

CRAVING A HERO

By Barbara Raffin

CHAPTER ONE

"OMG, you're Dane St. John," squealed the teenage girl from the boat's bow seat, letting the tip of her fishing rod dip into the lake.

"Holy crap," hooted the younger boy on the middle seat of the small craft. "You're Hawk!"

"Watch the language Boy," the father said from the back bench seat, absently holding out his fishing license to Conservation Officer Kelly Jackson.

But his gaze sharpened on the man sprawled in the bow of her boat, muscled arms draped over the gunwale, legs so long he'd propped them on the center seat. He'd assumed that pose when she'd refused to allow him to help her launch the boat from shore. She was, after all, as capable of handling a boat by herself as any other Conservation Officer. Still, the indulgent grin of the newest action star to come out of Hollywood researching his next role in the remote Upper Peninsula of Michigan had taunted her all morning.

"You that that actor all the kids are crazed about?" the father asked.

"Mom likes him, too," said the boy through the wide grin he'd fixed on *Hawk* a.k.a. Dane St. John.

Kelly took the license from the father's fingers, not even bothering to glance Dane's way. She knew he'd be flashing his pearly whites for his *fans*. He'd done so at every boat they'd stopped. And if their passengers weren't fans already, a wink from his brook-blue eyes won them over. Somehow, she'd managed to remain immune to his charms. Maybe it was his longish hair or the smug way he watched her through his Ray Bans...which he removed whenever they pulled up to another boat. Couldn't pass up an opportunity to show off those famous blue eyes. Though, judging by *Daddy's* frown, maybe she wasn't alone in that immunity.

"OMG," the girl squealed again, this time dropping her fishing pole into the bottom of the aluminum boat and producing a cell phone from the purse on the seat beside her. "No one's going to believe this unless I get a picture!"

"Me, too," said the boy, likewise discarding his pole and lurching to his feet.

Their boat rocked and Kelly shifted her attention from license to overall situation. "Sit," she commanded.

The boy obeyed and the father added, "And mind your poles. What if you get a bite?"

The boy had plopped his backside down on the bench nearest the DNR craft, which left the small fishing boat listing to one side.

"OMG! OMG!" the girl kept repeating, raising her phone in front of her face, and twisting in the bow to get herself and Dane in the same frame, her movement adding to the already precarious tilt of their boat.

Dane grabbed the neighboring bow and tucked it in close to the larger DNR craft, holding it steady...all the while posing practically cheek to cheek with the girl while she snapped pictures with her phone.

"Teenagers," the father grumbled.

Kelly smiled at him. "Bet she's begging you for car keys all the time."

"Not a chance of that for another couple years," the father said through a sigh of relief, and Kelly ticked off any necessity to check for further licenses. A good CO didn't always have to ask

direct questions to gain information...like whether or not the teenage girl was old enough to need a license herself.

Having given the father's fishing license a cursory once-over, Kelly handed it back to the father. "I see you've got one of Sven Maki's boats."

"Renting a cabin from him, too," the father said.

"My turn," the boy said, rocking the boat again as he leaned from his seat toward Dane.

A muscle popped in Dane's arm and a vein bulged in his neck. He was really one-handedly keeping that boat from swamping...or showing off big time.

"Settle down there, champ," she said.

"Use your own phone," the girl groused.

"I left it at the cabin," the boy said

"Take a picture for your brother," the father said, mumbling under his breath about how the boy had at least the courtesy not to bring his phone on their fishing trip.

"Your sister will take a picture of you and me together, won't you little lady?" Dane said in his deep, slightly raspy *Hawk* voice that females seemed to swoon over. But not her. Definitely not.

Dane had a stilling hand on the boy's shoulder and was bathing the girl in his high wattage smile. She was blushing, her fingers flying over the phone's keyboard.

"I'll just finish this twee—" She glanced into Dane's blinding smile and her fingers went still.

"So," Kelly said, turning her attention back to the father, "Catch anything yet?" mentally, ticking off her script of Conservation Officers questions.

The father eyed his kids huddled in the bow of the boat getting their pictures taken with Dane St. John. "Just a movie star."

#

Kelly kind of knew how the father felt. A double major in conservation and criminal justice and trained alongside Michigan State Police candidates and she was still being handed fluff jobs like babysitting an actor researching his next movie role. Boat stowed and morning duties behind her, she led her charge along a ridge through the woods, stewing over the fact she still had to prove she was more than the token minority hire.

"Nice family back there," her charge said, dogging her heels, so close she swore she could feel his breath on the braid hanging down her back. "But since you scoped them out with your binoculars, why'd you still check on them?"

"The girl was giving her dad grief about her life-preserver. Didn't want to buckle it up. That's something we can't ignore."

"So you'd have given him a ticket because *she* refused to buckle up?"

"I could have if she hadn't buckled up by the time I got to their boat," she said.

"But you wouldn't have, right?"

There was something in the tone of his question—something almost pleading as if he would have found her lacking if she even admitted she would have written a ticket. And damn, but it made her want to tell him what he wanted to hear.

"A true law and order CO—" *Like my father.* "—would have written a ticket."

"But there's room to give a person a break, right?"

"Kids and life-preservers, that's black and white—life and death," she said, avoiding giving him a straight answer.

"But the dad was trying to do the right thing and teenagers can be contrary."

She peered over her shoulder at Dane. "What do you know about teenagers?"

He grinned back at her. "I was one for seven years."

Before she could stop herself, she rolled her eyes. One corner of his mouth twitched. She stifled a groan and turned her attention back to the trail in front of them.

"You wouldn't have ticketed him," Dane said, sounding way too sure of his assumption.

"It's a moot point," she said. "By the time we caught up to them, the dad had gotten the daughter to buckle up."

"Yeah," he said, still sounding like he didn't believe she'd have ticketed the father.

Maybe she wouldn't have. Maybe the threat would have been enough to make an impression on the girl about how serious her lack of compliance was. She did see things more in shades of gray than black and white like her father. That was one of her issues—her failings as her father saw it.

Behind her, Dane's voice ruffled her braid as though each hair was a raw nerve. "I heard you tell that dad where to take his kids for some fishing action this evening. That was nice of you."

"Just spreading a little good will," she returned. "Good for the tourist trade."

"Is that part of the job?"

"As a matter of fact, it is."

"So, I learn another aspect of the job," he said.

"And what else did you learn today?" she asked before she remembered she didn't really care what he learned, if anything.

"I learned there're no shades of gray when it comes to safety laws and binoculars are a CO's best friend."

Surprised he even extracted that much from her morning duties, she gave him a cursory glance. His grin stretched.

"Surveilling the boaters on the lake before we—"

"*We?*" she cast over her shoulder, intent on reminding him that she hadn't allowed him to help her in any aspect of *her* job.

"Correction," he said, giving her a conceding nod. "Surveilling the boaters on the lake before *you* even launched the boat saved a lot of unnecessary stops once we were on the water."

"That's why binoculars are a good tool of the job," she said.

"That's what I was saying."

She huffed and trudged off along the trail, sweet trickling down her flanks. Ordinarily, she'd have taken the afternoon off after a morning of marine surveillance then gone back out in the evening or night. July afternoons were generally too hot for field work unless there was something specific to deal with. But she was in no mood to make anything easy for *Joe Hollywood*. So, she'd taken him hiking through a dense, mosquito filled woods. The only problem was they were quickly sweating off their insect repellent. Good thing they carried a fresh supply in their backpacks. Oh yeah, she'd made him don a backpack under the guise of *you wanted the full experience*.

"So," he said way too close behind her. "Just what are we out here looking for?"

Your breaking point. "Any sign of poaching."

"And what would that look like?"

"Animal carcasses. Make-shift hunting blinds. Worn patches where someone might have been sticking up." *Mostly the sort of poaching evidence left over from the winter that we look for in spring rather than hot mid-summer. Not that she was about to inform of that fact.*

"Circling crows overhead mean there's a carcass on the ground, right?"

In her peripheral vision she caught the upward sweep of his arm and glanced up. Just her luck, *Jo Hollywood* was some sort of Boy Scout. She exhaled heavily.

"Looks like they're over the highway. Probably just road kill."

"So, is this all you do, wander around the woods looking for signs of something illegal?" he asked, all but tripping on her heels.

"Yup," she said without so much as a backward glance. "Nice and mundane."

"Is that another reference to how my portrayal of field work in my last movie missed the mark?"

"I may not have been on this job very long, but I'm the daughter of a CO and not once in his thirty year career did he come home sooty and singed from an explosion."

"That's because he never played a CO in an action movie."

She stopped short and wheeled around at him. "None of that over-the-top crap happens in real life."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and grinned down at her. "Reality doesn't make for interesting action films. Besides, I portray a Game Warden along the Texas/Mexican border. Things get a little more heated when the bad guys carry Oozies rather than fishing poles."

"So your Game Warden character stumbles across drug mules for a drug cartel and winds up in an all-out war. Does *that* really happen even in Texas?"

He shrugged, his grin oozing charm. "Wouldn't know. I didn't write the script."

"Yet you come all the way to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to *research* the next installment of your gung-ho game warden movies?"

"Figured, if they were going to create a series around my character, I had an obligation to learn a little more about him and what he'd encounter in movie number two."

"And you think the Texas Department of Natural Resources would send one of their Game Wardens to the U.P.?"

"Actually," he said. "My character's supposed to be taking a vacation after all the mayhem he encountered in the first movie."

"And they thought nice, boring Upper Michigan was just the place for him to recuperate from...how many shots did you duck and explosions did you narrowly miss?"

His grin stretched and he hovered closer over her. "You really hate all that action crap, don't you?"

"Tell me they aren't going to blow up my woods for the sake of a movie."

His grin turned into a grimace. "Wouldn't be much of an action film if there weren't some fireworks. Besides, where the Hawk goes trouble follows."

She groaned at reference to one of the tag lines hyping his movie character, turned, and trudged off, calling back to him, "Just stay on the trail and watch your step. I'm responsible for your safety."

"Yes, ma'aaaam."

The humorous note in his voice turned into a wail and Kelly turned to see her charge somersaulting down the slope the ridge bordered. She cursed and skidded the forested hill after her tumbling movie star.

If the man broke a body part, the production company backing his latest movie was sure to blame her. They'd probably take the entire production budget of his up-coming movie out of her salary, which meant she could kiss good-bye any dreams of a new truck, home of her own, or comfortable retirement that should come at the end of a long career...not mention any chance of her father's approval.

"This isn't my fault," she shouted, sliding toward where St. John had come to a stop against a stump.

The only responses were Dane St. John's screams and the angry buzz of ground hornets swarming up around him as he scrambled to his feet.

"Damn it!" She shrugged off her backpack, dug out a spray can of wasp stopper, and blitzed the swarm, dropping them in midair.

But her movie star kept running, flapping his arms like some giant bird trying to get air born, one of those long legged sorts being that Dane St. John had a longer inseam than most movie stars. A truly man-size action hero...whom she, a mere female, had just saved from a swarm of angry ground hornets. The fans of his high-octane action movie, soon to be plural, should see him now.

A smile tugged at her lips as she watched him race off through the trees trying to outrun hornets that currently lay stunned at the bottom of the gulley he'd fallen into. Some hero.

Though she had to admit, ground hornets had a nasty sting and he probably didn't know she'd rendered them helpless.

Not that the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, her employer, was likely to see it her way, either. Even if tall, buffed, and handsome admitted it was his own fault he'd gotten bit up by hornets, she was in deep doo-doo. Never mind that she'd told him to watch his step on the narrow path behind her.

A flurry of angry buzzes hummed from the leaf covered forest floor mere yards from where she stood. The hornets fought the effects of the stunning spray. It wouldn't keep them down much longer and, when they came out of it, they were going to be angry. If ever there was a cue to exit...

She grunted at how easily she'd slipped into stage direction terms as she climbed the ridge over which her charge had fled. This is what babysitting a movie star got her, thinking in movie slang when all she wanted was to be taken seriously as a Conservation Officer. And assigned jobs that got her outside the office for real work, not just fluff jobs like escorting a pampered movie star on what was supposed to have been essentially a nature hike. A star, she reminded herself, for whom she was responsible. She'd be lucky if she even kept her job as a CO after this.

She didn't catch up to her charge until she reached the two rut road where they'd left her company truck. Dane St. John was bent over at the waist, hands on his thighs, breathing hard.

"Take your backpack and shirt off," she ordered.

He grumbled but complied. It was the first order of hers he'd obeyed without question.

"Looks like the backpack saved your back," she said, surveying his broad, sun-kissed shoulders and the expanse of skin tapering down to the waist of a pair of jeans that hugged trim hips and a firm tush. She'd never stopped to explore what about a man's backside intrigued her, but his was one of the best she'd ever seen fill out a pair of well-worn jeans.

Well worn? What'd he do, scavenge from some movie wardrobe the right *in-character* look? Or was it possible the man whose paycheck for one starring role no doubt exceeded her annual income times ten actually owned a pair of faded jeans with one corner of a back pocket tattered?

"Of all the damn stupid things—"

"Excuse me?" she demanded, in no mood to be dressed down by some stupid actor. "But if you'd stayed on the path behind me like I told you to do—"

One look at his welted arms and face, though, and she stopped in mid I-told-you-so. "You're not allergic to wasps, are you?"

"I'm not allergic." He kept his head down, refusing to meet her gaze.

"You sure?"

"Yes," he snapped, his knuckles white around the shirt gripped in his fist.

"Because, if you are, we had better head back to civilization right now."

"I'm fine," he growled, giving her a lethal glance.

What a jerk. She was the one who should be angry. He'd gotten himself into the fix for which she would likely be blamed, his well-being was her responsibility.

Taking in the extent of damage done to the actor's previously buffed to a rugged sheen face, she dumped her backpack on the lowered tailgate of the truck and dug a Benadryl from her first aid kit. "You better take one of these."

"I'm fine," he all but howled.

"Look here, Mr. I'm-the-Next-Hot-Hunk-Out-of-Hollywood-and-every-woman-should-be-impressed, you've got multiple bites. If your airway swells, you die just like us plain folk. Take this pill while you still have an opening to swallow through." *And I still have a job.*

The set of his mouth shifted and the eyes that had turned millions of women into quivering puddles of hormones narrowed at her. But he took the capsule from her hand, the scrape of his callused fingers leaving a strange itch in her palm. Mesmerizing eyes she expected from a movie star, but not callused fingers.

"This'll ease the sting," she said, breaking open a tube of topical anesthetic, trying to ignore the itch spreading from her palm where his fingers had touched her.

He washed down the Benadryl with water from his canteen as she dabbed at the bites on his arm and tried not to notice his Adam's apple bobbing up and down with every swallow...or the jagged little scar on the underside of his chiseled chin. So Dane St. John didn't run to a plastic surgeon to correct his every little defect.

The scarred jaw lowered and he nodded at the arm she dabbed. "Is something wrong there?"

"No. Why?"

"You've been dabbing that same bite repeatedly."

"Oh." She started and let go of his arm, sputtering, "Tube's empty."

She broke open another vial and went to work on his other arm, noticing a wide scar slashed across his forearm. Maybe the guy wasn't as pampered as she'd first thought. "Not as many bites on this one."

"I'm sorry," he said without a hint of sarcasm.

He should be, assuming he wasn't putting her on. Dabbing at some bites on his shoulder, she peeked up at him. The squint lines around the famous blue eyes lent his face an apologetic expression. Add the puppy-dog look in his eyes to the sincere note that had framed his apology and maybe...

No way. He was an actor, albeit one of those who quipped out witty lines in the midst of flying bullets and fiery explosions. Still, curiosity got the best of her.

She lowered the sting-kill swab from his broad shoulder, lowered her hand from its temptation and scrutinized him through narrowed eyes. "What are you sorry for?"

"I shouldn't have snapped at you. None of this was your fault."

"It wasn't? I mean, I know it wasn't."

The near corner of his mouth twitched. Sunlight cut through the trees and across his face, his considerably welted face. She winced. "When are you supposed to start shooting your next movie?"

He grunted. "Judging by your reaction, not as soon as my production company plans."

"Sorry," she said, retrieving a fresh tube from her kit.

"Not the kind of face that would make magazine covers now, huh?"

She cocked her chin and offered him an impish smile. "Oh, I don't know. I can think of a tabloid or three that would jump at a chance to feature *that* face on their front page."

"That good, huh?" He smiled the trademark smile that sent most women swooning.

Most women. Not her.

Yeah right. Three mornings ago, when they'd met face-to-face and he'd turned that smile on her, she'd very nearly melted at his feet. It'd taken every ounce of control to retain her professional persona. She was, above all else, a woman trying to prove herself in a man's job. She had no time for infatuations, especially with any man as superficial as an actor. So she'd pasted on her best CO face and shook his hand...which had left hers tingling far longer than was healthy for a career woman.

She nodded at a stump on the side of the road. "Sit and I'll dab your face."

He frowned at the stump. "I'll stoop down for you, if you don't mind."

"Leary of stumps now, are you?" she teased and she dabbed the welts dotting his forehead, trying to ignore how he smelled more of pine needles and rich, loamy soil than any fancy aftershave.

"Something like that," he murmured. His smile faded and his eyes angled at the ground.

He was hiding something and she was certain she knew what it was. Straightening, she said, "Now let's see the part of your backside the backpack didn't protect, Mr. Macho Movie Star."

His face came up and his eyes widened. "Surely you aren't serious."

"Surely I am. Drop the pants, Buster."

"I'll have you know I get big bucks for baring my butt," he said as he turned away from her and unzipped his jeans.

"Well, whether administering first aid to your butt or the butt of somebody less famous, I get the same bucks and not many of them I might add."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "So why'd you become a Conservation Officer?"

"It's all I've ever wanted to be."

He hitched a questioning eyebrow at her.

"My dad was a CO," she said, "a very good, very dedicated one."

"And you idolize him."

"Something like that," she said, using the same line he'd used when he'd hedged about the true reason he hadn't wanted to sit on any stump. Before he asked any more questions that might force her to admit she was out to prove something to her father and the local group of all male, old-timer COs, she prompted, "Enough talk. Drop the pants and bend over."

The sight of screen star Dane St. John's bare backside covered in angry welts made her laugh.

"That's not the reaction I usually get," he muttered, but there was a good-natured undertone to his voice.

"I imagine it's not," she replied, breaking open a fresh vial of sting kill. "Lean over the tailgate."

He groaned but complied.

"What I wouldn't give for a camera right now," she said.

"You'd get big bucks for the kind of shot I'm giving you." He peered over his shoulder at her. "You don't have a camera in that pack of yours, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," she chirped, dabbing at his welted behind. "Big bucks, huh?"

He peered over his shoulder at her. "You wouldn't."

"A picture like this could help pay for the damages your production company is sure to charge me for getting you hurt."

He shook his head. "The production company won't sue you."

She glanced up, hope surging through her. "They won't?"

He grinned back at her. "They'll sue your DNR."

She frowned. "Then I can kiss my job good-bye."

"A job you clearly like." His grin faded. "I was just kidding about the production company suing the DNR. Besides, you didn't get me hurt. I did it myself trying to impress you."

She paused in her dabbing. "You were trying to impress *me*?"

"Yeah," he said, still looking back at her. "You're the real deal. Law enforcement in the field and I'm—"

She all but stumbled back from him. "Did you just call me the *real* deal?"

He tugged up his pants and faced her. "That's what you are, right?"

She gazed up at Dane St. John. "But-but, nobody takes me seriously."

He shrugged. "Nobody takes me seriously, either." He pointed at his face. "You thought I was a male bimbo. Right?"

She felt herself blush. "Sorry."

He smiled at her, not the big screen smile the world got to see. This one was smaller, a little sheepish, and a whole lot more endearing.

"I'm the one who should be sorry," he said. "I was so busy showing off for you I didn't even think about how my screwing up could affect you."

"Dane St. John, showing off for me? Yeah. Sure." But, in spite of her words, her heart was doing a two-step against her ribs.

"Yeah. Sure," he replied, using her words.

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because you're not impressed by my Hollywood image. Because you're damn cute in your CO uniform." He fingered the crisp collar of her khaki shirt, his knuckles just one thin layer of cloth away from her skin.

"Because you're the real thing," he finished.

"Real thing, huh?" she retorted, though she didn't feel anywhere near as defensive as she had earlier.

"Yeah," he said, leaning close. "Now give me one of those sting kill swabs, Ms. Real Deal Ranger."

"Did I miss a welt?" she asked, trying to stifle a grin...but not too hard.

He took the swab she held up to him, cupped her chin, leaned in closer, and dabbed at her forehead. "Yeah. You missed one all right. But that's okay because I didn't."

There was a tone lacing his words, something that implied he meant more than he said. It was in the way his dazzling blue eyes met hers and in how his less than Hollywood polished fingertips held her chin. It was in the way he smelled of the woods rather than some high priced aftershave, the way his broad shoulders blocked out the sun as he hovered over her, taller than the usual Hollywood hunk, real man sized. Or had she finally fallen for the charm?

"Has anyone ever told you how amazingly bright your eyes are?" he asked.

"They're brown," she murmured, still caught up in his gaze, his touch, his smell.

"Pale with a hint of green and oh so bright," he returned, his face lowering towards hers.

Instinctively, her eyelids lowered and her mouth tilted to meet his. His kiss was gentle,

warm, just a hint of tongue testing the line of her lips. Then his lips were gone and she left with lips slightly parted, expecting—wanting more. She opened her eyes to find him frowning down at her. All at once, the words rushed from both of them.

"Why aren't you slugging me?" he asked.

"Why'd you stop?" she asked.

"You didn't want me to stop?" Him.

"You expected me to slug you?" Her.

Their words tangling, they laughed self-consciously. She noticed he no longer held her chin, that his hands filled the space between them, one still holding the depleted sting stop stick. The stick looked dwarfed between his fingers, fingers in perfect symmetry to his large, masculine hands. Why was she noticing such stuff about him *now*. She better change the mood here real quick.

She side-stepped him and gathered up the used sting kill sticks.

"I still can't believe you didn't slug me," he said, propping a lean hip against the lowered tailgate of the truck where she was dumping the used sting kill sticks into a waste bag.

"Why'd you think I'd slug you?" she asked, pleased her voice sounded reasonably normal.

"To say you haven't been receptive to my charms would be an understatement. You've been downright prickly toward me."

She shrugged. "You were a job."

"Babysitting job, I seem to recall overhearing you say."

As if her cheeks weren't already warm enough, a fresh flush of heat flooded them. "I didn't mean for you to hear that."

"Even if I hadn't, you made it pretty clear I wasn't welcome."

"It wasn't personal," she said, putting her emergency kit in order.

"Glad to hear it."

"Being the token minority hire, I get all the jobs nobody else wants to be bothered with."

"Didn't know I was such a bother."

She closed the lid on her kit and gave him a chastening look. "You could listen better—follow instructions better. If you had, you wouldn't have fallen into that ground hornets' nest."

"At least I got your attention... finally."

She studied him for some sign that he was making fun of her, that what he'd said earlier about trying to impress her was just some ploy to charm her. But damn, the man looked so blasted sheepish. Or maybe he looked vulnerable because his Hollywood face was studded with hornet stings.

"You didn't want me to stop kissing you?" he asked, this time with less astonishment and far more wonder.

"It was a nice kiss," she said, stowing her kit—keeping her voice as neutral as she could manage.

The cocky smile well documented in photographs stretched across his lips. "Nice? That's all?"

She groaned and picked up the waste bag. "I better get you to where a doctor can look at those bites."

"I'm fine," he said, adding the stick he'd used to the bag she was about to tie up.

"Sure you are," she said, closing the tailgate he still leaned against and making him jump away.

She headed for the driver's side door. He headed for the passenger side. One look in the

oversized side mirror seemed to stop him dead in his tracks.

"That doesn't look good," he said.

"Maybe now you'll listen to reason—understand why I want you to see a doctor."

He climbed into the truck. "I don't need a doctor. But I'd sure like to avoid being seen by that paparazzi booked into the motel room next to mine."

"Isn't that just typical of you Hollywood types, more concerned about your looks than your health," she said, inserting the key in the ignition.

One man-sized hand covered hers, stopping her from starting the truck. "Kelly—"

It was the first time he'd called her by her given name and it did something funny to her stomach. Or maybe it was his touch, or the quietness, the sincerity with which he spoke her name. Or maybe he was a better actor than she expected some action movie star to be.

"What?" she snapped.

"This business I'm in, it is focused on looks way more than I like. But, worse, it feeds on gossip. One front page tabloid picture of me looking like this, and it'll set off a firestorm of outrageous stories."

She thought of the tabloid papers her mother religiously read, of how they filled the racks at every checkout in every store and gas station in little Copper Ridge—how, whenever she picked her mother up at the beauty shop, the content of those rags was all anyone was talking about. She'd always thought it better than their gossiping about their neighbors. But, now, with one of the popular subjects of the tabloids sitting next to her in her DNR truck, she had to wonder.

"The headlines will read everything from Action Star Brought Down By Hornets to Action Star Struck With Career Ending Virus," he said.

She settled back in her seat, pulling her hand out from beneath his. "You sure you feel okay?"

"Yes," he said.

Still, she took one more shot at convincing him to let her take him to a doctor. "I thought the saying was better any notice rather than no notice."

He motioned to his welted face. "I know this is hardly a career ending story. I'm just not accustomed to being so much in the spotlight."

She gave him a you-chose-the-career look. "Comes with the territory, no?"

"Yeah. I just never expected to end up so popular that every little move I made, every little mistake I make would be front page news."

"So you admit you made a mistake in not listening to me."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Didn't I already say I did?"

She smiled. "How badly do you want to avoid that paparazzi?"

He sobered and settled his head against the headrest. "Real bad."

"Bad enough to rough it for a day or two until those welts disappear?"

He tipped a roguish grin at her. "I can rough it with the best."

She snorted and started the truck. "We'll see about that."

His grin stretched. "Guess not everything I did today was a mistake."