

## Chapter One

Torture would have been kinder than this. Seven surgeries in five months had led him here. The dead end.

“Having you closer to home will help all of us, Michael,” his mother rattled on until he tuned her out.

He gritted his teeth as she wheeled him inside the New Horizons Institute, the world-renowned physical therapy center intended to transition him back into his life. His life. He snorted. Paralyzed from the waist down, he failed to see the reasons for trying to change either his condition or his attitude about it by coming to this place.

“Hi, I’m Becky Shane-McGill, your new physical therapist. Welcome, Colonel.” Black hair spiked from her head at odd spurts as if she had recently had a breakdown of some sort and emerald eyes snapped with too much cheer for his taste.

Her name rattled his nerves, reminded him of a redheaded journalist who had saved his life and stolen his heart in a desert a world away. Hope Shane. His heart jumped as if waking from a deep sleep and he wondered if this woman with the crazy hair could be Hope’s sister. God, he hoped not.

An image flickered in his mind of a woman covered with sand and streaked with blood, flame-colored hair stuffed beneath the ugliest Bermuda hat he had ever seen and a smile wicked enough to make him forget the bombs exploding around them.

“Shane-McGill?” His voice sounded strange even to himself. Strained. Devoid of emotion. “Hope Shane’s sister?”

“Yes.” Becky cringed before shooting him a half-smile. “I am related to the infamous Hope Shane. After the story she did on you, how could I not request to work with you myself?”

“Infamous Hope Shane.” He squeezed his eyes closed and clenched his fists. Coming to the New Horizons Institute in Denver, Colorado, had been his family’s idea and he had opposed it from the beginning. Close to his parents and son in New Mexico, yes, but the connection to Hope Shane concerned him. He knew her well enough to suspect she had more to do with this transition than anyone would tell. Damn her. She was like a pitbull wearing lipstick when it came to her determination to interfere with his life.

Maybe she hadn’t returned to her hometown. He had seen her on NBC several times while he recovered in a hospital bed. Perhaps she was still putting herself in danger’s way or—worse yet—dancing with another man in an exotic location, making love with him, laughing with him, holding him.

Good. Fine. He didn’t want her anyway. Good-bye once and for all.

He clenched the box of letters and watched Becky lead the way down the hall. He had left too many loose ends and worried that the great unraveling would take place any minute.

When his mother steered him into his suite, he glanced at the extra-wide door, low countertops, yellow walls and denim-covered sofa. End tables were covered with family photos and Dalton's drawings. Homey, he believed his mother called it. Sweet hell would be more accurate.

"As you know, Colonel, this is a transitional facility not a hospital. Although we will continue with your physical therapy, our main purpose here is to prepare you for life on your own," Becky said with a perpetual grin.

His father and son stepped into the living area from the bedroom, beaming smiles and good will. As they smiled their strained smiles and chattered nervously about how wonderful it was, he realized that they had all gone insane. Completely nuts. The plant was just a plant, no adjective needed. The place was another trap, another illusion of progress and healing. He wanted out.

What he would give for a drink, a cold beer or nice shot of whiskey. God, what he wouldn't give for one day of freedom. One day with no one telling him what to think, when to roll over, what to eat, when to shower, what to say. One day of normalcy. One day without sympathetic looks or discussions about his injuries. One day when he wouldn't think about war and loss.

"Dad," Dalton approached him with a toothless grin, pulling up his jeans as he moved. "Grandpa and I just set up the XBox in your bedroom. Wanna play me sometime? I've been practicing."

"He would love to play, wouldn't you, Michael?" Gwen squeezed his shoulder.

"Sounds good." He looked at his son and hated the awkwardness between them. He had been overseas so long...too long...and now he didn't know what to do or how to

be.

Again he thought of Hope, felt her arms around his waist as she had half-dragged, half-carried him to safety, her husky voice warning him not to pass out, pleading with him to stay alive, promising him a bottle of oozo if they ever made it back to the Sates together. He remembered how her green eyes had flashed with fear and concern when hell erupted around them.

She had saved his life.

He would never forgive her for that.

“Michael?” Gwen leaned over him, concern shadowing her eyes. “Are you okay? You look exhausted.”

“Long flight, long day.” His gaze flicked over the wrinkles that had deepened on her forehead. Being his mother had aged her beyond her years. He looked away.

“Colonel?” Becky’s turn to hover.

“I’m tired. I have a headache.” He wheeled his chair toward the windows overlooking a courtyard. The Rocky Mountains framed Denver’s skyline.

“We need to leave dad alone, grandma. Let’s go,” Dalton said to Gwen as he tugged her long skirt. “Let’s leave dad alone.”

He glanced at his son. More than anything, he wished he could undo his time away from his boy. When he thought he would die, he had made Hope promise to come back to the States, find Dalton and tell him how much his dad had loved him. Now here he sat within five feet of the boy and couldn’t say the words he felt in his heart.

Once a marine; always a marine. That's what people said. But for the past five months he had behaved like a coward. He knew it, but had no idea how to stop the downward spiral.

"Where is Hope Shane?" He needed to know. "She isn't here, is she? I mean, she's not going to walk in the door any minute...is she?" He looked at the wooden box he held in his lap. She had written him every day. Postcards. Notecards. Backs of napkins. Whatever she could find, she had written on and mailed. Every day for five months. He had written back, but never mailed his responses because they had been filled with too much pain.

"Is she in Afghanistan? Did she go back?"

"She isn't in Afghanistan, Colonel." Becky chewed her lower lip, arms folded across her chest as she studied him.

"No?" His thumbs tapped on the box. "Did she have anything to do with me being transferred here? You're her sister...that's too much of a coincidence. Hope and I..." He shook his head, finding it impossible to describe who her sister had been to him. "I think it's too much of coincidence, that's all."

"No, Michael, we thought it would be best. This was our decision. She did send us the information, though, even recommended Ms. Shane-McGill, but we made the decision." Gwen glanced at his father who hovered uncertainly behind everyone else.

"Like I said, your father and I—"

"I know what you said, but I also know Hope. She always gets what she wants." A familiar swell of dread sloshed in his gut. Not that she would want him anymore, not like this.

“We brought up your favorite chair, moved in some of your clothes...” His father faltered and looked toward his mother. “Well, we plan on getting up here as often as possible. Dalton is out of school for the summer. We’re driving back home tomorrow, but we’ll be back up by the middle of the week.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Dalton said, taking a step toward him with a toothless grin. “Grandma and grandpa said we’re going to stay in a hotel that has a waterslide, isn’t that cool? Can you come see me there?”

He nodded, afraid he no longer knew the right things to say to his family.

“Captain McGee from your old unit is in town. He’s been good about keeping in touch. He is home on leave for six weeks, said he wants to stop by later.” Gwen hugged him again and lingered. “We’re all so happy to have you here, Michael, so close to home again. It’s a miracle.”

He fingered the lid of the box. Her letters had been postmarked everywhere from Pakistan to Libya. All with her PO box in New York as a return address. “If she’s not in Afganistan, where is she? She’s not in Iraq, is she? Or Pakistan?”

“She is in Denver, working at Channel 9 news. She moved back about six weeks ago,” Becky answered, her perpetual grin slipping. “Would you like to call her? I can give you her cell phone number.”

“God, no.” The thought of calling Hope Shane, or technically Hope Cedars, his estranged wife, crippled him more than his injuries ever could. “Does she know I’m here? Tell me what to expect. I don’t want to be ambushed.”

“Ambushed? I doubt it. Since returning to Denver, she’s been working non-stop. You know how she is, always chasing a story. I don’t see her much.” Becky looked at

his family for support but they still wore their strained, hopeless smiles.

It was obvious from her sister's blank expression that Hope had kept their secret. Of course she had. A woman like that didn't need to be saddled with a disabled marine as a husband. Maybe she had never filed the marriage certificate. Maybe she had finally given up but hadn't been able to tell him in the letters. Maybe she had already found someone else.

He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, punch something, throw something; instead he turned his chair and stared out the window.

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"Are you sure we have the right address?" Devon asked, peering over the steering wheel of her Prius.

Hope looked at the address scrawled on the back of the picture that had been sent to her office. "Yep, it's the right place." She flipped the picture over again and winced at the sight of illegal immigrants piled into the back of a van like pellets of produce. "I'm going to snoop around, you stay here."

"No way I'm staying here." Devon wrapped her hair into a quick ponytail. "I hate this neighborhood. We're going to stick out like flamingos in Alaska."

"Flamingos in Alaska?" She fumbled inside her messenger bag for a stone she always touched for luck. The white stone fit into the palm of her hand. Smooth. Flat. She rubbed her fingers over it before slipping it back inside the zippered pouch. Flashing Devon a smile, she opened the door. "I love flamingos, all pink and balancing on one leg. I need a vacation. Key West would be fun, wouldn't it? Are flamingos just wild down there or only in the state parks? Or zoos? They're not cooped up in zoos, are they?"

“Focus, Hope.”

“Don’t worry. I’m focused. You’re the one who brought up flamingos.” She tapped her fingers on her messenger bag while her gaze scanned the block.

Every building had bars on the windows. The sidewalk played out like an amusement park fun ride, all ridges and crevices. One house in particular kept her attention: its stone façade reminded her of an old whore, used up and neglected. The note that had arrived at her office claimed a human smuggling operation was trafficking through Denver, all going through this neighborhood.

“I have a feeling that this is going to be a big story, Dev.” Hope exited the car and strode toward a corner store. “Just hopefully not too big, if you know what I mean. I’ve had enough of dangerous situations to last me a lifetime.”

“Yet here we are skulking around one of the worst neighborhoods in Denver. Great. Ever since you came back to town, every story is a big story,” Devon complained, keeping pace. “I never knew Colorado’s seedy underworld until you came back.”

“High compliment, Dev.” She grinned at her friend, feeling the zap of adrenaline pulse through her veins at the prospect of breaking a big story. “We’ll get a feel for the place before we decide where to begin, I’m thinking we can do a few feature stories about the neighborhood—”

“No one’s going to believe that you’re doing feature stories—”

“That way we can build up some trust while we do the real digging.” Her grin turned into a toothy smile when she noticed Devon’s frown. “Where’s the faith, Dev? I can blend. I can be charming.”

Devon snorted her answer.



“Let’s have lunch,” she said, spotting a diner. “Mingle. Get some story ideas. You know, we could find some great stories here. People trying to better their community...stuff like that. I bet we can find some real gems while we sniff out the bad buys.”

“Sniff out the bad guys? Right. Got it. But do we have to eat? I just had breakfast,” Devon protested.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do.” She stopped, mind jumping with ideas. “We’ll do a feature on the diner to begin with, make nice with the locals, smile a lot. People like being on television. They’ll be flattered. The more we hang around, the easier it will be for us to find out what’s really happening.”

“And you think Marion will go for the feature series?”

“Of course he will. He’s thrilled to have me in Denver, remember? He loves me.” She laughed at the doubt twisting Devon’s face. “And I’m adorable, right?”

“Gee, I forgot.” Devon rolled her eyes.

“Maybe our source will surface.” Adrenaline pumped through her veins like an out of control freight train. “We’re being noticed. People like to talk. This is a good thing. Excellent.”

“You never should have left network. Denver will bore you. Did you know there’s a bet at the station about how long you’ll stick around? You’re a danger junkie, meant to cover wars and other major catastrophes around the world.” Devon motioned to their surroundings. “You had the glamorous job, the prestige of being a war correspondent. I don’t know how you could have left it all for this.”

Her smile faltered at the memory of being caught in the crossfire between

insurgents and the US military, the memory of her best friend Peter's head exploding in front of her, the memory of crawling into an overturned jeep with corpses at her feet and picking bits of Peter's skull from her hair, the memory of dragging a wounded marine to safety while hell busted out around them. Not so glamorous.

She shook her head to clear her mind. Focus, focus, busy, busy.

Inside, the diner wasn't much more appealing than the outside. Tile had been bleached more than once and the damage was irreparable. Orange booths lined the walls, some ripped some not. A cliché of mundane.

"You were the It Girl, the reporter destined to be a network anchor one day or to at least have your own show like Anderson Cooper. You were so close to having it all, the golden ring that every journalism student dreams of and you just walked away. Don't you ever miss-"

"Let's see what's on the menu, Dev. I need to eat," she said.

She feigned interest in the choices while her peripheral vision took in the room. She had been in worse places than this, eaten worse food. Hands shook on the menu as she remembered sharing a protein bar with Michael as they hid in a bombed out shell of a home. She had had to stitch up the gash in his head with the thread in her bag, the same bag she carried now. He had given her that stone that moment, told her that they would be leaving and taking that with them as proof of survival. And she had prayed that he wouldn't die...she had prayed and prayed and prayed.

"Hey, Hope, what's clicking away in your brain now? You look far too serious. What were you thinking about?"

She shook the images from her mind, folded the menu and struggled to regain

focus. Sighing, she rubbed the center of her chest with a closed fist. “An old friend and a shared dinner, if you could call it that.”

“The war? How come you never talk about it?”

“I was a war correspondent, Dev, I talked about it every day.” She exhaled a long breath. “Think I’ll have the veggie skillet.”

“This idea of yours is going to mean a lot of work. Feature stories, investigative reporting, research...lots of work.” Despite her words, Devon’s face flushed with shared excitement. “So when do we start oozing charm and good will?”

“Now,” she answered through a smile as she looked up to greet the waitress.

Hours later, and one feature story on the diner done and canned, she rested her elbows on her desk and closed her eyes. The newsroom buzzed around her with tip-tapping on computer keyboards, ringing of phones and loud conversation. She preferred noise over silence. Couldn’t stand silence.

“Hope, there’s a marine in the lobby asking for you.” Devon tapped her on the shoulder. “A really big marine. Scary looking.”

Marine. Her heart stopped at the word. It couldn’t be him.

“That’s the second time today you have disappeared on me.” Devon propped her hip against the desk. “What’s going on with you? C’mon. What’s going on with you today?”

She rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand and ripped her gaze from the doors. “Why is there a marine here? Who is it? What’s his name? Is he in a wheelchair? Who did he ask for? Hope Shane or...Cedars?”

“Cedars? I said he was here asking for you.” Devon glanced over her shoulder before leaning close to her. “Do you have another name I should know about? An alias or something?”

“Can you get rid of him for me?” She reached into her desk for a piece of gum. Panic clenched at her throat. Her fingers struggled with the wrapper.

“Are you scared of the marine?” Devon squinted at her, a smile pulling at the edges of her mouth. “Did you break a heart or two over there? Think it’s some long lost lover stalking you now that he’s back in the States?”

“My life is not nearly as exciting as you think it is. I’m not scared of any marine.” Her gaze darted toward the newsroom doors. “How tall is he? Is he wounded? Is he walking? Does he have a scar?”

“Geez, I don’t know. I didn’t think I needed to sketch the guy. Go find out.”

“Right. Find out.” Gum snapped between her teeth. Heartbeat raced as if she had finished running a marathon. “Sounds so easy, so why can’t I move?”

“I’ll tell him that you’ve left for the day.” Devon’s face softened with pity. “I have never seen you look like this, absolutely terrified. I didn’t mean to joke about it. I’ll take care of him. Don’t worry.”

“No, I’ll go. I can handle this.” She stood on wobbly legs. Nerves skittered beneath her skin as she walked from the newsroom to the lobby.

The only marine she cared to see had banned her from the hospital in Frankfurt, Germany. From Germany to Walter-Reed, she had kept trying to see him, had been denied access, had been humiliated more times than she could count.

Her heart sank like a deflated balloon at the sight of Captain McGee, US Marine, standing in the lobby looking at her framed picture on the wall. The last time she had seen him, he had tossed her over his shoulder and escorted her from the hospital in Germany. She had pelted his back with her fists, had screamed down the hallway for Michael to admit who she was to him...but she had been shut out. Denied. Restrained.

Unwanted memories assaulted her. Michael falling face first into the dirt. Her running back for him. McGee tackling her. Michael's lifeless body. McGee shouting at her. Machine gun fire. The taste of sand and blood in her mouth. Explosions. Helicopters. And the screaming...she could never block out the sound of her own screams.

"Captain," she said with more force than necessary.

He turned, his massive frame blocking out the sun from the window behind him, face hidden in sudden shadow. And she wanted to hit him. Hard. Fist to the jaw and then a kick to the crotch. That would make her point. Damn Captain McGee.

Their gaze connected, neither willing to break the stare first.

"What do you want?" She rubbed sweaty palms over her hips to keep from lashing out, rolled the gum in her mouth and straightened her spine. "I should have security toss you out on your ass, McGee."

"Payback is a bitch, ma'am," he kept his gaze steady on hers, "wouldn't blame you if you did."

"Of course you wouldn't. You're much more noble than I am. I hold a grudge." Be brave. Stand tall. Walk forward. "Is this an official visit, Captain? I can't imagine you want to grab a beer or talk about old times."

He shook his head, first to break the stare by glancing again at the framed picture of her in the lobby. “I heard that you won an Emmy for your series on Marishka,” McGee said after a long silence. His dark eyes drifted back to her face. “Congratulations. You earned it. So did Peter.”

“Tell me why you’re here.” She cleared her throat when her voice faltered. Breathless, she tried again. “This is about Michael, right? Is he dead? Just tell me and be done with it.”

“Hope, I need you to calm down.”

“Calm down? I am calm.” She shrugged deeply, hands outstretched. “This is me being calm. Stop being such a damn marine and spit it out.”

“I am a damn marine, ma’am.” He leaned his back against the wall. “How would you have me be?”

“Straight forward, how about that?” She wanted to vomit. “Is he dead? Is that why you’re here?”

From the solemn expression on his face, she knew the news was bad. Michael must have died. Too many surgeries, too many complications, too much damage, too many ghosts. Michael. Her worst fear realized, she braced herself against the wall and stared at her feet

“Hope...Ms. Shane...” he began, eyes watching her closely, “you need to know that I am really sorry for what happened in Germany, Shane. I am really sorry for everything. He’s not dead. He’s in Denver, at the New Horizons Institute.” McGee’s hand was on her shoulder, supporting her. “I’m sorry if you thought—”

“The New Horizons Institute?” She blinked at the man, certain she had misheard him. “In Denver? Here? When?”

McGee’s smile softened his face, making him look less like a hunk of marble. “You didn’t used to repeat things, Shane.”

“Well, you’re not exactly getting to the point are you?” She hit him in the shoulder. Hard. “When did he get here? Is he okay? Did he tell you to find me?”

“No, I am pretty sure he would be mad as hell if he knew I had tracked you down.”

“I gave his family the information on New Horizons, pulled some strings to move him to the top of the waiting list, but then I backed off. His family arranged on him coming here? Do they know about...about me? About Greece?” She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice. “About the marriage?”

“I believe only six people on the face of this earth know about Greece,” McGee said with a smile, “despite your efforts to make sure the entire marine corps knew. I kept waiting for you to blurt it out on one of your live newscasts.

“No one believed me.”

“Of course not.” His smile faded. “I had to respect his wishes. He is my commanding officer, my best friend.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she studied McGee’s face through a squint. “My sister Becky works there. She hasn’t said anything.”

“She’s his physical therapist. She told me where to find you, thought you would come if I came to see you myself.”

Feeling like a fool, she shoved her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and squinted at the floor. All those unanswered letters...silly random comments and observations written on anything she could find and tossed into the mail...hoping for a response that never came. She embodied the word fool when it came to Michael Cedars.

“It’s about time he stops hiding from me, don’t you think?” She met his gaze then.

“He’s not the same man you remember, Shane.” His eyes held a warning, but she already knew Michael had given up months ago. “He’s not the same man I knew either.”

And she knew what she needed to do.

“I’m not the same woman, either.”

“He won’t want your pity.”

“I don’t pity him. I’m spitting mad at him.” No, she did not pity the man. She wanted to tell him off, maybe slap some sense into him and then kiss him until he came back to life.

“Stay out of trouble, Shane.” McGee winked. “And give the Colonel some hell, I think he needs it.”

“I’ve been looking forward to giving the Colonel some hell, Captain.” With a mock salute, she turned her back on him and walked toward the newsroom. Oh, yes, she had definitely been looking forward to giving the Colonel some hell.

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