



DIVINE
COURAGE

CHLOE
CALLAGHAN

Divine Courage

Divine Cozy Mystery Series Book 6

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Cast of Characters

Joanna “Jo” Pepperdine. After suffering a series of heartbreaking events, Jo Pepperdine decides to open a halfway house for recently released female convicts, just outside the small town of Divine, Kansas. She assembles a small team of new friends and employees to make her dream a reality. Along the way, she comes to realize not only has she given some women a new chance at life, but she’s also given herself a new lease on life.

Delta Childress. Delta is Jo’s second in command. She and Jo became fast friends after Jo hired her to run the bakeshop and household. Delta is a no-nonsense asset, with a soft spot for the women who are broken, homeless, hopeless and in need of a hand up when they walk through Second Chance’s doors. Although Delta isn’t keen on becoming involved in the never-ending string of mysteries around town, she finds herself in over her head more often than not.

Raylene Baxter. Raylene is among the first women to come to the farm, after being released from Central State Women’s Penitentiary. Raylene, a former bond agent/bounty hunter, has a knack for sleuthing out clues and helping Jo catch the bad guys.

Nash Greyson. Nash, Jo’s right-hand man, is the calming force in her world of crisis. He’s not necessarily on board with Jo and Delta sticking their noses into matters that are better left to the law, but often finds himself right in the thick of things, rescuing Delta and Jo when circumstances careen out of control.

Gary Stein. While Delta runs the bakeshop and household, and Nash is the all-around-handyman, Gary, a retired farmer, works his magic in Jo’s vegetable gardens. A widower, he finds purpose helping Jo and the farm. Gary catches Delta’s eye, and Jo wonders if there isn’t a second chance...at love for Gary and Delta, too.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” John 15:16 (ESV)

Prologue

“Not here. Not now.” The shadowy figure lurked in the dark corner outside the deli, staring up at the lights above the hardware store.

A figure flitted across, moving too quickly to identify. Was it Malton? Or was it the convicted criminal? Fists clenched at the thought of a known felon living in town, in *their* town, steps away from innocent, upstanding citizens, filled the watcher with rage.

The thoughts railed around and around, growing louder and more insistent. Something needed to be done. Had to be done.

Go somewhere else! Go where someone wants you.

The woman was clearly visible now, her brown hair tumbling over her shoulders as she stood in front of the window peering down onto the street.

It was her. It was the convict...appearing as if she didn't have a care in the world. But not for long.

A plan began to form, small at first until it grew. A grim smile lifted the corners of the watcher's mouth. One way or another, the esteemed town of Divine would be rid of the criminal element, once and for all.

Chapter 1

“This is the last of it.” Nash Greyson slammed the tailgate shut. “You about ready to head over?”

Jo nodded. “I think that’s everything. If not, I can always run back to town to check on Sherry later.”

Nash placed a light hand on Jo’s shoulder. “You didn’t happen to intentionally leave something behind so you *could* use it as an excuse to check on her later?”

“Maybe.” Jo chuckled as she wrinkled her nose. “Is it that obvious?”

“To me.”

Sherry Marshall, a resident at Jo’s farm for former female convicts, had finally spread her wings and was out on her own. It was a move that both thrilled and terrified Jo.

Emily, the first resident to leave, had gone to live with an aunt and uncle in Abilene. During Jo’s last follow-up, she’d learned not only was Emily surviving but thriving under the watchful eye of family.

Sherry’s path forward was the exact opposite. She did not have the support of her family, who had cut all ties at the time of her incarceration, leaving the woman adrift.

But Sherry wasn’t alone. She had the love and support of Joanna Pepperdine, Delta Childress, Jo’s right hand gal, Nash, Jo’s handyman, who was so much more, and Gary, Jo’s gardener, not to mention the other residents of the farm who were cheering her on and encouraging her. Because if Sherry had the courage to go out on her own and succeed, that meant they could, too.

Marlee Davison, Jo’s friend and the owner of Divine Delicatessen, had also been instrumental in helping Sherry get on her feet by hiring her as a server.

Jo was convinced God had answered her prayers when Wayne Malton, who owned Tool Time Hardware, approached her about a vacancy at his recently-renovated apartment units above the hardware store.

She secretly suspected Wayne knew exactly how much Sherry could afford and set the monthly rental rate within her reach. After crunching numbers, Jo and Sherry were thrilled to discover not only could she afford the rent and utilities, she would also be able to save a little money.

For the umpteenth time, Jo pushed aside the feeling of uneasiness. The place was perfect for Sherry and a short drive from the farm, only minutes away. Sherry wouldn't even need a car. She could walk to work. Everything was right there in downtown Divine, and if she needed a ride, she could hop on the Tri-Tran, the area's public transportation, or ask Jo or anyone at the farm to take her.

"Hop in." Nash gave Jo a playful pat on the back and sneaked in a kiss.

Jo rounded the side of the truck and reached for the handle. She started to slide inside when she noticed a brightly wrapped package on the bench seat. "What's that?"

"A housewarming gift for Sherry."

"Which reminds me, I have a gift for her, too. I'll be right back." Jo darted to the kitchen door, nearly colliding with Delta, who was on her way out. "You were in such a tizzy to get going, you forgot about this stuff."

"Thanks, Delta. This whole move has me discombobulated. My head would fall off if it wasn't attached."

"Sherry's gonna be just fine." Delta handed Jo the gift bag and another bag. "I also threw in some of Sherry's favorite foods. She should have enough meals to last for a couple of days."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate it." Jo returned to the truck. She placed the bags on the floor and motioned to the package next to her on the bench seat. "So, what did you get Sherry?"

"It's a surprise," Nash said.

“What kind of surprise?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. What did you get her?”

“A surprise,” Jo teased.

Nash chuckled. “I deserved that.”

During the drive, the couple chatted about the farm and then the conversation drifted to Jo’s open spots. “Pastor Murphy has a woman he’s anxious for me to take in. I haven’t made a decision yet. I’m still on the fence.”

“Still on the fence?” Nash shot her a quick glance.

“There’s something about her.” Jo absentmindedly tugged on her seatbelt. “She’s...” Her voice trailed off as she struggled to describe the woman.

“Not ready for the farm?” Nash suggested.

“Oh, she’s ready. More than ready, according to her,” Jo sighed. “The problem is, I’m not sure *we’re* ready for her.”

“You don’t think she’ll be a good fit?”

“She’s a little brash, a little bossy.”

“Then say no. You have your hands full without adding a difficult resident to the mix.”

“True,” Jo murmured as she stared out the window. “The only thing stopping me is that she has nowhere to go. She’s older, and I think Pastor Murphy is having a hard time placing her. She has no money. No prospects.”

To date, all of Jo’s residents had been younger and in their late twenties and thirties, except for Raylene Baxter, who was in her early forties.

“Older than Raylene?”

“Laverne is in her fifties.”

“What’s she in for?”

Jo had a strict policy of not allowing convicted murderers to live at the farm, although she'd bent the rules with Raylene, whose case was unique. Because of the circumstances behind her incarceration, she'd taken a vote from the women. They voted to allow Raylene, a former bounty hunter, to stay. Jo had never regretted her decision.

But there had been a couple of others that she *had* regretted, which was one of the reasons she hesitated to accept Laverne and was leaning toward going with her gut, which told her to pass.

“Forgery and stealing from her employer. She diverted funds into her own bank account. Not only is she brash and bossy, she’s also somewhat conniving. Like I said, I’m struggling with the fact she has nowhere to go.”

“I’m sure you’ll make the right decision. First, and foremost, you need to think about what’s best for the farm, for you and for the residents.”

“Right.”

They reached downtown. Nash circled the block and pulled into the small parking lot behind the hardware store. The first order of business was to unload the sofa and armchair donated to Jo’s secondhand shop, Second Chance Mercantile.

Both pieces were in pristine condition and had been brought in by a local who was getting rid of everything and moving out of state to be closer to her grandchildren. She’d also managed to track down a set of barstools, which had fit perfectly at Sherry’s bar area.

With several purchases from the mercantile, Sherry had almost everything needed to furnish her new home.

Wrangling the furniture up the stairs leading to the apartment was half the battle. Nash and Jo twisted and turned it several times before they were able to half-carry, half-drag it to the top of the stairs and into the apartment.

Sherry, who knew they were on the way, stood waiting for them in the hall.

They set the sofa in the living room and returned to the truck to unload the armchair, as well as grab the bags of food and housewarming gifts.

Once everything was inside, Sherry rearranged the furniture several times before deeming it the perfect layout. “This is even better than I thought.” She ran a light hand over the back of the sofa. “This sofa looks brand new.”

“It’s in excellent condition,” Jo agreed.

“I still can’t believe how lucky I am to have gotten this place. I keep pinching myself.”

“How did you do for your first night alone?” Jo asked. “Did you feel safe? Were you able to sleep?”

“Like a baby. There’s already someone living next door. Wayne told me he plans to finish renovating a third unit across the hall and it will be ready by fall.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear you aren’t living here all alone.”

“What are those?” Sherry pointed to the bags Jo had brought up.

“Food. Delta sent enough food to last for days,” Jo said. “I saw some homemade chicken noodle soup, spaghetti pie and goulash. I think there’s even a container of Delta’s cookies and cream raspberry dream bars.”

“Tell her I said thank you.”

“I will.” Jo placed the bags of food on the kitchen counter and then handed Sherry the gift bag. “This is for you. It’s a housewarming gift.”

“A gift? You shouldn’t have, Jo. You’ve already done so much.”

“I wanted to.” Jo motioned to her. “Go ahead. I hope you like it.”

Sherry pushed the tissue paper aside and pulled out a set of towels.

“It’s a set of embroidered bath towels Delta has been working on for you.”

“They’re awesome,” Sherry’s eyes shined as she held up the pale pink towel with “SM” embroidered in white lettering. “I can’t wait to hang them.”

“I bought you a housewarming gift, too.” Nash handed Sherry the wrapped package.

“Seriously? You guys are too much.” Sherry slipped her finger under the edge of the paper, carefully peeling back the tape. “I want to save the wrapping paper and keep it as a reminder of how much you’ve done for me, that I’m not alone.”

Jo could feel her throat clog as she blinked back sudden tears. This was why she had put her heart and soul into the farm, the businesses, the women who were in desperate need of a hand up, not a handout. This was Jo’s reward, and her heart swelled with pride.

Sherry set the paper aside. “It’s a brown box,” she joked.

“A brown box with a special gift inside.” Nash cast Jo a quick look. “I didn’t run this by Jo first. I hope she approves.”

Sherry lifted the lid, reached inside and removed a second box, this one labeled.

Jo’s eyes grew wide as she stared at it in disbelief. She said the first thing that popped into her head. “You can’t give Sherry that.”

End of Excerpt...Divine Courage Coming Soon!

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