



A Midlife Vanishing Trick

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: It's not every day you nearly run over your long-lost husband.

It's bad enough that he disappeared for four years without warning... But now he's back and acting like he didn't abandon me in this small town.

According to him, he was stuck in some faraway place... But I've never even heard of Frost Mountain before.

I'd be a fool to let him waltz back into my life...
But I've never been able to resist this sexy snow leopard shifter.
How much longer before I give in to his advances?
I'm not sure I want to find out.
He broke my heart once already.
What's to say he won't do it again?

And that's not my only problem.
My husband brought someone back with him.
Someone dangerous.
Someone who won't stop until he gets his revenge.

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Prologue

Frost Mountain

Stanley knew he was a dead man. And that was before he saw the pit.

“Move,” said a gruff voice, and a hand shoved him deeper into the dark tunnel. He stumbled but regained his footing in time. He didn’t bother to glance over his shoulder and see who had pushed him. It had to be one of the collectors—Johan, most likely.

Since he’d been marched into the cave, his eyes had swiveled about, taking in whatever details they could. In the semidarkness, there were scanty details available. The ground beneath his feet was uneven. Rocks and grooves made it almost impossible to walk on without tripping. Overhead, he could just make out a few stalactites looming like Swords of Damocles, harbingers of the doom that awaited him.

The cave had been narrower when he’d first entered it, but it widened the deeper in they traveled. Stanley’s inner snow leopard growled with discomfort. It was bad enough that he had ropes binding his wrist, digging into his flesh. The cave was even worse. He’d rather be out in the open, running in the snow among the coniferous trees, or outside the village from whence he’d been so mercilessly dragged some days ago. Kirnham had been his village, but not anymore.

Guilt clawed at his chest. Were any of the townspeople of Kirnham still alive? He’d done his best to defend the town when the Collectors showed up before Johan snuck

behind the man and knocked him down. He winced at the memory and the accompanying dull throb in the base of his skull. For all he knew, the people of Kirnham were all gone.

He stared down at his hands before him, bound not too tightly but enough that he'd be overpowered and knocked out or worse by the time he managed to break free and try to make a run for it. He sucked in a deep breath, inhaling the cold, thin air of the cave, and an idea crept into his mind: He could try to shift. That would shock the Collectors and give him at least a couple of seconds of advantage. As a snow leopard, he could more quickly escape this dreadful cave and—

“Don't even think about it,” said the same voice that had barked at him earlier.

It had to be Johan speaking. Stanley had rarely seen the man, except for a few stolen glimpses, but he could picture the man's reddish beard twitching as he spoke and his grey, wolfish eyes boring into the back of his skull.

Stanley pulled in a ragged breath, making an effort to remain calm. This had to be the end of the road for him. They'd been traveling for ... how long? Four days. Four days since his capture and that of a few others who'd dared to stand up to the Collectors invading Kirnham. His stomach growled painfully. The whole time, he'd been given only enough food and water to keep him alive for the duration of the journey.

As he trudged deeper into the cave, the air grew warmer and was mixed with the stench of sweat and ... something else that he couldn't quite recognize. Whatever it was, it reminded him that death awaited him at the end of the trip.

He sighed. It was unsettling how suddenly death could arrive. One second, you were trying to survive in a village on a mountain designed to kill and destroy, and the next, it was all over. Even more disturbing was life itself, striking suddenly and without mercy. One minute, all was well, and the next, four years had gone by.

It had been four years since he'd arrived on Frost Mountain. Four years since he'd somehow found himself in this god-forsaken dimension after riding through a portal on his horse and nearly getting crushed to death in the snow. Four years since, he'd been forced to leave everything behind: his town, his ranch, his world, his life ... his wife.

His bound hands slowly reached up to touch the locket just below his collarbone as if to make sure it was still there. It was surprisingly warm to the touch. Were he not bound and being marched toward his doom, he'd have paused to take a look at the old photo of the beautiful woman smiling back at him. Over the years, it had become almost a talisman, one of the few things keeping him sane on this mountain of horrors. It was his good luck charm.

Not that his luck had been particularly great of late. A wry smile dragged across his face.

It's the end of the road, Stanley.

Johan gave him another shove, and he stumbled farther into the cave. The tunnel ended, and he found himself in a much bigger cave. Stanley looked around, and his breath froze in his throat. The cave was larger than anything he'd anticipated; larger stalactites protruded overhead from a ceiling that he couldn't see. The cave was dimly lit, with only a few lights flickering on the walls, enough for him to at least see more than a few feet ahead of him.

"My God," he breathed.

Another shove jerked him out of his daze. "Move!"

There were other people in the cave—Collectors and prisoners alike—either standing or on their knees. The stench of death was stronger here. Or was it fear? He looked

around again, and something else caught his eye.

What in the ...?

His first thought was that it was just a giant shadow. But what he saw seemed darker even than the flickering shadows cast across the cave. As he drew closer, a gust of wind hit his face, and he realized he was staring at a chasm, one so wide he could barely begin to comprehend it. It seemed to beckon him, promising him death.

Stanley had been struggling to stay calm this whole time, but the sight of the chasm shattered his resolve. A tremble raced through his body, settling at his knees, and each step forward became a challenge. His heart thundered in his chest, and a ringing filled his ears.

Johan forced him further toward the pit. “Kneel.”

Stanley hesitated for a second, then dropped to his knees, barely ten feet away from the gaping mass of darkness. Another gust of wind blasted him, and a shiver traveled up from the base of his spine. He glanced at the prisoners on either side of him: men on their knees lined up before the pit—prisoners awaiting their execution. There were a few he recognized.

This is it, he thought. The end.

“What is this?”

A voice ricocheted through the cave, deep and booming. Even when he turned his head, Stanley couldn't see to whom it belonged, but he sensed a sudden presence in the cave. The temperature in the cave climbed a few degrees. There was a collective shuffle as the Collectors dropped to their knees.

There was no mistaking who was the ruler of this place. The Collectors all worked for one person. Everyone who'd been on Frost Mountain long enough or kept their ear to the ground knew or had at least heard of Grim Jim, the Ice Melter, even though many believed him to be merely a myth.

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The voice Stanley heard and that settled in his bones didn't feel much like a myth.

"What ... what's going on?" one of the prisoners on his left said.

"Silence!" snapped one of the Collectors, and Stanley heard a heavy thud. "You are in the presence of the Ice Melter, the immortal, most powerful dragon ever to grace Frost Mountain. You would do well to hold your tongue."

"Ice Melter," Johan said, "these are prisoners from our latest raids."

"I sent you to bring me treasures," Grim Jim muttered, and the entire cave seemed to rumble.

"We did as you asked. We scoured the towns and villages for all we could find, and we brought you the treasures you requested."

"And why are these men here?"

"These are the survivors among those who dared to resist us. We would've chopped their heads clean off, but we thought it best for you to decide their fate."

In the silence that followed, Stanley found himself uncomfortably aware of how terrified he was. He was trembling now worse than ever, and he'd stared into the depths of the pit. The darkness seemed to gaze back at him, promising an unfathomable end. Whatever fate lay ahead of him in this pit, it had to be worse than death.

“I see ...” Grim Jim said, his voice jerking Stanley’s attention away from the pit.

“Yes, Ice Melter. These men can beg for mercy, ask that you spare their lives, and let them join the Collectors. Or they may face whatever lies at the bottom of the pit.”

The Ice Melter chuckled. Out of the corner of his eye, Stanley saw a stalactite break loose and drop from the ceiling into the pit. He listened carefully for the sound of the stalactite hitting the bottom of the chasm, but there was none.

Oh, God.

“Interesting.”

Stanley heard footsteps and he imagined that Grim Jim was walking across the cave. The air grew even warmer and stiller. Stanley tried to stop his shoulders from trembling.

“The choice is up to them.” Grim Jim said suddenly. “Any man here who chooses to join my Collectors today will be spared. Anyone else ...”

He didn’t need to finish his sentence. The pit was right there in front of everyone.

Stanley’s heartbeat pounded in his ears. He forced his gaze away from the pit and stared instead at his bound hands. The Ice Melter’s words continued to echo in his mind: The choice is up to them.

Maybe this didn’t have to be the end for him. All he had to do was join the Collectors, and he would be safe.

Even as the desperate thought occurred to him, his stomach churned at it. The Collectors were among the most feared and resented people on Frost Mountain, and

for good reason. They did all of Grim Jim's dirty work, pillaging and murdering at the Ice Melter's whims. Innocent people died or suffered losses at the hands of Collectors like Johan and the others who had brought him to this very spot before the pit.

He was so lost in thought that he barely registered the movement in his peripheral vision. Only when he turned his head did he see a prisoner get shoved into the pit. The man fell into the darkness, eyes wide with terror, hands still bound before him, his mouth open in a scream that sent a cold shiver down Stanley's spine, even though he barely heard the sound over the drumming in his ears.

A second later, the man was gone, completely engulfed by the darkness.

A hand suddenly clamped down on Stanley's shoulder, jerking him to his feet.

"Your turn," Johan said. The man brought his face closer to Stanley's. "Choose your fate. A fighter like you ... I saw the way you defended your village. You'd be useful to us here. You can join us, or you can follow the other prisoner and find out what's at the bottom of the pit."

Stanley expelled a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. He knew that nobody who went into that pit came back out. Even people who didn't know how deep it was or what lurked in its depths knew to be afraid of the gnawing mass of darkness.

I don't want to go in there, Stanley thought.

The alternative wasn't so great either.

"Don't waste our time," Johan snapped. "Choose, or I'll choose for you."

“I’ll never be one of you Collectors,” Stanley spat.

The other man chuckled. “I thought you might say that.”

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Quick as lightning, he started dragging Stanley toward the edge of the pit.

“Good riddance,” the man said.

Johan shoved him hard, but Stanley was quicker. He grabbed the man’s arm, holding on to it for all he was worth. Johan’s eyes widened, and he cried out as the momentum of his push sent them both tipping over the edge.

“No!” he yelled.

“If I’m dying,” Stanley said, “I’m not dying alone—you’re coming with me.”

And together, screaming, both men tumbled into the void.

Chapter One

The Man in the Road

“Come on, you can do it, Allison.”

Allison Reyes shook her head as if her best friend could see her through the phone. “It’s not that easy, Celine. What am I supposed to do, walk up to some random guy and say, ‘Hey, I think you’re really cute. Want to come back to my ranch with me tonight?’”

“That’s not quite how I’d do it,” Celine said, “but pretty much.”

Allison groaned. She glanced around, taking in the bar. The Blue Cicada was quite large for a small town like Torpe. From her seat in the corner booth, she could see everything, from the other customers at other tables, eating fries and talking with one another over beers, to just past the entrance door and a neon pink sign where half a dozen men stood around a pool table arguing. She smelled cigarette smoke and scowled at the continuous squeaking of the overhead fans.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been here, and she wouldn't be here tonight if Celine hadn't convinced her to get out of the ranch house and grab a drink or two. If she'd known the real reason her friend had urged her to come here, she'd probably be in bed by now, preparing for just another slow, boring morning on Reyes Ranch.

Allison tightened her grip on her glass, and her cocktail sloshed around a bit. "I'm not even dressed like I belong in a bar," she said. "I'm wearing a summer dress, Celine."

At forty-three, Allison never imagined she would find herself sitting by herself in a corner booth in some small-town bar, but life had a funny way of messing with you, dealing you cards you never expected. At her age, she should be at home on the ranch with her husband. But the world was unfair. Sometimes, all you could do was be grateful that things were as good as they were.

"I'm not sure I can do this," Allison said.

"Sure, you can," Celine assured her. "And I'm here to make sure of that."

"Here? You're not even in Torpe, Celine. You're all the way in New Hampshire."

There was a momentary pause. "Touché."

Allison could barely resist smirking. She and Celine Carter had been friends for the

past three decades. They'd both grown up in Torpe and had met in high school. Since then, they'd been pretty much inseparable, even when they went to college. It wasn't until after they'd both graduated that they went their separate ways. Celine had stayed in Chicago, where they'd both studied and Allison, preferring peacefulness and familiarity, had returned to Torpe.

Despite being so close, she and Celine had always been different. Celine was the more outgoing, adventurous type, always seeking greener pastures and newer thrills. Right now, she has a corporate job in the city. Allison, on the other hand, was more attuned to rural life, which Torpe provided.

"Allison," Celine said, "you need to move on. You're a beautiful elfish woman—"

"I'm only half-elf," Allison corrected. "More like a quarter elf if I'm being honest. There haven't been elves in my family since my grandmother."

"That's not my point," Celine told her. "You can't keep waiting for a husband who left you to magically return."

Allison winced. She knew her friend didn't mean to be hurtful with that comment, but it stung anyway.

She'd met Stanley Reyes in college in Chicago. They'd met at a party that Celine had practically dragged her to. As it turned out, Stanley wasn't having fun either.

Over the next few weeks, they got to know each other better. Allison was surprised to learn that Stanley had also grown up in Torpe, although their paths had never crossed.

It wasn't long before they started dating. Their mutual attraction was intense and impossible to ignore. Stanley was kind, funny, and intelligent, not to mention easy on the eye.

They got married after they graduated college. Like Allison, Stanley had every intention of moving back to Torpe in hopes of carrying on his family's ranch business. For the next thirteen years or so, they'd lived together on that ranch in bliss.

But then suddenly, everything had turned upside down.

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It began with a simple argument, one of many they'd had over the course of their marriage. Allison couldn't remember what it was even about. All she knew was that four years ago, Stanley had disappeared while riding his horse on the ranch property as he often did to clear his mind.

He never returned to the house that night or even the next day. By the second day, she was beside herself with worry. Stanley hadn't even called or sent a text. It wasn't like him. She struggled not to dwell on the thought that something might have happened to him.

As the days passed, she found herself unable to keep waiting in the hope he would return and decided to alert the police. They organized a search party, and for days—or was it weeks—they scoured the entire town looking for any sign of Stanley Reyes. They had no luck. It was almost as if he'd vanished into thin air.

Or skipped town.

Whatever the case, Allison grew more uneasy. If he'd been murdered or had an accident and died, there would've been some trace of him in Torpe. But there had been no sign of Stanley or the horse he'd been riding the last time she saw him. The only plausible explanation for his disappearance was that he'd taken off, but no one in town had seen anyone riding through the streets on a horse.

He was simply ... gone.

Allison had to admit that she'd been a complete mess when he first vanished. For two years, she experienced a deep melancholy and seldom left Reyes Ranch. At times, she

would find herself sitting on the front porch and staring out at the barns and the expanse of grassy field, half-expecting her long-lost husband to magically appear with open arms, gleaming blue eyes, and a big smile on that face she loved to gaze at so much.

It had taken support from Celine and a few of the townsfolk for Allison to pull herself together. And even now, after four years since Stanley's disappearance, it still hurt to think about what had happened.

Allison supposed it wouldn't have been so terrible if she'd at least gotten the closure of understanding why he'd disappeared. There were so many possible reasons, none of which she wished to entertain for too long. She wasn't sure which had pierced her heart more: the fact that he'd vanished out of the blue or that he hadn't bothered to reach out to her, not even once.

"I have moved on," she told Celine, feeling fairly foolish even as she said the words and knowing her friend would roll her eyes at her.

"Allison, you still use his last name. You need to really move on, turn your life around, find someone new to talk to."

Allison sighed. "I guess you're right. But where do I even begin?"

"Well," Celine said, "coming to the bar was a good start, although being on your phone the whole time doesn't exactly scream available to the guys there."

"Being on my phone is probably the only reason I'm still sitting here," Allison countered. "This isn't my style. I'm not exactly one for bars."

"You'd rather sit alone in that old ranch house?"

“Well ... it’s peaceful there. Not much going on.”

“To be fair, there’s not much going on in this town anyway. See why I asked you to come to New Hampshire last year?”

Allison pressed the phone harder against her ear. “You’ve always been the more outgoing one. I like it here.”

“I’m sure you’ll love it over here.”

Allison raised her cocktail to her lips and took a sip. “The city life’s too chaotic for my liking.”

“And Torpe’s too ... boring for mine. I’m just a girl, you know.”

She frowned. “Celine, you’re a forty-two-year-old woman with two degrees working as a software engineer for one of the biggest companies in the US.”

Her friend snickered. “Jeez, you small-town folk don’t keep up much with social media references, do you?”

“I mean, it’s not like we ...” Alison trailed off, peering over the rim of her glass at the man sauntering across the bar to meet her. “Uh, we have a problem.”

“What is it?”

“I think there’s a man headed my way.”

She wasn’t wrong. The man’s eyes were on her. There was no mistaking what that meant. The man was medium height—perhaps slightly taller than she was. He wore a checkered shirt, jeans, and boots and had a red hat pulled over a shock of hair. When

she met his gaze, he grinned in a way that made her stomach squirm.

“A man?” Celine’s voice had risen an octave. “That’s perfect! I’ll leave you two to talk. I’m going to hang up now. Next time you call me, you’d better have secured a date—”

“Wait, Celine—”

“—or a one-night stand.”

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“Wait, what?”

“Adios!”

The line went dead.

The man reached her booth and took his seat across the table from her. “I hope I didn’t interrupt your phone call.”

Before Allison could respond, he spoke again. “What’s a pretty woman like you doing alone in a bar like this?”

She groaned inwardly. “That’s a line no woman’s ever heard before.”

The man wasn’t bad-looking, but he certainly wasn’t the type of guy she’d give a second glance. His dark gaze darted from her face to her chest and back, and she recoiled slightly.

“I’ve been watching you for a while,” he said. “I figured I’d come and say hi. My name’s Jeff.”

“Hi, Jeff.”

“Say, you’re Allison Reyes, aren’t you? Haven’t seen much of you in a while.”

Of course, he knew who she was. Pretty much everyone knew everyone else in this small town, especially if you’d been here a while.

She clutched her drink almost protectively. “I ... I don’t go out much. I’m mostly on the ranch.”

“Not much to do in this old town, so I get it.” He nodded, his gaze shifting again. He pointed. “What’s that?”

Her hand immediately flew to her chest, and she realized what he’d been referring to.

“Oh, it’s ... it’s a locket.”

Her fingers traced a path along the golden chain supporting the locket. She opened it. Sure enough, Stanley’s face was grinning back at her. It was a photo of him from their college days. Younger though he was, there was no mistaking those blue eyes and that dirty-blond hair of his.

Her heart gave a painful throb. The locket had been Stanley’s gift to her shortly after their wedding. He had one just like it, with a picture of her inside. Allison bit her lip. She hadn’t taken the locket off since her husband’s disappearance, not even once.

Moved on, she thought, resisting a scoff. Sure, Allison.

Jeff’s gaze drifted lower. “You got a man, Allison?”

She blinked at him, unsure how to answer that question. Technically, she still was married, although her husband was nowhere to be seen. “Uh ...”

“Nice ring you’ve got there,” he said as an explanation. “Got me wondering what you’re doing in here if you’ve got a husband at home. Unless ... you’re looking for something different,” he said, leering.

Allison could feel her discomfort growing. “Look, uh, I’m not really interested in—”

“Oh, come on.” Jeff reached out and placed a large, clammy hand on hers. “No need to go looking around anymore. You’ve found me, haven’t ya?”

She quickly withdrew her hand. Coming here had been a terrible idea. “Look, I’m just—”

“Everything all right?” said a woman’s voice.

Allison looked up. She hadn’t even seen the barmaid approaching. The woman was about her age, with flaming red hair pulled back into a hasty ponytail. She wore a blue shirt over denim shorts, and she held a tray laden with empty glasses in one hand.

The barmaid looked them over, her gaze settling on Allison. “Need anything? A drink, maybe?”

“Why don’t you go back to wiping the counter, Penny?” Jeff said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I’m talking to this pretty gal here.”

Penny frowned. “Doesn’t seem like she’s interested in talking to you. Seems to me like you’re bothering her, Jeff.”

“Of course not,” he replied. He turned to Allison. “Right?”

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She blinked at him.

“Stop bothering my customers, Jeff,” Penny said sternly.

The man merely rolled his eyes. He rose to his feet and wandered off, presumably in search of some other lonely woman in the Blue Cicada.

“Sorry about that,” Penny said once he was out of earshot. She flashed Allison a smile. “I hope he didn’t make you too uncomfortable.”

Allison shrugged. “Saved by the barmaid, I suppose.”

The woman’s smile broadened. “I’ve been working here for the past couple of years, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in here before or around town, for that matter. What brings you to the Blue Cicada?”

“My best friend, who I am going to have a word with once I get home,” Allison said. “Speaking of which ...”

She rose to her feet, giving Penny a small smile. “I should get going. It’s getting late.”

Penny regarded her for a moment with knit eyebrows, then left to attend to other customers. She left the Blue Cicada, got into the old pickup truck in the corner of the parking lot, and drove home, making a mental note to give Celine an earful about steering her into bars with annoying men.

Other than a few lit-up buildings, neon signs, and streetlamps, the streets of Torpe were dark. There were few pedestrians on the sidewalks—by now, most people were already in their homes. Not much happened in this town. Not anymore.

Through the windshield, she could just make out the dark outline of Murton Ridge, looming over the entire town. The mountain stretched farther than the eye could see and was home to three different towns. Allison often imagined that Murton Ridge cut off the towns from the rest of the world. For example, Torpe was an old, boring town. No wonder Celine had left for the city.

Was that why Stanley had disappeared, too?

The thought struck her without warning, and as she tried to dislodge it from her mind, her grip tightened on the steering wheel.

Life in Torpe might give someone a plausible reason to want to escape, but it certainly was not bad enough to cause someone to vanish without a trace and abandon your wife and the life you'd built with her. It made zero sense. Stanley had never complained about living in Torpe. Like Allison, he'd always preferred small-town life to life in the city.

She drove past a flickering traffic light, shaking her head. It was almost as if this town had begun to deteriorate after Stanley's disappearance. When he'd been around, the place had been livelier, with flourishing businesses and a growing population. Now, it was slowly becoming a mass graveyard of potential.

Still, it was her home.

Allison didn't see herself leaving anytime soon.

She steered the truck around the nearest corner, and was speeding down the long,

dark road when her headlights landed on a figure standing in the middle of the road. Allison's heart flew into her throat, and she turned the wheel sharply, swerving to avoid colliding with the man. She slammed on the brakes and brought the truck to a screeching halt.

"What in the world ...?" she breathed.

For the next few seconds, she remained in the driver's seat, panting. Then she climbed out of the truck, frowning at the man she'd just narrowly avoided flattening. He was standing in front of her truck and was illuminated by the headlamps.

"Why were you just standing in the middle of the road like that? I could've hit ..." her eyes slowly widened "...you."

Taking in the sight of the man, she gasped involuntarily. He was slightly older than she was and wore nothing but dark trousers and boots, his chest completely exposed. She let her gaze travel over his barrel of a chest, to the veins traveling along his bulging arms. A few scars marked his body, crisscrossing his forearms and abs. The man's beard was dark and thick, with flecks of grey in it.

"Oh, my God," she gasped, a hand slowly rising to her chest.

But those details were all secondary to Allison. The body could have belonged to literally anyone. But there was no mistaking the blue eyes gazing back at her from beneath a tangle of dirty-blond hair.

Suddenly, she felt lightheaded. "This can't be real," she murmured. "This can't be—"

That was all she managed to say before her vision began to fade. She fell, and two strong arms shot out to catch her before she hit the ground.

Chapter Two

“I Got Lost”

The odds of nearly getting run over by your long-lost wife of four years were low but never zero.

His breath frozen in his throat, Stanley gazed at the woman lying unconscious in his arms and struggled to form a thought. The woman's hair, dark except for a streak of grey, fell past her face, swaying beneath her head like a curtain as he held her. Her slender body was still, except for the gentle rise and fall of her chest. The woman's eyes were closed, but a moment ago, he'd seen them, brown and wide and filled with incredulity. He let his gaze drop to her slightly parted lips, traveling lower to a gold chain gleaming on her neck. Attached to it was a small pendant. A locket.

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I'm dreaming, aren't I? he thought, yet he already knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was no dream.

Neither was finding himself in the middle of the woods after falling through that void with Johan's hands wrapped around his throat.

He'd thought he must be dreaming then when he found himself lying on solid ground, completely alone and surrounded by trees. He wasn't in pain—at least nothing like what he expected to feel after plummeting through the depths of that chasm. And when he'd opened his eyes, the darkness that greeted him had been dotted with tiny pinpoints of light scattered across his vision—stars.

For a while, Stanley thought he might be dead, that the fall must have killed him, and that this was some sort of last-minute dream or even the afterlife. It was a silly thought, though no less unbelievable than the idea of a dimension called Frost Mountain or a pit that seemed to have no end.

How long had he and Johan fallen? Minutes? Hours? All he'd been aware of was the darkness. That, and, of course, his struggle with Johan as they plummeted toward their doom.

Or what should have been their doom.

When he awoke, Johan was nowhere to be seen, and Stanley made haste to get out of the woods. It was only after he'd spotted the roads and buildings that he realized he was neither dreaming nor dead, not to mention he was no longer on Frost Mountain. This place seemed all too familiar. He was back on Earth.

More than that, he was back home, back in Torpe, his hometown.

He looked around. In the glare of the truck's headlights, he could see the road stretching into the night. Buildings and trees stood half-silhouetted against the sky in the distance. In all his four years trapped on Frost Mountain, he'd never once forgotten his true home, but even now, memories flooded his mind—memories of the time he'd spent here, of his life on Reyes Ranch.

Sweat trickled down his chin to his bare chest, already slick and dirty. It was an odd feeling to be thrust back here. And now ...

He looked down at the woman lying in his arms and felt a powerful throb in his chest.

"Allison," he whispered, a slight quaver in his voice. "It's really you."

In his arms, his wife remained as she was, chest heaving slightly. If he weren't utterly convinced that this was not a dream, he would have questioned the reality of his situation yet again. This was the love of his life, the woman he'd thought he'd lost forever, right before him now.

"It's been so long, Allison," he said.

His heart swelled with joy, his mind struggling to comprehend everything that had happened since he fell into that pit. But he could deal with all of that later, he decided. Right now, what he needed was to get them off the road and back home.

Home. The ranch. The thought made him smile.

He glanced down the road. Which way was home anyway? He had to assume Allison had been headed that way before she nearly ran him over. Stanley couldn't remember exactly where the ranch was—his mind was still filled with memories of Frost

Mountain—but he was certain it would come to him. He was back in Torpe, back on Earth. As far as he was concerned, he had all the time in the world to fully refresh his memory.

Right now, though, he needed to find a way to get them both home.

Rising to his feet, he walked around to the side of the truck, gently setting Allison's unconscious form in the passenger seat. Then he settled behind the wheel and, for a second, merely stared at the wheel. Could he still drive? There were no cars or roads on Frost Mountain. To get them home, he'd have to rely on the hazy memories of his time before his life turned upside down.

"Okay," he breathed. "Let's do this."

He turned the key in the ignition and started a little as the engine roared to life. He chuckled as the truck slowly rolled forward. Gripping the steering wheel, he brought his foot to what he assumed was the gas, and it lurched to a stop.

"Look at you, Stanley," he said, smirking at himself. "Hitting the brakes instead of the gas. Forgotten how to drive a truck already?"

Next to him, Allison stirred. He glanced at his wife, his heart fluttering in his chest.

"We're going back home, baby," he said.

He hit the gas, and the truck took off into the night.

When Allison opened her eyes the next morning, she decided she'd probably had a little too much to drink the night before.

She'd tumbled in and out of consciousness a couple of times during the night. When she finally woke up, it was from a strange dream in which she'd run into her husband Stanley—which, of course, was not possible.

When she pried her eyes open, the sudden light almost blinded her, and she felt a tiny throb in her head. She sat up, blinked her eyes to adjust to the brightness, and gazed around.

She was in her bedroom. Allison frowned. How had she gotten here? She sighed. She must have been so drunk that she couldn't remember the ride back to the ranch from the Blue Cicada or getting herself into bed. She looked down. She'd even changed out of yesterday's clothes into something more comfortable.

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She sighed again. Hopefully, she hadn't crashed the truck or run someone over. The last thing she needed this morning was a DUI.

Wait ... I didn't drinkthatmuch last night, did I?

All she remembered was having a cocktail, and she hadn't even finished it before that man approached her, so she decided to leave.

Her mind drifted back to the dream she'd had: Stanley standing in the middle of the road, and she felt her breathing quicken for a moment. It might have been impossible, but it all felt so real. She bit her lip. Celine would say it was because she still missed him after all this time. She wouldn't be wrong about that. Or about the fact that Allison did need to get Stanley out of her system.

She told herself she didn't need to worry about dumb dreams. First things first, she should check to make sure the truck was still in perfect shape.

She started to climb out of bed, but just then, the thud of footsteps outside the bedroom made her freeze. Allison frowned.Maybe one of the cowhands had come into the ranch house to discuss something with them? Before she could decide whether it was Aaron or Julian, two of the most trusted workers on the property, the door swung open, and a man walked inside, bearing a tray laden with—

“Coffee,” he said with a grin that nearly stopped her heart. “Black. No sugar. Just how you like it, if I recall.”

For the next few seconds, the bedroom was plunged into deafening silence. Allison

thought she could hear her own heart pounding against her ribcage.

She stood blinking at him. “It ... it wasn’t a dream.”

“Hi, honey,” Stanley said, settling the tray down onto the bedside table. “It’s me.”

It was him, all right. The same man she’d almost run over last night with the truck. He looked just as he had last night, long-haired and bushy-bearded. From what she could see, he’d gotten cleaned up and slipped into some of his old clothes. They barely fit him; his muscular frame was visible through the fabric, which threatened to rip under the strain of his body. He’d filled out over the years, she realized.

She had to admit, he was a sexy sight to behold. Looking at him, she suddenly felt as though there wasn’t enough oxygen in the bedroom for both of them.

And he was staring back at her. God, she’d almost forgotten what it felt like to be looked at by him. Those deep blue eyes of his were riveted on her. They’d changed too, she realized. She’d always thought he had a sexy gaze, but now his eyes were also filled with something else.

Pain?

In the past four years, only those eyes seemed to have aged much. She found herself wondering just what he’d seen in all that time. Where had he been? She had so many questions swirling about her mind, yet all she could do was stare dumbly across the bed at him.

It was Stanley who broke the silence again.

“Allison,” he said, slowly making his way around the bed to meet her. “It’s me. Stanley. I’m back.”

As he approached, she caught sight of the gold chain around his neck. He still had his locket.

“Stanley ...” she breathed.

He drew closer, cautiously, with the air of a man approaching a wild beast or a wounded horse. “I still can’t believe it’s you. After all these years ...”

It was almost as if he was reading her thoughts, speaking them to her as they appeared in her mind. After all this time, he was suddenly back. In her bedroom. Only mere feet away from her. Her lips parted, but before she could utter another word, he crossed the distance between them and covered her mouth with his.

His lips tasted like cinnamon. His thick beard was coarse against her chin, but that was the least of her concerns right now.

Stanley is kissing me.

That was what mattered. When he pulled her closer, one large hand cupping her cheek, the other wrapped around her middle, she imagined she might dissolve on the spot.

She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed this: Stanley touching her, holding her, Stanley kissing her. His body was hard against hers, the mere contact already sending the right signals into her body. She could feel her temperature rising rapidly. Her own hands rose to touch him, sliding around his torso to his back and feeling the contours of his muscles ...

He was back. Her husband was back after so long.

After so long.

Suddenly, she broke the kiss and pulled away. Stanley blinked and tried to come closer again, but she held out a hand to stop him.

“No,” she said firmly, feeling anger growing in her belly. “Not another step toward me.”

“Honey, what’s—?”

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“Don’t you call me that!” she snapped. “What the hell are you doing back here, Stanley?”

His brows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean by that? I live here. This is our home.”

She couldn’t help but chortle. “You sure about that? Because last I checked, you’ve been gone the past four years. At some point, I figured you’d gone and found a new home for yourself. And now you’re here.”

Allison hadn’t even realized just how much anger she’d been carrying all this time. For years, it had been cloaked in sadness and longing. Now that Stanley was here, standing before her, all that rage came spilling out. And she had no intention of hiding it. She glowered at him, fuming amidst feelings of relief as well as excitement from the kiss they’d just shared.

“You’ve got some nerve,” she said, jabbing her finger at him, “crawling back after abandoning me all those years ago.”

He shook his head. “But I didn’t—”

“Do you have any idea what it was like for me, waiting for you to come back after that evening?” She scoffed, her eyes blurred with tears, but she quickly brushed them aside. “You must have thought I was a fool, huh? That you could just waltz back into my life after four years and expect me to welcome you with open arms and a kiss?”

Her lips still tingled from the kiss. She ignored that.

“I didn’t abandon you, Allison,” Stanley said. “I got lost.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Really? That is the best you can come up with?”

“No, I’m serious. I’ve been on Frost Mountain this whole time. I don’t even know how it’s possible that I’m back here, but you have to believe me. I never abandoned you—”

“Get out,” she said.

His eyebrows rose slowly. “What?”

“Get out of here. I don’t want you in this house. I don’t want to see your face. I don’t want you near me. You left before. You can leave again.”

“Allison—”

“Go!”

She figured he would refuse. It was as much his house as it was hers. They were still legally married and the property was still in both their names. She had as much power to send him out of the house or off the property as he did to make her leave. Allison sucked in a breath, bracing herself for the inevitable No.

But it never came. A look of hurt appeared in his eyes, and he nodded.

“I’ll be in the barn if you need me,” he said. “It was nice seeing you again, Allison.”

He left the room. Allison remained rooted to the spot, listening to the sound of his receding footsteps until she heard the front door swing shut. She turned to the window just in time to see his broad-shouldered figure marching from the ranch

house to the nearest barn.

She turned away, walking over to the tray he'd left by her bed. Steam rose from a coffee mug. He'd gotten it right—black, just how she liked it.

Allison felt her chest contract. She needed to call Celine, right after she made herself a new cup of coffee.

Chapter Three

One Hell of a Summer Surprise

“Easy, girl,” Stanley said to the horse, stroking her flank. “Easy.”

The brown horse's name was Betsy, and she'd been stamping her hooves impatiently, the way she would if she was hungry or wanted to be let out of her stable.

Stanley thought he could relate to that. The snow leopard in him had always enjoyed the feeling of being out in the open. If it was nighttime, he might have shifted and gone for a sprint across the ranch. For now, though, he'd like to take Betsy for a ride. He gazed around the large barn at the other stables, some containing horses. He'd always loved horses. Since his childhood days, he'd learned how to ride and take of them.

Riding a horse had always been his go-to solution whenever he needed to mull things over or get some air, especially at times like this when his mind was racing.

Betsy nickered softly, and he ran his fingers across her flank again. “You'll be out in a bit,” he assured her, “and we'll go for a ride, eh?” The horse gave another whinny, and he chuckled. “Yeah, I missed you, too. It's good to be back.”

Only he wasn't so sure about that last part.

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The image of Allison glaring at him and asking him to leave remained at the forefront of his mind.

I don't want to see your face,she'd told him.I don't want you near me.

For a moment before that, he'd believed everything was fine. When he'd walked up to her and kissed her, she'd responded with a fervor to match his. Recalling it, he felt a part of him harden with desire. She was just as beautiful as the day he'd gone missing, if not more. He could have gotten lost in the softness and warmth of her body if she hadn't suddenly shoved him away.

He scoffed at his own foolishness. What was he expecting? She was right—hehadbeen gone for four years. And if he remembered correctly, he'd disappeared right after they'd had a fight.

It's not looking good for you, Stanley,he thought, feeling a twinge of shame.

She'd barely even let him get a word in. As she glowered at him and asked him to leave, he felt her anger and resentment.

He rubbed his eyes. He'd barely managed to sleep last night, what with the excitement of having returned to Earth after so long. He'd managed to find his way to the ranch with only a couple of scratches on the truck. Through the night, more memories of his life here had returned to him—including his wife's coffee preferences. It would take a while to get used to being back, he knew, but for now, all he cared about was that he was home.

And safe.

His mind flashed back to that cave. Just a day ago, he'd been kneeling at the edge of that pit, at the mercy of the Ice Melter. The past four years on Frost Mountain had been more about survival than anything else. And now ... he was back on Earth, back on his ranch. He had to admit, it was a bit jarring.

"Let's get you out of your stable," he said to Betsy.

Before he could open the small door, he heard footsteps, and two cowhands stepped into the barn. Stanley recognized them instantly: Aaron and Julian. Both men wore jodhpurs and boots, hats pulled over their faces. When they spotted him, they tipped their hats in greeting.

"Morning, boss," said Aaron the shorter one, an unusual expression on his face. "Figured you'd be in the house, getting some rest."

Both men had been visibly stunned when he'd driven the truck onto the ranch last night, even more so when they realized who was behind the wheel. Aaron and Julian had worked on the ranch for nearly a decade. They'd even been around when he stumbled through that portal and found himself on Frost Mountain. Like Allison, they figured he'd probably skipped town or something.

"Yeah, boss," the other man added. "Bit early in the day."

Boss?

It took him a moment to realize that they still worked for him. Stanley felt a twinge of embarrassment. On Frost Mountain, he'd been an ordinary man, not someone's boss. It felt a little strange now to hear someone refer to him that way.

“Never too early for me, Julian,” he said. He rubbed his chin. “Four years, huh? This ranch doesn’t look like it’s aged a day. Tell me, what’s changed around here?”

Both men shared a look. Aaron shrugged. “To be honest, not much. The ranch’s pretty much the same as it’s always been, though a couple of cowhands quit a year after you disappeared. The town ... well, Torpe’s not such a hot place to live anymore.”

“It’s slowly turning into a ghost town,” Julian chimed in. “Nothing interesting ever happens around here anymore.”

Stanley guessed that by interesting, the man no doubt meant supernatural. Both men were shifters, as were many other workers on the property. In fact, the town was crawling with all kinds of supernaturals.

He nodded. “And Allison?”

The cowhands blinked at him. “Boss?”

“How’s she been?”

They glanced at each other again. “Well ... once you left, she wasn’t herself,” Julian said, and Stanley couldn’t help noticing the judgment in the man’s eyes. “Mostly kept to herself. The rest of us were worried about her. But ... I guess she’s doing better now.”

Guilt gnawed at Stanley’s consciousness as he turned to face Betsy. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like for Allison. His disappearance had been sudden, without warning, even for him. No wonder she was so mad at him. As far as she knew, he’d run off with someone else.

“It’s a good thing you’re back now, boss,” Aaron said, a flicker of a smile on his face. “But where’ve you been, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Stanley shrugged. “Frost Mountain.”

“Frost ... Mountain?” There was a pause. “I’ve never heard of that.”

Stanley didn’t bother offering the man an explanation. He stepped back and led Betsy out of her stable. She nickered softly.

“I want to take her for a ride,” he said. “Clear my head a bit.” He heaved a sigh. “Me and Allison had a bit of a problem this morning.”

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Julian frowned. “Problem?”

“Let’s just say I’ll be sleeping in the barn for the time being.”

Aaron looked at him like he’d lost his marbles. “You can’t sleep in the barn. I’m sure we can get you a room—”

“No.” Stanley smiled and shook his head. “I’ll be fine. It’s comfortable in here. Besides, once you’ve had to survive on Frost Mountain, sleeping in a barn doesn’t sound so terrible.”

Once again, the two men exchanged a glance. Once again, Stanley didn’t bother trying to explain himself to them. Right now, there was only one person who really needed an explanation, and she wouldn’t speak to him.

Great to be back home, he thought sarcastically.

“I gotta say, boss,” Julian said, “you seem strange.”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah. Reminds me of that other guy from yesterday.”

It was Stanley’s turn to be confused. “What guy?”

“Some new guy in town. People have been wondering about him. No one knows who he is or where he’s from, but he’s been spotted a couple of times since last night.”

“Yeah, there’s something funny about him,” Julian said. “Maybe it’s the way he

dresses. From what I heard, he was wearing some kind of fur clothing, like he'd come from the North Pole."

The cowhands chuckled, but all Stanley could do was stare. His heart sank into the pit of his stomach as the reality of their words hit him, and his inner snow leopard recoiled.

Johan's in Torpe.

"So, how'd it go with Mr. Lucky last night?" Celine asked.

Allison couldn't help but roll her eyes. She raised her coffee mug to her lips, unsure how her friend would react when she told her all that had happened. But that was exactly why she'd phoned.

"I didn't talk to him much," she admitted. "I left him at the bar last night."

Her best friend let out a groan. "You've gotta be kidding me, Allison. I thought I told you to find a date. How are you supposed to move on if you don't actually try to move on? We've talked about this. You need to—"

"Something else happened last night."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "You hooked up with someone else?"

"No," Allison said firmly. And she told her what had happened after she left the Blue Cicada, concluding with this morning's interesting little encounter with Stanley.

"I told him to get out of the house," she finished. "He's sleeping in the barn now."

For the next few seconds, Celine said nothing, and Allison couldn't help but wonder what thoughts were going through her friend's mind. Stanley's sudden appearance had come as a surprise to them. Neither of them could have imagined Stanley would return after so many years.

"This is ... definitely something," the woman said finally. "I don't even know where to start. I mean ... how come he's back now?"

Allison shrugged as though her friend could see it. "That's what I asked him. I was so convinced it was impossible that when he returned, I thought I'd only dreamed it until he showed up in the house. Talk about an early-morning jump scare."

Celine took her time to respond. For the first time in a while, Allison's friend seemed to be at a loss for words. No surprises there. Even Allison was surprised she was still talking. Her mind was racing a thousand miles a minute, struggling to figure out exactly what the hell was going on—and seemed to be failing at it. It all made no sense to her.

For the second time this morning, an image filled her mind: Stanley standing in the middle of the road last night, staring wordlessly back at her. In the glare of the truck's headlights, he'd looked more like a ghost than anything else. No wonder she'd fainted on the spot.

He had been a ghost. For four years, he'd been gone with no explanation and no way to track him. He might as well have been dead. Only now, he wasn't. He was alive and well and on her property.

The thought made her heart flutter. All of this had happened so fast for her to process. Asking him to leave had been a good call. If she'd had to spend another moment in his presence, she wasn't sure what she would have done. Stanley had always aroused feelings in her. Even now, back from the "dead" after all this time, that hadn't

changed.

Yeah ... she definitely hadn't moved on.

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Her mind strayed back to the memory of him marching toward the barn. She wondered what he was doing in there now. Was he thinking about her? Her pulse quickened at the thought, and she tried to dismiss it from her mind.

“You think sending him out of the house was overkill?”

“What?” Celine scoffed. “Of course not. If I were you, I’d have asked him to leave the ranch even and never come back. Don’t tell me you’re considering his feelings. Did he consider yours when he disappeared four years ago?”

As usual, the woman had a point. Still, Allison couldn’t help wondering about her husband. He was different, and it wasn’t just the bushy hair. She recalled the pained, faraway look in his eyes like he’d been to hell and back if she didn’t know better ...

Well, she did know better. She knew that he’d left after an argument. For all she knew, he’d used it as an excuse to abandon her and, for whatever reason, had now decided he could come crawling back to her and find her waiting for him with open arms. For a moment, that had almost been the case.

A thought crept into her mind just then. Had he left to be with some other woman? Her gut clenched. Regardless of what he looked like right now or what that might mean, he had left her. Maybe he’d grown tired of her and decided to find someone else.

Probably. But she couldn’t know for sure. She didn’t know anything for sure.

She took another sip of her coffee. “This is one hell of a summer surprise.”

“Look,” Celine said, “for now, you just need to stay cool, okay? I know this is weird for you right now, especially after everything you’ve been through since he vanished. But we’re going to figure this out. Just try not to let the fact that he’s back get to you so much.”

“Easy for you to say. I’m pissed as hell that he’s come back after so long, and I want him gone, but there’s a part of me that just ... I don’t know. I shouldn’t be happy that he’s back. I really shouldn’t.”

Yet there was no mistaking the way her heart jumped at the thought of him. The image of Stanley walking up to her and kissing her, his strong arms holding and caressing her, had been burned into her memory. In that moment, brief as it was, he’d awakened something inside her, something that, until now, she’d assumed was gone forever.

If she hadn’t broken the kiss and shoved him away, then ... things might have escalated. Stanley had changed over the years, and for the better—there was no denying it. She could have let him continue kissing her, caressing her. She could have let him peel her clothes off and make love like they had all those years ago, as husband and wife.

But desire and excitement weren’t all that accompanied the thought of him. And it was that lingering pain and resentment that had driven a wedge between them this morning. Allison was somewhat grateful for that.

She stared into her mug. Almost empty. She was going to need some more coffee.

“Just play it cool, at least for now,” Celine said. “And stay away from him. You don’t need him around anymore. As far as you’re concerned, your husband’s gone. He’s in the past. You grieved for him. No need to try to bring back what’s already ended.”

“You’re right, Celine.” Once again. Allison heaved a sigh. “I’ll make sure to stay away from him.”

And she meant that. She meant to stay away from him.

So why did she feel so much doubt?

Chapter Four

“You Don’t Need to Lie to Me”

He heard the galloping of hooves as Betsy powered across the grassy plain, the horse’s powerful muscles working with each movement. Stanley clutched the reins, bouncing in his saddle, his hair fluttering behind his head. The wind blasted his face and bare chest; it was so refreshing. As he rode, he gazed about, taking in the vastness of Reyes Ranch.

In the distance, a few cowhands were at work, tending some cattle. He glanced over his shoulder. The ranch house and barns were now in the distance as he raced toward the edge of the property.

Betsy whinnied, leaping over what looked like a dead stump, and Stanley grinned.

“Atta girl,” he said.

Still holding the reins, he closed his eyes and sucked in a breath, letting it out calmly. Riding had always had that effect on him. So much so that on the day he left this world, he’d hardly panicked, at least until he found himself pinned beneath the weight of that horse in the snow. Now, as he rode, he could recall that day in almost perfect detail.

It had been a warm summer afternoon. He'd been reading a newspaper when she came into the kitchen, looking disgruntled. Stanley could remember her words: You sold two of our cows? Why didn't you tell me? He'd tried to explain himself to her—he'd sold the cows because the ranch needed some money, and he didn't think it was much of a big deal—but she'd been more upset that he hadn't bothered to mention it to her.

When he thought about it, he knew he'd been wrong, and he'd apologized to her. Still, he'd needed to be by himself for a bit, so he'd headed out to the barn and taken one of the horses, Charlie, for a ride.

He'd only been riding for a few minutes when his world suddenly changed. One second, he was galloping across the ranch, and the next, a cold, unforgiving wind blasted him in the face, and he was riding through deep snow, powering downhill. Charlie the horse had promptly collapsed into the snow, badly crippled, with Stanley pinned underneath him.

If he hadn't had a blade on him that day, he might have been a goner. He wasn't proud of what he'd had to do to set himself free. It had served as his first lesson about the gruesome reality of surviving on Frost Mountain, but not his last.

His first year on Frost Mountain had been particularly brutal. He'd kept track of the days and months that passed as a way to maintain his sanity as he struggled to stay alive in the harsh conditions on the mountain. He'd hidden in caves and learned to hunt animals for food and warmth. More than a few times, he'd nearly lost an arm or a leg, but somehow he'd managed to survive.

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It wasn't until after a year of barely making it alone on the mountain that he stumbled across a community. It was in a village called Kirnham that he'd learned the truth about Frost Mountain—that it was a dimension apart from Earth that he could never leave, that all he could do was continue to preserve his life.

Finding Kirnham had been a lifesaver—literally. It felt good to be around other people instead of sleeping in caves. In a way, it had been almost like he was back in Torpe. He'd offered to help guard the village. It was in the course of his duty that he'd learned about the Collectors, but it was years later that the marauders invaded the village and took him captive.

For a dimension so cold and snowy, Frost Mountain had been hell.

Still, he imagined it hadn't been easy for Allison either.

Stanley pried his eyes open and glanced again at the ranch house. His wife's image swam before his eyes. It must have been lonely and painful for her these past four years. No wonder she'd snapped at him and told him to leave. He winced at the memory. To her, he'd left of his own accord.

If only she knew what had really happened.

I'm home now, he thought, bringing the horse to a slow trot. I'm back. That's what matters. I'll make things right with her.

It had been three days since she kicked him out of the house, and he'd hardly seen or heard from her. The cowhands, Aaron and Julian, still shocked at his insistence on

sleeping in the barn, had brought him food over the past couple of days. He'd spotted his wife a couple of times, but she'd avoided him like a plague. However, he did have a chance or two to get a good look at her. One of those times, she'd had on a flowery dress, and all he could think of was what it would feel like to ease it up those sexy thighs of hers.

Not that it was likely to happen anytime soon.

But his strained relationship wasn't the only problem bothering him now. What about Johan? The cowhands had mentioned someone who fit the man's description, moving around Torpe. Stanley cursed under his breath. He'd assumed he was completely free of Frost Mountain, but fate had other ideas.

The pit that had brought him back must be some kind of portal, he figured. And it had transported not only him but also the Collector to Earth—to Torpe, to be precise. That alone had been hard to stomach, and now he had more to think about. If Johan was in town, then trouble couldn't be too far away. The Collector wasn't from Earth like Stanley was—he'd been born on Frost Mountain.

Stanley couldn't resist a grim smile. Johan was one of the many threats to his survival that Frost Mountain had thrown his way. If that pit hadn't brought them both here, Johan would have been the end of him. Not that it wasn't still a possibility.

He'd managed to escape from hell. And one of its agents had followed him.

He tugged on the reins, and Betsy turned around, trotting toward the barn. "What are you up to, Johan?" he wondered aloud.

Stanley hadn't gotten wind of any other strange happenings in Torpe. Maybe the man was lying low. Maybe he wasn't even in town anymore. He dismissed the thoughts, hopeful as they were. Whatever the case, Johan was bad news. Sure, things were

different around here. No more Grim Jim, no Collectors besides Johan himself. But Stanley's mind wasn't quite settled.

He urged the horse into a gallop, heading back for the barn. As he rode, he looked around again.

How is this possible?

No one could escape Frost Mountain. That was one of the first things anyone ever learned about the place. The same magic that had created the dimension and brought in people from Earth had made it impossible for anyone to leave for literally hundreds of years.

Had there been some kind of glitch? Was that what the pit really was? Or had he merely been lucky?

It doesn't matter much now, he told himself.

His stomach growled, and he grinned again. Once he got Betsy back in her stable and tended to the other horses, he'd find some food for himself. It shouldn't be a problem. Nothing around here was half as difficult as living on Frost Mountain. If he could survive being holed up in a freezing cave for days with no food and barely enough water, he could certainly find himself some grub.

He smirked at the thought and urged the horse to pick up speed, sighing as they neared the barn.

By the time he reached it, someone was waiting for him.

“I brought you some food,” Allison said. “I figured you might be hungry.”

She held out the little basket she’d brought with her. Stanley regarded her for a moment; brows furrowed like he was wondering if she was messing with him. Somewhat tentatively, he took the basket from her.

“Thank you,” he said.

His overgrown hair was somewhat tousled from the ride, and his bare chest heaved. With each breath, his abs tightened, and Allison’s breathing faltered a little. She looked away for a moment, her cheeks burning. Stanley led the horse into the barn. Allison followed closely behind, watching him as he put the horse in back in her stable.

“There you go, Betsy,” he said, stroking the horse’s large brown head. “Hell of a ride, that was.”

He stepped back and glanced in Allison’s direction, and she rubbed her arms nervously, feeling a little out of place. What was she even doing here?

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The answer to that was pretty simple. Over the past few days, trying to get him out of her mind had been like trying to lift a tractor with her bare hands—it simply hadn't worked. It hadn't been this much of a problem when he was gone, completely out of reach. But now that he was back, literally living in their barn, it was different. Without really thinking—well, she had been thinking about him—she'd baked him a pie, and now here she was.

Stanley sat cross-legged on the floor, looking not in the least bothered by it, and began helping himself to it. Allison blinked at him in confusion. She'd been feeling somewhat guilty about sending him out of the house since the other day. By now, she figured, he should've headed to a motel or something—anything was better than living in a barn.

“You're not uncomfortable?” she blurted.

He froze with a pancake on its way to his mouth. “Uncomfortable? Why would I be?”

He bit into his food, and his eyes lit up. “This is really good. Thank you.”

Allison frowned. Sure, Stanley had always loved horses and living on the ranch, even before his disappearance. But this? This was a little over the top.

She eyed him some more. Could it possibly have anything to do with his disappearance? He'd told her he'd been somewhere all this time. Where was that, again? Frosty Mountain?

No, Frost Mountain. Allison hadn't even heard of it. Maybe it had something to do

with ... well, all this?

Did it matter? Stay away from him, Celine had advised her.

“You need to get a haircut one of these days,” she blurted with a tiny smirk. “Just head down to Danny’s. You look like a hippie cowboy. How come you didn’t get a haircut all this time?”

He shrugged without looking up at her. “Didn’t need one.”

Allison took a step closer, ignoring the warning in the back of her mind. In the light streaking in from the open doorway, she could make out the details of his body. Those scars she’d seen on his forearms and abs weren’t the only ones. From where she stood, she could just make out a few more across his back.

She couldn’t help wincing at the sight. If she didn’t know better, she might’ve assumed he’d gotten into a knife fight with a gang and barely made it out alive. Whatever Stanley had been doing, wherever he’d been, it didn’t look like he’d been in the Bahamas. What could have done this to him? Some wild animal? A meat cleaver?

Once again, she had no answers. It was becoming more frustrating than ever.

This wasn’t right. Stanley was her husband, the same man she’d been in love with since college. They should both be in the house, in the kitchen, having lunch. He shouldn’t be living in a barn, for goodness’ sake.

He abandoned you, said a voice in her head. Why do you still care so much about him?

Because he’s my husband, she told it.

Yes, but he left you.

He could've returned to the ranch house any time since that morning. Stanley was no idiot. He knew he could sleep in the house if he wanted to, no matter how many times she asked him to leave. Yet he'd chosen to remain here. Why?

It took her a moment to realize he was staring at her.

"Uh ..." She stepped back. "I'll be going now. Just wanted to bring you something to eat. I'll be going now—"

"Allison, wait."

His voice stopped her in her tracks. She held her breath, staring at him.

He climbed to his feet and drew closer until he was standing barely a foot away, his chest heaving slowly.

"Allison," he said. "I've missed you. I ... I'm sorry I was gone so long. Now that I'm back ..." He paused, looking around as if searching for the right words. "I want to be around for you. I want to be with you."

She drew a sharp breath. "Stanley ..."

"I never stopped thinking about you." Those deep blue eyes bore into hers. His fingers reached up to touch the locket he was wearing. "Not for a day, a month, a year. I never stopped loving you. I never could, no matter what was happening to me."

His words swept over her like a cool breeze, soothing her senses. She blinked at him, trying to come up with a response, but his words, not to mention the fact that he was

standing dangerously close to her, made it almost impossible to form a coherent thought. She found herself wondering what might happen if one of them took a step closer. Those lips of his had felt warm against hers the last time he kissed her. If he could just touch them to the pulse racing in her neck...

“Allison...”

She saw him reach out with his hand to touch her cheek. The next thing she knew, she'd swatted his arm aside.

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“You never stopped loving me?” she scoffed. “I’m starting to wonder if you even loved me to begin with.”

He blinked. “Of course I did—”

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t have left.”

“I didn’t—”

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t have had me waiting for four years!” Her eyes welled up with tears, but she made no move to wipe them away. “Did you even care what happened to me while you were gone? I was in pain, but now you’re back and riding horses around like nothing happened.”

“Allison!”

The firmness of his tone made her freeze. She saw his jaw clench, and he moved even closer. He was bigger than she remembered. He was sexy and intimidating all at once.

“I never meant to leave,” he told her. “Not for a moment. It’s like I told you: The whole time, I’ve been stuck on Frost Mountain—”

“Not this again,” she snapped. “You don’t need to lie to me, Stanley. The least you could do is tell me the truth instead of spinning some tale.” She shook her head. “Not that I even want to hear it.”

She turned and marched toward the barn doors.

“Allison—wait!”

“Don’t follow me,” she snapped. “Just leave me alone.”

She left the barn, tears threatening as she headed for the house. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Aaron and Julian on their way to one of the other barns but paid the cowhands no notice. Only when she was inside the house did she pause to catch her breath. Only then did the tears begin to fall.

Chapter Five

“You’ll Pay for What You’ve Done”

“Well, would you look at that,” said Danny, the barber, with a chuckle. “You look like one hell of a mess.”

Sitting in the chair before the large mirror, Stanley couldn’t agree more. His reflection gazed back at him—shaggy-haired, with a beard to match. Allison was right. He did look like some sort of hippie. Back on Frost Mountain, it hadn’t mattered. Hard to care about looking prim and proper when you were wondering whether the cold would kill you before starvation did.

Back here in Torpe, though, things were different. He stuck out like a sore thumb. Hippie didn’t quite describe it. He looked more like some kind of hermit who’d finally decided to return to civilization.

His gaze swiveled, taking in the reflection in the mirror at Danny’s Haircutz. The barbershop was only large enough to accommodate three customers at a time. The other barbers were at work, grooving to the gentle music from a speaker in the corner. Danny himself stood right behind Stanley. He was bald except for a fringe of greying hair at the sides of his head. Brown eyes gazed back at him as the man looked him

over.

“When was the last time you had a haircut?” Danny wanted to know. “Or shaved, for that matter. Doesn’t look like you’ve touched a razor since you last showed up here.”

Four years ago.

The man was right, but Stanley wasn’t about to say that.

He remembered Danny. They weren’t exactly close, but Danny had been his long-time barber before he found himself on Frost Mountain. It felt weird to be sitting in the barber’s chair again. Then again, so did many other things.

“So, you wanna tell me what happened?”

Stanley’s eyebrows rose slightly. “What?”

“You’ve been away for a long time. The whole town was looking for you, but you were just ... gone without a trace. What happened to you? Where’d you go? And don’t they have barbers there?”

Stanley could barely suppress a grin. Danny was human and as oblivious as they came. If anyone in town would understand what he’d been through or even believe it, it certainly wasn’t this man, and he could see why. Even he had needed time to process his new reality after he found himself on Frost Mountain. Who in their right mind would want to believe what had happened to him was possible?

“Come on, you can tell me,” Danny urged.

Stanley sighed. “I rode my horse straight through a magical portal and found myself trapped in a magical dimension called Frost Mountain. I lived there for years, trying

to survive, until I got thrown into a chasm and found myself back in Torpe.”

For a moment, both men just looked at each other in the mirror.

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Then Danny burst out laughing. “Now, that’s one excuse I’ve never heard. It’s even better than when I told my buddy Garrick I’d come down with pneumonia just to get out of game night six years ago.” He clapped Stanley on the shoulder. “Although I’m assuming you needed to get away from someone else ...”

He stared pointedly at Stanley in the mirror. It took Stanley a second to realize what the barber was implying. He shot him an affronted look. “I wasn’t trying to get away from my wife.”

“Sure, you were just taking a break, huh?” The man chuckled. “Four years is a hell of a long time for a break, though, if you ask me.”

Before Stanley could respond, the barber raised a pair of scissors and began snipping away. Stanley watched the hair fall to the floor, feeling somewhat like he was losing a part of himself.

He glanced momentarily outside the barber shop. Through the large window, he could make out the red-and-white barber pole. Beyond it, people were walking along the street or in their vehicles.

A thought occurred to him then. If he had more information on Johan, it could come in handy. “Hey, Danny,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Any strange sightings around town lately?”

Through the mirror, he saw Danny's brows furrow. "How strange are we talking?"

Stanley shrugged and said, "Like anything out of the ordinary. Any strangers?"

"Oh, you mean the weirdo," Danny said and smirked. "He's no stranger than you if you ask me. I heard he's been poking around town, but that's all I know. That's probably all anyone knows. He lifted a curious eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

Stanley shook his head and said, "Just wondering."

Once Danny's haircut was finished, Stanley left the barber shop and headed home, admittedly feeling more confident because of his new look. He looked the town over as he walked, mainly because he wanted to sightsee but also because his driving skills were not yet up to par.

Maybe he should've ridden into town on a horse instead. His inner snow leopard was pleased to be able to ride across the ranch. It was so freeing, but the thought of racing through these streets on all fours as a snow leopard, exploring the town with heightened senses, was truly exciting.

On Frost Mountain, he'd shifted whenever and wherever he wished, without fear of repercussion. But he was on Earth now, where revealing his true nature around humans wouldn't end well for him or other supernaturals.

The town seemed mostly quiet this afternoon, he noticed as he crossed the street. There were a few pedestrians around, but no one he recognized. A few people stared a little too long as he passed them. On his way to the barbershop, flickering neon signs blinked at him from vacant store windows. Aaron and Julian were right. This place was slowly turning into a ghost town.

He glanced to his left as a car rolled past a red light and into the next street. He smiled. It felt good to be back despite his present circumstances. He'd missed this town.

At first, before he realized how Frost Mountain worked, he'd struggled to get to the bottom of it and get help to return home. After months of traveling and making zero progress, he'd given that up and focused solely on his survival.

Now that he was back home, he no longer had to worry so much about surviving. There were no harsh conditions or hunters or monsters he needed to look out for. There was no need to look over his shoulder. Torpe might be slowly dying, but at least there was safety in that process. Stanley appreciated that.

This was just an ordinary town with ordinary people. Well, not all were ordinary, some, like him, were supernaturals. But otherwise, it was as ordinary as a town could get.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a neon sign that made him pause in his tracks. The Blue Cicada, the sign read. He stared at it a moment and thought about walking over for a drink or two. He couldn't remember the last time he'd tasted alcohol. But then he thought better of it.

Next time, he thought, as he rounded the bend into the next street.

He continued walking, so lost in thought that he didn't notice the man walking next to him until he bumped into him, nearly sending him sprawling to the ground.

Stanley cursed under his breath. "I'm so sorry, sir. I wasn't really paying attention to ..."

He trailed off, staring at the man who had quickly regained his balance and was now

staring back at him with wide grey eyes. The man's red beard twitched. He'd changed out of his fur garments and was wearing clothes he'd probably stolen from someone's backyard or had threatened the owner: a hoodie over black sweatpants and sneakers that looked too small for him.

It was exactly the sort of thing a Collector would do.

"You," Johan said, his eyes narrowing. "I knew you had to be around here somewhere."

"I heard you were in town," Stanley said, bracing for an attack. "You don't blend in well. Then again, it took me a while to do that on Frost Mountain."

Johan's beard twitched again, and a growl rose in his throat. "You brought me here. I would still be on Frost Mountain if you hadn't grabbed me."

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“Yeah, well, you’re welcome, I guess.”

This comment only seemed to make Johan angrier. He took a step closer, a menacing look in his eyes. “You brought me into this world of yours, away from the Ice Melter.”

“In my defense, I thought I was going to die, and I wasn’t going to die alone,” Stanley said, certain this man was completely insane. Shouldn’t he be grateful he didn’t have to live on Frost Mountain anymore?”

Johan snarled and attacked, hurtling his fist at Stanley’s face. He dodged the punch easily, but then Johan kicked hard in the ribs and knocked him into a wall. With a grunt, Stanley slid to the ground, clutching his side. Johan stood over him, chest heaving.

“I can’t find a way back home,” he said. “And even if I did, there’s no telling I’d ever find the Ice Melter’s cave. You took me from my master, my home, everything I knew and cared for.”

Through his pain, Stanley smirked. “Isn’t that what you Collectors do?”

The man’s wolfish eyes gleamed with murderous intent. He struck again. This time, Stanley was more prepared. He caught Johan’s fist with one hand. When Johan attempted to kick him again, he ducked out of the way and launched a swift kick at Johan’s leg, knocking the man off balance. Johan hit the ground with a pained grunt and winced from the impact. Then, Stanley sprang to his feet and delivered a swift kick in the ribs for good measure.

“I don’t know what the hell your problem is,” he said. “I knew you would be trouble when I heard you were here in Torpe, but you’re insane, too. Why would you want to go back to Frost Mountain, of all places? You should be thanking me for bringing you to Earth.”

In a flash, Johan was back on his feet. He raised both hands, and Stanley saw black claws extend from his fingertips. For a second, Stanley considered shifting as well, but then it occurred to him that they were being watched. A couple of people had stopped to see what was going on.

Johan saw them, too. Stanley wasn’t sure if Johan was stupid enough to shift in public. But Johan wasn’t stupid. He’d no doubt been observing the place and the people. On Frost Mountain, he could have shifted in public view with no consequences. But this wasn’t Frost Mountain. On Earth, revealing himself as a supernatural would not end well for him.

The man quickly retracted his claws and stepped back. Stanley hoped no one had noticed them.

Glowing at him, Johan said, “This isn’t over.” He cocked his head. “You’ll pay for what you’ve done. I’m going to give you the death you should’ve had in the cave.”

Chapter Six

“I Shouldn’t Have Come Here”

Allison chastised herself. Okay, so maybe going down to the barn again hadn’t been such a great idea.

Her instincts had warned her to stay away as they had over the past few days whenever the thought of him crept into her mind—which, she’d come to realize, was

most of the time. Why should she go back to him after what he'd done?

Good question, Allison thought.

She found him brushing one of the horses, his bare back to her. He was humming a tune she didn't recognize. Allison stood in the doorway, adjusting her dress. She'd considered wearing jeans and boots but had opted for something more feminine. On her way to the barn, she'd convinced herself that she'd worn the dress because she liked it, not because Stanley would like it.

She ignored the other horses in their stables. She had eyes only for Stanley. He worked just as hard as he always had, if not harder. Over the past couple of days, she'd seen him tend to the horses and the cattle with the cowhands, riding around the ranch not at all like a man who'd been missing for four years. He acted as if no time had passed at all.

But she could see that it had. Just looking at him, she knew this wasn't the same man from four years ago. He'd gotten a haircut a couple of days ago and now looked a lot less like a hobo. His features were more defined, and she'd noticed his now-visible jaw chiseled.

It wasn't just the hair, she knew, taking a few steps farther into the barn. He still had his broad back to her. Even scarred, the sight of it was enough to send a tingly sensation spreading through her body. His muscles clenched as he worked; his back glistened. Whether the moisture was water or sweat, Allison had no idea, but it was mesmerizing to see.

She'd felt those muscles the day he came into her bedroom. But that was as far as she'd gotten before she'd stopped herself. If she hadn't, she might have gotten to explore him a bit more. Even now, her curiosity prodded her, and she wondered what might happen if she'd moved her hands lower, much lower ...

Stanley had always been an excellent lover. That was one of the many things she'd adored about him. And she was willing to bet the ranch that he hadn't changed one bit. The way he'd kissed her the other day had nearly melted her insides. She could think of a few other places she'd like to feel that hot, delicious mouth of his.

A gentle breeze blew into the barn, causing Allison's dress to flutter around her thighs. She bit her lip. What was she even doing here? She started to back away toward the barn doors.

"I remember when you'd come down here to watch me work," Stanley said from across the barn, stopping her before she could take another step. "You would stand and watch for hours until you were tired of standing, and then you'd sit."

He still had his back to her. Allison bit down harder on her lip. Had he known she was in here the whole time?

"We'd talk and laugh while I worked. And when I was done working in here, we'd head back to the house, have a nice dinner, and go up to bed together." Stanley turned away from the horse he'd been working on and faced her, dropping the brush. He wiped his hands on his jeans as he slowly approached her, a grin unfurling on his handsome face. Even after a trip to the barber, his dark beard was still speckled with grey.

"I ... I ..." She forced herself to look away, anywhere but at him. Not that it helped. She could feel his blue eyes boring into her. And she could feel her body responding to him touching her without touching her, caressing her with his burning gaze.

What had she been thinking coming down here?

"I miss that," Stanley said. He didn't stop until he was right in front of her, and she could feel his warm breath on her face. "I miss you."

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Up close, she could make out every detail, from the solid angles of his jaw to the dark blond strands of his hair. She lowered her gaze and immediately wished she hadn't. His chest, slick as his back was, was just barely touching hers.

The sight of it made her heart pound. That tingle continued to spread through her, and a dull ache settled in her breasts. Her nipples hardened instantly, grazing his chest.

He must have felt it because he suddenly stiffened.

"I missed you, too," she blurted.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Her cheeks burned. Might as well just tell him. "Yes." Her voice came out a little croaky. "I did."

For the next few seconds, all she heard was the sound of their breathing. She kept her hands at her sides, resisting the insane urge to reach out and touch him.

"I know you probably don't believe me," she heard him say, "but I've only ever wanted you, even when I was away, and I think you feel the same way."

You're absolutely right.

She swallowed, daring to look him in the eyes. "What makes you so sure?"

He cracked a tiny grin that sent a throb all the way down between her thighs. "If you

didn't, you wouldn't keep coming in here to see me."

She couldn't argue with that but merely gazed into his face, her nipples still grazing his rock-hard chest. Her lips parted, and she struggled to form words, but she could barely make a sound. Why did he have to be so handsome? And why did he have this effect on her?

She knew something like this might happen if she came down here. And yet she'd come. It was like knowingly walking into a trap. Why? Because she liked the way it—no, he—made her feel.

"You're as beautiful as the day I was lost to you," Stanley muttered, and for a moment, she saw sadness in those blue eyes.

She started to back away again, but he looped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, effectively preventing any chance of escape. His other hand came to rest on her jaw, forcing her to look up at him, the same man who'd hurt her years ago, the man who'd abandoned her, the man she couldn't get out of her mind.

Desire flickered in his eyes, and she knew she was a goner. His grip on her tightened, crushing her against him, and she felt his groin pressed against her. He was hard, long, and throbbing, an instant reminder that she wasn't the only one aroused in this barn. It was a reminder of his readiness to take her.

Excitement fluttered in her chest as she looked at him, trying to steady her breathing. Her distended nipples continued to graze his chest, aching to be touched, aching for his hot mouth. Hell, her entire body had come alive. She swallowed, eager for his touch.

As though reading her mind, he caressed her back with one hand, slowly lowering it to her buttocks. He cupped a cheek in his large hand and kneaded it. She let out an

involuntary sigh, loving the way he touched her. Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment.

I walked right into this one, Allison thought.

“I missed this, too,” Stanley said. “Holding you, touching you ...”

The temperature in the barn was rising at a dangerous rate. If she didn’t know better, she would think something was on fire near them. But it was her insides that had caught fire. And this man was bent on fanning the flames.

Allison was powerless to stop him.

“I missed your body,” he said, his breath hot against her skin. “And I missed ... I missed kissing you.”

It took all of Allison’s willpower not to melt into a puddle at that moment. It was a good thing Stanley was holding her because when he brought his mouth to hers, she nearly lost the remainder of her resolve.

He kissed her long and hard. His lips parted hers, making way for his tongue to explore her willing mouth. Allison sighed into the kiss. God, she’d missed this. She’d missed him. And judging from his eagerness, she could tell he felt the same way. The hand on her jaw traveled south between their bodies, tracing a path from her chin all the way down to her navel and back up. He traced circles around her nipples with his fingers, and her breathing quickened.

“Stanley ...” she began.

“Shh,” came his reply. He kissed her again as if to shut her up. “It’s okay.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, relishing the sensations he so generously gave her. He kneaded her breasts, one by one. Suddenly, she felt herself being moved. The next thing she knew, he'd pressed her against one of the walls of the barn.

A horse neighed, but before she could pay it much attention, Stanley was kissing her again. She could still feel him throbbing wildly against her. Her heart jackhammered in her chest, and she found herself filled with the urge to cup his thick, hard length in her hand. She ground her hips against him, grinning inwardly as he growled into the kiss.

"You're going drive me insane if you keep doing that," she heard him say.

He was one to talk. He'd driven her closer to the edge of sanity.

She wound her arms around his large body, letting her hands explore his broad back, determined to feel every contour, every inch of him. When Stanley broke the kiss and brought his warm lips to her throat, she dug her fingernails into his back. A moan escaped her, and she wondered what it would feel like to have his lips between her legs, where she throbbed the most—for him.

His breath caressed her skin as he brought his lips to her jawline. He nibbled her earlobe, and she shuddered against him. Suppressing another moan, she brought a hand around his slick torso, letting her fingers explore his body. Her fingers came to rest for a moment on his solid chest, and she thought she felt his heart pounding against her fingertips just before she went lower.

His abs tightened against her fingers. He pulled her closer, crushing his groin against hers. Then, as if reading her thoughts, he ran his hand along her body, down to her thigh, and brought it back up, taking the hem of her dress with it. Her breath faltered in her throat as his tough fingers caressed her soft flesh. Before she knew it, his hand was at her waist, her dress bunched up against his wrist. She inhaled sharply as he slipped his fingers through the waistband of her panties, caressing her folds.

“You’re soaking wet,” he said, a half-smirk on his face. “For me.”

And you’re hard for me, she thought.

His smirk widened. He began to stroke her clit, and a ragged moan escaped her lips. If there wasn’t a wall supporting her back, she might have fallen to the ground

already. Stanley continued to pleasure her with his fingers, sending wave after wave of pleasure through her body, and she nearly let out cries of ecstasy as he drove her closer to climax.

“There you go,” he whispered against her ear. “I want you to come for me.”

She wanted to, more than anything. She might have walked into a trap, but she’d be damned if this wasn’t the most pleasurable trap she’d ever encountered. She loved the pleasure that Stanley gave her, and she loved that it was he who gave it to her.

Simply put, she loved him.

And that was why it had hurt so much when he abandoned her. It was why it had hurt so much when he’d returned.

“Stanley ... stop,” she said.

“What was that, baby?” Stanley sounded lost in the pleasure he was giving her. If he kept that up, she was going to erupt—and loudly. The last thing she needed was for any of the cowhands outside to hear her screams of pleasure and wonder what was going on in the barn.

She grabbed his wrist. “Stop!”

He froze and blinked at her, concern in his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“I ...” She struggled for the right words, her mind mostly blank from the pleasure he’d filled her with. “I can’t do this.”

He frowned. “I thought you wanted this.”

You have no idea.

She bit her lip. “I do—I mean, I did. But I can’t just pretend the past four years didn’t happen. I’m sorry, Stanley. I shouldn’t have come here.”

She adjusted her dress, feeling her nipples still poking through the front at him. Stanley’s lips were parted, but he didn’t say a word. Allison turned and left the barn, half-expecting him to come after her. He didn’t, and she found herself feeling somewhat grateful for that. Because if he had, she might have gone back to him.

And there was no telling what would happen if she let herself get too close to Stanley Reyes again.

“You did ...what?”

Allison resisted the urge to pull the phone away from her ear. Still cringing, she took a deep breath and told Celine everything that had happened since she walked into the barn half an hour ago. She stood by her bedroom window, still half-expecting Stanley to emerge from the barn and come to see her.

Nothing like that happened. Had he merely gone back to work?

“What were you thinking, Allison?” Celine asked with an exasperated sigh.

That was exactly the problem. Allison hadn’t really been thinking. In her right mind, she would’ve known better than to go to see him again. She should’ve taken Celine’s advice and put as much distance between herself and Stanley as possible. Instead, she found herself drawn closer and closer to him, wanting more and more of him.

And she'd gotten that, hadn't she? The memory of what had happened in the barn prodded her consciousness: Stanley wrapping his big, strong arms around her, Stanley kissing her for all he was worth ... Stanley lifting her dress and caressing her, right where she throbbed the most.

You're soaking wet for me, he'd said.

Allison swallowed. If she hadn't put a stop to it, she would have gotten exactly what she wanted, what her body craved so much. But then she'd come to her senses. Letting herself get so close to him was dangerous, among other things.

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“I told you to stay away from him,” Celine reminded her.

“I know,” Allison replied, feeling a twinge of embarrassment. “I just ... I couldn’t help it. I know it’s been four years, but is it so crazy to still be attracted to him?”

Especially since he’d returned looking more like a steamy snack than ever. If it weren’t so serious, she would have drooled a little at the thought.

“No, and that’s exactly what I was worried about,” her friend said. “You can’t forget that he left you, girl. You can’t just let him come back into your life and seduce you.”

“Did he really leave me, though?”

There was a pause. “What?”

Allison bit her lip. She’d been giving it some thought for a while. What were the odds that Stanley had been telling the truth when he told her he hadn’t actually abandoned her? All she remembered was that he’d rode out on his horse, and she’d never heard from him again. According to him, he’d somehow ended up in a place called Frost Mountain and had been stuck there for years.

She remembered the scars she’d seen covering his torso. And what about the shaggy hair? Or the fact that he was practically twice the size of the man she’d lost four years ago? That wasn’t the kind of change you got from running away from your wife to find peace someplace else. If anything, it looked like he’d been struggling to survive.

A chill traveled down her spine. “What if he weren’t lying about where he’s been all

this time? What if he really got lost and was trapped on that ... that mountain for four years?"

Her friend sighed again. "Are you suggesting that because you think it's a reasonable explanation or because you want to believe he didn't choose to walk out on you four years ago?"

Chapter Seven

A Drink With Lara Croft

The next couple of days went by quietly. Stanley carried on in the barn, tending to the horses and taking occasional rides on Betsy. He spotted Allison a couple of times, but it seemed she was doing her best not to acknowledge him. After what had happened in the barn with her, he couldn't quite blame her.

He knew that his being back in Torpe was bringing up conflicting feelings in her. On the one hand, she was still as attracted to him as he was to her. He'd seen—and felt—it the other day. On the other hand, the fact remained that he had disappeared for four years. Whether he'd meant to or not, he'd hurt her, and he couldn't just expect her to come jumping into his arms, no matter how badly he wanted that.

How long would it be before all of this was behind them? She still didn't believe he'd been on Frost Mountain. Hell, she hadn't even let him explain himself before she'd walked out on him. He swallowed, stroking the mane of the horse he'd been tending to. Was this the end of his marriage?

In fact, the marriage might as well have ended for her years ago. Four years was a long time. He'd spent that time thinking of her, wishing with every fiber of his being that he could get back to her, yet doubting he ever would see her face again except in

his locket. But at least he had known what happened. She didn't, and she'd had to deal with the confusion and pain of not knowing whether he was dead or alive or whether he'd left her.

She couldn't have been waiting for him for so long. At some point, she'd probably given up. And all he'd done by returning to her was reopen the wound his disappearance had caused.

He sighed. "God damn Frost Mountain."

You'll pay for what you've done.

The words swept through his memory just then, and he ground his teeth together.

Great.

He had more than one problem to worry about, and one of them wanted him dead. He shook his head at the memory. He'd known Johan barely a few days before he'd found himself back on Earth, but he knew enough to understand just how ruthless and relentless the man could be.

If Johan wanted him dead, the least he could do was brace himself for a fight that might be his last.

His stomach growled. It was afternoon, and he hadn't had anything to eat or drink. For now, at least, he could use some water or orange juice.

A thought occurred to him. Given the current circumstances, it seemed completely insane, but Stanley wasn't in the mood to care right now. Before he could stop himself, he stepped out of the barn and stared straight ahead at the ranch house. A drink from the kitchen couldn't hurt.

He made a beeline for the house. He spotted Aaron and Julian on the way but paid little notice to the looks of surprise on their faces as he neared the front porch. He climbed the steps two at a time. The front door was unlocked. Was Allison at home? He looked around until he spotted the truck.

She was probably up in the bedroom. Without another moment's hesitation, he stepped into the house, heading straight for the kitchen. It wasn't until he reached the doorway that he heard the sounds coming from the kitchen and realized how wrong he was.

I should have known.

Allison stood with her back to him, chopping food on the counter. She had on another of those sundresses that didn't quite obscure her curves but instead teased him with the promise of easy access. She didn't bother looking up as he walked in, but judging from her demeanor, she sensed his presence.

"Julian?" she said. "Is that you? I told you I'd get back to you later about the feed."

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When Stanley didn't respond, she turned slowly, her eyebrows knit in a frown. When she saw him, her brown eyes widened to the size of dishes. Her lips parted, but before she could get a word out, he walked past her and made his way to the fridge, scanning its contents. A moment later, he pulled out a jar of orange juice and poured himself a glass, finishing it in a single gulp.

The sound of the glass being refilled was the only one in the kitchen. Stanley turned and faced his wife, raising his orange juice to his lips. She was still staring open-mouthed at him as if she couldn't believe he'd had the nerve to walk in here.

His gaze dipped, and he caught sight of her cleavage, breasts heaving with each breath. Her nipples had already sprung to attention, poking through the front of her dress like they had the other day, and the sight of them caused a stirring in his groin. In seconds, his erection was straining against the front of his trousers.

She must have noticed his own arousal because she suddenly drew a sharp breath. When he lifted his gaze, she was staring at his crotch.

Once again, they were alone, gazing at each other. The air between them seemed to hum with electricity. He felt his body tauten, his heart racing in anticipation. The memory of Allison moaning into his mouth in the barn reappeared in his mind.

In the barn, anyone could've walked in on them. Here, in the house, they had a lot more privacy. Her chest was heaving almost rapidly now. Her body was as responsive to his arousal as his was to hers. If he drew closer, if he came behind her and held her the way he knew she loved to be held, what was stopping them from finishing what they had started in the barn?

He looked into her eyes, slightly narrowed now and lust filled. The air in the kitchen seemed to get warmer. For a fraction of a moment, Stanley nearly gave up his resolve and followed his urges. He stepped forward, prepared to walk over to her, slowly peel her clothes off, and give her what they both knew she craved.

Or not.

He drained the glass of orange juice and put the jug back in the fridge. And then, without a single word, he walked out of the kitchen, feeling as though Allison's eyes followed him until he closed the front door behind him. He smirked.

Back to the barn.

Thirty seconds after the front door closed behind Stanley, Allison decided she needed a drink.

Unfortunately, there wasn't any alcohol in the fridge, and she wasn't about to settle for orange juice right now, so she abandoned the cabbages she'd been chopping for dinner, headed out to her truck, and drove down to the Blue Cicada.

It was just like the last time she'd come here, except there were slightly fewer people in the bar this afternoon. No doubt, most of the customers showed up after sunset. She spotted a man in one of the booths talking to a woman who looked like she had better places to be. He had on a familiar red hat covering a shock of hair. It took her a moment to realize he was the same man who'd come over to talk to her the other night. What was his name again? Jeff?

The man looked up, and their eyes met, but he made no move toward her.

Thank goodness.

She'd come here for a drink. The last thing she needed was another man disrupting her peace of mind today.

Fortunately, the corner booth she'd sat in the other night was still empty. She headed straight for it and sat down, grateful to be away from the ranch, if only for a little while.

She still couldn't believe what Stanley had done. Now that she thought about it, he hadn't exactly done anything wrong. Nothing was stopping him from going upstairs to take a nap or a shower. Still, considering he'd spent pretty much all his time in that barn, he was the last person she'd expected to suddenly walk into the kitchen and get a drink.

If she closed her eyes now, she could still see him standing there by the fridge, those deep blue eyes fixed on her. In seconds, she'd found herself embarrassingly turned on by his very presence, even more so when she noticed his own arousal.

Only Stanley had that effect on her. Once upon a time, she'd loved the intensity of their mutual attraction. Now, it troubled her. He was back, and there was no telling how much longer she could keep resisting him.

"You're back," said a voice.

It was Penny, the barmaid. She wore a brown top that exposed part of her midriff over khaki shorts. For a second, Allison couldn't help feeling like she was staring up at the country version of Lara Croft.

"You left in such a hurry the other night, I thought you'd never return," the barmaid said. "I almost threatened to kick Jeff out that night."

Allison glanced for a second at the booth where the man was still sitting, going off about something she couldn't hear.

“What's your poison this afternoon?” Penny asked her.

She thought for a moment. “Whiskey?”

“You asking me?” The barmaid looked a little amused. “What brings you back here, if you don't mind me asking? I mean, no offense, but you don't exactly seem like the type to just pop up in here on a random afternoon.” She lifted a brow. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Something like that. How'd you know?”

“You've got a funny look on your face a former friend got whenever she and her ex-boyfriend were arguing. The guy ended up leaving her for some chick in the next town.” Penny smirked.

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Allison let out a breath. “It’s more complicated than that. It’s a long story, really.”

“Well, now you’ve got a listener. I’ll pour you a drink, and we can talk. How’s that?”

Allison frowned. “Aren’t you supposed to be working?”

The barmaid gave a wave of her hand. “Everyone’s already drinking. I don’t think I’ll be getting any requests in a while. Hang on.”

She headed back to the counter. A couple of minutes later, she returned to the booth, holding a bottle of whiskey and a pair of glasses. A bottle of water was tucked under her arm. She set everything down and sat across the table from Allison, pouring her whiskey and pouring herself some water.

“Don’t want to drink on the job,” she explained before Allison could speak. “Now, I’m all ears. What’s the matter?”

Allison didn’t respond right away. She raised her glass to her lips and took a sip, then set it down with a sigh.

“It’s my husband. He’s back.”

Penny frowned. “I’m not sure how that’s a bad thing.”

“No, you don’t understand. He disappeared four years ago. We argued, and he went for a ride on his horse on the ranch. That was the last I saw or heard of him until the night I left this bar. He was standing in the middle of the road when I saw him.

Almost ran him over.”

“Whoa.”

Allison gave a tiny shrug. She wasn’t sure whether she should be telling all this to Penny. The barmaid was practically a stranger as far as she was concerned. If anyone at all, she should be talking to Celine. But Allison went on, staring down at her glass as she spoke.

“He’s been telling me that he never meant to leave me,” she said. “He said he got lost, trapped on some mountain. The whole thing sounds like a cock-and-bull story to me, but I can’t help wondering ... I mean, he looked different than when I last saw him.”

“Different?” The barmaid had a look of unwavering interest on her face.

Allison nodded. “Shaggy hair, no shirt. He looked ... bigger, and there were these scars all over his body.”

“What in the ...?”

“And his eyes ... I’m not sure how to explain it, but they look like they’ve seen things. He’s still the same old Stanley, but he’s also changed. I told him to stay away from me, and he’s been living in our barn without complaining. He’s never done that before.”

She sucked in a breath. Was the barmaid human or supernatural? She couldn’t quite tell. Whatever the case, she should probably try not to say anything that might suggest it.

“That’s not even the main problem. I was supposed to be over him. After everything I

went through after he left, I should've lost any feelings I had for him. But now he's back, and it's been ... well, chaotic. I want to let him in—at least, that's what my heart wants—but that would be foolish. He abandoned me before. I can't just pretend that it didn't happen. I can't risk him breaking my heart all over again."

Her words faded into silence, and she realized her breathing had quickened a little. Across the table from her, Penny took a sip from her glass, frowning like she was trying to make sense of everything Allison had just said.

"I'm sorry," Allison told her. "I'm dumping all this on you, and—"

"No, don't apologize." The other woman gave her a lopsided grin. "I did ask you to talk to me. But something you said made me wonder ..."

"What?"

"Something tells me your husband wasn't lying about not leaving you on purpose. You said he vanished."

"Without a trace."

Penny stared at her glass for a moment. "It happened to someone I used to know."

Allison sat up a little straighter. "Really?"

The barmaid nodded, brushing a few strands of red hair out of her face. "His name is—was—Adam. We were supposed to be together, and one day, he just ... vanished. I thought he'd abandoned me or something, but my pack—I mean, my family—did everything they could to find him. When even they couldn't, I knew something worse had happened. There was no trace of him anywhere. No sign that he'd taken off or been dragged away. He just ..."

“Vanished,” Allison said. That sounded a lot like what had happened in Stanley’s case. Except for one thing. “He still hasn’t returned?”

Penny had a sad expression on her face. “It took me a while to accept that he was gone. It still hurts, but not as much. I don’t know if it’s the same thing that happened to your husband, but I hope he’s doing okay wherever he is.” She reached halfway across the table as if to touch Allison’s hand, then seemed to change her mind. “I’m happy for you, anyway. And you should be, too. If I were in your shoes, I’d be more than grateful to have him back.”

Maybe talking with Penny hadn't been such a great idea, Allison thought as she drove back to the ranch. She'd barely gotten anything to drink, and by the time she and the barmaid were done talking, she'd all but lost her thirst. A good thing since she still had to drive back home. It was not so good because her thoughts were still racing.

She rounded a bend and flashed back to what Penny had said about her lover, who'd also disappeared.

The thought kept prodding her: What if he never really meant to leave?

Allison had already been considering the possibility, but what Penny told her made her wonder even more. What if she'd been wrong this whole time, and he really was telling the truth about this Frost Mountain business?

I'd be more than grateful to have him back, the barmaid had said.

Allison wasn't exactly ungrateful. In a way, despite all the pain and memories that had accompanied his return, it was great to have Stanley back, to know that he was around. And that was exactly why it was such an issue. She still cared, no matter how much she wished she didn't. And that made her more susceptible to being hurt by him again.

She was halfway down the dirt path that led to the ranch house when she sensed that something wasn't quite right. The cowhands weren't at work. A few of them stood by the barns, looking tense. They glanced at her as she drove by, but none of them even

waved in greeting. Allison frowned. What the heck was going on?

She continued toward the house. Allison spotted two figures in front. Julian was there, and sitting on the porch steps, bare-chested and mouthwatering as usual, was her husband.

Her stomach clenched. What was he doing back at the house? And why did everyone look so worried? She pulled up and climbed out of the truck.

“What’s going on?” she wanted to know.

Julian started toward her, looking like he’d rather not be the bearer of bad news. “Boss, something’s happened.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Allison replied impatiently, looking to him for an explanation. “What happened?”

“Three of our cows were slaughtered.”

She blinked at him. “I don’t understand.”

“Someone killed them earlier today on the field. I found them less than an hour ago with slashes and claw marks on their necks.”

“Claw marks?”

He nodded. “It’s almost like some wild animal did it, or ...”

He didn’t have to complete his sentence. Allison knew what he was about to say. Her heart sank into the pit of her stomach. Her animals had been slaughtered. That was the last thing she’d been expecting to hear upon returning to the ranch.

She glanced over his shoulder at Stanley. He sat motionless, his elbows on his knees, his brows knit together. He was still shirtless, a fact she could never not notice. His gaze was trained on the ground. Suddenly, he looked up, and their eyes met. His were filled with an emotion she hadn't seen since his return.

He's furious. And he looks like he knows something.

"Thanks, Julian," she said. "Give me a moment with my husband, will you?"

The cowhand looked at her funny but nodded and walked away. She faced Stanley just as he rose to his feet.

"You're right to give us privacy," he said. "We need to talk."

"About what?" she wondered.

"I know exactly who slaughtered those cows." His jaw clenched. "The bastard is after me, and now he knows where I live."

Chapter Eight

Stories and Scars

"Okay," Allison said, her fingers interlacing protectively around her mug, "I know I probably shouldn't believe a word that comes out of your mouth, and Celine's going to lose her mind when she finds out I agreed to talk to you, but I want to hear it."

Facing her across the kitchen table from her, Stanley lifted an eyebrow. "What exactly do you want me to tell you?"

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“Everything.” She seemed to consider that for a moment. “You can start by telling me why there are dead cows on our property.”

Except for them, the kitchen was empty and silent, as was the rest of the house, just like the last time he’d been in here. Only this time, there was no electric spark in the air between them that made him want to part her legs and bury himself deep within her. The silence that hung in the air was pregnant with unspoken questions.

He broke eye contact instead regarding the coffee mugs on the oak table. Allison had made herself black coffee as usual. Stanley added an extra cube of sugar to his. Coffee had never been his go-to drink, but after what he’d seen outside in the field, any drink would do.

I’m going to give you the death you should’ve gotten back in the cave.

His inner snow leopard growled at the memory. Johan’s words had remained vivid in his mind ever since he’d attacked him in the middle of the street, a reminder of how dangerous he was. And now the man had brought trouble to Stanley’s doorstep. Frowning, he plopped another sugar cube into his mug. He’d been expecting Johan to come after him, just not so soon and certainly not in his home. Then again, it had been only a matter of time.

He’d been resting in the barn shortly after he saw Allison’s truck leave the property—when he heard the cowhands yelling. Julian had come running to meet him, claiming he’d spotted the dead cows while riding near the field. Once Stanley saw what had happened, he and the cowhands had searched the property. They’d found no one, but that hadn’t surprised him. The second he saw the deep gashes in the

cattle, he'd known exactly who was responsible. Johan had snuck onto the property to leave him a message.

The Collector's message had been clear: I know where you live. I'm coming for you.

He ground his teeth. Despite everything Johan had done, attacking him back in Kirnham and shoving him into the pit in Grim Jim's cave, he'd held no animosity toward the man. At least he hadn't died like he feared he would. But Johan clearly wanted that to change.

The thought made Stanley's blood boil.

"Stanley?"

He blinked, and it dawned on him that his grip on his mug had tightened. Relaxing his hand, he faced his wife.

"Sure," he said. "But to do that, I'll need to explain a lot more. You need to know about Frost Mountain."

Her eyebrows twitched slightly. She nodded. "I'm all ears."

"Right." It had taken three dead cows and a murderous Collector to get her to decide she was ready to listen to him. Stanley wasn't sure how to feel about that.

He lifted his mug to his lips, keeping his eyes on her as he sipped. Allison shifted slightly in her seat. Her face was tight with tension, although it was impossible to tell whether it was because of Johan's attack or the man sitting right across the table from her.

"Frost Mountain," he began, setting the mug down, "isn't any ordinary mountain. It

isn't even a part of this world. You could say it's ... a dimension, a dimension separate from Earth."

He paused to gauge her reaction. For the most part, she seemed unmoved, although he thought her eyebrow had risen an inch in the last few seconds.

"So, it's a dimension," he went on, "a magical one. The mountain is the entire space. There are no islands or seas or countries. It's just Frost Mountain. Like Mount Everest, only there's no bottom. The mountain's all there is."

"That makes no sense," Allison said with a frown.

"Magic rarely ever does make sense. And the witches who created that place did so intending to mess with the head of anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves trapped in it."

"Witches?"

Stanley was aware that he was already starting to sound less and less believable, but he pushed on.

"I learned the truth—or at least, what people believe about Frost Mountain—a year after I got there. It's centuries old. And it was designed to be a prison."

"Awhat, now?"

He shrugged. "Centuries ago, there was a war on Earth between a coven of witches and shifters. It was a brutal one, and the witches won by using dark, dangerous magic. They created Frost Mountain as a prison to hold the shifters, literally doomed them to spend the rest of their days on a freezing, snow-covered rock with all kinds of nasty surprises."

Allison sat back and seemed to remember her coffee then. She brought the mug to her lips and took a loud sip before setting her mug back down. She stared at him for a few seconds before asking the question he'd already seen coming.

“What does that have to do with you disappearing?” she said.

Stanley sighed. “The shifters in that war weren't the only ones who were punished. Over the years, their descendants, born on the mountain, also had to struggle to survive. And there are portals on Earth linking this world to Frost Mountain, appearing randomly and claiming people, whether human or supernatural. Half the missing cases the police never manage to solve are people who stumbled into a portal and ended up there. Some survive on that mountain, like I did. Many don't.”

He grimaced as the image of a skull half-buried in the snow flashed across his mind. He'd stumbled upon dozens of those in his first year on that mountain. They were the remains of those who hadn't made it, a constant reminder of what happened to the weak and foolish.

More times than he cared to count, he'd nearly ended up as a grinning skull in the snow.

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“So,” Allison said, “you’re saying ... one of those portals—”

“Took me to Frost Mountain, yes.” He nodded. “I was riding my horse when it happened. The horse died less than an hour after I found myself on the mountain.”

He saw her wince at his words. She knew he loved horses. “Why didn’t you just come back through the portal?”

“You think I would have if I could?” Stanley nearly chuckled. “The portal was gone as suddenly as it appeared. There was no way to get home. The portals are one way. People come to Frost Mountain, and they never leave. And I know what you’re about to ask: How did I get back here?”

Allison said nothing but merely nodded.

“Well, to explain that, I’ll need to explain other things.”

“What other things?”

“I didn’t spend all four years trudging across the mountain,” he said. “Only one. I found a village and settled there. See, the thing about Frost Mountain is, it’s got all kinds of people and places—villages, towns ... people get together and form communities to survive and lead ... well, somewhat normal lives. And that’s what Kirnham was like.”

“Kirnham?”

“The village that took me in. The people there taught me everything they could about Frost Mountain. I lived in Kirnham for years as one of the guards of the village.”

She cocked her head to one side. “What were you guarding the village from? Wild animals?”

He thought he detected a bit of humor in her tone. “Wild animals are the least dangerous beings on Frost Mountain. Even the cold is more of a threat. What the people of Kirnham were really afraid of were the Collectors.”

Allison shifted again in her seat. So far, she hadn’t scoffed at his words or tried to cut him off. In light of his previous interactions with her since his return to Torpe, that was an improvement.

“The Collectors are marauders,” he explained, trying to make it as concise as he could. “They’re notorious for robbing villages and towns, searching for ‘treasures’ to take back to their ... well, their boss, a ruthless dragon shifter named Grim Jim.”

He saw she was amused, noting the smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Grim Jim?”

The name did sound a bit ridiculous, especially if you’d never been in the presence of the Ice Melter, not to mention at his mercy. Stanley nodded. “Yes. He’s the one who sent the Collectors to invade Kirnham. I still have no idea what exactly they were looking for, but the other guards and I tried to defend the town. We failed.

“I was captured by one of them, a man named Johan. He and the other Collectors brought me back to Grim Jim’s cave with them and threatened to throw me into an abyss if I didn’t join them in serving him. I refused, and Johan shoved me into the pit. I figured I was going to die anyway, so I pulled Johan in with me.” He shrugged. “But we were both wrong about the abyss.”

Allison frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Turns out there is a way off Frost Mountain. The pit’s some kind of portal back to Earth. It brought me and Johan here, to Torpe.” He could barely suppress a grin. “Grim Jim and his men have been shoving people into that pit, thinking they were killing them, but they were only sending them here.”

He could still remember how shocked he’d been to find himself back on Earth. Frost Mountain was supposed to have been his new and final home from the moment he raced through that portal on his horse. It would have been his grave, too. But he was back now, back to his real home. As time went by, Frost Mountain would become a fading memory.

“And Johan?” she asked. “He’s the one who slaughtered those cows?”

Stanley regarded his coffee for another moment before sipping from it again. “He is. He wasn’t born on Earth. And now he wants me dead for bringing him here.”

His words faded into silence. Allison pursed her lips, staring away from him as the seconds ticked by.

“Look,” he said, “I know all of this might sound crazy—”

“Oh, it does.”

“—but I think, deep down, you know I’m telling the truth. I’ve no reason to spin a story like that.”

She looked at him sharply. “Even if everything you said is true, Stanley, it doesn’t change what happened.” Her eyes softened, turning misty all of a sudden. “It doesn’t change how I’ve been feeling all this time, Stanley. You were gone—foryears.”

“I know, Allison—”

“I thought you were dead. Everyone around in town did, too. And when we couldn’t even find a body, I thought you must’ve taken off or something. Do you have any idea how your disappearance broke me? If not for Celine, I might’ve completely lost my mind.”

His heart throbbed painfully. He bit his lip. “Allison, I’m so sorry. And I know it’s hard for you to have me back here all of a sudden after everything you’ve had to deal with. All I ever wanted was to come back to you. The whole time I was on Frost Mountain, I never forgot about you. I never stopped loving you.”

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Her eyes were definitely teary. He could see the pain flickering in them. His heart throbbing in his ribcage, he reached across the table, taking her hand in his. She flinched but didn't try to release herself from his grasp.

"I'm here now," he told her. "And I'm not going anywhere. I'm not disappearing again. And I'm certainly not dying, no matter what Johan tries to do." He tried for a smile that he was sure looked like a grimace.

With her free hand, she wiped her eyes. "When you were ... when you were on Frost Mountain ... did you meet anyone else?"

She wouldn't meet his gaze. It took Stanley a moment to realize what she was asking.

"Oh ..." He couldn't resist a chuckle. "Allison, of course not. Never. I told you, I never stopped loving you. You were all I could think about."

To his relief, she smiled a little at that. "So were you."

She reached up then to touch the locket resting below her collarbone. Stanley's hand rose to do the same, feeling his heart swell in his chest.

"Your scars," she said, "how did you get them?"

Stanley glanced down his left forearm. "I got this scar fighting off a polar bear. The one on the other arm ... that was just before I got to Kirnham. Someone tried to kill me and steal the few supplies I had on me. He lost his arm that day. Most of these other scars are from attacks or accidents."

She stared at him with awe on her face. “Can I touch them?” she suddenly asked.

Before he could answer, she got to his feet and started toward him. Stanley rose, too, without really thinking. For a second, they stood facing each other, their breathing the only sound that filled the kitchen. Then he felt her fingers brush his arm.

“I’m sorry,” he thought he heard her say, “for everything you went through. Four years on that mountain ... it must have been hell.”

“It was.” His voice came out barely above a whisper. His heart was thudding harder in his chest as he followed the path her fingers were tracing along his skin as she caressed his scars. Her other hand came to rest on his chest, and his breathing nearly faltered.

There it was again. That electric spark. He could feel his body awakening, responding to her touch. Allison drew closer, her gaze darting between his eyes and lips. If he leaned a little closer, his lips and hers would be joined. The thought sent his heart racing with anticipation.

“Allison?” he breathed.

“Yes?”

“Are you sure about this?”

She was silent for a moment. “About what?”

He licked his lips. “Should you be standing so close to me right now? You know what happened the last time.”

“I don’t care,” came her reply, and she curled her fingers against his chest.

That was all it took. The next thing he knew, his lips were on hers, and the rest of the world seemed to fall away as he kissed her.

Chapter Nine

“It’s Our Home”

A few seconds before Stanley kissed her, it occurred to Allison that the kitchen wasn’t exactly the ideal location for what was certain to follow. There was no bed, and she wasn’t sure the old table would support their weight. Not to mention that a cowhand could walk in on them at any moment.

Then his lips touched hers, and suddenly, it didn’t matter where they were or who might see or hear them. Her entire world seemed to dissolve into that kiss, and all she could think of was Stanley.

His lips were as soft and fiery as always, enticing her with their delicious warmth, and she was little more than a moth to the flame he promised her. Desire surged through her, raw and desperate, and she felt her awaken, ignited by his sensual mouth. Her heart pounded in her ears, her breathing growing more ragged by the second, and the air around them seemed to rise dangerously.

She let her arms roam, her hands resting on his broad shoulders and traveling south, caressing the length of his own arms. A shiver raced through her body as she traced the path crisscrossing veins on his biceps and forearms with her thumbs, doing the absolute best she could to keep from ripping off his trousers and parting her legs so he could fill her.

Her desire raging through her body, she sighed into the kiss as his strong hands did some roaming of their own. He ran his fingers up her thighs, slightly tugging on her gown. For a moment, his hands settled at her waist, holding her firmly as he claimed

her mouth with his eager tongue, and then he lifted them to her breasts, drawing lazy circles around her nipples with his fingers.

“Oh, my—” was all she could get out before Stanley muffled her words with his mouth.

It was he who spoke next. He broke the kiss suddenly. She watched him with bated breath, wondering if the desire she saw in his eyes wasn't a perfect reflection of her own.

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“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked her.

If he asked her that again, she might snap in frustration. Of course, she wanted this. She’d craved his touch, his kisses, from the day he’d come into her bedroom with the coffee. Her doubts were all that had stopped her before. And right now, she’d suspended those.

All she gave in response was a nod. Stanley’s lips twitched in a grin that made her heart skip a couple of beats. A second later, he was kissing her again, long and deep. Allison felt like she’d been thrust into a dream. He cupped her breast, kneading it in his hand, his hot mouth filling her mind with all kinds of ideas. She moaned into the kiss, wanting, nay, needing more of it, more of him.

He settled back onto his chair and she followed him, straddling him without once breaking the kiss. One arm came around her to support her back. She ground against him, feeling his erection throbbing against her core. Her heart pounded even harder, and she felt a warm wetness gather between her legs. Could he feel it, too?

“When I was on Frost Mountain,” he said, planting a kiss on the corner of her mouth, “I looked at your picture in my locket all the time. Your beauty was unchanging. Even now ... you’re beautiful, Allison.”

As he spoke, he continued to kiss her, his fiery lips traveling down to her chin. When they touched her collarbone, she nearly melted against him. Stanley reached for the hem of her dress, but her hands reached it before his. Her fingers trembling with anticipation, she helped him lift the dress up her thighs and above her head.

She sat half-naked beneath him, her soaked panties the only thing keeping his wandering hands away from the part of her that ached the most. Her nipples grazed his chest, hard as diamonds, and a soft hiss escaped her lips with each contact. His eyes still filled with lust, he took a breast into his mouth, kneading the other in one hand. His tongue flicked over her nipple, and with a moan, she arched against him, lost in the sensations that he gave her.

She'd missed this. Man had she missed this, being alone with this man, skin pressed to skin, driving each other slowly toward the peak of pleasure. His kisses, his touch, his words ... they all awakened something deep within her, something only he had ever awakened. They'd barely even begun, but Allison wished she could remain like this forever, no matter that they were still in the kitchen.

His fingers traveled along her spine as he continued to suckle her, nibbling gently on her nipple. She let out another moan, her body bowing against him, unable to get enough of his hot, sensuous mouth. He flicked his tongue across her nipple again, and she felt tendrils of pleasure shoot through her like a lightning bolt, all the way to the spot between her legs.

"Oh, my," she gasped. Her fingers curled behind his head, holding him to her breast. "Oh, yes, Stanley. Just like that."

There was something about the way Stanley made love to her that she would never tire of. Something about the way he worshipped her body with his lips, his tongue, his fingers, even those sexy blue eyes of his. When she was with Stanley, she felt like the most beautiful woman ever to exist, deserving of all the pleasure he was capable of offering to her.

He continued to give it to her. And she was nothing if not receptive.

She bit back a protest as he slowly took his mouth off her breast, knowing there was

more to come. Sure enough, Stanley braced his hands on her hips. The next thing Allison knew, he'd set her down on the table. It creaked a little but didn't collapse under her weight, thank goodness. An injured tailbone would be one heck of a way to ruin a moment as intense as this.

Stanley's mouth covered hers in a momentary kiss. Then he was back on his seat, his face almost level with her thighs. He parted them slowly, grinning at the dark spot that had gathered in the crotch of her panties.

"I love how wet you get for me," he said. "I love seeing how horny I make you, baby."

If he kept talking like that, she was going to end up as a puddle in the middle of their kitchen. She started to remove her panties, suspecting what was coming, but he beat her to it. Her breath hitched in her throat as he slipped his fingers through the waistband of her panties, tugging them down her thighs. Now she sat completely bared to his hungry eyes.

"So beautiful," he murmured, bringing a hand to stroke her glistening folds.

He brushed a finger over her clit, and she gasped from the sudden pleasure. Those blue eyes snapped up to fixate on hers.

"Does that feel good, baby?" he whispered, stroking her some more.

With a whimper, she nodded.

"That's what I thought." He continued to caress her engorged clit, the gleam in his eyes seeming to brighten as her moans rose in intensity. And then, without warning, he brought his mouth to her clit, replacing his fingers. His warm tongue flicked across her nub with the same rhythm.

A cry erupted from her lips, and her hips buckled against him. Ecstasy rocked her body as he continued to pleasure her with his tongue. If he kept that up, she was bound to explode.

As if reading her mind, Stanley suddenly doubled his efforts. He slid a finger and then another into her, stroking her even as he licked and tasted her.

“Fuck, yes, Stanley,” she moaned, a slight jerk in her hips as he drove her closer to climax. “You make me feel so good.” She threw her head back in another cry. It dawned on her then that if there were any cowhands near the house, they might hear her. She brushed the thought from her mind as quickly as it had arisen.

“That’s it,” he murmured against her clit. “Come for me, baby.”

His words were her undoing. She gripped the edge of the table for all she was worth, feeling the sensations build up within her. And then her orgasm hit her.

“Oh, my—” Her eyes widened, and she bit down on her lip to stifle another cry as she reached her climax, her hips shuddering against his mouth. Tremors rocked her body in waves; Stanley continued to pleasure her with his fingers and tongue. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, and for a moment, she thought she might pass out.

And then it was over. She lay panting on the table, half-spent, her body still spasming slightly from the sheer force of her orgasm. She propped herself up on her elbows, her chest heaving, just in time to see Stanley rise to his feet. He towered over her, his massive frame nearly filling her field of vision.

He leaned down and kissed her, allowing her to taste her juices. A moment later, she felt his erection pulsing madly against her thigh. Desire raced through her yet again, and she reached for him, cupping his hardness through his trousers. She was rewarded with a soft hiss.

“Oh, Allison,” was all he said.

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“I want you inside me,” she told him.

For a moment, Stanley froze. Then she felt him moving again. The clink of a belt buckle and rustle of jeans being tugged down were music to her ears. She kept her gaze on him as he removed his boxer shorts.

His erection sprang free, long and hard and throbbing. Allison had only a second to gasp before he positioned himself against her, his cock pulsating against her wetness. Without really thinking, she reached for him, taking him in her hand and stroking him gently. Stanley’s body went rigid again, but only momentarily.

She might have ended up stroking him to near completion if he hadn’t suddenly pushed her hand away. His broad chest heaving, he parted her legs wider, the head of his cock teasing her folds.

“Do it,” she told him. “I want you.”

His gaze intensified in that single moment. “And you’ll have me.”

With that, he slid into her in a single, fluid stroke. She gasped as he filled her, her eyes widening as he buried himself deep into her. God, she’d almost forgotten how amazing it felt to take him into her. He shifted slightly, and a moan rose from her lips.

Stanley brought his face to hers, kissing her again. “I love you, Allison.”

Before she could respond, he began to move, his strokes gentle yet powerful. Her body shuddered with a mix of desire and ecstasy with each thrust. She threw her arms

around his neck, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“You feel so good, Allison,” he murmured. “So ... so amazing.”

She wanted to tell him that he felt even more amazing, that she never wanted this to be over, but just then, he quickened his thrusts, forcing cries of pleasure from her lips. With each thrust, he filled her, taking her closer and closer to ecstasy. A sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead, and his body soon became difficult to cling to.

“Oh, yes, baby,” he breathed. “I know you want to come for me again. Don’t hold back. Let go.”

She bit her lip, and a tear leaked from her eye as the sensations became impossible to bear any longer. Her cries were slowly rising to screams, and by now, she was certain everyone on Reyes Ranch knew what was going on in the kitchen.

“You’re so beautiful,” Stanley said.

That was all it took to drive her over the edge yet again. A roar filled her ears as she erupted, another tremor wracking her body. Whether she was crying out or not, she was too lost in her ecstasy to know or care. Stanley’s thrusts quickened as she spasmed, and soon, he, too, began to shudder as he found his release.

“Oh, Allison!” he grunted in her ear as he spilled himself into her.

With a final thrust, he sank against her. They lay together, the table supporting their combined weight, until he Stanley finally pulled himself to his feet. He lifted her into his arms and took his seat, propping her back onto his lap as his cock turned limp against her.

He planted a kiss just above her breasts, below her collarbone. “I hope nobody heard

us.”

She couldn’t resist a chuckle. “What does it matter? It’s our home.”

“Yes,” he said, and a smile tugged at his lips. “Ours.”

Chapter Ten

An Unexpected Visitor

“So let me get this straight,” Celine said. “You decided to let him into the house to tell you this crazy story of his about where he’s been the past four years, and not only did you believe him, but you also slept with him?”

Allison was silent for a moment. “Yes.”

“Tell me I’m hearing things.”

It was a day after the incident on the ranch—and in the kitchen with Stanley. Allison sat alone in the bedroom, curled up on the bed, her phone pressed to her ear, trying not to feel too silly as her friend spoke to her. She’d just finished telling Celine everything that had happened yesterday, from Stanley’s unexpected appearance in the kitchen to their eventual bout of lovemaking on the kitchen table. Allison was starting to wonder if she’d said too much.

“Look, I know it all sounds absurd—”

“Sounds?”

“—but I believe him. In a way, his story makes sense.”

Not to mention, talking to Penny was convincing as well.

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Her best friend heaved a sigh. “It’s already happened, so there’s no point trying to dissuade you now. Besides, he is your husband. But you need to be careful anyway. You don’t want to get hurt again like the last time.” Celine said nothing for the next few seconds. “And then there’s that man you mentioned, Jonah or something.”

Johan.

Allison swallowed as the troubled expression on Stanley’s face flashed through her mind. Last night, after their lovemaking, Stanley had told her even more about Johan. The man was plain evil. There had been no attacks since the slaughtered cows yesterday, and as the hours went by, she’d found herself wondering just what Johan might be up to, what he was planning.

She’d considered reporting the matter to the police. The slaughtered cows should be interesting enough for law enforcement. But what could she tell them? That a man from a magical dimension found his way onto Reyes Ranch and threatened their lives? What were the odds she wouldn’t find herself in a padded room wearing a straitjacket?

“I’ll be careful, Celine,” she assured her friend.

“You’d better be,” Celine said. “If it were up to me, you wouldn’t even be in that town right now. You’ve had more than your fair share of pain. I’d ask you to come to the city, but you already turned that offer down, and my guess is you’re not taking me up on it anytime soon.”

“You guessed correctly.” Allison sighed. Her friend was right. Things might’ve been

resolved with Stanley now, but there was still another problem on their hands. Johan was after Stanley. By association, she was in danger as well. What was it Stanley had called him? A Collector. A marauder. He didn't strike Allison as the kind of man who cared how many people were hurt as long as he got what he wanted.

And what he wanted now was Stanley's life.

The women continued talking for the next few minutes, and then Celine hung up, saying she had some other business to attend to. Allison got up, walked over to the bedroom window, and stared out at the grassy field. The setting sun cast an orange hue on the ground. There wasn't much movement in sight besides a few animals being slowly herded back to the barns by the cowhands.

It was then that she laid eyes on a horse and rider racing across the plains. The rider was bare-chested and blond-haired, muscles rippling as the horse galloped west of the barns. She watched the contours of his back with fascination. How long had Stanley been riding Betsy? An hour? Two? He never seemed to tire of it. It was no surprise he'd been riding a horse when he disappeared four years ago.

It was great to have him back. No, great didn't quite describe the warm, fluttery feeling in her chest as she watched him. Her mind flashed back to yesterday's lovemaking. They'd made love a couple more times in this bedroom before falling asleep and once again this morning before he left the house.

The memories flooded her mind like images on a projector screen: Stanley's full arousal throbbing against her crotch ... Stanley's head buried between her legs. Four years of being stranded on Frost Mountain hadn't dimmed his skills one bit. The man was still a lover to the core. And when he'd filled her core, sending her over the edge of ecstasy with his powerful thrusts, she couldn't have been more grateful to have him back.

A smile tugged at her lips. Things seemed to be returning to normal.

But how long would this normalcy last? Anxiety flickered in her chest as she gazed at him. What were the odds that he wouldn't disappear again?

She brushed the thought aside. It was a valid fear, she knew. Still, it was better to enjoy what she had now. She loved him. That hadn't changed, not at all. She doubted it ever would.

She realized she hadn't had anything to eat in hours. Between her excitement about having Stanley back in the house and her tiredness from all their lovemaking, she'd skipped lunch. Stanley had been outside since early morning, working in the barn and riding Betsy. He hadn't come back to the house, so Allison guessed he wasn't yet hungry. That was probably another side effect of being stuck on Frost Mountain. Maybe he'd had to go days without eating.

The thought made her shudder. She'd struggled to keep the horror from her face as he narrated his ordeal on the mountain. From crashing onto the mountain on his horse to being shoved into what he thought was a bottomless pit, he'd clearly been through hell. And Allison knew words hadn't done justice to the extent he'd suffered. To think he'd been trapped in such a terrible place for so long ...

At least he's back, she thought. And alive.

With a sigh, she left the bedroom and headed downstairs into the kitchen, pulling out a jar of cold water from the fridge. She poured herself a glass, and only after she'd taken a couple of sips did she hear the footsteps behind her.

"Finally taking a break from that horse, are you, Stanley?" she asked without looking at him. "I was starting to wonder whether you'd come back in at all today."

No doubt, he'd come in here for a drink, like her. The last time he'd done that, just yesterday, the sexual tension had been impossible to ignore. She drew a breath, her nipples hardening as the delicious memory of Stanley gazing at her with those sexy blue eyes crossed her mind.

There was no response. She could still hear him moving behind her, drawing closer.

"I'm sure you're probably tired," she said, turning around to face him, "but maybe you and I could—"

She froze with a gasp, and the glass slipped from her fingers and shattered to the floor.

"Wh-who ... who are you?" she demanded.

The man stepped closer. He was tall and had a bushy red beard that reminded her somewhat of Stanley's when he'd first returned from Frost Mountain. The man had on a dark hoodie over sweatpants and sneakers, like he'd just come in from an evening jog. A pair of grey eyes gazed back at her, studying her with what looked like surprise and then curiosity.

Her pulse pounded in her ears. She'd never seen this man before, and Stanley hadn't told her what he looked like either, but she instantly knew beyond a shadow of a doubt who he was.

She opened her mouth to scream. He moved then, quick as lightning and a rough hand clamped down over her mouth. The other hand rose slowly. As she watched, gleaming claws extended from his fingertips.

She gazed wide-eyed at him, shuddering all over.

Johan grinned at her, revealing a mouthful of yellowed teeth.

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“So he has a wife,” the Collector said. “Things just got more interesting.”

Betsy was growing tired of the ride.

Stanley was not.

He held onto the reins, loving the familiar feeling of the wind in his hair as he raced across the field on the horse. The view of the sunset out here was stunning. If it were up to him, he would ride on and on, basking in the twilight glow.

But that wasn't why he'd decided to ride Betsy in the first place.

He leaned forward on the horse, stroking her mane as she galloped. The grass below was almost a complete blur in his vision. He gazed ahead. The ranch house and barn were still in the distance, their outlines growing larger as he drew nearer. It reminded him somewhat of the day he'd left Earth.

He could almost see the portal shimmering into view again, the air shifting before his very eyes. Could something like that happen to him again? Four years ago, he'd ridden straight through the portal and had found himself in hell. If that happened to him again, if another portal opened suddenly before him as it had four years ago, he wasn't sure he could bear it, especially if it meant getting pinned under Betsy and having to kill her to ensure his survival.

It's all in the past now, he told himself. It's not going to happen again.

Still, his grip on the horse reins tightened a bit. Next to finding Allison again, being back in his world was the best thing ever to happen to him. He was free now. Free from the prison called Frost Mountain. Free from the need to struggle for his survival. Free from the Collectors ... and he wasn't about to lose his freedom again.

But then there was Johan.

Johan was still here. Johan was after him. Johan wanted him dead and wouldn't stop until he'd made it happen.

An attack from him was imminent, but Stanley had no idea when the man would finally strike. He knew he couldn't afford to be caught off guard. That was part of the reason he'd taken Betsy out of her stable. For most of his day, he'd been patrolling the property in case the Collector decided to send another message—or worse.

It could always be worse. Johan's last victim had been a couple of cows. Whose life would he take next? A horse? One of the cowhands? Or Allison? The thought made his blood boil. Johan could've walked away, moved to a different town, and started a new life there or something. Anything, really. Instead, he'd chosen to remain here. And for what? To get revenge on Stanley for dragging him away from the hellscape he'd lived in all his life.

It made no sense.

Not that it mattered now. Whatever Johan had in store for him, Stanley wasn't going to let it happen. He would fight Johan until his final breath if he needed to.

It occurred to him that his jaw was clenched. He relaxed it, steering the horse toward the barn. For a moment, he cut his gaze to the house. Allison must be in the kitchen now, making dinner. A smile tugged at his lips. He should go back there now and help out in the kitchen, maybe chop some onions for her or give her a long, warm hug

from behind.

If he did that, things might get pretty steamy, and they'd end up going to bed on empty stomachs, he realized with a chuckle. They'd made love so many times since yesterday that he couldn't help but feel that they were making up for lost time. Not that he minded one bit. Even now, he couldn't wait until the next time he was buried inside her, filling her to the brim, kissing her as they drove each other into ecstasy. His mind stirred with the memory of her gazing up at him from between his legs as she pleased him with her sweet, hot mouth.

Maybe later, he told himself, feeling his body slowly come alive as the image grew more vivid in his mind.

It felt good to be back with Allison, to share a bed with her again. He'd been living in that barn, hoping she would look past the fact that he'd been gone for so long and welcome him into her arms for two long weeks.

Stanley frowned. His inner snow leopard growled softly. He looked around. Something felt off, but he couldn't put his finger on it, so he brushed the feeling aside.

Betsy nickered softly. He'd given her quite a workout lately. She could use a good night's sleep. In the morning, he'd take her or one of the other horses for a spin. As he and Betsy drew closer to the barn, he could see some of the cowhands in the distance. They were done with work for the day, as was he.

He reached the barn and returned Betsy to her stable, stroking the horse's flank for a moment before exiting the barn and heading straight for the house. He'd only gotten halfway there when he realized someone was standing on the front porch.

Allison?

He drew closer, frowning.

Wait a minute.

It wasn't just one person. There weretwoof them, a man and a woman. Allison stood right in front of the man, gazing at Stanley as he approached. He was too far away to see either of their faces clearly, but he could already tell that something wasn't quite right. Who could that be? One of the cowhands?

It was only after a few more steps that he saw the look of terror on Allison's face. His gaze shifted. The man behind her stared back at him, grey eyes gleaming with murderous intent. He had a hand at Allison's throat, gleaming claws digging into her skin.

Stanley froze in his tracks, his eyes widening with realization. His inner snow leopard bared its teeth.

"You," he snarled, balling his fists.

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“Good to see you again,” Johan said. “I was wondering when you’d join us.”

Allison’s eyes were wide with terror. Her chest heaved with each breath. Stanley’s pulse roared in his ears. He glowered at the Collector, who merely grinned back at him.

“Finally,” he said. “It’s been a while since I sank my claws into someone’s throat.”

Chapter Eleven

“Frost Mountain Was My Home”

Stanley reacted quickly, making a dash for the porch steps quicker than he could form another coherent thought. But there was only so much good his speed could do him with Allison still firmly in Johan’s clutches.

“Not another step closer,” the Collector snapped, his grin widening slightly, “or I’ll have to kill your lovely wife.”

Stanley halted and stared daggers at the man. His inner snow leopard bared its teeth viciously.

“That’s it,” Johan said. “I want her to watch you die before I rip her throat out. It would be such a shame to have to kill her first.”

Stanley gritted his teeth. The man was insane. No, not insane. He was simply a murderer. A thieving, murdering marauder. The man must have snuck into the house

and grabbed Allison. How the hell had he done that without anyone noticing? Not a single alarm had been raised. The ranch was quiet except for a gentle breeze and the sound of his pulse jackhammering in his ears.

His gaze traveled over his wife's body. Allison looked frightened out of her senses, but other than that, she was unhurt.

It had better stay that way, Stanley thought.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Johan said, tracing a clawed finger across Allison's throat; it didn't pierce her flesh, but a shudder rocked her body. "If we were back on Frost Mountain, I'm sure the Ice Melter would have loved to keep her as one of his treasures."

The idea of Allison being stuck in that massive cave with Grim Jim made Stanley's gut clench. "We're not on Frost Mountain anymore," he said. "Things don't work that way here."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" The smile was suddenly gone from Johan's face. "You took me from my world to this ... this place."

Stanley sensed movement somewhere in the distance. One or two of the cowhands must have noticed something was up. Hopefully, they wouldn't come and try to help. Two or three men could overpower Johan without much of a struggle, but they'd be risking Allison's life in the process.

Besides, this wasn't their fight. It was Stanley's.

"I never meant to bring you here—" he began.

"You meant to kill me," Johan cut in. "You thought I would die in that pit."

“Isn’t that why you shoved me into it?” Stanley countered. “You were ready to sacrifice me to please your master.”

“The Ice Melter gave you a choice!”

“And I chose to die because it was better than joining you to murder and steal from innocent people. Turns out your pit of death was nothing but a way off Frost Mountain. You’ve been giving people freedom instead of sending them to their deaths.”

Johan scoffed. Before him, Allison gave a whimper that caused Stanley’s heart to throb painfully.

“Freedom,” the Collector said. “Is that what you call this? This strange world with its strange rules?”

“Welcome to America, asshole,” Stanley spat. “What you’re experiencing is called order. Must be a major culture shock since you’re used to chaos.” He shook his head, still glowering at the man. “You’d really rather be stuck in a dimension that was designed to trap and kill you? Not to mention not knowing when someone might rob or murder you in your sleep?”

He doubted trying to talk sense into Johan would suddenly give the man a change of heart, but if it bought Stanley enough time to come up with a way to get Allison out of his clutches and to safety, it was best to keep talking.

Johan’s gaze flickered for a second. Stanley got the feeling he was looking at his scars.

“Frost Mountain was my home,” he said.

That gave Stanley pause. Up until now, it hadn't really occurred to him just why the man might find being on Frost Mountain more bearable than coming to Earth. It seemed absurd at first glance—why would anyone prefer to be stuck in a freezing death trap? But now it made a bit more sense. Being here meant Johan had been cut off from every aspect of his life back on Frost Mountain, including Grim Jim and the Collectors. It was a feeling Stanley could empathize with. He had been stuck on the mountain for four years. The thought that he'd forever lost his old life, his ranch, and Allison had been devastating.

Not that it justified Johan's actions.

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“You might as well have sentenced me to death by bringing me here,” the Collector said. “And what was it you said to me when you pulled me into the pit?”

Stanley’s own words crossed his mind. If I’m dying, I’m not dying alone—you’re coming with me.

“You couldn’t kill me before,” Stanley told him. “I’m only going to warn you once: Let my wife go, and maybe I’ll let you walk away from here unscathed.”

Johan guffawed. “You think you could take me down in a fight?”

“You captured me on Frost Mountain because you caught me by surprise. And when you tried to kill me, you had your Collectors and master to protect you. I don’t see them around anywhere.”

It was a calculated statement intended to infuriate Johan. And it worked. The man’s face reddened, his grey eyes lighting up with murderous rage. For a moment, Stanley saw his grip on Allison relax a bit.

She noticed it, too. Before he could make a move toward them, she drove her elbow into Johan’s gut. Stanley doubted it hurt the man, but the blow took him completely by surprise. Johan staggered backward for only a moment, but that was all she needed to get away from him. She darted back inside the house just as Johan straightened and made a grab for her.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Stanley snarled, lunging for the man.

He caught Johan by the legs and tackled him. Johan kicked at him, struggling to get free. A second later, claws cut through the air before Stanley's face. He gave a heave, straining with all his might to get the man away from the front door, and the next thing he knew, they were tumbling down the porch steps.

Stanley rolled and sprang to his feet, bracing for an attack. Johan had already gotten up. The man's grey eyes bored into his.

"Maybe it's a good thing that pit didn't kill you," he spat. "Now I can do it myself."

He lunged, shifting as he did. His clothes ripped away, and a moment later, a large brown wolf collided with Stanley, knocking him to the ground. The wolf's jaws widened and snapped shut, missing his face by mere inches.

Stanley's inner snow leopard growled in response. Then, his own clothes ripped away as his body grew and changed shape. No sooner had his face elongated into a muzzle than Johan struck again. The snow leopard's quick reflexes kicked in, and Stanley easily dodged the attack, feeling the displacement of air where his head had been a second ago.

Johan struck blindly with his claws and was rewarded with a yelp. With a heave, he shoved Johan off his body and sprang onto all fours. The wolf growled menacingly. He wasn't bleeding as far as Stanley could see. All Stanley had done was make him angrier.

They circled each other, hackles raised, both poised to attack. Stanley studied his opponent intently. He was more agile, but Johan was larger. Those grey eyes gazed back at him, threatening demise. But Stanley wasn't ready to die.

He wasn't going to die. Not if he could help it.

It was he who struck next, feinting an attack on Johan's left flank and suddenly striking his right. It wasn't until he'd launched himself at the wolf that he realized he'd made a mistake. The sudden stab of pain in his shoulder confirmed that fact.

He hit the ground and rolled, getting up on all fours before Johan could deal him another blow. Stanley growled in pain. His left shoulder throbbed where the wolf's claws had slashed him. There was no telling how deep the wound was, but it was most definitely going to leave a scar.

If he survived this fight.

They continued to circle each other. Johan's jaws parted slightly as if the wolf were grinning at him, taunting him.

The ground rumbled beneath his paws as Johan charged again, lunging at him, claws outstretched. Stanley darted to the side. Just before Johan hit the floor, Stanley extended his own claws. He felt them make contact with Johan's body, and a howl of agony pierced the air. The ground shook again as the wolf landed, writhing in pain.

Stanley could see three bright red gashes on the wolf's side. As he watched, Johan shifted back to human form, groaning and clutching his side. Blood trickled from under his fingers. Stanley doubted the wound was deep enough to kill him but just deep enough to disable him.

The snow leopard's body gave way to his human form. Chest heaving, Stanley stood over Johan; the man glared up at him, his expression a mix of pain and resentment.

"You should kill me now," the man said, "while you still have the chance."

Stanley merely blinked at him.

“Do it!” Johan snarled. “Kill me.”

Stanley shook his head slowly. “No. I think you’re going to be around for a while. You’re going to love being on Earth.”

With that, he brought down his fist, knocking the man out cold.

“Glad you threw some clothes on him before the police showed up,” Allison said, folding her arms across her chest. “We’d have had to explain to the cops why there was a naked man bleeding on our front porch.”

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Stanley managed a grin, watching a policeman slap handcuffs on Johan's wrists and lead him toward the nearest police car. The man was silent, glowering at the couple as he climbed into the backseat.

It looked like the entire police force had responded tonight. Half a dozen cars were parked haphazardly, lights flashing as policemen inspected the property and took notes. They'd already questioned everyone they could, including a few cowhands who'd witnessed the whole thing, about what happened, and scoured the property twice for evidence. Allison had to admit, she felt a little uncomfortable having so many of them around, but the sight of Johan getting cuffed made it all worthwhile.

"I'm just glad it's over," Stanley said.

She looked at him. He'd managed to change clothes and discard the shredded ones before either of them heard the sirens. In his sleeveless grey T-shirt and blue jeans, he hardly looked like he'd just been fighting for his life. Well, except for the bandage on his shoulder where Johan had clawed him.

Another scar from Frost Mountain, she thought.

"Thank you," she blurted, "for saving me."

She'd shocked herself when she'd elbowed Johan and broke free, but she'd had enough presence of mind not to just stand there and let him grab her again. So she'd hurried into the house and called 911. By the time she put down the phone, all was quiet outside. It had taken all of her courage to step back outside. And what had she found? Stanley standing over Johan's unconscious form.

She'd never really seen Stanley in action before. Seeing him like that, with that dark expression on his face, had been a little unnerving. The man was a force to be reckoned with, especially after his time on Frost Mountain. He hadn't killed Johan, but Allison didn't doubt he could have if he'd wanted to.

The cops soon started to leave. The police car with Johan in it roared to life and began pulling away from the house. Allison gazed in its direction and froze. Johan was staring right at her. His face was expressionless now, but it still sent shivers down her spine. Barely an hour ago, the man's claws had been at her throat. More than once, she'd been mere seconds away from death.

Stanley put a protective arm around her shoulders.

"He can't hurt you," he said. "Not anymore. Not from behind bars."

She looked at him.

"He'll live," he told her. "The wound I gave him won't kill him, although I'm sure it'll leave a doctor or two confused for a while. But I don't think he'll go free anytime soon. It's been four years, but I'm pretty sure attempted murder is still a crime around these parts."

Allison managed a small smile, feeling a little relieved. "You're right."

"It's all over now. We're safe. Still," he continued, "I'm really sorry."

"For what?"

"Everything." He gesticulated vaguely with one arm and winced, lowering it quickly. "This is all happened because of me. You were hurt because I disappeared. And even when I returned, I brought a murderer with me and nearly got you killed."

His head started to dip, but she reached up and cupped his chin, turning his head to face her.

“You didn’t even know you’d be coming back here,” she told him. “I heard what you and Johan were saying. I was there, remember? You had no idea that pit was some kind of portal. You had no idea you were ever going to see me again. And it wasn’t your fault you disappeared.”

“You have a point.” Stanley’s blue eyes bored into hers. “I still feel like I need to make up for it somehow.”

“You’re here, Stanley. That’s all that matters. That’s all that’s ever mattered.”

His lips twitched. He turned to face her. “I’m not going anywhere. Not without you. You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried.”

“I don’t see myself trying anytime soon.”

His grin widened. And then he kissed her. By the time he pulled away, she was practically gasping for air. He reached up and touched the pendant resting on her chest.

“I love you, Allison,” he whispered against her lips.

She beamed at him. “I love you, too, Stanley.” She cocked her head to one side. “You know, maybe there is a way you could make it up to me.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“You could make me a cup of coffee ... right after some alone time together in the bedroom.”

Stanley chuckled. “Well, what are we waiting for?”