

A Blizzard Plane

CRASH

Thanksgiving

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A Blizzard Plane Crash Thanksgiving

Holiday Shifters of Frost Mountain

Book 1

By: Lisa Daniels & Scarlett Stone

Prologue

The gentle tapping on her arm roused Amanda Byrne out of her daydream. Blinking once more at the plane's left wing, she took off her Sony headphones and shifted her gaze from the small window. A groan rose in her throat as she looked at her sister sitting next to her.

“What is it this time, Maddie?” she asked as calmly as she could.

Her sister bit her lip, looking as though she was debating whether to say something or not. She was in her mid-twenties, with a round face and dark eyes. She brushed her auburn hair out of her face and adjusted her glasses. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Amanda shook her head. “That’s the twelfth time you’ve told me that. Give it a rest, will you? Nothing’s going to happen. It’s just a Thanksgiving dinner.”

“With Dad.”

The words sent a current of dread down her spine, but she doubted her sister would pick up on it.

“It’s going to be fine,” Amanda told her.

But in her heart, she knew it wasn’t going to be fine. She hadn’t the slightest doubt that Thanksgiving was going to be a complete disaster, and that was assuming she and her sister

lucked out. Suppressing a shiver at the thought, Amanda glanced out the window again.

They were about 40,000 feet in the air now, flying over Nebraska. At least that was what the captain had said twenty minutes ago before she'd put her headphones back on. The flight from Vegas to Chicago only took a couple of hours, but between Maddie's panic attacks and the rough air they'd been experiencing, it was beginning to feel like much more.

Just another day flying coach.

She gripped the armrest as the plane hit another patch of turbulence and the fasten seatbelt sign flashed on. Coincidentally, that's when the couple sitting two rows behind them chose to restart the argument they'd been having since the plane took off. Amanda sighed and looked to her right. The guy next to them was snoring peacefully, wearing a pair of noise-canceling headphones. Despite the rough air, a ginger-haired flight attendant, who looked like she'd rather be anywhere but on this flight, was lazily pushing a drinks cart down the aisle.

Amanda could relate. She figured half the people on this flight could. If it was up to her, she'd be back in Vegas right now.

No, that wasn't quite right. If she had her way, she wouldn't be working in Vegas at all. It wasn't as if she hated her job. Working as a casino waitress wasn't too bad, although the pay was nothing to write home about—unless you counted tips from the occasional big spender—and neither was the unwanted attention, which made her want to break a few

fingers now and then, but aside from those things, it was an okay job. Besides, she could take care of herself.

Considering where she was coming from, that meant a lot.

The plane trembled slightly again, and a voice groaned, “Bloody Daystar Airlines. I should’ve picked something better.”

Amanda shifted her gaze. It was the woman seated on Maddie’s right. She was slightly older, and in Amanda’s opinion, she didn’t look like she should be flying coach. Between her pearl necklace and diamond earrings barely hidden under her short hair, she looked like she should be sitting in first class. The woman wore a black pantsuit. Amanda lowered her gaze to the purse resting in her lap. Chanel.

What is she doing here?

The flight attendant reached their seat just then and cast a bored glance in her direction. She handed all three women trays, muttered an almost inaudible “Enjoy your meal” and moved on to the next row.

“What the hell?” commented the woman on Maddie’s right. Her face contorted with disgust. “This looks like it’s just been preheated.”

Maddie’s lips twitched, but she gave no response.

“Sounds like you’ve never flown coach before,” Amanda replied, unable to suppress a smirk.

The woman shot her a dirty look. Then she faced her tray again and the disgusted expression was back.

“They could’ve at least prechilled the orange juice,” she grumbled loudly.

Amanda figured she must be one of the rich folks from the casino. She definitely looked and acted the type. Why this woman with the expensive jewelry and designer clothes had decided to fly coach, Amanda had no idea, but she wasn’t about to get involved.

She faced her own tray and suppressed a grimace. Was that supposed to be pasta? Whatever it was, she didn’t have much of an appetite anyway. She closed her hand around the plastic cup of orange juice. The snobbish woman was right; it was tepid at best.

Yuck.

At least she could do something about it.

She stared at the cup, her eyes narrowed slightly in concentration. A second later, frost spread from its base, stopping just short of her fingers. She took a sip. Cold. Perfect. Before she could take another, Maddie nudged her in the arm.

Amanda nearly spilled her drink. “What the hell was that for?”

“I should be asking you,” her sister replied, staring pointedly at the cup. “You shouldn’t be—” she dropped her voice to a whisper “—you shouldn’t be using magic. Especially around all these humans.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. No one saw it.”

“It’s not just that. What would...?” A troubled look filled her eyes. “What would *he* think?”

“Dad’s not here right now. Besides, it’s not like he can punish us anymore. It’s been years, Maddie. You’re a twenty-six-year-old.”

“And you’re two years older. You’re supposed to be making the smarter choices.”

The remark dug into the recesses of Amanda’s mind. Biting back a retort, she took another sip and glanced out the window again, her brows furrowing into a scowl as the memories she’d tried so hard to ignore for the past ten years swam up to the surface.

She and Maddie hadn’t exactly had the best of childhoods. Their mother had passed away before Maddie even learned to spell her name. The “freak accident” that had claimed her life hadn’t claimed her husband’s, and so he’d been left to raise both their daughters himself. As if fate hadn’t been cruel enough. Amanda didn’t like to think about how bad her upbringing at her father’s hands had been. Apart from being a drunk, he despised the fact that his daughters, all that was left of his family, were witches.

For a time, Amanda hadn’t been able to tell whether it was because he was human or simply because he had some personal problem with witches. As she and Maddie grew, he’d become stricter. Using magic became a crime punishable by whatever means he deemed fit. Once he had caught Amanda trying to arrange her clothes by levitating them into her wardrobe and he’d screamed at her until she was beside herself.

“If I ever catch you doing that again,” he’d threatened, his fingers quivering with his rage, “I’ll take off your damn

fingers. That magic killed your mother.”

She and Maddie had avoided practicing magic since then. At least Maddie had. Amanda remembered the nights she'd spent hours levitating and freezing toys under the covers. As long as she didn't get caught, there was no problem using her magic. She'd continued in secret until she turned eighteen and decided she didn't need to live under the same roof as the man who made her life a living hell.

She'd been down and out, bouncing from odd job to odd job. She'd kept in touch with Maddie, partly out of guilt for leaving her sister behind, mostly because she needed to maintain a connection with the one person in her life who cared about her. College wasn't an option for Amanda, but that was the least of her concerns. After a couple of years working in an eatery, she'd decided to leave Chicago in search of greener pastures.

Forget all that crap motivational speakers loved to say—no one ever made it big in the big cities with nothing but a hundred bucks and a burning desire to succeed. Life in Vegas was hell for the first six months. And then it had gotten even worse. Between jerk boyfriends and annoying employers who didn't give a damn about burnout, it had taken her years to secure something steady for herself. She'd managed to land a job in a casino and things had started to look up since then.

Not that they couldn't be better. Unlike her sister, Maddie had been stuck at home with their father, who'd insisted that she complete her education. Truth be told, she'd turned out a lot better than Amanda had. Working as an accountant sounded pretty neat compared to waitressing at least. But

when she considered the woman sitting right next to her, Amanda couldn't help wondering if her sister had turned out so great.

Neither woman wanted to be in Chicago this Thanksgiving. But *he'd* insisted. After being away from their dad for so long, the thought of having dinner with him was unnerving, and she could tell that Maddie dreaded it even more. Amanda sat up straighter, her waist straining slightly against the seatbelt.

It's just a Thanksgiving dinner, she repeated silently. Nothing's going to happen. And if it does... I'll handle it.

She didn't consider herself a top-tier witch. Her magic was good enough for an occasional party trick, plus it had gotten her out of a rough patch or two, but beyond that, she wouldn't describe herself as powerful. Living under her father's roof and having to navigate the world by herself early on hadn't given her much of an opportunity to practice magic. Still, it was something. Whatever happened in Chicago, she and Maddie would be fine. She knew that much.

But that didn't make her any less uneasy.

"Who's going to be there?" she murmured.

"Huh?"

Amanda turned to face her sister. "Who's going to be at the dinner? Any other relatives?"

Maddie shrugged, frowning at her orange juice. "No one we care about, that's for sure."

"Want some ice in your drink?"

Maddie shot her an affronted look.

Amanda smirked. “It’s just a bit of magic. Comes in pretty handy when you serve old tycoons in a casino for a living.”

Her sister harumphed but said nothing else. Downing the rest of her orange juice, Amanda slipped her headphones back over her ears, leaning back against the headrest. The ever-haunting voice of Lana Del Rey warbled in her ears, and she closed her eyes, grateful for the opportunity to be alone with the music and nothing else except the occasional wistful thought that crossed her mind.

This was one of those times when all she wanted was to be free of everything. Her obligations, her *life* as she knew it. She could use something... different, something that didn’t belong to the string of unfortunate events she’d come to know as her life like a vacation to a faraway island with a dark, mysterious hunk of a man...

But then the plane shuddered again, harder this time, snapping her out of her reverie and the headphones shifted just slightly enough for her to hear the gasps rippling through the cabin. Her eyes flickered open just as another tremor rocked the plane. The lights in the cabin flickered dangerously.

Her grip tightened on the armrests.

“Amanda,” Maddie half-gasped, half-whispered. “What the heck is going on?”

The lights flickered some more. Unable to come up with a response, Amanda gazed around the plane. Panic had swept over the cabin like a tidal wave. Passengers were yelling at one another; some were uttering hushed prayers. A couple of people started to stand, ignoring the flight attendant’s instructions to remain seated and stay calm.

“Everyone stay put,” the flight attendant said as loudly as she could over the growing uproar. “It’s only turbulence—oh!”

Another sudden jerk knocked the woman off balance, and she went down in the aisle.

A sudden beeping filled the cabin. Oxygen masks dropped in front of the passengers; Amanda’s dangled before her face, but she was too panicked to pay it any attention.

Her heart pounding in her chest, Amanda glanced out the window to see what the hell was happening. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of snow-covered peaks. She could’ve sworn they were tens of thousands of feet above ground level. Now they were flying low over a mountain, and it seemed they were descending by the second. One thing was for sure: This wasn’t Nebraska.

Where were they?

A sudden movement caught her eye. The air just outside the plane seemed to ripple.

What the—?

There was a sudden explosion and flames streaked past the window. The plane dipped even further, teetering left.

“We just lost a wing!” cried one of the passengers.

She felt a hand clutch hers. Maddie’s. Someone was screaming in her ears, but Amanda couldn’t tell whether it was her sister’s voice or hers. Her mind raced with a series of thoughts that led to the same grim, foreboding conclusion: They were all about to die.

The sharp throb of panic filled her chest and she gazed around with wide eyes, unsure of what to do next. Around her, some passengers were bracing themselves for the crash. Another explosion rocked the plane, and the screams grew deafening. If she didn't know any better, she might have thought this was some terrorist attack. It would explain the sudden explosions.

But it didn't explain what was going on outside.

"Maddie..." she heard herself saying. "Maddie, I—"

Her words were drowned out by a deep, mournful groan as the metal body of the plane began to cave in from the pressure of their fall. And then, quite suddenly, the cabin broke apart.

Chapter One

Fur, Teeth, and Claws

The first thing Amanda registered was that she was falling. A swooping sensation filled her gut and grew by the second as she plummeted, still strapped in her seat, toward the mountain below. She was a couple of thousand feet in the air and dropping like an anchor. The snowy peaks swung in and out of her vision, drawing nearer, promising certain death on impact.

Oh, God, I don't wanna die!

Being flattened like a pancake wasn't how she'd pictured her Thanksgiving turning out, but here she was. The wind roared in her ears and threatened to burst her eardrums as the passenger seat spun through the air. She vaguely registered a hand still clutching hers on the armrest. Despite the cabin's explosion, the plane seats were still fused together. She, Maddie, and the other woman were hurtling to their deaths, and there was nothing they could do but scream as the mountain loomed closer.

Somewhere amidst her panic, a thought crept into her mind:
I'm a witch.

A tiny flutter of hope arose in her chest. There was no telling whether her magic was strong enough to save them, but if there was a chance she or Maddie could survive the crash, she had to take it.

You can do it, she told herself.

It was difficult to comprehend her own thoughts with the freezing wind in her ears. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on slowing their fall, but when she reopened them, they seemed to be falling even faster. How much longer before they all hit the mountain? Less than a minute, she figured. Less than a minute till her entire life, all her experiences, amounted to absolutely nothing.

They were close enough that she caught glimpses of snow-covered trees scattered across the mountain. And what looked like... houses? Whatever thoughts came to mind were instantly swept aside by hysteria. A single concept remained prominent, unyielding, in her stream of consciousness—self-preservation.

Now wasn't the time to hope for some deus ex machina. If she didn't do something right now, she and her companions were going to die. And if she did do something... well, it wasn't like their safety was guaranteed either.

Still, she had to try.

Twenty seconds until you die, Amanda.

Desperation surged through her and a hoarse scream burned her throat. The plane seats gave a collective shudder and a force smacked through her gut.

No!

The singular thought echoed through her consciousness.

Then she and her companions crashed into the mountain and everything went dark.

Her eyes flickered open and were all at once blinded with light. She closed them and winced, blinking as she reopened them. Bright sunlight streaked through the treetops into her line of vision, making it almost impossible to focus on anything. All she knew was that she was on her back, half-blanketed in snow.

And she was alive.

Amanda started to sit up, suppressing a groan as a dull ache filled her body, assuring her that she was not dreaming. The seatbelt halted her movement, and when she tried to unbuckle it, she discovered it was jammed. Not a problem. Nothing a bit of magic couldn't fix. She concentrated for a moment and burned a hole in the fabric until the seatbelt snapped, releasing her. She flopped out of her seat onto the snow, suddenly aware of how weak her body was.

“Ugh,” she groaned, disoriented. She started to get up, but her body could barely support its own weight. Plummeting toward certain death sure could do that to you. Between the crash and the cold that seeped into her bones, it was a wonder she was still alive.

Except... she was.

Am I the only survivor?

The thought raced through her mind like an electric current, filling her with alarm. She jerked to her feet, ignoring her body's protests, and turned to face her companions. Both Maddie and the other woman were still strapped to their seats, their eyes closed, their hair scattered in the snow. Her heart leaped to her throat and she rushed toward her sister, praying desperately for her to be alive.

The sight of Maddie's chest heaving slightly filled Amanda with a wave of relief. Her sister was unconscious, with a few shallow cuts on her cheek, but otherwise, she seemed fine. Feeling a surge of gratitude, she moved to the other woman, who was also breathing.

They were all alive. Amanda had been certain the crash would be their end, but here they were. Her head throbbed, and she felt as though she might drop at any second, but she'd survived. That meant her magic must have worked. At least a little.

She let her gaze drift from her companions to the grooves in the snow the plane seats must have made as they skidded across the mountain before coming to a stop. *Snow*. But where were they? One minute, they'd been flying over Nebraska. Wherever this was, it didn't look like America. Not even at this time of year. They might as well have crashed into Mount Everest.

Amanda's eyes darted around, carefully taking in her surroundings. The mountain they'd crashed into was massive, and that was putting it mildly. In the distance, she counted a dozen peaks, and they were nowhere near the top of the one they were on; it reached the clouds. When she gazed southward, the bottom was also impossible to make out. All she could see were snowy pines and rocks scattered about. As far as the eye could see, which wasn't far, there were no other signs of life.

Are there other survivors?

A shudder raced through her as she thought of the predicament she and the others faced. Her head throbbed with

questions. Where in the world were they? This wasn't Nebraska—she knew that much already. But it also didn't look like anywhere between Vegas and Chicago. Had the plane somehow flown off course?

No, that wasn't it. The memory of what she'd seen outside the plane window slowly returned: those ripples in the air like when you're skipping stones in the water. With the prospect of death as the plane plummeted, she hadn't paid much attention to it, but now her gut tightened with the realization of what might have caused the crash.

Magic.

That was the only explanation. It had to have been some sort of supernatural occurrence. They'd been transported maybe halfway across the world by accident. No wonder the plane had come apart.

They needed help. They might have survived the crash, but she doubted they'd last long before they froze to death. And that was not taking into account other threats that might be lurking in the mountains. Maybe she should try to head down the mountain to find help.

Hugging her arms around her body, she took a few steps through the snow, then looked at the two women still strapped in their seats. Her gaze landed on her smartphone and headphones lying half-buried in the snow. Feeling a spark of hope, she rushed toward the devices. The headphones had been crushed almost beyond recognition, but other than a few cracks in the screen, the phone looked fine. She switched it on, hoping to be able to call someone, *anyone*. But the screen

displayed two words that sent her hopes spiraling: NO SIGNAL.

Great. She was stuck on a mountainside in the middle of nowhere, with little hope of being rescued before turning into a human Popsicle.

Pain pulsated through her skull and her temples throbbed but at the same time, she remembered something else. Before the plane went down, she was pretty sure she'd spied a house or two somewhere on the mountain unless she'd imagined them while struggling for survival. She felt a flicker of optimism surge through her. Maybe the mountain wasn't as deserted as it looked. If she could locate those houses or huts or whatever they were, maybe there would be people, and that meant there might be hope for them after all.

Should she go in search of those houses now? Amanda bit her lip, staring at her companions. No, it wouldn't be right to leave the two of them here alone in their condition. She should wait for them to regain consciousness and then they could go and try to find help.

Her head swam, and she tried to steady herself. She had no idea what she'd done to protect them from dying in the crash—a protective barrier or a wind cushion to slow their fall maybe—but she was pretty sure she had a concussion.

She started to settle herself in the snow, hoping to rest her head for a minute. And that was when she heard a low, menacing growl come from behind her. And then another louder one. Startled, Amanda turned just in time to see three—no, *four*—wolves step out of the trees, inching their way through the snow toward her.

“Shit,” she muttered.

They were the largest wolves she’d ever seen. They had black fur that was covered with specks of snow. Their dark eyes shone with hunger and they were locked on Amanda and the two unconscious women.

Amanda swallowed. She should have known their luck wouldn’t hold out. Her gaze remained fixed on the four wolves. Was that all they were? Or could they be... shifters?

It didn’t matter. They looked like they were about to attack and kill them. Now would be a good time for the others to wake up.

“Stay back!” she shouted desperately. Her voice came out as little more than a croak. She edged back as the wolves advanced; they snarled and she nearly stumbled over her companions. “Don’t come any closer!”

Her words did not seem to affect the wolves. Amanda didn’t blame them. Her words sounded more like a plea than a threat. Her body began to tremble uncontrollably. She couldn’t die now. Not like this. Not after everything she’d already been through.

One of the wolves stepped ahead of the others, apparently more eager to finish her off than the rest of the pack. As it drew closer, she caught a glimpse of its razor-sharp teeth, which she knew could rip her apart in seconds.

“I said, get *back!*”

With a sudden burst of energy, she thrust her arms toward the wolf, sending the creature sailing into the air until it landed a few feet behind the pack. It sprang to its feet immediately,

snarling with what appeared to be rage. But it didn't come at her again, nor did the rest of the pack. They kept their distance, their gazes fixed on her for a few more seconds before turning and disappearing into the woods.

Amanda sighed deeply. They weren't alone on this mountain after all. She was willing to bet those weren't ordinary wolves either. Why she found that thought more unsettling than reassuring, she wasn't sure.

She needed to rouse Maddie and the other woman. Together, they had to figure out what to do. But as she reached down to touch Maddie's shoulder, she felt the last of her strength leave her and she collapsed in the snow. As she faded into unconsciousness a single thought crossed her mind: *Wake up, Maddie. We have to find help.*

Amanda had no idea how long she was out, but when she opened her eyes and looked around, Maddie and the other woman were gone and a man was standing over her.

Chapter Two

The Man With the Grey Eyes

Amanda's instincts spun into overdrive, screaming at her to run, to fight, to do *something*. With a cry, she struck out, hoping to throw the man backward with her magic, but the effort nearly knocked her out. The man stared down at her, his brows raised in curiosity. Standing close behind him were a couple of other men, each with a wary expression on his face.

“Relax,” the man told her. “You’re only going to end up hurting yourself. We’re not here to harm you.”

She tore her gaze away from his face long enough to regard the empty plane seats in the snow. When she passed out, Maddie and the other woman had been strapped in, completely unconscious. Now they were nowhere to be seen. The setting sun cast a faint orange glow on the snow around the seats. She must have been out for a couple of hours at least.

Amanda forced herself to look up at the man standing over her. Even from where she lay, she could tell he was rather tall. His broad shoulders blocked most of the sunlight, casting him in half-shadow, but she could see his face clearly. He was handsome, with short dark hair and a trimmed beard. A pair of grey, intelligent eyes gazed into hers. The man had on some sort of fur coat over a black shirt. Some sort of weapon was half-slung over his shoulder.

As she stared at him, a series of thoughts swam through her mind in rapid succession. The man reminded her of a slightly

younger, more rugged version of Gerard Butler. A part of her was starting to wonder if she wasn't imagining seeing him.

She didn't think he had been on the plane. He seemed too calm, too at home in this place to be a stranger in it.

He belongs here.

The realization struck her like a lightning bolt. She scrambled back as far as she could in the freezing snow, her eyes wide with fright. "Y-you!" she gasped. "You're a wolf shifter!"

The man regarded her for a moment. Amanda thought she saw him nod. Her gaze flickered toward the other men. Were they all part of the pack that had almost attacked her earlier?

"You came back for me," she whispered.

At this, the man arched an eyebrow, and she saw confusion flicker across his face. "What are you talking about?"

"Where's my sister?" Amanda demanded, her trepidation slowly being replaced by anger. She gestured at the empty seats. "What did you do to her?"

The man managed to look even more confused. He shouldered his weapon and took a tentative step toward her. "Look, you've been in a plane crash. You need help, even with your... powers." He shot her a pointed look.

What was he getting at?

"My sister," she said again as she struggled to her feet. "Where is she?"

"I have no idea," he replied. "You were the only one here when we found you. But you're not going to be around for

much longer if you don't let us get you inside."

He looked mildly frustrated, but there was no hostility in his eyes. Amanda started to wonder whether these men were the wolves who'd tried to attack her earlier. But then another thought crossed her mind. If these men had no idea what had happened to Maddie and the other woman, then there was a serious problem. Could someone else have come by and taken them?

Amanda's heart thudded in her chest. "I need to find my sister," she said. "Something must have happened to her."

What if she's dead?

"You're in no state to go looking for anyone," the man told her evenly.

He was right. Her body ached all over like she'd been lugging rocks up the mountain. The cold had sunk deep into her bones, and each time she moved she wanted to cry out in pain. But she couldn't rest while Maddie was still missing.

"I need to find my sister," she said, squaring her shoulders. "I can't do nothing while she may be eaten by wolves. Don't try to stop me."

She turned and began walking downhill, but she had only taken a few steps when she felt her knees start to buckle unable to support her any longer.

Oh, crap!

She stumbled forward, her vision dimming as the sky and the snow traded places. This time, two strong arms caught her before her head hit the ground.

Chapter Three

A Witch on Frost Mountain

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Micah Whitehound muttered.

The woman looked half-dead. Lying limp in his arms, she was a pitiful sight. Her auburn hair was tousled and covered with flecks of snow and her eyebrows were turning white from the cold. Her pale skin was almost as white as the snow and her lips were parted ever so slightly, letting out shuddering breaths every half minute or so.

Even injured and half-frozen, the woman in his arms was beautiful. Micah couldn’t help but notice that, and she was no ordinary woman. That much he already knew.

He had to admit, his day had been pretty uneventful until he’d found her. He was a hunter, one of the best on Frost Mountain—according to his pack. The same pack that had spent hours scouring the woods this morning, hoping to catch a goat or some other animal they could bring back to the village. For days on end, they’d hunted and had caught nothing. His companion and best friend, Daniel, had suggested they go farther down the mountain to hunt for whatever they might find. And then they’d witnessed the crash.

He and the other hunters from his pack had been trudging up Frost Mountain, headed back to their village, when the passenger plane materialized high above them and promptly burst apart, its fiery compartments scattering in multiple directions all over the mountain. It had been a gruesome sight.

He and the other men had rushed to the crash site in hopes of finding anyone they could save. For hours, they had searched, stumbling across roasted, mangled corpses and bits of the wreckage. The more they searched, the less hope they had of finding anyone alive. And then they had found... her.

Micah had suspected there was something unusual about this woman who'd managed to survive the crash without losing as much as a limb. And that was even *before* she'd tried to attack him. Now he knew what she was, and he had a pretty good idea why she was still alive.

The thought made his jaw tighten. *This can't be good.*

Behind him, he heard a footfall and turned slowly to see Daniel coming toward him, the mix of emotions on his face reflecting the thoughts spinning through Micah's mind.

"We need to get her back to the village," he told Daniel. "If we get her back there in time, my mother can still help her."

Daniel looked at him as though he'd lost his marbles. "Tell me you're kidding. You want to bring *her* back with us?"

"I know it looks bad, Daniel, but she's the only survivor we've found in hours. Are we just going to leave her here to die in the cold?"

Daniel's jaw clenched. "You know what she is, right?"

Micah stared back at him for a moment. Then he nodded.

A witch.

That was what this woman was. It made perfect sense. How else could she have crash-landed with escaped death without so much as a lost finger? Even a shifter would have had

serious injuries. Instead, she mostly seemed faint and drained of energy like her magic had taken a toll on her.

But that wasn't even the issue, and he knew it. Bringing a witch back to the village... sounded like a terrible idea. One of the worst ideas he'd come up with in years.

He glanced up at the sky, half-expecting some other plane to breach the invisible barrier that had kept everyone here for so long. The last time a witch had landed here... it hadn't ended well.

History won't repeat itself, Micah thought, trying to reassure himself.

"She's not a threat," he said, clearing his throat. "Not yet, at least."

The look on Daniel's face told Micah he was itching to say something else, but the other man simply nodded. He and Micah had been close since childhood, but there was a limit to how much Daniel was willing to go along with, even though Micah was the alpha.

And it wasn't like Micah didn't have a point. This woman didn't look like she would be trouble. All she cared about was finding her sister.

I'm not going to sit here and wait for her to be eaten by wolves, she'd said. Micah frowned at the memory. She'd also said, *You came back for me*.

It hadn't occurred to him earlier, but now the meaning of her words dawned on him: She'd been attacked by wolves already. No wonder she'd seemed so unsettled when she

realized what he was. Some other pack had tried to kill her. Definitely not his. And not wolves from his village either.

A familiar voice arose from the depths of his memory. *Come here, little nephew. I'll make this quick. Quick and painless.*

A series of thuds filled his chest, and the woman in his arms suddenly seemed twice as heavy. He gazed about, peering into the distance, half-expecting to see the wolves lurking somewhere between the pines or behind a rock. Nothing. This part of the mountain was deathly quiet. It reminded him that there had been no game lately. Another failed hunt. But clearly, his pack hadn't been the only one hunting.

His discomfort must have reflected on his face because his friend suddenly stepped closer. "What is it?"

"The Blackclaw clan—they've been here."

Daniel's eyebrows rose slowly at the implication of Micah's statement. "How can you be sure?"

He stared down at the unconscious woman. "She mentioned something about wolves. I think she was attacked before we got here."

"And you think it was the Blackclaws because...?"

"Who else would do such a thing?"

Realization seemed to cross the other man's face. His expression darkened. "But she's still alive. You know what that means, right?"

Micah felt the stab of pain in his chest again. He nodded. "She must have defended herself with magic."

“That’s the only reason those bastards would’ve backed off instead of ripping her apart on the spot. They know what she is, too. This isn’t good, Micah.”

Micah said nothing. His mind was already racing, each thought worse than the last. If the Blackclaw clan already knew there was a witch on Frost Mountain, it wouldn’t be long before there was trouble. And, therefore, bringing this witch back to their village was probably the worst thing he could do. Daniel was right. This woman was dangerous.

But he couldn’t just leave her here to die, could he? Witch or not, she was a plane crash survivor with no clue where she was or the slightest idea that she’d taken a one-way trip to a mountain crawling with more threats than she’d ever imagined.

She was in for the shock of her life.

He stared into the woman’s face. For someone with such delicate, pretty features, she’d already proven to be quite a fighter. Not even a plane crash had been enough to keep her down. His lips twitched in a smile. A small part of him wondered what her name was and what her marital status was.

He would satisfy his curiosity once she was conscious again. First, he needed to make sure she didn’t die in his arms. He turned from Daniel to the other men. “Let’s get the hell out of here,” he said. “My mother is not going to be happy about this.”

Chapter Four

A Dangerous Decision

Frost Mountain was a steep, rocky, desolate peak. It stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions, a snowy mass studded with trees, defined by its slopes and promontories.

The peak of the mountain remained out of sight, hidden in the clouds. The base of the mountain was a different story. In all of his thirty years, no matter how far he wandered, Micah had never reached the base. So, for him, it was as though the base didn't exist.

Micah knew that wasn't the case. It was all magic. Dark, powerful magic that had existed for centuries.

Frost Mountain was the only place he'd ever known. He had been born and raised here, in the cold, away from the world he should have been a part of, the world *she* was from.

In his arms, the woman stirred a little. Micah felt his heartbeat quicken. She wasn't the first survivor he'd rescued from a plane crash, but she was different. Looking at her, amidst the troubling thoughts that tore at his consciousness, he felt a surge of something else: *hope*.

Don't get ahead of yourself, he chided himself. *You don't know anything for sure.*

He discarded the thought. There was more to concern himself with anyway. This woman's arrival had guaranteed that. Trouble was on the way.

Trudging downhill next to him, Daniel tightened his grip on the hunting knives strapped to his waist. His face was set in a scowl, and Micah didn't have to ask to know what was going through his mind: Their hunting outing had been a complete disaster. For hours, they had scoured the woods, expecting to catch one or two animals to bring back to the village. Instead, they were bringing back a witch.

Happy Thanksgiving.

It *was* Thanksgiving, wasn't it? Melanie, one of the human villagers, had said so at least. That human was resourceful in more ways than one.

Twenty minutes later, after making a deliberate trip through the woods in case there was any game in sight, they arrived at the village.

"Home, sweet home," Daniel muttered with a sigh.

Aneira. The word resounded in Micah's head. With barely fifty inhabitants, the village wasn't a very large one. Less than two dozen cabins stood in a semicircle around a small campfire. Behind the cabins, slowly being silhouetted as nightfall drew nearer, stood a scattered row of trees.

This village was home. In all of Frost Mountain, nowhere else felt quite so safe, so familiar. This was where his family was. This was where his responsibility lay.

He knew the villagers would stare at him even as he entered the village. As expected, murmurs rippled through the air as Micah and his men drew nearer. It was obvious they were wondering about the identity of the woman he was carrying in his arms.

A few villagers greeted him as he passed by, but he paid them little notice, walking straight to one of the middle cabins. He climbed the porch steps and gave the door a nudge with his foot, letting out an audible sigh of gratitude when it swung open. He stepped sideways into the cabin, careful not to bang the woman's head on the doorframe.

The interior of the cabin was furnished simply, with a fur rug, some crudely made furniture, and shuttered windows to keep out the cold. A couple of doors led to small bedrooms. The doors were half-shut, illuminated by the flickering flames of the wood-burning fireplace.

“Oh, you're back. Hope you caught something today. Melanie's been talking about having a nice, big dinner for Thanksgiving. I think it's unnecessary and... what in the world is going on?”

Sitting by the fire, stirring food in a pot, was a wiry older woman in brown clothing. Her greying hair was pulled into a short ponytail. She blinked up at him, her grey eyes widening slightly with confusion.

“Micah?” Theresa Whitehound rose to her feet, the pot forgotten. “Who's this?”

“Didn't you hear the plane crash? She's one of the passengers.” He set the unconscious woman next to the fireplace. “I brought her back as soon as I could. Can you help her?”

Theresa looked concerned. It was an expression Micah was used to seeing on his mother's face like she was analyzing the possibilities of every situation.

For some time, he'd wondered if she had been like that before he was born...

"That depends. She looks like she's lucky to still be breathing. She'll need a few days' rest at least. By a fire, too—her temperature is too low." She dropped to a crouch next to the woman. "Where did you say you found her?"

"Next to a plane seat."

"On the plane?"

"I didn't see the plane."

Theresa's eyes widened. She laid a hand on the unconscious woman's wrist as though checking to make sure she had a pulse. "How the heck did a human crash-land on a mountain in a seat and survive? That's impossible."

Micah shook his head. "She's not a human."

"She must be fae, then. That makes sense."

"No. And she's not a shifter either."

The older woman's eyes suddenly narrowed slightly. "Then is she...?"

"A witch."

A few seconds passed in pregnant silence. Confusion flickered across Theresa's face followed by disbelief and then realization. With a sudden gasp, she scrambled back from the unconscious woman as though she'd been burned.

"A *witch*?" she almost shrieked. "You brought a witch to our village?"

Micah held up his hands to placate her. “Look, I can explain —”

She raised a finger to silence him. “How could you do something so reckless? You’re putting all of us in danger. Have you already forgotten what happened the last time a witch showed up on Frost Mountain?”

He didn’t need the reminder. It had been over a decade ago, but he’d been old enough then to understand the horror. It might as well have happened yesterday.

“I know what you mean,” he pressed, “but I couldn’t have just let her die. I had to make a choice, and this was it.”

“Well, it seems you made the wrong choice.”

He stared down at the unconscious woman. “She’s... she seems different. This isn’t like the last time.”

His mother raised an eyebrow. “And you know this... how?”

“All she wants is to find her sister.” It sounded even more pathetic when he said it. “Look, when I found her, she’d already been attacked by other wolves. I’m guessing Blackclaw.”

For a moment, he thought he saw terror flash across Theresa’s face. She shot back to her feet, staring at him in disbelief. “Blackclaw? As in—”

“As in Adrian’s clan, yes,” he said, nodding. “Before she passed out, she told me she got attacked by a pack of wolves. I think she defended herself.”

“With magic.” His mother was barely in her fifties, but suddenly she looked twenty years older. “Which means they already know about this witch. And you brought her right here, into the same village they’ve been hoping to attack for years.”

When she put it like that, it did sound like he’d made a stupid decision. Adrian Blackclaw had resented the Whitehound clan for as long as Micah could remember. That man would look for whatever excuse he could to wipe out Aneira. Between his clan’s threats and occasional attacks, Blackclaw had become a name to be feared by many, wolf shifter or otherwise. Even bear shifters on Frost Mountain avoided his clan whenever they could. Even Micah avoided the Blackclaws as if they weren’t his family, too. As though Adrian weren’t his—

“You’re the alpha wolf of this clan, Micah,” his mother said, interrupting his thoughts. “You’ve been leading us for the past five years. You’re supposed to make wise decisions, not put us in danger.”

His jaw clenched. “What if she could help us?” He gestured vaguely about him. “A witch started all of this, right? Maybe she could end it.”

“That’s exactly what everyone thought the last time a witch was here,” Theresa pointed out. “No one leaves Frost Mountain. It’s time we accepted that. As alpha, you have a responsibility to the people of this village. Everyone here looks up to you, Micah. Do you have any idea what that means? They respect you, despite... despite...”

She trailed off, but he already knew what she was going to say. *Even though you're also from an enemy clan.* That fact had stuck with him ever since he was brought to this village. It would follow him to his grave.

His mother looked as though she was considering reprimanding him some more. Instead, she sighed. She pointed at the witch lying between them. "I'll do my best to speed her recovery. I just hope you know what you're doing, son."

Without another word, she turned and left the room, no doubt to gather whatever healing materials she might need. In her absence, Micah regarded the woman lying at his feet. Her hair was fanned out around her head; with her eyes closed, and her chest heaving slightly, she looked even more delicate.

She's beautiful.

And she was supposed to be a threat to the village, to everyone on the mountain?

I hope you know what you're doing, Theresa said.

I hope so, too.

He'd already put his village in trouble. Things were about to get worse.

Chapter Five

“She’s Your Problem Now”

Amanda opened her eyes. She sat leaning back and she could see the blue sky and a fluffy band of cumulus clouds. The clouds seemed to be moving or perhaps she was, her view constantly shifting ever so slightly. *Weird*. A sudden flicker of light brought the glass pane before her into clearer focus.

“You’re awake,” said a familiar voice next to her. “I was beginning to think you’d sleep throughout the flight.”

She turned her gaze from the window. Seated next to her, Maddie was smiling. Her eyebrows immediately knit with concern. “Are you okay, Amanda? You don’t look so great. Don’t tell me you had a nightmare. I’m the one who usually hates flying, remember?”

A nightmare? Amanda stared around at the other passengers in the passenger cabin, then back at her sister, struggling to come up with a response. “Huh?”

Maddie’s smile grew an inch wider. “Relax. It’s just a Thanksgiving dinner. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

Then a tremor rocked the plane and it burst apart, sending them both plummeting toward the rocks jutting out of the snow.

And Amanda opened her eyes. This time for real.

She blinked a few times, trying to adjust to the dim light filtering through a window. She caught sight of wooden walls and the flicker of a dying fire. A dark figure stood over her. It looked like a woman.

“Maddie?” she croaked.

Before she could turn to look directly at her, everything went dark again.

She drifted in and out of consciousness a few more times. The next time she opened her eyes, the semidarkness was gone. It was daytime, although the windows were still closed. She lay flat on her back, still hearing the steady crackling of a fire. This time, she managed to turn her head. She was in a cabin. There were some chairs and a table, and she was lying next to a fireplace.

“Where am I...?”

She heard the sound of footsteps, and she glanced up in time to see a figure step into the room. It was a middle-aged woman. The woman pushed her graying hair out of her face as she came near. She paused mid-step, her grey eyes locked on Amanda’s. A series of emotions crossed her face—shock, relief, and... was that indignation?

The woman pursed her lips and dropped to her knees next to her, mechanically checking her vitals. “You’ve been out for three days, but you seem fine now.”

Amanda couldn’t help but notice that she didn’t sound too pleased. She decided not to mention it. Instead, she gazed around, frowning. “Where am I? What happened?”

Then the memories came rushing back: the ripple outside the plane's window; Maddie grabbing her hand just before the plane burst apart; their seats tumbling through the air toward the mountain that should not have been there; wolves attacking... and a man standing over her. A man with grey eyes.

She jerked into a sitting position. "Maddie. Where is she? Where is my sister?"

The woman frowned. "You kept muttering that name in your sleep. I've no idea where your sister is. You're the only one Micah brought back to the village."

Village? If Amanda remembered correctly, she'd crashed onto a mountain. She remembered spotting a couple of buildings before the plane crashed, but a village? Perhaps there were more people on this mountain than she'd realized.

Despite feeling groggy, she was already considering the possibility that maybe someone else had found Maddie. Or maybe something else had happened to her sister. She had been asleep for three days, according to this woman. Who knew what could have happened?

Just then, the door swung open affording Amanda a glimpse of the snow outside, and someone stepped into the cabin. It was a man wearing a coat. She recognized him instantly—this was the guy who'd been standing over her the other evening. He must have carried her here. His grey gaze locked on her for a few seconds and Amanda felt her gut clench.

"You're awake," he said, and his lips curved into a fleeting grin. "Good. I was getting worried."

“She’s your problem now,” said the older woman, and Amanda couldn’t help wondering if the man and woman were related. “My work here is done. Just do your job as alpha and make sure she doesn’t kill us all.”

With a scowl in Amanda’s direction, she got up and walked past the man and out of the cabin.

The man stepped closer to Amanda. “Sorry about that. That was my mother, Theresa. She’s... well, never mind. I’m just glad you’re better. You’re in my village, Aneira. I’m Micah. What’s your name?”

Amanda regarded him for a moment. Even with all those clothes on, she could tell he was well-built. Definitely alpha-like.

“Amanda.”

The smile returned. “It’s nice to meet you, Amanda. We’re not going to hurt you, I promise. I’m sure you’ve got a lot of questions. I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

Amanda did have questions, like where was she and why was there so much snow in November? And how had they ended up here when they’d been flying over Nebraska just seconds before the crash? And why had his mother looked at her like she was a pet rodent someone had asked her to babysit? But before the answers to those questions she had a burning desire to know one thing: “Where is my sister, Maddie?”

Micah grimaced.

He even looks attractive when he grimaces, Amanda thought.

She gave herself a swift mental kick.

“I’m sorry about your sister,” he told her. “We’ll look for her soon. For now, I just need you to stay calm—”

“You can’t expect me to stay calm when my sister is missing!” She shot to her feet in an instant, brushing past him. “We both landed on this freakin’ mountain. If you’re not going to help me find her right now, I’ll do it myself.”

Her stomach growled a little, and he lifted an eyebrow. She needed to eat something and she needed more rest. But she had bigger concerns.

She stared at Micah as though daring him to try to stop her. When he made no move to block her path, she brushed past him and stepped out of the cabin; the porch steps creaked under her weight, snow crunching beneath her heel. Suddenly it dawned on her that she had no shoes on. The cold ran up her legs until her whole body was shivering.

Theresa must have taken her shoes off her while she was unconscious. It took Amanda a moment to realize she was wearing a different set of clothes as well. A blue shirt and a pair of grey pants. Barely enough to shield her from the cold that was already whipping her skin, teasing her cheeks with a slight burn.

It wasn’t until she looked up that she took in her surroundings. So *this* was the village. There were other cabins just like the one she’d been sleeping in. All were arranged in a large semicircle. In the center of the small village was a blackened spot in the snow—the remnants of what must have been a small campfire. Beyond the cabins was an expanse of snow, beyond which was a thicket of pine trees.

But that wasn't all there was to see.

There were other people in the village. They'd been moving about, some seated on porch steps, others walking about and discussing among themselves, but they'd all stopped and were now staring in her direction.

Amanda thought she caught a few murmurs of "witch" here and there. A couple of wolves sat amidst the people, watching her just as intently. They had metallic-grey fur, different from the wolves that had attacked her the other day, but that didn't make the sight of them any less unnerving.

Was that a growl she just heard?

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a slender blonde woman in a fur-lined parka leaning against the side of one of the cabins, arms folded across her chest. The woman caught her eye, and her lips twitched.

What *was* this place? Who were all these people? Other wolf shifters?

It didn't matter. It wasn't like she was planning to stay here anyway. Once she got Maddie, they'd find their way off this mountain. The nearest town couldn't be that far away. These people all were regularly dressed, wearing coats or sweaters over plaid shirts and snow pants and boots. They couldn't be that far from the rest of civilization.

"Amanda?" Micah's voice floated out of the cabin. "Amanda, wait—"

That was all the encouragement she needed. Ignoring the cold seeping into her body, she broke into a sprint through the snow, determined to get the hell out of there. None of the

villagers stopped her; they gave her a wide berth, and she felt their gaze on her as she passed them, heading straight for the woods.

“Amanda!”

“Maddie!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. Her voice just barely carried through the woods. If Maddie was nearby, she might pick up on the sound. Assuming she was still breathing. “Maddie, where are you?”

It occurred to her that screaming her sister’s name might not be the brightest idea. How many voice-triggered avalanches had she seen in the movies? Not to mention she had no idea what was lurking in the woods right now.

A shiver raced through her body, and she hugged herself with her arms. Why hadn’t she thought to grab a coat and shoes before taking off? The most she could do with her magic was try to warm her feet for a while. Conjuring boots and a jacket was next-level stuff she doubted she’d be able to do.

She trudged farther through the woods, wincing now and then as she trod on a particularly jagged rock or a fallen branch in the ankle-deep snow. Why *here*, of all places anyway? Couldn’t she have crash-landed someplace warm like the Bahamas?

A small smile teased her lips at her crude attempt at humor. She scoured the woods for the next few minutes before she decided she was probably looking in the wrong direction. This was a big mountain. Maddie could be anywhere.

With a sigh, she turned around and started heading back the way she had come. It wasn’t until minutes later that she

realized she could no longer see her own footprints in the snow. It dawned on her at that moment that she was lost.

Chapter Six

The Truth About Frost Mountain

“Stubborn as hell,” Micah muttered as he marched through the woods. “She’s going to get herself killed.”

He paused in a small clearing of pines, a pair of shoes in one hand, and scanned his surroundings for any sign that she’d been here. Nothing. No footprints in the snow. No snapped twigs or fallen leaves either. Where the hell had she gone to?

What was she thinking, running off like that?

Her sister, of course. It was all she’d talked about since he laid eyes on her. He had to admit, the fierceness and desperation he’d seen on her face earlier had struck a chord in him. He understood her need to find this Maddie person. If anything happened to *his* family, he’d be running off in the snow as well. Swallowing his frustration, he dashed out of the clearing.

Please be alive, he prayed silently, pausing again and glancing around.

He never had trouble figuring out which was the right way to go—one of the many perks of having been born and imprisoned on Frost Mountain—but it was hard to track anyone when all the trees looked pretty much alike and the few prints in the snow could’ve been made by anything, including wolves. A pang filled his chest at the prospect of Amanda landing in Adrian Blackclaw’s clutches.

I’ll make this quick. Quick and painless.

No. Amanda didn't deserve to die. Certainly not at the hands of that maniac. Micah would never allow it.

Now, *that* was odd. Why did he feel so protective of someone he'd met only a few days ago? A witch, for that matter. The whole village knew what she was now—someone had let that bit of information slip. He doubted it was Theresa or Daniel—probably one of the other hunters.

He moved several feet farther before he caught sight of the first human-size footprints. His heart leaped. She couldn't be far off. He burst into a sprint, keeping his eyes on the tracks as he wound through the woods until he came across a form crouching near the base of a tree, knees hugged to its chest.

"Amanda," he said.

She glanced up and he froze for a moment. She was shivering all over, her jaw trembling slightly as she looked at him, but it was the fear in her eyes that made his heart nearly sink into his stomach. How long had she been sitting here like this?

Without another second's hesitation, he rushed over to her, throwing his coat around her body. He helped her to her feet and handed her the extra pair of shoes, watching silently as she slipped into them.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

He already suspected the answer, but couldn't suppress a tiny flicker of relief when she nodded, her delicate lashes batting slightly as she gazed up at him.

"I couldn't find her," she said. Her voice quivered. "And I got lost."

“I’ve got you now,” he assured her. “You’re safe. We can head back home now...” He trailed off, another thought occurring to him just then. “Or we could look for your sister together. We can go back to where I found you and see if we can figure out where she might be headed. How’s that?”

He might have been imagining things, but her beautiful eyes seemed to brighten a little. His heartbeat drummed in his ears.

It took them less than twenty minutes to reach the crash site. It was just as Micah had left it the other day, except the snow had risen a few inches, giving the impression that the plane seats were sinking into the ground.

“There aren’t any footprints,” Amanda pointed out, looking downcast.

“It’s been three days,” he replied. “And it’s only going to get worse. Feels like there’s a blizzard on its way.” He glanced around for a moment. “Let’s head downhill.”

She nodded. “Good call. Maybe she went looking for help. Bottom of the mountain’s the only reasonable place to start, right?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she had already begun marching down the mountain. With a sigh, he headed after her.

They walked in silence for the next couple of minutes before she suddenly frowned at him. “You don’t have a coat.”

He shrugged. “I don’t need it. I’m used to this place. We wolves are.”

“But... I saw people wearing parkas back at the camp.”

“Some of them are human. Some are fae, others elves. If you didn’t try to take off every chance you got, you might get to know some of them.”

She scoffed at his words. “As if they’d care to know me. I can already tell they don’t like me.” She stopped in her tracks, her frown deepening. “What’s going on here, anyway? There’s something strange about this place. I’ve known something was off since before we crashed back there. I know magic brought me here, but where *is* here?”

Micah stared into her face for a moment before responding. He could see the fierceness behind those gentle eyes of hers. Something told Micah she’d been through a lot despite her delicate appearance. Still, she wasn’t the least bit prepared for what he was about to tell her.

“This,” he said, “is Frost Mountain.”

“Never heard of it.”

“That’s because it doesn’t exist in your world. This place... this is a different dimension.”

He let his voice fade into silence, watching her try to process what she’d just heard. Her eyebrows rose slowly.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Micah shook his head. “Frost Mountain isn’t one of your mountains. It’s been here for centuries since the first group of shifters left your world, your earth. Wolves, bears, dragons, leopards... all of us—we’ve lived here for generations.”

“Why would anyone want to spend their lives here on this freezing mountain? It’s supposed to be Thanksgiving, and there’s snow all over, for goodness sake.”

He cracked a smile. The shifters of Frost Mountain hadn't celebrated holidays and hadn't even had a proper concept of time until the humans started showing up. Over the decades, even before he was born, more of them had appeared, lost from their world, bringing all kinds of knowledge—not to mention clothing. Some of the humans—the ones who'd managed to get over the fact that they were gone forever from their world anyway—had settled in quite nicely, integrating with shifters all over the mountain. From language to dressing and what Melanie called “the American way,” the place had changed over the years. At least somewhat.

Thanksgiving was drawing near. Melanie had made everyone in Aneira aware of that. It was why he and the rest of his pack had been hunting for days on end, hoping to catch something good.

“We didn't choose this. Our ancestors were banished to Frost Mountain. This entire place is magical. The mountain is all that exists. It never ends. You can get in, but there's no leaving. No bottom of the mountain. No flying away. This place isn't just a home—it's a prison.”

Chapter Seven

The Blackclaw Clan

She blinked repeatedly at him as though wondering if she'd heard him correctly. "You mean... we're trapped here?"

Another shrug. "More or less. No one has found a way to escape."

"What...?" Her shock and confusion were quickly replaced with a curious look in her eyes. "What about me? I mean, we weren't banished here or anything. How did we get here?"

"No one knows why it happens, but you're not the first to crash on Frost Mountain. It happens all the time—ships, planes, and even the occasional wanderer end up here. There are many entrances and portals leading to Frost Mountain. Your plane went through one of them. You crossed the barrier between your world and this place."

"You're saying this place is like the Bermuda Triangle?"

He frowned at her, puzzled.

"Never mind." She waved dismissively, swallowing. "There's got to be a way out of this place."

"I hate to break it to you. You're stuck here. I'm sorry—this is... unfortunate. But it's what happens now and then. It might take a while for you to adjust, but you should fit in nicely."

Assuming you don't get ripped apart.

For a moment, her expression softened and Micah thought she might burst into tears—which, if he was being honest,

would be a tame reaction to everything she'd just heard. But instead, her eyes took on a steely look. "I'm sure there's a way out of here. But I don't care about that right now."

With that, she turned and continued heading downhill as though still hoping to reach the foot of the mountain.

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

"To look for my sister," came her reply. "What else? If I can't get out of here, I can at least try to find her."

He hurried to meet her. "She could be anywhere. In the past three days, she could've gone far. Maybe she was trying to get to the bottom of the mountain, too."

"A bottom she doesn't know isn't there."

She whirled to face him. "We should move faster. Who knows whether she's ended up in some other village. With any luck, it's not a reenactment of *The Lord of the Flies*."

"What's that?"

"It's a book from..." She shook her head. "Never mind. Let's just go."

She continued walking and he held back for a few seconds, watching her go, her slender form almost completely hidden by his coat. She'd been here for only three days and conscious for less than twelve hours, but she'd been a lingering thought in his mind from the second he'd laid eyes on her.

You know what she is, right? Daniel had asked him the other day.

A witch. Under different circumstances, he might have been wary of her. He might have even attacked her. But she didn't

seem to be a threat to anyone but herself unless his mother and others were seeing something that he wasn't seeing.

He went after her, crossing the distance between them in a few large strides. The silence continued between them as they trudged downhill and entered the woods ahead of them. After a few minutes, she turned to him again.

“Your people don't seem to like me,” she said.

“What?”

“I'm pretty sure your mother thinks it would've been better if I'd frozen to death.”

He smiled, which she didn't return. “It's because you're a witch.”

“I already figured that part out,” she told him. “What have you got against witches?”

“You haven't figured *that* part out?”

“What are you talking about?”

“All of this—” he spread his arms wide, gesturing at their surroundings “—is magic. This entire prison—or mountain. We—our ancestors, I mean—were exiled here by witches. There was a war between shifters and witches. Shifters lost. Witches created this place with powerful dark magic.”

“So, you don't get witches around here very often.”

“We did once.” He stopped walking. “It was years ago. She was much older than you and much more powerful. When she found out what had happened, she agreed to help reverse the magic that brought everyone here.”

“I can tell how that worked out.”

He sighed. “It didn’t work, of course. But it was worse than that. No one knows why, but she turned on us all of a sudden. Shifters died by the dozens. In the end, they had to come together—dragons, bears, wolves—and put an end to her. We haven’t had a witch here ever since... until now.”

“And my being here is a reminder of what happened. They blame me for all of you being trapped here, don’t they?” She stood completely rooted to the spot, her eyes fixed on him. “I’m pretty much public enemy number one.”

“Not everyone around here knows you’re a witch,” he assured her. He bit his lip. “Only my clan does. And the Blackclaw clan.”

“The *what*, now?”

“Blackclaw. Remember those wolves who attacked you the other day?”

She scowled. “Yeah, I remember. They’d have ripped me apart if I hadn’t knocked one of them back.”

“Exactly. And now they know you have magic. My mother thinks that’s going to be a huge problem for us.”

“Is there something going on between your clans?”

Micah scoffed. “The Blackclaw and Whitehound clans have been enemies for longer than I’ve been alive. Not everyone here on Frost Mountain is friendly or on good terms with other clans. We’re people, too, you know. And people... have their problems.

“The Blackclaw clan has always tried to wipe us out. Threats, raids, ambushes... they’re nothing new. And that was even before I was born. Their alpha, Adrian Blackclaw... he’s

not someone you want as your enemy. He's evil, deadly. Once he's set his eyes on you, it's over."

She tilted her head a little to the side. "It sounds like you know him personally."

This time, Micah grimaced. "I do."

"How come?"

Quick and painless.

"He's my uncle."

Her eyes grew wide. "Wait, what? I thought he belonged to the enemy clan?"

He hesitated for a moment before responding. "He does. My mother's a Whitehound. My father... was a Blackclaw. You can imagine how both clans reacted when they found out about me."

The memory of wolves snarling and claws slashing filled his mind, and he clenched his jaw. "My father was murdered by Adrian himself—his own brother. I would have been killed, too, but I was rescued."

And I still have the scars to prove it.

She looked at him with sympathy. "I'm so sorry about that. I... I lost my mother when I was a kid, too. My dad raised me and Maddie, but sometimes I wish he hadn't."

"Why?"

"He... he wasn't exactly the world's greatest dad. He hit me and Maddie. He didn't like us using magic."

She averted her gaze then, her expression revealing the pain she and Maddie had suffered and Micah couldn't help but feel a tenderness toward her. She had been through a lot between the plane crash, getting attacked, and losing her sister on top of what she'd had to deal with growing up. A flicker of annoyance filled his chest at the thought of someone hurting her. Before he could say anything, she chuckled.

“I guess we both come from pretty dysfunctional families, eh?”

She was smiling at him now, and Micah found himself thinking, not for the first time that day, how beautiful she was. Her cheeks were flushed, and she had her arms folded across her chest, her final line of resistance against the cold, but as he gazed at her, all that crossed his mind was how much he would like to reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her lips curved wider, and his chest fluttered. Before he knew what was happening, he'd stepped toward her, suddenly very aware of his breathing and hers, his gaze locked intensely on her eyes.

“Micah,” she said, “What are—?”

A sudden sound made her pause in mid-speech. Micah heard it clearly. It sounded like something was moving through the woods, thrashing through the snow. Running.

Right toward them.

“Maddie?” Amanda whispered, hope gleaming in her eyes.

“Shh,” he said.

The sound grew louder—a steady crashing that filled his ears and made the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Whatever

was headed toward them wasn't human. He braced himself, expecting a wolf—or maybe a murderous polar bear shifter—to leap out at them. But it wasn't a shifter that burst through the trees.

The first thing Micah registered were the antlers—long and gnarled; they extended far beyond the creature's small head, brushing the pine leaves and scattering snow about.

Amanda let out a strangled gasp as the deer neared them. She stumbled backward, nearly losing her balance.

Micah was quicker to respond. Just as the creature reached them, grunting aggressively, he grabbed it by the horns, heaving with all his might. The buck let out another grunt as it landed on its side, crashing into the snow. Before it could get back up, Micah tackled it, pinning it to the ground. In a fluid movement, he drew a hunting knife from his belt and jammed it into the creature's neck.

The deer thrashed around for a few seconds, then went still, the snow around its head turning red.

As Micah straightened up, Amanda stared at him with her mouth wide open.

“Smile, will you?” he said, beaming. “Looks like we'll be eating well tonight.”

Still stunned by what had just happened, she half-shrugged. “I'm hungry but...”

Micah stared at the deer bleeding out onto the snow for a moment, then hefted it onto his shoulders and turned to face her. “Let’s head back to the village. We can continue the search for Maddie later, okay?”

Amanda bit her lip. “Okay.”

They backtracked through the snowy woods. Micah tried to make light conversation, but Amanda was shaken and didn’t feel like talking. By the time they got back to the village, it was noon. The villagers were still outside their cabins, but something looked off to Micah. No one was moving and there was a palpable tension in the air. As he drew closer, Micah realized why. Half a dozen wolves stood in the center of the crowd, growling at everyone, poised to attack. It took Micah only a second to realize they weren’t from his pack. Their fur was black. An all-too-familiar color. Micah felt his muscles stiffen in fear.

“What’s going on?” Amanda muttered under her breath.

“Nothing good,” he replied.

His gaze drifted to the figure standing in front of the wolves. The man had his back to Micah, but as he and Amanda drew nearer, heads turned to look at them. A series of gasps and murmurs rippled through the crowd. He glimpsed a few metallic-grey wolves standing between the intruders and the rest of the village. Daniel and the rest of his pack, no doubt.

He took a few cautious steps closer.

Then the man turned around... and Micah felt his heart sink.

Chapter Eight

“This Witch Needs to Die”

She knew who the man in front was even before Micah said his name: Adrian. As he turned around to face them, Amanda felt her breath freeze in her throat. He was shirtless, but his muscular torso was the least threatening thing about him. The man had long, grey hair pulled into a ponytail. The smirk on his face sent a chill down her spine. His eyes were coal-black, gleaming with a hunger that reminded her of the wolves she'd encountered the other day.

“Adrian,” Micah said, letting the deer fall from his shoulders. “You shouldn't be here.”

Adrian Blackclaw cocked his head to one side, his eyes twinkling. “I expected a warmer welcome, nephew.”

The black wolves turned with their leader, growling and snarling in Amanda's direction, and it took every bit of her resolve to keep from turning and fleeing for her life.

So, *this* was Micah's uncle, the man who'd tried to murder him as a child. Looking at him, she felt a spark of rage. Men like this were pure evil. But her anger was nothing compared with her fear.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Micah stiffen. When she glanced at him, his grey eyes were slits, his jaw clenched.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“I believe you already know,” the other shifter replied. “My men told me there was a young witch on the mountain. You wouldn’t happen to know where that witch is, would you?”

As he spoke, his gaze shifted from Micah to Amanda. An electric jolt raced through Amanda’s body. The man’s wild, menacing eyes suddenly bore into hers. Involuntarily, she took a step back. All at once she understood what Micah meant when he said that his uncle’s gaze held the promise of death.

Micah stepped forward. “I have no idea what you mean. There hasn’t been a witch on Frost Mountain in—”

“Fifteen years,” Adrian finished. His grin widened. “But my men would never lie to me.”

As if to emphasize his statement, one of the black wolves snarled in Micah’s direction. Amanda swallowed. The possibility of this interaction spiraling into a bloody fight was growing by the second. If that happened, none of them would be spared. She might have saved herself from becoming debris scattered on a mountainside, but she knew she wouldn’t last long against a pack of wolves that looked bent on ripping her apart.

“Maybe your men were wrong.” Micah shrugged. “Besides, even if there is a witch on the mountain, what makes you think I would know where she is?”

Adrian snorted. “Is that so?” He jerked his head toward Amanda, who flinched. “Who’s this, then? I’ve never seen her around here before.”

“She’s a crash survivor,” Micah replied without missing a beat. “Found her out there, unconscious, and brought her here.”

She's only human."

Adrian eyed her suspiciously and Amanda felt a sudden chill as his gaze roamed her body.

"I don't believe that," he said, his lip curling.

Suddenly, claws extended from his fingertips, and for a split second, she saw his teeth as he lunged at her. She remained on the spot, unable to move, to think, to even *breathe*. Her heart pounded in her ribcage, threatening to explode.

There was a blur of movement, and something smacked into Adrian, knocking him aside. Those claws swiped the air barely an inch away from her face. It was Micah. He pulled himself to his feet, coming to stand protectively before her.

She heard someone snarl and she glimpsed the black wolves advancing toward her.

At the same time, the metallic-grey wolves growled, poised to attack. Adrian sprang to his feet, murder in his eyes. He shook the snow out of his hair and fixed Micah with a meaningful scowl.

"You remember what happened the last time a witch showed up on Frost Mountain," he said, retracting his claws. "They imprisoned us here, and then they tried to attack us instead of helping us. Their kind cannot be trusted. This witch needs to die."

"I agree," Micah said.

What? Amanda's heart nearly burst from her chest. She took another step backward and saw a triumphant gleam in Adrian's eyes.

“But” Micah went on, “as I said, I have no idea who or where this witch is. Maybe you should look elsewhere. What I do know is that you need to leave. *Now.*”

Adrian growled and clenched his fists.

Micah growled back.

The two alphas stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. Then Adrian’s lips curved back into that deadly grin.

“You know,” he said, “you shouldn’t even be alive, Micah.” He licked his lips. “One day, I’ll have the pleasure of correcting that... error. But for now, the only person I want to sink my claws into is the witch. And when I find her...”

He drew a line across his throat with his finger.

“I’ll be seeing you around, nephew,” he said.

His gaze flickered toward Amanda, and for a moment she thought he might leap at her again. Then he turned and marched out of the village, his pack in tow. Amanda stared after them until they were out of sight.

“You’re safe,” Micah said, turning to Amanda. He was still scowling, but at least she knew it wasn’t because of her. “I told you you’d be okay here.”

Amanda didn’t feel okay or safe. She’d just come close to being slashed to ribbons by a killer wolf shifter. Not to mention she’d put all villagers in danger just by being here. She had no idea what Adrian had been saying to the villagers before they’d returned, but they’d looked shaken. If he’d attacked any of them... that would have been on her head.

Before Micah could utter another word, she raced back in the direction of Theresa's cabin, feeling the eyes of villagers following her every step of the way. She hurried up the porch steps and into the cabin and sank to the floor, her back against the wall, the tears coming hot and fast.

She shouldn't be here. Not in this village. Not on Frost Mountain. Hell, she shouldn't even have been on that damn plane. But she'd landed here, in this place—this *dimension*, Micah had called it. A monstrosity of a place magic created by her kind. She was trapped here, surrounded by people who hated her and wanted her dead.

For the first time that day, she felt completely hopeless. In a matter of hours, her life had completely come apart. She'd landed here and lost her sister. As much as she tried to, she couldn't hold back the nagging fear that Maddie was gone for good, a frozen corpse buried in the snow. She never felt more alone.

A knock on the cabin door made her jump. She wiped away her tears as quickly as she could, her heart racing. Had Micah come after her? Somehow, she found the thought comforting. The image of his face floated in the forefront of her mind, only somewhat hazy.

The cabin door swung open, and a voice that wasn't Micah's said, "Found you!"

Chapter Nine

“Micah Doesn’t Hate You”

Micah hoisted the deer back onto his shoulders and walked through the still-tense crowd, dropping the carcass in the snow in the center of the village. He could still feel their eyes on him—humans, shifters, fae... everyone. A part of him wondered what they must be thinking, but he mostly ignored them, his thoughts concentrated on a singular person: Amanda.

Daniel drew closer, his grey fur covered in some snow, and sniffed the deer. He looked up at Micah, who nodded. “Killed it in the woods east of here,” he said. “I figure we should go back out there tomorrow and see what else we can find.”

The wolf continued to gaze at him and Micah could tell what was going through his friend’s mind. Right now, the last thing he needed to hear was Daniel saying, *I told you so*.

But it wasn’t Daniel he had to worry about.

He turned, hoping to follow Amanda into the cabin, but just then he saw his mother coming toward him, annoyance flashing in her grey eyes.

“I told you something like this would happen,” she snapped, holding up a hand to silence him before he could speak. “You should have listened to me and gotten rid of that witch as soon as you found her. Adrian Blackclaw showing up at our village and threatening our people... what do you think is going on in their heads?”

Micah looked around again. The villagers were mostly going about their day again, a few had taken the deer to prepare it for dinner, but he could still sense the tension in the air. Tension because of Adrian and because there was a witch in their midst.

“She’s not a threat,” he said, loudly enough for those around to hear; several people paused to listen. “And she’s not going to try to harm us.” He lowered his tone again. “She’s just scared and trying to find her only family. So far, the only people she’s attacked are those who have tried to hurt her—the Blackclaws.”

His mother shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. He will be back, and you know it. I’m sure he already knows she’s the witch. Do you really believe he won’t hurt the rest of us for sheltering her?”

Micah’s jaw clenched. She had a point. Adrian would look for whatever excuse he could to wipe the Whitehound clan out of existence. If he returned, there could be bloodshed.

“He would’ve come here anyway,” he shot back. “Trust me, Mother—I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” Theresa scoffed, and without another word, she turned and walked away.

“You,” Amanda whispered, staring at the newcomer.

It was the woman she’d seen earlier this morning, just before she ran off in search of Maddie. Her blonde hair hung down the sides of her face, resting on her shoulders, looking

odd against the army-green parka she had on. Besides that, she wore black pants, boots, and a friendly smile.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Melanie.”

Amanda stared dumbly at her for a few seconds.

“You’re the newbie,” the woman said. “I saw when Micah brought you in. You’re in the wrong cabin, by the way. Micah’s is the next.”

“Oh...” Amanda felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment as she looked around for the first time and realized how different this place looked from the cabin she’d woken up in. “I’m sorry, I should go—”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Melanie laughed. “We’re not exactly territorial in this village. I like to think of us as one big family. Besides, I was hoping to chat with you.”

Amanda realized she must be one of the previous survivors Micah had mentioned earlier—other people who’d crash-landed on the mountain. Whether she was human or fae, or even a shifter, it was hard to tell, but seeing this woman here, Amanda started to feel a little less alone. The woman had the faintest trace of a southwest accent—Texas, maybe.

“Uh... okay.”

Melanie came to rest against the wall next to her. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t see anything wrong with you being a witch. You look like the average Brooklyn woman to me.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” Amanda asked.

“Nope,” Melanie replied with a smirk, and they both laughed.

“So,” Amanda continued, deciding it couldn’t hurt to get acquainted with a fellow survivor, even if she wanted more than anything else to be away from this village, from this mountain. “What’s your story? Did your plane crash into the mountain, too?”

The woman shook her head. “Not a plane. I was on a ship heading south. Next thing I know, we hit something, and the ship foundered.” She suddenly got a sad, faraway look on her face. “Lots of people died that day. Turns out it was a whole mountain we’d hit, not an iceberg like the *Titanic*.”

Melanie laughed at her quip, but all Amanda could do was wonder how terrified the woman must have been at the time. It certainly wasn’t the same as dropping out of the sky strapped to a seat, but she imagined it must have been terrifying, being on a ship as it capsized—on land.

Micah had told her that there was no end to Frost Mountain. It was a world unto itself. How many ships and planes were half-buried under the snow? It gave her a chill to think about it. This place wasn’t just a home or a prison. It was a nightmare, a death trap, a one-way trip to a certain demise. It was a place where hope came to die.

“Anyway,” Melanie continued, “it happened seven years ago. I wasn’t the first human on Frost Mountain as it turns out, but I was one of the first few to join this village, Aneira. The Whitehounds found me and some other survivors. They brought us here. It was hard for me at first, being around all these... supernaturals. I didn’t even know they existed. I was worried they’d try to eat me at night.” She laughed at the memory.

“They weren’t exactly too friendly from the start either,” she said. “But with time, things started to change. I’m one of the few reasons this village doesn’t look like it’s inhabited by cavemen. The more people from our world show up, the more these folk learn and change. Heck, I showed them how to keep time with a calendar. It’s mostly so I don’t go crazy, but it’s helped in other ways, too. How else would I know that Thanksgiving is just around the corner?”

Thanksgiving. In all the chaos that had erupted since the plane crash, she hadn’t even given it much thought. Just three days ago, she’d been staring out the plane window, wondering how much of a disaster the Thanksgiving dinner with her father might be. A part of her was glad that she wouldn’t have to sit through that dinner. But part of her felt differently—that she’d been robbed of the opportunity to make that choice. She was stuck here whether she liked it or not.

“You miss being out there, don’t you?” Melanie asked suddenly, as though reading her mind. “In our world, I mean.”

Amanda shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

That was the most honest response she could come up with. Her life in the real world hadn’t been perfect. She’d been trying to survive out there just as much as she was here, if not more. The only difference was that here, she had no job to think about, no bills, and no jerk of a father to see during Thanksgiving.

Oh, and she was public enemy number one. That was something she’d never experienced in Vegas.

“It’ll take some time,” the other woman assured her, “but soon you’ll get used to living on Frost Mountain. Sometimes, I

miss my old life, but mostly, it's not so bad."

"Easy for you to say," Amanda scoffed. "Everyone here either hates me or is afraid of me. I can tell."

"Give it time. Besides, *I* don't hate you," Melanie pointed out. "And I'm sure as hell not scared of you."

It was Amanda's turn to smirk. "That's because you're from... Texas I'm guessing from your accent?"

"Right," Melanie said.

"I'm surprised you haven't invited me to your ranch to have dinner with you."

They laughed in unison again, and Amanda felt the tension she'd been under all day begin to ease.

"Micah doesn't hate you, either," Melanie said after a moment of silence, her smile and twinkling eyes sending a definite message.

Amanda studied the other woman's face.

"Well, I... I..." she spluttered. "I mean... I guess not."

Micah had made it clear to her from the start that he had no intention of hurting her. He'd brought her to his mother's cabin to heal her despite how she and all the villagers felt about witches. And he'd rushed after her through the woods to find her and bring her a coat and boots.

She thought back to when she and Micah were at the crash site. Was he about to kiss her before the deer came charging through the woods at them or had she imagined that? Though they didn't know each other well, he'd gone to great lengths to protect her thus far. Did that mean he had feelings for her?

“I’ve never seen him go all out for anyone the way he does for you,” Melanie told her. “Well, except maybe his mother. He’s never been this protective. Clearly, he doesn’t hate you.”

Amanda wondered if her cheeks were turning red, and whether she could pass that off as an effect of the cold.

“Sure,” she said. Then a thought occurred to her. Thankful for an opportunity to change the subject as subtly as she could, she asked, “You mentioned something about knowing the holidays. Is there going to be a Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Of course,” replied the blonde woman. “It’s only a week away.” She frowned for a moment. “No, six days. Whoa, am I getting rusty? It should be six days away.” Her lips parted with a chuckle. “It won’t be a turkey dinner, though. Depends on whatever Micah and the hunters catch.”

Micah’s face loomed in her memory once again, and she struggled to skirt around it. Clearing her throat, she said, “I need to find my sister before then. That is if I’m still alive by then.”

And if she’s still alive.

“Your sister?” Melanie asked, an eyebrow raised.

Amanda nodded. “We got separated after we crashed. I woke up and she was gone. I need to find her.”

“So that’s why you ran out of the village this morning?”

“Something like that,” Amanda said, her voice expressing her disappointment that the day’s search had turned up no clues to her sister’s whereabouts.

Logically, she knew it would take more than a day to find Maddie. She could be anywhere, maybe even in another village, or she could still be out there in the cold. If that was the case, her chances of survival were minimal at best because, unlike her, Maddie never used her magic; she hadn't used it in years.

"I need to keep looking for her. But I doubt Micah will let me go on my own." She blushed again, as Melanie grinned. "He didn't need to try to hide me from Adrian."

The other woman's smile wavered. "He did what he needed to help you. Would you have preferred he hand you over to that madman?"

"He's putting the rest of you in danger."

Melanie shrugged. "We're in danger as long as the Blackclaw clan exists. Trust me, you're just an excuse for him to try to attack us. Without you, he'd find some other reason. We're just lucky he hasn't stopped looking for reasons yet."

Amanda regarded her for a few seconds. "I guess you're right."

"Of course, I am. When have I ever been wrong?" The woman rolled her eyes dramatically as though Amanda had just said something incredibly silly—a gesture that reminded her of Maddie. Amanda couldn't help but smile.

Maybe things would turn out all right after all. She would find Maddie, they would have a nice Thanksgiving dinner, and they'd be okay. Trapped on a mountain with no hope of ever leaving, but perfectly okay.

Her stomach growled suddenly, reminding her that she had not had anything to eat since she'd regained consciousness.

Melanie shook her head with a chuckle. "Come on," she said, getting to her feet. "Dinner isn't for a few hours, but I'm sure we find something for you to eat so you don't starve to death."

Chapter Ten

“You Have Feelings For This Woman”

Micah enjoyed hunting more than anything else in the world—well, more than anything else on Frost Mountain. He was good at it and being out with his pack, scouring the expanse of the mountain for wildlife to take home was thrilling. The hunt was more than a job for him. It was a sport he loved to play from a young age. The longer he hunted, the more engrossed with it he became.

So, it was with a twinge of irritation that he glanced up from the carcass of the deer he'd just killed to answer Daniel.

“What is it?” Micah asked with a sigh. “I thought you were with the others looking out for more deer. We've only caught a few.”

Daniel gazed toward the woods where the deer had charged Micah and Amanda. There had been more lurking around there, just as he'd figured. Some had tried to make a run for it, but Micah and his men had been quick to catch them. Right now there were half a dozen of them on the ground, either struggling or already bleeding onto the snow, turning it crimson.

“I know,” the shifter said. “I've just been wondering about the other day.”

Micah frowned at his friend, absently twirling his hunting knife between his fingers. “What are you talking about?”

“Adrian.”

Ah.

A few days had gone by since Adrian and his pack had surprised the villagers with their visit. Since then, to his relief, a few of the villagers, particularly Melanie, had been more welcoming to Amanda. She was sharing a cabin with Melanie and some of the other humans, having opted to sleep there herself instead of in Micah's cabin. For some reason, that had bothered him.

However, most of the villagers still kept their distance from her, despite his attempts to explain to them that she wasn't the threat they believed she was. Micah couldn't blame them. Most of them remembered what had happened the last time there was a witch on Frost Mountain. Memories like that were hard to forget. Still, things were improving, even though he was getting tired of being asked how long it would be before Amanda turned on them.

But Adrian's threat still hung over their heads like a dark cloud. Micah hadn't been able to get it out of his mind. Each morning, he woke up in a cold sweat from reliving the past in his dreams, which were more like nightmares.

"What about Adrian?" Micah asked, although he already suspected what his friend was going to say.

"It's been days. You know he must be planning something."

Micah nodded. "It's only a matter of time before he comes back and tries to take her by force."

"Don't you think the sensible thing to do would be to get her out of the village and hide her someplace?" He gestured to some huts in the distance about half a day's journey away.

Micah knew what Daniel was suggesting. There were lots of places he could leave Amanda—shacks by the river and other lodges scattered higher up the mountain. And those were just the places Micah was familiar with. A massive mountain like this had to have so many more locations to send the witch and be free of her and where she would be safe from whatever Adrian might be planning.

As if.

“No,” he said firmly. “She’s staying with us in the village.”

Daniel pressed his lips together as though refraining from saying something he might regret. Finally, he spoke. “You’re putting yourself and the rest of the village in grave danger.”

“So everyone keeps telling me. But I’m not risking Amanda’s life. She’s under my protection. If Adrian wants her, he’ll have to go through me.” It struck him then that fighting his uncle was not something he particularly looked forward to but would have to face if necessary. “She’s innocent and she’s harmless.”

His friend sighed. “You and I both know that’s not the real reason you’re protecting her.”

“Is that so?” Micah asked innocently. “And what do you think the real reason is?”

“You have feelings for this woman.”

The knife slipped between Micah’s fingers, sinking halfway into the snow next to the deer. His eyes widened slightly, and he felt his heart suddenly thudding in his ribcage.

“What?” he scoffed. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“I’ve seen the way you act around her. I’ve seen the way you *look* at her, like she’s something precious you can’t afford to lose. I’m your best friend—you think I don’t notice these things?”

Micah started to argue but stopped himself. Daniel wasn’t exactly wrong. He had to admit, as the days went by, he found himself wanting to be near Amanda, finding excuses to talk to her. There was something about her... something that drew him like a magnet. Perhaps it was the fact that they had both lost someone dear to them. Or maybe it was that stubborn streak of hers that he found attractive. Not to mention the fact that she *was* quite beautiful...

“You’re insane,” he told Daniel, forcing a laugh. “I don’t feel anything for her. She’s just someone who needs our protection now more than ever.”

“If you say so,” Daniel replied smugly as he turned away to join the other men. “Forget I mentioned it.”

But Micah couldn’t forget it. The thought of having to finally confront Adrian stayed fixed in his mind. What would his uncle do next to try to get to Amanda? As he picked up the knife and gazed down at the deer carcass, he couldn’t help but feel as if he was suddenly embroiled in a different hunt. Only this time, Adrian was the hunter and his village, Aneira, was the prey.

Whatever happened, Micah doubted the fight would be quick and painless. Adrian only kept his word when he was promising bloody murder.

The pack spent the rest of the afternoon waiting, watching, and hunting in the snow. By the time the sun began to sink

below the horizon, they'd slaughtered a couple of more deer, although Micah could hardly conceal his disappointment that they couldn't have brought home more. Finally, they made their way back to the village, Micah walking ahead of the rest of the pack, his deer resting heavily on his shoulders, a comforting weight that reminded him that the villagers would be eating well for the next couple of weeks.

A strong gust of cold wind greeted him as he and the rest of the pack stepped out of the woods leading to the village. A blizzard was imminent. He gazed ahead at the village. Most of the villagers had headed inside, although a few of them were still sitting on their front porches. Micah spotted the lone figure of a woman sitting by the fire, tossing logs into the flames, which sent tendrils of sparks into the cold night air. She sat with her back to them, but Micah could tell just by looking at her greying hair that it was Theresa.

A grin teased his lips. *She'll be pleased to see how much we've caught today.*

As his pack drew closer, he noticed a dark blur of movement. Half a dozen shapes shot out of the woods toward the village. It took Micah a split second to realize they were wolves. It took him a full second more to notice their fur. It was not the metallic grey of Whitehounds—no, these shapes were dark as night.

“What the—?”

The wolves raced toward the woman seated by the fire, and the deer slipped from Micah's shoulders.

“Mother!” he yelled.

Chapter Eleven

“I Know How Much She Means to You”

Even before she heard the cry, Amanda knew something was wrong.

She'd been sitting on Melanie's porch, listening to her talk about her expectations for Thanksgiving dinner, when a crawling sensation shot up her spine. She sat bolt upright, nearly startling her companion in mid-speech.

“...and I was thinking we could have a nice dinner around the campfire with—what's gotten into you?” Melanie asked, startled. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

Before Amanda could respond, a voice yelled, “Mother!”

Her head snapped up just in time to see three—no, *four*—black wolves racing through the snow toward the lone figure by the fire. Theresa glanced up at the same time, but by the time she turned to see what was going on, it was too late. Blackclaw wolves surrounded the woman and looked as if they were about to attack.

“No!” Amanda shrieked.

She sprang to her feet, a mixture of fury, fear, and desperation coursing through her body, and shot out her arms. The air rippled in an arc that swept toward the wolf closest to Theresa. The creature had only enough time to open its jaws when it was knocked into the air, landing hard in the snow.

Amanda rushed down the porch steps toward the older woman unsure if she was capable of holding off the entire pack, certain only that she had to save Theresa. The older woman had sprung to her feet, her eyes widening as she backed away from the remaining wolves. Beyond them, Amanda spotted several figures rushing toward them. It was Micah and the other hunters. They were still too far away to be of any help, so she knew it was up to her.

As if to confirm her fears, the wolf she'd attacked sprang to its feet and joined the others. All four began circling her, poised to strike. Amanda felt terror grip her. She started to wonder if Theresa had been the wolves' real target. The circle tightened, and she caught glimpses of the wolves' razor-sharp teeth and cold, dark eyes that told her she was seconds away from a painful death. Then, one of the wolves lunged.

She was quick to react, knocking the wolf aside with another blast of her magic. Just then, something large collided with her, sending her tumbling backward into the snow. She glanced up just in time to see a wolf's head appear just inches from her face. Those jaws parted, affording her a glimpse of its teeth and tongue, and she knew she was done for.

Before the jaws could snap shut over her face, however, there was a furious bellow and the wolf was suddenly knocked off her body. Amanda sat up, her heart pounding so hard she thought it might burst through her ribcage, and looked to her left. Micah had tackled the wolf to the ground. They thrashed around for a few seconds, and all Amanda saw were claws and teeth. Then there was a flash of silver, and those clawed limbs went limp.

She shot to her feet and glanced around. The other wolves had been subdued as well. The snow was dark with blood. She watched as Micah climbed to his feet. Only his face was scratched, but he was pissed as hell.

Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she tried to catch her breath. One minute, she'd been listening to Melanie talk and then the next minute she'd found herself literally inches away from the jaws of death. It didn't take a genius to figure out why the black wolves had come.

All around, people were hurrying from their cabins to see what had happened. There were gasps and exclamations of horror as their eyes went from the dead wolves in the snow to Micah, Theresa, and, finally, Amanda. Then the whispers began.

Micah marched toward his mother, his face still contorted with fury. He took her by the shoulders. "Are you okay?"

Theresa's gaze drifted from her son's face to Amanda's.

"Yes," she said, her expression one of disbelief and wonder. "Yes, I am."

Micah followed her gaze, his eyes meeting Amanda's in one electrifying instant. For a second, she thought he might be angry with her for bringing on this attack and she readied her defenses, but then his expression softened and he walked over to her and wrapped her in a bear hug, crushing her against the solid expanse of his chest.

"Thank you," he said, and she detected a hint of emotion in his voice.

He smelled of blood and there was some fur on his clothes, but she found herself hugging him back. He felt surprisingly warm despite the cold, and she might have continued hugging him if she hadn't suddenly realized that everyone was watching. She pulled away, feeling self-conscious and a little embarrassed.

"I couldn't let her die," she told him, averting her gaze. "You wouldn't have let me die either. Besides, I know how much she means to you."

Just as much as Maddie means to me.

She had to admit, seeing Micah with his mother filled her with a sense of emptiness. The only family she had left on this godforsaken mountain was still missing. And she'd be damned if she didn't do something about it.

"This is Adrian's doing," Daniel said, coming up to Micah. "I told you he might try something like this."

"And this is just the start, Daniel," Micah replied grimly. "But the next time he tries something, we'll be here to protect the village. Besides, I think everyone knows now that Amanda isn't going to turn on us."

Daniel stared at Amanda for an embarrassingly long time. Then he nodded and walked away. But he wasn't the only one staring at her now. It seemed the entire village was standing outside, staring at the scene before them. The murmurs were growing louder, and although she could barely make out what was being said, it wasn't too difficult to figure out that they were talking about her. Even Melanie stood nearby, gazing at her in amazement.

“That,” she said, “that was...”

Amanda brushed by her and headed toward the cabin she'd been staying in. The last thing she needed was all these eyes on her, even if a couple of the women of the village were now grinning in her direction. She just wanted to get the hell out of this place. But where could she go? Who knew how many more of Adrian's wolves were waiting outside the village to jump her?

It wasn't until she'd closed the door to the cabin and leaned against it that she realized she'd been holding her breath the whole time. In a matter of seconds, things had spun into a chaotic blur. She'd been forced to use her magic—something she'd been loath to do around these people—and for the second time in barely a week, she'd come extremely close to losing her life. And then Micah hugged her. Amanda was pretty sure that was when she'd stopped breathing.

God, she'd wanted that hug to never end. It felt amazing and like she'd known him forever, like they shared a bond, which, of course, they didn't, right?

She shook her head, determined not to let thoughts of Micah cloud her thinking. As much as the thought of being near him excited her, she had other priorities and time was running out. She needed to act quickly before it was too late. She stepped away from the door, her jaw set resolutely. First thing tomorrow morning, she'd head out and search for her sister.

Chapter Twelve

Quick and Painless

“You what?” roared Uncle Adrian.

His black eyes blazed with barely concealed fury; a vein pulsed in his forehead, and his chest heaved as he stared at the duo before him—a dark-haired man of equal height with eyes just as dark and the little boy holding his hand. Micah blinked at his father, then at his uncle, in confusion. Why were they mad at each other?

All three of them stood in a clearing of trees in the woods. Adrian recognized it the second they arrived here. He’d passed this area many times with his parents. His mother had told him that their villages were on separate sides of the woods, miles apart. Micah wondered why his parents never took him to their homes. They’d come here to see him together, but they always left him with Patricia, who lived far away by the river.

“You heard me, Adrian,” his father said. His voice was calm, but Micah could sense the anger in his words. “We had a child. And we hid him from you all this while because we knew you would react like this.”

Uncle Adrian’s eyes bulged. “Five years, Liam,” he spat. “Five years you’ve had a child with that... that thing! I warned you against getting cozy with the enemy, but you wouldn’t listen. You went ahead and... had him with their healer.”

As he spoke, he gestured toward Micah, who simply stared back. It was his first time meeting his uncle, and the man already seemed angry with him. This was not good.

“Theresa is not the enemy,” his father said firmly. “She’s not even dangerous. She’s just a healer. And we both think this rivalry is stupid. There’s no need for our clans to be enemies. And what we have...” He swallowed. “What we have is proof of that. I didn’t tell you about Micah, brother, because you’re insane.”

“What did you say?”

“You’re bloodthirsty,” said Liam.

“I am alpha!”

“And you shouldn’t be. All you’ve done is try to destroy the Whitehounds. All you want is bloodshed.”

A maniacal grin crossed Adrian’s face. “You’re right about that.”

He lashed out so suddenly, Micah barely saw him move. A second later, both men were on the ground, Adrian on top. Micah turned just in time to see blood gurgle out of his father’s mouth. A moment later, Adrian straightened, retracting his bloodstained claws. Micah saw blood spurting from a wound in Liam’s chest.

“You...” Liam struggled. “Adrian, you...”

More blood spurted from his mouth. His body twitched for a few agonizing seconds, his eyes wide and filled with shock and betrayal.

And then he lay perfectly still.

“Father!” Micah cried, tears already springing to his eyes. He wasn’t sure what had happened to his father, but he knew it wasn’t good. “Father!”

Adrian rounded on him, eyes still blazing. His lips pulled back in a wide grin. Micah’s lower lip quivered. He just wanted to go home. Why wouldn’t his father wake up?

“Come here, boy,” he heard Adrian say. His uncle beckoned to him with those bloody fingers. “Come here, little nephew. It’s all right. I’ll make it quick. Quick and painless. You won’t even feel a thing.”

Micah stared at him for a moment, fear creeping over his small frame. Something wasn’t right. Still, this was his uncle. Innocently, obediently, he covered the short distance between them, standing right before Adrian.

“You were never meant to be,” the man said, the smile slowly fading. “You... you were a mistake. And I’m going to change that.”

Micah saw his fingers elongate into claws...

“MICAHA, RUN!” screamed a voice.

He spun around to see a figure burst out from between the trees. Theresa’s face was ashen, her eyes wide as she rushed toward him.

Just then, he felt a stabbing sensation in his back. A shrill scream escaped his lips, and he rocked forward. Arms caught him before he collapsed in the snow, and amidst the pain, he was vaguely aware of being whisked away.

“Get back here!” Adrian bellowed.

And Micah's world dissolved.

When he opened his eyes, he was already sitting up on the hard length of the floor in his tiny bedroom, beads of sweat rolling down his face. As usual, his clothes were already drenched. He pulled off his shirt, feeling the rivulets trickle down his torso. He glanced around. It was morning. It was still somewhat dark in the cabin, but he easily heard his mother in the other room. She was snoring lightly. The sound took his heart rate down a few pegs.

Just a dream. No, just a memory. Of something that had happened twenty-five years ago. Something he couldn't seem to get over.

He reached behind him, his fingers brushing the hard muscles of his back until they touched the jagged marks that had never quite faded. Adrian had given him those scars that night—a constant reminder of just how close he'd come to death. A reminder of Adrian's bloodlust.

Sometimes, if he concentrated hard enough, he could still feel the pain from when Adrian had clawed him.

He got to his feet and, as quietly as he could, stepped out of the cabin. A powerful gust of wind smacked him in the chest, reminding him that he was shirtless. Reluctantly, he retreated into the cabin and pulled on a shirt and a coat before stepping back outside. It was snowing heavily, the haunting howling of the wind filling the village.

Darn blizzard.

He shook his head, glancing around. Everyone else was indoors. The snow had risen at least a few inches since last

night. There was no trace of the fire Theresa had been building up the night before.

Speaking of which...

He'd come so close to losing his mother yesterday. Adrian's doing, yet again. The alpha's bloodthirst had survived for decades. If Amanda hadn't been present when those wolves attacked... well, Theresa would be sleeping in a different bed right now.

Theresa hadn't said much since the incident; Micah figured she was still processing what had happened. He'd hoped to talk to Amanda some more yesterday, to thank her again for saving his mother's life. But she'd promptly disappeared into Melanie's cabin.

He cast a glance in the direction of the cabin. Maybe he could go and try to talk to her now or at the very least check on her.

She's probably asleep, said a voice in his head. Why do you need to check on her right now?

Micah bit his lip, feeling a smidgen of embarrassment. Maybe Daniel was right about his motives. Still, it wouldn't hurt to knock on the door and see how she was doing. She could be cold. The temperature had plummeted a few degrees since last night. The cold didn't bother him much, but she wasn't used to these temperatures. He could bring her an extra layer of clothing.

Right, that's the only reason you want to talk to her.

After debating with himself some more, he finally gave in to his desires and made his way through the snow to Melanie's

cabin. He climbed the porch steps and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He knocked louder, hoping someone would hear the sound above the wind. Still nothing. Micah was just about to turn away and head back to his cabin when the door opened a crack. He caught sight of Melanie's blond hair. A tired-looking eye peeked out at him.

"Hey," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the wind. "I just wanted to check on Amanda."

The door opened a bit wider, affording him a glimpse of her confused expression. "Huh?"

"I said, I wanted to check on Amanda," he repeated, although he was quite certain she'd heard him the first time. "Is she asleep?"

She gave him a look that said, *Are you for real right now?* but said, "Hold on... I'll check."

The door closed shut, and he faintly heard her moving through the cabin. A minute later, the door opened again and Melanie stepped out, her brows furrowed in puzzlement.

"What's the problem?" Micah wanted to know.

"It's weird," came her reply. "She's... gone."

Gone? It hadn't even occurred to him that she might leave the cabin in this weather, but now that he thought about it, it wasn't something he'd put past her. She'd taken off. He should have seen this coming.

Where the hell are you, Amanda?

Amanda had never considered what it would be like to be buried alive in the snow, but now it seemed a real possibility. The wind howled in her ears and whipped at her face, stinging her skin and making it nearly impossible to see more than a few feet in front of her. She held up a hand to shield her face, but it did little, if anything, to help matters. The extreme cold easily penetrated the tiniest gaps in the parka Melanie had lent her a couple of days ago. She suppressed yet another shiver as she trudged wearily through the snow, fighting as hard as she could against the powerful urge to lie somewhere and close her eyes.

Maybe coming out today had been a bad idea.

No shit. Hadn't Micah mentioned a few days ago that a blizzard was on its way? She should have stayed in the cabin with Melanie. But how could she continue to sleep peacefully knowing her sister was somewhere out here? She'd crept out of the cabin and out of the village at the first sign of light, determined to spend as much time as she reasonably could searching until she found Maddie. She'd made it to the crash site, where the plane seat was now barely visible in the snow, and headed across the side of the hill where the trees were less dense.

And then, all of a sudden, the snow was coming down heavily. Beneath the material of her parka, she felt a tremor work its way up her body. "F-f-fuck," she muttered, struggling to see in front of her.

There wasn't much in sight besides the low-hanging tree branches sagging under the weight of the snow. Between that

and the snow-covered rocks she kept tripping over, she made almost no progress.

“I’m gonna die out here,” she shouted. The wind drowned out her voice almost instantly.

With her luck, that might just turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. She continued through the woods, her boots sinking into the snow with each step. The weather was getting worse. At this rate, by the time she was discovered, she’d be frozen solid. Still, she trudged forward, trying to brush aside the nagging thought that she might be headed in the wrong direction. How far away was she from the village? A couple of miles, at the very least. Not *that* much distance unless you were lost in a blizzard, of course.

She leaned against a pine tree, sending snow cascading from its branches onto her head, and squinted through the snow. She was lost again. This time, Micah wouldn’t be here to save her. Not in this weather. Figuring out how to get back to the village would take time and a miracle, and Amanda wasn’t too confident about her luck these days.

The image of Maddie’s face swam up from the depths of her consciousness and she pushed herself away from the tree.

Keep going.

Her sister was out here somewhere. And she would find her, whether she was alive or dead.

No, not dead. Don’t think like that.

But it was a possibility, wasn’t it? Days had passed. Maddie could’ve been buried in the snow by now, her body a solid

block of ice. And on a mountain as infinitely large as this one, it would be easy to get lost and never be found.

Amanda glanced behind her, warily taking a mental note of the way she'd come. Coming out here today was one of the stupidest things she'd ever done. The cold tore desperately at her, and she wanted more than anything to just lie here in the snow until the blizzard subsided. That would be even more stupid. If she gave in to her inclinations now, she'd be a goner.

She soon found herself pausing again, leaning with one hand against another tree trunk, the cold seeping through her glove. Maybe she *should* take a short break, try to warm herself up with some of her magic and keep going. She sank onto her haunches by the tree, rubbing her palms together, and closed her eyes in concentration.

I'm not going to die out here. Not if I can help it.

She was relieved to feel the sudden warmth spread all over her body. A sigh escaped her lips, and as she reopened her eyes, she saw the condensation fill the air before her face. It disappeared immediately, and her gaze landed on a figure less than twenty feet away.

Amanda frowned. Was that a deer? She hadn't come across any since morning. She squinted, hoping to make out whatever it was. It didn't look like an animal. Too tall. And it was standing on two legs.

A person.

Amanda's breath caught in her throat. Whoever it was, it was hard to tell whether they were male or female in this weather. Could that be Maddie?

“Hello?” she called out.

As if she could be heard in this wind. She straightened and rose to her feet, shielding her face with a gloved hand, trying to get a better look at the figure. Her heart drummed in her chest as a new possibility flickered in her mind. What if that wasn't Maddie? It could be Micah. He'd come after her the last time, hadn't he? And he'd found her. He knew Frost Mountain better than she ever could.

But what if it *wasn't* Micah? The thought gnawed at her, filling her with sudden nervousness. That could be Adrian or one of his men, for all she knew. Maybe someone had followed her and gotten ahead of her.

As she watched, the figure began walking toward her.

Shit.

Should she run? She doubted she would get very far. Between the cold and the rising snow, running more than a few feet would be difficult. She glanced over her shoulder, then back at the advancing figure. It was only about ten feet away now, still little more than a dark outline in the snow. Amanda's teeth chattered. There was no getting away at this point.

Please don't be Adrian, she thought, realizing just how close she was to death.

The figure drew nearer, close enough that Amanda could see its face through the blizzard. Her eyes bulged nearly out of their sockets and her mouth opened in a scream that she never heard.

Chapter Thirteen

Visitors in the Blizzard

Where is she? Micah asked himself as he stepped out of yet another cabin, his chest heaving with worry and desperation. She wasn't in any of the other cabins. By now, he'd woken up the entire village. People stood in their doorways and on porches, their gazes following him around the village. He could barely hear a thing over the wind, but it wasn't hard to put two and two together and figure out that they thought he'd lost his marbles.

She's gone, Micah, said a voice in his head. *She's somewhere out there in the blizzard.*

He knew that already, had known it even before he began scouring the village for her. No doubt, she'd somehow gotten it into her head to look for her sister without him and in these harsh conditions.

His jaw clenched with frustration. How could one person be so hardheaded? Even more frustrating was the realization that he could be just as stubborn when it came to the people he loved, the people he cared about like Theresa and... Amanda.

He couldn't just stand here and pray she made it back in one piece. Tracking her in this blizzard would be damn near impossible, but if there was even the slightest chance she was still out there alive, he had to find her. He hurried down the porch steps, shielding his face from the biting cold with one arm, and started for the woods. But he stopped dead in his

tracks when someone stepped out from between the trees. No, not one person. There were *two* of them. Micah's entire body went rigid. Surely, those weren't Blackclaws...?

He stood his ground, prepared to strike at whoever was making their way toward the village. Then they drew closer, and his eyes widened.

It was a woman. Auburn hair whipped around her head, she hugged her arms to her torso as she stumbled closer. And next to her, with one arm around her shoulder, was another woman with the same hair color. She was slightly taller, and although both women looked somewhat similar Micah instantly recognized the look on the latter's face—fierce, determined, and stubborn.

“Amanda!” He broke into a mad sprint through the snow, reaching both women in seconds. He threw his coat around the other woman's shoulders and led them to the nearest cabin, gesturing for them to sit on the porch steps. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a few villagers drawing closer.

“You're okay,” he told Amanda, grateful when Theresa appeared next to him.

The other auburn-haired woman shuddered. Micah looked at her for a moment. She looked like she was only hours away from hypothermia, but it wasn't the trembling extremities or the snow in her hair that drew his eye. It was the striking resemblance, the way she and Amanda held on to each other like they were the last two people in the world. It struck him then, who this woman had to be: Maddie.

“We need to get them both inside,” his mother said. “They must've been out there in the blizzard for hours.”

“Wow,” Maddie muttered, raising the small rubber cup to her lips.

Amanda gazed through the cracks in the cabin’s window. The blizzard had stopped just as suddenly as it had begun. The snow nearly reached the windowsill. Still, the villagers carried on as usual, chopping wood, feeding their animals, and tending to household chores.

Amanda gazed at her sister, once more thanking her lucky stars it wasn’t her frozen body she’d found out there. Since yesterday, when they’d staggered back to the village, Maddie had spent most of the time sleeping by the fire in Melanie’s cabin. Even now that she was awake, she still looked like she could use more rest, and Amanda knew it wouldn’t be long before she closed her eyes again. Theresa had offered whatever healing help was needed and was staying close by Maddie in case of emergency. A couple of times, she’d caught Amanda’s eye as she tended to Maddie, and Amanda hadn’t missed the look of gratitude on the older woman’s face.

“You’re telling me this place is... *magical*?” Maddie uttered the last word in a near whisper.

Amanda nodded. “And we’re pretty much stuck here for now.”

“Oh,” her sister said with uncertainty.

She was handling the information better than Amanda thought she would. Maybe she was still too shaken from her ordeal to absorb what Amanda was saying.

Maddie had told her that she'd been trudging through the snow ever since the day they crash-landed on the mountain. She and the haughty passenger who'd landed with them had woken up to find Amanda unconscious, and they'd both agreed to head down the mountain to find help. The other woman had abandoned Maddie a couple of days later for whatever reason and after trekking for days and finding nothing and no one, Maddie had given up and decided to head back up the mountain. It was by pure accident that she'd come upon Amanda.

Amanda couldn't imagine how horrible it must have been for her sister, alone out there with no magic, no food, and no warm clothing. It was a miracle she'd even survived.

"So," Maddie said, setting down the cup, "you mentioned something about these people having a thing against witches. We're not in any danger, are we?"

Amanda pressed her lips into a firm line. She crossed her legs, half-mesmerized by the flickering flames of the fire. "It's complicated."

"Try me."

Somehow, in the span of a few days, Maddie seemed more mature than Amanda remembered. There was something about having to survive on your own that forced you to grow up.

With a sigh, Amanda explained how wary the villagers had been of her when she first appeared in Aneira because of a curse that another witch had put on the mountain a long time ago. She told Maddie that the villagers felt she was endangering them just by being there and didn't trust her because that witch from long ago had turned on them and

trapped them on Frost Mountain. No one could leave, she told Maddie, even if they could manage to find a way out. Maddie looked upset by this information until Amanda explained how she'd saved Micah's mother, Theresa, from death at the hands of the Blackclaw clan of wolf shifters who were the enemies of the villagers who were Whitehounds, and that now, the villagers had started to accept her.

"Who's Micah?" Maddie asked, and Amanda saw the corners of her sister's mouth twitch. "You've mentioned his name an awful lot since I woke up."

Amanda knew what she was getting at. Heat rose to her cheeks. She shrugged, trying to sound casual, "Well, he did save my life. Plus he's alpha around here."

"Is that why you keep glancing out the window every few minutes?" Maddie asked. "We were separated for only a couple of days and you've already found a love interest?"

"More like a week actually," Amanda pointed out.

Maddie cocked an eyebrow.

"Okay, maybe," Amanda said, rolling her eyes. "I mean, he's handsome, that's for sure. And he acts sort of protective of me. It's hard not to be attracted to that."

"How far has this gone? Has he made a pass at you?"

"What!" Amanda spluttered. "This conversation is over."

Maddie chuckled knowingly, then yawned.

"Get some rest," Amanda said and helped wrap the blankets around her sister as she lay on her side by the fire.

Once Maddie was asleep, Amanda glanced out the window just in time to see Micah walking across the village toward his cabin. As she watched, Micah paused mid-stride and glanced in her direction. Amanda's eyes widened. Could he see her?

No, he wasn't looking directly at her. He seemed to be lost in thought. A second later, he shook his head and continued up the porch steps into his cabin.

She turned back to look at her sister. Maddie was sleeping peacefully by the fire and Amanda could feel a wave of relief wash over her. This wasn't at all how she expected this year's Thanksgiving to turn out, but at least Maddie was alive and they were together again.

She got to her feet and grabbed her parka. Now would be a good time to see Micah.

Chapter Fourteen

Scars and Recollections

Micah wasn't surprised to hear someone knocking on his cabin door. He just wasn't expecting to see *her* when he opened it.

"Hi," Amanda said.

He stared wordlessly at her. In the past few days, with so much happening, he'd barely seen her. She had her parka on, zipped up to her throat. She'd tucked her hair behind her ears and was gazing up at him. Micah felt his heartbeat quicken.

"Hey," he replied. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you today." He opened the door wider and stepped back to let her inside. "Why don't you come in?"

She flashed him a small smile that made his heart suddenly slam in his chest, and stepped inside. Theresa was out tending to a fae woman who'd sprained her ankle in the snow yesterday. He and Amanda were alone in the cabin.

"Have a seat," he said, gesturing to one of the makeshift stools near the fireplace, and they both sat down.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his bedroom door standing slightly ajar. He concentrated his gaze on Amanda. The light from the flames danced about her face, leaving a gleam in her eyes that made him want to get closer to her.

"I saw you come in a moment ago from Melanie's window," she began, staring into the flames instead of at him. "So, I figured I would come by and see you."

He lifted an eyebrow, grinning. “You were spying on me?”

“No,” she said her face turning red. “I... I just happened to be looking out the window, and I thought I should come by and see... I mean, I thought I should come by and see how you are doing.”

“I should be asking you the same thing,” Micah said. “I haven’t seen you since...well, I saw you yesterday, but I don’t think we’ve said more than a few words to each other in the past few days.”

She shrugged. “I’ve been okay, I guess. I can’t pretend the past couple of days haven’t been crazy, but at least I was able to find Maddie.”

“How is she doing?”

At this, she turned to look right at him. “She’s sleeping again right now. She needs her rest after all she’s been through. She’s lucky to be alive.”

So is Mother, he thought. The memory of that wolf attack still angered him. The only reason he hadn’t decided to strike back was because he was waiting for Adrian and the Blackclaws to come to him. He wanted to take them down on his own turf and on his own terms.

“You okay?”

Amanda was staring at him, a look of concern on her face. He looked down and saw that his fists were clenched in his lap.

“I am,” he replied. He cleared his throat. “I wanted to thank you again for what you did.”

She shook her head. “No need.”

“You saved my mother’s life, Amanda.”

“She wouldn’t have needed saving if I hadn’t been in the village to begin with,” she countered.

There was silence in the cabin for the next few seconds, except for the sound of the fire crackling softly.

Micah let out a sigh. “You need to stop looking at it that way. Even if you never stepped foot on this mountain, Adrian would’ve attacked us. This isn’t the first time. He’s wanted us gone for decades. And seeing as it was my mother who saved me from him all those years ago, I’m not surprised she’s the one he chose to attack.”

Her eyebrows knit closely together. “What do you mean?”

He stared into the flames, deciding if he wanted to share with her those memories, as painful as the injuries he’d sustained all those years ago.

“My mother and father were not supposed to marry because they were from different clans; she is Whitehound, and he was Blackclaw. When my mother gave birth to me, they kept it a secret from both clans for five years because they knew how much trouble it would cause. But when Adrian found out. He murdered my father in front of me and he asked me to come closer so he could do the same.”

“Whoa.”

He kept his gaze on the fireplace, but he could guess her brows were rising slowly.

“I had no idea what was really going on, of course,” he went on, “so, of course, I went to him. If my mother hadn’t appeared out of nowhere and taken off with me, I wouldn’t be sitting here today. We got away with nothing but a few scars.”

“Scars?” Amanda’s brows furrowed like she wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly.

Micah was still for a moment. Then he got to his feet and took off his coat. He heard a soft intake of breath as he took off his shirt to give her an unobstructed view of his back.

Amanda’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God,” she muttered as she rose to her feet and he heard a tiny quiver in her voice. “Adrian did this to you?”

“He could have done much worse.” He knew exactly what the scars looked like: two short claw marks running down his back and a much longer one in the middle. The scars had been smaller when he was still a child, but over the years they’d grown and stretched with his skin.

“As I said, I’m lucky to be alive. A split second later and... well...” He shrugged.

“Can I... touch them?”

The question caught him completely off guard. But he nodded.

He expected to feel the coldness of her gloved hand and was stunned when her bare skin came in contact with his. He felt an electric jolt race through his body. For a second, he stiffened.

She trailed her fingers down the length of his back as she felt the contours of his muscles and scars. He clenched his jaw,

fighting the urge to spin around and pull her close.

“This... this is a lot,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry, Micah.”

He lost the battle within seconds. He turned around slowly, staring deep into her face, and he thought he saw her eyes flicker with a question just before he leaned down and touched his lips to hers.

Micah is kissing me.

Amanda couldn’t pretend she hadn’t hoped something like this would happen. But when she saw those scars on his back, she had no words to express her shock. And then he’d turned and their lips met and no words were necessary.

Micah’s lips were silky and warm. She kissed him back, pleased at how natural it felt to kiss him. His hands were warm as they cupped her cheek. And when he pulled her closer so that their bodies were practically joined, she could feel him stiffening against her. A wave of anticipation crashed over her. For a fleeting moment, she entertained the possibility of the door swinging open and Micah’s mother walking in on them. Theresa might be friendly toward her now, but there was no telling how she’d react to the sight of her son making out with a witch.

Too late to stop now. She let her hands travel along his back. Scars or not, his taut, muscular body was a work of perfection. A consequence of years of hard work on the mountain, no doubt. She sighed softly into his mouth as their kiss deepened, sending tendrils of excitement through her body. This was amazing. This was heaven. This was...

This was perfect.

His hand came up to cup her cheek again, his fingers brushing her skin. *Ah*. His touch was warm, comforting, *thrilling*. The more he caressed her, the more she wanted to rip all her clothes off her body and lie beneath him on the hard, wooden floor. She doubted it would be long before the cold got to her, but between the fireplace and the heat from his body, she doubted that would be a problem.

She brought her hands to the small of his back and then around his torso, running her fingers along his washboard abs. When she placed her hands on his rock-hard chest, she felt his heart thudding against her palm.

As though reading her thoughts, Micah covered her jaw and neck with fiery kisses that left her feeling as if she might combust. In a fluid movement, he unzipped the parka, letting it fall at her feet. Her shirt came next. She stood barely breathing before him, her breasts exposed to his grey eyes. They gleamed with hunger, but it wasn't the same hunger she'd seen in Adrian's eyes.

This was pure *desire*.

“You're beautiful,” he said.

She smiled shyly at him, loving the heat of his gaze on her body. “I could say the same about you.”

He flashed her a grin that had her throbbing in the apex of her thighs. And then he closed the distance between them again, putting his arms around her. Amanda felt a slight jerk, and the next thing she knew she was lying on her back on the floor, and he was on top of her, his arms braced against the

floor on both sides of her. He planted another kiss on her lips, then slowly made his way down her jawline to her breasts. Then, without even the slightest hesitation, he took her nipple into his mouth.

A ragged moan escaped her lips and she quickly clamped a hand over her face to stifle the sounds that threatened to fill the cabin. Micah's mouth was hot and wet; he suckled her ravenously, flicking his tongue across her nipple, and her body bowed slightly off the floor. He suckled her some more, wrenching more stifled moans from her mouth as he kneaded her other breast. When he gently nibbled her nipple, she thought she just might explode from the pleasure and anticipation that filled her.

It was almost strange how connected she felt to this man. She had known him only a week and yet here she was freely giving herself to him. It usually took her much longer to decide if she wanted to be intimate with a man.

Not that it was a total surprise. She did feel like she related to him on some level. They weren't much different when she thought about it. Like him, she was a survivor, someone who'd learned the hard way just how tough the world could be. If she was being honest, the biggest difference between them was that he'd lived his entire life on this mountain instead of in the States.

Even now, amidst the spasms of her ecstasy, she found herself picturing in the back of her mind a bewildered Micah trying to navigate the streets of Chicago, coat wrapped tightly around him. The thought brought a tiny smile to her lips, instantly wiped away as a whimper parted them.

Her eyes slid shut, and she ran her fingers through his hair, wishing they could remain like this forever. But Micah had other ideas. One second, his hot lips were on her breast, and the next she felt the cool air on her distended nipple. She opened her eyes just in time to see him hovering close to her waist, a mischievous grin on his lips. He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of her trousers and tugged them down her legs, tossing them to the side. Then, still grinning, he nudged her legs apart with a hand and brought his face down her already throbbing core, flicking his tongue against her distended nub.

It took every fiber of her being to keep from crying out in pleasure. Each stroke of his tongue sent a shiver through her body, urging her toward climax. He remained as he was, pleasuring her clit, but Amanda felt his fingers inch into her, first one and then another. She sucked in a breath as he began to stroke her. She nearly clamped her thighs down on his head, but he held them firmly apart.

“Oh, God,” she gasped, raking her fingers through his hair. Her eyes fluttered open and shut again. “Oh, keep doing that.”

Her climax hovered near, and a soft cry escaped her throat. Again, her body bowed, and she covered her mouth just in time to stifle the screams that rose in her chest as her orgasm shot through her and she was lost in waves of pleasure. Micah continued to taste her, his fingers working as his tongue did until she was a quivering, dripping mess.

It seemed like an eternity had passed by the time she finally ceased her trembling. Micah rose between her legs, flashing her a glistening smile as she struggled to catch her breath, and

in the flickering light from the flames, she watched him take off the rest of his clothes. He knelt before her, his stalwart, pulsating erection swaying like a pendulum as he lowered himself onto her.

When he slid into her, Amanda thought she might pass out from the pleasure. He filled her utterly, completely.

Perfectly.

“You feel so warm,” he grunted, his features relaxing. “So amazing.”

He began to move, their bodies rocking together in a steady rhythm. Amanda’s eyes nearly rolled back in their sockets. She cradled his face in her hand, gazing deep into those grey eyes as he drove them closer and closer to their climax. A shudder raced through her as he picked up the pace, each stroke filling her with ecstasy until she thought she might pass out.

He kissed her again, and she moaned her pleasure into his mouth, wrapping her legs around his waist to keep him going. Her hands strayed again to his back, caressing the rigid expanse, wanting to feel every inch of this beautiful, marvelous man.

She knew her orgasm was on its way moments before she felt it. Micah’s thrusts grew more powerful, and her legs tightened around him as she came, trembling, over his cock. His mouth stifled her cries, and he maintained a steady rhythm even as her pleasure cascaded over her like a waterfall. Suddenly, his thrusts grew erratic, and she felt him shudder against her as he found his own quiet release. His movements slowed and then came to a trembling halt.

They lay entwined afterward, panting in the wake of their pleasure. Micah planted a kiss on her cheek and another one on her lips, and she let out a soft chuckle, still reeling from everything that had just happened and wondering if she'd imagined the whole thing.

She certainly hadn't, seeing as they still had their bodies wrapped around each other. Amanda let out a soft, satisfied sigh. If she was being honest, this was the best thing to happen to her since she landed on Frost Mountain.

A silly, giddy thought formed in the back of her mind: Maybe being marooned here wouldn't be so terrible after all.

Chapter Fifteen

A Lovely Thanksgiving Dinner

“Pass this piece to Maddie, will you?” Theresa was saying.

Micah took the plastic plate laden with a large piece of meat from his mother and handed it with a smile to Amanda, who blushed and passed it to her sister. Maddie took the plate from her, flashing her a smile and a wink that made Amanda’s cheeks burn even more.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” she told her sister.

Maddie’s grin widened. “It certainly isn’t the Thanksgiving I had in mind. I didn’t know you could celebrate with a deer instead of a turkey. And I don’t see any mashed potatoes or pumpkin pie.”

“To be fair, we don’t exactly have that many options here,” Amanda replied, and both women laughed.

The entire village sat in a wide circle around a large fire Micah and Daniel had set up. A large deer was cooking on a spit, its hide skinned to reveal its flesh, filling the air with a mouth-watering scent that pervaded Amanda’s nostrils. Everyone around the fire was talking and laughing, digging into the food Theresa and a few others had prepared. Through the flickering flames, Amanda caught sight of Melanie sitting across the circle from her, lost in conversation with another woman.

Micah nudged her and handed her another plate. “That’s for you.”

“Thanks,” she said, feeling a tingle race up her arm as his hand brushed hers. She dug in immediately, reveling in the taste that filled her mouth. “It’s delicious!”

Seated on Micah’s right, Theresa beamed proudly.

He leaned closer to Amanda. “You know, this probably sounds selfish, but I’m glad you landed on Frost Mountain. And I’m glad it was me who found you.”

“It does sound super selfish,” she told him, looking him in the eye. The corners of her mouth twitched. “But I’m glad you found me, too. And... I’m kind of glad to be here. I’ll take some more time, but I think I’ll get used to it. That’s what Melanie told me, at least.”

Micah gave her hand a light squeeze. She glanced across the circle just then and caught the blonde woman’s eye. Melanie shot her a knowing smile, and Amanda couldn’t help but blush.

It had been barely a day since she and Micah had made love in his cabin. She had to admit it had left its mark on her. Just being this close to him made her feel tingly. She hadn’t told Maddie what had happened, mostly because her sister had slept through the rest of the day, but she could see in Maddie’s eyes that she already knew. Still, the look Maddie gave her told her they had a lot more catching up to do.

“You’re not supposed to eat yet, you know,” Melanie said from across the circle, loud enough for everyone to hear. “We’re all supposed to say what we’re thankful for first.”

Theresa let out a groan, and a chuckle rippled through the village.

Melanie refused to be fazed. “I’ll go first,” she said, sucking in a breath. “I’m thankful for this big community. This... family. Crashing into this mountain all those years ago... well, that wasn’t exactly a great time for me, was it?”

Several people chuckled. Amanda resisted the insane urge to take another bite out of her deer.

“It was hard at first, but you all made living on this mountain so much easier. It’s been amazing. I’m grateful to have found you guys.”

There were a few *awws* and a couple of people clapped. Soon, others began to speak up. Amanda swallowed, realizing it would eventually be her turn to share. What could she say?

She glanced at Micah. She was definitely thankful for him. She wouldn’t be alive if it hadn’t been for him. And Maddie? Finding her alive had taken the weight of the world off her shoulders. She might be trapped on this mountain but at least she had her sister.

“Amanda?” said a voice, interrupting her thoughts.

She blinked. It was Theresa. She and several other people around the circle were staring at her expectantly.

“Huh?”

“It’s your turn to speak,” the older woman told her. “What are you thankful for?”

She stared back, eyes widening like a deer in headlights. A wave of awkwardness settled over her. “Uh...”

She never got to complete her statement.

“I’ll tell you what *I’m* thankful for,” said a deep voice.

Amanda turned toward the voice and gasped. The plate she was holding slipped out of her hands onto the snow as a pack of black wolves entered the village. There were at least a dozen of them, all growling with their razor-sharp teeth bared. Among them walked a few large men wearing black coats. And leading the entire pack, a familiar bloodthirsty blazing in his eyes, was Adrian Blackclaw.

“I’m thankful,” he said, spreading his arms wide, “for the opportunity to correct past errors and do what needs to be done. Sorry to break up your little feast, but I’ve come for the witch.”

Micah shot to his feet immediately, his heart thudding in his chest, his mind racing. Several others who’d been seated around the campfire got up and the sound of clothes ripping filled the air as they began to shift. A moment later, multiple grey wolves stood snarling at the newcomers, fur bristling. Most of the other villagers backed away slowly, whispering among themselves.

Micah clenched his jaw, glaring in Adrian’s direction. He’d figured the man would show up at some point, but between all that had happened yesterday with Maddie, the prospect of his uncle attacking the village had almost completely slipped his mind. He’d caught them off guard. Micah gazed around at Adrian’s pack, then back at him. His uncle wasn’t leaving without a fight.

Blood would be spilled today.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve coming here,” Micah spat, “after your last attempt.”

Adrian's gaze flickered toward Theresa, who stiffened in fear. "I knew when none of my men returned that they'd failed. Not to worry. This time, I don't think there will be any failures. Now, as for that witch of yours..."

He directed his gaze past Liam to Amanda, and his eyes narrowed. Suddenly his lips split in a broad grin. "It can't be. The witch has a sister. Another witch?" He chuckled. "What a lovely surprise. Looks like one more person will be dying today. I guess I do have a lot to be thankful for."

Micah heard Maddie whimper. One of the black wolves snarled in Amanda's direction. Micah stepped in front of her, glaring at Adrian.

The other man merely sighed. "I wish I could say I hoped it wouldn't come to this, but I'd be lying to you, nephew."

Then he gave the signal for the black wolves to attack.

Micah's pack struck back. The result was a chaotic blend of wolves and men tumbling in the snow, snarling, jaws snapping, knives flashing, and blood staining the snow. The villagers scattered, hurrying to their cabins amid screams of terror.

Micah turned his head just in time to see a black wolf charging his mother. The wolf lunged, jaws wide open, but Micah stepped out before his mother, grabbing the creature in midair and swinging it around, using the wolf's momentum to shove it into the fire. It tried to get back up, but promptly collapsed again, writhing and howling in the flames until it went silent.

Around them, the battle continued to rage. A few grey wolves were down, staining the snow with their blood. Micah counted two Whitehounds and one Blackclaw. Not good. He gazed through the chaos. Adrian was watching the whole thing with a pleased smile on his face. The man shifted his gaze, and their eyes met.

Adrian's eyes gleamed brighter. *Let's have a go, nephew,* they seemed to be saying.

Micah was vaguely aware that he was clenching his fists.

"Go. Take cover. Save yourselves," he said tersely to Theresa, Amanda, and Maddie.

"Micah—" Amanda began.

"Go!" he rasped. "I'll handle this."

With that, he rushed toward Adrian, prepared to leap at the bastard and rip him apart, but he'd only made it a dozen feet when a scream pierced the air. He ground to a halt and spun around just in time to see five black wolves surround Amanda and the other women, teeth bared.

"No!" he cried.

He started to rush toward them, but right at that moment, pain flared in his back. He collapsed in the snow, grunting as the searing sensation grew. *What the hell?*

Micah rolled over to see who his attacker was.

Sure enough, Adrian stood over him with a triumphant grin on his face.

"I've been waiting for this moment for twenty-five years," his uncle said, raising a clawed hand. "I guess today is my

lucky day. When I'm done with you, I'll kill the witches myself. Or do I kill them and your mother first?"

An enraged growl rose in Micah's throat. This was the same man who had murdered his father and the man who had tried to have his mother killed. And now he wanted Amanda dead, too. Micah had no idea what his chances would be in a fight against Adrian, but no harm could come to Theresa or the sisters, not while he still had a breath left in his lungs.

He rolled away before Adrian could strike him again. He concentrated as hard as he could and he began to transform. The changes began almost immediately: Dark fur sprouted from his skin, spreading all over his body as his bones shifted. In seconds, he stood on all fours, baring his teeth at Adrian. The man didn't even look the least bit fazed. Instead, excitement flickered in his eyes.

"You are a Blackclaw after all," he said with a sinister chuckle. "It's a shame I still have to kill you."

Adrian began shifting as well, and soon a large black wolf stood barely six feet away, those dark eyes fixated on Micah. They began circling each other, fur bristling; the cold air was thick with tension along with the smell of burning wood and the metallic tang of blood from the battle raging around them.

The other wolves continued to circle the three women, who huddled together. Micah caught a glimpse of Amanda's face. That fierce, determined look was growing in her eyes. His stomach did a nosedive. All three women were outnumbered as it was. Even with her magic, Micah doubted Amanda could do much against five wolves. If anything, she was going to get herself killed.

He couldn't let that happen.

Adrian's muscles rippled beneath his skin. A low growl rose in his throat, a calculating look in his eyes. With a sudden roar, Micah lunged forward, claws extended, his jaws open wide. Adrian simply ducked to the side, and just as Micah hurtled past him, he caught a glimpse of Adrian's claws. Pain flared in his side, and he went down.

Quick as lightning, he was back on his feet, growling and snarling as he struck again. This time, Adrian didn't try to dodge the attack. He stood his ground, and suddenly both wolves were rolling in the snow, trying to claw each other's eyes out. Micah's jaws snapped shut just inches away from Adrian's snout. There was another guttural growl, and Adrian tossed him aside.

He'd barely hit the snow when Adrian leaped at him, murder in his eyes. Micah was quick to react. He rolled out of the way, springing to his feet just as Adrian's feet touched the ground. Sensing an opening, he struck, his jaw clamping down on his uncle's exposed shoulder, and a deafening howl filled the clearing.

The taste of blood filled Micah's mouth. If he'd moved a little quicker he might have struck Adrian's jugular.

Adrian staggered to his feet, bleeding from the gash in his shoulders. For a moment, he growled at Micah, and the latter braced himself for an attack.

Instead, Adrian turned and raced toward Amanda and the other women as quickly as his injury could permit him.

Something inside Micah snapped.

NO!

He broke into a sprint, colliding with Adrian before his uncle could reach the women. Adrian lashed out with his claws, and Micah registered pain in his flank. They thrashed around in the snow, grappling for control and dominance. Half-blinded by the snow, he opened his jaws, clamping down on whatever flesh he could find...

Suddenly, Adrian went limp underneath him. Micah opened his jaws, gazing down at the twitching form in the snow. Adrian's flank was covered in blood, but it was nearly impossible to tell whose it was. The wolf's shoulder glistened with blood, as did his latest injury—a deep gash in his neck where Micah's teeth had penetrated. Adrian's eyes were wide, though whether with pain or panic, was unclear. Finally, he went completely still, the fire in his eyes fading to nothingness, leaving behind nothing but glassy, unfocused orbs.

He's gone.

Micah stepped away from the body. It took him another moment to process the entirety of what he'd done.

He's... dead.

It occurred to him then that the battle raging around him had suddenly ceased. The village was already a mess of bloodstained snow, but all the surviving wolves, Whitehound and Blackclaw alike, were still, their gazes locked on him as though appraising the scene before them. Even the wolves circling Amanda and the others had stopped. A deathly quiet settled over the village, broken only by the murmurings of spectators and the groans of the wounded and dying.

And then, one by one, the wolves all bowed their heads. Micah gazed around, frowning in puzzlement. And then it dawned on him—three thoughts filling his mind all at once.

He was both a Blackclaw and a Whitehound.

Adrian Blackclaw was dead.

He was alpha now—not of one clan but of *two*.

He turned to face Amanda, who was staring back at him with a mix of confusion and amazement. Behind her, Theresa looked like she'd just come face to face with an apparition. Her mouth hung open as she struggled to form the right words.

“You...” she said. “You’re...”

It's over now.

He could hardly believe it. Decades of conflict, all ended in one afternoon. Even more so, he was still alive. He was bleeding from his sides, the snow beneath him turning darker by the second. The injuries Adrian gave him were deeper than he'd realized. But he was still alive.

With a strained grunt, he shifted back to human form, standing, unclad before the entire village. His body was covered in blood, and he could feel his consciousness slowly waning. And yet he had eyes only for one person. Amanda was safe. She looked shaken, as did her companions, but otherwise seemed perfectly fine.

He turned to the rest of the village. The wolves and people had lifted their heads. Scores of eyes gazed back at him expectantly.

You're alpha of both clans now.

“This fight is over,” he declared.

And then exhaustion crashed over him. His eyes drooped, and he felt his world tilt. Right before he hit the snow, he saw Amanda rush toward him.

Epilogue

“Ow! That hurts!” Melanie exclaimed, making a face.

“Good,” replied Theresa, wrapping the cloth tightly around the woman’s forearm. Her forehead creased as she struggled to fasten the knot. “It’s supposed to hurt. You hurt yourself trying to play hero yesterday.”

“I was just trying to get as many people inside as I could.” The blonde woman rolled her eyes. “Didn’t exactly cross my mind that the stairs were slippery.”

“Well, be more careful next time.” With a barely concealed smile, Theresa turned away from Melanie and climbed off her porch. Her gaze met Amanda’s and she paused in mid-stride.

“Micah’s fine, in case you’re worried,” she told her. “His wounds were deep, but he’s healing quickly. He should be fully recovered by this afternoon.”

Amanda nodded, feeling a sudden gratitude toward this woman. She watched as Theresa went down the porch steps and headed across the snow to another cabin, then shifted her gaze to the sky. The morning sun cast a warm glow over the village. It had snowed last night, leaving a fresh coat of white on everything. Daniel and several other men had carried off the bodies of the dead, but they still needed nature to cover whatever traces remained of yesterday’s battle.

She still could hardly believe what had happened. Wolves trying to kill Theresa was one thing. Adrian storming the village with his pack and promptly attacking everyone was

something else. Thanksgiving dinner had been going great, and then everything had suddenly gone south.

Next to her, Maddie sighed. “It’s certainly been a week to remember.”

Amanda scoffed. “Tell me about it.”

There had been dozens of casualties from the fight and many had been badly injured. Theresa with the help of a few other villagers had been working nonstop since yesterday, trying to attend to everyone.

But other than that, things seemed to have worked out quite well. With Adrian gone and Micah the victor, the Blackclaw clan wouldn’t be making any more trouble, especially now that they had a new alpha.

She looked around the village. All sorts of people from both clans were helping out with chores. In a way, it was almost as though decades of hostility had been reversed, although she couldn’t help noticing the distrustful gazes a few Whitehounds gave the Blackclaws near them.

Melanie came to sit on the porch steps next to both women. “I never thought I’d end up... God knows how many thousands of miles away from our world,” she muttered. “But it’s been one hell of a thrill ride.”

Amanda couldn’t entirely disagree. With Adrian gone, she was no longer in danger, which meant that, for the first time, maybe she’d get to enjoy being here without the threat of death hanging over her head. With Adrian gone, the clans were uniting under their new alpha—or so it seemed. She doubted anyone else would be coming after her for being a witch now.

And she could be with the man she loved.

Ah, yes.

She and Micah were going to have a lot to talk about once he recovered. She wanted to know everything about him and Frost Mountain. There would be lots of talking, maybe with a few kisses snuck in between the words.

“I’ve only been in this village for a couple of days,” Maddie said, staring out into the distance, “and I think I’ve seen a lot more than I figured I’d ever see in my life.”

Amanda’s lips twitched. Then a sudden thought occurred to her. “Hey, remember that other woman who sat with us on the plane? The one who kept complaining?”

It was Maddie’s turn to scoff. “You mean the one who abandoned me out there in the cold?”

“That’s the one. What do you think happened to her?”

Maddie shrugged. “Beats me. Maybe she found another village or something. Or maybe she’s, you know... gone.”

Silence hung in the air for a moment. “Maybe we can talk about that later. For now, it looks like your Prince Charming just woke up from his nap.”

She pointed, and Amanda followed her gaze. Sure enough, Micah was standing outside on his porch, staring around at the camp. Several of the people working had already stopped, staring at him as though waiting for him to say something. Micah’s gaze traveled further, and suddenly he was gazing right at her. A grin spread across his face.

“Uh... I’ll be right back,” Amanda said to Maddie and Melanie.

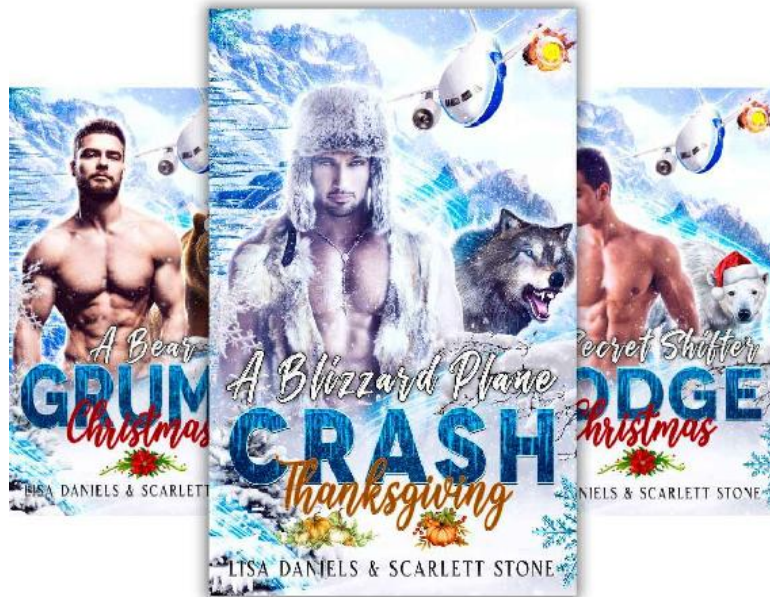
“Oh, take as much time as you want,” her sister replied with a chortle.

Amanda returned her gaze to Micah. He was still staring at her. A flutter filled her chest.

Smiling, she got up and hurried down the porch steps to meet him.

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