

Winter always slowed business at restaurants in the Far North, so Allyson was down to her core staff. Gary was prepping food in the back. Hannah was finishing her place settings. Brent was organizing his bussing station. The music played at the perfect background volume.

She made one final check. The dining room looked perfect. Warm beige tablecloths complemented the maple trim and earth-toned walls. Lake Superior, or just plain "the Lake" to everyone who lived on the North Shore, was at its magnificent best through the huge picture window along the row of booths. Rolling steel-blue waves shimmered beneath a cloud-flecked sky. The Lake drove the entire North Shore economy: tourism, recreation, fishing, and shipping of taconite ore, coal, timber, and grain from the west. The Lake was so large, it influenced weather in the Arrowhead Region—the so-called Lake effect.

After a deep breath, Allyson recited in a bare whisper the prayer she'd recited every day for the past five years. "God, please give me the strength to resist all that is bad for me. Give me the wisdom to do what's best for Josh. Give me the faith to know that tomorrow will be better for us than today." Praying did little to calm her jittery nerves, but each prayer added a block to a spiritual and emotional wall between today and her past life.

At eleven o'clock, she flipped the switch on the "Open" sign and checked the front door to make sure it was unlocked. The Halcyon Bar & Grill was open for business.