

*A Secret Shifter*

**LODGE**

*Christmas*



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# **A Secret Shifter Lodge Christmas**

Holiday Shifters of Frost Mountain

Book 2

By: Lisa Daniels & Scarlett Stone

# Prologue

## Ten Days Ago

Charlotte Lodge pulled the lever, grimacing at the deafening hiss that filled the cramped cubicle as the powerful vacuum cleared the toilet of the rest of her vomit. Straightening, she grabbed a wad of tissues and wiped the corners of her mouth, hoping she hadn't gotten any of it in her hair. The way this stupid journey was going, that would be the icing on the cake.

This was the third time she'd excused herself from her seat and briskly walked toward the cubicle to throw up. The last time she'd hurried in here, she'd barely had time to shove her hair out of her face before her stomach heaved, expelling half of this morning's meal into the toilet bowl. Hopefully, this would be the last time. Any more trips to the toilet, and she'd have the other passengers wondering if she was airsick.

*If only that was the real case.*

She gazed around the cubicle, feeling revolted at what she saw—the dark specks on the toilet seat, the cracked counter. The only remotely appealing thing about the cubicle was her reflection in the mirror, frowning back at her.

She smiled despite herself. *Beautiful*. She'd heard herself described that way for most of her life. Even at thirty-three, she was still a sight to behold. She was wearing a black pantsuit that hugged the curves of her slender body, the neckline just low enough to reveal a healthy cleavage. Anyone who saw her might think she was headed *to* Vegas, but not *from* there.

Charlotte's gaze traveled up, past her lips to her piercing green eyes. Her blonde hair cascaded down the sides of her face, stopping just below her ears. A pair of diamond earrings gleamed softly in the overhead light.

She brought her fingers to her pearl necklace. Those should've been diamonds, glittering for all to see. But she'd tucked them away in her purse.

The last thing she needed was to draw too much attention to herself. As it was, she'd already attracted too many glances her way.

*I look chic, she thought. Very chic.*

Her reflection grinned back at her.

Right at that moment, someone knocked on the door, and a woman's voice called, "I need to get in there."

"Well, this toilet's occupied," Charlotte snapped, feeling suddenly irritable. Couldn't the woman read?

"Are you going to be in there forever?"

Charlotte found herself considering the woman's words. If the cubicle wasn't so revolting, she might consider staying in here for the rest of the flight. At least she wouldn't have rushed in here to throw up.

*And if I stay in here, maybe he won't see me.*

Just then, the plane hit a patch of turbulence, dislodging that thought from her mind. She braced her hands on the sink to maintain her balance, taking a few deep breaths. Then she faced her reflection again.

She could use some lipstick.

The knocking continued louder this time.

"I'm coming, dammit," she said, rolling her eyes. "Tell your bladder to take a chill pill, will you?"

Smoothing her hair with her fingers, she reached for the black Chanel purse on the counter and made to exit the cubicle, but another thought stopped her in her tracks.

*What if he is here?*

Anyone who got their hands on her purse automatically had the diamonds. That was a chance she wasn't willing to take. Still, wearing seemed so much riskier. Without hesitation, she reached into the purse and withdrew the necklace. She stared at it for a moment, almost mesmerized by the sight of

the gleaming stones. Three dozen white diamonds in a row, with a seventy-five-carat yellow diamond pendant.

“Not bad for ten million dollars,” she muttered.

She tucked the necklace into her pocket. Then, clearing her throat, she checked her reflection in the mirror once more and unlocked the door. A disgruntled-looking older woman stood just outside. She muttered something about keeping her waiting, but Charlotte paid her no notice. She returned to the cabin, staring down the aisle at the rows of seats and the heads turning in her direction.

Resisting the urge to wrinkle her nose, she made for her seat, nearly bumping into the flight attendant who was talking to one of the passengers. The woman whipped around, looking momentarily startled. She was slightly taller than Charlotte noted, and her ginger hair hung down the sides of her face. She tucked it behind her ear every few seconds.

Looking at her, a single word came to Charlotte’s mind: *tacky*.

“You okay, ma’am?” the flight attendant asked, trying to sound sincere. “That’s the fourth time you’ve headed for the toilet.”

*Hopefully, it’s the last.*

“Third time, actually.”

“Ma’am?”

Charlotte waved dismissively. “Yes, I’m all right, uh...” She glanced at the name tag on the woman’s shirt. “Hazel. I’m just a bit airsick.”

“Sorry about that, ma’am,” Hazel replied. “Is there anything I can get you?”

*Besides a list of all the passengers on Flight 18?*

“No, I’m fine.”

The attendant’s lip curled slightly, and Charlotte realized she must have snapped.

*Oh, well.*

Without bothering to muster an apology she brushed past the woman and slipped back into her seat, which was, to her dismay, on the aisle. Two other women sat in her row, both with auburn hair, both dressed like everyone else in this cabin: regular. The one in the window seat kept gazing out, headphones on her head, and the one in the middle seat, no doubt her sister, sat fidgeting between them.

She sighed and cast another glance around the cabin before leaning back against the headrest. If anyone had told her two weeks ago that she'd be sitting on a plane bound for Chicago in late November, she would've made their life a living hell for even suggesting something so horrible. But she was here right now, wasn't she? On her way to Chicago. Flying economy.

The plane shuddered a few minutes later, and Charlotte felt the diamond necklace clink in her pocket.

"Ugh," she complained aloud. "Bloody Daystar Airlines. I should've picked a better one."

A few heads turned at the sound of her voice, but she paid them little notice. She still couldn't believe she was flying economy. She'd never flown coach before, never had to. One of the perks of growing up rich. She'd never flown coach even when she'd ended things with Sam two years ago. She glanced at the passengers next to her and suppressed the urge to wrinkle her nose. She shouldn't be here. She should be flying first class as usual.

But this was different, she thought, touching the necklace bulging in her pocket. So much depended on this. Maybe even her life.

Ignoring the slight tremor that filled her palm, she glanced around yet again. She needed to stop doing that. All it would do was draw more attention to herself—counterintuitive, given her situation. Still, how could she be sure Dennis wasn't on the plane with her—even worse, in her cabin?



*Get a grip, will you?* she chided herself. *If he was going to find you, he would have by now.*

It was hard to ignore that logic. They'd been in the air for a couple of hours now, or so it seemed. She'd heard the pilot say something about flying over Nebraska. Shouldn't be long before the plane touched down in Chicago and she could breathe again. For all she knew, Dennis wasn't even on this plane. If he'd followed her, he would be sitting in first class by now.

Charlotte scoffed. People like Dennis didn't fly first class. He wasn't the type to care about comfort when it came to his spending habits. Economy class was more his speed. Her chest swelled slightly with panic. Did that mean he'd flown coach, too?

*Relax, Charlotte.*

Even if he *was* on this flight, he probably figured she was in first class. He'd never figure she was here. Once the plane touched down, she'd leave the airport as soon as she could. All she needed to do was lay low in Chicago for a while, maybe until after Thanksgiving or Christmas, and hope this little problem died down by the time she returned to Vegas.

Or she could just take the matter up with the Chicago police. Hopefully, they'd be more helpful than those idiots back in Vegas.

A squeaking sound reached her ears, growing louder by the second. Charlotte craned her neck and spotted the flight attendant, Hazel, heading down the aisle with a food cart. The woman wheeled the cart to a halt and handed trays laden with food to Charlotte and the sisters next to her, her lips pulled back in a strained attempt at a smile.

"Enjoy your meal," Hazel muttered. Then she turned and moved on to the rows ahead.

Charlotte lowered her gaze to her plate and instantly felt a wave of revulsion. A plastic cup of orange juice next to a bottle of water. And ... that

wasn't pasta, was it?

"What the hell?" she complained aloud. "This looks like it's just been preheated."

Hazel glanced over her shoulder at her, and Charlotte saw irritation flicker across the woman's face, but she wasn't about to apologize this time either. Before either of them could say a word, the woman seated next to the window scoffed.

"Sounds like you've never flown coach before," she said.

Charlotte cast a withering glance in her direction. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hazel wheel her cart away. Charlotte stared at her tray again and grimaced. If she tried to eat this, she'd be hurling her guts in the toilet before she could say "disgusting."

"They could've at least prechilled the orange juice," she grumbled loudly, frowning at the cup.

Minutes later, she was still debating whether this meal would be the cause of her stumbling back to the toilet when a sudden movement near the front of the cabin caught her eye. Mildly confused, she frowned and spotted a man glancing back at her from one of the seats on the aisle. He looked young, maybe two or three years younger than she was, with greasy black hair and a terrible goatee. Just before he turned out of sight, she got a good look at his eyes. They were dark and gleamed with triumph.

*Dennis.*

Charlotte's heart started to pound, and her hand flew to her chest.

*He's here!*

She grabbed the plastic cup and gulped down the warm orange juice. *Ugh.* It made her want to retch, but she needed to drink something. Dennis was here, for goodness sake. And not only that, but he'd also *seen* her. He knew she was here.

Getting off this flight was going to be harder than she'd figured.

Maybe she could call attention to him. But what good would that do? He might get held up at the airport, but he'd be released once he had the authorities convinced he wasn't following her. And *then* he would follow her again.

Maybe going to Chicago wasn't getting far enough away from him. Once the plane touched down, she could start making arrangements to head somewhere else. Paris didn't sound like such a terrible idea. At least, she could hang there for a couple of months and—

Before she could finish that thought, a violent shudder rocked the plane, sending the rest of her orange juice sloshing around in the cup. She heard several passengers gasp and for a fleeting moment, a small, hopeful part of her believed it was nothing more than turbulence. Then the plane trembled again, even harder this time; the lights overhead flickered, and her heart lurched in her chest.

"Oh, God." The words escaped her lips, quivering with her breath.

"What the hell is going on?" she heard someone yell a few rows behind her.

"Terrorists!" someone else cried. "We're done for!"

Somewhere in the depths of her mind, beneath the crippling panic that had risen to the surface, she knew this was something else. Not an attack. Not turbulence. But something much, much worse. This was the end of her life.

A few passengers had bowed their heads in their seats, though whether they were praying or bracing themselves for a crash, Charlotte had no idea. She gripped her seatbelt, a soft whimper parting her lips—her own desperate, incoherent prayer to whoever was in charge of her life to save her. In the aisle, Hazel was yelling instructions to the passengers, struggling to be heard over the chaos growing in the cabin.

“Everyone stay put,” she was saying. “It’s only turbulence—oh!”

Another tremor rocked the plane, like the aftershock of an earthquake. Hazel spun off balance and went sprawling to the floor. A beeping filled the cabin just then, and an oxygen mask suddenly dangled before her face. She grabbed it and covered her nose, sucking in as many deep breaths as she could to distract herself from the sudden humbling realization of the insignificance of her own life.

*Charlotte Lodge. Multimillionaire. Successful divorcee. Femme fatale. Soon to be deceased.*

She drew another breath, tears blurring her vision. She heard an explosion and something bright orange lit up the side of the plane for a moment.

“Fire!” a passenger cried. “We’ve just lost a wing!”

Screams filled the cabin, and she gripped the armrest, still clutching the mask over her face, her heart threatening to burst from her chest. This was it. She might as well have stayed in Vegas and put herself in danger. This was even worse. Her death was certain, imminent. The beeping grew louder in her ears, and tears streamed down her face.

And then it happened: With a sudden groan, the body of the plane caved in and broke apart. The floor beneath Charlotte’s seat disappeared and she tumbled through the air, not over Nebraska, not toward the tell-tale high-rises of cities, but toward a massive, snowy mountain.

# Chapter One

## *The Ex-Wife of Charlie Chaplin*

### Present Day

The same freezing weather that had lulled her to sleep hours ago now woke her. But the weather had gotten worse.

Charlotte knew that she was conscious because she was aware of the cold. It tore at her without mercy, biting every inch of her exposed flesh and rocking her body with tremors. With great difficulty, she pried open her eyes. Her eyelids felt heavy as lead, and a dull pain throbbed in the back of her skull. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then forced them back open in a sudden fit of panic.

*What the heck happened?*

Her eyes swiveled about, taking in her immediate surroundings. She was lying in the snow, just beneath the jutting edge of a large, cracked rock. A cluster of pine trees hovered on the edge of her vision, shivering slightly in the wind. Charlotte drew her attention back to the rock, wincing as a memory flashed through her mind.

*Right.*

She'd ducked under the rock for shelter and must have banged her head and knocked herself out.

She pulled herself into a sitting position as more memories flooded back to her, memories of her final moments on Flight 18, memories of her screaming as the plane burst apart and she plummeted like a meteor toward this leviathan of a mountain. She and the two other women in her row had crashed into the face of the mountain. The impact should've killed them instantly, but somehow, she was still alive.

Or was it weeks?

She'd lost count of how much time had gone by since she and one of the other passengers had woken up to find the third woman lying unconscious in front of them. They'd agreed to head downhill and look for help at the bottom of the mountain, but after trudging through the cold for days without seeing anyone, they'd split up.

Well, Charlotte had made that decision. The other woman—Maggie or something—had wanted to go back for her sister. At first, Charlotte had been okay with the idea. But she couldn't possibly go back up the mountain after coming this far. They'd barely survived on the icy water and nuts they'd found along the way; the last thing she wanted to do was extend her stay on this meat locker of a mountain. So, she'd abandoned her companion and continued her journey downhill.

How long had it been since then? Days? Charlotte shook her head, gazing about at the trees. Her awareness was centered around her own survival, not the passage of time. She dreaded going to sleep when darkness fell; she was afraid if she did, she might never wake up. So, she continued stumbling down the mountain as quickly as she could with her stamina gradually deteriorating.

The problem was, she didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

With a grunt, she pulled herself to her feet, turning her gaze downhill. That was all she saw—the downward slope of the hill that led nowhere she could see. No matter how far she walked, she made no progress. She might as well be walking in place.

Except she wasn't.

*Just how big is this mountain anyway?*

A sudden shiver raced through her body, causing her teeth to chatter loudly. She hugged herself with her arms, wishing she'd worn something warmer than a pantsuit on the flight. Over the days, she'd stumbled across

other parts of the plane and spotted a few suitcases that hadn't been destroyed but none of them contained any food or warm clothing.

She'd been fortunate to find a business suit, but even that wasn't helping her much. She had no idea how she'd managed to survive this long, but it was only a matter of time before her luck ran out. The cold seemed to affect her more each day. Charlotte had read somewhere that Mount Everest had claimed over three hundred lives. This didn't look like Everest, but she was pretty sure her life would soon be over. And all because of the plane crash.

She could've sworn they'd been flying over Nebraska.

Questions swirled through her mind; she was confused yet her strong sense of self-preservation kept her going. She had no answers for now, but she would get them once she reached the foot of this godforsaken mountain. Or when she found someone.

It was afternoon now or maybe morning. It was hard to tell without her phone or watch. She'd lost her purse in the crash leaving her with zero hope of contacting anyone. With a sigh, she began to move. The diamond necklace clinked in her pocket as she ventured downhill, and she almost subconsciously reached for it. Good thing she'd taken it out of her purse before the crash.

"A fat lot of good that necklace will do me now," she muttered.

Snow fell gently on her path as she journeyed downhill. Overhead, the sky was a blanket of grey and white. Her stomach growled loudly. She hadn't had much to eat or drink in days, and the urge to close her eyes and sleep was growing stronger by the second.

"Where's a Starbucks when you need one?" she said with a dry laugh.

She'd found a few nuts and stumbled upon a stream or two on her way through the woods. Now and then, she startled a deer resting by a tree or spotted little critters scurrying across the snow, but the thought of trying to

kill and eat one made her stomach churn.

“Over my dead body,” she said with a shudder.

*Well, I’m going to die, anyway, she thought. The only thing keeping me alive is—*

A twig snapped to her left, and her head jerked sharply in the direction of the sound. A deer disappeared between the trees.

Another sigh escaped her lips.

*It’s just a dumb animal, Charlotte. It’s not ... him. You’re safe.*

She remembered something just then—Dennis’ eyes gazing right at her moments before the plane burst apart. He couldn’t possibly have survived the crash, could he?

*She* had survived, hadn’t she? If she could, then so could he. The realization sent a series of shivers down her spine. What were the odds that he was in the woods with her, watching?

“That’s impossible,” she said aloud with a laugh.

But even as the words left her mouth, she knew she didn’t believe them. She’d been wrong before.

“Crap,” she muttered, leaning against a tree. “Fuck you, Dennis.”

If it weren’t for him, none of this would be happening. She wouldn’t have boarded Flight 18 and she wouldn’t be fighting to stay alive in this snow. But he wouldn’t leave her be. That break-in had been the last straw.

Charlotte didn’t mind being a divorcee. For four years, she’d been married to Sam Martin, a business tycoon with sad eyes, a beer gut, and a mustache that reminded her of Charlie Chaplin’s. Their marriage had been a loveless one, and for the most part, he’d cheated on her with several women. It wasn’t until the day she returned home to find him screwing the help in their bed that she decided she’d had enough.

Good thing she’d signed that prenup. There was nothing better than



walking away with half of everything your cheating millionaire ex-husband owned. She didn't even have to work anymore. She'd been living in luxury ever since, buying a million-dollar home deep in the heart of Vegas and indulging whatever interests delighted her.

But the thing about being set for life was that you never knew just how soon that life might end.

Sam hadn't been too thrilled about the divorce settlement. It took a year and a half for Charlotte to spot the greasy hair and dark eyes staring back at her from a dark vehicle and to realize she was being stalked. And by none other than Dennis Parker, part of Sam's security detail.

It got worse, of course. Dennis followed her everywhere—parties, the mall, her dentist appointment. She'd glance back and find him lurking in the shadows or pretending to read a magazine. To people who'd seen her with Sam and his security before the divorce, Dennis appeared to be looking out for her, doing his job as a professional bodyguard.

But Charlotte knew better. It had been over a year since the divorce, and Sam hadn't reached out to her in nearly as long. If one of his guys was following her around Vegas, she had every reason to be worried.

Months later, *it* happened.

She'd come home that night from a friend's party, half-drunk and wishing she'd agreed to spend the night with the hot guy who'd been hitting on her, only to find her entire house turned upside down. Someone had been in there, and it looked like they'd been searching for something. Drawers and closets had been pulled open, and clothes were strewn across the bedroom floor.

It had taken her barely a minute to figure out who the intruder was, and only ten more to realize what he'd been searching for. Most of her jewelry had been untouched, but he'd taken a special interest in the little green safe in her closet containing her most prized possession.

Charlotte shoved her hand into her pocket, touching the necklace. Danny hadn't been able to break into that safe. Why he'd tried to, she had no idea, but one thing had become crystal-clear: It wasn't safe being in Vegas anymore. Whether he'd simply been after the necklace or wanted to hurt her was unclear, but she wasn't about to wait around and find out. There was no telling what else Sam's guy was going to do if he'd already come this far.

Reporting the matter to the police didn't do her much good, and she'd realized why. Who would believe that Sam Martin, business tycoon, would want to hurt his "bimbo" ex-wife? She was a mouse being shoved into a corner. And so, she'd fled, taking the next flight to Chicago.

Looking back on it now...

"Why didn't I just take a private jet?" she wondered aloud.

At least then she wouldn't have had to worry so much about Dennis. And maybe she wouldn't be slowly turning into a human Popsicle.

"Brilliant," she groaned. "Just brilliant. I'm going to die out here, worrying about some guy who's probably already gone."

Was he, though? She hadn't seen any other survivors—which either meant they'd been buried in the snow already or they'd landed somewhere on the other side of the mountain—but there was no telling whether, by some sick, insane twist of fate, he'd managed to make it out of the crash in one piece.

But thinking like this wasn't going to do her any good, especially in this dreadful weather. She forged forward, concentrating her thoughts and efforts on staying alive until she could find help.

It was difficult to tell how many hours passed as she walked, but after some time, the ache in her legs worsened. She leaned against the nearest tree. She could feel her strength waning. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to sit and rest for a while.

*No, she thought. Just a bit farther...*

She had to stay awake. Falling asleep was too risky. She had an and she smirked to herself.

*Sing a song.*

Charlotte had always loved to sing. And she was damned great at it. Sam had told her once that he'd fallen in love the first time, he'd heard her sing. That had turned out to be a lie, of course.

Singing in the snowy woods sounded like the dumbest idea ever—what was she even supposed to sing, Christmas carols? Still, it might help her stay awake.

Feeling somewhat silly, she continued to move, softly singing “California King Bed,” but she'd only gotten to the first hook when a sound stopped her dead in her tracks.

Her heart racing again, she turned around slowly, just in time to hear the same sound of snow crunching underfoot coming from somewhere in the woods and growing louder and heavier by the second as it got closer, confirming her worst fears. It wasn't a deer this time.

Someone was following her.

## Chapter Two

### *“Do You Have Any Idea Who I Am?”*

David Tennyson wasn't too surprised to see the woman. This was not his first time discovering strangers in the woods, although the ones he'd stumbled upon were usually already dead.

He stood between the trees, observing her for a moment. The first thing that caught his eye was her clothes. She wore an old grey jacket over a black outfit that hugged her skin, outlining her curvaceous body. Her blonde hair was a nest of twigs and snow, and he guessed she must have been out here for quite some time. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, and her eyes were wide with fear or confusion—maybe both—but she was beautiful nevertheless.

“Dennis?” the woman called out, staring in his direction. “That’s you, isn’t it?”

She couldn't see him. Not yet. As David watched, she stooped and grabbed something in the snow, holding it in before her like a weapon. A stick, he realized. He was torn between curiosity and amusement.

*Definitely a survivor*, he thought. He'd heard the plane break through the barrier and crash onto Frost Mountain days ago. With her confused, panicked expression and the fact that she looked like she might drop at any moment, she certainly looked the part of a plane crash survivor. If he had to venture a guess, she was human.

David lifted an eyebrow. Most humans didn't last very long alone in the cold. She must be a lot more resourceful than she looked.

*She has no clue where she is. She doesn't even know where her plane crashed.*

Not yet.

“Y-you think this is funny, Dennis?” the woman said, the fear in her voice betraying her despite the brave face she tried to put on. “The least you could do is grow a pair and come out instead of lurking behind me. You’ve been doing that long enough.”

*Dennis?*

He stepped out from between the trees, drawing close enough that she could see him. He heard her gasp. For a second, she raised the stick higher, gripping it until he saw her already pallid knuckles turn even whiter. Her eyes widened slightly, and he could practically see the gears turning in her head. Relief quickly replaced the fear on her face, but she kept the stick raised.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

David suppressed a groan. This woman wasn’t his problem. He had a problem of his own. Letting himself get distracted by some woman in the woods would only waste his time. He’d been moving through the woods, hoping to hunt some game when he heard the singing and, against his better judgment, decided to look for the source of the sound.

But he needed to go. His son’s life depended on it.

“Hey, I asked you a question,” the woman snapped.

She shot him an appraising look, and David couldn’t help feeling a twinge of irritation. He’d seen this woman’s type before—entitled, oblivious, and, frankly, annoying. The last thing he wanted to do was stay and talk to her.

“I’m David,” he replied reluctantly. “And you’re not supposed to be here.”

“No shit.” She rolled her eyes, hugging her arms to her chest with the stick still clutched tightly in her hand. “My plane crashed on this mountain, and I’ve been trying to find help ever since. You’re not from the plane, are you?”

She frowned at his clothing—an old brown fur coat over a plaid shirt and baggy trousers. His boots were covered with snow. Slung over his shoulder was a bag containing a few extra clothes. Strapped to his waist, peeking out

from underneath the jacket, was a hunting knife.

He shrugged. "Take a wild guess."

Annoyance flashed across her face, and she looked like she was fighting the urge to say something. Finally, she cleared her throat and took a step toward him. "You obviously live on this mountain. You need to help me get off."

A smirk tugged at his lips against his will, and he saw her face redden.

"I mean, I need you to help me get off this *mountain*," she said quickly. "Do you have a cellphone, or a flare or something? I need to find out where the heck I am and get back to Vegas."

The irritable expression on her face was back. It was almost hard to believe this was the same woman who'd been trembling with fright a few moments ago like she thought something was after her.

No, not something. *Someone*.

She was in more danger than she realized between the cold and whomever she was worried about. Still, it wasn't any of his concern, was it? If he didn't get those herbs and get back to the lodge soon, someone else was going to die.

If his son's life wasn't in mortal peril, David wouldn't even be here. He'd kept to himself most of his life on Frost Mountain, even more so in the years following his wife's untimely death. Even now, the irony of her demise would be funny if it wasn't so tragic—a polar bear shifter slipping into a deep cold and shivering even in her final moments. Alice had taken to illness only weeks earlier, and by the time David realized there was a cure, it was too late.

And now history was repeating itself.

Twelve days. Twelve days since his son Peter took ill. It was the same ailment that had claimed the boy's mother's life, David knew. The symptoms were the same as Alice's and worsening by the hour. But David would eat

snow before he allowed the same tragedy to occur in his home again.

He'd left their family lodge near the top of the mountain, giving his brother instructions to watch over Peter. For eleven days, he'd been trudging downhill through the snow, determined to find the only cure he'd heard about: herbs procured by a healer down the mountain. And time was running out. With each day that passed, his son drew closer to death.

He tried to ignore the tightening sensation in his chest. He glanced at the woman standing a few feet away. If he left her like this, she wouldn't last more than a couple of days. She needed food, water, and more clothing. David had lived on this mountain his entire life. He would survive. This human would not.

"No," he said.

She blinked at him. "What do you mean, no?"

"What do you think it means? I'm not helping you. I have other priorities. You'll only slow me down."

Indignation flashed in her eyes, and for a second David thought she might attack him with the stick. "How dare—" She let the stick fall into the snow, balling her fists. "Do you have *any* idea who I am?"

In response, he gave another shrug. "You're a human."

"Well, *duh*." He could've sworn he saw a vein pulse in her forehead. "I'm Charlotte Lodge. Maybe look that up. I'm the last person you should ever think of ignoring."

The more she spoke, the more David wished he hadn't let her see him. Most of the humans he'd met in his lifetime were oblivious and annoying, but this one was even worse.

"Too bad," he told her. "I need to be on my way. Try not to die out here."

Her eyes widened. "Wait—you're *leaving* me here?"

David didn't answer. He stepped closer, keeping his eyes on her, and

continued walking past her toward the trees.

“Wait!” he heard her cry after him. “You can’t leave me here!”

*Watch me*, he thought.

He trudged on, relieved to be putting some distance between himself and this annoying woman. She was attractive, he’d give her that, but the last thing he wanted was to hang back and listen to her speak. Hopefully, someone else would come by whom she could bother with her overinflated self-importance.

He’d only taken a few steps when she spoke again. This time, her words stopped him in his tracks.

“I can help you,” she said. “I’ve got something you’ll want.”



## Chapter Three

### *Ten Million Dollars' Worth of Diamonds*

The big man turned around slowly, curiosity flickering in his brown eyes despite the frown on his face. He looked older than her, but he was still quite handsome. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with muscled arms that strained against the sleeves of his coat. She figured he was either a bodybuilder or did lots of hard work on the mountain. Between the stubble gathering on his jaw and his bushy, dark brows, he looked pretty rugged.

If she'd met him in Vegas, she probably would've taken him back to her place for the night and never speak about it to her friends. Only she wasn't in Vegas. She was freezing out here, and he was her only hope of staying alive. And Charlotte was willing to do whatever it took to get off this godforsaken mountain.

"What is it you have?" the man demanded. The deep timbre of his voice reverberated through the woods. "Show it to me."

She might've been seeing things, but for a moment she could've sworn she saw a familiar look flash in his eyes. It was the same look she'd seen on so many women's faces as they gazed at her jewelry: greed.

*Jackpot!*

"I'm waiting," the man said. What did he say his name was again? David.

She reached into her pocket, grateful that she'd decided to put the diamonds in her pocket on the flight. Now she could buy her way back home. She wasn't going to give this guy the entire necklace, of course—maybe a tiny piece of it. No way was she going to hand ten million dollars to some guy who looked like he belonged on the label of Brawny paper towels.

Suppressing a grin, she pulled out the necklace. Fortunately, the clouds had moved a little and the diamonds glistened in the sunlight streaking through

the trees, practically illuminating the small clearing. The yellow diamond glowed the brightest.

Her ticket home.

She glanced up, expecting to see David's face light up in awe, but the man merely stared back at her unfazed.

"What is that?" he asked her.

*What was this?* Charlotte couldn't believe her ears. "You're kidding me, right? This is ten million dollar's worth of diamonds. If you help me, I'll let you have a few of them."

David still didn't seem particularly wowed. Again, he shrugged—a gesture that was beginning to get on her nerves. Who the hell was this guy who didn't seem to understand what she was offering him? Here she was dangling millions of dollars in his face—money that had almost cost Charlotte her life—and he simply shrugged. If he wasn't her last hope, she might have smacked him in the head with the diamonds.

"And what's in it for me?" he said.

He had to be kidding. Either that, or he wasn't even as intelligent as his gentle, yet intense gaze suggested. "You get to be rich, that's what. How does five hundred grand sound? A million?"

He shook his head, then he chuckled. It was a calm chuckle, but something about it sent a tremor down her spine.

"Your money and diamonds are of no value here," he said.

"Yeah, well, you can always go into the nearest town and get supplies," she countered. "Buy yourself some more clothes or something once we get to the bottom of the mountain."

His grin widened. "There is no bottom of the mountain. You can't leave."

Charlotte frowned at him. "What do you mean there's no bottom?" Another question stirred in her mind. "Where the hell am I anyway?"

“Nowhere you’d like to be,” he replied. “This is Frost Mountain.”

It sounded almost silly, like naming a desert *Sand Land*, but that was the least of her concerns right now. “Where’s that? I’ve never even heard of it. It’s not in the States, is it?”

His eyes twinkled. “You’re a long way from your world.”

What was *that* supposed to mean? Charlotte bit back a snappish retort. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on here or what you think you’re saying, but you’re not making any sense right now. If you’ll just—”

David took several steps closer until he was inches away from her. He gazed into her face, and she suddenly realized just how hard her heart was pounding.

“This,” he said, gesturing around them without breaking eye contact, “is Frost Mountain. And it’s all there is. Your world is gone. The second your plane broke through the barrier, you entered this dimension. And now you’re trapped here. No one leaves Frost Mountain.” He cocked his head, amusement teasing his lips. “Do you understand me now?”

A nervous laugh escaped her lips. “Run that by me again, will you?”

“I can’t help you get off this mountain because there’s no getting off it. Anyone unlucky enough to end up here is trapped forever. Or at least until you catch your death of cold or get ripped to shreds.”

*Ripped to shreds?*

“Okay, you’re not exactly helping matters right now,” Charlotte said, casting a nervous glance around them. “What you’re saying is impossible. Another dimension? You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

The man smiled, and for a moment she wanted to believe that she was right, that he *was* pulling her leg. But deep down she already knew he wasn’t. Things were starting to make sense to her now, like the fact that she’d been walking for days without seeing the bottom of the mountain. She’d figured it

was probably just a huge mountain, but this ... this was worse. If what he was saying was true, then it meant she could never leave, no matter how much she walked.

And he'd mentioned a separate dimension. That was some weird crap she'd never expected to hear from this lumberjack-looking guy. Maybe he was nuts. Then again, maybe he was right. In which case, she was trapped here.

Then a thought occurred to her. "Wait a minute," she said. "You're not implying that ... that magic is real, are you? Because that would be insane."

But so was her tumbling out of a plane from thousands of feet and crashing into a mountain without breaking so much as a finger. Or the fact that they'd been flying over Nebraska, not this mountain. A lot of things weren't right with this mountain.

David's expression turned almost sympathetic. "You're confused. Give it time. It usually takes weeks for people to accept the fact that they're trapped."

"What, you mean there have been others?"

"There's more to Frost Mountain than I can tell you all at once," he replied.

He craned his neck, staring at the tracks he'd made in the snow. Then he lifted his gaze to the grey clouds overhead. The sky was already darkening. Charlotte hadn't seen a sunset yet. Maybe the snowfall was about to get worse.

"It's almost nightfall," he said. "I need to keep moving."

With that, he turned and continued through the woods. Right before his bag disappeared behind a tree, she rushed forward and grabbed it. David glanced over his shoulder at her, a disgruntled look on his face.

"Please," Charlotte said, desperation creeping into her voice. She shoved

the diamonds back into her pocket. “Let me come with you. I ... I can’t stay out here alone! I don’t have anything else to offer you, but ... I guess I could come up with something.”

She couldn’t afford to spend another night alone in these woods or on this mountain. If what David told her was true, if she was really trapped here, then her objectives had changed. She couldn’t keep hoping to get to the bottom of the mountain before the harsh conditions claimed her life. Right now, she needed to focus on survival. One more night on her own and she might never see the morning sun. If the cold didn’t get her, she might—

*Get ripped to shreds*, David had said. Who knew what kind of creatures might be lurking in these woods?

Not to mention Dennis could still be after her. It seemed unlikely—even if he’d survived the crash, he should be struggling to stay alive like she was, not pursuing her, right? But for some reason, she couldn’t seem to shake the gnawing feeling that he was following her trail, watching her every move.

Yeah, she couldn’t spend the night alone in these woods.

“Please,” she begged again. “I’m not sure where you’re headed, but—”

“A healer’s cabin,” he replied in a low tone. “It’s further downhill. I need to get herbs from her to heal my son. Once I’ve got them, I’ll be heading back up the mountain.”

He had a son? It was starting to make sense now. The greed Charlotte had seen in his eyes hadn’t been because he thought she had money to offer him. No, he’d probably figured she had some sort of cure with her. No wonder he seemed in such a hurry. This was a man determined to save his son’s life.

“Why up the mountain?” she asked, although she already knew the answer.

“Because that’s where the lodge is.”

“What lodge? Is it at the top of the mountain?”

He regarded her for a moment. “That is a secret you don’t need to know.”

A secret lodge. Curiosity tugged at her, but Charlotte brushed the thought from her mind. “Sure. Maybe I could stay with this healer person once we get there.”

“I never said I was taking you along,” he told her with a frown. He said nothing more for a moment but just stared at her. “Fine. You can come with me to the healer. And then I’m leaving you.”

“Thank you so much,” Charlotte told him, feeling like a weight had been lifted from her chest. “I can’t tell you how—”

He stopped her with another chuckle.

“Don’t thank me just yet,” he said. “Just pray she doesn’t kick you out. If that happens, you’re on your own again.”

## Chapter Four

### *“A Sled and Guts of Steel, and You’re Santa Claus”*

The woman’s name was Charlotte, and David was starting to regret bringing her along.

Leaving her behind would’ve been a smart decision, but he’d agreed to let her come with him. In all honesty, the only reason he’d let her tag along was that he figured he could use some company on his journey. As much as he hated to admit it, it was nice to see another face. Especially one as pretty as hers.

And he would’ve been content if Charlotte could only keep her mouth shut.

“I’ve got a question,” she said.

A little over a day had gone by since he agreed to let her come with him, and she hadn’t stopped bombarding him with questions: Did it always snow on the mountain? How many people lived here? Had he seen any other survivors from the crash?

He’d answered most of her questions as best as he could, but he could feel himself growing more frustrated by the second.

He groaned inwardly. “What is it this time?”

“Yesterday, you said you came from a secret lodge. Why’s it a secret?”

This time, he groaned aloud. They’d exited the woods not long ago, but David had decided to hang around the edge for the night. He sat crouched by the trees with his knife clutched in his hand, watching carefully for signs of movement. Overhead, the sun was already setting, casting a reddish glow over the snowy mountain as far as his eyes could see.

*Nothing yet*, he thought with a sigh. If he didn’t catch anything, they’d go hungry tonight.

“Why do you think people keep secrets?” he shot back.

There was silence for a moment, and he imagined she was pondering his question.

“I mean, I’d keep secrets if I didn’t want to be found. Especially if I had something to lose,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. Then, before she could ask another question, he added, “My family lives in that lodge.”

“Your family, as in your wife and son?”

David ground his teeth together but didn’t answer. He glanced over his shoulder. Charlotte stood fifteen feet away by a small stream, her arms folded across her chest. She’d put on some of his spare clothes and given herself a quick wash. David had to admit, she looked even more gorgeous. The last time a woman had worn his clothes, he’d pulled her into a kiss and they’d made love in the lodge. But that woman was ...

Right. Alice. Before she died.

Feeling a stab of guilt at the thought, David averted his gaze, staring instead at the blanket of snow stretching downhill. It should take a couple more days to get to the cabin at least. He sucked in a deep breath. He might’ve left his son with other shifters, but without the herbs, there wasn’t much they could do. And if David didn’t get back soon enough ...

A memory filled his mind just then: a woman lying completely still on the wooden floor, her eyes open and unblinking, never to see again. He’d come in from the blizzard that night to find her near the fireplace, completely lifeless. The sickness had finally taken its toll after weeks of struggle. Alice’s face had turned blue, her skin icy despite her having lain by the flames for nights on end. Her lips, the lips he’d once kissed, were parted slightly, and that night he’d found himself wondering whether she’d called for him while drawing her final breaths.



He still had no idea what this strange sickness was, only that there was supposed to be a cure. And that Peter was next.

*I won't let it happen,* he told himself, returning his gaze to the trees in front of him. *Peter will live because you're going to save him.*

Charlotte's voice broke through his thoughts.

"How do you know so much about this place?" she asked. "About ... magic."

He cut his eyes toward her just in time to see her pretty features contort into a frown like she was still battling to understand how magic fit into her limited concept of normalcy. The sight nearly made him laugh.

"I know the history of this place."

"Tell me," she demanded.

Irritation flickered in his chest, but he suppressed it. "Maybe later." His curiosity prodded him, and he decided to ask a question of his own. "How come you were on that plane anyway?"

More silence. She bit her lip like she was debating giving him an answer.

"I was ... I was heading home for Thanksgiving," she said after a few seconds, "to see some friends and family."

She looked away, but David didn't even need to see her face to know she was lying. Charlotte was hiding something. Whatever it was most likely had something to do with her constantly glancing over her shoulder as if she was expecting someone to burst out of the woods. When he found her yesterday, hadn't she thought he was someone else?

There was more to this woman than she let on. David could feel his curiosity growing by the second. At first, all he'd seen was a haughty, annoying woman who expected doors to magically open for her, but there were clearly other sides to her. The fear he caught in her eyes now and then told him as much.

“Thanksgiving,” he repeated. “That’s some kind of holiday, isn’t it?”

“Duh.” For a moment, she looked at him like she couldn’t believe he didn’t know what she was talking about. Then something seemed to click inside her head. “Please tell me you at least know what Christmas is.”

David gave a soft chuckle. “Of course, I do.” In a low voice, he added, “I’d like to get back to the lodge before Christmas.”

“Any reason in particular?”

“My son loves Christmas.”

“Oh.”

There was an awkward pause.

Then: “How come you know what Christmas is, but you’ve never heard of Thanksgiving?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you ask too many questions?”

She turned away from him, her nose in the air. “No one’s ever dared to speak to me that way.”

“Well, welcome to Frost Mountain.” He smirked. “If you survive out here long enough, you’ll probably come across more people like me.”

He saw her stiffen and realized that his words had gotten to her. He thought of apologizing but decided not to. The questions were starting to get on his nerves. Maybe if she sang instead like she’d been doing when he found her ...

Instead, he said, “When is this Thanksgiving holiday of yours?”

She faced him and he saw her shoulders relax a little. “It’s in late November. A few weeks before Christmas. But I’m pretty sure it’s already passed.”

He nodded. “It has. It’s almost Christmas.”

Charlotte frowned. “How can *you* tell? I mean, it’s always winter here, isn’t it? On Frost Mountain, every day’s pretty much Christmas. All you need

is a sled and guts of steel and you're Santa Claus."

She cracked a smile and he realized that she had attempted humor. Shaking his head, he replied, "When the weather starts getting worse, I can tell Christmas is on its way. The snow gets heavier. It gets colder. There's no way of knowing for sure, but I figure Christmas is sometime between two or three weeks after I see the first signs."

She arched an eyebrow. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"Why would I need to do that?" he retorted.

Charlotte opened her mouth to say something else, but right at that moment, a blur of movement caught his eye. David turned his head just in time to see a large shape dart through the trees. A deer most likely.

No time to waste. He lunged into the dense forestation, knife raised, and struck at the creature before it could escape. A few seconds later, the deer lay bleeding in the snow from a gash in its neck. David observed the animal for a moment, then dragged it out of the woods toward the stream where Charlotte stood. She let out a gasp at the sight of the bleeding creature.

"Is it dead?" she asked in a tiny voice.

He shot her a look as if to say, *Are you serious?* "What does it look like?"

"It looks like it's bleeding a lot."

"What it looks like to me," he countered, refraining from rolling his eyes at her, "is a successful hunt. I'd be happy if I were you. This should be enough to last us the next couple of days or at least until we reach the cabin."

Charlotte blinked at the creature lying at his feet, then up at him. There was no mistaking the look of revulsion on her face.

"Look, if you don't eat some real food, you'll starve to death out here. Nuts can only last you for so long. You eat meat, don't you?"

She nodded. "I've just ... I've never had to see ... this."

"Of course." This time, he did roll his eyes. "We'll need some wood for a

fire since we're camping out here for the night. I'll cook the deer and cut it up so we can carry it with us tomorrow."

Within minutes, he'd gathered enough sticks to start a large fire. He was just preparing to skin the deer by the brilliant light from the flame when Charlotte walked up to him. He paused with the knife to the animal's flank, knowing even before she spoke that she had yet another question for him.

"What is it this time?" he muttered.

"I'm just curious," she said, shoving her hands in the pockets of the coat he'd lent her. "The plane crash ... do you think other people could've survived? I mean, I did, for some reason. And I'm pretty sure I shouldn't have."

David glanced up at her. In the light from the flickering flames, her beautiful face was set in a warm glow that made it nearly impossible to tear his eyes away from her.

"I think you already suspect the answer to that," he told her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've seen the way you keep watching our surroundings like you think we're being watched." He lowered the knife. "The answer is yes, Charlotte. If you're alive, then I'm sure others are alive, too."

A shadow crossed her face just then, but David couldn't tell if it was from the flames or not. "You're ... you're saying that—"

"Yes," he cut in, shooting her a pointed look. "I'm saying that whoever is after you probably survived the crash."

## Chapter Five

### *“I’ll Leave You Here If You Waste My Time*

“The healer’s cabin isn’t very far off now,” David said, pointing into the distance at something she couldn’t see. “We’ll cross the river and head straight down into the woods up ahead. By tomorrow, I should be on my way back to the lodge.”

Charlotte stared at the river before them and stifled the urge to scream. It had to be at least twenty feet across! The surface of the river had turned to ice, but she suspected it was only recently frozen. It stretched almost as far as her eyes could see, an obstruction on their path that led eastward, meandering at a far point, and trailing farther downhill toward what looked like a cliff.

“You want us to cross ... that?” she asked, wincing at the sight of the river. Somehow she figured it would be a lot less scary if it wasn’t frozen. “You must be out of your damned mind.”

“Even worse,” he replied, turning to look at her. “I’m determined.”

She glanced over her shoulder. The trees behind them were less dense than the ones that lay ahead. Between the woods and the river, she’d gladly choose the woods any day.

The past few days had been hectic. They’d set up camp a couple of more times, getting up to leave at first light and trudging downhill until dusk. It was barely afternoon now, and Charlotte’s legs felt like they might give away beneath her any second. The last thing she needed to be doing was attempting to cross a frozen river that looked like it could barely support her weight. If there was one thing she’d learned in the past week or so, it was that things tended to head south pretty quickly. One second, she could be standing on the ice, and the next she could be sinking like the *Titanic*.

Life came at you fast, especially when you were on Frost Mountain.

It wasn't like she had much of a choice anyway. Either she crossed with David, or they went their separate ways. Sure, they were going to split up anyway, but she'd much rather it was after she was safe and warm in the healer's cabin than while she was still out here with next to no survival skills.

Two months ago, this wouldn't even rank as one of her concerns. It was a testament to how much worse her life had gotten in a matter of days. One second, she'd been a millionaire, enjoying the finest things in life, from nights in the casinos to days jetting around the world, and now she had nothing.

Well, except for the diamonds. But they were nothing without people who cared enough to give them value. Wasn't that how it worked? A bunch of silly people *ooing* and *aahing* over shiny gemstones, lost in the belief that what they owned made them better than other people. The same gemstones had nearly cost Charlotte her life and reduced her to nothing in the process.

*I could be attending parties right now, she found herself thinking all of a sudden, having drinks with friends, dancing with some hot guy in the moonlight.*

Yet here she was, trudging down some magical mountain with a man she'd met only a couple of days ago, constantly on edge and praying she didn't get mauled or freeze to death in her sleep. Typical riches-to-rags story.

*More like riches to snow, Charlotte thought with a sardonic smile.*

Not that the man she was with wasn't hot. She spared a glance at him and swallowed slightly. Despite looking like he'd had it tough his whole life, he was one heck of a looker. She'd woken up early a couple of days ago to find him washing in the stream, completely bare and seemingly unbothered by the cold. Charlotte had gotten a good, long look at his thick arms and broad, contoured back, golden in the rays of the morning sun.

Good thing she'd shut her eyes before he'd turned around. The last thing

she needed right now was the image of his junk burned into her mind.

“Okay,” she muttered, only half-distracted by the snowflakes settling lightly on her nose. “How do we cross?”

He looked at her like *she* was the crazy one. “On foot. How else are we supposed to get across?”

She blinked at him. “What are the odds the ice won’t crack under our weight? I had a friend who drowned like this when we were kids. Fell right through the ice while skating. They didn’t let anyone go near the lake for a month after that.”

A strange smile crossed David’s handsome face. “Well, it’s a good thing we’re walking, not skating.”

Before Charlotte could respond, he stepped off the snow onto the ice, walking calmly across to the other side. Her heart gave a violent lurch.

“Jesus Christ!” she gasped.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, his grin widening. “The name’s just David Tennyson. But there’s still no need to be afraid.”

She managed to roll her eyes. “You’re insane.”

He reached the other shore, and she heard the crunch of snow under his boots. David turned to look at her, his expression expectant.

“I don’t have all day,” he told her. Charlotte didn’t need him to explain what that meant: *I’ll leave you here if you waste my time.*

“It’s only a frozen river,” she muttered to herself. “If the ice cracks, you’ll just get swept away by whatever current’s still underneath. If I’m lucky, I’ll freeze to death within the first couple of minutes.”

With that, she stepped onto the ice. It didn’t give under her weight, but she wasn’t about to wait and watch for cracks. She hurried across the icy surface, her heart in her throat until she reached the other shore. When her foot touched the snow, she nearly collapsed with relief, but David caught her in

his arms, pulling her to him.

“That wasn’t so hard now, was it?” he asked, and she thought she saw his eyes twinkle.

It dawned on Charlotte then that her body was crushed against his. His large, strong arms were wrapped tightly around her. If she put her head to his chest, she was certain she would hear the steady pulse of his heartbeat.

She craned her neck, gazing directly up at him. His brown eyes stared back at her through snow-flecked lashes. Charlotte felt her breathing slow down. She lowered her gaze. His lips were parted slightly, his breath pleasantly warm against her face.

Feeling her cheeks burn all of a sudden, she pulled away.

David cleared his throat. “We should keep moving. The sooner we’re through those woods, the better.” He patted his bag. “There’s still some meat in here if you’re hungry.”

That was enough to drag Charlotte back to reality. She made a face. “Again?”

“If you’d rather eat nuts, be my guest.” With a shrug, he turned and began heading toward the thicket of trees up ahead.

She watched him go, half-wondering at her ill fortune. Despite how much time had passed, and how much she tried to wrap her head around it, it seemed to evade her, prodding the back of her mind regardless. *This is my life now.*

Charlotte stared across the frozen river one last time, and for the tiniest fraction of a second, she thought she saw something flicker between the trees. Her eyes could be deceiving her, but she was pretty sure it looked like a person.

*Whoever is after you probably survived the crash,* David had told her the other day. The words rang in her head, and a shiver raced through her body



that had nothing to do with the cold.

Could it be...?

*It can't be*, she told herself. *You're seeing things.*

Was she?

Without waiting for an answer to that question, she hurried after David.

## Chapter Six

### *The Cabin in The Woods*

“We’re here,” he announced.

Charlotte followed his gaze, panting and clutching her side. The cabin sat about a hundred feet away, a thin plume of smoke stretching high above the snow-covered roof toward the sky. In stark contrast to the snow, it wasn’t hard to miss. It wasn’t very large, but this was the first building she’d laid eyes on since she landed on Frost Mountain.

“That we are,” she breathed. “I thought it would be less than a day’s journey?”

“So did I,” came David’s reply. “But there’s no point dwelling on that. The sooner I can lay my hands on those herbs, the sooner I can start heading back for the lodge.”

*Without me,* Charlotte thought.

She’d given it some thought over the past few hours. He was just going to take off, leaving her with this healer woman, and head back home. The more the prospect nagged her, the more reluctant she felt. She’d gotten used to being with David over the past few days. Not to mention there was no telling just how hospitable the healer was, or if the woman would even be willing to help her. She’d never been one to accommodate strays. If this healer was anything like her, Charlotte could expect to spend another night in the snow.

“Let’s go,” she heard David say, and he moved before she could respond, taking large, determined strides in the direction of the cabin.

Charlotte stumbled after him, struggling to keep up with his pace. By the time they reached the cabin, she was completely winded, but he didn’t even look the least bit short of breath. She eyed the cabin again. Up close, it was somewhat larger than at first glance. It looked old, the snow doing little to

cover up the effects of time on the railing of the small porch.

The stairs creaked under their weight as they climbed onto the porch. Before David could knock on the door, a voice rang out.

“I already know you’re out there,” it said in a somewhat irritable tone. “I saw you coming, so don’t break my door down, you big bear.”

They heard the sound of footsteps, and a moment later the wooden door creaked open. A short, frizzy-haired woman in her mid-sixties poked her head out, eyeing them.

“Penelope,” David said.

“David.” The woman’s black eyes blinked at him. She opened the door wider. “I’d say it’s nice to see you again after all these years, but if you’re here now, it can’t be good. Who’s this?”

They both turned to look at Charlotte.

“I ...” she began. “I’m—”

“This is Charlotte,” David said. “She’s a human I found in the woods. New to this place.”

Penelope’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Interesting. Well, come on in, both of you. It’s been a while since I saw another human.”

Charlotte shot David a look as if to ask, *What does that mean* but he was already stepping into the cabin. She followed suit, her mouth opening with marvel and a sigh of relief as she gazed at her surroundings.

The cabin was pleasantly warm, much warmer than anywhere she’d been in the past few days. Small tongues of fire flickered around them in what looked like the bottom halves of beer bottles. In the moderate glow, she caught sight of the furniture—two chairs by a large fireplace—and an animal-skin rug that looked like it had been there for years. But it was the plants that caught Charlotte’s eye. They lined the walls, all various colors and in various stages of growth.

The windows were shut, but a couple of doors stood ajar. Through one of them, she caught sight of a narrow cot.

The entire place was simple, like one of her vacation cottages, only this one looked less lavish and more lived-in. Charlotte was still gazing around in awe when Penelope spoke again.

“You can sit,” Penelope said, gesturing toward one of the chairs. When Charlotte merely stared at her, the woman grinned wryly. “I’ve been on Frost Mountain so long I’ve almost completely forgotten what other humans are used to. Please, sit. You look half-dead, dear. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Feeling heat rush to her cheeks, Charlotte moved to the chair and sat down stiffly, grateful for the extra warmth.

“Please don’t tell me it’s what I believe it is,” she heard Penelope say to David.

He nodded grimly. “My son ... it’s been two weeks now.”

The healer’s aging face contorted into a frown, more lines creasing her forehead. “He’ll make it. Don’t worry; I’ve still got the remedy.”

With that, she turned toward one of the plants and got to work immediately, snipping off several of its leaves into a stone mortar and grinding them dexterously with a small pestle. Charlotte watched the woman work, her mouth hanging open in utter fascination. She was used to doctors in round glasses and bleached lab coats walking around clutching clipboards, but there was something more natural, more relaxed about the way Penelope worked.

The older woman set down the mortar. “It’ll be ready by morning.”

David’s eyebrow shot up. “What? Why not now?”

Charlotte glanced in his direction, realizing for the first time just how tense he looked. His jaw was clenched and his hands were trembling slightly.

“Precision takes time, David,” Penelope told him. She sighed. “Look, I

know you wish to return to your son as soon as you can. But you and your friend here are going to have to spend the night. Speaking of which, where did you find her?”

Charlotte shrank in her seat.

David’s shoulders relaxed a little. “She was trekking down the mountain when I found her several days ago.”

“Trying to get to the bottom?” the healer asked, shaking her head with a small knowing smile. “Looks like she’s faring better than she should be. I’m guessing that’s your doing.”

He shrugged. “I guess.”

“Well, you did well.” Penelope turned to face Charlotte. “Still, you two have been out in the cold for too long. You can’t leave now. You need a hot bath, some food, and a proper night’s rest. I’ll run the bath and prepare dinner.”

Something about the woman’s expression told Charlotte that she wasn’t the sort of person who took no for an answer. Charlotte felt a small smile pull at her lips. That was one thing they had in common.

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The hot bath was heaven.

She sat naked in the bathroom, inside the large basin that Penelope used as a tub, her breasts bobbing just below the surface, and watched the steam rise gently in the air before her through half-lidded eyes. Penelope had prepared it about ten minutes ago, but she could’ve sworn she’d just climbed in. David was somewhere outside the bathroom, talking to the healer. Charlotte wasn’t sure. All she wanted was to relax in here, enjoying the heat that seeped into her bones.

This whole place was cozy. She’d never lived in such a small house before, but she would take it over the blistering cold outside any day. Not that there

was any guarantee that Penelope would be willing to take her in anyway. Besides, as much as she'd like to stay here, a part of her wanted to go back to David's secret lodge with him.

But wouldn't that be wrong? He was the reason she was safe. Heck, if not for him, she'd probably be dead and buried six inches under the snow. But he'd already helped her enough, hadn't he? Not to mention he had someone else to protect, and Charlotte was pretty sure his son wouldn't be the only one waiting for him when he got home.

He had a wife, no doubt. He'd ignored the question she threw at him days ago. Thinking about it now, Charlotte couldn't help feeling a spark of jealousy at the thought of David abandoning her to go home to some other woman.

*Don't be ridiculous,* said a voice in her head. *He's not even your man.*

Right. Jealousy made no sense. Not right now. This wasn't anything like Sam. For all she knew, she was nothing more than a burden to this guy.

She was still deep in thought, wondering what she was supposed to do after David left for home when she heard a soft thud and felt the water rise well past her breasts. Her eyes snapped open in alarm. Standing in the basin before her, just as naked as she was, was the devil himself.

*Oh, my—*

"What the hell!" she shrieked. Then she took her voice down a notch. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Enjoying the water," was David's causal reply. "It's quite warm."

She gulped. "But you're ...you're—"

"Naked?" he finished for her. A smirk teased his lips. "You didn't seem to have any trouble ogling me at the stream the other morning."

*Did he see me?*

She turned her head away from him, suddenly finding it difficult to

breathe, but it was already too late. The image of his naked body was already burned into her memory. And what an impressive body. For a moment, she'd been mostly fixated on the hard muscles of his torso ...

And then her gaze had dropped.

The water's surface rose higher as he settled into the basin across from her. She forced herself to look at him again, keeping her eyes on his face. Another big mistake. His hot gaze traveled from her face to her breasts, and she felt her nipples harden instantly. When his gaze traveled even lower, she thought she might melt into the water.

*Fuck.* The longer he stared at her, the more thoughts she had, each more salacious than the last.

"Are you all right, Charlotte?" she heard David ask over the deafening roar in her ears. He sounded as calm as usual, but his voice seemed to drip with suggestion. "You look like you could use a cold bath instead."

Oh, she most certainly could. Her breathing was quickening by the second, her nipples harder than her ten-million-dollar diamonds, and she was pretty sure she'd hear the steady throb of her heart under the water if she listened hard enough.

*Don't look down, she told herself. Don't do it.*

She looked down. Even through the water, she saw him.

*Oh, my God.*

He was long, hard, and beautiful.

That was as much as she could take. With a strangled gasp, Charlotte leaped out of the basin, splashing water in all directions.

"You're—" She faltered, her cheeks burning like hot coals now. "You ... you—"

It dawned on her then that she was completely exposed to his gaze. She stood before him, dripping from head to toe, her body glistening, with

rivulets of water cascading down her.

“Going somewhere?” David asked.

She thought she saw something flicker in his eyes. Hunger. Desire. Greed. She’d seen that look in the eyes of so many men over the years, and most of the time, it had been annoying. But when David looked at her like that ... well, it felt different. The mere knowledge that he was staring at her was enough to leave her a panting, dripping mess.

“I’m done bathing,” she snapped, reaching for the towel—a brown cloth Penelope had handed her earlier—and wrapping it around her body. “Enjoy yourself.”

She exited the bathroom, feeling both relieved and disappointed to be away from him. If she’d stayed in there any longer, she might have combusted. Or, worse, she might have ended up acting on the desires that even now threatened to take her over.

“That was a close one,” she muttered.

Not close enough, it seemed.



## Chapter Seven

### *Conversations in the Night*

The rest of the evening was spent mostly in awkward silence. Charlotte avoided David as much as she could, which was close to impossible since the cabin was so small. It wasn't until he stepped out to gather firewood for dinner that she felt like she could breathe again. But not long after he was gone, he was back.

Dinner was even worse. She, Penelope, and David sat around the animal-skin rug to eat, the only sounds being the crackling of the flames and Charlotte's heart pounding in her ears. She avoided glancing in David's direction. Not that it did much to remove the images that had etched themselves into her memory. All she needed to do was close her eyes and she could see his erection pointing through the water at her.

Penelope didn't say much, but Charlotte could tell from the way the woman's gaze darted between her two guests that she knew something was up.

When dinner ended, Charlotte was grateful, but even that didn't last long. What could be worse than having to sit through dinner with the guy whose naked body turned you into an aching, throbbing mess?

"We're sharing *that*?" she almost shrieked, looking down at the small cot. Luckily, she caught herself in time, lowering her voice to a near-whisper so Penelope wouldn't hear from her bedroom.

David stared at the cot. "Don't worry, we won't have to share. I'll sleep on the floor."

Charlotte doubted there was much of a difference between the cot and the floor, but any distance sounded like an excellent idea. "Are you sure you don't want to take the cot instead? The cabin's warm, but the floor's going to

be cold tonight.”

He smirked, and in the light of the tiny flames by the window, she caught a glint in his brown eyes. “I’m used to harsh conditions. Besides, it’s probably better if you get used to the bed since you could be spending a lot more time here after I’m gone.”

When he put it that way, sleeping alone in the bed sounded even worse. Way to put a damper on her mood.

She laid down, feeling his gaze on her as she did, and curled up by the wall. “I’m not sure beds like this even exist in my world. It’s so ... small.”

David chuckled, and a moment later, he was stretched out on the floor, just a couple of feet away. “Well, a lot of things you’ll find on Frost Mountain aren’t from the mountain. They’re from your world. So, beds like this ... I’m sure they exist.”

“From *my* world?” That would explain the beer-bottle lamps. “What are you talking about?”

“Tell me more about your world,” he said, ignoring the question. “I’ve heard things, but you’re the first human I’ve met in a while. And you seem different.”

“The first human?” What did that mean? Before she could ask, another thought came to mind. “No, how about you tell me what I need to know about Frost Mountain? I seem to recall you promising me answers a few days ago.”

“Did I?” he asked, and for a second, she could picture him rubbing his chin, deep in thought.

“What’s the story behind this place? This mountain, I mean. Or dimension ... whatever. You said it’s magical, right? That’s like warlocks and sorcerers? They’re the ones who created Frost Mountain?” She felt foolish asking, but her experience on this mountain hadn’t been anything close to normal so far.

“Not sorcerers.” David’s voice went down a notch. “Witches.”

Something about the way he said the word sent a tiny shiver down her spine. “Witches?”

He sighed. “This mountain is a prison, a dimension created by powerful witches to contain our ancestors, the shifters who fought the war against them.”

“Shifters?”

There was silence for the next few seconds, and she imagined he was gritting his teeth at her incessant questions. The thought brought a smile to her lips.

“We shifters,” he said finally, “can transform into other creatures.”

“Like werewolves.”

“Wolf shifters exist, yes. But there are bear shifters, too. Even dragons and leopards.”

*Dragons.* He was kidding, right?

But somehow, she knew he wasn’t, which meant this mountain was even more dangerous than she’d figured. All those nights she’d been alone, she could easily have stumbled upon some bear, wolf, or dragon.

But if what he was saying were true ... that meant he wasn’t human? He was some kind of shapeshifter. A dragon? A werewolf? Should she be afraid?

She probably should. But for some reason, she wasn’t. Not a bit.

“Anyway,” David went on, “we’ve been trapped here for centuries. Generations of shifters have passed. We’ve gotten used to this place. Most people build cabins and live alone or join villages. There’s been word of entire towns in different areas of the mountain. I’ve no idea if that’s true, but anything’s possible when you’re in an infinite dimension. You could have a whole country here and no one would ever know.”

He chuckled at that. Charlotte did not laugh.

David sighed. “There have been humans, too. Others like you over the years.” As if he could see her eyebrows raised, he added, “Frost Mountain keeps us trapped, but it doesn’t keep people out. Through plane crashes and shipwrecks, random people end up here. And they never leave.”

Charlotte wondered about that. Those people had to have been devastated, realizing they’d ended up in some magical prison they knew nothing about and were stuck in forever. And what about those who’d never even gotten the chance to figure out where they were, but simply died in the cold? They were gone. Forgotten.

That could have been her fate as well. Not that where she’d ended up was much better. She was still trapped. It was almost as if she’d been ripped from her home and her entire life. Here, nothing she had mattered—not even the diamond necklace in her pocket. Her wealth, her name, and even her connections meant nothing now.

Had she been forgotten, too, or were there people searching for her, searching for the flight that had mysteriously vanished like something out of a Bermuda Triangle conspiracy theory?

“So, that’s why you people have these clothes and these ... *human* items.”

“It is. We salvage whatever we can. And over the centuries, humans and even other shifters who’ve arrived here have told us about the outside world.” He drew a breath. “I’m still curious, though. What was it like out there for you?”

Charlotte was silent for a minute as she thought. What *was* it like for her? She’d been wealthy, even before Sam. Life had always been easy for her. And after the divorce, it had gotten even easier. Between the cars, the occasional boy toy, and the expensive jewelry, there hadn’t been much to want for, except peace of mind, that is. Being followed and having your house ransacked could do that to you.

“It was not as great as it seemed,” she admitted with a sigh. “Even before the plane crashed, I was afraid for my life.”

“Because of the man who’s after you?” David guessed. “What did you say his name was, Dennis?”

Charlotte nodded, even though she knew he couldn’t see her. “My ex-husband arranged it all. He’s been watching me for months. The only reason I got on that plane is that he broke into my house and tried to steal my diamonds. I’m pretty sure he wanted to hurt me, too.”

“That’s why you’ve been glancing over your shoulder ever since I met you. You think he’s still coming after you.”

“Yes.” Charlotte didn’t mention that she was pretty sure she’d seen someone watching them from the woods yesterday, just after they’d crossed the frozen river. In fact, she was just realizing that the only reason Dennis hadn’t gotten to her was probably that David was around. But David would be leaving the cabin in the morning. What would happen to her then?

“So, you left your husband,” she heard him say. “I have to say, I’m a little surprised.”

She frowned. “Why’s that?”

“You don’t strike me as someone who’s ever been married.”

Charlotte could barely hold back a chuckle. “Really? Why’s that?”

“I figure someone as beautiful would spend a lot of time avoiding men.”

*Beautiful?* “Are you flirting with me?” she teased. “Your wife won’t like that.”

“My wife is dead.”

An uncomfortable silence followed for what felt like an eternity. Finally, Charlotte found her voice.

“I’m so sorry,” she began. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” he replied quietly. “It happened years ago.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

More silence. Then: “It was the illness that took her. The same one that’s affecting my son now. For weeks, Alice struggled and suffered. And then one night, I returned to the lodge and I found her. She was gone.”

“Wow.” No wonder he’d seemed so reluctant to take Charlotte with him. No wonder he’d been so reluctant to spend the night here. He’d lost the woman he loved, and now his son, no doubt his only child, was about to face the same fate as his mother. If David had his way, he’d be trudging back up the mountain by now.

Her heart throbbed. Despite his calm, stoic demeanor, this man was hurting.

“He’s going to make it,” she said, hoping she sounded comforting and not stupid. “Your son. He’s not going to die. I’m sure of that.”

David said nothing, and for the first few seconds, she thought he was thinking of an answer. A minute passed, and then another, and soon it dawned on her that he’d either fallen asleep or simply did not wish to continue their conversation.

“Goodnight, David,” she whispered. Then, turning on the cot, she closed her eyes and soon drifted off into sleep.

## Chapter Eight

### *The Healer's Story*

“So, what’s your story?”

Penelope glanced up from the misshapen pot of soup she was preparing over a gentle flame. The older woman blinked at her as though appraising her. “What story?”

Charlotte shrugged. “Yesterday you said I was the first human you’d seen in a long time. You’re not from this dimension, are you? David told me last night that humans have been on the mountain for centuries, almost as long as the shifters have been here.

Penelope’s lips twitched. “Sounds like you learned a lot last night.”

She and Charlotte sat by the fireplace, fixing breakfast. Charlotte was starting to get used to the warmth of the cabin. The rest of the place was quiet. The windows were still shut, but she suspected it was colder outside today than it had been days ago. David was somewhere out there, gathering more firewood for Penelope before they had breakfast and he hit the road.

“My story,” the healer said with a soft sigh, “started almost sixty years ago.” Her grin widened as Charlotte’s eyes did. “That’s a long time, right?”

“I’m just surprised you’ve managed to survive out here so long,” Charlotte replied. “You must have been really young when you got here.”

“I was eight years old actually.” She stirred the soup in the pot. “A rather frail child, I might add.”

“Did you get here on a plane, too?”

Penelope shook her head. “I got here on foot.”

Charlotte frowned. “Wait, what?”

The old woman chuckled. “I’d run away from home because my mother was trying to get me to do chores. One minute, I was crossing the neighbor’s

backyard, and the next thing I knew I was standing on a snowy mountain, staring at rocks, trees, and animals.”

“Oh, my God. You must have been terrified.” Charlotte tried to picture what it must have been like for her—a little girl lost in a world that was little more than a death trap. Even Charlotte was lucky to be alive, and she’d only been here for weeks. How the heck had Penelope survived sixty years?

“I found people,” the healer replied. “Shifters. They took me to their village. I grew up around them and their children and learned to survive out here. When I was old enough, I decided I wanted to be by myself. So, I had this cabin built, and I’ve been living here ever since. It’s been peaceful.”

“Don’t you miss our world?” Charlotte asked.

“This is our world now, dear. It’s all that concerns me now. I felt bad for my parents and the friends I left behind, but it’s no use pining after what’s gone forever. I don’t concern myself with my old life anymore. It’s all behind me. Still, it’s always nice to see another human on this mountain.”

“So, you’re not curious to know who won the Cold War?” Charlotte teased despite herself. “Not even a little bit?”

Penelope flashed her a small smile, but before the healer could respond, the cabin door swung open and David stepped inside, brushing snow off his head and shoulders. He glanced at the duo by the fire, and Charlotte’s heart nearly skipped a beat as yesterday’s memories flooded back to her. He cracked a smile, and she felt a rapid flutter in her chest.

“I’ve stacked the wood behind the cabin,” he said to Penelope. “It should keep you warm for the next couple of weeks.”

The old woman smiled warmly at him. “You didn’t have to do all that, David.”

“It was the least I could do to thank you for your help.” He shrugged. “You didn’t want food or anything else. I had to repay you somehow.”



It struck Charlotte how odd it was that these were markers of value in this world. Her diamonds could've bought her a mansion in Vegas, but out here, all they had was beauty. They might serve as a thoughtful gift, but that was it. Here, what people cared about was survival.

"Thank you, dear," Penelope said. She turned to Charlotte. "He's a good man. You should be okay as long as you stick with him."

Charlotte thought she caught a wink, but she didn't dwell on it. A thought had just occurred to her.

"Penelope, I—we were wondering," she began, catching David's eye. "Could I stay with you for a while? David and I agreed that I'd stick with him until we got here. Here, we part ways."

The healer's eyes widened slowly. She glanced at David as though for confirmation, but he suddenly seemed particularly interested in the furniture.

Penelope tucked her curls behind her ear, shooting Charlotte an apologetic look that could only mean one thing.

"I'm sorry, dear," the healer said. "I'd love to have you here, but I cannot let you stay. I'm a healer. People come to me for help all the time, but no one ever stays. I simply don't have enough room for another. I hope you understand."

Charlotte felt her heart plummet into her stomach. She'd been expecting the woman to say something like this, but still, she wasn't prepared for Penelope's words. If she couldn't stay here, then that meant ... it meant she'd have to go back out into the cold. Maybe she'd luck out like Penelope had and find some shifter village that would accommodate her for the next couple of years until she could survive on her own. Or she could just keep moving until she was an icy Statue of Liberty.

"That ... that's fine," she said, turning her gaze to the flames. "I guess I'll leave this morning then. Thanks for letting me stay the night. I'm—"

“You can come with me,” David said.

She blinked at him, wondering if she’d heard incorrectly. “What?”

“You heard me. You can follow me to the lodge.” He gave a half-shrug and a smile. “Unless you’d rather go someplace else—”

Before she could stop herself, Charlotte flew out of her seat and threw her arms around him. “Thank you!” she said into his shoulder, feeling a wave of elation and relief. “Thank you so much!”

“Yeah, whatever,” he replied, but she heard him chuckle. “But we need to get moving as soon as possible. Time is running out.”

“You should stay and have breakfast first,” Penelope said, as Charlotte pulled away.

David opened his mouth to argue but closed it instantly. “Sure.”

Breakfast was quick, and after advising them to be safe on their way back to the lodge and offering to pack them some food for their journey, Penelope waved them off.

“It’s still early,” David said, as they headed back up the mountain, Charlotte shouldering the bag filled with their food and the medicine Penelope had given them. “We should be able to get through the woods and across the river by nightfall if we move fast enough.”

She paused, her feet planted firmly in the snow, and folded her arms across her chest. “What made you change your mind about taking me with you?”

David shot her a look of incredulity. “You can’t seriously be bringing that up right now.”

“Well, I am. How come you agreed to take me along?”

“Would you rather I left you to survive out here all by yourself?” When she didn’t reply, he lifted an eyebrow as if to say, *I didn’t think so*. “Let’s keep moving. We’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

Resisting the urge to thank him yet again, she nodded and they kept

moving.

Crossing the woods took a chunk of the day, just as David said it would. They walked in near silence broken only by the sound of their shoes crunching snow and their shoulders snagging pine branches as they moved. Charlotte found herself grinning now and then. She'd been worried sick that she would have to survive on her own, and the relief of it all made her feel slightly giddy.

But that wasn't all she'd been worried about. She'd also been afraid of being separated from David. Even if he'd left her behind at the cabin, even if Penelope had agreed to let her stay, it still would've been strange being without him.

By the time they left the woods behind, the sun had almost sunk below the horizon. David led the way up the mountain toward a glassy expanse that gleamed in the fading orange sunlight. It took Charlotte barely a second to realize it was the frozen river.

"Ugh," she groaned aloud. "Here we go again."

"You crossed it before and nothing happened." David stared at the frozen river before them, then at her. "But you're welcome to stay here if you want."

Charlotte suppressed a grimace. The ice had been pretty solid when they crossed it earlier, and once they were across, they could make camp for the night. The woods up ahead didn't look any safer than what lay behind, but at least they'd be moving.

"I'm not staying back."

He smirked. "I didn't think so."

He stepped toward the river and crossed it quickly. Charlotte bit her lip, but followed suit, joining him on the other shore. She took a few seconds to steady her breathing, then faced David.

"I'm fine," she said, adjusting the bag on her shoulder. "Where are we

stopping tonight?”

Before he could reply, she caught a sudden movement in her peripheral vision. Charlotte turned just in time to see a figure rushing toward them.

“David!” she shrieked.

David spun around a second too late.

With a grunt of effort, the figure slammed into David at top speed, knocking the big man backward. David let out a surprised cry, stumbling toward the river. He landed heavily on the icy surface, and Charlotte thought she heard a crack.

Panic lanced through her gut. “No!”

Groaning, David started to get up, but a series of other sounds filled the air like gunshots. The ice beneath David, glowing slightly in the sunset, was suddenly covered with a series of webbed cracks. There was a split second in which Charlotte’s world seemed to freeze. And then David was gone, leaving a dark, gaping hole in the ice.

“David!” Her heart threatened to burst from her chest as she rushed toward the river, but a hand clamped over her arm, yanking her backward. She spun and found herself face to face with a tall man wearing a coat a size or two too small. Something sharp was pressed against her throat, but she was too stunned at the sight of the man to register it immediately.

He looked a total mess, and in the dimming light it was almost impossible to make out his face, but Charlotte recognized the goatee and those dark, triumphant eyes.

“You,” she gasped.

“Yes, *me*,” Dennis replied with a sneer. He pressed the knife harder against her, ignoring the whimper that escaped her throat. “Did you think a plane crash could stop me? I’m here for what’s mine, and I’m not leaving this mountain till you hand it over.”

## Chapter Nine

### ***“Have You Lost Your Mind Out Here?”***

*“You can’t leave now, David,” George said, raising his voice to be heard over the howling wind. “You need to wait until morning and hope the blizzard’s died down.”*

*David shot his brother an incredulous look. He jabbed a finger in the direction of the lodge. “Are you kidding me? Alice is in there, dying with every second I do nothing. If there’s any chance that Penelope has this cure, then I’m willing to take it.”*

*He turned away before his brother could speak, watching the snow blanket the trees. This wasn’t their first argument tonight, and David was growing tired of it. The blizzard had begun moments before he left the house. Naturally, George had tried to stop him. Thrice now, if memory served him.*

*“Go back inside,” George said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “You can go when the storm clears in the morning.”*

*“Penelope’s cabin is weeks away from here. I don’t have time to waste. If Alice dies before I can save her...”*

*George’s tone was unwavering. “She won’t. I’m sure of it. Now, get back inside, brother. I’ll remain outside here just in case you try to leave again.”*

*David glared at his brother, then shook his head slowly. George had a point. In this weather, even he might get lost before long. Heading out in the morning was easily the smarter choice.*

*“Fine,” he snapped. And without another glance at his brother, he marched back inside the lodge.*

*First thing in the morning, he would head out, and nothing would stop him. Not as long as his wife’s life was at stake.*

*He climbed the porch steps and stepped into the house, making straight for*

*the living room. There she lay as usual, in front of the large fireplace. But something was wrong. David knew it even before he rushed to her, dropping to his knees by her side.*

*“Alice?” he gasped. “Alice! George, get in here!”*

*Alice was no longer moving. Her eyes were wide open, staring blankly back at him. Her skin bore a pallor, unlike anything he’d seen since she took ill, except for her face, which had turned a slight shade of blue.*

*“Alice?” David tried again, knowing what had happened but refusing to believe it was true. He patted her arm. Her skin was gelid to the touch. Alice’s lips were parted slightly as if she had been trying to say something.*

*Had she been calling for him?*

*“Alice!”*

*David’s eyes fluttered open weakly, seeing nothing but darkness. A sharp cold surrounded him, seeping into his bones, and his lungs ached. His thigh throbbed painfully as though he’d been hit by something sharp, and a single thought filled his mind.*

*I’m drowning.*

*He could feel himself sinking slowly, swept away by the river’s powerful current. He closed his eyes again, struggling to pull his body and mind out of the mess into which he’d just fallen.*

*“Alice. Angel, wake up.” His voice trembled as he spoke, and his vision began to blur. “Please, Alice.”*

*This couldn’t be happening. But it was. His wife lay lifeless before him, and he knew those eyes would never blink again. Those lips would never move. It was over. She was gone.*

*“I was going to look for the cure,” he heard himself say. “I was...”*

*“What’s wrong, Dada?”*

*David heard the voice as though from a mile away. It took him a few more*

*seconds to fully register it. He glanced up and immediately felt as though a clawed hand was slowly squeezing his heart. Standing nearby in a doorway, looking from his father to his mother, was a dark-haired child with round eyes.*

*“Peter.” David’s entire body went rigid. “You shouldn’t be here. Go back to bed.”*

*“Dada?” the boy asked, cocking his head curiously to one side. “What’s wrong? Is Mama asleep?”*

His eyes flew back open, and he fought desperately against the current, swimming in the only direction that made sense: *up*. Ignoring the pain in his thigh, he powered through the water, but was soon met with another problem: he’d been swept away from the part of the river where the ice had shattered beneath him. Here, the ice was still intact. He swung a punch at it with all his might, but it didn’t budge.

His lungs burned. A weak orange light registered in his vision through the icy surface, fading by the second. Time was running out. If he didn’t reach the surface soon, he was done for.

If that happened, he’d never get the medicine to his son. The memory of Alice lying before him, pale and lifeless, flashed through his mind again. That would be Peter in a matter of weeks.

And what about Charlotte? She was in danger, too. Someone had shoved him onto the ice. Dennis, no doubt. The man who had been stalking her. Not even the crash had stopped him from looking for her. And now he’d found them. With David out of the way, there was no telling what he’d do to her.

Unless David did something about it.

Feeling a surge of renewed determination, he closed his eyes and began to concentrate, feeling himself grow heavier even as he continued to tread water. His limbs thickened, his head expanding, and a snout grew from his

face. Fur sprouted from his skin, spreading all over his body, and claws extended from his digits.

He swung a powerful fist toward the river's surface, sending cracks spreading through the ice.

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"I knew you survived, you know," Dennis was saying. "People like you don't die easily. You get away with whatever you want. When I woke up from that crash, I knew you were alive somewhere. And I knew I was going to find you."

He still had the blade pressed against her throat. His rancid breath filled her nostrils, making it almost impossible to breathe without wanting to retch.

So, he *had* been following her. This whole time, she'd been right. He must have been waiting for them to show up so he could strike. She turned her gaze to the hole in the ice. David still hadn't resurfaced. Was he...?

"He's gone," said Dennis with a grin. "You're all alone with me now. But before I deal with you ... where the hell are those diamonds?"

She blinked at him. "Wh-what diamonds?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Charlotte," hissed the man. "I know you took the diamonds with you when you took off from Vegas. A woman like you isn't stupid enough to leave them behind. Give me the diamonds."

"I ... I don't have them anymore," she replied, hoping she sounded convincing. "I lost them in the crash. They're somewhere on the mountain."

"Nice try." He grabbed the bag before she could stop him and yanked it open, cursing under his breath as he rummaged through it. "I know you've still got those diamonds." He withdrew the food Penelope had packed for them along with the spare clothes and the medicine, wrapped in what looked like leaves.

It was too dark to see him clearly, but she could feel his frustration grow as



he searched the bag. Charlotte briefly considered attacking him or making a run for it. Neither option seemed particularly wise. She'd never seen him use a knife before—all of Sam's bodyguards had guns—but she wasn't about to doubt his abilities with a blade.

Dennis let the bag and items fall into the snow. "I know you've still got them somewhere."

Before she could protest, he grabbed her again, pulling her up close, and she felt his hands run up and down her body, feeling for the jewels. Charlotte gritted her teeth, holding back a scream.

"Aha."

Dennis straightened, holding up the diamonds before her. In the fading sunlight, they glowed softly, and she caught the look on his face. His eyes shone hungrily in the semidarkness.

"Ten million dollars," he muttered. "Once I get off this mountain, I'll be a rich man."

Charlotte found herself scoffing. "Good luck finding a way off the mountain."

His eyes narrowed. "You're one to talk. Only one of us is getting back to Vegas alive, and it's not you."

This time, she chuckled in spite of her terror. "There's no getting back to Vegas, you idiot. Don't you get it? This mountain came out of nowhere. You can't get off because there's no bottom. It's all magic."

It was his turn to scoff. "Magic? Have you already lost your mind out here?" He shrugged. "Doesn't matter anyway. As far as anyone's concerned, you're dead. You died in that crash. And I'm here to make that official. Thanks for the diamonds."

He lifted the knife.

Trepidation rushed through her body. "Did Sam send you to kill me?"

“Sam?” The man frowned. In the diamonds’ glow, she thought she saw confusion flicker in his eyes. “Sam didn’t—”

Before he could finish his statement, there was a deafening crash and a roar, and something large and heavy lumbered through the snow toward them.

Dennis spun around. “What the—?”

That was all he was able to utter before the creature smacked him in the gut, sending him flying backward. He sailed several feet toward the river, landing hard on its surface. Charlotte knew what was going to happen before it did: With a loud crack, the ice shattered. Dennis had only a second to gasp and try to get up before he plunged into the river with a strangled cry. And then everything was silent.

Charlotte stared blankly at the spot where Dennis had been a second ago. A low growl brought her back to her senses. Standing before her, nearly as tall as she was even on all fours, was a white creature. It was too dark to see it clearly, but Charlotte had enough sense to put two and two together and figure out what it was: A polar bear. It stared at her.

She stared back at it, not daring even to breathe.

Then, before she could figure out whether the bear was going to eat her or toss her into the river after Dennis, it began to shrink. Charlotte let out a cry and staggered backward, staring at the creature in shock. But the bear didn’t attack. It continued shrinking, its white fur receding into pale flesh. In seconds, the bear was nowhere to be seen.

In its place was a naked man.

“David?” She sucked in a breath, her eyes widening. She dropped to her knees, throwing her arms around his neck. “You’re alive! But how ... how did you ... I thought ... I have so many questions.”

In response, he gave a heavy grunt. It took Charlotte a moment to realize

why. Even in the semidarkness, she could see the dark gash in his left thigh.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. “You’re injured.”

“I got cut on the ice when I fell,” he replied. His sounded mostly calm, but she could hear the strain in his voice. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“It’s too dark to see much, but it sounds bad. Can you walk?”

With a series of grunts, he pushed himself to his feet, leaning heavily on his good leg. He took a step forward and nearly collapsed onto the snow.

“Not without help, it seems.”

Charlotte’s lower lip trembled, but she ignored it. “Okay. We can go back to Penelope for help. All we need to do is find a way to get across this river, and—”

“No.” He shook his head. “We’re not going back. The only way now is *up* the mountain. We don’t have much time.”

“But David—”

“You heard me.” It was too dark to see, but she could tell he was grimacing from the sheer effort it took to stand on his own. “We’ll make camp tonight. There should be a cave nearby. I’m sure I saw one the last time we were here.” He pointed at something in the distance close to the woods. “There. It should be over there somewhere. We’ll spend the night. I heal quickly. This wound should be better by morning.”

He didn’t sound too certain about that, but Charlotte wasn’t eager to spend the night out in the open either.

She sighed. “Okay.”

They began to move, David’s arm slung over her shoulder. He was heavy, but she did her best to help support his weight. Between his grunts and groans, her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it would burst through her ribcage.

As they headed toward the cave, a soft gleam caught her eye. Charlotte

froze. Lying in the snow was the diamond necklace, gleaming in the remaining rays of sunlight. Dennis must have dropped it when David attacked him. Next to the necklace was the knife.

Was Dennis gone? Charlotte didn't know much about polar bears, but that man had just been smacked through the air like a rag doll. If the impact alone hadn't killed him, the river probably had. By now, he must have been caught up in the current and drowned.

*Good riddance*, said a voice in her head.

But something didn't quite make sense to her. He'd been about to tell her something before David struck him. *Sam didn't*—

Didn't what? Send him? Did that mean he'd been acting on his own this whole time? It made no sense. Why would he even do such a thing?

It didn't matter now. Dennis *was* gone. If she was lucky, she'd never see him again.

Brushing the thought aside, she stooped and picked up the necklace, shoving it in her pocket. Then, as an afterthought, she reached for and pocketed the knife.

## Chapter Ten

### *A Night in the Cave*

Just as David had predicted, there *was* a cave just outside the woods. She'd missed it earlier but there it was. The sun had disappeared by the time they finally found the entrance, and the moon cast its pale light onto the snow, giving the surroundings a ghostly appearance.

The cave was small, but provided a degree of warmth, which made it infinitely better than spending the night outside. Once they were inside, Charlotte helped David get settled on the ground. He propped himself against a wall, wincing with the effort.

"We need a fire," she said, blinking through the semidarkness at him. "How do you make one?"

David laughed. "First, you need firewood. But since I can't go out to get some..."

"I'll do it." Charlotte could hardly believe the words coming out of her mouth. "I'll gather firewood. It can't be that hard, right?"

His silence told her everything she needed to know. But Charlotte wasn't about to sit around and do nothing. David was still injured. She needed to help him. To do that, she needed to *see* him clearly.

Before he could stop her, she scrambled out of the cave and marched toward the woods, trying not to think about what creatures might be lurking in those dark depths. She paused near the tree line and glanced around. If she wanted to get enough wood, she'd need to cut down a tree or something. She was still wondering how she was supposed to do that with her bare hands when her gaze dropped, and an idea swam to the surface of her mind.

Fifteen minutes later, she marched back into the cave and dumped an armful of sticks at David's feet.

“Where’d you get those?”

“Found them lying around,” she replied with a shrug. “It’s not much, but they’ll do.”

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Following his instructions, she attempted to make a fire, and within minutes she had a small but steady flame burning, illuminating the cave.

She caught on quickly, David thought, watching her arrange the sticks in the fire. And she was resourceful, too.

She turned to face him, frowning. “You’ve put on clothes.”

In her absence, he’d managed to pull on pants and a shirt from his bag. “I didn’t feel like lying here naked in the dark.”

He saw her blush and he smiled. She was beautiful when she got flustered. Her frown deepened as she gazed at him, and he knew what was coming next.

“You need to take those trousers off,” she told him, looking as though she’d rather be anywhere else but here right now. “I want to see your thigh.”

David groaned. “There’s no need to—”

“If you don’t get your wound cleaned, you could die,” she snapped. “You’re the first good thing that’s happened to me since I landed on this mountain, goddammit. I’m not about to let you die.”

She looked away, a scowl on her face. For a brief moment, David stared at her. Then he began to chuckle.

Charlotte’s face turned a deep shade of red. “What’s so funny?”

“You remind me of her,” he told her. “Alice, my wife. She got fierce and bossy sometimes. Called me stubborn”

“Well, she was right.” She gazed down at his pants, then arched an eyebrow at him. “I’m not going to say it twice.”

With a grin, he tugged the trousers off. He heard her gasp, but it was

unclear whether she was staring at his wound or something else. He looked at the wound on his thigh. It *was* bad. The ice had made a deep cut. It was a miracle he hadn't already bled to death. Each time he moved his leg, a pain shot through his body, and as much as he tried to hide it, he knew his eyes betrayed his agony.

Charlotte took a few deep breaths, then rummaged through the bag. A second later, she pulled out a shirt and ripped off a sleeve.

"Okay, I'm going to bandage your leg with this," she told him. "If we were by the river, I could try to wash it first."

"No rivers." He shook his head. "Not tonight." The memory of the dark, freezing water draining the life out of him was still fresh in his memory.

"I figured you'd say that. I'll just dress the wound then."

"You know how to do that?"

"I've seen it done in movies and on television," she muttered. She turned to look at him. "You know what those are, right?"

"Pictures that move and talk?" he asked. "They sound kind of silly to me."

She rolled her eyes. "You sound like a real back woodsman."

She got to work, winding the cloth around his thigh, and securing it with a knot. By the time she was done, the cloth was soaked with his blood. It was not much of an improvement, but at least it stopped the bleeding. If he healed quickly enough, he should be able to walk on the leg by morning.

David grunted. "Thank you."

"So, you think I'm fierce and bossy, huh?" Charlotte asked all of a sudden, folding her arms.

"No, but I think it's adorable when you try to act that way," he replied with a smirk.

"Well, someone has to take charge since you went and got yourself injured," she shot back. There was some silence between them. Then she

said, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” With a grunt, he tried to sit up straighter. “So, I was right after all. Dennis *was* following you.”

“I can’t say I blame him. Ten million bucks is a lot of money. With the diamonds, he’d be super rich back in our world.”

“Except there’s no going back,” he pointed out mildly.

She nodded. “Still ... something isn’t right. He acted like Sam never sent him after me, like everything he’s done since the divorce has been his idea alone. This whole time, I thought my ex-husband was mad at me for asking for a divorce. Something else is going on.”

“But it’s over now. He’s gone.”

But even as he said the words, he couldn’t help wondering if they were true. In the brief moment he’d encountered Dennis, something had struck him—the man was a survivor through and through. It had been weeks since the crash, and he’d managed to stay alive with nothing but a knife and his wits.

If they were lucky, then he really was gone, drowned in the river unless by some miracle he managed to survive that, too.

He tried for a smile. “There’s no point keeping those diamonds in your pocket anymore. You might as well just wear them.”

Charlotte’s eyes lit up a bit. “You’re right actually.”

And she pulled the necklace out of her pocket, holding it up to the firelight for a moment before fastening it around her neck. The jewels gleamed brightly, and David heard a sharp inhale. It took him a second to realize it had come from him.

“You look beautiful,” he said in a half-whisper.

She grinned at him. Between the diamonds and her face, it was hard to tell which glowed more brightly. Those green eyes gazed back into his, and he found himself wishing he could pull her closer, wanting to feel the warmth of



her slender body against his. He wanted to wrap his arm around her as he had once before and trace a finger along her smooth jawline. He wanted to feel those lips on his, to taste them until he was drunk on her very essence.

“You’re staring a lot,” she said, drawing him out of his reverie.

David gave a shrug. “Maybe I am.”

She blushed again. “When were you going to tell me you could turn into a freaking polar bear?”

“I thought I told you that night in Penelope’s cabin.” He lifted a brow. “I’m a shifter.”

“Well, yeah, but it didn’t really occur to me then. What else can you turn into? A wolf? A dragon?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “It doesn’t work that way. Every shifter is born with the ability to shift into a specific animal. I can only become a bear, nothing else. Of course, there are a few exceptions. I’ve heard of hybrids who could turn into bears *and* wolves, but they’re supposed to be rare.”

Her curved, sensuous lips formed an O. “Well, I can’t pretend it wasn’t scary standing face to face with a polar bear. I might’ve fainted if you hadn’t transformed back.”

He smirked. “I wasn’t going to hurt you. I shifted into the bear so I could break through the ice and save you. And save my son. I have to get back to him before Christmas.”

“Yeah, you mentioned he loves Christmas.”

David nodded. “It’s one of his favorite times of the year. I don’t want to celebrate it with him sick and dying or...”

He trailed off before he could utter the final word, but it hung above their heads like a storm cloud.

“What’s he like?” she said quietly a moment later.

A gentle smile teased David's lips. "Peter? Well, he's a bundle of joy. Never stops smiling. He's the best thing to ever happen to me."

"I can tell you love him."

He almost scoffed. "More than anything else in my life. Except Alice, I suppose. But she's gone. Sometimes it takes losing or almost losing people to realize how much you care about them. How much you love them."

Her eyebrows rose slightly, and he wondered if she could tell what he was thinking. Out there, after Dennis knocked him into the river, all he'd been able to think about was protecting her and saving his son. Could that mean...?

"I was worried about you," she muttered, throwing a couple more sticks onto the fire. "I thought I'd lost you in the river. I thought..." Her voice quivered, and she fell silent. "I'm just glad you're okay now."

He gestured at his crudely bandaged leg. "*Okay* is a strong word."

"Well, at least you're alive. That's what I'm grateful for. Even if you were paralyzed from head to toe, I'd still be grateful."

"Paralyzed?" he repeated, and this time he did scoff. "I'm sure I can walk perfectly fine even now. Just—"

He straightened and started to get to his feet, but just then, pain lanced through his leg. With a grunt, he collapsed, hitting the cave floor hard.

"David!" A second later, his agonized mind was aware of Charlotte leaning over him, her eyes wide with worry. "Are you okay?"

"Like I said," he replied with a strained grin, "*okay* is a strong word."

He laughed at that and was relieved when her troubled expression gave way to relief and what looked like amusement. Her face hovered close to his, her body almost nestled against his own, and in the throes of her laughter, she was beautiful, so very beautiful...

David wasn't sure who moved first, but the next thing he knew, her lips

were pressed against his. They were pleasantly warm, despite the cold. David let his eyes slide shut, feeling her body melt against his. They fit quite nicely together, her slender curvy form and his rigid body. She brushed against him as they kissed, and he felt a stirring between his thighs.

He nibbled her lip and she moaned into his mouth, arching her back so that her breasts grazed his chest through his clothes. He reached under the coat hanging from her shoulders, caressing her through the thin fabric underneath, feeling himself stiffen with each second that went by. His hands felt up her torso, and he marveled at the magnificence of this woman. She was perfect, just perfect...

*What am I doing?*

The thought filled his head in an instant, and he broke the kiss, panting. As if also coming to her senses, Charlotte sat bolt upright. In the flickering firelight, he saw her expression morph from surprise to confusion, finally settling on mortal embarrassment.

“I—I’m sorry,” she said, looking away. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Her lips were slightly swollen from the kiss. All David had to do was look down to see his own reaction to their brief interaction.

“Charlotte—” he began, but she’d completely turned away from him now.

“You should get some rest if you want that wound to heal,” she told him, her voice suddenly devoid of emotion. “Like you said, we’ve got to keep moving. Good night, David.”

And before he could say anything else, she curled up by the fire with her back to him.

The conversation was over.

## Chapter Eleven

### *Goldilocks and the Four Bears*

By morning, David's thigh was still in terrible shape, and despite how much he tried to convince Charlotte that he was fine—he managed to take a dozen steps out of the cave before collapsing in pain—she insisted that he take a day's rest.

"I know you want to save Peter," she told him, "but you're not getting anywhere in this state. You need more rest."

He'd scowled at her, and for a moment Charlotte thought he might refuse. To her surprise, he merely grunted and sat back down, resting his head against the cave wall.

"It's an interesting turn of fate, you know," he said as she pulled out some of the food Penelope had given them. "When I first met you, I thought you would be a burden and slow me down if I let you come along with me. And now I'm practically a burden. I'm slowing us down."

"In my world," Charlotte replied without looking at him, "we call that *irony*."

The rest of the day went by without much conversation between them, which Charlotte found somewhat convenient. After last night, the last thing she needed was for their kiss to come up in conversation. Even thinking about it tended to get on her nerves, especially since she could hardly keep the thoughts and memories at bay.

David slept through most of the day, only waking up at intervals to eat or complain about being delayed. Seated next to him, she sang softly now and then, or simply stared at his unconscious form. As Charlotte watched him sleep, she couldn't help thinking how strong he was. In barely a day, this big man had nearly drowned, getting injured in the process. In spite of that, he'd

managed to save himself and her. With an injury like his, Charlotte would be a goner, but he seemed to be doing better already. She'd redressed the wound a couple of times while he slept; it was healing impossibly quickly.

Maybe she'd end up a healer like Penelope, she found herself thinking. She nearly scoffed at the thought. Charlotte barely even knew what she was doing, trying to help David. It wasn't like she could watch a seven-minute YouTube tutorial on how to heal shifter patients while stranded on magical snowy mountains.

By the next morning, David seemed to be doing a lot better. Reluctantly, Charlotte agreed to continue moving. They wasted little time packing their bag and leaving the cave, heading up the mountain through the woods. Now and then, David grunted and she saw his face contort with pain, but he wasn't about to take another day's break.

"I'm fine," he told her each time she pointed out that he might need some more rest. "We've wasted too much time as it is. It's almost Christmas. I need to get back to my son."

Christmas. These days, it barely occurred to her that holidays were still a thing here. These shifters were part of her world once, long before Frost Mountain. Not to mention humans lived here, too. It made sense when she gave it some thought—celebrating holidays just might be the thing keeping people from going crazy out here on this magically infinite mountain.

And this year, she would be spending it with David and his family. He'd mentioned them earlier, but he hadn't said much about them. If his wife was gone, what did that leave? His siblings? Maybe parents?

*A family of bears*, Charlotte thought with a dry smile as she and David trudged through the woods. *Might as well change my name to Goldilocks.*

Not that there was any guarantee she'd be spending Christmas with them. David had been reluctant to let her tag along with him at first. For all she

knew, his family would be even less accepting. Even if they did let her stay, for how long? As long as she wanted? Or until she learned to survive on her own?

As if she didn't already have enough to worry about. Charlotte snuck a glance in David's direction. Except for the occasional strained grunt, he moved quietly, a look of determination plastered on his face. He clearly had a lot on his mind. She wondered what he was thinking about. His son? Or ... the other night?

Ah, the kiss. It was starting to seem like she could barely go ten minutes without the memory popping up. What the hell had she been thinking? One second, they'd been laughing together. And then, unable to stop herself, she'd kissed him.

In her defense ... well, she didn't have much of a defense.

Neither of them had brought it up since that night, which Charlotte was grateful for. Things were already awkward enough between them without their talking about it. But Charlotte couldn't stop thinking about it. And as embarrassing as the memory was, she couldn't pretend it didn't excite her, thinking of the way he'd kissed her back, the feeling of his hands on her body...

Yeah, she'd definitely do it again. If it weren't so awkward.

*Focus*, she chided herself. David was already ahead of her, his large, sturdy form filling the center of her vision as he moved between the trees.

Oh, how she would've loved to run her fingers along his broad back that night. Alone in the cave, the fire casting their moving shadows on the wall ... that would've been beautiful. Charlotte's cheeks burned slightly.

That part was getting annoying. Men didn't usually get her this flustered. Sure, she found some attractive, liked to go on dates with them, even go to bed with them. But David wasn't just any man.

*It was just a kiss, though,* she reminded herself.

Except it really wasn't. With David, everything was different. He could smirk at her and leave her with frozen nipples and a racing mind. That kiss the other night had sent sparks flying around in her belly like it was the freaking Fourth of July. She couldn't help wondering just how much more could have happened if he hadn't broken the kiss.

Several days later, she decided to bring it up.

"There's something I want to talk to you about," she said, as they moved up the mountain.

She'd never been around here before. There were few trees, and all she could see in the distance was snow and jagged peaks. They were getting close to the mountaintop, Charlotte figured. It looked somewhat precarious, with sharp rocks forming dangerous-looking ledges.

David shot her a sideways glance. His leg had healed completely days ago. When he showed her, she could hardly believe it. Other than a dark scar, there was nothing that suggested he'd gotten injured in that river. He moved much faster now, determined to reach his son in time, and Charlotte was forced to double her pace to keep up with him.

"Well?" was all he said. He paused. "Better watch your step here, by the way."

She barely registered the words. "Okay, so I've been thinking about the other night in the cave, and—oh!"

Suddenly, the ground gave way beneath her. For a split second, the memory of the river cracking flashed through her mind, and she thought she was about to drown. But all she hit was snow. Charlotte let out a strangled scream as she fell, tumbling downhill. She rolled for what felt like an eternity before coming to a rest. When she opened her eyes, there was a tree towering above her.

“What the hell just happened?” she muttered, pulling herself into a sitting position.

She glanced around. At first, she’d figured she’d rolled back down the mountain, but the ground was level here. Trees she didn’t recognize stretched behind her, the growth almost too dense to see through. Charlotte looked back the way she’d come and gasped. She’d rolled into some sort of crater. And standing at the edge, thirty feet above, grinning down at her, was David.

“I told you to be careful,” he said, dropping to a crouch.

Charlotte pulled herself to her feet as he began making his way into the snowy basin. “What’s going on? How come I didn’t see this place earlier?”

“Well, it’s supposed to be hidden,” he replied with a shrug. “That’s how secrets work.”

“Secrets?” she repeated. And then it dawned on her. Her eyes grew wide. “You don’t mean...?”

“I do.” David brushed some snow off his clothes. “We’ve reached the secret bear shifter lodge, Charlotte, and you’re about to meet my family.” She stared at him long enough to catch his expression darkening. “And see my son.”

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The lodge was a large cabin in a basin in the mountain, almost completely hidden from view and surrounded by a thicket of trees. No wonder David had said it was a secret. It was nearly impossible to find the place except by accident.

“So, this is your home,” Charlotte muttered as they stepped out of the thicket. “It’s beautiful.”

The cabin was larger than Penelope’s and looked well cared for.

David stood next to her, staring at the building. His jaw was clenched slightly, and she guessed what was going on in his head.



“He’s still alive,” she told him. She briefly considered resting a hand on his arm but settled for a light tap. “You’re not too late, David.”

“If he’s gone...” He patted his bag as though trying to feel the medicine inside. “If he’s gone, this journey will have been for nothing. And it’ll be my fault.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, sounding a bit harsher than she’d intended to. “Come on, let’s go inside and see Peter.”

Before they reached the porch steps, the front door opened, and a big man stepped out. He was tall, like David, wearing a green jacket over dark trousers and a pair of boots that looked like they’d seen better days. He frowned, glancing from David to Charlotte, and she caught a glimpse of his brown eyes.

“Is that your dad?” she whispered to David. “He doesn’t look much older than you.”

“He’s my brother,” came the reply. “This is George.”

The other man stared at the duo silently as if he was trying to assess the situation. Finally, he said, “I didn’t realize you’d be returning with a friend.”

“Long story, brother. How’s Peter?”

“He’s gotten worse, but he’s still breathing,” George told him. “Did you get the cure?”

David nodded.

His brother’s face suddenly split in a grin. “Welcome back, brother. Come in.”

He stepped aside to let them enter the house. Charlotte flashed George an awkward smile, which was met with a raised brow. The house’s interior was nicer and homier than Penelope’s because it was roomier, had more furniture, and more light.

George led them into the spacious living room. The wooden floor was

covered with dark rugs. Makeshift lamps cast flickering shadows on the walls and there was a fire burning in the stone fireplace. A few chairs were set by the windows and a couple more by the fireplace. In one of them, a silver-haired woman sat watching over a pale, shivering form wrapped in a blanket.

The woman looked up, and her eyes widened. “David. You’re back. Did you ...?”

David didn’t answer. Charlotte heard his sharp inhale. “Peter.”

He made a beeline for the fireplace and dropped to his knees next to the boy, cupping his face in his hands. Before she could stop herself, Charlotte went after him. The boy was dark-haired and somewhat frail, no doubt from weeks of sickness. She figured he was no more than eight or ten years old. His skin was almost white, his lips slowly turning blue.

“Hey, Peter,” said his father. “I’m here now. And I brought a cure.”

The boy opened his eyes. They were brown, just like David’s. They widened at the sight of him, and his lips curved into a smile.

“Dada,” he said weakly.

“You’re going to be okay.” Was that a tremble in David’s voice? “I’m going to make sure of it.”

He rummaged through the bag for the medicine. The boy’s gaze drifted slowly toward Charlotte.

“Pretty,” he whispered.

Charlotte’s heart throbbed. She beamed at him. “Thank you, Peter. You’re quite handsome, too.”

“What ... is that?”

He didn’t point, but she already knew what he was talking about. Her hand reached up to touch the diamonds on her neck. Peter’s eyes were wide with interest. Even the woman seated next to him had a curious look on her face. Charlotte figured she must be David’s sister or something.

“This? It’s a diamond necklace.”

“What’s a ... diamond?”

“It’s a very, very expensive stone from my world,” she told him.

The boy’s face lit up even brighter. “It’s beautiful.”

David pulled out the wrapped medicine and handed it to the silver-haired woman. “Evelyn, we need this boiled as soon as possible. He has to drink it before we run out of time.”

She nodded.

## Chapter Twelve

### *The Eve of Christmas Eve*

He sat on the edge of the chair that night, hunched over his clasped hands, and watched his son sleep. Peter lay curled on his side, still wrapped tightly in the blanket. His skin was still pale, and his body trembled slightly with the cold. The boy's eyes were closed. Better that than wide open and reflecting the pain that wracked his tiny form with each passing day.

It had been hours since Peter had been administered the treatment. Penelope had assured him the medicine would work, but there had been no changes so far. Peter was the same as when David had first seen him earlier.

What if the healer was wrong? What if this "cure" did nothing at all?

This sickness ...it had come for Alice. It had come for Peter, too. Who would it come for next?

No one. As long as his son survived, there was hope. But that was the problem. What if he *didn't* make it? Time was running out. In a matter of days, maybe even *hours*, Peter could be lying with his eyes wide open, with a plea frozen on his lips like his mother had.

David leaned closer. His son's body heaved slowly. He was still breathing.

*Thank goodness.* He let out a sigh, sinking his head in his hands.

He heard a series of gentle footfalls on the wooden floorboards, causing him to straighten immediately. He swiveled in his seat just in time to see Charlotte walking toward him. She'd had a warm bath and changed her clothes. She had on a brown sweater and a pair of old jeans and had her blonde hair pulled back into a bun behind her head. She looked almost ethereal. George's wife, Evelyn, had helped with the clothes and the bath. Charlotte had taken off the diamond necklace; her neck was bare, half-cast in shadow.

She caught his eye as she neared him and flashed him a grin that set his heart racing.

“You should be asleep,” she said, coming to a stop beside him.

“What about you?” he shot back.

“I couldn’t sleep. My bedroom window was open a crack. I could barely close my eyes without shivering.”

He managed a small smile. “That’s Peter’s bedroom actually.”

“Oh.” There was some silence. Then: “You’re still worried about him, aren’t you?”

To say that he was worried was an understatement, but David nodded. “I’m afraid he might not make it.”

“David, he’s had the medicine. He’s going to be fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“What if the medicine doesn’t work?” he countered.

“Of course, it will—”

“You don’t get it, Charlotte.” He sank his head in his hands again. “I found my wife dead once all those years ago. This is the same nightmare happening all over again. Peter has to *live*. If he dies ... I know I’ve still got my brother and his wife, but Peter ... he’s my world.”

“I understand.” She rested a hand on his shoulder, sending a jolt through his body. “He means the world to you. That’s exactly why I need you to keep calm. He’s going to be okay. I promise you that.”

David stared down at his son again. He didn’t look okay. When he laid eyes on Peter earlier, he’d nearly broken down on the spot. Somehow, he was still managing to hold himself together. But if Peter didn’t make it, it was over.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked, glancing up at her.

Her face glowed in the firelight. She cracked the tiniest of smiles; even that

was enough to stir a flutter in his chest. She settled on the armrest of the chair, barely inches away from him.

“David,” she said, “we’ve come this far. We’ve been out there for days—no, weeks—and we made it here despite everything, despite this godforsaken cold, despite you getting injured, despite ... well, Dennis. You saved me, David. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. And you’ve saved your son. It’s all going to be okay.”

Another sigh escaped his lips. “I guess you’re right. Maybe he’s just taking more time to recover than I expected.”

“That’s the spirit.” Her grin broadened. “I’m sure he’ll be better by morning. Christmas isn’t tomorrow, is it?”

David frowned, pondering for a moment, then gave a shrug. “There’s no way to tell what day it is exactly. I guess any day from now could be Christmas.”

“Like ... tomorrow?”

He nodded.

She tapped her chin. “How does the day after tomorrow sound?”

“That would make tomorrow Christmas Eve,” he replied.

“And tonight’s the eve of Christmas Eve.” She chuckled. “I guess that gives us time to figure out what we want to get each other for Christmas. Please tell me you guys share gifts at Christmas. I’d hate if all you did was sing carols.”

He suppressed a laugh. “We share gifts. What would you like for Christmas?”

Charlotte stared into the flames, lost in thought for a moment. “I’m not sure now that I think about it. I guess that’s what happens when you’re used to being gifted Ferraris and diamonds.” She shrugged. “I’ll come up with something. What about you? What do you want for Christmas?”

He stared at her for a moment, drinking in the sight of her—her smooth skin, her piercing green eyes, those lips that seemed to beckon to him...

“You.”

She tittered. “That sounds like something Mariah Carey would say—”

He pulled her onto his lap and covered her mouth with his, smothering the rest of her speech. Charlotte’s body tensed against his, and for a brief, uncertain moment, he feared she might pull away from him. When she kissed him back, those delicate lips of hers caressing his, he thought his chest might explode.

A thought crossed his mind, and he broke the kiss instantly. Disappointment flickered in her eyes, but he smiled to assure her that everything was all right.

“Why don’t we take this somewhere else?” he suggested.

She gazed at Peter’s sleeping form on the floor and seemed to understand what he meant. “Sounds like a great idea to me.”

He got to his feet, carrying her in his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, bracing her hands on his shoulders as he moved from the living room into his bedroom. He had barely shut the door behind them when she let go of him and stood upright, hooking her thumbs into the waistband of his trousers.

The next thing he knew, she’d pulled him into a kiss, standing on her tiptoes. Her hands traveled eagerly along his body, feeling him through his clothing. Her fingers came up to touch his face, and he felt another jolt race through his body. He slid an arm around her torso, pulling her toward him and cupping her bottom in his hand so that she moaned into the kiss.

This time, it was she who broke the kiss; she stood gazing into his face, her green eyes lit with a fierce passion.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited to do this,” she breathed.

## Chapter Thirteen

### *A Sudden Proclamation*

David understood how she felt. Even the slightest touch was enough to make him feral. The more her body pressed against his, the more he wished he could rip her clothes off and sink himself deep into her. He reached up to cup her face, relishing her gaze for a second before touching his lips to hers again.

Her body was warm and pliant against his, and he felt his arousal strain against his clothes, a symbol of the urgency of his desire. He cupped her breast, delighting in its tenderness. He ground against her, a groan escaping his throat, and felt his self-control slowly slipping out of his grasp.

Suddenly, he was lifting her sweater above her head and tossing it toward the bed. Her shirt followed, and she stood before him with her breasts bared.

He cupped her again, brushing his thumb across her already engorged nipple, and she sighed into his mouth, which did nothing but knock another inch into his arousal. Charlotte seemed to sense it and reached between them to cup him through his jeans. His breath froze in his throat, and he throbbed against her small hand, fighting the growing desire to divest them both of their clothing and shove himself into her so they were both joined.

As if reading his thoughts, Charlotte began unbuttoning his trousers. In seconds, she'd pulled them down his legs, letting them fall to his feet. When his erection sprang free, she gasped and reached for it, and sending a shudder through his body. He continued to fondle her breasts, his strong hands caressing them in turn, and he saw her eyes darken.

“Oh, yes,” she whispered.

She began stroking him gently, and he felt himself grow impossibly harder in her grasp. Sensing where this was headed and unwilling to put a halt to it,



he pulled off his jacket and the shirt underneath so that he was completely naked before her. For a moment, Charlotte took in the sight of his body, and he relished her appreciative gaze. Then, slowly, her fingers still curled around his erection, she sank to her knees.

When she took him into her mouth, swirling her tongue around his throbbing head, he thought he might wake the entire cabin with groans of pleasure. Her warm lips slid along the length of his shaft, her fingers stroking him just as gently. Before he knew it, David was cupping her head, stroking it as she brought him nearer to orgasm with her mouth.

“Charlotte—” he gasped.

She took him deeper into her mouth, staring up at him as she continued to pleasure him, and he felt his body grow tense. The more she suckled him, the closer he got to finding his release. Suddenly, she took him out of her mouth, teasing him with her tongue yet again. David gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to fill the cabin with moans of pleasure.

“Charlotte,” he started again. “Charlotte, you’re—”

She shut him up with another flick of her tongue. Her fingers slid down his shaft, cupping his balls and fondling them until David was certain there was little more he could take. He squeezed his eyes shut, lost in the ecstasy that she gave him.

It wasn’t until he felt his orgasm hovering near that he opened his eyes.

“Stop,” he growled. When she refused, still staring up at him with those beautiful eyes, he reluctantly pushed her head away, easing himself out of her mouth. As much as he would’ve loved to come in her sweet, hot mouth, he could afford to end their fun just yet.

Before she could protest, he pulled her to her feet and took her toward his bed, laying her gently on her back and divesting her of the rest of her clothing. He stared at her naked form beneath him, delighting in the sight of

her curves. Her nipples stood erect, her breasts heaving as she stared back at him. and in that moment David nearly thrust himself into her.

How interesting fate waw. When he first met this woman, all he had felt was amusement and irritation. And now the mere sight of her was enough to make his heart race. He trailed his fingers along her body, feeling her delicious skin from her breasts to her navel. He brought his fingers lower, caressing her engorged clit, and a strangled gasp filled the bedroom.

Motioning for her to be quiet, he continued to stroke her, parting her legs wider. When he slid his fingers into her and continued to stroke, she let out a soft moan that made David wish he had his cock inside her instead of his fingers. She was a stunning sight whether he was gazing at her from above or between her legs. Her back arched slightly, her breath quickening by the second.

“Oh, my God, David,” she gasped. “I love your fingers.”

“I love your body,” he whispered back. And then he drew closer, flicking his tongue against her clit.

Immediately, she moaned, her hips jerking slightly, and as he continued to please her with his tongue, savoring her wetness and warmth, she clutched his head, grinding against him.

“Oh, yes, just like that,” she panted. “Just like that, David.”

He continued to pump his fingers inside her, determined to give her as much pleasure as she craved. Charlotte’s breathing grew more ragged. When she clenched around his fingers, he knew the moment was upon her. Her eyes widened and she clamped a hand over her mouth, barely stifling a cry as she erupted, her fingers digging into his shoulder as her body spasmed.

It took over a minute for her to stop trembling, by which time his chin was wet with her juices. She blinked at him, and he saw her face redden.

“Oops,” she said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh, be quiet,” he said with a smirk. “I enjoyed every bit of it.”

She smiled back, and he covered her body with his, lowering his lips to hers. Their kiss began gently, but soon turned fierce and feral, and soon his hands began caressing her body again, eager to feel and savor every inch of her. He broke the kiss for a moment, touching his lips just below her ear and trailing them down to her jawline. Her ragged breaths filled his ears, and her chest heaved against his.

She reached between them, her hand snaking down toward his still-rigid cock. Another grunt escaped his lips, and he covered her mouth with his again as she slowly guided his throbbing erection toward her delicious wetness. He cupped her breast again, fondling her as she fondled him, and their sighs filled the bedroom in unison. Her free hand stroked his cheek, her touch sending tendrils of ecstasy through him.

“Charlotte,” he groaned against her lips.

“David,” was her strained reply. She brought his throbbing head closer to her entrance, rubbing him against herself, and he gave a soft hiss. “I want you inside me. I want you now.”

He kissed the corner of her mouth and grinned down at her. “I want the same thing.”

Her desperation and desire surged through his veins. In one swift, fluid motion, he parted her thighs and slid into her.

“Oh, my God,” she said, her eyes widening.

She was tighter around him than he had figured, and her warmth rolled over his cock as their bodies joined. It felt nothing less than perfect, this sensual, passionate union of theirs. She whimpered as he began to move, delivering gentle strokes and gritting his teeth to keep from alerting the whole of Frost Mountain of his ecstasy. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her legs wound about his waist to hold him close, and each of his thrusts

elicited a whimper from her.

He gazed down at her and felt his heart throb almost painfully. She lay beneath him, her hair somehow freed from its knot and scattered around her head, her piercing eyes staring back at him, trusting, desiring. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, and he thought he could feel her heartbeat.

“Beautiful,” he muttered. “You’re so beautiful.”

He picked up the pace, and sensed her breathing quickening as his thrusts did. He kissed her again, stifling her moans before anyone outside the bedroom could hear them. In the throes of their passion, it was easy to forget that there were other people around, but he had to retain enough presence of mind to avoid awkward stares and questions from George and his wife in the morning.

He continued to slam into her, swiveling his hips with each thrust, and she shivered against him. When her grip on him tightened, he knew her second orgasm was on its way, and continued his powerful yet careful strokes. Within seconds, he heard her muffled cry as she came, clenching around his cock. David broke the kiss to plant his lips on her jawline, and as he gazed into those wonderful eyes, he felt his own orgasm draw near.

It came almost immediately, and with a violent jerk of his hips he erupted, throwing his head back in a hoarse groan as he spilled into her. His thrusts slowed, coming to a halt in seconds.

Spent, he eased himself out of her and sank onto the small bed next to her, pulling her close. They held each other for a minute, struggling to catch their breath, before either of them spoke.

It was Charlotte who spoke first.

“Well,” she said, “this is one hell of a Christmas Eve’s eve, if you ask me.”

He grinned and kissed her cheek. “It is. I love you, Charlotte.”

It took him a few seconds to realize what he'd just said. The words had come out suddenly, without precognition. And as shocked as he was to have said them, even more surprising was the realization that those words were true.

*I love you, Charlotte.*

“Well, you’d be daft not to,” came her reply, and he chuckled.

There was silence for the next few seconds—or perhaps a full minute—except for the sound of each other’s breathing. He wondered what she was thinking, whether she was still processing what they’d just done, or whether he’d made her uncomfortable with his proclamation.

Then Charlotte drew closer, aligning her body with his so he could feel her warmth.

“I love you, too, David,” she said.

## Chapter Fourteen

### *Former Multimillionaire. Survivor. Lover Girl*

Charlotte was glowing. That was what Evelyn, David's sister-in-law, had told her earlier this morning. She glowed as she moved around the house, helping out with whatever chores were available until George began to stare at her in wonder.

But she wasn't the only one in high spirits this morning. Everyone had a smile on their face. The medicine was working. Peter was recovering from his illness. He was still quite sick, but his skin had lost its pallor, and he seemed somewhat stronger. By noon, he'd been moved from the fireplace into one of the chairs, where he beamed at everyone in view.

David's mood had certainly improved since yesterday. His smiles were brighter, but Charlotte couldn't tell whether if that was due to his son's recovery or what had transpired between them last night.

Last night had been ... well, *spectacular* didn't quite describe it. If she hadn't woken up next to David this morning, she might have figured she'd dreamed the whole thing. The second he pulled her onto his lap and kissed her, she'd nearly lost her senses. The sex had been mind-blowing. And afterward...

*I love you, Charlotte.*

The memory of those words filled her with a pleasant tingle. He loved her. Those words had burst out suddenly, randomly. She'd been unable to speak for a moment, not simply because she'd been stunned silent by his words, but because somehow, deep down, she'd known he was telling the truth.

His words had wrenched the confession from her own lips. She loved him, and as odd as it felt to admit it, was right. They fit perfectly together.

*Charlotte Lodge. Former Multimillionaire. Plane Crash Survivor. Lover*

*Girl.*

“Why are you smiling?” A voice broke through her thoughts.

She blinked. Sitting across her just before the fireplace, his body still covered with a blanket, was Peter. He stared curiously at her.

“Huh? Uh, I’m happy you’re getting better.” That was true.

He grinned widely, revealing a gap in his upper teeth. “Dada says we’re celebrating Christmas tomorrow. I can’t wait.”

“Neither can I,” Charlotte replied.

“I told Dada he doesn’t need to give me any gifts for Christmas, but I don’t think he’s going to listen to me.” He frowned. “He’s already gone through a lot, hasn’t he?”

She pressed her lips together. “Well ... yes.” The last thing she wanted to do was narrate their ordeal out there in the snow to this preadolescent boy, but she wasn’t about to lie to him either.

Peter nodded slowly but said nothing. Charlotte shifted her gaze to the flames crackling softly in the fireplace. When she looked up, the boy was snoring slightly.

Her lips curved slowly. Curled up on the chair, the boy looked at peace, innocent. Charlotte was willing to bet he hadn’t spent a day outside this lodge in his entire life. And hopefully, he’d never have to. Looking at him, she couldn’t help feeling a sudden protectiveness toward Peter.

She’d only arrived here yesterday, and getting used to living here was going to take a while, but she already felt a closeness to this family, especially David and his son. She stared at the sleeping boy in the other chair, and her heart swelled. She might not be his mother, and she’d be damned if she ever tried to take Alice’s place, but she couldn’t help thinking how wonderful it would be to get to raise this boy as her own.

Charlotte could hardly help scoffing at herself. Where was all of this

coming from? This mountain had certainly changed her. She doubted she would recognize her old self if she was staring back at herself in a mirror.

The thud of footsteps made her turn her head. It was David. He'd pulled on a sweater and was about to head out of the cabin, a blunt axe clutched in his hand. When he caught her eye, he paused in his tracks, he grinned in a way that filled her stomach with butterflies.

"I see you're getting along with Peter," he said.

She glanced at the sleeping boy. "He's a sweetheart. What's with the axe? Going somewhere?"

"I'm just going to gather some wood. We need to keep the fire burning."

The memory of David taking her breasts into his mouth, of David planting his warm lips on her neck, of David slamming into her for all he was worth, smothering her cries with his lips. Yeah, they'd definitely kept *that* fire burning last night. Any longer and they would've created an inferno.

"Oh?" She shot to her feet before she could stop herself. "Why don't you let me do it?"

He looked at his axe, then back up at her, and a silent question hung in the air between them.

"I can do it," she assured him, feeling an immense pull as she drew nearer. "I don't need the axe. Remember when we were in that cave, and you couldn't move?"

He lifted a brow. "I doubt you'll find that many fallen sticks lying in the snow. So, if you really want to gather wood ..." He held out the axe. "You might need this."

She took the axe from him and nearly buckled under its weight. "Nope. Not gonna need it."

With a smirk, he took the tool from her. "Fine. Have it your way, then."

She wanted to tiptoe right then, to feel his lips on hers again, but she held



herself back. There would be time for all of that ... later.

Before she have second thoughts, she headed out of the lodge, shivering slightly at the sudden cold as she stepped into the snow. It was beautiful outside this afternoon. Between the trees and the snow, her surroundings were a blend of white, green, and brown. Beyond the woods that ringed the cabin, there wasn't much she could see.

Whoever picked this spot to build the lodge had a sensible head on their shoulders, Charlotte thought. It was a perfect location, even though she was willing to bet that it was colder this high up the mountain.

"Right," she muttered. "Firewood."

This shouldn't take too long. She'd gathered wood before, and since the trees were barely twenty feet away from the cabin, she should be back indoors in minutes. Humming to herself, she made for the trees, picking up whatever sticks she could find.

She figured David would come out here later and chop a few logs. She might've saved them back in the cave, but out here, a few sticks weren't going to be of much use to an entire family. Still, it felt good to be out here doing something for this wonderful family.

Christmas was less than a day away. Tomorrow, they'd need to be cozy and in high spirits. With David around, Charlotte doubted that would be a problem.

She ventured deeper into the woods, grabbing as many large sticks as she could carry at once, and was stooping for the umpteenth time, trying to figure out whether the brown form sticking out of the snow at her feet was a stick or a rock, when a dark shape swept through her field of vision.

With a gasp, she straightened, letting the sticks fall to her feet. She cast a quick glance around her. No one in sight. Was she imagining things?

"David?" she called. "Is that you?"

She listened for an answer, some indicator that he'd followed her into the woods, but there was none. Not a single sound except for the steady crunching of snow right behind her.

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“So,” George said, shooting his brother a sideways grin. “Are you going to tell me, or do I have to ask her myself?”

David frowned at him. George's eyes were shining despite his attempts to mask his eagerness for mere curiosity. “Ask her what exactly?”

“You know what I mean. I've seen the way you look at her.”

David looked away, suppressing a smile as he gazed into the flames. He and his brother sat together in the living room next to the sleeping Peter. The child was snoring lightly. The sound was almost music to David's ears.

He sighed. There was no avoiding this conversation with George. Especially after last night. Charlotte was going to be with them for a long time if he had his way. He might as well tell George what he needed to know.

“What do you want to know?”

George shrugged. “Everything. How did you two meet? What's she like? Why do you keep looking at her like she's some angel who dropped out of the sky?”

“Well, Charlotte *did* fall out of the sky,” David pointed out. “Days before I met her I think.”

And he told his brother everything: how he'd heard her singing in the woods and eventually agreed to take her along with him, how they'd gotten attacked, and he'd been injured, causing her to take care of him in the cave. He left out the part about her wrapping her legs around him and moaning into his mouth. George didn't need to hear that.

George's mouth was hanging open by the time David completed his story.

“I see,” he said after a moment of silence. “So ... you love this woman?”

The memory of David's proclamation last night flashed through his mind. He nodded. "I do."

"I can tell. It's been years since I saw that spark in your eyes." His brother was silent for a moment, simply gazing at him. "Take care of this one, okay? I'm sure Alice would be happy to see you moving on. I know I am."

David's head dropped. He would be lying if he said he hadn't felt a bit of guilt when he woke up this morning. Guilt about last night. Guilt about loving this woman who had come into his life and into his heart. Guilt about the prospect of letting another person hold a place in his heart that Alice had once held. But George was right—it *was* time to move on.

And that was exactly what he would do. He would love this woman with everything he had. What they had was special, and he would be a fool not to try and keep it going.

He nodded slowly. "I guess she would be happy."

His brother clapped him on the shoulder, letting out a chuckle that faded almost instantly. "Speaking of this Charlotte, where is she? We haven't gotten a chance to sit down and really *talk*."

"She headed out to get firewood," David replied. He frowned. "She should have returned by now." A thought filled his mind, persisting no matter how hard he tried to dislodge it. "Something isn't right."

"Maybe she got lost," George offered. "Or tripped and fell."

"Let's hope it's that's all it is," David said, shooting to his feet, his eyes widening slowly in alarm. "Because if it isn't, then Charlotte's in grave danger."

## Chapter Fifteen

### *A Christmas Eve Reunion*

Dennis looked worse off than the last time Charlotte had seen him. Dark circles ringed his eyes, and his face was bright red from the cold. His clothes were in tatters. Through the holes in his shirt, she could see multiple small cuts in various stages of healing. His left arm hung limply in a sling he must have fashioned out of a piece of clothing. The only thing recognizable about him was the nasty gleam in his eyes.

“I found you,” he said almost gleefully. “*Again.*”

“Congratulations,” Charlotte told him, desperately forcing herself not to succumb to the terror that washed over her. “You want a cookie for that?”

In a flash, his hand was at her throat. She gasped as something sharp slowly dug into her skin. A knife. His heavy breathing filled her ears, nearly matching hers. He had her backed against a tree trunk. Not much chance of breaking free and taking off, even if one of his arms was in a sling. She’d never make it past a few feet.

“The only reason you’re still alive is because that bear attacked me,” he snapped with a scowl. “But I’m back now, princess. I’m here to finish the job.”

Now that he mentioned it ... “H-how are you still alive? I saw you fall through the ice into the river.”

He grimaced but with a hint of pride in his voice he said, “I broke my arm when I hit the ice, if you must know. That dumb bear...” His lip curled, and it occurred to Charlotte that he had no idea that the bear was David.

He took the knife a little ways from her throat as he recalled what had happened to him. “I could barely swim, but I held my breath and made sure I didn’t sink. It wasn’t long before I found another hole in the ice.”

Amidst her fear, Charlotte suppressed an inward groan. Of *course*, he'd survived. Sam hired only the meanest, toughest men as his bodyguards. And she was pretty sure Dennis was one of his best. The fall and the cold should have killed him, but here he was, battered, bruised, and bloody, but alive.

"Once I got out, I followed you, you know," he went on. "I kept watching you two, hiding between the trees until you got here. That was the easy part. Getting you out here so I could take what's mine ... now, that was the difficult part. But you've made it so much easier now."

The knife was suddenly back against her throat. "Where," he hissed through gritted teeth, "are the fucking diamonds?"

*Inside the house*, Charlotte almost told him. But she knew that would be the wrong answer. Once he knew where to find them, he'd have no use for her. The only thing stopping him from slitting her throat were those jewels, which she'd tucked under the small pile of clothes she'd used as a pillow in Peter's bedroom yesterday evening.

Instead, she asked him the question that had been bothering her ever since their last encounter. "You said Sam never sent you after me. Why were you following me then? You're some sort of sick pervert, aren't you? Tailing me all over the city, watching me from corners, breaking into my house! What was all of that for?"

She expected him to get mad, but his lips curved into a sinister grin that chilled her insides. "Sam never sent me. That fool stopped caring about the divorce after a month. Found himself a girlfriend. But me? I couldn't let it slide. You knew what you were doing, divorcing him so you could get his money."

Despite her panic, she managed a laugh. "Are you kidding me? I caught that bastard cheating on me."

"That's what you all say," Dennis said. "It was an excuse. You just wanted

his money.”

“What does it matter to you anyway? It wasn’t *your* money.”

He brought his face closer, his dark eyes boring into hers. “It happened to me, too. Ex-wife decided to take me for everything I had. Said I was a terrible dad, a terrible husband.” He laughed. “Can you imagine that?”

“I wonder why she’d ever think that.” Charlotte ground her teeth together. This guy was insane!

“I guess we’ll never find out.” His grin broadened, and it dawned on her what he meant.

Her eyes grew wide. “You sick bastard!”

“You know, it gets on my nerves when I see people making off with things they don’t deserve. And if no one’s going to make sure they get what they deserve, then I will.”

“So that’s why you’ve been stalking me.” Her voice quaked. “It’s why you’ve been following me around for months. You broke into my home to steal the diamonds and kill me because you’re still hurting because your wife left you for being a crappy husband and father.”

His eyes blazed with sudden fury. “I’m doing what Sam should have done the second you signed those divorce papers. Who knows? Maybe after I kill you, I’ll go into that cabin and kill whoever’s in there. And once I’m off this mountain, I’ll sell the diamonds and start a life someplace new. Sounds great, doesn’t it?”

She stared back at him through tear-filled eyes, unable to utter a word. This man was delusional at best. He had no idea what was going on and that he was never getting off Frost Mountain, and that made him more dangerous than ever. This man had a mission and he would stop at nothing to achieve his goal.

“The diamonds,” he said. “Give them to me.”

“I—I don’t have them,” she blurted.

His eyes narrowed. “Then maybe I’ll just cut you up and look for them in that cabin, eh?”

“You are not welcome here,” said a deep voice behind him.

Dennis’s eyes widened to the size of plates. He whirled about, just in time for a large hand to grab him by the throat.

“Remember me?” David growled, glaring at the man. A vein throbbed in his temple. “You’ve got some balls coming after us after everything that’s happened.”

There was a blur of movement, and David let go of Dennis with a sharp cry, clutching his forearm. Blood trickled between his fingers. Charlotte lowered her gaze and saw the knife clutched in Dennis’s hand.

“No!” she shouted.

There was a brief moment in which time seemed to freeze, and a part of her sensed that things were about to go from bad to worse. And then it happened. With a roar, David swung his fist at Dennis. He transformed mid-air, white fur covering his growing body, his clothes ripping to shreds in an instant.

A split second later, the massive paw of a polar bear slammed into Dennis’ jaw with a sickening crack. Dennis hit the snow instantly, barely moving for a few seconds and then stirring slowly, a groan escaping his lips. Blood trickled from his nose onto the snow.

With a roar that shook Charlotte’s insides, David pulled Dennis to his feet. For a second, those black claws hovered above Dennis’ head, and she saw the man’s entire body go limp with terror. Then David was gone, lumbering deep into the woods with Dennis in his clutches.

She stared at the spot where they’d just been, struggling to steady her breathing. David’s shredded clothes lay in the snow, which was spattered

with blood. Her breathing faltered for a moment. Was David going to ... kill him?

Before she could dwell any further on that thought, David returned, not as the polar bear but in human form, completely naked but unscathed except for the cut on his forearm. His expression was furious, but his features softened as his gaze rested on her. He hurried forward, wrapping her in his arms.

“Are you hurt?” he asked her, examining her body for any injuries.

She shook her head. “He didn’t get the chance, thanks to you. David, did you ...?”

“Kill him?” His brown eyes darkened. “No, although I should have. I knocked him out and took him deep into the woods. He’s got multiple broken bones now, but he’ll live if the cold doesn’t take him first.”

“Oh.” Somehow, she found that more comforting. “What if he comes back?”

“He won’t. He already knows what’s in store for him if he tries anything else.” He gazed through the woods in the direction he’d just come from. “Besides, I think I broke him.”

Charlotte blinked. “What do you mean?”

“He’s human, like you, and I don’t think he knew or even cared about the supernatural until now. That’s why he’s been so obsessed with that necklace of yours. After he saw me shift, he’ll likely spend the next few days trying not to lose his mind. If he’s lucky, maybe he’ll process what happened today before he freezes to death or gets killed by some angry dragon shifter.”

He was right, she realized. If David hadn’t already explained that magic was real to her at first—and even *that* had taken a while for her to process even though she’d seen the signs—the sight of him transforming from bear to human that night by the river would have left her shaken for days on end. Even now, it was going to take a while to get used to the fact that the man she



was in love with wasn't human.

"Thank you," she said, putting her arms around him. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. You keep saving my life."

His chest rumbled with a chuckle. "I'd do it all over again if I had to."

She pulled back, lifting an eyebrow at him. "Why the heck would you want to go through all that a second time?"

"Because it would be worth the experience of falling in love with you all over again," he said, and kissed her.

When they broke apart, she was gasping for breath.

"Last night," David said, "when I told you I loved you, I meant it."

She found herself blushing to the roots of her hair. "I meant it, too, David. I love you."

He kissed her again, more passionately this time. By the time they pulled apart, his gaze had darkened. "I would take you right here. All you need to do is say the word."

It was a tempting offer, she had to admit. And she didn't need to look down to see the effect their kiss had on him.

"As thrilling as that sounds, I'm not sure now's the right time for it." She gestured pointedly at the bloody snow. "That doesn't exactly set the mood."

He grinned. "In that case, why don't we head back to the cabin? I should probably put on some clothes."

She took one look at his magnificent unclad physique and fought the urge to disagree. "Sure thing. Let's go inside. We've got a lot to do before tomorrow."

Christmas. She still almost couldn't believe that was just right around the corner. Back in her world, she would be throwing a grand party with everyone who was *anyone* showing up. Here, all she had was a cabin with four shifters she was still getting to know. But deep down, Charlotte knew

she wouldn't trade this for anything in the world.

"You're right," David replied. "It's Christmas tomorrow. Peter should be fully healed by then." A troubled expression crossed his face. "I still haven't gotten him a present. Never had the time to figure something out."

"That's okay," Charlotte told him, remembering her conversation with the child. "I'm sure he won't mind not getting anything from you this year. Besides, you saved his life. What greater gift could there be?"

He nodded, giving her a little smile and shrug. "I guess you have a point. Still..."

"Look, you don't need to worry about that. I think I've got the perfect Christmas present for Peter."

His brows furrowed. "What's that?"

"Well, how does ten million dollar's worth of diamonds sound?"

Those brows shot up suddenly. "You're joking, right?"

She shook her head. "I know they're not actually worth any money on Frost Mountain, but the necklace is beautiful. Peter said so himself. He likes it. Why not let him have it?"

David regarded her for a few seconds. Then he threw his head back in laughter.

It was her turn to frown. "What's so funny?"

He cleared his throat, still grinning. "Well, that necklace is the reason you're on this mountain in the first place. You've been holding on to it for so long, and now you're willing to give it away to a child."

"Yeah," she said. "All that matters is it makes Peter happy."

David's eyes twinkled. "Now you see why all I want for Christmas is you?"

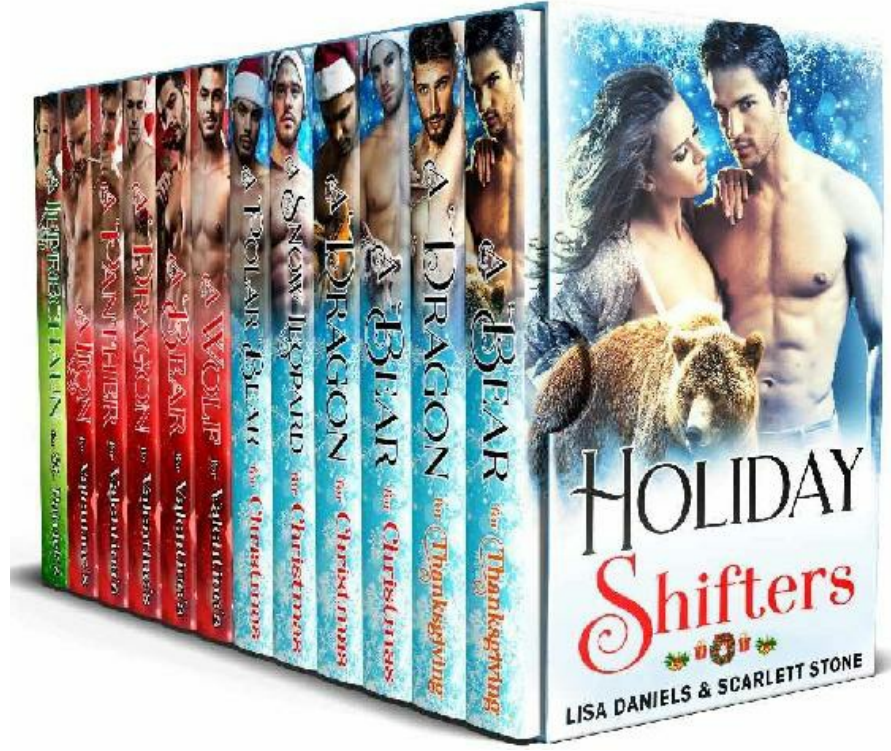
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