



Protecting the White Bear

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: An FBI agent, a polar bear shifter, attempts to rescue a kidnapped victim when a hot state trooper, also a bear shifter, gets in her way.

Trooper Andy MacMathan insists on being her backup. She wants to leave him behind. What begins as a kidnapping scheme twists and turns into something darker, while they turn into their polar bears to even the odds against their human foes.

Romantically falling for each other isn't in the plan, but the heat between them sizzles. The mission to learn the truth deepens their commitment to each other while navigating the danger—if they can live long enough to solve the case.

If you love shifter novels, it's time to check out the White Bear series.

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With a whopper of a blizzard predicted to hit White Bear, Alaska and the surrounding areas in a matter of hours, State Trooper Andy MacMathan joined his family at his parents' tavern for breakfast before needing to rescue stranded motorists.

Additional hired staff prepared the meals while his dad supervised; no one was surprised. Andy's brother, Ben, who worked at the tavern, helped get everyone water, coffee, and juice. Andy swore Ben was always cheerful, no matter the time of day. It was 5:00 a.m., and everyone, especially his cousins who had little ones, looked exhausted.

Andy grabbed a couple of highchairs for Daniel and Jenny, Andy's cousin Rob and Alicia's two-year-old twins. All the children were special, but Alicia always said she thought the twins would have some special abilities like she and Rob had.

Rob and Alicia had premonitions of future events and could see past events by touching something. So far, nothing had surfaced with the kids as Andy sat Jenny in her highchair, and Alicia helped Daniel in his. Both the kids had their parents' dark brown hair, but they had their mother's blue eyes.

"See, Rob, I told you Andy has been working out. Look how strong he is," Alicia teased.

Smiling, Rob was helping his brother Edward and sister-in-law Robyn settle their brood at the table, getting their seven-month-old twins, Lucas and Sawyer, into highchairs. Immediately, the six-year-old twins, Garrett and Bryan, began arguing

over who got to sit next to their daddy.

Garrett and Bryan looked just like Edward when he was their age, with dark brown hair and eyes. But Edward and Robyn's seven-month-old twins were redheads like Robyn, with the same sparkling blue eyes.

"You got to sit with Dad last time, Bryan." Garrett folded his arms and tapped his foot on the floor, his face a mutinous pout.

It was way too early for the tyke to be up. Bryan wasn't budging. He also wanted to sit by Daddy.

Edward sighed. "Now you're making Mommy sad." He finished belting Lucas into the highchair.

Robyn was securing Sawyer while Rob put her unicorn bib on. "We could always just go home and back to bed." Robyn spoke sweetly, not as a threat.

The skin beneath Alicia and Rob's eyes was darker and baggier than usual. They needed more sleep. But they wanted to gather with the family before the blizzard made the families with children housebound.

Andy gave them breaks by fishing with Garrett and Bryan in the summer, building snow forts, and having snowball fights in the winter. It was a free-for-all in the fall, raking the leaves into a mountain and jumping on them. When spring came around, Andy was the best egg-hider of them all.

Six-year-old Garrett finally gave up the grudge and quickly climbed onto the seat beside his mom, looking up at her as if hopeful she wasn't disappointed that he had wanted to sit by his dad. She smiled down, hugged him, and kissed him on his forehead. "I love you."

“I love you, Momma.”

They'd already preordered their breakfasts and had the staff come in early to expedite things. So once everyone was seated, the food was served.

Still, before anyone could ask Andy's brother Craig and his mate, Margot, if there were any babies on the horizon, a usual scenario for the family gatherings, Alicia said, “Ohmigod.”

When they stopped to hear what she said, everyone was forking into maple syrup-covered pancakes, omelets, sausages, or spooning into cereals.

Alicia looked straight at Andy. “You're off for a week from trooper duty, right?”

Andy's nerves tingled with a strange apprehension. “I would be, but with the blizzard coming in, the police force needs me. My boss will adjust the time to compensate me. Why?”

Alicia twisted her lips. “Okay.” She took another spoonful of oatmeal, topped with blueberries and whipped cream.

No one resumed eating. Even Garrett and Bryan were waiting in anticipation of what their aunt would say since she had told them they would lose their favorite soccer ball in a snowstorm if they didn't put it where it belonged. Did they listen? Nope. When they lost it, they knew she had special powers.

“Rob?” Andy asked since Alicia didn't seem forthcoming about a future premonition.

Rob shook his head. “This is all on Alicia, it seems. You know how hazy the events we can see are. We both don't get them about the same situation always, either.”

Alicia and Rob didn't know the exact times or settings, but they could sometimes catch glimpses of snapshots of what was happening.

Then, everyone slowly began eating, but continued to glance in Alicia's direction.

Andy knew she wasn't trying to make this more dramatic than he already felt it was, but she was attempting to make sense of whatever she had seen or could still be seeing.

Then she ate another blueberry and swallowed it. "You've met her before. A female polar bear."

Andy raised his brows. He had met lots of female polar bears before. "A name?"

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Alicia shook her head. “I don’t know. She appears angry when she has some business to attend to, and you want to thwart her. She must reach her goal, but you’re an impediment.”

Ben laughed.

The others all looked at him reproachfully.

“You’ve never been with her intimately. I’ve never seen her before, but I know, as if I’m in her body, that you are a problem for her,” Alicia said.

Everyone looked at Andy.

Hell if he knew what any of that meant, but he assumed the worst—he would meet the woman he’d met before in a current traffic accident, since the blizzard was coming—and they would disagree about how things would go. Great. That’s all he needed—an uncooperative accident victim whom he knew when all sorts of other trouble could be brewing.

Ben shook his head. “Whenever my cousins or brothers have major issues with a female, they mate. So it can’t be all that bad, can it?”

“I’m sure it will work itself out,” Alicia said confidently.

Most of what Rob and Alicia envisioned was dire. With the soccer ball scenario, any parent could assume that a soccer ball left outside before a snowstorm hit White Bear could be buried and disappear.

Even though Ben was trying to make light of the situation, he wore a worried frown. In fact, everyone was.

“Everything will be fine.” Yet Andy was now thinking it wouldn’t be.

In an unmarked car, FBI Special Agent Monica O’Connell watched the heavyweight kidnapper drag his ten-year-old female victim in through the front door of a white wood-framed house while the snow began coming down. Weather reports had warned of a blizzard of epic proportions hitting the area soon. She needed to rescue the girl pronto.

Monica called for backup, but every minute counted. She wasn’t waiting for anyone to show up. As soon as she told them where she was, she left her car, raced around to the back of the house, found a glass door, and peered inside. The giant of a man forced the girl down on the brown leather couch, tied her wrists in front of her, and left her to enter the kitchen.

Monica wished she could shift into her polar bear and take him down.

She knocked lightly on the glass door to alert the girl that she was there for her. Sherry Tuttle glanced in that direction, and her eyes widened. Monica pointed at the door lock. Sherry glanced at the kitchen, then dashed to the door. She unlocked it, and Monica pulled her outside. Putting her finger to her lips, Monica told her to be quiet and then closed the glass sliding door.

Her heart and Sherry’s were beating frantically as Monica motioned for Sherry to move to the side of the house where she prayed the girl would be safe. Sherry ran off through the snow. The kidnapper came out of the kitchen with a sandwich on a plate, saw she wasn’t sitting on the couch any longer, and glanced at the glass sliding door.

When he saw Monica with her gun readied, his eyes widened.

He dashed for the kitchen. Monica moved away from the door so he couldn't shoot her through it.

Now that the kidnapper didn't have Sherry under his control, Monica didn't barge into the house to try to take him down. She would wait for backup. His significant figure filled the glass door before he jerked it open.

"Down on the ground, now!" she shouted.

He changed his mind and returned to the house, slamming and locking the door. She peered in to see what he was doing next. He headed out through the front door, and Monica raced around to the side of the house to make sure Sherry was still there and out of his sight.

Tears were running down Sherry's cheeks, and Monica pulled out a knife and cut the rope that was binding her wrists. Sirens wailed, headed in the direction of the house. Thank God.

"Stay here, all right? We'll get you home soon." Monica called her boss. "Sir, I've got Sherry. The kidnapper is getting into his pickup truck and attempting to flee. Police are nearly here."

"Keep me informed."

"I sure will."

She motioned for Sherry to stay at the side of the house and checked around the corner to see where the kidnapper was. He was gassing the engine of an old blue Ford pickup, but it wasn't moving out of the driveway.

Then, four patrol cars drove up and blocked him in. The officers piled out of their

vehicles, using them for cover. With weapons pointed at his truck, they shouted at him to get out of the vehicle.

Monica waved her badge at them. “FBI Agent Monica O’Connell. I’ve got Sherry over here. She’s safe.” She had to let the officers know that the kidnapper didn’t have Sherry in the truck where he could use her as a hostage.

“We’ve got you surrounded. Come out of the truck!” the officer shouted to the kidnapper.

He opened the driver’s door.

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“Come out slowly. Out of the truck now!”

He didn't move. She was poised with her gun, but she didn't want to shoot him if she didn't have to. An investigation would result. They would take her gun. They would likely have a psychologist talk to her about how she felt about shooting the man. Perhaps they would even put her on paid leave until they determined how it all unfolded.

Because her body cam was on, at least investigators could see everything that had happened.

She knew, too, that her boss would have something to say about her slipping around the back of the house to rescue Sherry alone, but she couldn't have waited.

The man got out of the truck. She swore he towered over everyone there, downright intimidating.

“Put your hands up in the air!” “He's got a gun!” “He's armed!”

“Drop the weapon. Do it now!”

He raised the revolver and began firing. The police officers scrambled for cover. One yelled, “I've been hit!”

The other officers fired back at the kidnapper, and he crumpled to the snowy ground on the other side of his truck.

Once he was down, the police officers raced across the snow to get his weapon while another officer took care of the wounded one until an ambulance arrived.

Unless the kidnapper got up to fight again, this was done. She called for an ambulance and hugged Sherry.

“It’s done. The officers are taking him into custody,” she said to Sherry.

“He told me to tell anyone who saw us together that he was my uncle, but he isn’t.” Sherry was still sniffing.

“We know.” Then Monica called her boss back. “The kidnapper is in custody. I’m heading back to Anchorage after this is done.”

News vans pulled up, and reporters hurried to get the story. Despite not wanting to talk to them, they were in her face, and she said a few words. “Everyone in law enforcement has helped to end this case in the best way possible.”

“But you’ve successfully rescued four kidnapped victims in the last year,” a strawberry-blond-headed guy said.

“With the help of others.” Actually, no. Her polar bear senses helped her locate the victims and rescue them more safely, but she always wanted to ensure that everyone who had helped received credit for the good deed. The year before that, she hadn’t been successful, and that weighed heavily on her mind every time she tried to rescue a hostage or kidnapped victim.

The ambulance pulled up, and the EMS pronounced the kidnapper dead. Okay, so he wasn’t going to be taken into custody. Fine by her. She wondered if he thought he could fight it out with the officers and get away or if he wanted to do a suicide-by-cop routine. The wounded police officer had only been grazed, for which she was

glad.

The EMS checked Sherry over, but she hadn't been harmed. Not physically, anyway. She held her hand out to Monica. "Will you stay with me?"

Monica nodded. "Sure thing."

One of the officers brought over a stuffed teddy bear. "Here you go, Sherry."

Sherry smiled and hugged the polar bear.

Monica stayed with Sherry until her parents arrived to take their daughter to the hospital.

Her parents hugged their daughter, and when Sherry told them Monica had rescued her, they hugged her, too. She was so glad that the outcome had been exactly what everyone needed.

Once they left, one of the officers asked Monica, "How did you manage to get her out of the house without being shot?"

"I was just lucky, I guess." Her polar bear instincts helped her to smell, hear, and detect movement better. And she'd had a bit of luck. "Thanks for coming to back me up."

"You bet."

The adrenaline still coursing through her blood, she climbed into her Ford Expedition, waved goodbye, and drove from Sea Lion Cove to a mini-mart service station in White Bear. She planned to head home to Anchorage when she got a call from Pierre Johnson, a guy she'd dated several times back home. That was a shocker.

“Monica, I heard you were in Sea Lion Cove and helped rescue a girl from a kidnapper.”

“News travels fast.” She guessed he must have been watching the news.

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“Yes. It has been all over the news. If you didn’t know, I live in White Bear, close to where you probably are now if you’re traveling through the town.”

She filled up her gas tank at the mini-mart. She had broken things off with Pierre when he lived in Anchorage because he was human and not a bear shifter like her. So she was surprised to hear from him. Did he want to get together? He’d been annoyed when she broke it off with him, so no, she didn’t want to see him. And then—it was like it was too much for him and he moved!

“My girlfriend has just been kidnapped.”

“What?” That changed everything.

“Yes. Her name is Helen Wright. Some guy knocked on the door, and she went to answer it. He barged into the house and slammed the door shut. He said he wanted five hundred thousand dollars. Somehow, he knew I was good for it.”

Pierre was a braggart about his wealth, so anyone could have known about it.

“Before he knocked me out and took off with her, he said he would kill her if I reported it to the police. I don’t know how long I’d been unconscious. You can’t tell anyone. ”

“Oh, no, Pierre. Did you call 9-1-1? Do you need an ambulance?”

“No. I told you. You can’t tell anyone. He said he would kill her if I told anyone.”

“So why call me?” None of it made sense if he wasn’t supposed to tell anyone.

“Because you’re known to extract kidnapped victims from their kidnappers without the kidnapper being able to react. You’ve done it three times before that I know of, and now, today, you did it again. And you’re close by, right?”

“Yes. I’m in White Bear now.”

“Okay, listen. Helen called him Denny in surprise when he came to the door. I’ve never met the guy, but she often told me about her ex-boyfriend, Denny Wilson, and how his grandparents own a cabin northwest of here. She said he would always take her there. I looked it up on Google Maps. Here are the coordinates.”

“All right. But you don’t know for sure that they’re going there.”

“No, but it’s a good bet.”

“Are you sure you don’t need medical attention?” After saving the coordinates, Monica entered the station to use the restroom.

“No. She had a restraining order against him. That’s why she left him. He was abusive and stalked her. Can you rescue her?”

“I’m at the mini-mart on Main Street. I’ll be on my way in a few minutes. ” But so was the big snowstorm that was coming.

“Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me. I’ll let you go then.”

They ended the call, and she hurried into the restroom, not knowing when she might get another chance. Afterward, she grabbed some bottles of water, jerky, and protein bars just in case she needed them. She paid for the items and took them to her car.

Monica called her boss to let him know she had a lead to a possible kidnapped victim and explained the situation.

“Our agents are tied up everywhere.” Remington sounded worried about her.

“Yes, I know.” That was why she didn’t have a partner in this last kidnapping case; no one had been available.

“Be careful. Let me know when you learn if she’s there, and I’ll send the cavalry.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a desperate sense of urgency, Monica checked the aerial photography concerning the cabin's location. Then she got into her car and raced down the country road, determined to save Helen, who, if what Pierre had said was true, was being held captive in a cabin in White Bear County.

The wind-driven snow made seeing more than fifteen feet ahead difficult, but Monica pushed on, knowing time was of the essence. The snow swirled in a circle, and she felt like she was driving through the funnel of an ice-driven time machine.

Her heart raced from the worry that she would drive off the road and into the ditch when she could barely see the road and not reach the woman in time. She prayed she would reach the cabin before the ex-boyfriend holding the woman captive hurt her or worse.

Forty miles from White Bear, Monica felt her tires slide on a crusting of ice on the snow-covered road, making her whole body prickle with unease. Suddenly, the wind shifted, and the snow parted for an instant.

Her heart nearly quit when a trooper waved his arms as he stood in the middle of the

road ahead, trying to get her to stop. She slammed on her brakes, thinking his car was off in the ditch, buried in snow, and he needed a ride. But he was standing on the road in her direct path, which was suicidal.

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Her car slid on the slick, icy snow, and her brakes felt squishy, not responding. What the hell?

Ohmigod, the trooper wasn't moving, waving his arms and shouting at her to stop!

Her skin prickled with unease as she honked her horn. "Get out of the way! I can't stop!"

Not that he could hear her through her closed window. Then she saw her next nightmare: he stood in front of his patrol car as if protecting it from her. It wasn't in the ditch.

At the very last moment, the trooper leaped out of the way and vanished into the snow on the side of the road down the embankment. She frantically slammed on the brakes again, but there was still no response. With quick thinking, she turned the steering wheel to avoid a head-on crash, though she knew it could potentially lead to an equally disastrous outcome.

Her SUV collided with his vehicle with a loud crash. The jarring impact caused the airbag to burst out of her vehicle's steering wheel and dashboard. For a moment, everything was obscured by a vast whiteness. The airbags deflated, and she could see the shattered windshield and the snow-filled landscape, but the trooper's car was no longer there.

Shards of glass covered the dashboard, and snow blew in through the broken windshield, engulfing her vision in even more white. Snowflakes gathered on her eyelashes, and glass shimmered on her jacket as she realized in horror that her SUV

had knocked the trooper's vehicle off the road and into the vicinity where he'd landed in the snow.

She hoped he'd gotten away before her SUV impacted his. As soon as she tried to open her door, she couldn't budge it. Her back hurt something fierce, and her right hand did, too. She recalled throwing her hand up to protect herself from the airbag's release and injuring it somehow.

But she had to leave the car and check on the trooper straightaway. She swore under her breath as she tried to release her seatbelt, and her back hurt even more. She hoped she hadn't broken something. She was going to grab her cell phone sitting on its stand, but now it was on the passenger's floor.

She released the seatbelt and tried again to open her car door, but the impact had crumpled the frame, making the door inoperable. She had to climb over the console and hoped the passenger door would open. Her body strained as she pushed herself up and over the console, her arms and legs shaking with effort. Her phone lay just inches from her fingertips.

Her body strained as she pushed herself up and over the console, her arms and legs shaking with the effort. Her breath was ragged and heavy. The excruciating pain in her back reminded her that she was injured!

The cold, smooth screen of her phone brushed against her fingertips and she grasped it with relief and triumph. She tried calling 9-1-1, but she had no reception. Great. She slipped her phone into her jacket pocket. She pulled on her hat and goggles and put on her ski mask to protect her face from the cold.

Thankfully, she managed to open the passenger door and climb out of the car. "Hey, are you all right?"

She didn't see any sign of the trooper. Her heart was already racing from the adrenaline in her blood from the accident, and from trying to reach the kidnapped victim. Still, she swore her adrenaline was on overload while she worried that the trooper was pinned under the wreckage.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" She struggled down the slope through the deep snow to reach his vehicle, fearing the worst when he didn't respond to her.

2

Until disaster struck, Trooper Andy MacMathan had been patting himself on the back for finding so many stranded motorists in this deadly winter storm and getting them to safety, including one man who had lost control of his car and landed down the embankment. Now Andy laughed darkly at himself.

A snowplow had covered the man's whole car except for his driver's side mirror. After several police officers had searched for him in vain, Andy found him and got him aid for hypothermia and dehydration.

But now this.

One totaled cruiser, on top of him, no less. And pain was shooting through his ankle. It was either sprained or something was broken. Not to mention, he was pinned down now.

"Hey, are you okay?" The woman started a mini avalanche as she descended the embankment, the snow rolling down beside him.

Hell, she'd wrecked his cruiser, buried him with it, and injured him, though not gravely, thankfully, but no, he wasn't okay. But then he frowned. He thought he recognized her voice, but couldn't place her.

“Do you have a shovel?” Snowflakes buried his goggles as fast as he wiped them off. His muscles tensed as he tried to free himself, exasperated with being trapped.

Silence. Either she did, or she didn’t have a shovel. He figured she didn’t. “I’ve got one in my vehicle.”

She crunched through the crusty snow as she climbed the incline, opened her hatchback, and closed it. She plowed through the snow on her way down to him. She was dressed in snow boots, waterproof pants, a black parka, and a faux-fur hat, and carried a small shovel. Like him, her face was covered in cold-weather protection—goggles and a ski mask to ward off frostbite.

“Are you hurt?” She sounded worried.

“My ankle. It might be sprained.” After that, he immediately took her to task. “You were speeding too fast for the weather and road conditions.” He took another whiff of the air as she tried to dig some snow out from around his left side. “You’re?—”

She frowned. “A polar bear. Like you. Surprise, surprise. Wait...”

“Monica O’Connell?”

“Andy MacMathan?”

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“Well, hell, I’ll be.” He’d seen her a year ago when she passed through White Bear, had a flat tire, and he'd really hoped she'd moved to White Bear so he could date her.

“Why did you try to protect your car when I couldn't brake? I could have killed you.”

Now she was scolding him? “Your brakes weren’t working?” Bad brakes were not a good scenario at any time, but especially during a blizzard.

“No. What do you think? That I was trying to run you over?”

“Some people hate getting a traffic ticket for violating the law.”

She scoffed.

He smirked while she tried to dig at the snow, but she was only using her left hand and wasn’t progressing. “Here, let me do it.”

“Be my guest.” She handed him the shovel and pulled her cell phone out of her pocket.

“No reception.” He didn’t have to look at the bars on her phone or his. He’d already tried calling for help when his vehicle got stuck.

“I know. I thought I would try again, just in case. What about your radio?” She sounded just as exasperated with him as he was with her.

“In the car, but you can’t get to it until I’m out from under it.”

“I. Know. That.”

He smiled a little, amused by her response to his comment. But he wasn't making much headway digging himself out. She watched for a while as he struggled to extricate himself. He groaned as the movement sent shooting pains through his injured ankle.

“Here.” She pulled the shovel out of his hands, appearing irritated. Again, she used her left hand only to dig.

She needed to use both hands to make any headway. It finally dawned on him that she might have also been injured.

“You injured your right hand?”

She glanced at him. “Yes. And I'm right-handed.” She struggled just as much to dig him out, but she was wincing a lot as she worked on the snow, one little shovelful at a time.

It appeared she had just as little patience with him trying to get himself out as much as he did while watching her make the effort. Then, he finally figured that was good enough and tried to use his good foot to push himself out.

“You're probably not strong enough to pull me out, but maybe with you pulling and me pushing, I can get out from under the car.”

“You know what? Sure. I can do this.” She began yanking off her clothes, but then groaned and took it a lot slower.

He knew then what she planned to do, but hoped she wouldn't bite him once she was in her polar bear fur coat. She was a pretty blonde with a great-looking body, well-

toned, and looked stronger than he gave her credit for.

Then she shifted into her bear—a beautiful white bear with big white teeth. She reached down, grabbed his jacket collar with her teeth, and pulled him out. He groaned as his ankle hurt even worse, though the snow helped keep the swelling down. He would need to remove his boot.

As hard as she'd pulled to free him from underneath his vehicle, he was sure his jacket collar wore her teeth marks—something more to remember her by.

She moved over to her clothes, shifted, and dressed. “Okay, you’re free. I’ll try to find your radio.”

“If your hand hurts?—”

“It does. But your ankle is injured, and it might be more than just a sprain. I think the airbag tore the ligaments in my thumb. I don’t think I have any broken bones.”

“And your back?”

“Yeah, it hurts. Whiplash, pulled muscles, most likely.” She started to climb to the top of his vehicle, and it settled deeper into the snow.

He was glad he was no longer pinned underneath it.

She tried to open the door. “It won’t budge. You can wait in my car for someone to arrive to take care of you.”

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“Where do you think you’re going? You’re supposed to stay with the vehicle. Especially after wrecking mine.”

“Are you going to charge me with hit and run? I’m on a mission, and it can’t wait.”

“An important mission? More imperative than getting out of here?”

“Yeah.” She trudged up to the road, opened her hatchback, took some items out, and brought them down to where he was sitting in the snow. She set the first aid kit on the snow beside him and wrapped an emergency blanket around his shoulders.

“You know how they say people walk for miles in a blizzard like this and are found frozen to death some days later.” He didn’t want her to try to reach civilization to get him help. It would be too dangerous.

Though she didn’t exactly tell him that was her mission.

“Okay, look, you know I’m FBI. What you don’t know is that I must reach a cabin located in a northerly direction from here, where a kidnapped woman might be held hostage. It’s only about four miles from here, and I’ll get there on foot.”

Now, that revelation shocked the hell out of him. “All right, find me a sturdy stick.”

“What? To use as a cane? To go with me? No way. You’ll slow me down.”

“How’s your shooting stance with one hand out of commission and your back hurting like crazy? This is non-negotiable. I’m your backup.”

She frowned at him every bit as much as he scowled at her.

There was no way he would let her do this by herself. “What about your fellow agents?”

“We’re spread so thin as it is, and then this storm hit. I was the closest one to the location.”

“Same with our troopers.”

“Exactly. Pierre said the kidnapper told him not to tell anyone or he would kill her.”

“Then why would he tell you?”

“Because I’ve saved kidnapped victims without getting them killed. Pierre knows me and heard about me being close by on another case I had just resolved. It was on the news.”

“I’ve been busy, so I haven’t seen the news.” Determined to make this work, he needed a walking stick to help support his weight on his injured ankle. “All right. Could you find me a stick? I’m going with you.”

She grunted and stomped through the woods nearby. “Finding a sturdy branch to help you walk will be impossible, as much as the snow has piled up. Fine,damn it.” She stripped off her clothes again.

Even though shifters were used to shifting in front of others, that was mostly if they’d grown up together. She irked him fiercely yet simultaneously ignited a fire in his loins.

The first time he’d met her, she’d been annoyed with him for offering to help her

change her tire when she knew how to do it without any problem. Until she realized he was a fellow bear.

She was from Anchorage, which was the end of any real beginning of a relationship, though he'd sure been interested in seeing her further. Not to mention, she was dating some guy then, making him wonder if she still was.

Her human form blurred into a polar bear again so fast it was hard to capture the change with the human eye. She stood up on her hind legs and, with her left paw, swatted a branch so hard that she knocked it clean off the tree.

She grabbed the branch with her teeth, carried it to him, dropped it before him, and waited.

He suspected she wanted him to try it out before she shifted again and dressed in this cold weather, which was the only way to do this. He got to his knees and used the branch to help him stand, and it snapped in two. He wrenched his injured ankle, groaned, and dropped back to his knees.

She growled.

“Fine. I’ll get a branch that works.” He was going with her no matter what, and he could knock off branches with his bear paw, just as she could. However, standing upright could be a problem.

She huffed, turned around, and headed for another tree.

While she was looking for a stronger branch, he struggled to get his boot off before it constricted the blood in his swollen ankle. He began wrapping his ankle with an ace bandage from the first aid kit. Then he found a plastic bag to secure around his foot, perfect for keeping it dry, but he needed something more to keep it warm when they

hiked to the cabin.

Another branch snapped, and he glanced toward the sound, figuring Monica had knocked off another branch. Hopefully, it would be a much sturdier one.

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But she was gone.

3

Monica needed to get on with her mission! She wanted to take care of Andy, but she worried about Helen. When she met Andy a couple of years ago, she had been dating a bear—not now. But she and Andy still lived too far apart for a meaningful relationship. Yet she loved his gallantry when he saw her changing a tire on the side of the road.

Still, she had an independent nature and didn't want any guy to think she couldn't change a tire. Learning he was a polar bear and seeing his interest—the smiles, the brushes of his fingers against hers when he handed her another lug nut, his scent—indicating he was intrigued with her, she couldn't help but make a similar connection.

Briefly, she had wished he were living in Anchorage. She would have dated him in a heartbeat.

Her relationship with her boyfriend had been getting rockier by the day. They didn't do anything special together; they just watched TV at her house. His place was always a disaster, and she hated to trek through the clear aisles because everything else was so cluttered. Unlike when they first started dating, they no longer went out to the movies, ate out, or did anything together.

Andy had the sweetest, mischievous smile when she had worked with him to change her tire. And he bought her a meal. She suspected he had wanted to date her if she'd

lived closer by.

She couldn't believe she would run into him again, in not such a good way.

She didn't want him to injure his ankle further while he traveled with her to the cabin. And she didn't know if he could help her take Denny into custody after all the strenuous effort he would have to make to get there.

He could rest in the back of her car with the heater on as long as the snow didn't cover the exhaust pipe. He could keep his foot elevated under the emergency blanket and another couple of blankets she had from home for urgent cases until she returned, or help arrived.

The only alternative was shifting into his bear form, which could pose other problems if someone came to rescue him and found a polar bear instead.

She finally found an oak tree in the forest with a branch she thought might work for him. She stood up and struck the branch, wrenching her back and bruising her arm for sure. A cracking sound resounded, and the branch fell onto the soft snow. She sniffed it. It smelled like hardwood, not weaker wood like the other.

She hated having to rip the branches off the trees and damage them. Her arm would be bruised, and with every strike she made, she hurt her strained back muscles even more. She grabbed the branch in her mouth and carried it back to Andy.

“Hey, I thought you'd left me until I heard you break off another branch in the distance.”

Annoyed Andy would think she would have left him and continued with her mission, she dropped the new branch before him and grunted, waiting for him to see if it worked.

“I need something more to wrap around my foot to keep it warm.” He grabbed the branch and struggled to stand on just one foot. “This is much better. Thanks.”

She ambled back to her clothes, shifted, and hurried to dress. She was toasty and warm when wearing her bear coat, but removing her clothes before or after she shifted was awful. She was so chilled!

“I’ve got a bag with emergency clothes in my car's backseat. I would be grateful if you could get another pair of socks out for me if you can open the door,” Andy said.

“I’ll try. I still think you should stay here. I could help you get to my car, and you can sit in the passenger seat. Or you can lie down in the back seat. I have a couple of wool blankets in there. You could elevate your sprained ankle and rest up. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

“I’m going with you. You have a partner in this no matter what.”

She sighed and walked over to his car. She struggled to open the door, finally wrenching it free. She grabbed his radio, but it wasn’t working. Searching in the backseat, she found his black backpack underneath a blanket, and a first aid kit was located under the car's front seat.

“Is there anything else you need besides your first aid kit and backpack from your car?” she asked.

“I’ve got my gun and handcuffs on me. A couple more handcuffs, extra clothes, water bottles, and protein bars are in the backpack, so that should be all we need.”

“Okay.”

Carrying his bag, she left the car and returned to Andy. She crouched beside him and

tried to unzip the bag, but groaned. Darn hand.

“I’ve got it. Rest your hand. We should wrap it, but we can’t do so while you wear heavy gloves. The glove will probably help protect the injury.” At least Andy was glad his hands were uninjured, but he didn’t want her to do more than she had to if he could do the work himself.

He dug his socks out of the backpack and pulled one on, then another, over his foot, his ankle killing him. Shifters healed in half the time of humans, so he hoped his ankle would be fine before long.

“How is your back?” He had seen her wince several times while trying to do things.

“It hurts.”

“What about when you shift?” He pulled the plastic sack over his foot, secured it, and then tried to stand using the branch, but she quickly helped him with her good hand, which he appreciated.

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Standing on solid ground was one thing, but trying to stand in deep snow was another.

“My back hurts all the time. After I’ve rescued the kidnapped woman, I’m taking some time off work to recuperate. Hopefully, it won’t take long for this to heal.”

“I know. I was thinking the same with my ankle.”

“Right. Seriously, can you make it all right? If you can’t make it, I’ll have to leave you behind and rescue the woman. I don’t want to leave you in the snow to freeze to death.”

“Yeah, I can make it.” If she could do it the way she was feeling, he could do it. Even if it killed him, he wasn’t letting her do this on her own. “Besides, if I can’t make it, I can always shift into my bear coat, so you don’t have to worry about me freezing to death.”

“As long as no one catches you like that.”

The wind, snow, and his injury wouldn’t keep him from being there for her and for the kidnapped victim.

She slipped his other boot into his backpack and helped him get his pack straps over his shoulders. He secured it in front.

“Let’s go.” She trudged through the deep snow, her feet sinking deeply with each step.

He followed close behind, his own footsteps muffled by the layers of white covering the ground while he tried to keep his balance and not step on his injured ankle. She was a small figure in her dark jacket against the vast, snow-covered forest, and he was a shadow following in her wake.

After the first mile, he struggled to lift his legs through the deep snow, and his feet had become numb. She had also begun to slow down and was trying to lift her feet through the deep snow, packing it down as much as she could for him.

He watched her, admiring her determination and strength. She was like a force of nature, determined to conquer whatever obstacles lay in her path. Even in the face of such harsh conditions, she never faltered. He, on the other hand, kept stumbling.

The path she created was narrow, and he struggled to follow in her footsteps. But he was determined to keep up with and support her despite their challenges. After another two miles, her shoulders tensed, and her steps quickened as they neared their destination.

She kept looking back to see that he was still with her, and he appreciated that she was worried about him. He was concerned about her, too. He'd had whiplash from a car accident a couple of years ago and knew how painful it could be.

Knowing how dangerous this situation could be for the kidnapped victim, he tried to keep up with Monica. "So, what's the story about the woman and her kidnapper?"

"Helen Wright was with her new boyfriend, Pierre Johnson, at his place in White Bear. Her ex-boyfriend, Denny Wilson, went to the house, knocked Pierre out, then took off with Helen. She had a restraining order against him because of stalking and prior abuse."

"Sounds like Denny is bad news."

“Exactly.” Monica explained that the little girl kidnapped in the nearby town was why she was close enough to take on this job.

"I sure didn't hear about that. I was trying to locate stranded motorists and thought I saw a car stuck in the snow down the embankment ahead of me. I parked, got out, and took a closer look. The snow had buried most of the roof even. When I dug out enough to look through the window, I found no one inside the vehicle. So the driver must have gotten out before the car was buried."

"Oh, good, two or more people might have needed rescuing. Though you could have kept them company in my car."

Andy realized just how stubborn Monica was. "I began walking back to my patrol car when I saw your headlights through the screen of snow. You were driving at a high rate of speed, headed straight for me."

"For your car, you mean. If you hadn't stood before it, I wouldn't have been headed straight for you." She struggled through the snowdrifts in the woods, just like he was.

He was getting out of breath when he thought he was in great shape. His heart was beating hard from the exertion, adrenaline surge, and pain in his ankle. He figured she was having as much or more pain than he was with her back and hand injuries.

"I thought you didn't see the car because when I looked for any occupants of the buried vehicle and returned to my cruiser, my car was half buried in snow. Not to mention how difficult it was to see because of the low visibility with the heavily blowing snow."

"And you thought"—she paused and then began to climb over a fallen western hemlock that had been partially buried—"that I could see you any better?"

She got to the other side, then held out her good hand to help him over it.

"I thought so, sure, or I wouldn't have done that." He sat on the hemlock and moved his legs over it, careful of his ankle. Taking hold of her hand, he climbed down on the other side of the tree. "Okay, so what's the plan of action?"

She started trudging through the snow again. "We get as close to the cabin as possible and then see if we can look inside. We need to locate Denny and Helen. I'll do that. You'll walk too slowly to reach the cabin if Denny is looking out the windows. A small clearing surrounds the front of the cabin, and a long drive goes to another road, which is not the one we were on."

"Have you been there before?"

"In the vicinity. I rented a cabin, about a quarter of a mile from there. The place they're at is a one-story log cabin built in the '70s. I looked at aerial photographs of it before I drove here, and it shows a woodpile a hundred feet from the cabin. I'll head for that. One black pickup truck is sitting near the cabin's front door, but it's probably half buried by snow now. The license plate showed it was Denny's."

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"Is there a back door?"

"Yeah. But the cabin has windows all around it. I don't expect him to be watching out all the windows, but he might expect someone to realize where he is and be on the lookout."

"How did you know about the cabin?"

"Pierre said Helen told him that Denny had taken her to it several times."

"So this is just speculation."

"Yes, but you know how it is. Any tip needs to be investigated."

"What if Denny threatens Helen in any way?" It was important to know how they handled a situation when working with a "partner" with whom Andy had never been on a mission.

"I won't hesitate to kill him."

"Or I'll have to shoot him."

She didn't respond. He figured she didn't like that she was handicapped now. Though he suspected that if push came to shove, she would fire her weapon even with an injured hand. He just worried her aim would be off.

"I have a body cam I can turn on when we get close to apprehending him. Do you

believe he'll be violent toward her at the cabin?" Andy asked.

"Yeah. That's why she left him in the first place. She had a protective order restricting him from coming near her, but that didn't stop him. Did the police do anything about it?" She gave Andy a disgruntled look.

"Hey, if I had been there, I could have persuaded him to stop. I would have taken him out into the wilderness and told him I'm friends with a polar bear I raised as a cub, then shown him one mean polar bear, scared him to pieces, and then returned him home. Or left him out there to find his way back alone."

Monica chuckled. He smiled then but took a spill in the deep snow and cried out.

Fearing the worst—that Andy had hurt his ankle to the point that he couldn't make it any further—Monica whipped around and wrenched her back. Poor Andy was on his knees in the snow. She tried to hurry back to him but felt she was treading through the snow in slow motion.

"Sorry," he said.

"Don't be. If I'd had a sprained ankle, I would have insisted you carry me."

He laughed. "You wouldn't have had to." He dug his sturdy branch into the ground while she lifted him as much as she could in a bear hug. She was still hugging him when he got to his feet, their breaths fogging up their goggles, hearts wildly beating, their eyes colliding and lingering.

"Are you okay with continuing?" She didn't want to let him go. He was warm and huggable.

"Yeah, thanks."

Enjoying the moment of hugging him, warming herself and him, but reluctantly released him, and immediately missed his warmth. “Good, because despite what I said earlier, I’m glad for your help with this. And my boss will be grateful to you too. At least between us, despite our injuries, we should be able to manage Denny.”

She started forward again so that she could tramp down enough snow to make an easier path for Andy, so he wouldn’t fall again, but every step was harder; her legs were wearied, and her back and hand ached.

"So, what's the deal with your brakes?" Andy asked.

"Like I know?" She didn’t mean to snap at him. But she was perturbed that her brakes had stopped working. “Whenever I stopped at stop signs or signals in White Bear, they were fine. Once I hit the country road, I didn't need to stop or slow down, at least not using the brakes. I couldn't believe it when they wouldn't work.”

“You should have anti-lock brakes, and they shouldn’t have locked up on you.”

“No, they didn’t. It was like they were mush, and then I slid on the top layer of ice coating the snow. Of course, I tried to avoid hitting you and your car. Thankfully, you finally jumped out of the way.”

"Then you knocked my vehicle on top of me."

"That wasn't planned, either. When you hurt your ankle, was it when you jumped out of the way of the collision or from your car landing on you?"

"My legs were the only parts of my body still located near where the car landed. My impact with the snow created a deep imprint, which I was grateful for as it helped cushion my fall and prevent serious injuries. I couldn't say for sure if it were the impact of the car or my jumping from the road and subsequently landing down the

embankment that injured my ankle."

"Sorry."

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"If you hadn't had an emergency you were trying to get to, I would have ticketed you for speeding too fast for the weather conditions."

She chuckled under her breath. "Thanks. For not giving me a speeding ticket. It wouldn't look good on my blemish-free driving record."

"So, are you still in Anchorage? I would have noticed you if you had moved to White Bear."

"I'm still living in Anchorage."

"I didn't have a chance to tell you the last time that my parents own the White Bear Tavern, and my brother Ben works there. I have another brother, Craig, who flies a plane all over to deliver supplies."

"That's a much-needed job, though I imagine he's now grounded."

"Yeah, in this weather, for sure. I have two cousins, Edward and Rob, who have a tour guide business."

"That's great. I bet they're grounded too for the moment."

"They are. So what made you join the FBI?"

"My dad was an FBI agent. He's retired now. I wanted to follow in his footsteps. Mom is a real estate agent, and I'm glad she wasn't in our line of work. They worry about me, naturally, but I've done well so far. Except for the accident and injuring

myself and you."

"I guess it couldn't be helped." Not if her brakes hadn't been working.

"Guess?"

"It couldn't have been," he amended. "Are you still dating that bear in Anchorage?"

She glanced back at him.

He smiled.

She faced forward again. "Nope."

"Good," he said under his breath, hoping she could stay in White Bear longer if she were off work due to her injuries. "Are you sure we're headed in the right direction?" He was ready to become a polar bear and get warmed up. He feared his foot would end up with frostbite despite having extra socks.

"Yeah." She showed him the compass she was using. "It's due northwest." When he fell behind, she immediately returned to him. "How is your foot? Is it warm enough?" Now, she sounded worried.

"Cold." He hated to admit it to her. He wanted to be a source of strength for her.

She frowned. "I estimate we have another three-quarters of a mile to go. I don't want you to get frostbite. I should have thought of this before." She untied her wool scarf from around her neck.

"You need that." He didn't want her to get cold.

"I don't need it. My collar is already keeping my neck warm. It's just an extra layer of warmth, but you could use it more than I. Once we deal with the kidnapper, we can sit by the fire and warm up."

That sounded nice as long as everything went according to plan.

She joined him, and he sat down in the snow. Then she removed the plastic bag from his foot and massaged the socks-covered foot to get the circulation going. She took her scarf, shook off the snow collected on it, and carefully wrapped the dry side around his foot and ankle. Once done, she pulled the plastic bag over his foot again and secured it.

"Is that better?" she asked.

"Hell, yeah."

"It's wool. I should have thought of it before. Are you ready to go again?"

"I sure am."

She helped him up, though they both groaned from their injuries.

As they stumbled through the snowy landscape, his thoughts began to race. Had he delayed her too much? Would the kidnapper have harmed the victim? Were they even at the cabin still? Or had they ever been there at all?

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He had to get his mind off what-ifs. It never helped with a case. “Do you have any other family?”

“No. Just my parents in Anchorage. It must be nice having more family.”

“It is. We have lots of family functions and celebrations.” And he hoped this time she could meet them.

“That must be great.”

“So you have handled other kidnapping cases before.”

She didn't say anything right away. “Yeah.”

“Successfully?” He was afraid when she didn't respond right away that maybe some were failures.

“Four of the five cases, yes.” Her tone of voice revealed she still felt troubled about it.

He didn't probe, figuring she'd tell him about the failed case if she wanted to. He'd had his own disastrous failures a few times when trying to rescue stranded motorists. It wasn't something he liked talking about.

About half a mile out, he smelled smoke. “The cabin.”

The smoke gave him hope that the man and woman were still at the cabin. Though he

did have the niggling worry that they might be at the wrong cabin. Then what? He could imagine someone readying a rifle at them, thinking they were going to break in and steal from them.

Monica glanced back at him, and though she didn't need to whisper, she did. "You sound like you didn't believe I knew where I was going."

He smiled. He wouldn't lie. It seemed to take forever to get that close. However, their injuries, the weather, and the deep snow made the trek extremely difficult. In the end, they had been going really slowly.

Finally, they reached the small cabin nestled in the trees just like Monica had described: a tiny clearing, a one-story log cabin, a woodpile, and a black truck mostly buried in snow in front of it.

She stopped behind a tree, and he caught up with her. Her breathing was as ragged as his, her heart beating just as rapidly.

Both were observing the windows, but then she glanced at the woodpile.

"I'm going to get my gun out of my holster." He wanted to cover her because of the way she was poised; he knew she meant to dash for the woodpile.

4

Trudging through the heavy snow, Monica was sorely vexed that she and Andy were injured to the extent that it really put them at a disadvantage when they rescued the hostage. Her back was hurting like crazy, and that long walk through the blowing snow, chilling wind, and half-frozen feet and fingers added to her distress.

She pulled her gun out of its holster. "I need you to get closer to the cabin."

“What if he sees us moving to that location? You can dash over there. I can’t.”

She hesitated, examining the path she would need to take. “Okay. Revised plan. We’re going to trek through the woods in that direction. I don’t want him to see our path in the snow. If we move over there, he won’t be able to see our trail from the house or the woodpile unless he walks around it.”

“I’m with you. Let’s go.” They would have much better odds, and Andy could use the firewood to prop himself up as he provided backup for Monica.

She put her gun back in its holster and secured it, and he did the same with his. She moved first through the fir trees, creating the path while he followed. When she reached a point in the woods safe from the view of the cabin, she waited until Andy caught up with her.

Finally, she reached the edge of the woods and pushed the thick branches aside slightly, allowing them to view the steep roof of the cabin and the woodpile.

“All right. I’m going to go. If he pops his head out at all?—”

“I’ll shoot him.”

With her heart racing, she ran toward the woodpile and hid safely behind it, crouching low. She turned to look at Andy to see if he was okay, but he was already halfway to her, crawling to the log pile.

He smiled at her and shrugged. He appeared bound and determined to be there for her no matter what, and plunging through the snow on an injured ankle must have been so painful. She admired his iron will.

When he finally reached the woodpile, he leaned against it and took a deep breath.

She sat next to him. “I need to reach the cabin and then learn where they are.”

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It was still just afternoon, though the blizzard continued to howl as the freezing wind whipped across the clearing, sending snow swirling into a frenzy of white. At least while they were navigating the woods, the winds hadn't been as strong. But the snowstorm concealed her when she was out in the open as she dashed for the cabin.

Their visibility was reduced to only a few feet, and she figured she could make it to the building without being seen.

"Okay, if you're ready, I will make a run for it." She stood up. As high as the woodpile was on the back side, Denny couldn't see her.

"All right. I'll have your back."

She helped Andy to stand, and then he leaned against a log poking out of the woodpile, his gun ready.

At least he was tall enough that he could do so. "I can see between the two logs and watch your progress. Be careful."

"Yes, and you too."

Monica pulled out her gun and moved around to the end of the woodpile. She watched the windows for what seemed like forever before she made a move.

"I don't see anyone at the window. I'm going to make a run for it." She prepared herself mentally for the maneuver.

“I’m watching the windows. I don’t see anyone.”

“Okay, good.” She hadn't seen anyone looking out the cabin windows either, and took off running as much as possible through the impossibly deep snow.

Her feet sank with each step, making it more like a slow trudge. She could feel the cold seeping through her boots, the wetness creeping into her socks, but she tried to ignore it.

She concentrated on finding a window through which she could peer while listening for any sounds inside the cabin. She needed to know where both the kidnapper and his ex-girlfriend were. Then she had an idea. If she could break a window and simulate that a branch had blown into it and broken it, that would get the kidnapper’s attention.

The problem was that she would have to return to the woods to find a sturdy enough branch and rip it off the tree while wearing her polar bear coat.

Then that gave her another idea. She began stripping off her clothes. Andy would probably think she was nuts. She quickly shifted into her polar bear, figuring if she peered into the windows and either of the people saw her, the kidnapper wouldn’t shoot, nor would he dare leave the cabin.

She padded through the snow, glad to be warm in her fur coat, her paws navigating the snow so much better. She approached the first window to the right of the front door at the end of the house and peered in. A light was on deep inside the house, and the door to the bedroom was open. No one was in there.

What if the window was unlocked? She shifted and pushed at it, but it didn’t budge. She shifted back into her bear form and headed to the next window, higher up, perhaps a much smaller bathroom window. She stood up on her hind legs and peered

in. No one was there, the light was off, and the door was open.

She moved around to the back of the house until she reached another window, peered in, and found it was another bedroom. The man and woman must be in the living area, which would make sense since it wasn't nighttime yet.

However, she realized she wouldn't have her backup because Andy couldn't see her. But also, her gun was with her clothes by the first bedroom at the end of the cabin.

She moved toward the patio deck, complete with several chairs and tables buried by snow. From her angle, she could see that the curtains were open. On one wall, an orange-flamed fire made the cabin appear warm and cozy, though she was perfectly comfortable in the snow while wearing her polar bear coat.

Then she inched toward the deck and climbed onto it. She peered in. She didn't see anyone or hear anyone talking. She was worried Denny had killed Helen, and that was why no one was talking.

She took a deep breath and moved closer to the double-window doors. She could hear moaning inside and feared the worst.

Andy had to move to the cabin to help Monica. He wasn't doing her any good by staying by the woodpile. Besides, he was dying to know what she planned to do as a bear. After watching the cabin and seeing no one looking out the windows, he secured his gun, grabbed his walking stick, and made his way in Monica's tracks.

When she'd carved her path through the snow to the cabin, she hadn't been in view of the front windows, but if someone looked out at the ones at the end of the cabin, they could see the narrow path she'd made. Though the snow was blowing so hard, it would soon fill it up.

Once he reached the cabin, he leaned against it and peered into the bedroom window. He moved to the next one, but the window was too high. He came around the corner of the back of the house and found Monica peering in through the glass doors at the back of the deck.

She must have heard him coming and jerked her bear head around to look at him.

Suddenly, a woman screamed, and he was ready to rush into the house to protect her, but Monica shook her head as if to say it was too late.

She left the deck and ran to her clothes at the end of the house, and he hurried after her. She had already shifted and was pulling on her boots and sweater as soon as he reached her. He helped her into her parka.

“They’re in collusion.”

“What?” he whispered.

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“The two of them. They are having sex.”

Andy’s jaw dropped. “It’s not a case of him forcing her or that she feels she has to so that he won’t kill her or something, is it?” Andy couldn’t believe it, not when he truly had believed Helen was a victim.

“No.” Then she frowned. “It looked like they were mutually agreeable to having sex.”

“So either we’re rescuing her and taking him down, or we’re arresting both of them.” Andy had never faced such a crazy turn of events while on the job.

“The new boyfriend is loaded with money. So maybe this kidnapping and ransom had been planned from the beginning,” she whispered back.

“If there’s no urgency to arrest them because there’s no actual kidnapping involved, we could wait until the snowstorm blows over and let our injuries heal. They are not going anywhere until the road can be cleared. And that might be days.”

Monica handed him a bottle of water from her field pack. “Okay, so we watch the house from the woods, but shift into our bears and stay warm that way.”

“Yeah. This will be my first mission in which I’ve conducted surveillance as a polar bear.”

“Truthfully, the same for me.” She pulled out another bottle of water and drank it. “And I like it. Okay, let’s return to the woods after a snack and shift. I’ve got some food in my pack. And we’ll wait them out.”

She handed him a package of peanuts and grabbed another. They ate them and then shoved the empty wrappers in her backpack. To cover her tracks, she moved through the same trail she'd made to the woodpile. After he joined her, she returned to the woods, and he followed her once she was safely there.

Then she helped him remove his clothes as fast as she could. He sat on his rump in the freezing snow and shifted into his polar bear—much warmer. She started to remove her parka, groaning a little, and he quickly shifted and hurried to help her undress.

“You’ll freeze to death,” she admonished, but he could tell she was glad he was helping her.

Then, they both shifted in the blink of an eye, and she cuddled next to him. She nipped his ear, lay on her belly, and watched the house.

He never thought he would be on a surveillance mission with a beautiful white polar bear, either. Snuggling together—well, hell, just seeing her again—had him thinking of dating possibilities. She felt soft, furry, and warm beside him, while he warmed her with his body heat. Despite their circumstances, he felt relaxed and enjoyed this restful time with her.

While lying on his belly, he lay his head on his paws and watched the house for a long time. A small amount of light filtered through the windows, then suddenly shut off. Denny and Helen weren't going anywhere.

Monica put her head on one of his paws, and he nuzzled her. Then she closed her eyes.

It was still early, but already dark, and they needed to rest their injuries to heal more quickly. They had slept for perhaps two hours when the cabin door creaked open.

They both raised their heads to see what was going on. A flashlight wavered in the dark through the blowing snow as Denny headed for the woodpile.

Without warning, Monica leaped from the ground and charged at Denny. She ran as fast as a polar bear could at twenty-five miles per hour, not that Denny could have gotten out of her path even if she'd been running slowly.

As soon as she ran around the woodpile, Denny screamed in fright. She slammed her paw against his head, and he crumpled on the piled-up snow. At once, Andy shifted and began getting dressed, wrapping his foot back up. His ankle was feeling better, though it still hurt to walk on, but he had to get his gun out.

Monica returned to where they had their clothes in the woods, shifted, and he helped her to dress. “We’ll drag him into the house, tie him up, and question her. How is your ankle?”

“Better. Not healed, but it should be good by tomorrow.”

“All right.”

“How’s your hand and back?”

“Awful, but a good night’s sleep; after these two—if both were complicit in trying to steal money from her new boyfriend—are tied up, we can sleep inside a nice warm cabin.”

“That sounds good to me.” It would be even better if he could sleep with Monica in one of the beds. He shouldn’t have thought of that, but the notion of healing quicker came to mind as if that was all that came to mind. Being with her, close and snuggling, was too irresistible a notion.

He grabbed his walking stick.

Monica hurried back to Denny, and Andy caught up with her. He realized trying to move the guy into the cabin would be troublesome, but he had to help. Monica tried to pull him through the deep snow, but she wasn't progressing.

Trying to walk on his bad ankle gingerly, he used the stick in one hand, and with his free one, he helped her drag Denny through the snow toward the cabin. They made slow progress, but at least they were getting there.

He was surprised that Denny hadn't seen the tracks Monica and he had made earlier when they'd gone to the end of the house, but the snow was in their eyes so much from the wind blowing so hard, Denny probably didn't believe anyone would be out there, so he didn't notice.

As they approached the cabin's front door, Helen said, "Honey, be sure and get more kindling!"

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Honey. That said it all. Helen could have locked Denny out of the house if she hadn't been in on this whole arrangement and hadn't been tied up inside. He would have frozen to death eventually.

When they got close to the door, they pulled Denny onto the snow-covered porch and left him there. Both Andy and Monica went inside with guns drawn.

Helen was sitting on the couch, soaking up the heat of the fire, drinking a glass of red wine, and wearing only a green and plaid blanket. She tossed her long blond hair over her bare shoulder. Her clothes were scattered all over the floor where they'd discarded them during their lovemaking. She looked like a perfectly happy cat curled up in the blanket on the couch.

“Put the glass of wine down—” Monica commanded.

Before she could finish speaking, Helen screamed and dropped her glass of wine on the blue braided rug-covered floor. The red wine soaked into the rug, the glass surviving the fall.

“Ohmigod, we don't have any money! What...what...where is Denny?” Helen sputtered.

Andy walked carefully over to the couch, realizing it was much easier to walk now that he wasn't trying to maneuver through heavy snow. He read Helen her Miranda rights, then pulled out handcuffs. “Put your hands above your head. Now.”

“What? Oh.” Helen began to cry. “Denny forced me to go with him. He kidnapped

me! I was held here against my will. You can't arrest me!"

If she didn't sound like so many others that he had arrested who screamed foul when they were part of the whole rotten criminal venture.

"I heard the whole thing. I saw you making love with him, and you certainly didn't resist; in fact, you took over and thoroughly enjoyed the whole process. So save the story for the judge," Monica said.

Helen's eyes widened. "You...ohmigod, you're Pierre's ex-girlfriend." She glanced at the front door and frowned. "Where's Denny?"

As if she finally remembered her lover wasn't in the cabin.

"On ice." Literally. Monica glanced at Andy, and he raised his brows.

Yep. Monica had some explaining to do as far as having dated Pierre before. She hoped he wouldn't be perturbed with her for not telling him about it.

"You killed Denny?" Helen looked stricken. "I don't have any clothes on. At least let me get dressed."

"Do it now." After all Monica and Andy had gone through to get here, she felt highly annoyed to learn Helen was part of the criminal act and not a victim. "Where are his guns?"

"Guns?"

"He struck your current boyfriend, Pierre, in the head with a gun, which could have killed him and knocked him out. So where are the weapons?"

“I don’t know.” Helen hurried to get dressed while Andy waited to put the cuffs on her. He turned to watch the fire, giving her some privacy.

“She’s dressed,” Monica said.

“I don’t have my shoes on yet.”

“You don’t need them.” Monica glanced at the fire.

They did need firewood, but neither Monica nor Andy was in the best shape to lift the wood from the stack buried in snow.

“We need firewood. Helen could get it,” Monica said.

“It’s too cold out,” Helen whined.

Andy waved the cuffs at her. “The agent is right. Put on your boots and parka, and go out to bring in some firewood. We’ll carry your boyfriend inside before he freezes to death out there.”

Then Andy and Monica put their guns away. Helen didn’t have anywhere to run to. She wasn’t armed. She could at least get some wood for the fire.

They pulled Denny into the house and laid him next to the fireplace. Andy searched for a gun on him but didn’t find any. He put handcuffs on Denny because he was the most likely to cause trouble. Once he warmed up, they would secure him better.

However, once Helen returned with the firewood, they would handcuff her, too, so they could get some rest without worrying about them.

Monica returned to the front door and peered out.

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“Is she getting the firewood?” Andy sat down on the couch, having to get off his ankle.

“She’s trying to. I don’t think Denny could have done so, either. We need to find his gun. I’ll go out and get some firewood.”

“As a bear?”

“Yeah. I think that’s the only way to do it. I’ll send her back inside, and you can cuff her. Then I’ll get the firewood. When I return, I’ll look for the gun. We can question him when he comes to if I don’t find it.”

“All right.”

Monica went to the front porch and said, “Come on in, Helen. It looks like you won’t be able to free any firewood from the log pile.”

Helen began trudging back through the snow. Tears streaking down her cheeks were frozen. “But we need some more firewood.”

“Tell me where he put the gun, and I’ll get the firewood.”

“It’s on the bookcase.”

“I’ll get it.” Andy used the couch to maneuver around it and reach the bookcase.

Helen finally reached the house. She pulled off her gloves, hat, goggles, and parka.

Monica put a handcuff on her one hand and then the other, and cuffed her. “Sit over there on the loveseat for now.”

“What did you do to Denny?”

“He’s taking a nap. He’ll probably have a headache when he wakes.” Monica went outside and shut the door.

Andy made his way over to the window and watched Monica. She had already removed her clothes, dropped them on the piled-up snow next to the door, and shifted. As a bear, she ambled over to the woodpile, reached it, and slid the snow off the top of one group of logs.

Then she slammed her good arm into the stacked-up wood on top, knocking three pieces off. She grabbed one in her mouth and walked upright back to the house.

He assumed her injured hand hurt too much from running on it like a bear. He opened the door, carried the log into the living room, and put it next to the fire to dry out.

Helen’s mouth hung agape. “How did she manage to get a log? I don’t think Denny could have even gotten them loose as high as the snow is piled up on them, and they’re frozen together. I certainly couldn’t budge them.”

“She’s stronger than you give her credit for.” Monica was remarkable, and that was all Andy could think of as he returned to the window to watch her as she walked back with another log.

He figured she’d only bring the three she had knocked loose, but she had whacked another four off the stack and carried them back the same way. Once she was done, she shifted and dressed. At least he was there to assist her.

After shutting the door, they moved into the living room. He helped her out of her gloves, goggles, hat, and parka, then pulled an ace bandage from her backpack first aid kit and wrapped it around her injured hand. "It's time for us to rest."

"We need to handcuff them to something so they can't harm us while we sleep," she said as he pulled off her boots. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Once we have secured them, we can rest. It wouldn't do for them to get hold of our guns or knock us out." Or worse.

She spoke low for his ears only. "I liked resting together as bears." She smiled at him. "But being by a warm fire will work too."

Not the same as being in bed together, he was thinking. What he wouldn't give to curl up with her on a soft mattress, covered in blankets, and sleep their injuries away. And more. He already had the hots for her, feeling protective and admiring her dedication to her job, as well as her tender ministrations to ensure his foot was warm enough on the journey.

He looked around the room and noticed the kitchen bar had brass poles on three sides holding up the countertop. A long storage cabinet held up the rest of the countertop. "Those brass poles should work."

"I agree."

They dragged Denny to the pole in one corner of the bar and handcuffed him around it.

"You can't do that tome. I have my rights," Helen shouted from the loveseat.

Andy suspected she was trying to rouse Denny, but he was still dead to the world.

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“Yeah, and by rights, you should be in jail soon,” Monica said. “What I think is so despicable is that you would use Pierre in such an awful way.”

Helen’s face was filled with an odd look, but Andy couldn’t decipher its meaning as he and Monica moved Helen opposite Denny at the end of the long counter.

Once they had cuffed her to the bar, Andy checked on Denny, his heart beating steadily.

He suddenly opened his eyes, saw that he was handcuffed to the brass pole, tried to sit up, and groaned. “Who the hell are you? And what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“FBI Special Agent O’Connell at your service.” Monica flashed her badge.

“I’m a state trooper. MacMathan is the name.”

Denny glanced at Helen. “Why is she handcuffed?”

“We know the whole story.” Monica heated up the milk to make hot cocoa for her and Andy.

Now that was much better than cold water in a chilling blizzard.

Denny quickly looked at Helen as if he thought she had told them the whole story.

“They were a couple of damn peeping Toms,” Helen snarled. “They saw us screwing

around.”

“And enjoying it,” Monica said.

“That doesn’t mean—” Helen started to say.

“That you aren’t in collusion in planning this whole kidnapping for ransom matter? Sadly, your new boyfriend was willing to do anything to save you at all costs and would have paid for your release. This sack of garbage only wants money. I guess you too.” Monica poured the cocoa into two mugs, found whipped cream in the fridge, and topped off the cocoa with swirls of cream.

Andy figured Monica was right.

Helen looked at her ex-boyfriend.

Denny shook his head. “That’s not true, honey. You know I love you.”

“So why are you the ex then?” Monica asked.

Helen began to cry, and Andy swore it was all fake.

“He abused me.” Helen cried even harder.

“Oh, that’s a great reason to return with him and con the new boyfriend.” Monica sipped her cocoa and got a dab of whipped cream on her nose.

Before she could wipe it off, Andy came over and licked it off. She chuckled and kissed his mouth. He kissed her chocolaty lips right back and deepened the kiss. Now this was more like it.

“You know, Pierre wouldn’t stop talking about you. I got sick of hearing it,” Helen said.

“I can’t imagine. We dated only for a while.”

“To hear him talk about you, you were perfect. I wouldn’t ever measure up.”

“That’s news to me.” Monica seemed to be sincere about it.

Andy was still surprised she’d dated him and hadn’t mentioned it earlier. He suspected she didn’t want to discuss it now in front of the others.

Denny squirmed to get more comfortable. “With two more of you here and us stuck here because of the blizzard, you know we’ll run out of food soon. Have you looked at the food supplies?”

5

Worrying they might be stuck there for several days, Monica and Andy finished their cocoa, and then she began checking the stockpile of food in the cupboards, fridge, and freezer. “We have enough food here to eat for a while. The blizzard should end soon.”

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“And then what?” Helen’s eyes filled with tears again.

Monica didn’t buy that Helen was truly repentant. The tears were more likely to be shed for getting caught or for show. She thought about Helen’s comment that Pierre felt like Monica was perfect. He had often been annoyed that her job always came first. They’d had a couple of dozen dates over six weeks. No way had Pierre thought she was a perfect girlfriend.

That would have been someone who ignored her work to be with him when he wanted her to. Instead, she’d often had to say no or cancel on a scheduled date. Besides, it was supposed to have been a fun excursion with him, nothing permanent. She certainly hadn’t wanted to turn him into one of her kind.

Monica took a pillow from the couch and elevated Andy’s foot on the coffee table. Then she removed the plastic bag and began unwrapping her scarf from his foot. She carefully pulled off one sock after another and then the ace bandage until his foot was bare.

His ankle was bruised and swollen, but luckily, he didn’t appear to have frostbite.

She told Andy, “I’ll warm some water and apply it to your feet with a cloth.”

“Thanks. I’ll do the same for you.”

“What about us?” Helen asked as if she needed pampering when she’d been curled up in a blanket by the fireplace without a care in the world while Monica and Andy, both injured, had been trekking through miles of snow.

“You can’t be serious.” Monica applied a warm, wet cloth to Andy’s foot, warming it up and being careful not to hurt him. She couldn’t believe he’d made that trek in the snow on a sprained ankle.

He removed his boot and sock from his other foot.

She was proud of him for his fortitude in being there for her, aiding her, and protecting her. “Your foot looks good. Your ankle is a bit swollen, but being out in the snow may have helped keep it from swelling as much as it might have. There’s bruising around the ankle. But it’s turning black and blue in the next bruising stage—not from frostbite.”

“That’s good. Once we were inside the cabin and not walking through deep snow, I could step on it lightly. It should be good by tomorrow.”

She pressed another warm cloth on his foot, and he moaned. She looked up at him and stopped, worried he was in a lot of pain. “Are you okay?”

“That feels heavenly.”

She smiled with relief. “Your feet are cold. Thankfully, there are no signs of frostbite.” After she had applied the warm, wet cloth, she dried his feet, then massaged them gently.

He sighed. She pulled his dry socks on so his feet would stay warm.

“Okay, it’s your turn. Lie on the couch, put your feet on my lap, and I’ll check yours for frostbite.” He removed her boots and socks and felt how cold and wet her feet were.

As soon as she lay down on the couch, she groaned. “Sorry, my back hurts.”

“Yeah, you’ve been doing too much work.”

“As if we had a choice—either of us.”

“True.” He tossed her wet socks near the fireplace to let them dry. Her feet were burning and ice cold at the same time. He turned and placed her feet between his legs, warming them. “Man, are your poor feet cold.”

“That feels so much better. I didn’t realize how cold they were.” Changing into her bear would have probably helped warm her feet up a few times, but getting naked and standing in the snow hadn’t helped.

Now, her feet felt heavenly between his legs. And then his erection swelled up against her toes. The tips of his ears turned a little red, and she wanted to laugh. She smiled instead, and he smiled back. Man, he was hot.

Then her thoughts turned to other matters. After the snowstorm had stopped, they could be stuck there for a long time and run out of food. They had water and enough logs for the fire for a couple of weeks, but the food would only last a few days. They would have to ration it. At least Helen and her ex-boyfriend couldn’t “sneak” food while they were cuffed.

Monica closed her eyes and stretched out on her back on the couch while keeping her feet warm between Andy’s legs. He hadn’t expected his cock to respond to her pressing against his groin. He was glad she wasn’t bothered by it.

He couldn’t help that any little bit of intimacy between them aroused him into wanting more. Glad she could finally relax and rest after all they had been through, he must have drifted off himself when Denny suddenly spoke.

“Hell,” Denny said, “a polar bear nearly killed me.”

Monica opened her eyes, glanced in Denny's direction, and raised her brows. Andy had hoped that Monica could rest from her injuries longer, so he was annoyed that Denny had woken her.

“A polar bear? Get real.” Monica's tone said it all—the guy had to have been delusional.

Helen looked at Denny to see what he had to say. Denny was a blond-haired man, his hair cut short and butch. He had a stern look, bullish, his brown eyes narrowed and angry most of the time. He never softened his expression, even when he looked at Helen.

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“You brought me into the cabin and saved me, didn’t you?” Denny asked Andy.

Andy massaged Monica’s feet. “We both did. You should be damned grateful.”

Monica moaned. “That feels so good.”

He was glad he could make her feel better.

“You had to have seen him. Unless he was gone when you found me lying in the snow. I was by the woodpile when I saw a trail in the snow. I thought a ton of people had been walking through there. I tried to loosen the log but couldn’t. Then hell, I saw the bear. I thought it was looking for food. I had left my guns in the house.”

A good thing for everyone concerned, Andy thought.

“Then the polar bear reared up and struck me.”

“If therewasone, he might have eaten parts of you,” Helen said.

“You don’t believe me? I thought at leastyouwould.” Denny sounded pissed off at her. “Maybe he’d just killed something nearby and thought I might want to steal his food.” Then he glowered at Andy. “You can’t keep us locked up like this forever. Who knows how long we’ll have to be here?”

“Yeah, I gotta pee.” Helen wiggled around as if she was a kid who couldn’t hold it in for another second.

“Okay, I got you,” Monica said.

“Are you okay with taking her? I can do it.” Andy wanted Monica to rest from her injuries.

“I would let you, but you can take him when he needs to go.” Monica groaned as she left the couch, and Andy walked over to release one of Helen’s handcuffs from the metal post.

“Don’t pull anything,” Andy warned her.

“Like I can go anywhere.” Helen stalked toward the bathroom.

Monica stayed with her.

When she was done, Monica told Andy, “Can you lock her up again? You can give her a couple of floor pillows she can sit on.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Helen whined.

“You aren’t. But you are in custody for the false kidnapping charges, and you can’t be allowed to roam the house freely,” Monica said.

Monica was right, even if Helen wasn’t as much of a threat as Denny. Who knew how she might react if she were free of restraints? She might try to free Denny when they weren’t watching.

Andy locked Helen back up and gave her a couple of large floor pillows to help her feel more comfortable.

“What about me?” Denny patted the hard wooden floor.

“What about you?” Andy suspected he wanted a more comfortable situation, too, but he might need to use the bathroom.

Monica flushed the toilet in the bathroom.

“I want some pillows, too, and I need a bathroom break,” Denny said.

“I’ll give you one in a minute.” After Andy took one! When he returned to the living room, he saw that Monica had given Denny a pillow.

“I want two pillows like Helen got.”

“Be lucky that you get one.” After all he’d put them through, Andy felt that he barely deserved a blanket for the night.

“I’ll make us some dinner,” Monica said.

“After I take Denny for a bathroom break.”

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Monica got her gun out.

“Hell, what do you think I’m going to try and do?” Denny eyed her with the gun.

“Nothing. Not with a gun on you.”

Andy removed his cuff from the bar pole, placed his hands in front of him, and cuffed them. He grabbed his arm and led him to the bathroom.

“What are you going to fix for us for lunch?” Helen asked.

“Soup and crackers.” Andy stayed by the bathroom door while Monica stayed nearby.

“That’s all?” Denny did his business, then came out of the bathroom, and Andy took him back to his post and handcuffed him.

“We’re on rations until we get picked up,” Monica said.

“I want one of the steaks I brought here,” Denny said.

Monica smiled. “Andy and I should eat them to celebrate taking the two of you into custody.”

“That would be theft.” Denny raised a brow.

Monica shook her head. “Truthfully, we’ll save them for later just in case it takes us a while to get out of here.”

Denny frowned at her. “Where did you come from? You couldn’t have driven here. I would have seen a car when I went to get firewood. And we’re snowed in.”

“We hiked in.”

“Is that how you got your injuries?” Denny asked.

Monica didn’t respond. Andy didn’t either. It was none of Denny and Helen’s business.

Then Denny said, “You’re damn lucky no polar bear attacked the two of you.” Then he sank down on the pillow. “I guess you can’t call anyone from here.”

“We both have satellite phones, but there’s no reception in the blizzard and forest.” Andy felt frustrated over that as well.

“Figures.”

“How did you think you would get the ransom money from Pierre?” Monica asked.

“We didn’t expect the blizzard to hit this hard.” Helen squirmed to get comfortable.

“You didn’t expect anyone to come looking for you? Here? When we know Denny’s grandparents owned the cabin?” Monica asked.

Helen cast a hard look at Denny. “You said this was a friend’s cabin, and no one knew you were friends with him. No wonder they’re here. Jeez, Denny. You’re such an idiot.”

Monica frowned at Denny, then searched through a drawer in a desk in the living room.

No more honey this or that, Andy noticed. He joined Monica at the desk. “What are you looking for?”

“If his grandparents don’t own this place, anyone who might come to help us will look at the wrong location.”

“But you had the description of the place, and you went straight to it.” However, Andy was beginning to think she had valid concerns.

She pulled out some mail. “Yeah, but the cabins look so similar, and the terrain features covered in snow do too. The address they sent these to is someone other than Denny’s grandparents.” Her face was a little flushed.

Andy rubbed her back. “Hey, I’m surprised we made it to a cabin in this blizzard.” Then he smiled. “Besides, it worked out in the end because we came to the right one anyway.”

“True, but if my fellow agents come to assist us when my boss doesn’t hear back from me, they will look for Denny and Helen at the wrong location. They won’t know we’re all here. They might think the tip was wrong or that Denny took Helen elsewhere and never intended to come out here.”

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“Yeah, that’s true.” Which wasn’t good news.

“I’ll go make dinner.” She headed into the kitchen and brought a couple of cans of chicken and rice soup. She searched through the drawers and pulled out a handheld can opener.

Andy followed her into the kitchen and opened the soup cans for her. “Why don’t you lie down? I have two good hands and can manage a lot better.”

He could walk on his injured ankle much better now, and she needed to rest her strained back.

“All right. Thanks.”

He rummaged through the freezer and found an ice pack. “Here, use this on your back.”

She carried it into the living room, lay down on her stomach, and put the ice pack on her back.

Once he had prepared the dinner, he released one of Helen’s hands so she could eat. Then he sat down with Monica at the dining room table.

“What about me?” Denny said angrily.

“After we eat.” Andy didn’t trust him not to cause trouble, so he released only one of the perps at a time.

“Do you think your boss will send out more troopers to look for you?” Monica asked Andy.

“Yeah, once I don’t check in or return home. My family and friends could also be. We might get lucky, and your fellow agents could end up at this cabin by mistake.” Andy bit into a soda cracker.

“That would sure be welcome.”

“At least the agents in your office would know where Denny’s grandparents’ cabin is and that it’s probably fairly close to this one. With my officers, they won’t have any idea. They could assume we had trekked through the woods to search for a cabin to wait out the weather. Because of the blizzard, our tracks will be gone when anyone begins searching for us.”

“And our scents will be gone too.”

6

The fire was dwindling as Andy cleaned up the dishes after they had soup and crackers, and the room was beginning to turn chillier already. Only two more logs were sitting in the big brass box next to the fireplace, which wouldn’t get them through the night.

Outside, the whiteout condition persisted.

“I’m going to get us some more firewood.” Andy didn’t want to wait any longer.

Denny should be helping. But Andy didn’t trust him to uncuff him, and he didn’t believe he could get any logs loose, either.

"Are you sure? I can do it." Monica was getting ready to leave the couch where she'd been resting her back.

"No. I'm feeling much better." Andy didn't want her to hurt her back further; his ankle was nearly normal.

Walking in deep snow might be an issue, but he could do all right as long as he could follow the trail she had made earlier while in her bear coat. He went outside, shut the door, and stripped off his clothes. Then he shifted into his bear, glanced back at the window, and saw her watching him.

Unfortunately, the path she had created was nearly obliterated by all the fresh snow. He lumbered toward the woodpile, rose on his hind legs, and swiped at the top layer of snow. Then he slammed his paw into the logs, something he'd never done before. Hell, it hurt!

He hated that she'd had to do that earlier. She'd made it look so easy.

He knocked two logs free from the frozen woodpile. Now he knew what she had gone through! He knocked four more logs free. While he was at it, he wanted to get as many as possible. He certainly didn't want Monica to have to get any more.

The heavier polar bear's weight on his injured ankle was starting to bother him though. He still had to carry all the wood back to the cabin. He freed four more logs and began carrying them back to the house. At least Helen and Denny were confined so they couldn't see him shifting into a polar bear, or thatthatwas how he was getting the logs loose.

Once he began bringing the individual logs to the house, Monica came out to get them. He wanted to tell her to stay in the cabin. He would carry them in after he moved them to the front porch. He had carried more than half of them to the porch

when he heard something coming through the woods. A cougar? Wolf? Maybe some of his people or Monica's?

As shifters, they could see better at night than humans. But then flashlights headed their way up the drive. He considered the distance to the cabin. Could he make it in time to shift and dress before anyone saw him shifting? He didn't want to risk it. None of their kind could shift in front of non-shifters without having to turn them or eliminate them, depending on who had seen them.

If they were fellow law enforcement officers, he couldn't kill them. He headed around to the side of the house to see what was happening. Monica was watching him. She looked sharply in the direction of the road covered in snow.

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The lights were more visible now. Three separate flashlights or headlamps wavered in the dark as they drew closer.

She grabbed another log off the porch and Andy's clothes, then ducked back inside the cabin. She slammed and locked the door.

Andy was still watching to see who it was when he saw three men in the blowing snow, one in forest camouflage, wearing ski clothes, ski masks, and goggles, none of whom were in law enforcement gear. They could be hikers who had gotten lost and seen the lights on inside the cabin.

Then one of the men called out, "Hey, Denny, it's just us."

All three men were carrying backpacks. Andy wondered if they had picked up the ransom money from Pierre. Then again, maybe they weren't even aware of the kidnapping plot. But why would they be trekking to the cabin in a blizzard that wasn't Denny's if they weren't involved in all this?

He assumed they were not the good guys if they were meeting up with Denny. Andy feared Denny would warn them that they were walking right into trouble.

Monica dropped the log and Andy's clothes on the floor inside the cabin and locked the door. She immediately grabbed her scarf that Andy had been wearing around his foot and wrapped it around Denny's mouth to keep him from calling out if the guys approaching the cabin were bad news.

She had done it just in time before one of the men approaching the cabin called out

Denny's name. This was so not good. There were three of them, and Andy was still outside in his polar bear coat.

She grabbed a hat and stuffed it in Helen's mouth, then raced to the bedroom at the end of the house. Once there, she unlocked the window, but when she tried to push it open, it was frozen shut and wouldn't budge. Frustrated and anxious, she had to go out the back door and take Andy's clothes to him.

She didn't want to leave the house when both she and Andy would be outside in more danger. But she needed Andy inside, wielding a gun.

She grabbed his clothes beside the front door and raced to the back door. She opened it and headed outside and around the back of the house to where she'd seen Andy go. He approached the corner as he heard her, but he shook his bear head at her. Did he want to stay outside and fight the men?

All right. She headed back inside and dropped his clothes off near the fire. Then she locked the door and grabbed both her gun and his. She holstered his and kept hers in her good hand.

Through the curtains on one of the living room windows, she surreptitiously watched the three men grow closer. She sure hoped Andy didn't get himself shot!

The men's faces were covered with ski masks and goggles to protect them from the blowing snow, so she had no idea what they looked like. She sure wished she could notify her fellow agents about their predicament and get more backup.

The three men ended up on the porch.

The one who had called out before yelled, "Hey, it's me, Wendell." He tried the door but found it locked. "Hey! Denny!"

Monica was standing with her gun readied. If they broke in, she wouldn't have a choice but to shoot at their lower extremities. She couldn't allow them to take control of the situation.

"Go, try the windows. Look and see if you can locate them," Wendell said.

"Where the hell would they be if not in the cabin?" one of the other men said. He wore a purple hat, which seemed incongruent with his camo clothes.

"Drunk and sleeping it off? Just go look," Wendell said.

The other two men left the front porch and began trudging through the path toward the woodpile. "It looks like he was headed in that direction," the one man said.

"Yeah, around the end of the house," the other said.

"If he got hypothermia and died out here, the money is ours," Wendell said.

The others laughed. The two men moved around the end of the house and suddenly cried out in fright.

Perfect, Andy thought as the men about shit their pants when they saw one big polar bear coming at them. Both men wore heavy ski gloves to stay warm, and they weren't prepared to shoot at him if they were armed, thankfully.

He lunged at the closest man, knocking him down. Andy closed in on the second man before he could backtrack and get out of there, though he had nowhere to go unless he could get into the house. Andy struck him on the back of the head, and the man fell to the ground.

Andy glanced at the other man, but he was out cold too. Andy dragged the last one he

took down to the back door. Thankfully, Denny and Helen couldn't see him from where they were secured to the bar poles. But he wanted to get the unconscious men to the back door. He and Monica would secure him as soon as possible.

Wendell was still an issue. He yelled from the front porch, sounding stressed. "What's wrong, Teague? Lionel? Shit!"

Your buddies won't be able to help you, Wendell.

Andy returned to the end of the house to move the other guy. He grabbed him by his parka collar, pulled him around to the back side of the house with his teeth, and left him on the deck.

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Andy peered through the double glass doors and saw Monica waving at him. She was holding her gun, ready to shoot if Wendell tried to come in through the front door. It was all quiet outside. Andy suspected that Wendell wanted to learn what had happened to his cohorts, but was afraid to investigate.

“Teague! Lionel!” Wendell’s voice was coming from the other end of the house. He sounded a lot more panicked, not so happy-go-lucky that they’d brought the money for the ransom to Denny if they had.

Andy was confident Wendell would have a gun out, and he didn’t want to face him head-on and get shot. He still had to help Monica confine the other guys.

He ran around to the other end of the cabin and then to the front, desperate to reach Wendell before he moved to the back of the house and saw his cohorts passed out.

Wendell suddenly cried out, right at the corner of the house. Andy figured he’d gotten a shock when he witnessed his buddies knocked unconscious on the back deck. He might believe they were dead.

Wendell backed up and then turned as if he were going to run away. He was carrying a gun like Andy assumed he would be. Wendell saw Andy charging him, and he nearly fell back into the snow. Polar bears could leap six-foot hurdles. Andy just had to jump far enough before Wendell shot him.

Behind Wendell, Monica raced toward him. “Drop the gun, or I’ll shoot!”

Andy slammed into Wendell, knocking him over. Wendell’s gun went off, the round

shooting into the dark sky. Wendell scrambled to use his weapon again, but Andy struck him in the head, knocking him out.

“I’ll put your clothes on the back deck,” Monica said to Andy.

He growled at her and followed her back to the deck. She headed inside and then came out with his clothes.

Once he had shifted and dressed, getting his boot on his injured foot even, they began hauling one of the men inside. Then she removed the scarf from Denny’s mouth and the hat from Helen’s.

“Hell,” Denny said, looking at the unconscious man.

“Yeah, that’s what happens to you when you decide to go on criminal ventures.” Andy felt smug that he and Monica could capture five of the perps “And we’re on the case.”

“A polar bear hit me!” Denny was irate.

“Right,” Monica said, returning to the deck, and Andy followed her.

They dragged in the second guy.

“Are they dead?” Now Denny looked worried.

“No, just sleeping it off.” Andy headed back outside to grab the last guy.

Monica went with him. “You know, once these guys come to, they’ll all share stories about that wild polar bear that nearly killed them,” she said, speaking low for Andy’s ears only.

“Yeah, you were behind Wendell, telling him to drop his weapon, and he could see me charging him. So he’ll mention that you had to have seen the bear.”

Monica pulled at Wendell’s arm. “Yeah. Maybe agreeing that I saw the bear will keep them from venturing outdoors. We do have another problem. We will be out of food sooner with so many more people to feed.”

“True. If these guys arrived on foot, they might have an operable vehicle closer to the cabin.”

“Yeah, good idea. Or we could leave them all tied up and then get help.”

Andy laughed. “I like that idea, but their defense attorneys would have a field day with that.”

Andy and Monica dragged Wendell into the cabin, and then she locked the back door.

"Okay, I have at least a couple more pairs of handcuffs. What about you?" Monica asked Andy.

"Three more. I have more in the squad car, but getting there is a bit of a trek." He pulled handcuffs out of his backpack and then confined Wendell, figuring he was the boss of the other two, while Monica secured one of the other men.

Andy got the last one. He glanced around the room, not wanting to put the three of them with Helen and Denny. "Okay, there's a pole here on the side. Wendell can go there."

"And the other two?"

"Well, the leg of the couch might work for each of them. I noticed the beds have

wrought iron legs, but I think it's better if they're in the same place as us so we can keep an eye on them."

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"I agree."

Andy dragged one of the men over to the couch and secured him. Monica helped him pull the last man over to the farthest couch and confined him.

"You can't keep us like this forever. If that bear breaks in, we're all dead," Denny said.

"You can't confine me," Helen said. "It's illegal. What you're doing is illegal!"

"We could confine her to one of the bedrooms," Monica said.

"I have every right to speak. The Fourth Amendment gives me that right. And you can't do that to me."

"Yeah, let's move her." Andy figured that would free up one of the brass poles, which could hold one of the men.

Then, between the two of them, they took her out of the room and confined her to the bed.

"You can't do this to me," Helen screamed.

But they really needed that other pole to confine the last of the men. The couch would have to do for the other.

Once they secured her to the bed, they started to leave the room.

“You can’t do this to me!” Helen screamed at them. “I’m going to sue you both. What are your badge numbers?”

They gave her their badge numbers again and then left the room, shutting the door. Then they moved the man secured to the couch to the other bar pole. They checked the men’s pockets for anything and found three more loaded handguns.

“So this one is Lionel Boyer, the guy in camo,” Andy said, looking at his driver’s license.

“And this one is Teague Moore.” Monica stuffed his driver’s license in his wallet and set it on the kitchen counter.

They checked Wendell’s driver’s license and saw his name was Wendell Marquart.

Andy put Lionel’s wallet with Teague’s. “So tell me about these guys, Denny.”

“I’ve never seen them in my life.”

“That’s why they’re here at this cabin, hollering your name. Or at least Wendell was,” Andy said.

They opened Wendell’s backpack to see what was inside.

“You can’t go through my stuff without a search warrant.” Wendell’s face turned red with anger.

Wendell’s shaggy, mousy brown hair covered his ears, a scar raked across his cheek, and a skull tattoo on his left hand mocked the viewer. His chin was stubby with a cleft the size of Texas on it, and another scar cut across his bottom lip that dove into the cleft. What had he been involved in that had caused the scars? Other criminal

pursuits?

“He said he had the ransom money, patted the bag, and that’s good enough to check out the bag to see if he has the money.” Andy opened the bag while Monica recorded it with her cell phone. “Besides, we needed to look for any other weapons.” Andy pulled out another gun.

“You’ve violated a million of our rights,” Denny said.

“We saved your lives from that polar bear, remember?” Andy figured the gig was up as far as making up a story that all four men couldn’t have seen what they thought they had seen.

Monica checked the two other guys to ensure they were still breathing.

Teague started to stir and sat up, alarmed. “Hell.” He looked around the room. “Where’s the bear?” His red hair was tied back in a tail, and he wore a mustache; his chin was clean-shaven. He had a baby face with red freckles that bridged his nose and cheeks.

“See, I told you it was a polar bear,” Denny said, annoyed.

“Hell, yeah, it was a polar bear,” Teague said. “He got you too? I can’t believe we’re alive.” He pulled at his restraints. “What the hell?”

“You and the others are under arrest for obtaining ransom money for a false kidnapping,” Monica said. “Are there any more of you involved?”

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No one said anything.

“What are you going to do with us?” Teague raised his brows. “How many of you are there? Just two?” He scoffed. “You won’t be able to handle all of us.”

“Where’s the vehicle you drove to get here?” Monica asked.

“Like I’m telling you.” Wendell leaned against the island while sitting on the floor.

Monica took Andy aside and spoke to him privately. “We need to find that vehicle. One of us can look for it now while the tracks are still fresh. If it’s a big enough vehicle, we could take them all back to White Bear, at least to the point where we can get a hold of other law enforcement to help take these guys in.”

“How close were you to the cabin before you had to walk?” Andy called out to Wendell.

“Listen, man, you can’t leave us and go looking for our truck. The bear will kill you, and then what will we do?” Wendell said.

Denny glowered at Wendell, and Andy suspected he hoped one of them would look for the truck. Then they would manage to free themselves and take out the last person who was left watching them.

“I’ll go,” Monica said.

“Okay.” Andy would have suggested it because he figured she would prefer that, and

he certainly would if he had to handle one of the men or more.

Monica pulled on her cold-weather gear—hat, coat, snow boots, and gloves. Then she put on her mask and snow goggles. She put all their guns in her backpack. “I’ll be back as soon as I find the vehicle.”

“You’re making a mistake, lady,” Wendell said, sounding panicked.

Ignoring him, she left the cabin and headed out into the cold snow. At least the snow wasn’t coming down as hard now as Andy watched her walk in the direction the men had taken.

He hoped she would find a vehicle to take them to White Bear. He also hoped they could manage five co-conspirators without any trouble. Without a confining cage to put them in, trying to transport them safely to White Bear would be a dangerous prospect.

Monica headed through the deep snow on the path the men had made. She walked for about half a mile when she saw a black pickup truck sitting on a clear road. The one that she had just traversed hadn’t been plowed. She immediately felt relieved to see the vehicle and the plowed road.

The truck even had a slide-in camper on the back and over the double-wide cab. She looked in the back—a full-sized bed, pallet, fridge, sink, propane tank, solar module, and storage—nice. Hopefully, they could incarcerate some of the perps in the camper.

She tried her satellite phone but couldn’t get a signal. She tried her phone next, but there was no signal.

She turned around and headed back to the cabin as quickly as she could to give Andy the news when she heard shots fired back at the cabin, sending her heart into

overdrive.

“Bang, bang, bang!”

7

While anxiously watching for Monica’s return, Andy heard something rustling by the couch. He jerked his head around and was relieved to see that Lionel was still secure.

“What the hell is going on?” Lionel asked, yanking at his restraints wrapped around the couch leg. He looked to be about six feet three, heavysset, with a black beard and bushy black eyebrows, and he had a crooked nose that appeared to have been broken at some point in his life.

“You’re under arrest for facilitating a case of false kidnapping and obtaining the money for it.” Then Andy continued to watch for Monica, hoping she had found the truck and that it wasn’t too far away.

He wasn’t sure how they would get all the arrestees into the vehicle if they had to travel a long way in this snow, particularly with them all restrained.

The next thing he knew, Lionel must have lifted the couch, gotten loose, and was crossing the floor, heading straight for Andy.

His heart pounding, Andy yanked his gun out, but before he could aim it at Lionel, the guy was on top of him, slamming into him and taking him to the floor. As a polar bear, Andy was formidable. He was muscled and strong, but didn’t have the bulk of a human that Lionel did. Between them, they wrestled for the gun.

The gun went off, the round striking the kitchen island with a thwack!

Denny shouted, “Jesus! Try to kill us, why don’t you!”

Andy wasn’t letting go of his weapon. He was glad Monica had the foresight to take their guns with her when she left.

From the back bedroom, Helen screamed, “Let me out of here! Let me out!”

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Adding to the chaos, Wendell and Teague yanked at the poles holding the kitchen island up. As soon as they tried to break free, so did Denny.

Helen seemed to be the only one unable to go anywhere, though if they'd secured one of the guys in the bedroom, he probably could have lifted the bed and gotten loose. At least for now, the brass kitchen counter poles were holding. But as much as the three men were yanking at them, Andy feared they would soon pull them loose.

His biggest problem for now was keeping Lionel from killing him with his own gun. Suddenly, Lionel slammed his fist into the side of Andy's head. Shit! That hurt. Lionel must have been or still was a boxer.

Andy lost his gun, which slid across the wooden floor. Andy dove for it, but Lionel had his hands on it first. Andy jumped up and ran to the front door, but Lionel was getting to his feet and fired wildly at him.

Andy threw the front door open and ran for the trail Monica had used. Damn it to hell! He wasn't wearing his parka, gun, hat, gloves, goggles, or anything he would need to keep from freezing to death in the frigid temperatures. Then he saw Monica moving as fast as she could toward him, gun in hand.

"Go back that way." She motioned back to the road.

"Lionel has my gun. At least you have all the rest of them."

She hesitated. "Okay, come on, we'll go back to their truck. They won't come after us until Lionel frees the other men. Denny will tell him I'm still armed, and I've got

the rest of their guns. You shift. We're out of the view of the cabin. You'll freeze to death the way you're dressed. I'll carry your clothes to the truck."

He quickly stripped off his clothes and shifted. Then she gathered up his clothes and led him half a mile to a pickup with a camper on top. She opened the back of it and climbed in. He soon joined her.

"Here, there are more clothes and a rifle. You can dress and wear this parka and hat."

He began pulling on the parka and hat and found a ski mask and ski goggles.

"We have a few choices. We can wait for them to come to their truck because they'll need to leave here, figuring their location is compromised. They can spread out and try to overcome us with greater numbers." She sounded as winded as he was.

Andy found some bottles of water and emergency food. "Right. Woods surround us. They could come at us from different directions."

"We could hotwire their truck, leave them stranded, and return to White Bear. Then we would let everyone know where they're holed up. Or we can return to the cabin and stop Lionel from freeing the others."

"I hate leaving them behind when we have them all incarcerated, but if he frees them before we return, I'm afraid they could overwhelm us. If Lionel gets off one shot where he manages to kill or wound us, we would be in bigger trouble."

"True. Once Lionel frees the others, it won't be long before they're headed here. We could disable their truck and flatten all the tires, but we would be at risk as they search the area to kill us."

"Unless they're afraid of the polar bear. Our best option is to hotwire the truck and

drive until we can get some reception to call for backup.” Andy climbed out of the camper and helped Monica out.

She helped Andy start the truck, and once it was running, she drove and backed down the road until they reached the main road. “I don’t want to get stuck anywhere.”

“If we do, then we’ll have to flatten the tires and take the starter...” Andy ran his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry about all this.”

“About what? If I had been in the house and Lionel had overwhelmed me, I would have been dead. At least you made it out alive. I take it he lifted the couch to free himself.”

“Yeah, he came to while I was watching for your return. I didn’t think he could do that with his hands confined behind his back, but I was dead wrong. He somehow managed to get his cuffs off. It was too late when I realized he was coming at me. Once he had my gun, he began shooting at me, and I fled the house.”

“When I heard the shots fired, I nearly had a heart attack. He must be a lousy shot.”

“He might be concussed and seeing double because of me knocking him out initially.”

“I sure hope so.”

Two miles down the road, the truck slipped on the ice, and she slowed down, regaining control of the truck.

“Do you want me to drive?”

She rolled her eyes at him. As soon as she did, he assumed she thought he was saying

so because she'd already run into his patrol vehicle and totaled it.

“The roads are icy, and the slide-on, hard-shell camper makes this vehicle top-heavy. I've driven one before, so I know what traveling in these conditions is like.”

“All right.” She came to a stop, and they switched places. “The tank is only about a quarter full.”

“We won't make it to White Bear then.”

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“I was hoping we would get close or maybe even run into someone looking for us.”

“Neither of us was traveling on this road,” he reminded her.

“I know. I wonder if they’ve cleared the one where our vehicles are.” She sighed, leaned against the seat, and closed her eyes. “Tell me when we get to where we’re going.”

“We could try the satellite phones.”

“I tried mine when I went to the truck, but still no reception. It's the same with the phone. Then I heard shots fired.”

“At least you had your backpack with your gear in it.”

“I never leave home without it.” She got quiet then, and he let her rest.

This was a chaotic operation, though he reminded himself that they had stranded the people they had arrested, which was a good thing.

Once he was driving, he was battling a strong wind and an icy road. No wonder Monica had trouble controlling the truck, especially with her injuries. He admired her tenacity and fortitude.

Considering the conditions, he was surprised that Wendell and his men had made it to the cabin.

“Ohmigod, the...heat feels...great in here. I was...free-freezing to death,” a woman said from the back seat of the truck.

Shocked to hear someone in the truck, Monica and Andy immediately investigated the back seat to see a woman of about twenty, wrapped up in blankets, brushing her blond hair out of her face. “Who...who are you?”

“Friends of Wendell,” Monica quickly said. “Have you been in the truck all this time? It’s no wonder that you didn’t freeze to death. I’m Monica, and this is Andy. What’s your name?”

“Elo...Eloise.” She sounded like she was half out of it.

Monica turned the heat up on high. “Have you been drinking? Are you on anything?”

“Why? Are...you a...cop?”

“She might be hypothermic,” Monica said. “I’m coming back there to check you out.” She climbed over the seat. “Ugh. A half-empty container of gin is lying on the floor back here.”

“Drinking alcohol and being out in this cold for an extended period can be a lethal combination.” Andy concentrated on the icy road conditions.

“That’s for sure. It looks like she’s just drunk. If we could give her a field sobriety test, I’m sure she couldn’t pass it. But if she’d been out here much longer, she would have been in much worse shape.”

“Who are you? A friend of Denny’s? No...uh, no, Wendell? You...you wouldn’t be driving...driving...driving hisss truck otherwisse. Why...why are you...you driving hisss truck?”

Andy came up with a quick tale to explain the situation, hoping she had been asleep and hadn't heard their earlier conversation. "We're getting gas for his truck."

"Aww." Eloise closed her eyes and pulled the blanket back over her.

Monica climbed back into the front seat and fastened her seatbelt. "I don't think we'll have a problem with her for a while. As long as she doesn't get belligerent like Helen was."

"We could put her in the camper."

"I would be worried about her opening the back door of the camper and falling out of it in her condition."

"True."

"I see lights ahead! A few businesses. A service station. Maybe someone's got reception." Monica sounded as excited as he felt hopeful.

He sure hoped they could get hold of someone when he saw a van headed in his direction. He thought it looked like one of his cousins' vans they used on their tours, but when he got close enough to see the side of the van, he realized it wasn't theirs.

Monica glanced at the van. "Someone you thought you knew?"

"Yeah, my cousins' van. They take tourists on wilderness tours, and their vans are white like that. But they have signage on the side: White Bear Wilderness Adventures Tour."

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“That’s too bad they couldn’t help us, though they’re not law enforcement. The service station looks dark, as if no one is operating it.” Sounding frustrated, she peered closer at the service station.

Signs on the gas pumps stated they were out of gas.

“People probably made a run on the gas ahead of the blizzard,” Monica said.

“Yeah. And they couldn’t get a truck out to fill the gas tanks during the storm.”

Then she brightened with enthusiasm again. “A motel is up the road that way. We could stop there and see if we can get a landline reception. Their vacancy light is on.”

“Do you want to share a room?” Andy smiled at her in a way that said he was serious as sin. Man, he would love to.

She smiled back, appearing to like the idea. “I guess we could do that. We could keep driving until we run out of gas, get closer to White Bear, and sleep in the camper, but a warm hotel room sounds better.”

“Let’s see if we can get accommodations.”

Then Monica frowned. “What do we do about Eloise?”

“Get her a room of her own. I don’t want to take her into custody. She won’t be able to go anywhere. We can interrogate her tomorrow when she’s sober and learn all about her involvement in this.” He pulled into the Frontier Motel, which had ten

rooms in the single-story motel, except for the end of the lobby, which was a double-story structure with a covered roof over a drive-thru.

The outer walls were white metal, the bottom half of the motel was covered in red brick, and each motel room door was the same color as the brick. Each room had small double windows covered with curtains. All the rooms were dark, as if no one was staying there.

Snow covered the sidewalk from the blizzard, which hadn't been cleared for guests, surprising Andy. The parking lot was also covered, but he managed to drive through it.

"The Yukon parked near the lobby might be the clerk's or manager's, so I'm sure there's someone here. I'll go in and get us a couple of rooms. Then again, maybe I should stay with her, and you could have your own room if she's involved in this. "

He let out his breath. "We could do that." But he didn't want to.

And what was up with that? He was interested in the she-bear, that was what. Still, they had a job, and other considerations weren't important. Telling himself that didn't dampen his enthusiasm to get to know her better.

"I'll wait in the truck with Sleeping Beauty while you go in and get the rooms," he said.

"Be right back." Monica left the truck while he kept the heater running, thinking of sharing a bed with her, even if it wasn't practical.

From behind the check-in counter at the motel, a black-bearded man dressed in all black narrowed his eyes. His mouth curved down, and his stance was rigid and untrusting as if Monica wasn't supposed to be there. That made her suspicious. She

reminded herself that he might worry he was in trouble with the law when he saw her FBI parka. Not everyone welcomed law enforcement agents.

Or he might be concerned she was there to arrest someone else at the motel, though there were no other vehicles parked there, so it appeared no one was there. It would cause trouble for him if it turned out to be a crime scene.

No one was in the lobby, and he was the only one behind the counter.

“You drove up in Wendell’s truck. What’s going on?”

Uh-oh. At once, she smelled his aggressiveness, and he could probably see Andy at the truck's wheel as he parked under the drive-thru awning in front of the lobby.

“He sent us to get some gas, but it looks like the only service station in the area is empty and shut down for the time being.” Her heart beat sped up; she was ready to pull out her service weapon.

“Why would he send a cop to do that? Has he been arrested? Where is he?”

She pulled out her revolver. “Put your hands where I can see them.”

He dropped down behind the counter and came up with a shotgun.

Damn!“No one can get here in time to take care of your bullet wounds if you don’t put down your weapon,” she shouted.

He snorted. “When I shoot you, you won’t need medical attention.”

“What’s Wendell to you?”

“It’s none of your business.”

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She shrugged. “If you think you’re going to kill me, what does it matter if I know?”

“He’s my cousin.”

“So you know what he’s involved in. Drop your weapon, and I won’t charge you with obstruction.” And more. She suspected he wouldn’t comply.

“How come you got his truck?”

“I told you. He needed gas.”

“Come on. You’re going to take me out there, and we’re going to make sure he’s not handcuffed in the back seat of the truck or the camper.”

She couldn’t let him go out to the truck. If she didn’t disarm him, he could shoot Andy and her. She hoped that at least Andy would make it out safely.

The guy started to rack his shotgun, and she shot him in the arm. She hated to do it in case she put him in a life-threatening situation, but she felt she didn’t have any other choice. He cried out but aimed his shotgun at her. She dove out of his sight and landed behind a sofa in the lobby. The blast was loud as the round slammed into the back of the faux leather couch with a thunk.

Before she could rise and shoot him again, hopefully fully incapacitating him this time, a large, beautiful polar bear ran into the lobby. Whenever she saw Andy in action, she thought how striking he was. When Andy scrambled over the counter, the man looked like he would die of fright. He cried out in distress, and Andy knocked

him out.

They heard the truck back up and take off, and Monica raced outside. Eloise was at the wheel, tearing down the road toward the cabin. Had she seen Andy shift? Had she heard the shots fired? Would she make it as drunk as she'd sounded? Unless that had all been an act, just like the kidnapping had been.

What about Andy's clothes? She ran outside and found them where Eloise had run over them with the truck. Monica carried them into the lobby. Security cameras were installed in the lobby, so she entered the restroom and placed his clothes there.

She would have to erase some of the video anyway. Not of her shooting the man or of him shooting at her, but just of a polar bear attacking him.

"Eloise took off with our truck." Not that it was their truck. Monica tried the landline to call for help. The phone line was dead. "Not working."

Andy licked her hand and then headed into the men's restroom. She began binding the man's wounds while Andy dressed and returned to take care of the security videos, which had been her next plan. She liked that he thought along the same lines as she did.

She searched for a wallet and learned from his ID that he was Harvey Marquart. "He's Wendell Marquart's cousin, who owns the truck we had confiscated."

"Great," Andy said from the office.

"Do you think Eloise knows where to go?"

"She won't make it to the cabin on the amount of gas she has. Driving as fast as she did out of here and with the unwieldy height of the truck, I would say before long,

she'll lose control of the truck and end up in the ditch in a snowbank.”

Monica found Harvey's keys. “Okay, I've got his keys.” She put a No Vacancy light on for the motel and then put a sign in the window saying: Closed.

“I hope no one had plans to stay here,” Andy said as she joined him in the office, and she watched him delete the last footage of the polar bear attacking Harvey.

“You shifted inside the camper.”

“Yeah. I figured no one would see me from any motel room if anyone was there. Eloise wouldn't have either. But there's only one vehicle out there.”

“The Yukon that we're going to take to White Bear.” She poked the key fob, and the Yukon's lights flashed on and off. “Hopefully, it will have more gas than the truck.”

“And it will get much better gas mileage than the truck with the camper on top.”

One thing was puzzling her, though. “If you stripped out of your clothes inside the camper...”

“I dropped them at the end of the camper, and I left the door open so I could run back out there, climb in, shift, and dress. When she tore off, my clothes fell out. Thankfully. Though she went backward instead of forward. I was afraid she was really out of it. The door looked like it shut on its own.”

“That's how she drove over your clothes then.”

“Yeah.”

They both tried their satellite and cell phones but had no luck.

Because they had to get Harvey medical treatment, and he was involved in trying to kill her, they needed to incarcerate him. She bandaged his wound, then put a pair of cuffs on Harvey, and they dragged him out to the Yukon. When they got him inside, they secured him in the back.

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Andy took over the driving, glanced at the gas gauge, and smiled. “It looks like he must have filled up before the blizzard hit, got stuck here, but at least he has a full gas tank.”

“Good. Something’s working for us for a change.”

“Hey! What the hell! You shot me, and now you’ve stolen my vehicle?” Harvey shouted from the back, struggling to get loose.

Andy and Monica could be in a real mess again if he broke free from his constraints.

8

Giving them both a little burst of adrenaline, the Yukon hit another patch of ice, and Andy maneuvered to get the vehicle back under control. At least when the winds had hit the Yukon, the vehicle wasn’t shoved off the road because it was top-heavy. She was also glad they had a full tank of gas.

“You tried to kill me! You can’t arrest me! You are a couple of crooked cops. I’m bleeding to death! I’m going to die! You’re going to be charged with my murder. I’ll make sure of it! You stole my vehicle! That’s more charges!” Harvey yelled from the hatchback.

Andy reached over and squeezed Monica’s hand. She smiled at him. She wasn’t worried about Harvey charging them with anything. She was more concerned about getting him medical attention, more than they could give him with their limited first aid supplies.

Then she thought she smelled drugs in the back seat of the Yukon. She lifted her nose, took a deep breath, and then released it.

“Do you smell them too?” Andy asked.

“Yeah. Heroin.”

Andy pulled the Yukon over, and Monica got out of the vehicle and checked the backseat. “Ahh, white powdered stuff in bricks under the front seats.”

Andy glanced over the back seat. “Definitely heroin.”

“You can’t search my vehicle! I didn’t give consent to search my Yukon! It’s illegal to search my vehicle without a search warrant. It’s an illegal search!” Harvey said.

“I liked him better when he was passed out.” Monica climbed back into the passenger’s seat and closed the door.

“Hell, a polar bear attacked me in the lobby of my motel,” Harvey suddenly said, as if the comment about him being passed out finally made him remember what had happened to him. “I was knocked out. I didn’t just...pass out. You must have hidden so the bear didn’t kill you.”

“A polar bear? Have you been taking drugs or drinking?” Monica asked.

“No, I didn’t take anything. You know that. And I didn’t have anything in my vehicle. You planted those. You saw the bear. He knocked me out.”

“You tripped on your own two feet after you tried to kill me and fell and hit your head,” Monica said. “Thankfully, or I would have had to shoot you again.”

“I would have gotten you first.”

He probably would have shot her if Andy hadn't barged into the lobby to protect her and taken Harvey down.

“Yeah, then you would have been arrested for murder. As it is, we arrested you for attempted murder.” Andy was all growly.

“I'm dying back here! Get me out of here! I need help right now!”

They saw lights up ahead through the fog of snow, and their hopes were renewed that the road was clear ahead.

“Headlights,” Monica realized no one was coming toward them, which made no sense.

Then the disaster unfolded before them.

“Multiple car accidents ahead.” Andy slowed down.

The headlights were shining in all kinds of different directions. Two cars were still on the road, looking like they'd sustained minor damage. Three other cars had sailed off the road down the embankments.

They didn't see emergency vehicles flashing colored lights or sirens, declaring help was coming. Monica tried her phone, but still had no signal to call anyone. The accident must have just happened.

Andy stopped the vehicle, and he and Monica exited the Yukon to check on everyone.

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“Let’s get anyone we can find and move them to the Yukon if we can. The heater will warm up some of the injured.” Monica grabbed her backpack with the first aid kit. “There’s another first aid kit by the heroin under the driver’s front seat. ”

“You can’t stop now! I’m dying back here! And you can’t bring a lot of bloody people into my car,” Harvey screamed.

“How are you feeling, Monica?” Andy grabbed Harvey’s first aid kit.

“Hey, you can’t use my first aid kit on some random people. That’s mine!” Harvey shouted from the hatchback.

“I used my first aid kit on you, so you need to replenish my supplies.” Monica slammed the door shut. “My back and hand feel better, Andy.” But it would take a couple more days to feel perfectly fine. “How about you?”

“The sprain is gone. I don’t want you to hurt yourself further.”

“Thanks. But I need to take care of them, too. I’ll heal up soon enough. We need to check on everyone and, if possible, move the vehicles out of the way. If they’re operable, maybe we can have the drivers drive them the rest of the way to White Bear.”

“Yeah. I’ll check the one car down the embankment. Two of the vehicles appear to have been heading away from White Bear. The ones in the ditch will have to be pulled out with a tow truck.”

Two men emerged from a car down the embankment. Both wore black jackets and hats, snow clinging to them as they climbed the embankment to the road. Since no one else had left their vehicles yet, she figured everyone was pretty shaken up. She hoped no one was badly injured.

The men looked similar: They had shaggy, wind-blown dark brown hair, were about six feet tall, and looked like they were related. However, neither appeared injured in the accident, which was a blessing.

“Are the two of you all right?” Andy called out to them.

Monica went to the vehicle below the road, opposite where the two men had emerged from their car to check on the occupants.

“Yeah, man, what a mess. What can we do to help?” the little stockier of the men asked.

“Check to see if anyone needs assistance. Are you sure you’re okay?” Andy headed instead to one of the cars still on the road, blocking it.

“Yeah, I mean muscle aches, bruises, but otherwise okay,” the other man said.

In the crumpled blue car down the embankment, now scarred with red paint and scraped clean metal, Monica found a mother and her two children in car seats, who looked to be about the ages of three and five.

Her heart went out to them for the terror they had experienced. Yet they weren’t crying, just looking a bit stunned. But the mom had a gash on her forehead and was bleeding.

“Ma’am, what’s your name?” Monica cleaned the wound and then covered it with a

bandage.

The woman looked at her, but wasn't focused on Monica's face. She appeared dazed.

"Ma'am, can you tell me your name?"

She said nothing and leaned her head back against the headrest.

"Keep your eyes open, ma'am. I'm going to check on your girls. They're yours, right?"

"Hmm."

Monica left the door open and checked on the girls in the back seat, wearing fuzzy winter coats, hats, and snow boots. They were watching her, looking curiously at her, and, thankfully, not upset. "Are you girls okay?"

"Momma," the oldest girl said, looking at her mom as if she wasn't supposed to talk to a stranger.

"I'm...I'm here."

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Monica asked over the seat, glad to hear her speaking.

"Yes, yes, where...what happened?"

"It looks like you were involved in a five-car collision."

"What about my girls?"

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“They’re okay. They’re just quiet. How are you doing?”

“My head hurts.”

“I’m going to move you to another car with the heat on.”

“What about the car seats?”

“I’ll just put you and the girls in the back seat to warm you up. Then I’ll come back and get them.” Monica moved to the driver’s side. “I’m going to help you to the car and then come and get the girls.”

“Can you take our blankets too?”

“Definitely. Do you have a first aid kit?” Monica did worry about Harvey being handcuffed in the rear of the Yukon, though he was secured to a bar in the back. She didn’t want him swearing at the mother and her daughters, but she had to get them into a vehicle that was operable.

“The...the first aid kit is in the trunk.”

“Can we use it?”

“Of course.”

Andy joined Monica down the embankment. “I’ve got the mother.” He helped the mother out of the car. Monica got the five-year-old out of her car seat and then

carried her through the snow to the door where the three-year-old was sitting in her car seat.

Once Andy got the mother into the back seat of the Yukon, he came back to carry the older girl to the car. Monica carried the younger girl through the snowdrifts.

“What the hell,” Harvey said as Monica set the youngest girl in the back seat with her sister and mother. “I told you that you have to take me to the hospital now! And I don’t want anyone else in the car. Not you even.”

“Watch your language, or we’ll move you to another car and leave you in the cold.” Monica didn’t want to have to, but she would if he continued to give them trouble.

“You can’t do that. You already shot me,” Harvey said.

“Is he a criminal?” The mom sounded worried.

“Yeah, because he pulled a shotgun on me and shot at me. I didn’t have any choice but to shoot him.” Monica didn’t blame her for feeling unsettled. She made sure the kids and mom were okay. “I’ll return with your blankets.”

She grabbed the kids’ stuffed unicorns, purple fairy blankets, and the mom’s big red blanket.

When Monica returned to the Yukon, she handed the blankets and stuffed animals to the mom and kids. They cuddled together on one side of the back seat, the youngest on her lap, while Monica went to help Andy look for more accident victims.

Another car in the ditch had sunk into the snow, so she would need Andy’s help getting the driver out of his white sedan.

Then the two other men joined her. One was carrying a foldable shovel, and he began trying to dig out around the car door so they could reach the driver.

Monica used her uninjured hand to dig away the snow while the other man helped her. On the road, Andy helped a white-haired woman to the Yukon. The woman looked slightly wobbly and shaken, but she didn't appear to be injured.

“What about Tom?” the older woman asked.

“I'll assist him after I get you to the car.” Then Andy helped her into the car and returned to the one on the road that was banged up, with one headlight dangling and the fender torn partly loose but looking drivable. He brought her husband out of the car, and Tom walked on his own to the Yukon, but didn't get in. He just watched what was going on.

Monica and the two men aiding her finally pulled the older, gray-haired gentleman out of his smashed-up car down the embankment.

“Thanks...thanks. I thought I would freeze to death in there.” The man pulled a big, black, faux fur hat on.

“I'm glad we came along when we did. Let's get him up to the road and to the Yukon. We've got one more vehicle on the road. Has anyone checked on them?” Monica asked.

“It's a young woman, and she's belligerent. Every time the trooper tried to get her to open her car door, she screamed obscenities at him,” the one man told her.

“Okay, can you take this gentleman to the Yukon, and then I'll help Andy deal with the woman?” They needed to move the drunken woman's car, which was not as badly damaged as some of the others—a crunched right rear fender and scrapes along one

side of the car where someone's car had slid alongside it. Maybe they could get the older couple's and the woman's car and safely transport everyone out of there.

"Yeah, sure," the one man said.

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“Thanks so much for helping out.” Monica followed Andy to the belligerent woman’s car.

“I couldn’t get her to open her car door.” Andy sounded exasperated. “I believe she’s drunk or high on something.”

Monica eyed the wild-haired woman in the car, screaming obscenities at them. “Oh, that’s just great. We need to turn this car around and use it to head back to White Bear. Unless we return to Harvey’s motel and set everyone up in the various rooms until we can get help.”

“Because Eloise took Wendell’s truck from the motel, I’m afraid she knows where they’ll all be, join Denny and the gang, and they’ll have a ride out of there. They might go to the motel to rescue Harvey if they got some more gas,” Andy said.

“All right. We need to get this woman out of her car then.”

Andy touched the frosted window with his gloved finger. “I would break the window, but I don’t have a tool on me to do the job.”

“We can’t stay out in this cold and freeze to death while trying to convince her to open the door.” Then Monica had a thought. “My flashlight. It’s in my backpack.”

She hurried back to the Yukon and pulled her flashlight from the backpack. When she returned to the woman’s car, one of the men helping them joined them.

“I’ve got one of those emergency hammers to break out a car window,” the man said.

“I’ll get it,” his companion said and trudged through the snow to the car down the embankment to get the hammer.

When he brought it back up, he handed the hammer to Monica. She broke out the front passenger’s window. Then she opened the door as the woman screamed at her. “No!”

An open, half-finished bottle of vodka was sitting on the floorboard of the front passenger’s seat, which reminded her of the other woman, Eloise, who had been in Wendell’s camper-covered truck and the bottle of gin.

Monica climbed into the car, reached over the driver—who shoved at her and screamed like a toddler having a tantrum—and unlocked her door.

Andy yanked the door open and pulled the woman out of the car. Monica quickly joined Andy to help him confine her.

“Get off me! Stop! Don’t touch me! Let me go!” the woman screamed. “You have no right to touch me!”

“This is my last pair of handcuffs,” Monica said while she and Andy struggled to get the woman into the cuffs.

“Let’s hope we don’t have to arrest anyone else.” Andy was trying to pin the woman down on the snow-covered road as Monica tried to get the cuffs on her wrists. “Quit resisting, ma’am.”

The drunk woman kicked at Andy and Monica and connected with Andy’s leg. “You’ve just committed battery on a law enforcement officer,” Andy said.

“I don’t care! Let me go!”

“Okay, what do we do now?” Andy pulled the woman up off the road.

“Let me go.”

Monica said, “We should settle people in the three vehicles that can move and then head out. I suggest that the two cars involved in the accident that had been damaged drive ahead of us so we can make sure they don’t have trouble along the way.”

“Agree. How do you want to split up the people?”

“My brother and I can drive the car with the broken window,” the one man said, his gaze shifting to his brother—and she felt there was an unspoken communication between them.

“Yeah,” his brother agreed. “It would be too cold for anyone else to ride in it. We can cover it with an army wool blanket that will work.”

“Are you sure?” Andy asked.

“Yeah. Then you can take the drivers and passengers in the other two vehicles.”

Monica wasn’t too sure about these guys. She wasn’t certain what was making her senses feel that something wasn’t quite right about them—she should have just been grateful they hadn’t been injured and were helping—but she didn’t exactly trust them.

She got Andy to the side of the road out of their hearing as the brothers went down the embankment on the other side to get the blanket and maybe their personal items out of their car. “There’s something not quite right about these guys. They seemed so keen to move away from their car right after the accident. When they realized you were a uniformed law enforcement officer, they were eager to help.”

“Watch what they’re bringing up from their car.”

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“I’ll do that. You ask the older couple who own the car if they want to come with me and I’ll drive it. They both appear too visibly shaken to drive,” Andy said.

“Okay.”

The drunk woman was still screaming her head off about being released. “You have no right to cuff me!”

“What do we do with the drunk woman?” Monica was exasperated that they had to deal with her on top of everything else.

“You can’t take her to the Yukon with Harvey there. She would have to sit in the back. She’s so loud and aggressive, I’ll have to take her if the owners of the car are all right with it,” Andy said.

“That sounds good to me. I’ll go talk to the other couple then.”

Monica glanced at the two men down the embankment and thought they were taking a long time to gather whatever they needed from their vehicle. When she reached the Yukon, she told the couple, “Andy is going to drive your vehicle if that’s okay with you. You can ride with him if you would like.”

“Oh, sure.” The gentleman looked less pale now. “This is my wife Jessica, and I’m Tom Richardson. After that wreck, I feel a little shaky.”

“I don’t blame you. I’m Monica O’Connell. Are you all right otherwise?” Monica sure didn’t want him to be suffering a stroke or heart attack.

“No, I’m okay.”

Monica looked back at his wife. “What about you, ma’am?”

“I’m okay. Just shaken up. If the trooper drives our car, that’s fine with me.”

“Perfect. I have one other question. We arrested a woman in the other car that we’ll be driving back to White Bear or the first location we can reach. She’s drunk and belligerent and kicked Andy while resisting arrest. I’ve got a prisoner in the back of the Yukon?—”

“My vehicle,” Harvey reminded her.

“So is that all right if she travels with you?” Monica asked the couple.

“Yeah. We’re both retired cops, so we’re used to pulling over drunk drivers,” Mrs. Richardson said.

“Great! I’m so relieved. I was afraid you might be offended.”

“She can’t say anything we haven’t heard already,” Mr. Richardson said.

The couple left the Yukon, and Monica walked with them back to their car.

“We’re going to start the car and make sure it’s running all right, but from the looks of it, it appears it should be okay.” Andy started the engine.

“They said they were fine with having the drunk driver in their car.” Monica was so pleased to have retired law enforcement officers with them who knew the ropes. “They’re retired police officers.”

“Oh, great.” Andy smiled warmly at them.

“We’ll sit in the back seat,” Tom said. “You can keep the drunken driver in the front seat.”

The owners climbed into their car. Then Andy went to get the drunk woman into the passenger seat and strapped her in. She finally looked like she was about to fall asleep and was no longer combative, thankfully.

Once they shut the doors, Monica asked Andy, “Are the two men still in their vehicle?”

“Yeah, I’m going to check on them. This is taking too long.”

“I’ll go with you.” She was starting to have a bad feeling about this.

Monica and Andy headed over there, but before they could start down the embankment, the two brothers hurried out of the vehicle, each carrying two black bags and an olive-drab army blanket.

“Hey, are you ready to go?” The man sounded slightly startled that they were coming for them.

“Yeah, we thought you might need some help,” Andy said. “We’re ready to leave.”

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“No, no, we’re good. You can see how hard it was to get into the car the way it had plowed into the snowbank and was half buried in snow.”

“Right.” Monica still felt they had taken way more time to get their bags out. They didn’t look like bags filled with clothes and personal items someone would take on a trip.

“We can follow behind you.” The man readjusted the one bag on his shoulder.

“No. You’ll go in the middle. We don’t want the wrecked vehicles following in the rear of the caravan if either of them should have car trouble,” Andy said. “We wouldn’t want to leave you behind by mistake.”

The two men exchanged glances. Why would they want to drive behind the caravan unless they planned to take off in the other direction, which was probably the way their car was going from the track their car was pointed in?

“Where were you going?” Monica tried to decipher what was going on with these two.

“Just west of here to see some friends of ours. They’ll be worried that we never showed up.”

“Well, when we get somewhere that we have reception, you can call them and tell them where you are and that you’ll be a little late.” Monica sure hoped they would get reception too.

“Yeah, all right, but the first place we come to, we’re getting some other form of transportation. You can have someone else take the car to White Bear because we were going the other way,” the one man said.

“Sure. That will work.” Monica was even warier of their intentions now. “Andy, we need to move the kids’ car seats to the Yukon.”

“On it.”

The two of them went down the embankment, retrieved the car seats from the car, and carried them to the Yukon. The mom secured one of them while Andy got the other. Monica checked on Harvey. He looked like he was barely staying awake, no longer combative, which worried her.

“We need to get him some medical attention soon,” Monica said to Andy.

“Absolutely. We’re leaving as soon as we get the kids buckled in.”

The brothers got into the drunk woman’s car and turned on the ignition.

Monica told Andy, “The bags the brothers were carrying didn’t look like luggage.”

“No.”

“I didn’t smell drugs on them,” she added.

He shook his head. “I didn’t either. We really can’t detain them without more to go on, though. Besides, we don’t have any more handcuffs.”

“Maybe we’ll get some reception and learn something more before they ditch the car.”

“All right. Let’s get moving before these cars conk out on us or run out of gas.”

Monica climbed into the Yukon’s driver’s seat. Andy returned to the older couple’s vehicle. They drove off, with the brothers in the middle of the caravan and Monica in the rear.

“How do you feel?” Monica asked the man with the fur hat.

“I’m good. Once I was out of the car. I had a horrible case of claustrophobia.”

“I don’t blame you. I would have too. How are you doing back there?” Monica asked the mom and kids.

“We’re good. I’m so glad you came along to help us. No one else showed up,” the woman said.

“In these conditions, it’s understandable. Especially since none of us have cell reception to call out for help.”

“We might not have had the accident if those two men hadn’t been trying to pass me at such a high rate of speed,” the woman said. “They even knocked Mr. Holmes’s car off the road.”

“The two men who were helping us?” Monica was surprised, despite feeling something was off about them. Was it because they had caused the accident and thought they would get fined?

“Yeah. I was so angry when their car spun around after hitting Mr. Holmes’s car and hit mine. I lost control of my car and went off the shoulder and down the embankment,” the woman said.

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Mr. Holmes resettled himself on the front passenger seat and removed his hat. “I’m just grateful that no one was badly injured.” He glanced at Monica. “At least you’re going in the direction I wanted to go.”

“Not us. We were visiting my brother and his wife and returning home,” the mom of the two daughters said.

“When we get somewhere with reception, you can call them and arrange to get home.” Monica felt bad for everyone involved in the accident. She was surprised to hear that the drunken woman hadn’t been the cause of the pileup. “I guess the Richardsons were behind all of you and then ran into?—”

“Those two men’s car,” the woman said. “The drunken woman plowed into their tail end. That made the speeder lose control, and he drove off the shoulder and down the embankment. I was glad since they’d caused the accident in the first place. I would have been angered if they had just driven off and left us all in a mess. And I’m sure they would have.” She kissed her daughters’ cheeks. “Of course, at the time, I hadn’t known the driver of that last car was inebriated.”

“The weather conditions are bad enough. No one should have been trying to navigate these roads under the influence.” Monica got a call on the Yukon’s Bluetooth startling her. The caller ID showed it was from Wendell. She glanced back in the direction of the hatchback.

The woman looked over the back seat. “He’s sound asleep and lightly snoring back there.”

“Good.” Monica answered the call but said nothing, hoping to learn where Wendell was now. Had Eloise made it to the cabin? How did she have reception?

“Hey, Harvey, where the hell are you? Eloise said that she woke up to find two cops in my truck, and they drove it to your motel. She took off in my truck when she heard shots fired in the lobby. Luckily, there was a gas can in storage in the camper bed. When we reached the motel, there was no one there. So where the hell are you?”

9

Glad to see that there was cell phone reception, Monica ended the call with Wendell on Bluetooth, pulled out her phone, and checked in with her office, but she couldn't get any answer. The same thing happened when she tried to reach the police. She figured there were so many emergencies because of the storm's severity that the phone system was tied up for emergency services.

She contacted Andy. “Hey, we've got reception, but I can't get through to law enforcement agencies.”

“I'll call my family and see if I can get through.”

“One other thing. Wendell called on Bluetooth and asked Harvey what was going on. Harvey's sound asleep in the back, though we really don't want him to sleep; at least he didn't tell him what had happened.”

“So they have reception now.”

“Right. The bad news is they're at the motel. The drunk woman in Wendell's truck drove to the cabin where Dennis and Helen were staying. I don't know if they're all together now at the motel.”

“They probably are because they need to move before we send reinforcements to pick them up at the cabin, and I doubt they have another vehicle. They won’t have gas to get them very far unless Harvey has some stored at the motel. Eloise could be involved, not just someone clueless, sleeping it off in the truck.”

“They had more gas in the camper. But I agree. I will call Helen’s new boyfriend, Pierre, and tell him Helen is in on the whole thing so he doesn’t worry about her safety.”

“All right. I would hate to be him.”

“I know, right? At least now you and I can talk back and forth until my phone runs out of charge.”

“Yeah, the same with mine.”

“I’ll talk to you in a bit.” She ended the call and phoned Pierre, but there wasn’t any answer. Great. She called Andy back. “I’m going to give you the number for Pierre. I couldn’t reach him, so if you can call him periodically, we’ll tell him not to worry about Helen.”

“Okay. I’ve got my parents on hold. Speak with you in a little while.”

“Everyone has been out looking for you, son,” Andy’s dad said. “Your cousins, your brothers, and half of White Bear. I’m damn glad you’re all right.”

“We’re coming in. I’ll explain it all to you later, but we’ve got a caravan of cars, two involved in a five-car pileup, and I’m driving the one in the lead. Though I’ve slipped a few times on the icy, snow-covered road, the road is fairly clear. We need medical attention for a man who has been shot.”

“Shot? Who did the shooting?”

“Monica O’Connell. She’s an FBI agent.”

“We never expected you to be in such a mess. Ben and Craig found your vehicle and two others stranded. We learned you’d run into an FBI agent’s vehicle.”

“Uh, she ran into me. My car was stuck.”

“Okay, well, we’ve been looking for her also.”

“She’s with me in a vehicle we commandeered. I’ll tell you all about it later. Both of us are safe. Do me a favor. If you have time, try to get hold of Pierre Johnson for us.”
Andy gave his dad the phone number.

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“Will do.”

“His girlfriend was supposedly kidnapped, but it turns out Helen was just doing this for the ransom money, and she’s back with her ex-boyfriend. Monica’s and my phones are dying, but we want Pierre to know that Helen is fine.”

“Sure. How far are you from White Bear?”

“About another hour and a half. This is the first time we have had any phone reception. We’re on the main route, but travel is slow.”

“I’ll call everyone to let them know where you are, and they’ll meet you with an ambulance.”

“Okay, thanks, Dad. I know Mom’s been worrying, too. Tell her we’re all right. Oh, and Monica’s one of us.”

“Your brothers and cousins smelled her scent in her car. No one we know, though?”

“Uh, well, I went out with her once, but none of you know her. She’s out of Anchorage and was working on the kidnapping case. We need more backup. We have a drunk woman in custody also.” He didn’t mention the brothers with the bags because he didn’t know if they were in trouble yet.

“I will get a hold of everyone.”

His parents owned and ran the White Bear Tavern, and his brother Ben worked full-

time there. When Ben couldn't reach Andy, he knew they would call the state troopers and have them come to help.

"I'm so glad our phones are working," Mr. Richardson said. "I'm letting our daughter know we're heading back to White Bear. She and our son-in-law live on the outskirts and will meet us at the police department. Our son-in-law will drive our vehicle to their house. Though, if you need to, you can use the car or our phones, if yours run out of power."

"Thanks. I've got family in White Bear. They'll give me a lift. As to the phone, I appreciate the offer. I might take you up on it if I lose power completely. So who caused the car wreck?"

"Those young men who were helping everyone out. I don't trust them one bit," Mr. Richardson said.

"Why?" Andy wondered if they would confirm his and Monica's suspicions that something wasn't right about the brothers.

"They were flying down the road as if the whole world was chasing them. Just an old cop's intuition," he said.

"They're the ones who caused all the cars to wreck," Mrs. Richardson agreed. "They were trying to pass the woman's car with the two little girls in the backseat. I'm so glad they weren't hurt. But the driver needs to be charged with reckless driving. I agree with my husband that they're not to be trusted. Something's up with them."

"Monica and I thought so too, but just a general suspicion. Nothing concrete," Andy said.

He continued to drive, slipping on the icy road, moving more slowly than he wanted

to because he was worried about Harvey and his wound. Luckily, the drunken woman was snoring loudly against the passenger window, not causing any trouble. But he kept wondering what the brothers might have in their bags.

He called his mom this time since she managed the cash register while his dad cooked in the tavern's kitchen. "Have any crimes been committed in White Bear around the time the blizzard hit?"

"Oh, honey, I'm so glad you and the woman are all right. Several break-ins at shops in town have occurred because of the blizzard. It seems criminals used the opportunity to rob businesses shut down during the snowstorm."

"Have they identified any of the perps?"

"Three sixteen-year-old teens drove a pickup truck into a gun store and stole twenty-one guns. They located two of the teens right away, still holding onto thirteen of the guns. The other teen was caught and had another eight. All of them are being charged as adults for illegal possession of firearms, in addition to stolen vehicle charges."

"Well, damn." Andy knew there would be some crimes committed during the storm, but nothing that outlandish. "Good thing they were caught."

"Yeah, that's what everyone thought."

"Was anyone else in a robbery that might have involved a blue Ford Bronco?"

"Oh, yes. A couple of men wearing black ski masks robbed the White Bear National Bank and drove away in a blue SUV."

Could that be the brothers? That could very well be why the men had been speeding on the road away from White Bear, avoiding getting caught.

“The men wore all black: pants, jackets, ski masks, and boots. The police have been displaying a video of them leaving the bank, and several eyewitnesses have given descriptions to identify them. They have guns.”

“Okay, that’s good to know,” Andy said.

“If they were involved in the accident and with you in the caravan now, be careful. The scariest part is that they had breakfast here this morning before they did it,” his mother said.

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“So you also have them on video?”

“Yes. Ben waited on them, and I saw them when they paid their bill. We both gave the FBI agent who came to investigate the men’s descriptions, and a sketch artist drew what we remembered about them.”

“All right. I’m going to let you go and let Monica know.” Then Andy ended the call with his mother and checked in with Monica. “Hey, I asked my mother if there had been any crimes in White Bear since the blizzard, and she said several, but one makes me wonder if it’s the brothers involved in the car crash. A couple of men held up a bank, wearing the same clothes and driving the same kind of vehicle.”

“Oh, great. I’m glad they’re driving in the car by themselves so they don’t have any hostages if it comes to trying to arrest them. Everyone here says that the men caused the accident.”

“Same here.”

“Okay, well, we can’t do anything about them now except keep them in sight. I’ll call my headquarters again to let them know since the FBI will get involved in a bank robbery,” she said.

“Sounds good. I imagine that’s why the brothers didn’t want anyone else in the car and wanted to follow behind you so they could slip away at some point. I’ll let my boss know.”

“We don’t have any more handcuffs to confine them with, and really no room to take

in a couple more perps,” Monica said.

“Yeah. If Wendell is on his way to try and get rid of us and free Harvey, we can’t stop anyway. At least he won’t know we’ve hooked up with several people involved in a car pileup. I...I hear sirens.”

“Great.”

“I see lights.” He continued to drive until a couple of patrol cars and an ambulance headed their way. “Two police cars and an ambulance.”

“Wonderful. I’m pulling over.”

“The same with me.” Andy exited the car, ready to introduce himself, when one of the troopers waved.

“Hey, Andy, we’ve been looking for you and the FBI agent. We thought the two of you were having a tête-à-tête,” Roger Milhouse said.

Andy laughed. “Yeah, Roger, as if. The woman in the passenger’s seat of the car I was driving is a drunk driver and resisted arrest. She needs to be taken to jail.”

The two men suspected of armed bank robbery tried to pass the patrol cars as if they didn’t need to stop, and Andy shouted, “Stop them. They might be the bank robbers of the White Bear National Bank.”

Roger jumped into his squad car and blocked the road before the brothers could speed past them. The driver jerked his car off to the left to avoid hitting the patrol car and plowed off the road and into the embankment.

Roger jumped out of his patrol car. “The bank robbers who hit the bank brandished

guns.” He pulled his gun out.

Andy, Roger, and the other officer hurried down the embankment to where the car had rolled onto its top, discovering the vehicle was buried in an avalanche of snow.

While the situation with the suspected bank robbers was in action, Monica talked to the EMTs as they pulled Harvey out of the hatchback and cared for him before he was put into the ambulance.

As soon as she was sure he would get the care he needed, she grabbed the folded shovel and hurried down the embankment to help the other cops with the possible bank robbers. No matter what, they had to get the men out of the car before they ran out of oxygen.

Andy took the shovel from her and began digging out the front passenger window where the glass had already broken. Monica and the other officers had their weapons poised at the window. It was the only way for the men to get out, but no one was moving around. They were upside down and maybe injured this time.

“Can you get out?” Andy asked the brothers.

They didn’t answer.

Monica didn’t want Andy to go in and try to get them, not if they were armed and shot him, though they weren’t getting out of this mess that they’d gotten themselves into this time.

“What about digging out around the back window? We can check on them and see if they’re badly injured,” Monica said.

Andy started to dig out the rear passenger window behind the broken one.

“Do we have a tire iron we can use? Duct tape?” Monica asked. “A mirror? Or we can use a phone to insert in there to see what’s happening.”

Mr. Richardson called out, “I have some duct tape in a bag of groceries I had just bought. And I have a tire iron.” He and his wife stood on the road above them, watching them.

“Yeah, that would be great.” Monica thought they were wonderful for wanting to help however they could.

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“I’ve got a hand mirror,” Mrs. Richardson said.

The couple trudged off to get the items. Monica wanted to peek in and not waste precious time, but she didn’t want to get shot. Still, if the men stayed there, they could be injured, suffer from critical injuries, and become hypothermic.

Once she had climbed the embankment to get the items from Mr. Richardson, Monica taped her phone onto the tire iron, figuring she could get a better visual using it rather than a mirror. At least she still had some power left on her phone. Then she returned to the car and turned the video recorder on. She slipped the phone in through the back window.

Andy and the other officers viewed the video when she pulled her phone out of the car. Both men appeared sprawled out inside the car on the roof’s interior when they had rolled. Neither had been wearing seatbelts. It looked like they had been knocked out and were still unconscious.

The army wool blanket was still covering the front passenger’s window frame where Andy had broken the window. He yanked the blanket free and tossed it. Then he shined his cell phone light into the car. “They’re breathing. I see their frosty breaths, but they’re still unconscious. I’ll pull the one brother out first, and then you can take him up to the road.”

“I called for another couple of ambulances,” Roger said.

“Good. They only made this harder on themselves.” Andy strained to pull out the first brother, who had been sitting in the passenger seat.

Once he had him all the way out, the two police officers carried the unconscious man up the embankment.

Monica went down the embankment to help Andy with the other man. Then, they'd need to verify that the bags were in the car and what was in them. Once they had pulled the other man out, Roger ran down the embankment to help, leaving Monica to investigate the contents of the bags. She was glad because her hand and back were giving her fits with all the workouts they were getting.

She took pictures of the bags and opened one, revealing bundles of cash. She released the breath she was holding. Wow. Then she did the same with the next three bags, all containing a ton of cash.

Andy rejoined her and whistled. "We might not have successfully handled the fake kidnapping scheme for the ransom money to its fruition, but at least we caught the bank robbers."

"Yeah, I'm glad we managed to accomplish that."

Roger joined them. "The brothers are in the back of two different patrol cars. They're stirring but still half out of it. From the information we received from the video of the two men, who have been identified as the Williamson brothers, we've got them. According to their rap sheets, they've been in jail multiple times for store thefts, then decided on bank robberies. They've done three of them in the area. That's not the vehicle they were driving, though. It was a blue Ford Bronco."

"Which is down the embankment a few miles back at the scene of the accident they had caused," Andy said.

They all peered at the money.

“Nice haul,” Roger said.

“Okay, I’ve photographed the car and the bags of money. We need to take them with us,” Monica said. “Do either of the men have IDs?”

“Yeah, they both have their driver’s licenses. They both have prison records for bank robberies in the past,” Roger said.

“While some were trapped in their cars back at the accident site, they were a big help to us,” Monica said. “It’s awful that they threatened others with guns to rob a bank earlier.”

“I agree,” Andy said. “Though I can’t help but feel that they only assisted us because they wanted to appear to be law-abiding citizens and didn’t want us to suspect them of a crime. Particularly, since we are law enforcement officers, and they had bags of stolen cash in the Bronco.”

“True. They also needed a working vehicle to get out of the mess they were in. Are you ready to head back toward White Bear? We need to get out of this cold, and we can meet the ambulances to have the men checked out,” Monica said.

“Yes, let’s go,” Roger said.

Andy and Roger carried the bags up to the road.

They put the bags of money in Harvey’s Yukon hatchback. Then Andy continued to drive the Richardsons’ car while Monica moved the Yukon.

The police patrol cars led the way to White Bear again. It wasn’t long before they heard ambulance sirens and saw their emergency lights. Then, more sirens sounded as police joined them. Everyone stopped again to meet up with the emergency vehicles

so that they could move the injured brothers to the ambulances.

Monica thought they would never get to where they were going, but she was glad the bank robbers would receive medical care and be incarcerated.

The new patrol cars had two officers each. The EMTs took care of the bank robbers and then loaded them into the ambulances. A police officer went with each ambulance, and they drove off.

Then they were on their way again.

When they finally reached White Bear, tow trucks and more police cars were headed to the multi-vehicle accident site to deal with the wrecked cars. Andy and Monica drove to the police department and parked. Several people and the media were gathered in the parking lot.

Andy and the Richardsons exited their car.

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Thankfully, the police kept the media away from everyone leaving their vehicles.

“Thanks for all your help,” Andy said to the Richardsons, shaking their hands.

“We owe you for all you did,” Mr. Richardson said, his wife agreeing. “In all our years on the force, we never faced as many challenges as you had to go through in so few hours.”

“Me either,” Andy said.

Then, they wished them well. The Richardsons joined their son-in-law and got into his vehicle, and he drove off. Their daughter drove the Richardsons’ car off.

After the EMTs checked out the mother, her brother and sister-in-law picked her and her daughters up. Monica wished them well. The other older gentleman had found a ride with a friend and thanked them for their help.

She was glad everyone had someone to take care of them after the harrowing ordeal.

Afterward, Monica and Andy talked to DEA agents about the drugs in Harvey’s vehicle. The agents confiscated the Yukon.

Federal agents met with Monica and Andy to discuss the stolen bank money. They explained what had happened. The blue Ford Bronco would be hauled in for forensic investigation.

Five vehicles pulled up into the parking lot. An older couple and four men who

looked like Andy and were about his age greeted him. He hurried over to talk to them. She smiled as they hugged him, and then Andy pointed to Monica. She waved in their direction but continued to speak with the agents.

Then she explained to the agents about the kidnapping case she had been working on alone until Andy joined her to assist. "So Helen was not a kidnapped victim. We tried to tell her boyfriend, Pierre Johnson, that she was safe and was part of the whole scam but couldn't get through to him."

Andy rejoined her.

"We'll make sure Pierre gets word. We understand you were injured in the first vehicle accident with the trooper's patrol car. We've been looking for the two of you all this time. We need to get you checked out," the agent said, who was someone Monica had never met before.

"We've got the money bags from the Yukon," another patrolman said.

"Good," Monica said.

"Thanks," Andy said.

Then, the EMTs checked her out.

One of the men told her, "We want to take you to the hospital to run some tests."

Andy quickly shook his head. "She has a local doctor here. She'll see him."

They looked surprised because she hadn't said anything about having a doctor in White Bear and didn't live here. "Of course. That's what I want to do." She hoped she hadn't looked too startled.

“Craig and I will give you a ride over there.” Andy took her arm as if she suddenly needed help walking, which amused her. Then he led her to his brother’s car, a silver SUV.

“Don’t get into any accidents.” She sat in the back seat while Andy buckled her in.

That had been a chore with her injured hand, so she was glad for the help this time.

“Don’t intend to,” Craig said cheerily. Then he drove her to the clinic.

“We have a wolf doctor who runs the clinic,” Andy explained from the passenger seat.

“All shifter run?”

“Yes.”

She couldn’t believe it, but that was good news.

“Craig is the pilot in the family. Once the doctor checks you out, we’ll take you for a meal at the White Bear Tavern. Then you can stay at one of our places and rest up. Or we can get a room at one of the local hotels or a bed for you and a meal if you would prefer.”

They hadn’t eaten for hours, and she was dead tired. She really just wanted to sleep. But maybe she could sleep better after a meal.

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Then they pulled into the snowed-in parking lot of the large, one-story, white clinic, where a few cars were parked. A large arched window over the glass doors caught her eye, and they had a covered drop-off for patients in need. Andy hurried to get her car door and seatbelt.

“I know you’ve been doing this alone, but we didn’t have much choice considering our trouble. Now it’s time you had some pampering and got some rest.”

“What about your ankle?”

“It’s fine. It healed up. Bruised, I’m sure, but no more sprain.”

“Good.”

Craig and Andy walked inside the clinic with her. White walls and windows brightened the lobby and patient check-in area, making it feel clean and more expansive. A combination of aqua and pastel sky-blue trim work was added to give it a calming essence. She hadn’t ever been to a clinic this welcoming.

The nurse came out and called her name, then took her right back to an X-ray lab. “I’m Phyllis. Sara, our lab technician, will bring you to the exam room after she takes X-rays.”

Someone must have called ahead for Monica. Now that was more like it—immediate service. What amazed Monica the most was that Phyllis was a gray wolf, and Sara was an Arctic wolf. She loved that shifters ran the clinic.

Sara took X-rays. “We got word you’re an FBI agent, and you apprehended several bad guys and women. Were the injuries from that?”

“No, from the car accident beforehand.”

Sara shook her head. “If I had been so injured, I wouldn’t have been moving a muscle.” She escorted Monica to an exam room. “I’ll show your X-rays to the doctor, and he’ll be right in.”

“Thanks.”

Monica sat on the chair, waiting for the doctor, and it wasn’t long before he arrived.

“I’m Dr. Vaughn.” The blond-haired, bearded man, with smiling blue eyes, seemed amused to meet her. He was definitely a gray wolf.

“I’m Monica O’Connell, and I’m glad to meet you. It’s nice being treated at a clinic that is shifter-run.”

“Yeah, as soon as I came here on a trip and learned that White Bear is mostly shifter-run, I decided to set up my practice here.”

“I imagine everyone was thrilled about that.”

“Yes, and I was. I’ve heard all about Andy’s and your heroics. I’m glad you had no more injuries after all the two of you went through. His brother Ben called to say they had an emergency where an FBI agent needed immediate attention.”

Monica laughed. “We were lucky we didn’t get shot, but this wasn’t an emergency.”

“I know him well enough to realize he wanted the most expedient and best care for a

fellow shifter.” Dr. Vaughn showed her the X-rays. “You don’t have any broken bones, which is the good news. The bad news is that you have strained and pulled ligaments in both your back and your hand, particularly the thumb region, which can take longer to heal.”

“Which means some time off from work. I have to try and look at the good of any situation.” Then again, they had to do an inquiry into her shooting Harvey, and she would have to surrender her weapon and take administrative leave for that also.

“Absolutely. You shouldn’t have been doing all you did while injured, though I understand the situation's urgency. I’ll give you a muscle relaxant that will help ease the pain and help you sleep. Don’t drive while you’re taking it though.”

“Thanks, Doctor.”

“I’m putting you on leave for three weeks. Just give this note to your supervisor.”

Once the nurse had rewrapped her hand in an ace bandage, Monica was ready to go. She left the clinic with Andy and Craig. She hadn’t even thought she would be off work for three weeks. She had planned to continue doing what she was doing once the review of her firing a weapon was concluded.

“No breaks, right?” Andy worried it might have been worse than they had thought, and she’d injured it further.

“No, just strained ligaments. The doctor gave me a muscle relaxant. So after I eat, I’ll take the medicine and sleep. Hopefully.”

“Yeah, that stuff works,” Craig said. “I hurt my back skiing once, and the medicine made all the difference in the world.”

“Good. I need all the help I can get.”

“Right. After all we went through, we dealt with this stuff practically nonstop.”

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“What about the drunk woman?” Monica had forgotten about her.

“Roger took her to jail in his car. Even he could still smell the alcohol on her breath, and I turned over her open gin bottle for his report. I told him what had happened with her resisting arrest.”

“Good.”

“So what exactly happened between the car crashes, kidnapping, and bank robbers’ capture?” Craig asked.

Andy explained what had occurred.

“I wanted to arrest Denny and his cohorts, but that’s off the table while I’m off work for three weeks.” Monica hated it when she couldn’t resolve a case satisfactorily.

“Right. Once you tell them about it, they’ll have agents headed that way.” Andy sounded like he was glad she wouldn’t be going after Denny and the rest of them anytime soon. “We did all we could do and got a lot more information than they had before about the kidnapping situation.”

“Yeah, but I wish we’d been able to bring them in with the money and all the cohorts.”

“Me too.”

“After we eat and before we get to your place, I want to drop by Pierre’s home to

check on him.” She had a niggling worry something wasn’t right.

“You...don’t have premonitions about things, do you?” Andy’s brow furrowed with concern.

She glanced at him. “No. Why?”

“Our cousin Rob and his mate, Alicia, both have premonitions. It just seems like sometimes that you seem to know something before it happens.”

“Premonitions.” Thenshe frowned. “Does it ever get them into trouble?”

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Concerned that Monica might be a nonbeliever when it came to Andy’s psychic cousin and Alicia having premonitions, he’d never considered that possibility. That would be hard to deal with unless something happened that proved to Monica that—oh, hell!

Alicia had predicted he would have trouble with Monica in the middle of the blizzard! He hadn’t even given it another thought with all that had happened since then.

“I had breakfast at the tavern with the whole family before I went on patrol the morning of the blizzard, and Alicia had a premonition. She said I would meet up with a woman, polar bear type, who I had met before, but never been intimate with.”

Monica’s eyes widened. “She had a future vision of us?”

“Well, they’re hazy, and she was trying to grasp what she saw. She’d never met you before, she didn’t know your name, but she said...” He hesitated to say.

Monica's lips curved up slightly. "What?"

Andy cleared his throat. "Well, as I recall, she said you would be angry because you had someplace important to go, and I would be an impediment."

"Yep," Craig said at the wheel. "That's just what Alicia had said."

For a moment, Monica just stared at them and then laughed. "Boy, she hit the nail on the head. Not that you were an impediment. You were just who I needed in my life. That is just amazing."

"I thought you would be a motorist caught up in the blizzard and giving me grief for not allowing you to try to reach your destination. Instead, I would have taken you back to White Bear. I never gave it another thought while I was rescuing travelers. Or when you ran into my vehicle."

"That's just amazing. I can't say it enough."

"Rob and Alicia only envision situations in the past or future, which causes them problems, but only because they see the trouble coming," Andy said.

"That's a cool ability. I admit I didn't really believe in such a thing until I had a case where we were looking for a murder weapon, and this woman called out of the blue, saying it was under a rug beneath a coffee table. I don't know how everyone missed it. She said she...envisioned it. So we took her comment with a grain of salt."

"But checked into it and found the gun," Andy surmised.

"Yes, and then took her in for questioning. No one with psychic abilities had given us clues about anything before. So when she did, our first thought was that she had to have witnessed the crime scene. How else would she have known about it?"

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“I understand. We would have most likely felt the same way if we hadn’t seen what Rob and Alicia could envision. Was she exonerated?”

“Yes. She had been with her ten-year-old daughter the whole time, first at a school music program and then with others to celebrate dinner at a fast-food restaurant with friends when the crime occurred, so we knew she hadn’t been there. I hope I’ll be more open-minded if that happens again.”

“That’s why you asked if my cousin and his mate got in trouble for sharing what they were witnessing.” Andy got the point now.

“Yes. If they ever helped a police department with what they had seen.”

“They have on occasion. They’ve helped locate missing kids too, not only because of their sense of smell and hearing but because they could ‘see’ where the child had gone.”

“Now that’s a remarkable ability to have. They ought to be in law enforcement.”

“I’m sure they would feel there were still too many skeptics.”

Craig dropped Monica and Andy off at the White Bear Tavern, and they thanked him for the ride. Inside the tavern, Monica met Andy’s parents, Genevieve and Ned. Ben came over and greeted her.

“We’ve all been so worried about the two of you,” Ben said. “Once we found your vehicles, we immediately smelled that Monica was a bear. No trails or scents were

left behind to indicate where you had gone. The blowing snow had obliterated everything.”

“That’s what we were afraid of,” Monica said.

“She tried to leave me behind,” Andy said, as if he still couldn’t believe she would do that to him.

“He had sprained his ankle in the accident,” Monica explained. “I didn’t feel that he could easily follow me.”

“Which makes perfect sense. I probably would have suggested the same thing. Your vehicles were both towed back to town,” Ben said. “The tow truck operator said it appeared your brake lines had been cut at some point, Monica. Police are checking to see if it was due to the accident or something else.”

Monica closed her gaping mouth. Then she frowned at Andy because he’d made disparaging comments about her not taking care of her vehicle.

Smiling sheepishly, Andy shrugged. “I figured you had faulty brakes and hadn’t serviced your vehicle properly.”

“Well, I did.”

“Which means we need to learn what that was all about if the brake lines had been cut on purpose.” Andy was serious now and sounded ready to take down whoever had tried to harm her.

Ben shook his head. “I can’t believe you would accuse the agent of not taking care of her car like that. Is that also why you wanted him to stay back at his vehicle?”

“No. He had a badly sprained ankle, and I had to investigate the kidnapping. I didn’t want him to slow me down.”

Ben laughed. “I definitely would have left him behind.”

Monica smiled. “We complemented each other in the end. I couldn’t have managed five arrestees at the same time.”

“We had to use our polar bear strength even at that,” Andy said. “Of course, that didn’t go into our police reports.”

“Wait,” Ben snapped his fingers. “Alicia’s premonition!”

Andy and Monica smiled.

“She knows about it, right?” Ben asked as if he had spoken out of order.

“Yeah, and I think it’s just remarkable how much Alicia got it right.” Monica squeezed Andy’s hand.

“I’ll get you your menus.” Ben hurried off.

Andy and Monica sat beside a warm and welcoming two-sided brick fireplace. Orange-red flames curling up the chimney made it a cozy spot for two.

The walls were a warm oak, and the ceilings held antiqued brass lanterns for each table. The tables also had little blue and white candles with orange flames. Soft music played in the background, adding to the lovely ambience. She noticed the polar bear oil paintings on the walls and wondered if they were of Andy’s family.

She pointed to one featuring five male bears about the same age. One looked like

Andy when he was in his bear coat. “Is that you?”

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“Yeah. It was Margot and Craig’s idea to have the paintings done. We posed for photos, and then the artist painted us. Those are my brothers and cousins with me. Over there are Mom and Dad. Then Rob, Alicia, and their little ones. Edward, Robyn, and their kids, though the babies were sound asleep the whole time. And Craig and Margot.”

Craig and Margot touched noses in a display of polar bear affection, which she thought was so sweet. “You don’t have one of the whole family.”

“People probably think they’re AI creations anyway, but if the whole family were in one portrait, they would think that for sure.”

“True.”

Ben returned with their menus. “Everything we serve is excellent. I’ll let you take a moment to decide on what you would like to have. It’s on the house.”

“Is mine on the house?” Andy asked.

Ben laughed, then left to wait on another table.

“The family’s meals are free,” Andy said.

“I figured. What are you going to get?” Monica eyed the fresh halibut and the prime rib steak.

“I feel like having some juicy red meat,” he said.

“It sure looks appealing. But the golden crusted halibut does too.”

When Ben returned, she ended up ordering the halibut. Andy ordered the steak.

“I’ll get these right in,” Ben said.

“So, where would you like to stay? Here with us?” Andy sounded hopeful.

“Sure. I don’t have a vehicle here.” She shrugged. “I can get a ride home when I feel better.” No way was she going home to an empty house when all the action was still down here. Not to mention, getting to know Andy better was becoming more of a priority. No dodging bullets or manhandling perps into cuffs. Just resting up with a hot bear that she really was intrigued with.

“Absolutely,” Andy said. “I can take you home whenever you want.”

It didn’t take long before Ben brought their meals to them. “Dad took care of your orders as a priority as a salute to our law enforcement officers. If you need anything else, just let me know. Mom and Dad will offer for you to stay with them, but you can visit me.”

She smiled. Ben was cute, but Andy was the one who was already in her sights.

“She’s residing with me if she agrees.” Andy sounded possessive, like Ben was encroaching on their relationship.

She laughed. “I’ll stay with Andy. We need to figure out when and where my brake lines were cut. So we have a mission before I return home and get back to work.”

Ben shook his head. “I’m always late to the party. Do you need anything else?”

“No, I’m good.”

“Thanks, Brother.”

Ben left to take more orders at a nearby table while Andy and Monica began cutting up their halibut and steak.

Monica took a bite of her halibut. “Hmm, this is so great.”

“Thanks. We try to have the best meals possible and get top star ratings.”

“I can see why. Okay, so if you’re fine with this, can we go to Pierre’s place and talk to him about the kidnapping business?” Monica still wanted to find out what was up with him.

“You’re supposed to be off for three weeks and rest up. The other agents said they’d get hold of him.” He sounded a little worried that she was still so concerned about Pierre.

“Yes, but I want to see Pierre and tell him what we found. The other agents weren’t there.”

“It’s an ongoing investigation though.” Then Andy frowned. “Wait, do you think something else is going on with him?”

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She sighed. “Everything about this case has been turned on its head.”

“Well, hell.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Andy’s cousin, Edward, dropped by their table and winked at Monica. “I brought your SUV here so when you’re ready to leave, you’ll have your own transportation, Andy.”

“Great.” Andy told Monica, “You briefly met my cousin Edward at the police department.”

“Right, so good to see you again.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

“Thanks so much for bringing my SUV by.”

“We knew you needed your wheels to get around.” Then Edward told Monica, “We hear you’ll be with us for a while. If you need a place to rest up, you can always visit with my mate, Robyn, and me.”

“I’m good. I pulled Andy’s arm, and he agreed to put me up.”

Edward laughed. “I’m going to grab a bite to eat. Come for dinner at our home when you feel more up to it.”

“That would be lovely.” Things were looking up after all Andy and Monica had been through together. Though she really needed to lie down.

When they finally finished dinner, she and Andy drove to Pierre’s house to check on him. She couldn’t help feeling anxious about his welfare if he wasn’t truly involved in all this business.

Monica sighed. "So I need to tell you how I know Pierre Johnson."

"I wondered about that."

"Yeah, I met him in Anchorage when he lived there. He came into the shop where I was having coffee and doing my usual—checking Facebook and other places concerning cases I was working."

Andy smiled. "I've done the same thing."

"There's a wealth of information out there just waiting to be found. So this gentleman hovers over my table, and I look up. He was carrying a tray with a coffee and a scone and asked if the seat across from me was taken. The coffee shop was always busy, and I didn't mind if he sat there."

“It wasn’t more than a meeting by chance?”

“Spoken by a true investigator. He was so smiley and nice that I teased him, saying it would cost him if he wanted to sit there. He said he would do anything for me so that he could sit there. I took his scone, and he laughed and went and got another.”

“Hmm, sounds like a smart move on his part.”

“We dated a couple of dozen times before he moved to White Bear. I'd just ditched

the bear I was seeing before I met Pierre, and so it was fun going out with a human for a change. I had no intention of having a serious relationship with him. But I think he wanted something more serious than I would give him.”

“Because he isn’t a bear.”

“And more. I never had a deeper physical connection than I have had with you. I don’t know, but I think he really was torn about leaving me behind. Still, it seemed like something else was forcing him to move on. I kept telling myself he was tired of me saying no to dates because of my long hours on the job.”

"Ahh. So, exactly how did you get involved in this case?"

"I had been working on a kidnapping case in Sea Lion Cove, where a neighbor had snatched a ten-year-old girl off the street near her home. I found her—great sense of smell, you know, and freed her from her kidnapper. I decided to drive through White Bear to get gas when I got the call from Pierre saying his girlfriend had been kidnapped."

"So he knew you were in the area?"

"Yes, he’d seen me on the news already. But he said he wanted me to secretly handle it because the kidnapper warned him that he wasn't supposed to alert law enforcement or Denny would kill Helen. So I agreed. However, I did tell my boss about it. He couldn't put any more agents on the job at the time. I was supposed to keep in touch, but you know how that went."

"Yeah, we had no way to contact anyone, so seeing Pierre is more personal." Andy charged his phone in his SUV as he drove her to his place.

"I guess you could say that."

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"Well, I hope he's not too upset that his girlfriend stole his money."

"Hopefully, the other agents will catch up with Denny and the rest and still have the cash on them."

They located Pierre's house and parked in the driveway. The one-story brick home looked quiet, with no lights on. "Maybe he's not even home. I didn't think of that." She was afraid this was another failed mission.

"Did he say how much Denny was asking for?"

"Five hundred thousand. My main goal was to find Helen and rescue her."

"Understandable. What does he work at?"

"He's independently wealthy."

"That must be nice."

"He made money off the stock market and invested in real estate, so as far as I know, he just works out of his home."

"Okay."

They left Andy's SUV and headed to Pierre's front door, and she knocked on it.

But then she smelled Wendell Marquart and his cohort's scents around the doorway.

"Do you smell what I smell?"

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Andy smelled Denny and Helen had been there—naturally, when the kidnapping scheme happened. But why were Wendell, Teague, and Lionel's scents at Pierre's front door? "Yeah, the whole lot of them have been here," Andy said to Monica.

He'd never heard of a case where the kidnappers seeking the ransom money would go to the victim's house. They always made the transfer secretly so they wouldn't get caught.

"It appears they came here to get the money from Pierre." Monica called the agents she'd spoken with about telling Pierre what had happened. "Hey, did you get hold of Pierre?" She put the call on speakerphone.

"No. He never answered his phone. We dropped by there, but he wasn't home. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, and his car wasn't in the driveway, so we figured he was out. His phone went to voicemail."

"Thanks." They ended the call, and she turned to Andy. "Okay, I don't like this. Since Wendell and his cohorts all came here, maybe they killed Pierre and took the money."

Andy cupped his hands and peered in through the living room window, but it was covered with drapes, and he couldn't see anything. "Then we have probable cause to check inside Pierre's home to ensure he's safe."

"If we're asked how we thought he was in peril, that would justify us breaking in, we can't tell them what we know—that we smelled Wendell and his men had been here, and they had the ransom money with them. Why wouldn't they have had Pierre drive to another location to exchange the money?"

“That’s what I was thinking. It’s too easy for someone to catch sight of them. Why didn't he wait longer to pay the ransom money? I mean, most people couldn't afford to pay out a substantial amount of money in a matter of hours. If he had delayed paying them, that would have given you more time to catch up with Denny and Helen," Andy said.

"I was thinking the same thing. Unless he didn't want me to really catch up to them." She glanced around at the outdoor security cameras. "He has cameras."

"Yeah, I noticed them right away."

They went around the whole house, looking through windows, but drapes covered most of them, so they couldn't see inside. A couple of uncovered windows only gave them the view of a laundry room and an exercise room, and he was in neither of those. No lights were on in the house, and no electronic or appliance sounds were being made.

They knocked on the windows. "It's me, Monica O'Connell."

"I've got a tool we can use to get in through the back door to check on him." Andy pulled out the tool attached to his keychain and used it on the lock. He managed to unlock the door with a click and opened it. "Police officer! Is anyone home?"

"It's me, Pierre," Monica said again. "We're worried you might have come to harm. Are you here?"

No one responded, and Monica grew more worried about him by the second. On the other hand, she didn't smell a dead body or blood anywhere in the house, indicating they had severely injured or killed him.

They checked the entire house and didn't find him anywhere. No signs of a struggle

or cleaning solution had been used to cover up a crime scene. It looked like he was just out running errands.

She peeked into the garage. “His Mercedes is gone. I guess he has gone out, and it doesn’t look like he has had any difficulty with anyone.”

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“We had a good reason for breaking in.” Andy sounded a little worried that they shouldn’t have been in there. “We can check here later. We’ll keep calling him periodically.”

“That sounds good. Let’s go to your place so we can sleep. I’m ready to take some of that medicine the doctor prescribed and crash.”

They relocked Pierre’s back door and returned to Andy’s SUV. “I’m ready for it.”

She laughed. “Absolutely. Do you have a phone charger that works with my phone at your place? Mine was in my car. Maybe whoever grabbed the stuff from my SUV put it in my bag.”

She searched for it and pulled it out, dangling it. She plugged in her phone just as he pulled into his driveway.

“We can charge it in the house.”

“Sure.” She put her charger back in her bag. When they walked into the home, she felt warm and welcome at once.

He removed her coat and hung it in a coat closet near the front door, and then he did the same with his. He also took her hat and his and hung them on a hat rack. He put their gloves on top of a chest. Both removed their boots.

Large windows covered one wall, and a fireplace was featured on an adjacent wall. A high pine paneled ceiling met the off-white walls, the floor covered in a lighter pine

that reminded her of a Scandinavian home. Really pretty, light and airy. A bookcase was framed by two windows and filled with children's books. She smiled. "I like your reading material."

He chuckled. "Edward and Robyn's older kids, Garrett and Bryan, are six so when I'm off if Robyn needs a break I have them over. Edward and Robyn also have twin boys, Lucas and Sawyer, who are seven months old."

"Do you take care of the babies too?" She raised her brows. She would really be surprised if he did.

Smiling, he shook his head. "Grandma, my mother, takes care of them every chance she gets. And my dad too. Rob and Alicia's children are nearly two, a girl and a boy, Jenny and Daniel. I've sat for them for a few hours, any little thing to help when I'm off."

"That's so sweet of you."

"The kids are fun to be around."

"You do have two bedrooms, right?"

Andy laughed. "I have four bedrooms. You can sleep in any one of them. One is the kids' room, if you don't mind sleeping on a bunk bed. The triple bunk bed combines three twin beds arranged with one up top against the wall and the two down below coming out from the wall with drawers in between."

"For the boys? You keep them overnight also?"

"Yeah, I'm a pushover. But the older they get, the more fun they are."

“I’ll have to see which of the beds makes my back feel the best.”

“Like in The Three Bears.”

She chuckled. The house smelled of cinnamon and cloves, and she breathed deeply. “Wow, it smells so nice in here.”

“I’d made wassail the night before I had to rescue victims from all the accidents during the snowstorm.”

“Hmm, do you still have some?”

“I sure do.” He pulled a container from the fridge, poured some wassail into two polar bear mugs, and then placed them in the microwave. Once warmed up, he took them into the living room.

She pulled a glass out of the cabinet. “I’m going to take some of the medicine the doctor prescribed me right now so it takes effect by the time I lie down.”

“That’s a good idea.” He hooked up her phone to a charger station. “Your phone will be charged up in just a little while.”

“Great, and thanks.” She sat on the soft gray sofa, and he took off her boots and set them next to the door leading out to the garage.

“So none of this is making any sense.” Andy pulled off his boots and left them beside hers.

“What?”

Andy sighed. “You knew the guy who received the ransom demands. The men who

took the money from him went to his house to get it from him, but they didn't hand over Helen—though we know why that is, but did Pierre? And your car brakes were mysteriously tampered with.”

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“We need to get a look at Pierre’s security videos.”

“To see if they revealed who they are even though we know them?” He took a drink of his wassail. “We should have looked at them while at the house.”

“Well, if we have to return there, we can do it. I had hoped the video would show how Pierre responded to them. Were they wearing ski masks? Were they already known to him? Did he greet them, or was he scared of them?”

“Was he in collusion with them?” Andy asked.

“Right.”

“Okay. The thought had briefly crossed my mind that they could be together in this because the men went to his house to get the money.”

She finished her wassail. “Yeah, well, I truly thought Helen was a kidnapped victim. So who knows what else is true in this whole mess?” The medicine was beginning to work, and she loved how it took the edge off the pain from her injuries. “But what if they told him where to pick up Helen, and that’s why he’s gone.”

“Okay, so if he’s not in collusion with the whole kidnapping scheme, that could be a possibility. Why would he give them all that money if he is in league with them?”

She pondered that while she drank her wassail. “He got the money from some source, and it’s insured somehow, and he gets a big share of it to keep?”

“Yeah, money makes the world of crime go around.”

“Show me the way to the most comfortable bed in the house. I’m ready to lie down.”

“Mine is the most comfortable mattress in the house.”

She laughed. “I’m too tired to try out beds so I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“Is the muscle relaxant kicking in?” He drank the rest of his wassail and helped her from the couch.

“Yeah. I will pass out on the couch if I don’t retire to bed soon.”

“Good. That means you’ll be able to sleep well.” He carried her bag down the hallway, and she followed him.

When she looked inside the bedroom, she saw it was all in aqua and beige. “Hmm, I love the color scheme.”

“Thanks. Some snow leopard friends flip houses, and they recommended their interior designer. She said it was perfect for couples if I ever found a significant other.” He pulled down the covers for her.

“She has good taste.” Monica sat on the bed. “Wow, this feels good.”

He removed her socks. “I’ve got a long-sleeved T-shirt you can wear if you don’t have any sleepwear.”

“I’ve got some sleepwear in my backpack.” She pulled out pajama pants featuring sleeping polar bears. The top had two polar bears nuzzling each other.

“A fan of polar bears, I see.”

“Yeah. They are super lovable.”

“Some more than others. I will grab a couple of things and sleep in the guest bedroom. If you need anything from me, it’s the first one on the left on the other side of the house.”

“I wouldn’t think of chasing you out of your bedroom. We’ve already slept together on a couch at Denny’s friend’s cabin. So you can sleep in your own bed. I won’t even notice you’re here once I fall asleep. Which will happen soon.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Yeah. Besides, if someone really cut my brake lines, hoping I would have an accident, you can continue to be my backup.”

“You got it.” Andy quickly removed his clothes, threw them in a white wicker laundry basket, and entered the bathroom. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“I would take a shower too, but I don’t want to fall asleep it.”

“You can join me, and I can hold you up.”

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She chuckled. “Now if that isn’t a guy line if I ever heard one.”

“Yeah, but it’s sincere. A hot shower would be good on your back, nice and relaxing.”

“That sounds heavenly.” She climbed out of bed and joined him in the bathroom.

It was so bright and spacious. The commode was in its own separate room. There was a large bath big enough for two, giving her ideas of joining a hot bear in it when she wasn’t hurting. A double sink for two was backed by a large mirror and lighting, covering one wall. The shower was glassed in, a walk-in variety that she loved.

She removed her pajamas and put them on a warming rack in one corner. “Now I love this feature.”

“Yeah, it’s great to keep towels from being damp after showering. They’re nice and warm when you get out of the shower.”

“That’s what I need.”

Then he removed the ace bandage from her hand, and she walked into the shower, and he joined her.

“I’ll get your back.”

The steam of the shower felt delightful. His hands, covered in body soap, gently slid down her back, making her feel heavenly. She breathed in his fresh bear scent and his

masculinity. She would soap up the rest of herself after he finished with her back, but then he began soaping up the front of her.

She had to take her turn soaping him up, eager to do it. They had already seen each other naked several times while they were shifting. Touching him was so much different than just seeing him naked. All those planes of muscles were fabulous, and his buttocks were so firm. They started kissing, his tongue intertwined with hers.

Their bodies slid against each other, but she couldn't do this right now. Not with her hand and back hurting so much.

"I've got to sleep." She didn't want to stop their sensual caresses, but she knew she had to.

"Absolutely." He kissed her forehead, finished rinsing off, and then they dried off. "Are you sure that you're going to be okay with me being in bed with you?"

"Yeah. I need my injuries to heal before we go all the way."

He smiled, appearing glad that she wanted to continue their relationship.

He helped her into her pajamas, pulled on his own, and then they climbed under the covers.

"Night, Andy, and thanks so much for letting me stay here."

"I'm so glad you are staying with me, or Ben would be after you."

She laughed and then curled onto her side to sleep.

They had slept through most of the night when Andy got a call from Roger. He

hurried out of bed so as not to disturb Monica, who looked like she was sleeping heavily, probably from the medicine.

“Yeah, Roger?” Andy headed out to the kitchen and started the coffee. “What’s up?”

“Monica’s brake lines were definitely cut. Not enough that she would run out of brake fluid right away while traveling through White Bear and could get help, but just nicked enough to drain the brake fluid once she was out in the middle of nowhere.”

So who knew what she planned to do and needed to stop her?

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Before she headed out to rescue Helen, only one person who knew Monica was in White Bear came to mind: Pierre.

Now that Andy knew Monica’s brake lines had been cut, and not just to cause an accident near White Bear but to give her time to travel somewhere else where she would be stranded in the wilderness and could have died of hypothermia, he was sure it had to do with the kidnapping case she’d been on.

Hating to tell her the news, he couldn’t think of any other reasonable explanation.

Monica’s light footsteps approached as she walked down the hall toward him.

“Hey, good morning. How are you feeling?” He was ready to make them breakfast, but first, he pulled her into a warm embrace and rubbed her back.

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She melted against him. “Much better, thanks. I really needed that sleep. Not moving more logs with my bear strength, walking through deep snow, or moving knocked-out bodies around makes a difference.”

He kissed her cheek. “I know what you mean, and I’m so glad you’re feeling better. Would you like some coffee and breakfast?”

“Yes, that would be great.”

“How’s your hand?”

“I’ve got more movement in my thumb and hand now. It’s getting better. No more need to wrap it.”

“That’s great. What would you like for breakfast? Eggs? Bacon? Waffles?”

“Eggs and bacon would be perfect.”

“Okay, I’ve got news.” He poured coffee for Monica. Then he started cooking the bacon and eggs.

She added milk and sugar to her coffee. “Do you want some too?”

“Yes, that would be great. A teaspoon of sugar and about as much milk as you have.”

“Okay. So what’s the news?”

He let out his breath in frustration. “It’s bad news. Your brake lines were definitely cut.”

“Ha! I knew it!”

“But it was cut so you could travel some distance before the brake fluid leaked out. Who knew where you were going? If you were driving around town, you could have gotten help. It makes me believe whoever did it knew you were heading out on the country road to find Denny and Helen and would have lost control of the car and been stranded. And that would mean Pierre.”

“Pierre Johnson, you’re right. I told him where I was, at the mini mart, getting gas, and then leaving to locate them.” She took a sip of her coffee. “He’s the one who knew Denny’s grandparents had the cabin where Denny might end up at.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Andy said.

“It doesn’t mean it was him for sure. If he was afraid that I would learn about the kidnapping and want to rescue Helen, why send me in that direction? Why not tell me to go somewhere else entirely, far away from where Helen would be?”

“I agree that it doesn’t make much sense, except that if you had gone in another direction, you might have had more agents available. Whoever cut your brake lines must know how far you would get. It was cut to allow you to travel way out of town.”

“Right.”

“Besides, Pierre gave you a different address than where they stayed. We just got lucky in finding where they were.” He served up the eggs and bacon.

“On the other hand, that’s the only place Pierre knew about. He probably wouldn’t

have known Denny would stay at another cabin near his grandparents’.” She sat down with Andy at the dinner table. “Wendell Marquart and his thugs knew where Denny and Helen were, so maybe Pierre was completely in the dark and just guessing where Denny might have taken Helen.”

“That could still be true. What bothers me is that you were targeted.” Andy bit into his bacon.

“Yeah, me too. When I’m done with breakfast, I’m going to look at my laptop. They packed it in with the stuff from my car in my bag.”

“Okay. And do some research?”

“Right. Before this, I hadn’t had time to research Denny and Helen. All I knew was that Denny had been her ex-boyfriend, and she was dating her new boyfriend, Pierre. I don’t know anything about her other than that.”

"We'll need to check the service station where you stopped to get gas. They'll have CTV cameras, and we can look them over. We can also see if whoever cut your brake lines bought anything in the store. Was there anywhere else you stopped before hitting the country road?"

“I just drove to White Bear and stopped for gas. I had only a quarter of a tank. With the bad storm upon us, I didn’t want to get stranded anywhere without gas.”

“Which almost happened anyway, only we were in a different vehicle.”

“Right.”

After they finished breakfast, Monica retrieved her laptop while Andy cleaned the kitchen. She sat down in Andy's recliner and started doing some searches.

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“Do you want another cup of coffee?”

“Yeah, sure, thanks. Okay, I’m looking up more about Helen. Oh, wow, according to Facebook, she is Harvey’s sister.”

“So she’s Wendell’s cousin. They’re all involved in it, or at least knew about it.”

“Yeah, I agree.” She tried calling Pierre again, but there was still no answer. “I still can’t get through to Pierre. What do you think is going on with him? I would think he would be home at some point. Although if he’s involved in the kidnapping for ransom scheme, as in he gets a cut of the money, he could have left the state already.”

“Right. He would have taken his cut and hightailed it out of there. He wouldn’t have any need to rejoin the other conspirators. Though it might make him guilty of a conspiracy to commit fraud if he defrauded a company or individual to obtain the ransom money in the first place.”

“I agree. I’ve pulled up his car license number. We can issue a BOLO to be on the lookout for his Mercedes because he still might be a victim. Wendell and his men might have taken him hostage and disposed of him somewhere. We don’t know.” She closed her laptop.

But Andy bet that Pierre was one of the bad guys.

“Let’s go check out some security video footage at the service station to see who might have tampered with my car if it was done there.”

“I’m ready.” He grabbed their coats and carefully helped her into hers.

She was still in pain when she gingerly pushed her hand through her coat sleeve, and he could tell her back was hurting her again by the way she winced.

Once they arrived at the mini-mart service station, they went inside and asked for the security camera video.

“Sure,” the manager said. “Hey, Trooper MacMathan, we heard what a mess it was out there.”

“Yeah, lots of people were in accidents. We were looking for security video on this date when FBI Special Agent Monica O’Connell’s SUV was getting gas.”

“Right there!” the manager said. “She filled up her vehicle and then came in to buy a few things—a bottle of water, protein bars, and some jerky.”

“You were holding out on me,” Andy said to Monica.

She smiled. “I ate the jerky on the way to crash into you. Sorry.”

Andy examined the video further. “So you moved your SUV to the parking area in front of the service station there.”

“Right. I never leave my vehicle at the gas pump after I’m done in case someone needs to use the pump.”

“So you were on your phone while the gas was filling the tank.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t see anyone near your vehicle while you were getting gas.”

“No. But when I went inside the station?—”

“Someone slipped between your vehicle and a van. He didn’t get into the van, but he crouched down and disappeared,” Andy said.

“Right there. As tall and bulky as he is, he is wearing a black parka with red fur around the collar. That’s Teague, one of the men with Wendell.”

“Yeah, that’s who I thought it was. Then right there, he’s behind your vehicle and heading toward?—”

“That truck with the camper. Wendell’s truck. God. Here they were sabotaging my SUV all along, and I never had a clue.”

“And they knew you were going to Helen’s rescue because you talked with Pierre about the kidnapping.”

“Exactly.” She couldn’t believe Pierre would set her up to possibly die so that other agents would think she was handling the case until she had backup.

She got a call from one of her fellow agents. “Hey, did you get the lot of them?”

“No. I was calling to give you an update. They were long gone by the time we reached the motel, but they left a lot of handcuffs at the cabin.”

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“Crap. Well, thanks!” Monica explained what had happened to them, such as disabling her car and Pierre's disappearance.

“We'll be looking for him also,” her fellow agent said. “We've continually tried to catch up with him with no success.”

“Yeah, me too.” They finally ended the call, and Monica told Andy what had happened.

“Well, hell, I was afraid they might just disappear once Eloise took off with Harvey's truck. I sure wish we could have brought them in when we had them in cuffs.”

“I know. Me too.” Then she got a call from her boss, Remington. “Yes, sir?” She put it on speakerphone so Andy could hear.

“Everything was caught on security video at the motel—you realized Harvey Marquart was a danger, warned him to put his hands up, and then he brought out a shotgun and racked it. So the finding is a justified shooting on your part. There was a question about a missing video segment for a few minutes right after he shot at you, and you ducked behind the couch.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, we were all on the edge of our seats, believing you would have been dead from the encounter or killed him, which, of course, we know didn't happen because you managed to get him into custody. But how did that happen exactly?”

“He tripped over his own feet while coming after me, fell, and hit his head, I guess. I was hiding behind the couch, waiting for him to come around it, ready to shoot him if he tried to shoot at me again. So I didn’t see what happened when he knocked himself out.”

“And Trooper MacMathan was in the restroom the whole time? The next thing we see is him coming out and helping you with Marquart. Then you put the closed sign on the door, took Marquart to his vehicle, and confined him to the hatchback.”

She didn’t respond to the part about Andy being in the restroom. “Did the DEA agents find any more drugs at the motel?”

“Yes, and tons of money were hidden in various locations in the office, and one of the rooms that is never rented out.”

“Good.”

“Yeah, he has already been found guilty of drug trafficking and just got out of prison only six months ago.”

“So he’s on probation, had a firearm as a convicted felon, and lots more,” she said.

“Attempted murder of a law enforcement agent. Yep. I got the paperwork about you being on leave for three weeks to recuperate, but I just wanted to tell you you’re not on administrative leave over the shooting.”

“Thanks. That’s a big relief.” She had worried about them learning that some of the video had been deleted, but there was no way she could explain any of that. “What about Denny and the others and the kidnapping scheme?”

“No new leads on them. We’re not sure where they’ve gone to. You don’t need to

worry about the case for now. Take it easy and check back in with me when you can.”

“Thanks.” Then they ended the call, and she raised her brows at Andy.

“Hell, it sounded like I was in the restroom while you were fighting for your life!” Andy shook his head.

She chuckled. “You were my bear hero. Unfortunately, we couldn’t allow that to be seen on the video. Everyone in our world will know the truth, and that’s all that matters.”

He scoffed.

She laughed, knowing he wanted everyone to see him as a hero who had saved her in the nick of time. If he’d been coming into the hotel lobby to rescue her, that would have been one thing. But coming out of the restroom after he’d shifted and dressed like he’d missed all the action? She smiled.

“That decides it. The next venture we’re on together when it comes to taking down criminals—you wear your polar bear coat, and I’ll be on the CCTV?—”

“Getting shot at?” She laughed. “We did every version of that on our wild adventure already. So you’re planning on teaming up with me on more assignments?”

She didn’t believe that was possible unless she got another case in this area and contacted him for backup.

“I sure am. You need backup, and we still have some bad guys on the loose that I’m damned determined to catch. You’re off for three weeks, and I figure we can do some sleuthing during that time.”

“What will your boss think of that?” She hadn’t discussed it with Andy, but she figured he would have to return to work. Chasing down Denny and his gang probably wasn’t something his boss would be all right with.

“Well, I’m responsible for enforcing traffic and criminal laws on state-regulated highways and responding to emergencies involving motorists, which I was doing when the blizzard hit. Of course, I also assisted with detours and evacuations. But I have seven days off to do my own investigative work.”

“Seven days off? Well, that’s something.”

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“Yeah. I worked a week on and a week off before the blizzard, but then I had to go out to rescue stranded motorists instead of being off and then ended up on a kidnapping case.”

“Okay.”

“So I got credit for having to work, and I have a full week off. If you’re resting your hand and back, we can check into this kidnapping case.”

“That means we only have a week to catch all of them.”

“Yeah, but when we do, I want to be caught on video arresting them. But first—we need to stock up on more handcuffs.”

13

“What about your gun?” Monica asked Andy as they left the mini-mart and headed home.

“About losing my gun to the perp? My boss wasn’t happy about it, but he understood my dire circumstances. He authorized the reissue of another gun for me, and they’ve notified all the agencies that one of the men we had confined, Lionel, had fought me for it.”

Andy told his boss about it as soon as he had reception when they were driving to White Bear. He’d had to tell him what he’d been doing the last few hours also. In case Lionel or one of the other men had used his gun in the commission of a crime,

he had to warn his boss that he didn't have it any longer.

“And?”

“Everyone in the department will give me grief about it when I pick up the new gun, but losing it was in the line of duty while I was fighting for my life. It wasn't a case of me leaving it in a bathroom stall at a bar, which happened to one of my coworkers.”

“Oh, no.” Monica shook her head.

“Yeah, and worse, he lied about it being stolen, but an honest citizen turned his revolver in to the police. So the officer was fired for drinking on duty, being drunk, and losing his weapon. Totally a different case from mine.”

“Wow, not a good thing to do. Regarding our perpetrators, we need to learn where they could have gone.”

“We could question the owners of the cabin Denny and Helen were staying at and learn about their association with Denny,” Andy said.

“What if Denny just broke into their place and wasn't supposed to be there? He feared someone might realize his grandparents had a cabin, and he would take Helen there. He might have thought they could safely hole up in the vacant neighbor's cabin instead if the word got out that there was a kidnapping in progress.”

“On the other hand, if he did know the owners and they had agreed to let him use their cabin, they might have a clue as to where he could go next.”

“Not his cabin,” Monica said.

“Your agents would have undoubtedly checked it and even talked to the cabin owners.”

“Let’s see if we can locate them, call them, and learn what we can.”

They went inside the house, but he noticed Monica wincing every time she got in and out of his car. “Before we do anything else, you’re napping. You’re supposed to be resting during these three weeks, you know.”

“That’s the part I don’t like about being off.”

He laughed. “I know. It sucks.”

“Okay, will you call them while I’m napping?”

“Absolutely. I’ll run into the department and get some handcuffs and my replacement gun while you rest. That way, we’ll be ready to go as soon as we have a lead.”

She smiled and hugged him. “More than anything, I would love to nap with you.”

“I feel the same way, but you need to rest your back.” He wrapped his arms gently around her and kissed her mouth. “Feel better.”

She kissed his mouth back, and he parted his lips for her, their tongues tangling with each other in pent-up intrigue. Then she pulled away.

“Whatever you do, you don’t go anywhere on this case without me if I’m sleeping and you get a lead,” she said.

“Are you kidding? I’m not going anywhere without you. This is a team mission.” He just hoped neither of them would get killed doing it. “I’ll be back.”

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“Better be.” She headed for the bedroom.

“Do you need me to tuck you in?”

She chuckled. “Tonight.”

“Gladly.” Then she retired to bed, and he headed to the station.

When he arrived there, he knew he would get a lot of grief from everyone in the office. Losing a gun, no matter how it happened, was big news.

“Hey, Andy, you didn’t tell me you lost your gun to one of the perps.” Roger slapped him on the back. “And your jacket. One of the officers turned it into us when they searched the cabin.”

“Oh, that’s great. Yeah, the guy got his handcuffs out from under the couch leg. I couldn’t find anything else to handcuff him to. He came at me like a grizzly ready to rip me apart.”

“Which one was he?”

“Lionel.”

“Oh, yeah, we have an APB out on the whole gang, and you’re right. The guy’s huge. Six-four, muscled...I can see why you had trouble keeping him away from your gun. The boss said you can have a replacement, right?”

“Yeah, it was in the line of duty, unlike one of our fellow troopers who left his gun in the restroom.”

“That was a dumb action—drinking on the job, the whole thing. I heard you need a slew of handcuffs. The guys chipped in and got a bunch together for you.”

Andy laughed.

Roger opened his desk drawer and piled ten pairs of handcuffs on his desk. “I don’t know if this will be enough for you, but if it isn’t, we’ll get more. Your parka, backpack, and other gear are hanging on the rack. You know everyone is damned proud of you for braving that blizzard to help the agent out and try to capture the people involved in the kidnap scheme. ”

“I couldn’t let her do it on her own.” He was so glad the guys had retrieved his gear.

“Yeah, as pretty as she is, I would have done the same thing. I can’t believe you had a sprained ankle on top of that. And then to capture bank robbers too?”

“Hey, you and the other guys helped with that.”

“Well, that’s true. We got many accolades for that, and”—Roger smiled—“of course, many troopers said if we hadn’t been there, you might have lost them too. We defended you, reminding them that you and the agent had been injured in the car wreck, and you were outnumbered five to two with regard to the other perps. With those odds, truly, we were amazed you could take them all into custody.”

Andy was afraid he would be questioned on how they had managed that.

“So...how did you do it?”

“We took them down separately. We had already taken Helen into custody. Denny left the cabin to get firewood, and we easily managed him. Lionel, Teague, and Harvey separated so we could take them down one at a time.”

“Aww. I told the other troopers that you two didn’t have secret superhuman powers. Then, the four guys claimed that a polar bear had attacked them. Even the one you took into custody at the motel. We don’t have polar bears in the area. So what was up with that?”

“The blizzard made visibility next to nothing. I’m sure they thought we were polar bears coming for them in their delusional state. Maybe when Harvey hit his head in the lobby, he dreamed up being attacked by a polar bear.” Andy shrugged.

“Uh, yeah, that’s what we figured.”

Andy hoped everyone would believe their story.

“So...we heard Monica’s staying with you for now. You’re off for a week. What are the two of you going to do?”

Andy smiled. “Really? You think I would answer that?”

“I heard she’s a workaholic. So are you. If I had to guess, I would say you’re going after the suspects you lost since no one has caught them yet. If you need any help, let me know. Many of the guys would assist if you learn something and need us as backup.”

“I appreciate that, but then you would say we couldn’t handle the matter without you guys.”

Roger laughed. “Yeah, but there are six of them now, the four men and two women,

and there might even be more if the only ‘victim’ in this—Pierre—is in on it.”

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“That’s true. But I doubt they’ll all be together. I’m sure they’ll have split up so we don’t catch them in one place.”

“I figured that too. So you do plan to go after them.”

“We’re just going to try to learn what we can about it. You know how that goes. Lots of research and lots of dead ends. I don’t know how long Monica plans to stay with me. She’s from Anchorage, you know. But we’ll try to get some intel while I’m off.”

“All the bachelors are talking about how you rarely are seen out on a date, and now you pick up an FBI agent, and she’s living with you. They want to know how you managed that.”

“When you’re busy saving each other’s lives, you build a special connection.”

“That’s what I told the guys.”

Andy chuckled. “I’ve got to grab a gun and the handcuffs and get out of your hair so you can work.”

“Just remember to call me if you need help.”

“I sure will. Thanks, Roger. And thank the guys for me for getting all this together for us.”

“You’re welcome. They wanted you to be safe if you had trouble.”

Then Andy signed out another gun, grabbed the handcuffs and his parka, goggles, gloves, facemask, and backpack that he'd left behind at the cabin, said goodbye to Roger, and headed out. Before he returned home so he could let Monica rest longer, he stopped by the tavern to say hi to his mom, dad, and Ben.

When he walked inside, his mom frowned at him. "Where's Monica?"

"She's at home resting her back."

"Oh." Then his mom frowned again. "Why aren't you at home looking after her?"

Andy smiled. "She's sleeping. I told her I had to get a replacement gun and handcuffs."

"You better not be planning to chase after these villains when she's still injured."

"We aren't. We'll do some research though."

Ben hurried over to see him. "Hey, how are the two of you doing?"

"Great."

"You're not together."

Andy laughed. Maybe he should have skipped seeing his family this morning, but he knew they would be annoyed if they learned he was in town and hadn't dropped by to tell them what was happening. They hadn't wanted to intrude on them while they were at home.

"She's resting," their mom quickly said.

“Oh, of course. So I guess there’s no hope for me.”

“None,” Andy said.

Their dad left the kitchen and joined them. “Family gathering, I see. Is she staying here for good?”

“No, Dad. She’s just here for as long as she wants to be. I doubt she wants to leave her job to stay here.”

“Do you know her favorite dessert?” his mom asked. “We know yours is cheesecake.”

“We haven’t discussed our tastes in desserts yet.”

“All right. We’ll make it for her when you learn what she loves.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it. I’m headed home but just wanted to check in with you all.”

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“We’re glad you did and haven’t chased her off already,” their dad said.

Andy laughed. “No way. I’m hoping she stays with me for the three weeks.” And he planned to make that happen with whatever resources he had available.

Then he got into his vehicle and called the cabin owners near Denny’s grandparents’ cabin.

Monica woke to her phone’s ring tone going off and climbed out of bed to get it. She grabbed her phone and looked at the caller ID. “Pierre?” Ohmigod, it was Pierre. “Where are you? We’ve been trying to get ahold of you. We were worried the people with the kidnapping scheme had killed you.”

“I’m hiding out. They figured out I had told you, an FBI agent, where Helen’s ex-boyfriend was. They’ll kill me now.” Pierre was talking low as if he was afraid he would be overheard, but she didn’t hear any background noises she could distinguish.

“Where are you? We’ll put you in protective custody.” She wanted to ask him about her brake lines being cut—that he was the only one who knew where she was at the time.

“No one can be trusted.” He sounded paranoid.

“Where did you hand over the money to them?” She wanted to ask how he got it so quickly.

Then she heard the garage door open and headed in that direction with the phone to

her ear.

“They wanted me to go to some isolated spot, and I said no. I figured that would be the end of me for sure.”

Andy walked into the house, and she immediately put her finger to her lips and mouthed, “Pierre.”

Andy nodded and set his phone to record. Now he was the perfect partner in an investigation!

“I’m going to put this on speakerphone. I hurt my hand and back in a car accident while trying to track down Helen so I need to take something for the pain.”

“I’m so sorry, Monica. I should never have put you in harm’s way like that.” After working on this case, Pierre sounded sincere, but she didn’t know what to believe.

She put her phone on speaker and laid it on the island counter. “I’m just going to get some water and the medicine. Did anyone contact you to tell you Helen was behind the faux kidnapping and request for ransom money?”

“No, hell, so she’s, well, hell.”

Monica poured water into a glass and drank it, but she wasn’t taking any medication until she was ready to go to bed that night.

“I’m sorry I had to give you the bad news”—if Pierre wasn’t part of the plot—“but at least you don’t have to worry about Helen being at risk since Denny hadn’t taken her hostage.”

Pierre still hadn’t answered her about where he had met the men to hand over the

money bags. Was he shocked that Helen had taken his money under false pretenses, and was mulling over the business? Trying to figure out why he hadn't realized she was pulling a con?

“Okay, you said you didn't want to meet them in some isolated place to hand over the money.” Which made sense.

“Right, and the blizzard was coming. No way did I want to get caught out in that.”

But it was all right if she did! Then again, she was an FBI agent and was supposed to go after the kidnapped victim. She was growing impatient with Pierre for not telling her where he had met the men who got the bags full of money.

“Where did you meet the men to give them the money?”

“They told me just to set the money in the bags on the front porch. It's hidden from the road, and I wouldn't have any other visitors, so nobody would see the bags sitting there.”

“Oh, that's great!” She feigned enthusiasm. “That means you have security video of them taking the bags, right? When I went to your house, looking for you because I was concerned for your welfare, I saw the security videos around the house.”

“I'm afraid they aren't working. I planned to replace them but haven't gotten around to it.”

Okay, so Pierre definitely was still on her list as a probable co-conspirator. He hadn't said he was angry with Helen for using him like that. He didn't say he was relieved to know Helen wasn't harmed but angry that she had stolen his money. Hewasn't reacting like Monica thought he should. The non-working security cameras? Way too convenient.

“I’ve got to go,” Pierre said, panicking.

“Wait!”

The line clicked dead.

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Monica tried calling Pierre's number back. "There's no answer."

"What do you think about his claims?" Based on what others said and Pierre's reactions, Andy wasn't sure if Pierre was a victim of the crime or a willing participant.

Monica ran her hands through her silky, long hair, and he wanted to do that. Every move she made was sexy.

"He was non-committal about his girlfriend duping him out of money. I didn't have time to ask him how he got the money together so fast. What if he's a crook and had it hidden in a safe in his home or somewhere else that he could easily access? And he had mistakenly shared this information with Helen?" she asked.

"That's a good possibility. That has certainly happened in numerous cases—normally involving theft, not a kidnapping scheme though."

She sat down on the sofa. "True. That's an awful lot of work to steal some money. This leads me back to the idea that he was in on it and hoped it would appear he had nothing to do with it."

He joined her on the sofa, and she leaned against him.

"This is nice." She sighed, and her body warmed him.

He took in her vanilla-scented fragrance and kissed her cheek. "I agree." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and they just cuddled. "How is your back?"

"Feeling much better. The nap helped." She kissed his chest. "What did you learn about Denny's grandparents' cabin neighbors?"

"I couldn't reach them."

"Well, darn. I need to make a call." She selected her boss's number from the menu. "Sir, O'Connell here. I just spoke with Pierre." She explained what she had asked him and his responses. "Andy recorded the conversation."

"We need to have him working for us."

She smiled. "We need to interview Pierre to see if he was involved. Can we track his phone? He's still using it."

"I'll have someone get on it right away."

"Thanks."

"I'm glad he's alive and talking to you. Maybe you can still get to the bottom of this," her boss said.

"I sure hope so."

Then they ended the call.

"That was a good idea." Andy pressed a kiss against her forehead. He breathed in the fragrance of the vanilla shampoo she had used on her hair and inhaled her essence.

“Yeah, I just wish we’d been tracking it before this. Maybe we would know where he was.” She slipped her arms around him and kissed his cheek, her lips warm against his skin.

He met her mouth with his and kissed her deeply. “I was thinking that if he were behind some of this, he wouldn’t have kept his phone, knowing the police could track him.”

“Hmm, yeah, you’re right. Maybe he is a good guy.”

“Or he’s just not good at being a bad guy.” Andy got a call and saw it was from Craig. “Hey, are you still grounded?”

“Yeah. I’m going to get a pizza for the missus and me. Do you want me to pick one up for the two of you while I’m out? That will give you more time to recuperate.”

Now that sounded good. “Let me ask Monica. Craig wants to know if we want a pizza for lunch. He’ll get one for us while he’s picking up one for him and his mate.”

“Double cheese, bell peppers, mushrooms, and pepperoni.”

“Did you hear that, Craig?”

“Yeah, I’ll drop it by in about half an hour.”

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“All right. Thanks, I owe you one.”

Once Andy ended the call, Monica said, “That’s so sweet of them.”

“Believe me, he doesn’t usually offer to bring a pizza over to me. Oh, and my mother asked what your favorite dessert is.”

“Hmm, lots of things, but I love chocolate cheesecake.”

“How did I not remember that? You had that when I took you out for lunch after you got a flat tire.”

“Yes! It’s still my favorite.”

He got on his phone and called his mother. “Mom, Monica’s favorite dessert is chocolate cheesecake.”

“Coming right up.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Then they ended the call.

“Wow, that’s so nice of your mom to make it for me.”

“She and Dad want more grandkids.”

She laughed. “So that’s how you make kids? That’s a new one on me.”

He laughed, then kissed her cheek. "I'm going to start a fire."

"That would be nice. And tonight, when we go to bed, maybe we can finish what we started."

"Only if your back and hand are okay." He sure wanted to go further with Monica, but he didn't want her to be in pain. He set a log on the fire.

"I'm sure I'll manage just fine." Monica heard something out back and headed for the window. "Ohmigod, how cute. Who are they?"

Andy joined her at the window. He laughed. On the land connecting his, Alicia's, and Rob's property, Alicia was digging a snow cave as a polar bear that she'd started a few days earlier, and both of her bear cubs were checking out what she was doing. "That's Alicia, my cousin Rob's mate, and their two-year-old cubs, Daniel and Jenny."

"She has made some inroads."

"Yeah, it's their daily exercise. Sometimes, Edward and Robyn are out there with the six-year-old twins. They can shift at will now. But the younger twins, just seven months old, only shift when their momma does."

One of the cubs was pawing at his mother from up above while she was digging out the snow down below. She looked up at him, then began digging again.

"That's Jenny on top. Oh!" Andy said as Jenny put her small paw out to get her mother's attention again and fell into the snow cave.

Andy and Monica laughed. "Too cute," she said. "Let's join them."

“As bears? What about your hand?”

“It doesn’t feel as bad.” Monica began stripping.

“Okay, I’ll tell Craig we’re out back playing with Alicia and her cubs. He’ll leave the pizza in the house. It’ll probably be half an hour before it’s ready and when he arrives here.”

“Sounds good.” She shifted and waited for him to open the back door.

He quickly texted Craig, undressed, opened the back door, and shifted. Andy led the way because Alicia and her little ones didn’t know Monica.

When they ran across the snow, Jenny and Daniel raced to him until they saw Monica. Then they paused.

Andy nuzzled Monica to show them she was all right, and then he ran to them. They jumped all over him in excitement, their little bear bottoms wiggling.

Monica just watched them.

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Alicia came out of the mostly dug-out snow cave. Since half their heritage was polar bears, she figured this was part of their training. Normally, a mother bear wouldn't dig a snow cave unless she was about to birth new cubs.

Was she? The instinct had to be so strong that maybe that was the situation. Though Andy hadn't told her that was the case.

Rob finally joined them and worked on digging out of the cave.

Alicia brought her cubs over to meet Monica and nuzzled her face to show her cubs Monica was safe.

The doorbell rang. Andy glanced in that direction. Then he ran for the back door, but Craig opened it and smiled. "Pizza delivery!"

The cubs headed straight for the house. Alicia hurried to corral them out of the way. Monica smiled, then followed Andy back to the house.

Inside the house, Andy shifted and started pulling on his clothes. "We have to appreciate this now because Craig will be back to making emergency deliveries once the visibility is better and won't have time for it."

"I make special deliveries on occasion. Even when I'm working," Craig said.

Monica shifted inside and hurried to dress.

"Thanks, Bro."

Craig smiled at Monica. “We were getting pizza anyway and thought you might like one also.”

“Well, we appreciate it,” Monica said.

“You both deserve a hero’s welcome home. I’ve got to get our pizza home, or my mate will be frosted because it’s so cold.”

“Thanks, Craig, for the pizza and the thought. Tell your mate I said hi.” Monica pulled a fuzzy white blanket over her on the couch.

She looked like she belonged there in Andy’s home with him, and he hoped he could convince her to continue seeing him even after the three weeks were up.

“I will. She wants to meet you when you feel up to more company. Later, Bro.” Then Craig headed back to his SUV.

Andy shut and locked the door. “Do you want to eat on the couch or at the table? You look so comfortable there.”

“If you think we won’t make a mess?—”

“I have TV trays for eating.”

“Do you eat in the living room a lot?”

He smiled. “At night. During the day, I eat where I can or take lunch with me.”

“Oh, me too.”

He set up oak TV trays, then brought glasses of ice water and slices of pizza on

plates. “Do you want to watch something?”

“Yeah. Whatever you would like. I like lots of stuff.”

He sat down to eat with her and turned on the television. With the fire going, it felt like a fun at-home date.

“This is good,” Monica said, taking a bite of the pizza. “Enjoying it with you while watching TV makes it all the better. The toddlers were so cute when they thought they could have some pizza.”

“Yeah, but Alicia would have had to shift so they could eat as kids. As bears, they would make even more of a mess.”

Monica laughed. “So what shall we watch?”

“How about this story about a couple who are CIA who have retired to raise their two kids and end up back in a CIA operation with the kids in tow—who have no idea their parents are former operatives.”

“Yes, it sounds perfect.”

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He started the movie, and they continued eating while the CIA couple fought the bad guys. “This reminds me of our little adventure.”

“Yes! Except we were both injured and handicapped during our operation, but we did pretty well with our bear forearms when we could.”

“Right.”

Then came the part where the CIA wife told her husband she was pregnant with their child. Another big fight ensued until the plane went down, and it was the perfect solution—the plane was totaled, and they vanished, presumed dead.

“Hmm, well, they must have had money to start over completely and lead a new life.” She pulled off another slice of pizza.

“Yes.”

“I love this movie.”

“It’s perfect for a fun afternoon of relaxation.” Especially when he could enjoy it with Monica.

“After what we went through, seeing someone else dealing with all those problems is refreshing.”

“I agree.”

After they finished their meals, he cleared the tables and plates away so they could cuddle. This was the only way to watch the movie with her in his arms while enjoying the action-packed, fun-loving movie.

When the movie ended, neither of them was ready to stop snuggling. He was glad she wasn't jumping up to work on searches for the kidnapping schemers, but he worried she was still hurting too much.

"Do you want to watch another movie?" he asked.

"Yeah. This is perfect for a rest day after our wild adventures."

"All right. I agree." He flipped through the selections, and she picked out a movie. "A great western train robbery, it is."

"More action, adventure, suspense, with a historical perspective."

"Exactly."

At some point, the two of them fell asleep, her on top of him, his arms wrapped around her, but the sound of the doorbell ringing woke them.

She stretched. "I didn't expect to fall asleep."

"We both needed it after being up for so long during our wild ride."

She moved off him so he could get the door.

"Were you expecting company?" she asked.

"Nope." He opened the door and smiled. "What a nice surprise. Ben's here with a

cheesecake delivery.”

“Why don’t you ask him to join us for dinner?” Monica cuddled up in the blanket. She looked like a happy bear wrapped in the white, fluffy blanket.

“Are you sure?” Ben asked her.

“Yeah. You drove all the way out here to do this for us.”

Andy laughed. “He has the home and acreage adjoining mine. He was just on his way home.”

“You could have pretended I was being extra valiant like the two of you were.” Ben came inside and removed his snow boots, coat, and hat.

“You’re too funny.” Now Andy needed to figure out what he would make for dinner. “How does spaghetti sound?”

“He makes great spaghetti,” Ben said.

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“I’m game. What can I do to help?” Monica asked.

“You just relax. The more you rest, the better your injuries will be,” Andy said.

“Yeah, Andy and I have got this. Just like we always do when we have get-togethers.”

“I think it’s great that you guys cook. My dad does too.”

“Our dad taught us at a young age,” Ben said. “That’s partly because we were learning to help run the tavern and assist our parents, uncle, and aunt since they were co-owners.”

Then Monica got a call and answered it.

Andy glanced at her, wondering if it was Pierre again, and maybe they could track him down.

“Yes. Oh. Well, darn it anyway. Thanks. Talk later.” She shook her head at Andy. “That was my boss. He said that once they got the okay to track Pierre’s phone, they located it in the back of a pickup truck headed to Canada.”

“And he wasn’t in the truck.” Andy knew that before long, Pierre would either turn his phone off or ditch it. He chopped up mushrooms while Ben was slicing the onions.

“Nope. The agents questioned the driver, and he said he didn’t know whose phone it

was. He told them he had stopped to eat lunch at a restaurant in White Bear. But it had been about three hours since he had left the restaurant.”

“So Pierre’s probably not in White Bear any longer,” Andy said. “I can’t believe he was still here when he called you that first time.”

“Yeah, me either.”

After Andy finished browning the hamburger, he and Ben tossed in the vegetables, tomato sauce, and seasonings and began cooking it.

“Wine?” Ben asked.

“Not for me. I’m taking medicine so I can’t drink any. But you guys go ahead.”

“What about you?” Ben asked Andy.

“Sure, a glass would be fine with dinner.” Andy winked at Monica. “He’s still hopeful you might ditch me for him.”

She smiled.

“Well,” Ben said, “we can’t let the good ones get away.”

“I agree.” Andy finished cooking the noodles. “Is everyone ready for dinner?”

“I am. I think I’m making up for all the exercise we got yesterday!” She joined them at the table while Ben dished up garlic toast. “Hmm, this looks great.”

Andy served spaghetti. Ben got glasses of water for everyone and then poured glasses of wine for Andy and himself. Andy handed Monica the container of Parmesan

cheese, and she sprinkled it on her spaghetti and then passed it to Ben.

“So, what’s your next step with this kidnapping business? I’m sure Andy’s eager to help you find these guys.” Ben bit into his garlic bread with a crunch.

“Well,”—Monica wound her spaghetti around her fork—“until these guys are caught, I want to find where they are and have them arrested. I will continue working on this unless I get another case once I’m off leave.”

Ben glanced at Andy. “Well, I’ll have to return to work in six more days, but when I’m off, I’ll work with Monica on her case,” Andy said.

“If you need help with anything, you know I’ll assist you. This spaghetti is so good, if I do say so myself,” Ben said.

Andy and Monica laughed. Monica told them, “The spaghetti and the garlic toast are great.”

Andy agreed. “Thanks for the offer of assistance, Ben. If we need your help, we’ll let you know.”

“You know I’ll be right on it.”

After dinner, they had chocolate cheesecake for dessert and decaf coffee. Andy was glad Monica liked something Ben enjoyed, though they were big on berry and honey desserts.

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“Oh, yum, this is excellent.” Monica licked her fork.

“Rob will wish he had some too. He is a big chocolate fan,” Ben said.

“We should have invited them over,” Monica said.

“Later, when you’re feeling even better.” Andy would love for them all to get together at each family’s home like he knew they wanted to when she felt a hundred percent. He just hoped when they did, they wouldn’t overwhelm her.

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Monica hoped she had made a good impression on Andy’s family. Since seeing Andy again and working with him on her case, she wanted something more between them. But what if his family worried she would be unhappy about quitting a job she loved? Or moving to a smaller community?

Ben and Andy ate another slice of chocolate cheesecake at the dining room table. She got some milk for all of them and sat back down to finish her first slice.

She’d never been able to work with an FBI agent who was also a polar bear, and what a boon it was to work with a trooper who was one on the case. But they didn’t have an FBI post here, and though Andy could move to Anchorage, she really liked being out here where she could shift more easily. She rarely shifted for that reason.

She certainly didn’t want him to leave his extended family. She could see how close they were.

Ben finally took their dessert dishes into the kitchen, and Andy joined him with the coffee mugs and milk glasses. They cleaned up the kitchen. She felt like a lazy bear, but she needed to rest her back in case they got a lead on the perps, and then they could deal with them more easily.

“I’m going to leave you two to your own devices. Thanks for inviting me to dinner and sharing your cheesecake with me.”

“Thanks for helping me make dinner.” Andy slapped him on the back in a brotherly way.

“I’m glad you stayed and shared it with us. Otherwise, we would have to go out and work off all those calories,” Monica said.

The brothers laughed. She liked their laughter, boisterous and true to heart.

Then Ben said goodnight and left.

“Now what?” She left the couch, pulled Andy into her arms, and kissed his mouth.

“Well, we could work on this case some more.”

“Or we could head to bed.”

“And?” He raised his brows.

“I don’t think I need to explain it further.” She took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

“You don’t. I’m ready for this, uh, if we’re not just going to retire to bed.”

“No way. If we’re going to keep having family gatherings, I have to know how good you are in bed.”

He laughed. “I still worry about your back and hand.”

“It won’t stop me from enjoying this time with you.”

“If you start feeling bad, you tell me.”

In the bedroom, he gently removed her sweater over her bandaged hand and over her head. After having the injuries she did, it sure helped to have a partner who would help remove her clothes!

Besides, he did it in such a sexy way as he caressed her arms before gently pulling her shirt over her head. “I can’t help but wish we’d continued seeing each other since I met you over your flat tire.” He kissed her breastbone, tickling her.

“We lived too far apart.” She licked his cheek.

“We still do.” He kissed her bare shoulder.

It sent a delicious chill up her spine, and she kissed his neck with a soft kiss, breathing in his delightful male scent, a mixture of vanilla soap and spice. His heart was beating harder, just like hers was.

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“Yeah, but it’s totally...” she said.

He licked her shoulder, and she moaned.

“Totally...” she continued.

He captured her mouth with a searing kiss. She reciprocated with a kiss that was just as passionate, and he groaned with satisfaction.

She smiled, licked his lips, and then pulled away so he could strip off his sweater and shirt. Much, much better. She ran her hands over his hard chest, feeling his soft skin under her fingertips, enjoying the way he flexed his muscles, and shivered a little at her touch.

She leaned over and kissed one of his nipples and touched it with her tongue, then swept her lips across his chest to his other nipple, licked it, blew on it, and kissed it. He moaned and reached behind her to unfasten her bra, licking and kissing her neck.

“Unacceptable...” she breathed out.

He looked into her eyes, his filled with lust, and raised his brows.

“Living so far apart,” she said breathlessly.

His beautiful masculine mouth opened into a broad smile, his eyes expressing the same happiness. “Seriously, way too far apart.”

He unfastened her pants. He quickly removed his also, and she cupped his groin, which was already hard and ready for her, still confined in his brown boxer briefs. “Hmm,” she said.

He came behind her and nuzzled her neck with his mouth, cupped her breast with one hand, and slid his other hand down the front of her panties until his fingers connected with her feminine bud. His other hand was caressing her breast, and she moaned as he continued to stroke her into a place beyond heaven and earth.

She moaned in gratitude as he wrapped his arm around her ribcage underneath her breasts, holding her up so she didn't collapse under the pleasure. Adding to the eroticism, he was rubbing his stiff erection against her backside, and she couldn't wait to witness it.

Her heart and his were racing, and their pheromones swept them up in the hot moment.

She truly loved what he was doing to her and didn't want to give him up. But then she felt the heat and passion swelling up inside her until the explosion of orgasm washed over her in a hot, wet blanket. She groaned. “Aww, yes.”

Smiling, he turned her around, pulled off her panties, and discarded them on the floor. She glanced down at his bulging crotch; his boxer briefs had to be strangling him. But she couldn't easily pull them off one-handed. Next time, she was doing the honors.

He quickly pulled them off, tossed them in a fun-hearted way, and they landed on the bedside lamp. They both glanced at it and chuckled. She eyed his full erection. And smiled.

She slipped onto the bed. “Oh, soft plush sheets. I was so tired last night that I didn't notice. I've got to get some for my own!”

“Yeah, they’re silky but warm. Beats scratchy flannel that I had before.”

She laughed. “That’s what I have now.”

He pulled open a bedside table drawer and lifted a condom out of it.

She eyed the packaged condom and shook her head. “We’re covered.”

He hesitated. She raised her brows. Then he tossed the wrapped condom into the drawer and shut it. He quickly climbed into bed and began kissing her. He was such a wonderful, slow, methodical, and passionate kisser, which worked her up all over again.

He pushed her legs farther apart with his knee, then plunged his erection deep inside her. Oh, man, he was huge, and she loved it.

Andy loved how receptive Monica was as he brought her to climax and then continued to kiss her as he pumped into her tight sheath. She was running her good hand over his muscled shoulders as if she was enjoying the feel of them working as he thrust into her. Her tongue caressed his in a deeply sensuous kiss. She ran the heel of her foot over the back of his thigh.

Even that erogenous play made it hard for him to avoid coming too soon. Monica was pushing him over the edge.

Her smooth, firm, yet curvy body fit him so perfectly, and making love to her was incredibly exquisite. “You are unbelievably beautiful,” he said, kissing her cheek and her mouth as he kept thrusting into her.

“Oh, you are amazing,” she breathed out.

Her voice was so sexy, and her delightful feminine scent and pheromones sent him over the moon. “Oh, yeah,” he said and came in one explosive rush.

She smiled and pulled him into her arms. “Hmm, was it as good for you as it was for me?”

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“Hell, yeah. About our jobs and living situation...”

“Yeah, that’s something we’ll discuss later. For now, let’s go shower.”

Monica loved being with Andy like this. She wondered if she’d seen him for longer after she’d had her flat tire, if they would have ended up together much sooner.

They showered and returned to bed. He was really a dream bear. They drifted off to sleep in each other’s arms.

Then her phone rang, but it was charging in the living room, darn it. Dashing out of bed wasn’t a viable option. To her surprise, Andy slipped out from under her, jumped out of bed, and raced out of the room.

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Andy ran back into the bedroom with Monica’s phone, his sexy male parts bouncing, and she smiled at his nakedness.

“No time to get dressed,” he said.

“I’m not complaining.” She glanced at the caller ID. It was an unknown caller. She answered. “Hello?” She put the call on speakerphone.

Andy climbed onto the bed and sat behind her, gently massaging her back. Oh, she had to give up her position in the FBI and come and live here with him. Let him support her. Until she had a job in town, she supposed.

“I...I heard you were on my sister’s case,” the woman said over the phone.

“Your sister?” Monica didn’t know who the woman was.

“Helen Wright’s sister. Ivory Redman.”

Monica was surprised to hear from a sister.

“Denny’s abusive toward her. She had a restraining order against him. She wouldn’t be in on any kidnapping scheme. She likes Pierre. He has been so good to her. He’s just perfect for her.”

And rich. “Yes, that could be true.” As far as Pierre went, Monica agreed, unless he was involved in the kidnapping scheme. “Helen and Denny appear to be back together again.”

Monica was certain from the display of passionate sex between them that Helen was enjoying the experience and not in the least forced into it. Her sister was either unaware that Helen had gone back with Denny over the kidnapping scheme, or Helen was willing to go with him.

“Your brother is Harvey Marquart?” Monica asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

“And Wendell Marquart is your cousin?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, just making sure.”

“I tell you that Denny forced her to go with him. She never would have gone with him otherwise.”

Considering what had happened between Helen and Denny at the cabin, Monica didn't feel it was her place to tell her sister what she had seen. “Do you have any idea where Denny might have taken Helen?”

“His grandparents' cabin. But you must have already checked it out.”

“Yes.” The other agents would have. “But they weren't there. They had been at a friend's cabin when we located them.” She told her the other cabin owner's name.

“That's no one I know. At least Helen never told me she knew them.”

“Okay.” Which could be the truth. Denny and Helen could have broken into the cabin without the owners' knowledge.

“Denny is a master manipulator. A con man of the highest order. He has been stealing money from women whenever he can.”

“From Helen also?”

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“Yeah, from the money she makes at the beauty parlor. She won’t admit it, but I know he’s always taking the lion’s portion of her earnings. Have you checked Denny’s grandparents’ home? They have gotten him out of trouble for years.”

“I’m sure the agents who took over for me have verified that with them. But I’ll investigate them, just in case. What about his parents? Or your parents?”

“Our parents despise him for the way he has treated Helen. I don’t know where else Helen and Denny would go unless he went to one of his friends' places.”

“Like the Marquarts?”

“Yeah.”

“They’ll check into the relatives and friends of everyone with him at the cabin.”

“What about his girlfriend, Eloise Mayfair?” Helen’s sister asked.

“Denny’s girlfriend?” The drunken woman in Wendell’s truck?

“Yeah, when Helen left him and took up with Pierre, you don’t think Denny would have just been moping around, do you? He always had a girlfriend, even when he was Helen’s boyfriend. The guy’s a grifter and a serial cheater.”

“Do you have any idea where Eloise might be?”

“At her place? She lives on the outskirts of White Bear. She had been living with

Denny there. Helen knew they were and drove me past there. It's on Fox Run Road." She gave Monica the rest of the address.

"Thanks, we'll check it out."

"Just don't hurt Helen. She has done nothing wrong."

"Okay." She was innocent until proven guilty, but Monica highly doubted it.

"Go save her." Then Helen's sister hung up on Monica.

Andy hurried to get dressed. Then he helped Monica dress much more slowly.

"Are you going to call for backup?" He pulled her parka on.

"You're my backup. Unless we have some indication that she's at her place or that any of the others are, there's no sense in calling up the cavalry. Now, if we believe she or any others are holed up there when we arrive, then yes."

He pulled on his boots and parka, then grabbed their hats and gloves, his gun, the handcuffs, and her gun. They both put on their body cams.

"Let's go." She was already headed for the garage door.

He joined her in the SUV, and they were on their way. "Eloise's home is about twenty minutes from Pierre's home."

"So what do you think? Was Helen being forced to go along with this plan?" she asked.

"I don't know. On the one hand, anything's possible. On the other hand, you saw how

Denny and Helen acted toward each other. Not like she was afraid of him and wasn't trying to escape him."

"You're right. If we didn't consider the way they had been having sex, just the way she was acting, so lovey-dovey on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, while he went to get firewood, sure made it appear she was with him on the whole deal."

Twenty minutes later, they closed in on Eloise's house.

"Okay, there's the house number, the pale yellow, one-story home." He drove by and then parked out of view of the house. "I didn't see any sign of anyone there."

"Me either. There were no lights on, and no vehicle is out front."

Before they could make their plans, they saw a pizza delivery van pull up. "Real pizza delivery?" Andy asked.

"Well, there's only one way to know for sure. They just provided our cover for the next few minutes."

"At least we know for sure that someone is home."

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"Let's just hope it's Eloise and not someone we're not interested in."

They hurried out of the vehicle and headed for the pizza delivery van, quickly moving out of sight of the house when they ended up at the driver's door. The pizza delivery guy had blond curly hair, his head shaking to the loud music blaring in the van. He was on his phone when he realized Monica and Andy were at his door, his blue eyes widening.

He rolled down his window. "Are you here for Eloise's order?"

"We'll make the delivery." Andy flashed his badge.

"Oh, oh, okay."

"We want you to keep your van here for appearance's sake until we deliver the pizza," Monica said.

"There are six large pizzas here," the delivery guy said.

Andy glanced at Monica. "All right. Hold on." He called Roger and said, "If you're still in the area, we need some backup."

"I am. What have you got going down now?"

Andy gave him the address. "Eloise is one of the people involved in the kidnapping scheme. We don't know her involvement, but she ordered six large pizzas, so we don't know if some other suspects, or just family or other friends, are there."

"All right. Give us time to get there while I gather some of the guys I can reach."

They really couldn't wait. Not when they worried someone might see that the pizza van was here and the guy wasn't delivering the pizzas or leaving the area.

"Here, let me borrow your hat," Andy told the guy.

"You got to give it back."

"Yeah, sure, it's just for this mission." Then Andy took hold of the pizzas.

"I'm going around the house to the back to wait there in case anyone tries to leave," Monica said.

He didn't want her behind the house, out of view, but they had no choice. He wished they had backup this minute, but he couldn't have gathered a full-scale takedown of the perps without knowing that anyone was even there they might need to detain.

"Hey, man, I don't want my van shot up."

"We'll have you move it after I deliver the pizzas."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. One of the other officers who's coming will tell you to move it. Are the pizzas paid for?"

"Yeah, online."

"Okay." Andy assumed they would be, but he had to make sure. He didn't want the pizza delivery guy to pay for them.

Monica made a wide sweep around Eloise's house. He hoped the neighbors surrounding the home weren't her friends and would alert Eloise that a woman was sneaking around the back or that no one saw Monica moving that way.

"I've got another six deliveries to make," the delivery guy said.

"Just think. You can tell all your friends that you helped to take down possible suspects in a major federal crime."

"Can I tell them now?"

"No. Wait until we can deal with this, hopefully without hurting anyone." Andy got a text from Monica. She was hiding behind tall snow-covered shrubs with eyes on the back door.

He texted her back:I'm headed for the door before they wonder what's happening.

She texted:Has backup arrived yet?

No.

Same old thing. Okay, go for it.

Wearing the delivery guy's hat, Andy carried the hot pizzas up the sidewalk as slowly as possible, hoping Roger and some others would be there soon. Though they would probably all get some grief over this operation. It wasn't something they were assigned to do.

The sidewalk wasn't clear, so he had trouble reaching the doorway, just like when they were trekking through the woods to the cabin.

He realized he should have told Roger not to run lights or sirens to alert the house occupants. It was too late to warn him, but hopefully, he would realize the danger to him and Monica if he did so.

Thankfully, the house had no security cameras, and he didn't see a doorbell camera either. He finally reached the snow-covered porch and rang the doorbell. He couldn't hear it ring, so he thought it might not work. He knocked on the door. Again, no answer.

He hoped that didn't mean that Eloise had looked out the window, recognized him, and was rapidly getting her friends together to escape. But then she finally said through the door, "I paid for the pizza! Just leave it on the doorstep like usual."

He swore she sounded like she'd been drinking. This wasn't exactly what he had planned to happen. He set the pizzas on the snow. He didn't want to return to the van.

He wanted to grab her and take her into custody as soon as she opened the door.

What if she was watching to ensure he left and returned to his van before she opened the door? She might be paranoid about the cops coming to get her. She was smart if she was.

He turned and headed back to the van, texting Monica: Eloise sounds like she's drunk. She didn't open the door to me, so I had to leave the pizzas. I'm returning to the van.

Roger pulled in front of Andy's SUV so fast that his patrol car slipped on ice and nearly rammed it. Andy realized he'd been holding his breath, expecting a collision. Talk about it being a failed mission if that had happened.

Andy moved to the driver's side of the van and gave the driver his hat back. "Okay, we're going to start heading that way. Slowly, as if you were afraid of slipping on ice."

"To hide you."

"Yes. Just think of this as your heroic duty."

"I didn't want to get involved."

"You are just doing your civic duty." Andy backed up while the delivery guy moved his van toward Roger's car.

As soon as the van was out of view of Eloise's house, the pizza guy hightailed it out of there and Andy joined Roger.

"We've got a slew of officers headed this way." Roger sounded tense and excited simultaneously. "You know someone will say this isn't our job."

"Yeah, but we got the intel, and we're backing up the FBI agent on the case."

"Isn't she on leave for her injuries?"

"Slight technicality. There aren't any other agents in the area."

"Speaking of which, where is she?" Roger asked.

"Behind the house in case they start to escape." Andy and Roger hid in some shrubs while watching the front door.

Finally, the door opened, and Eloise, dressed in pajamas and slippers, leaned down to get the pizzas, dropped one, and tried again, cursing all the while.

Then she slammed the door shut, knocking icicles off the roof's edge.

They waited until four more patrol vehicles showed up and parked out of view of the house, but on the other side of the driveway. Again, Andy hoped no one would see the police force and alert Eloise.

Suddenly, the garage door began to open. They were making a run for it, at least Andy assumed.

Out back, he heard, "Stop! FBI!"

Hell, he needed to protect Monica. "Stop whoever is leaving in the car!" Andy told Roger.

He raced around the side of the house to find Lionel running through the deep snow with Monica in hot pursuit. At least it was just a case of one-on-one, and she wasn't outnumbered. But then Teague ran out the house's back door after Lionel and

Monica.

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His heart pounding, Andy plowed through the snow after him. He intended to tackle Teague before he reached Monica. But he missed him by inches and fell into a face full of snow. Damn it.

As long as Teague and Lionel didn't use deadly force against them, and not knowing all their involvement in the kidnapping case, they couldn't just shoot them. But Andy couldn't believe he'd misjudged lunging for Teague and missing him. Only by inches, sure, but it could have been by a mile as the guy kept running after Monica, and Andy was trying to get to his feet.

Then Andy was off and running again, furious with himself for the mistake. If Teague caught up with Monica and hurt her, he would never forgive himself.

Her left hand was still injured, and she wouldn't have time to tackle Lionel or deal with Teague. With adrenaline surging through his veins, Andy dove forward, trying to reach Teague before he could get to Monica. He was getting closer, but Teague was too close to Monica.

Teague reached her, grabbed her arm, and she swung around with her gun in hand and slugged him in the temple. He went down into the snow, and she glanced back. Andy had a zip tie out and hurried to confine Teague. He and Monica continued to pursue Lionel.

They didn't speak to each other; they just breathed in the ice-cold air, their breaths frosty as they plodded through the snow after their target.

The land dropped off, and suddenly, he was out of sight. That made Andy think of an

ambush. He and Monica slowed down until they reached the dip in the hill. Down below were more homes. Lionel's body had plowed through the snow, but he had gotten around the front of a white house and was now out of sight.

Still, Andy and Monica continued to follow his tracks and pursue him.

"I'm going this way. You go the other way around." Monica didn't wait for Andy to respond, which showed her leadership qualities and drive to complete the mission.

He admired her for it as he took off in the direction Lionel had gone, still following in his trail. This meant Monica had taken the more difficult route.

He finally reached the side property and got close to the end of the house, his gun out, ready for anything. A car's engine roared to life nearby. He hoped it wasn't Lionel getting away in his vehicle or stealing someone else's.

Monica shouted, "Get out of the car now!"

Hell, she was a firecracker ready to explode. He raced beyond the house and saw her facing down a car, Lionel in the driver's seat.

Andy shot out the car's tires facing him. Lionel was racing the engine, threatening to run Monica over. She was holding her position, her gun in her hands, ready to shoot through the windshield. Andy dashed through the snow to the car, unsure what he would do when he got there.

He needed to keep Lionel from running over Monica, forcing her to shoot him. But he didn't know if Lionel was armed either.

He slipped on the ice and slammed into the passenger's door. That wasn't planned either.

His heart pumping hard, he looked inside the fogged-up window at Lionel, who suddenly gunned the engine. Monica fired at the front driver's side tire and leaped into the snowbank. Andy hoped she hadn't reinjured herself.

He raced into the street and shot out the remaining tire. Lionel had no control over the car on the icy street with four flat tires. He sailed into a mailbox and crashed into a truck parked in front of another house.

Andy should have just run toward the car before Lionel managed to extricate himself from it, but he had to help Monica out of the snowbank in case she was hurting. He pulled her free, and they both ran toward the wrecked car. Lionel raced off and slipped on ice, falling onto his backside in what would have been a laugh-out-loud moment, except he had a gun, and he turned it on them.

Andy shoved Monica out of the way, forcing her into a snow pile. And fired back. He hit Lionel in the shoulder. Lionel dropped his weapon as two police cars roared down the street, sirens sounding off and lights flashing this time.

"Move away from the gun!" Andy shouted, realizing that the gun Lionel dropped was Andy's! He and Monica were still in the line of fire if Lionel retrieved Andy's gun and shot it out with them. Monica ran for cover behind the wrecked car.

Andy continued to hold his gun on Lionel, who was looking at him and then at the gun, which was only a few inches away from him. Would he take the bait or not?

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With her gun ready, Monica moved around the car to reach Lionel. The other officers had exited their vehicles but were staying behind them. Andy was the most vulnerable for now. She had to rush around the truck that Lionel had collided with and reach him before he shot Andy. As soon as Lionel heard her sneaking around on

the crunchy snow, Lionel turned to observe her.

"Roll this way," she ordered, her weapon poised at him.

At the same time, Andy took advantage of the distraction and raced onto the street to grab Lionel's gun. As soon as he did, Lionel grabbed for it.

Was the guy suicidal?

Monica ran the last few feet just as Andy reached the gun and grabbed it. He would have just kicked it away from Lionel, but it was impossible with the street covered in snow.

The officers quickly joined them. Andy pulled gauze from his first aid kit and applied it to Lionel's arm. Then he wrapped it in a pressure bandage when the sound of more sirens rent the air. More police vehicles were suddenly on the scene, and an ambulance arrived.

"There were six large pizzas," Monica suddenly said.

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“Yeah. And all we saw were two of the guys. Was anyone found in the house?” Andy asked one of the other officers.

“The pizzas were on the dining table, but everyone had left. We suspect they were in Eloise’s car. Others went after the car but lost them,” one of the officers said.

“She sounded like she was drunk again,” Andy said.

“She wasn’t driving. Some guy was. We didn’t even see her, just the guy at the wheel.”

“Then the others were hiding in the car, most likely,” Andy said.

Roger soon joined them. “We have Teague in a police car.”

EMTs were taking care of Lionel’s arm, and one of the cops accompanied him as they transported him to the hospital.

“You know you’re going to have to turn over your gun,” Roger said to Andy.

“Yeah, but at least the other police arrived with their car cams, and I have my body cam on.”

“I was glad when everyone began getting those,” Roger said.

“Yeah, me too.” Monica agreed that the videos were essential to show what had happened in the cases she had worked.

After connecting with his and her bosses, Monica told Andy, “We need to speak with Lionel and Teague.”

She wanted to chase after Eloise’s car, but she had no idea where they had gone.

“Yeah, let’s do it. Hey, Roger, thanks for all the help.” Andy thanked the other officers still there.

Monica did too.

Then she and Andy climbed the hill and headed past Eloise’s house. Officers were there searching the home. Monica waved to one of them. “Have you found any evidence that Wendell Marquart, Helen Wright, or Denny Wilson had been there? I’m the agent who managed to catch them the first time.”

“We heard about that,” the one officer said. “But not yet.”

She told him what they had learned, not wanting to give up her case, but it only mattered that they were caught and prosecuted.

He said, “We’re conducting a search warrant. We’re looking for anything related to the faux kidnapping crime.”

“I’ll join you. I need to know if the others were in the house and left with Eloise. I need to locate them.”

“Let us know if you find anything.”

“I will.” She turned to Andy. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here.”

Roger soon joined him, and she was glad Andy had someone to talk to and wasn't just left out in the cold.

She entered the house and saw the pizzas on the table where they had been dropped. They must have realized that Andy had been with the police and quickly made their escape. Several of them had been there—except Helen and Wendell. That's why she had to check out the house. To see if she could smell their scents.

That was one of the shifters' huge advantages in locating people—both the good guys and bad.

She walked into one of the bedrooms where she smelled that Eloise and Denny had been having sex. That didn't make any sense. Where had Helen and Wendell been?

She walked around the rest of the house, smelling the scents of Lionel and Teague. So that was it. She didn't see any bags that the men might have owned.

“We found drugs,” one of the officers said.

“Did you find any money?” Monica asked.

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As in ransom money. Neither Lionel nor Teague had any on them, so Eloise and Denny must have taken the bags and thrown them in the car to hide the evidence. They must not have had time to grab the drugs.

“No money. We’re still looking.”

“Okay. They might have gotten the bags of money for the kidnapping and thrown it in the car or hidden it somewhere else before they came here.” Monica wished they had at least found that.

“You would think the other men, Teague and Lionel, would want their cuts.”

Monica agreed. She figured they weren’t too far away from the money. “They might already have their cuts and then have them hidden elsewhere. These people aren’t the smartest criminals. Gathering like they did was sure to get them caught.”

“Yeah, I agree, which is good for us. Maybe we can catch these guys.”

“We will.” She was determined to do so. She just wished, like before, that the others hadn’t gotten away. “Good luck on the search.”

“Did you gather anything from looking around?”

“Not much. Just that they left quickly.”

“Good luck with your case.”

“Thanks.” Monica left Eloise’s house and joined Andy and Roger.

Andy immediately hugged her. She hadn’t expected it because she was on the job, and so was he, even though they were both supposed to be off duty. But she appreciated it and hugged him back.

“Are you ready to interview Harvey, Teague, and Lionel?” Monica asked Andy.

“Yeah, I sure am.”

“Let’s go. And thanks, Roger, for helping again,” Monica said.

“My pleasure.” Roger saluted them and headed to his car.

Monica got into Andy’s SUV.

“How are you?”

“Good. My hand is much better, and so is my back. I still can’t touch my thumb to my pinky, but I’m gently working on getting more mobility in it.”

“That’s good.” He took her hand and pressed a gentle kiss on it. Then he started the car and drove to the police department. “What did you learn in Eloise’s house?”

She loved that Andy was always so affectionate. “That Denny and Eloise had sex recently in her bedroom.”

“Hell, no kidding?”

“Yeah, and there was no sign of Wendell or Helen having been there.” She explained about the drugs. “But no money.”

“Good that they got her on drugs once they capture her.”

“Right. I opt for us to talk to Teague and Lionel first. Maybe they’ll spill the truth about where the others went.”

“I agree.”

The police department loomed ahead, its brick exterior imposing and intimidating. As they approached, they could see people coming and going, some in uniform, others in handcuffs. The building's windows gleamed, reflecting the sunlight with a touch of authority.

Monica took a deep breath and exhaled.

Andy rubbed her arm to offer support, which she so appreciated. Not in a million years would she have thought she’d need someone to bolster her like that.

“Are you okay?”

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“Yeah. I want to make sure that I ask all the right questions and we get all the right answers.”

“You will. Maybe not on the first interview, but when you get the others to corroborate their stories.”

“True.”

The department was bustling with people, some filing complaints or missing person reports, and some being fingerprinted and photographed. Phones rang, people chatted, and papers shuffled in a constant barrage of sounds. The occasional siren could be heard in the distance, a reminder of the urgency and importance of the police department's work.

The faint scent of coffee and the sharp odor of cleaning supplies wafted through the air, with a hint of sweat and nervousness. The familiar smell of ink and paper from fingerprinting kits lingered in the background. Due to the bears' heightened sense of smell, everything seemed sharper.

Monica showed her badge to the officer. “I need to speak to Teague Moore and Lionel Boyer separately. Harvey Marquart after that.”

“Yes, ma'am. You too, Andy?”

“I'll let Agent O'Connell do all the questioning, but I'll listen in.”

The officer shook his head, smiling. “Most of us have a love-hate relationship with

the FBI when we try to investigate a case, and then they take it over. But you're starting to be on better terms with at least one of them."

Andy laughed. Then he listened from the viewing room while Monica interviewed Teague first.

When she entered the room with a few papers, Teague glanced at Monica, raised his brows, and tilted his chin up arrogantly.

"Okay, you're in a lot of trouble right now." Monica sat in the chair on the opposite side of the table from Teague, started the recording, and read him his rights. Then she leaned forward, closing the gap between them in more of an intimidating stance.

"I haven't done anything." He shoved his hands in his pockets but didn't move away from her.

"You were carrying a bag that contained ransom money paid for the kidnapping of Helen Wright."

"Says you. It's not so. You have no proof. I've never met you before."

"I hate to inform you that both the trooper and I were wearing body cams that showed everything that happened at the cabin."

Teague's jaw dropped. He leaned back away from her, trying to distance himself now as if she had actual evidence.

"So even if you and your cohorts all said the same thing, that they'd never seen us, it won't wash. Oh, and the federal agents picked up all the handcuffs we'd used on you and obtained the DNA from them, so you won't be able to lie your way out of this." Monica sat back in her chair. "Where are the others?"

“Hell, if I know. That trooper tackled me and handcuffed me, and then I was hauled off to jail.”

“Okay, well, we have Lionel also. Where would Eloise and Denny go next? With all the money, right? Do you trust them to hold onto your money also?”

“We already got our cuts.” Teague sat immobile, staring at her, unexpectedly telling her about his complicity. He looked just as surprised to realize he had done it, pulling his hands out of his pockets and running them through his hair. “I mean?—”

“So, how much did you get?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay, look, I want a deal.” He kept talking before she could tell him it would be up to the district attorney. “I got five thousand dollars.”

“How much was paid in total?”

“We all got five thousand.”

At least, she was sure that’s what Denny told them. But she was also certain that he would have had the lion’s share and wouldn’t have told his minions how much he was actually getting from the deal.

“Where would Denny and Eloise have gone, and why did you and Lionel head out the back door while they were driving off in their car?”

“I have no idea where that bastard took off to. We’re all in on this together, and then suddenly, it’s every man and woman for himself. Eloise goes along with everything he says or does. She’s like a cult follower.”

“But you?”

“Hell, the two took off while I was in the bathroom, and Lionel was out on the back deck smoking. That’s when I heard Dennis and Eloise leave quickly and knew Lionel and I were in trouble. They just left us to take the fall!”

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That's what Monica liked to hear. No loyalty among criminals.

“When I saw Lionel running down the hill, I followed him.”

“You weren't after me?” She raised her brows. She knew he had planned to take her down. Maybe not kill her, but stop her from going after Lionel and him, had he reached her in the snowdrifts.

Teague said nothing; he stared at the table and tapped his foot on the floor.

“I don't understand why Eloise was with Denny when he and Helen were together.”

Teague frowned at Monica. “Eloise is with Denny. He and Helen are old news.”

“But...” That's certainly not what she saw when Helen was with Denny at the cabin before they took them into custody. Had she made the mistake of thinking Helen was in on the faux kidnapping scheme when she was a kidnapped victim? But it sure didn't look like it.

Teague was eyeing her, waiting for her to finish what she had to say.

“Where are Helen and Wendell?”

“Hell, if I know. Listen, I'm not the boss of this thing, get that? I was just one of the deliverymen.”

“Why did you go to Pierre's house instead of arranging to pick up the money at some

other location? Somewhere that no one could identify you?"

"He disabled his security cameras."

"At Wendell's request?"

"Hell, no. He didn't want to be caught in this whole thing." Teague looked at her like he thought she was an idiot.

"Because Pierre was behind the whole kidnapping?" She was sure she looked shocked.

"Bingo, lady. You get the prize."

"Why?"

"Because you figured it out. Hell, I thought you already knew all this."

"No, why would Pierre want to do this?"

"The money? Maybe? Come on, I thought you had figured out this whole thing. Wait, you thought Denny oversaw the operation?" Teague laughed. "That would be the day."

"How did you know to cut my brake lines, but just enough so that I would be out in the wilderness and in danger?"

Teague didn't say anything for a moment.

"Someone had to tell you to do it. You wouldn't have known I would go after Helen and Denny otherwise. So who did?" She leaned forward again, getting closer to him,

demanding he tell her what she had to know.

Teague looked at the floor.

“Unless you’re just a maniacal sadist.”

He frowned at her. “Helen told me, all right?”

“Helen?”

“Yeah. On the news, she saw you had rescued a kidnapped victim, and even the vehicle you were driving as you left the scene. We were nearby because we were going to grab Pierre's money. The others stayed in the vehicle. I was a car mechanic, so I knew how to handle it.”

That finally sounded plausible.

“She said Pierre had the hots for you, which really bothered her. He knew Helen had been with Denny at his grandparents’ cabin. Helen bet any amount of money that he would call you up since you were in the area, his old girlfriend, who solved kidnapping cases, and ask you to go to her rescue because he was still hung up on you. So she told me to make it impossible for that to happen just in case she was right.”

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“Wow.”Helen the bitch. “Okay, well, I’ll be right back.” Monica needed to talk with Lionel and Andy.

When she left the interview room, Andy joined her. “You know damn well he planned to take you down when he was chasing after you.”

“Yeah, and I was lucky to have you as my backup, or Teague might have. He had much longer legs, but I was waiting for just the right moment to cold cock him with my gun. But I might not have knocked him out all the way, so I was glad you zip-tied his wrists right away. I hate to ask, was the gun Lionel had on him yours?”

Andy’s ears were tinged a little red. “Yeah.”

“Good. Then you’ve got it back, though it will be used as evidence in the upcoming trial. At least we know he’s no longer able to use it in the commission of a crime. So from what Teague says, Pierre oversaw the kidnapping.”

“And Helen was responsible for having your brake lines cut.”

“Yeah, that was a surprise and a half.” Monica got on her phone, called her boss, and told him what she’d learned from Teague. “I will speak to Lionel next to see if he verifies what Teague said.”

“Let me know as soon as possible so that I can relay the word to the other agents in the field.”

“I will, sir.” They ended the call, and she hugged Andy. “This case is a nightmare and

a half.”

“But at least we have two villains locked up, including Harvey, though he hadn’t been in on the kidnapping case.”

“We just need to get the rest of them.” Then, they walked to the next interview room, where she went in to talk to Lionel, and Andy watched through the viewing window.

Lionel was leaning back in the chair, arms folded across his chest, looking nonchalant.

She sat opposite him, started the recording, and read Lionel his rights. “Okay, so Teague told me about everyone’s involvement in the case.”

“Shit,” Lionel said, his indifference changing immediately to one of concern.

“We’ve got Trooper MacMathan’s gun back; we have a body cam of your involvement at the cabin and how you tried to kill him. We have a body cam of you trying to kill us with his gun just an hour ago behind Eloise’s house.”

“If you know so much, why question me?” Lionel lifted his hands as if punctuating the question.

“Denny said you were the mastermind of the whole operation.”

“No way in hell. Pierre was.”

She didn’t know what to think. “How much money did you get?”

“Five thousand. I’m sure Teague already told you that.”

“He did, but they didn’t split the money equally. Two million dollars? Not a very equitable share, I wouldn’t think.”

“Two million, no way.”

“I don’t get why Eloise and Denny were hooking up at her house when he was hooking up with Helen at the cabin.”

“What?”

“Having sex. I mean, if she were a hostage. Helen, that is.”

“Of course, she was a hostage. As mad as Denny was that you handcuffed us and we couldn’t get free until I managed to lift the couch, he was even madder that you thought she was a liar and in on the whole scheme. That was until he thought he could use it to his advantage.”

“Aww, but she told Teague to cut my brake lines, so why would she do that? I’m sure you and Wendell watched him while he did it. He said both of you stayed in the vehicle.”

“Damn it, Teague,” Lionel said under his breath.

“Why would Helen have consensual sex with Denny?” Monica asked, shifting gears and not understanding the dynamics between them.

“She loved the bastard even if she didn’t mean anything to him. She was just a means to an end when he learned she was dating Moneybags Pierre. And Pierre went along with the plan. Pierre didn’t care about Helen either. But he needed money, and the scheme was perfect.”

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“Pierre did?” Since Helen was in on the whole scheme, she couldn’t feel sorry for her. But she really couldn’t believe that Pierre would be in on it. Maybe his investments had soured, and he was looking at bankruptcy, and this was a way to dig himself out of the hole. “Where did Pierre get the money from?”

“How would I know that?”

“Where are Wendell and Helen?”

“I have no idea. My mistake was in going to Eloise’s house. We were going to split up, but we planned to eat pizzas first, since Eloise was buying them, and then leave. But that weasel, Denny, lit out of there with Eloise and stranded Teague and me.”

“Six pizzas?”

“Yeah. We would have taken anything that was left over with us to have as a snack.”

So no one else had been there then. “You said that Pierre went along with the kidnapping plan. But you also said Pierre was the mastermind in charge of it.”

“Well, he was. Denny learned from Helen that Pierre had tons of money. She wanted to get back with Denny. She thought if they did this scheme, she would pretend to be kidnapped, they would have accomplices get the money from Pierre, and then we would all go our merry way.”

“Wait, so Helen was in charge of the plan?” Man, this was hard to keep up with.

“Yeah, Helen thought up the plan first. I was there when she was seeing Denny and suggested it. She was all excited about how wealthy Pierre was. But when Denny went to Pierre’s house to ‘grab’ Helen, Pierre talked him into a new scheme. He couldn’t access the money unless he did a con, and then he would split the money with Denny and his cohorts.”

“All right. I’ll talk to you more later.” Monica left the room and joined Andy.

“It started out with Helen wanting to get the money and be with Denny, and somehow, Pierre took over the plan. But why involve you?” Andy asked.

“To make it seem more legitimate, maybe? He had sent me to rescue her, but Helen ensured I couldn’t follow them. I believe Helen devised the scheme, thinking she could win Denny back. She probably knew he was with Eloise now. But she most likely believed Denny would go along with it to get some fast money. She needed some way to get his attention. Then Pierre convinced Denny to let him in on the scheme.”

Andy stroked his chin. “Most likely because he wanted to keep a big chunk of the money, and he was angry with Helen for planning the con.”

“Right. That would make sense. It had to be money he could readily get and then claim his poor girlfriend had been kidnapped. I would be the patsy because—” Monica said.

“He steered you to the cabin he thought they might be at. But he had to make it look like?—”

“She had been kidnapped.”

“That would only happen if he sent you to go after her. Because he knew you

personally, he felt comfortable telling you, and you wouldn't alert other law enforcement that might get her killed. But it was just a ruse to give him more of an alibi," Andy said.

Monica let out her breath. "It sure sounds like that. Otherwise, if he never called me and didn't call anyone else, no one would know it was a kidnapping."

"Exactly."

"You don't think Teague and Lionel would make that story up, do you?" Monica asked.

"No. It sounds to me that that's all they know. Are you going to speak with Harvey?"

"Yeah. The DEA agents will have questioned him already. So I need to ask him if he knows about the kidnapping scheme. Even though I suspect he won't know about it unless Wendell, his cousin, or Helen, his sister, blabbered about it to him."

Monica had Teague and Lionel returned to their cells and then asked to interview Harvey.

"Perfect timing," the officer said. "He was brought into the jail a half hour ago after being at the hospital."

"Good. Did DEA agents question him at the hospital?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was on guard duty while they did."

"Okay, thanks."

Once Harvey was escorted into an interview room, Monica walked inside and sat at

the table. She read him his rights. “All right, your sister, Helen, and your cousin, Wendell, are in trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

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“The fake kidnapping? Extortion?”

Harvey shrugged. She figured she didn't have a lot of leverage to force him to give up the truth, especially when he might not know much of anything.

“Tell me why you weren't invited in on the kidnapping for ransom scheme. Why did Wendell get a piece of the pie and cut you out? Why take a couple of his buddies instead? Each of them got twenty-five thousand for the affair.” Monica hoped that approach might work instead.

Harvey's eyes widened a bit. Then he folded his arms and narrowed his eyes. “They didn't get that much.”

So he did know about it. “You already have hefty drug charges against you, not to mention possessing a firearm as a felon and the attempted murder of a law enforcement officer. Do you want to add obstruction charges?”

Tilting his chin up, he didn't say anything.

“Okay, look, Mr. Marquart, Denny and your sister made the most out of this deal. They ended up with five hundred thousand apiece.”

Harvey's jaw dropped, but he quickly snapped it shut. “No way.”

“So here's the thing: everyone else is getting in on the gravy train but you. Your cousin and your sister.”

“I don’t know what they had planned. That’s all I can say.”

“But you knew something was going to happen.”

“I had a beer with Helen at the motel, and she brought it up, okay? But like a joke. Not like anything they were going to do.”

“So what did she say exactly?”

“Pierre had loads of money, and she was thinking she would scam him by faking her kidnapping, and Denny would be the kidnapper.”

“You know she’s back with Denny then?” Monica wondered who really knew the true story.

“Nah, she’s with Pierre still. She needed Denny to act as the kidnapper since she knew he would go along for the money. But hell, she never said she was going to make that much. Believe me, Denny wasn’t going to make that.”

“That’s what Teague and Lionel said.”

“Helen wouldn’t have told any of them how much she would make off the deal. She and Pierre were splitting the funds.”

Now Monica didn’t know what to think! Since Pierre was in the wind, did that mean Helen got her share, or was he supposed to keep it to spend on them? Which meant he ran off with the money and left her behind, or was she with him?

“You know that for certain?”

Harvey shrugged again. “That was the plan. I told her it was damn risky. Denny

would want more if he learned she was getting all that money. I didn't know she would involve our cousin Wendell or our buddies. She didn't tell me that part, and none of them mentioned their involvement."

"Okay, well, let me know if you think of anything else."

Then Monica left the interview room and had the officer lock him back up.

"How more twisted could this be? Do you want to go for a drive?" Andy asked as they left the police department.

"You mean in the direction of where the officers lost Eloise's car?"

"Yep. If you want to and feel up to it."

"Yeah, let's go. We need to unravel the whole story and learn the truth, which means we have to catch them now before they disappear for good."

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On the drive to Denny's grandparents' cabin, Andy had the niggling concern that Wendell and Helen might have gone to the motel to hide out.

Before he could voice his concern, Monica echoed his own thoughts, "Do you think they're at Harvey's motel?"

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"That's certainly a possibility. It'll be taped off as a crime scene because Harvey tried to kill you when you were in the lobby, but he's incarcerated now. The police won't have any reason to be there now. How much do you want to bet that Wendell or Helen has access to it? Which would make the perfect place to hole up for a while."

"Right. So the motel is on the way. We'll check it out. If it looks like no one is there or has been there, we'll go to Denny's grandparents' cabin. Or even to the cabin where they stayed before," she said.

"I agree that's the best move."

Monica got a call. "It's my boss. Yes, sir?" She put it on speakerphone.

"One of our agents questioned the couple who own the cabin where all this went down. They said they know Denny because they're neighbors who live about a quarter of a mile apart. But they hadn't told him he and his girlfriend could stay there. Denny has his grandparents' cabin to stay at. So they were pretty steamed about the whole thing."

"Good. I'm glad they're also not involved."

"From the sounds of it, they're sincere. We checked into their background, and he owns a nightclub in a town north of White Bear. She has an accounting business there. Neither has had any run-ins with the law."

"Okay, thanks!"

"Did you question Lionel and Teague?"

"Yes, sir." She explained what had happened.

"I thought you were supposed to be resting up."

"I am. But I'm still checking into things in case we can get a lead."

"I don't want you to overdo it and need even more time off."

Andy smiled at her.

Monica smiled because, as it was, she wasn't taking off that much time, but she knew from the tone of her boss's voice that he was glad she was still working the case. He was known to have a sense of humor. "Yes, sir."

"Keep me informed."

"I sure will." Then they ended the call.

Neither she nor Andy said anything for a moment. He finally cleared his throat. "You're working on your time off."

Monica chuckled. "Yeah, it's a joke between us. He knows when I get injured—I was shot once in the leg—I recover quickly, and I'm back on the job."

"I hope whoever shot you is in prison or dead," Andy said.

"Uh, no, he was a fellow agent and meant to get the perp, but hit me instead. When I went down, he managed to take out the gun-wielding robber. Of course, the agent was given grief because of shooting me, but I told my boss and the investigators that

he was a fine agent, and he'd saved my life.”

“Fine agent.” Andy scoffed.

“He was. The robber had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and he would have shot and killed me if my partner hadn't hit me, making me fall, and then taken the guy out.”

"Did your partner purposefully shoot you?" Andy asked.

She smiled. "No. He was just trying to hit the robber. The poor guy was so shaken up about it that he quit the FBI. I felt bad for him because he was good at his job, except for shooting me. But one incident like that can mar someone for life."

"That's for sure, but if you ever need to shoot me to get me out of the way so you can save my life?—"

"I'll make sure it's just a graze."

He laughed.

This time, they had traveled much faster to the motel than when driving in a caravan to White Bear. He was surprised when they finally came upon the motel. The lobby was taped off as a crime scene, but no one was there. There were no vehicles, no lights on in any of the rooms, the lobby was dark, and the closed sign was still on the glass door.

"Looks dead," Monica said.

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"Yeah." Andy parked his car in the drive-thru in front of the front doors to the lobby.

"Do you feel like this is déjà vu?"

"Yeah, I sure do." As soon as he drove under the cover at the drive-thru, envisioning leaping out of Harvey's camper truck as a bear, and roaring in to save Monica. Andy got out of his car.

Monica left right after him, and the two approached the door. They peered in but saw no movement.

She tried the door, but it was locked. Do you have your lockpick handy?

"Yeah. Just watch out for the cops while I do this."

Her smile warmed him.

He unlocked the door, and they moved under the crime scene tape, locking it behind them. They listened for any sign that anyone was in the lobby but didn't hear anything.

Andy said low for her ears only, "Do you want me to take your gun and lead the way because of your injured hand?"

"No. If we need to shoot someone, I want to be the one responsible for using my own gun. Otherwise, my boss would go ballistic and say I really shouldn't have been trying to track these guys down."

"All right." He glanced at the security videos. "Good, the security cameras are operational." He said so quietly, but in a way that the camera would capture him saying it, making it appear they were there like they were supposed to be.

The only reason to alter the video was if either had to shift into their bears.

They checked out the restroom, but no one was in there. They searched the counter area and the back office and found them empty. They walked into the laundry room and didn't smell that anyone had been washing clothes recently; there was no humidity or scent of laundry detergent having been used recently.

They left the laundry room and reached a set of stairs. Monica warned, "I smell Denny and Eloise's scents."

He agreed and wondered if the stairs led to an apartment where Harvey lived. But it could be just storage. Still, if he was dealing drugs here, he was probably staying here and managing the motel also as a cover-up.

She started climbing the stairs, trying not to make them creak. She was doing well, too. He, on the other hand, just had to step on a stair that squeaked. With their enhanced hearing, he felt it was loud enough to wake everyone in the motel if anyone had been staying there.

She glanced sharply at him, and he shrugged, embarrassed, but he couldn't help it. He was trying to be careful! She was just sneakier than he was. And weighed less.

They finally reached the landing. A door was closed at the end of the walkway, and a balcony looked over the front desk. She moved down the hall to the door, gingerly walking that way while he tried to follow in her footsteps and not make any more noise.

Before she reached the door, a floorboard beneath his feet creaked, and his heart nearly stopped. She didn't glance back at him this time. He felt like she probably thought she should have left him waiting in the vehicle because he was making so much noise.

She waited until he was beside her. Then he tried the doorknob because she had her gun in her hand. The doorknob didn't budge.

Harvey probably kept it locked while he was downstairs taking care of customers. That would make sense. Andy placed his ear next to the door to listen for anyone in the place. He shook his head, telling Monica he heard nothing. He did smell the odor of weed beneath the door, which could be from when Harvey was in there last—nothing new.

"Weed," Monica whispered.

Andy nodded. He got out his toolkit and unlocked the door. Even though he did it as carefully as possible, he swore it sounded like he was making a ton of noise. He heard a click. Then he waited, ensuring he didn't hear people moving inside when they thought someone was about to breach the room.

Nothing. He looked at Monica, asking silently if she was ready.

She nodded.

He slowly opened the door, and the darn thing squeaked. Wouldn't you know? When his doors made noise like that, he put oil on the hinges, but it worked if Harvey wanted a creaky door to sound an alarm.

Andy looked around the door but didn't see anyone in the living area. It was filled with two couches, three lounging chairs, a big maple coffee table in the center, and a

few things tossed around—pillows and clothes. Law enforcement agents would have grabbed what they could for evidence after the shootout in the lobby, and because they had found drugs in his vehicle.

He smelled more weed, stronger in the living room, but there was no evidence of any right now. The police had probably confiscated it. He also smelled Denny and Eloise's scents; they were new enough to make him think they had been here recently.

A small kitchen was located off to the left, and a counter divided it from the living room. The cabinet doors and drawers were shut, and nothing appeared to be out of place, making Andy wonder if someone had recently been using it. A glass door, covered by vertical blinds, was located at the back of the apartment. He headed for it and opened the blinds.

Snow covered the deck off the bedroom. Only bird tracks had been left in the snow. He closed the vertical blinds.

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Monica checked out one of the three doors opposite the kitchen. She listened at one door, then hearing nothing, he hurried to open the door for her. He turned the knob slowly.

She peeked in and stepped into the room. He quickly joined her and looked inside. The compact bathroom had a sink, commode, and bathtub. She pulled back the shower curtain and shook her head.

Clear. Then they went to the next door, and when she opened it, they found a closet, coats hanging inside, snow boots, and nothing else.

They moved to the last door, which had to be the bedroom. This time, Andy turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. A queen-size bed was sitting against one wall, the covers half hanging on the floor as if someone had recently left the bed.

He headed over to the wooden door in the room that he suspected was the closet and found a walk-in closet with clothes on one side and linens and towels on the other.

Monica checked out the glass door, half hidden by vertical blinds, and he assumed that it led to another balcony. A wall must have separated the living room balcony from this one, so he hadn't realized there would be another balcony.

He hurried to the door, but when he went to unlock it, he realized it was already unlocked. He peeked through the blinds. Smaller boot prints were imprinted in the snow, and a larger man's boots were beside them.

"Hell." Irritated to the max that they could have just missed them, Andy rushed onto

the balcony and looked down.

Footprints had run toward the imprint of where a car had been parked. Then, the two people got into the car and took off. There were no cars anywhere in sight.

Monica joined him. "It looks like they were here for a while, probably straightened up the kitchen and went straight to the bedroom to rest."

"Yeah. Then heard us enter the apartment at some point." He pointed to a parking area behind the motel. "Tire tracks there."

"Let's see if we can find them."

They hurried out of the apartment, down the stairs, and through the lobby. Once outside, they got into his car and headed around the motel to the backside, where a dumpster and room for about six cars sat. Only one vehicle had been there, and now it was gone.

They drove off and followed the tracks, but the road led back to a snow-packed area, and they couldn't tell where the car had gone.

"They only have three ways to go—back toward town, or in the direction of the cabins, or hit the road we had been on and go from there once they get farther down the road," Monica said.

"They would most likely keep going. I suspect they would be afraid whoever was after them might return to the cabin they'd stayed at or go to Denny's grandparents' cabin." Andy drove back toward the cabin.

"Or not. Pierre supposedly is the one who planned things out and disappeared, unlike these guys, who ended up back at Eloise's house. So maybe they will go to one of the

two cabins. I would opt for his grandparents' place. "

Andy drove as fast as he could, but the road conditions were still icy, and his tires slipped on patches.

"Don't wreck the car."

He shook his head, not wanting that either. "Nope. I can't imagine what the guys would say at the office if they heard I was in yet another accident."

"Right. And out here?" She checked her phone. "No reception. So we don't want to be lost in action again."

They finally reached the first road that led to the neighbor's cabin. Andy slowed down.

"Yeah, go for it. It's first, so we might as well check it out."

He pulled into the long drive, but Eloise's car wasn't there. "Do you want to go inside to see if there's anything anyone missed?"

Monica eyed the lifeless building. "I don't think anyone's here, but we're here now, and we might as well make certain."

They exited his SUV, guns drawn, and approached the cabin using caution. A white hare hiding under a snow-covered bush darted out of its hiding place and dashed into the nearby woods, making Monica jump back.

Andy caught her arm before she completely lost her balance and fell. "Are you all right?" He ran his hand over her back to calm her nerves.

“Yeah. Don’t tell me the hare didn’t scare you too.”

He chuckled. “Damn near gave me a heart attack.” He used the lockpick to let them in, and they cleared the house. No one had been here since the police had been.

Monica took a deep breath and let it out. “Are you ready to find Denny’s grandparents’ cabin?”

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“Okay, so we just drive up this road, and the cabin is on a side road to the left?” Andy asked, determined to catch the perps this time and keep them in custody until they were incarcerated.

“I sure hope so. It was hard to tell when the conditions were snowy. But I think so.” Monica sounded like she hated to admit she’d gotten lost in the blizzard. And they’d only gotten lucky that they had found the cabin where Denny and Helen had been.

As far as he was concerned, she’d made the best move. “Here’s a drive. Let’s take it.”

He drove down the driveway, but when he came to the end, the property was just cleared off, like someone had planned to build a cabin but hadn’t started.

He turned around, returned to the main road, and drove in the direction they figured the cabin had to be again. The next driveway they found had fresh tire marks in the snow.

Monica’s heart rate increased. “This could be it.”

“We can’t call for backup.” Andy’s heart rate was surging, too. However, he realized it could just be someone else’s cabin. But then he recognized Eloise’s green Nissan Rogue.

“No. But if we’re lucky, it will be just the two of them. I’m sure Denny will be the only one we’ll have issues with. If Eloise is like how she has been the last two times

we've seen her, she's still wasted."

He drove slowly down the drive but out of view of the cabin. He would block the drive so that Eloise's car couldn't get past them without ending up down the embankment and in the trees. After that, he and Monica needed to sneak in on foot through the forest.

"Are you ready?" He put on his emergency brake.

"I sure am."

They got out of the car and carefully closed the doors so they wouldn't make too much noise. The sound shouldn't reach the occupants because they were so far from the cabin unless they were outside getting firewood, but they wanted to take precautions.

This time, Andy made the path through the deep snow in the woods while Monica followed his trail. He was ready to take the two down, though he suspected Eloise didn't have much to do with anything. It was likely that she was more of a tag-along.

Still, if they could interview her, she might be able to tell them more of the story.

Smoke curled out of the two chimneys of the square, two-story log cabin. An overstory of alder and an understory of spruce and hemlock surrounded the place. A large front deck wrapped around the cabin. Lights were on in both the first and second-floor rooms. The second story also had a large balcony across the approximately twenty-foot front of the cabin.

The green metal roof covered the upstairs balcony, and the balcony floor partially covered the first-floor deck. Both were cleared of snow, indicating the occupants had to have removed it after the blizzard. The front of the cabin had a window on

either side of the windowed door on both floors. On the east side of the cabin, there were no windows.

“Let’s navigate through the forest over there.” Monica pointed in the direction.

Eloise’s car was parked next to the side of the building.

“We need to disable their car.” Andy figured that Eloise and Denny wouldn’t be able to escape if he and Monica accidentally alerted them before they had them in custody.

Even though he parked his car to block the drive, he still didn’t trust that they wouldn’t try to use her vehicle to shove him off the driveway.

Monica brought out a retractable knife and slashed the passenger’s side tires while he took care of the other tires.

They moved through the deep snow to the back side of the cabin. It had a door featuring a window and windows on each side of the door, and there was another deck back there and up above, but the snow hadn’t been cleaned off. They climbed onto the deck and then, staying low, crept to the first of the windows.

They paused, and then Andy looked first through the frosty window. He ducked down again. “A fire is in the fireplace, but I don’t see anyone in the living area. A kitchen is located to the east. I didn’t see anyone in the living area or kitchen. Stairs are to the west, and there’s a balcony, probably to a bedroom or two.”

Monica moved through the dense snow to the door and tried it. It was locked. “Have you got your handy door opener?”

“Always.” He joined her, removed his lockpick, and carefully unlocked the door. He twisted the doorknob, peeked inside, and listened. “Voices upstairs.”

“Let’s go.”

He walked into the house, his boots covered in snow, tracking it into the house. He shouldn’t have been concerned about it when he was on a mission, but he wished he could have kicked off the snow before he entered the house—just a natural reaction to not wanting to make water puddles on the floor.

On the other hand, Monica tracked in just as much snow but didn’t seem bothered by it as she pulled out her gun, ready for action.

Now, it was time to move up more wooden stairs, hoping they wouldn’t creak and warn Denny and Eloise that they were here. Well, at least Andy hoped he didn’t alert them this time.

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Like before, Monica was quiet as she moved up the stairs. They didn't hear anything on the second floor. No talking, no movement, nothing.

He wondered if they were asleep. They couldn't have been alerted that they were here. Hell, if Denny and Eloise climbed off the balcony, found her car disabled, and saw his car down the road...

He could imagine them breaking into his car, possibly hot-wiring it and taking off, leaving Monica and him stranded!

He ran ahead of Monica to the door and shoved it open. No one was in the bed. Hell. He rushed into the bedroom and looked out the glass door at the deck. There were no footprints.

Monica dashed to the bathroom door and signaled to him that someone was in there.

She opened the door, and Denny rushed her, naked as the day he came into the world and was covered in soap and water. He quickly tackled her for her gun, throwing her back onto the slippery tile floor. The shower was still on, and the bathroom was steamy from the hot water.

Andy was on top of Denny instantly, but he was wet and soapy, and getting hold of him was nearly impossible. Andy got him in a neck hold finally and yanked him off Monica. She quickly pulled her handcuffs out and slapped them on one of his wrists. Then Andy helped her to get the cuff on the other wrist and locked them in place.

“Hey, you can't leave me here like this!” Denny said.

They dragged him out of the bathroom onto the wooden bedroom floor.

Monica quickly headed for the bathroom again while Andy joined her. "Out of the shower now!" Monica shouted to Eloise, who was in the shower stall.

The glass was fogged up, and it was as if she could hide in there until they left.

"What are you doing here! Shit! Give me a towel, why don't you? Damn pigs."

"When you get out. Turn off the shower now."

Instead of turning off the shower, Eloise opened the door and sprayed Monica with the shower hose. The water was steaming hot, and Andy yanked Monica out of the bathroom to keep her from being scalded.

"Now what?" Andy asked, calling from outside the door as water splashed all over the floor. "Eventually, your hot water will run out. You're coming with us whether you want to or not."

Denny began moving behind them, and they turned to see him on his knees now, his hands still handcuffed behind his back. He was trying to get them to his front, but unlike Lionel, who had been able to do that, Denny was having a hard time, which was good for Andy and Monica.

They still had the problem of taking them to the car like this. They had to get them to dress themselves, which could be practically impossible if they didn't cooperate, and nothing in their previous actions said they were about to do so.

"We could always resort to calling in the white coats," Monica told Andy.

Yeah, as bears, they wouldn't have all the guff. "We could. We'll let them prove they

can get dressed on their own first. I would rather not have to dress them ourselves."

"Agreed."

Eloise was no longer shooting water out of the shower, so Monica peeked inside the bathroom. "Turn off the water now."

Eloise aimed the hot spray of water at Monica again. Only this time, Andy rushed in, yanked the hose out of Eloise's hand, and dragged her out of the stall. With Monica's bad hand, he couldn't wait to see if she could manage to wrestle with the violent woman. Instead, Monica shut off the shower, still holding her gun at the ready.

"You know, if you hadn't tried to scald us and had acted civilly, we wouldn't have had to take such drastic measures." Monica grabbed a towel off the rack and shoved it at Eloise.

Andy released Eloise's arm so she could wrap the towel around her. Instead, she started to towel dry herself. Andy grabbed another towel, dried off his parka, and hung the towel back on the rack. Then he left the bathroom while Monica continued to hold the gun on her. He returned with Eloise's clothes, handed them to her, and left the room again to keep an eye on Denny.

"He's cute for being a pig." Eloise walked into the bedroom with her clothes in hand; probably because the floor was so wet, she would have gotten her clothes wet—or at least her pant legs and socks.

Monica watched her dress while Andy glanced out the window, and his heart rate increased. Wendell was trudging up the drive through the path the rest of them had made. He wouldn't know the car sitting on the drive belonged to Andy, but he would probably be wary of who it belonged to. Wendell headed straight for the front door of the house.

Andy checked on Eloise. She wore her bra and pants but was still playing with her sweater. Andy stalked over to the bed and yanked the sweater from her hands.

"Hey, dammit! I can do?—"

He jammed it over her head and forced her arms into the sweater sleeve, then quickly handcuffed her.

"You watch these two." Andy located a gun on the bedside table that most likely belonged to Denny. "I'm going to make us all some hot cocoa."

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Monica raised her brows, but he assumed she knew they had some trouble approaching, or he would have stayed and made sure Denny and Eloise were dressed, then gotten out of there. Wouldn't you know, they would end up outnumbered again.

"Hot cocoa? Add whisky to mine." Eloise sat on the bed and stuck her foot up at Monica, as if she wanted her to finish dressing her.

Andy moved into the hall and headed for the stairs before Wendell entered the cabin. He ran down the stairs. When Andy reached the landing, Wendell twisted the front doorknob and found no resistance. The front door hadn't been locked. Denny had probably figured no one would have bothered them, so there was no reason to lock the door.

Andy moved to the side of the door, waiting for Wendell to enter the house, but he hesitated, probably listening for signs of trouble.

Then Eloise said, "Hey, honey, make it with extra whiskey. And add whipped cream."

Eloise thought she was cute, but she made Andy's job easier. Wendell, most likely thinking Eloise was calling out to Denny and that he was making spiked cocoa, walked forcefully into the house, glancing in the direction of the empty kitchen.

From where he stood, hidden behind a bookcase filled with books and games, Andy quickly said, "Put your hands up where I can see them!"

Monica knew Andy wasn't getting hot cocoa for everyone. Something else was the

matter. As soon as he left the room, she looked out the window. Wendell was headed for the front door, sending a chill up her spine.

"While my partner gets our cocoa, I'll help you put on your socks and boots."

"Why was he shouting at someone to put his hands up? And what about my coat?" Eloise asked.

"He's having a bit of fun putting on a show. As to your coat, we'll take care of that as soon as we go downstairs."

Monica set her gun on a table, then was about to help Eloise with her socks when Denny, still on his knees with his wrists handcuffed behind his back, lunged forward to tackle Monica. She sidestepped him, and he fell on his face.

Irritated to the max, she grabbed her gun from the table. She couldn't do anything until Andy was here to help her.

Monica wanted to continue talking to Eloise like nothing was wrong, or she might alert Wendell, and they would have a shootout. Monica so wanted to turn into her bear and knock Denny out.

Then, to her surprise, Eloise called out to Andy, "Hey, honey, make it with extra whiskey. I'll also take a load of whipped cream on top, not just a dab."

That was a great cover for Andy.

She was glad Andy had Denny's gun because he needed to be armed! Then there was a scuffle, gunfire, three shots fired, damn it! Figuring these two couldn't escape their cuffs, Monica headed for the hallway and reached the stairs. Andy was taking cover on the backside of the couch.

Wendell was behind a recliner opposite him, but she had the perfect view of everything in the living room from the balcony above.

"We're here!" Denny called out from the bedroom. "Shoot the bastards!"

"Drop your weapon!" Monica called out, pointing her gun at Wendell.

Wendell jerked his head in her direction and fired a shot, but as soon as he did, Andy, who had used the distraction to go after Wendell, plowed into him, taking him down. Monica ran down the stairs to grab Wendell's gun.

Andy had him pinned down, but Wendell was fighting so hard she knew he might get loose at any moment. She grabbed Wendell's gun hand in a way that forced his thumb back, and he lost his grip on his gun.

Then she pulled his gun away from him and tucked it into her belt. She tossed a pair of handcuffs to Andy, and he flipped Wendell onto his belly and yanked his arm behind his back.

"Hey, you're going to break my damn arm."

"Then don't fight me." Andy got one cuff on, but Wendell tried to roll over and take charge of the situation.

"You know that bear they kept talking about?" Monica said.

Andy played along with her. "The polar bear?"

"Yeah. I think I hear it near the door, snuffling around. He's probably smelling the food in here."

"Can you get to the front door and close it?" It was still standing wide open.

"Not while I've got my gun on him, and you can't because Wendell won't let you handcuff him. Ohmigod, I just saw him peer in."

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From where Wendell was lying on the floor next to the couch, and Andy still had his knee in his back, one hand in the cuffs pulled behind his back, neither man could see the doorway.

"You're lying," Wendell said.

"Hell, you can't hear it huffing around the front door?" Andy asked.

Then she heard snuffling around the door. Black bears wouldn't be roaming during winter storms unless they awoke prematurely from a nap.

"Black bear?" Andy asked her, sounding a little worried.

"You said it was a polar bear," Wendell said. "I knew you were lying."

Then suddenly, a polar bear entered the cabin, and her heart raced. "Ohmigod, it's a polar bear."

The bear roared.

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"Come on, Monica." Andy released his hold on Wendell and grabbed Monica's arm as if protecting her from the polar bear, leaving Wendell to fend for himself.

Andy rushed up the stairs with her.

"What about me!" Wendell tried to get to his feet, one handcuff dangling from his wrist as the polar bear came for him.

"That's Craig," Andy whispered as he led Monica up the stairs to check on the other two detainees.

"Oh, that's good to know." She wondered who he was and why he had arrived at the cabin.

She glanced downstairs. Wendell backed up, screaming, "Help me!" Before the bear took a swipe at him and knocked him out.

Monica smiled and gave Craig a thumbs-up. He growled in his fiercest polar bear way.

She and Andy entered the bedroom, but neither Denny nor Eloise was there. They couldn't have escaped! She headed for the bathroom, and both were standing in the shower, still handcuffed, hiding from the polar bear.

Andy shut the bedroom door and joined her in the bathroom. "Okay, so here's the deal. You come out, and we'll let Denny out of his cuffs to get dressed. It's the only way you'll survive this situation with the polar bear coming after us. Agreed?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Denny said.

Now, this was more like it! Cooperation. Finally.

Monica and Andy left the bathroom so Denny and Eloise could leave the shower stall and join them in the bedroom.

"If you fight me at all, I will have to leave you for the bear and take Eloise and my

partner to safety.” Andy didn’t mind using threats if it got what he wanted in a tense situation like this.

"I'm not going to cause any trouble. You've got guns. There's no way I can protect myself."

Andy released one of Denny's cuffs while Monica held her gun on him.

"Okay, get dressed. You don't need to have the cuff removed from your wrist to do it."

Monica was glad he had left Denny's one wrist cuffed. That way, they could put him back in cuffs more easily once he was dressed.

"You can't keep us cuffed," Denny complained.

Eloise looked out the window. "Ohmigod, is that the bear?"

Believing Eloise wasn't bluffing, Monica glanced out the window. Andy trained his gun on Denny while he dressed. The polar bear suddenly rose on his hind legs, and Eloise immediately jumped back. Monica knew Craig was doing it for show.

"He's going to get us!" Eloise screamed.

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"You've got to be quiet," Monica said, "or he's going to come looking for us."

"You got to arm me." Denny pulled on his socks.

They had both Wendell's and Denny's guns, but arming Denny, even if they were facing a wild bear, was out of the question. Monica could imagine him shooting them and uncuffing his girlfriend, and they would leave Monica and Andy for the bear to eat.

"What...what about Wendell?" Eloise sounded shaken up over the whole situation.

"We had to get away." Monica knew he couldn't be dead, but sharing that wasn't a good idea. "He wouldn't cooperate with us, and we didn't have time to do anything but run."

"We'll never leave here alive," Eloise cried.

"No, you just need to keep your wits and lower your voice."

"You have to release us," Denny pleaded. "I swear I'll help you kill the bear."

"Killing polar bears is illegal," Andy said.

"Hell, he's going to kill us. It's self-defense."

"I tell you what. I'll leave you here, handcuffed, and Monica and I will take Eloise out to my vehicle and bring help when we can."

"No, no, I don't want to go outside with the bear out there," Eloise said. "He'll rip us to shreds."

"Let's get the handcuffs on," Andy told Denny. "Then we'll all check out the downstairs. Once we lock the door, the bear will go away. He's outside, isn't he?"

Eloise was watching out the window. "Yeah. And he looks...ohmigod, he's growling at me. He's got huge teeth."

"We have to secure the front door and check on Wendell," Andy said. "Put your hands behind your back, Denny."

Denny looked mutinous, scowling at Andy. Monica figured he didn't want to comply because he felt more vulnerable to a bear attack, more so now than before, because he didn't want to be taken into custody. She totally understood. He knew he could fight a man. A polar bear? There was only one outcome for that.

"I swear I'm going to lock you out of the bedroom, and you can face the bear on your own," Andy said.

Denny frowned at him. "Are you recording all this?"

Nope. Not this time.

Then Denny finally turned around, but Andy knew that trick. "Get on the ground. Lie on your belly."

If he tried to cuff Denny while he was standing, he could swing around and try to take the gun from Andy.

Denny reluctantly knelt on the floor and then got on his belly.

Andy put his knee to his back and cuffed his hands together. "All right. Let's go."

"We can't go down there with the bear roaming about," Denny said.

Monica quickly put Eloise's socks and boots on.

If they had been all polar bear, no. Then Andy helped Denny up. "All right, you go first."

"Me?" Now, Denny didn't have so much bravado. Not when he faced a polar bear instead of a man or woman.

"Yeah. You're not going behind us and shoving us down the stairs." Andy didn't trust him in the least.

"What if you did that to us and we were left at the mercy of the bear?" Denny asked.

"We have our cameras on, remember?" Though Andy had never said he did.

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Denny just scowled at Andy, not appearing to believe that would be enough to keep them from just leaving him and Eloise for bear food.

"Go." Andy gave him a little shove toward the door.

"What about Eloise?" Denny asked.

"She'll be right behind you," Monica said.

"But you have the guns," Eloise pleaded.

"Go." Andy opened the bedroom door for Denny.

Downstairs, they heard the cracking of wood being split apart.

"Ohmigod, what is the bear doing?" Eloise shouted.

The woman would have gotten them all killed if they'd been actors in a B-grade horror movie.

Denny's face was filled with terror. He looked like he was ready to be torn apart by a vicious bear.

"If you care anything about your buddy, Wendell, get a move on." Andy was beyond fed up with this bunch.

Denny finally started to walk toward the stairs, glancing over the balcony, looking

like he wished he were anywhere but here. Craig had destroyed the front door while they'd been in the bedroom.

"I told you we shouldn't have come here," Eloise said. "Not when you were already injured by the polar bear at the other cabin. Not that I believed it. But now I do."

"Shut up," Denny said.

"Keep your voices low," Andy warned, amused to playact about the seriousness of the situation. He was so glad his brother had shown up to come and help them out.

"I can't believe he would come here too," Denny said.

"He's hungry," Eloise said. "Idiot."

"Watch your mouth, or you'll get a fist in it," Denny said, which would be hard to do with his hands confined behind his back.

But it made the abuse charges that Helen had filed against him sound as though they had been real.

"Go down the stairs. Slowly," Andy said.

Denny started down them, but Andy waited with the others while they watched. He jerked his head back to look at them. "Hey, you can't make me go by myself. I can't check on Wendell with my hands cuffed behind my back."

Andy just wanted him to sweat a little. Not that he wasn't already. Denny was shaking so severely that he was barely descending the stairs.

"Go, Eloise," Monica said, right behind her.

"No. You can't make me." Eloise sat down on the top step and wouldn't move her butt.

"You are such a coward." Monica sounded exasperated.

If the bear had been all polar bear, Andy wouldn't have had any of them risk checking on Wendall until they saw the bear amble off.

Monica grabbed Eloise's arm and hauled her around Andy and down to where Denny was slowly descending the stairs, one snail step at a time.

"Wendell could die before we get down there," Monica said.

"Whose fault is that?" Denny asked. "If you hadn't broken into the cabin?—"

"Wendell came in alone and left the door wide open." Monica continued to struggle to take Eloise down the stairs. "We came in through the back door and shut it. The bear destroyed the front door."

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Andy moved past her to get this show on the road. He grabbed Denny's arm and hurried him down the stairs so the women could reach the bottom.

"Okay, now, after we revive Wendell, we will go out the back way. We'll make sure the bear isn't there and use your car to hide behind until we can reach my vehicle." Andy just hoped they could get them in the vehicle and secure them.

"We're safe here," Denny said. "Safer than out there."

"You're not safe here." Andy didn't want to have this going backwards.

"He can't get upstairs to the bedroom, and we can lock that door," Eloise said.

"You better believe a polar bear can climb stairs. And look what he did to the front door? The bedroom door is just a couple of pieces of plywood." Andy shook his head at her and hurried Denny over to Wendell, who was stirring.

"Wendell, hey, are you all right?" Denny asked, looking from his buddy to the front door that was splintered and in ruins on the living room floor.

Eloise peeked out the front window, and Monica followed her while Andy checked on Wendell. He sat him up and then flashed his light in his eyes. Wendell suddenly pulled away from him, and Andy quickly cuffed him.

"Hey, the bear got you," Denny said.

"Where is he?" Wendell asked.

"Outside right now," Denny said.

"Ohmigod, there are two of them, and one is heading this way!" Eloise screamed.

"Now you've alerted them," Andy said, pretending to sound angry with her. His cousin Rob was the new bear on the scene.

Eloise rushed for the stairs, but Monica grabbed her arm and yanked her toward the back door.

"We have to get out of here," Monica said. "Both of them could come right in here looking for their next meal after you practically told them to come eat you."

Andy got Wendell to his feet. If the polar bears had been wild, he would have barricaded them all in the bedroom and waited.

"Okay, Denny, Wendell, this way." Andy grabbed them both and started hauling them toward the back door.

Denny balked. "We can't go outside."

"You can stay, and I don't have to bother charging you with any crime because you won't like having a confrontation with polar bears." Andy wasn't ready to leave them behind. He wanted them to be incarcerated. But maybe that would convince them to leave. "All of you. Or, you can come with us and have a chance to reach the car and get the hell out of here."

Eloise was shaking so hard that she looked like she would shatter into a million pieces. Monica opened the back door quietly, then pulled Eloise onto the snow-covered deck. She quickly pulled her off the deck and headed around the side of the cabin.

Andy pushed Denny forward, holding Wendell's arm because he kept tilting as he walked, as if he was having trouble with his balance. Andy quietly closed the back door once the three men were on the deck.

Eloise was crying now.

"Shh," Monica said to her. "Be quiet. Do you want to get us all killed?"

Andy loved how Monica was playing her role. He knew his brother and Rob were listening to the conversations with their excellent hearing, most likely amused.

Then he came around the corner of the house with Denny and Wendell. Eloise and Monica were hunkered down by Eloise's car with the flattened tires.

Then Eloise scowled. "You tore up my tires! I will sue you for this. I'll have you fired for it."

"Shh," Monica told her.

Eloise grated on Andy.

The sound of the bear trashing the kitchen made Monica glance through the kitchen window. "One bear is in there, breaking things up to get to the food."

"Where's the other?" Andy hadn't seen Rob again.

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"Hopefully, he'll go into the house so we can reach your vehicle, but we have a long hike," Monica said. "Should we go through the woods like we did when we came here? Maybe they won't see us?"

"They'll see, hear, and smell us." Andy had to ensure their detainees didn't plan to run off alone.

Their only chance to get out of there was to stick with Andy and Monica, who were armed.

"Let's get to your SUV then," Monica said.

She headed into the woods anyway because she and Andy had left a trail there for them to trudge through.

He followed her with the other two men, watching for signs of the other bear, and then saw his cousin, Rob. Andy smiled at him and inclined his head. But he was certain his cousin and brother would be concerned that he and Monica had three arrestees and didn't have a vehicle to carry them back to White Bear safely.

Andy and the others kept moving toward his vehicle when Rob ran into the woods out of sight.

"One's gone," Andy said.

"Yeah, but he could show up at any minute," Denny said. "And there's still the other."

Andy suspected that either Rob planned to scare Eloise, Wendell, and Denny into complying on the way to the car or that he had something else in mind. Maybe shifting and dressing, then coming to help him with his charges. He and Monica could sure use the help.

Craig left the house in his woolly bear coat, ran away from them into the woods, and disappeared.

"That's both of them," Eloise said. "We have to go back to the house."

"No, they're still out there and could come back anytime," Monica said. "You don't want to tangle with them."

Wendell was the only one who wasn't saying anything, and Andy was a little worried about that. They were near his vehicle, but Wendell had parked his truck behind Andy's.

"Which pocket do you have your truck keys in?" Andy had to hurry this along and move Wendell's truck out of the way.

Wendell didn't respond. He looked out of it and didn't seem half as scared about the bear as Eloise and Denny.

Craig or Rob's vehicle was out of sight. When Wendell didn't cooperate, Andy searched his pockets and found his keys. Monica pulled out her gun and kept it trained on the three detainees. Then Andy got into the vehicle and drove it off the road and into the snowbank.

When Andy climbed out of the vehicle and ascended the incline, Craig and Rob

walked up the drive as if they were meant to be there. "Hey, Andy, Mom wanted you and Monica to come for lunch. We couldn't get through to you, so we came to see what trouble you had gotten yourself into this time."

"Yeah," Rob said. "Have you ever thought of using more backup?"

"No signal. But I'm damn glad you're here. And lunch is mighty welcome."

"You've got a handful; we'll take one off your hands. Who do you want us to take?" Craig asked.

"Denny. Wendell's half out of it, and Eloise knows we won't put up with her nonsense if she gives us any trouble." Andy handed Wendell's gun over to Craig. "I'll go with you to watch Denny. Rob and Monica can follow right behind us. That way, we will have a law enforcement officer in the vehicle to watch these guys."

"Okay, let's load them up. We're parked just beyond the drive next to the trees," Craig said.

"Do you want me to drive?" Rob asked Monica.

"Yeah. I'll keep my gun on these two."

They got Eloise and Wendell situated in the vehicle, handcuffing them to the overhang handles.

"This isn't necessary," Eloise whined. "You haven't even read us our rights."

"I haven't questioned you about anything. But sure, I'll read you your rights." Monica did.

Andy said to Denny, "That goes for you also."

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Rob started to back down the drive in Andy's car while Craig and Andy led Denny on the tire tracks in the snow. Once Rob was on the main road, he parked, waiting for Andy and the others to get into Craig's truck. After they had handcuffed Denny to a handhold, Craig climbed into the driver's seat, and Andy sat in the back with Denny to watch him.

"So what happened this time?" Craig asked. "I mean that you were without backup again."

"We're short of staff. You know how it is. We were checking out Harvey's motel when we saw Denny and Eloise make a run for it. There was no reception; we couldn't let them get away. So we took chase."

"Where did the bears go? Did you see them?" Denny asked.

"What bears?" Craig asked. "All I saw was you in handcuffs with the others, being herded to Andy's car."

"No, you have to have seen them. Well, no matter. My grandparents' cabin door is trashed, and all of us saw the bears."

Andy hadn't had his body camera on, but wasn't sure if he should admit to having seen them, too. Three of the people with them said they were there. Otherwise, how would they explain the mess at Denny's grandparents' cabin?

"Maybe a grouchy black or brown bear woke up from his sleep and did that," Craig said.

"Hell, I know the difference between polar bears and black or grizzly bears," Denny said. "What do you take me for? A moron?"

Craig smiled.

Andy kept calling for backup so they could turn the three perps over to patrol units designed to carry detainees. He finally got service before they reached Harvey's motel. He called Roger first.

"What's up? Are you coming in early to work? Or inviting me to a cold-weather barbecue?" Roger asked.

"We need your help again." Andy told them where they were.

"Right on it."

Then they ended the call, and Andy read Denny his rights in case he talked.

Denny started in about the polar bears. "They need to be shot. Both of those polar bears."

Showing off their polar bear coats to non-shifters could be a problem, so they always had to come up with a plausible explanation. Though they also tried to do what they needed to do with as much covertness as possible in the first place.

Andy couldn't think of one this time, so he didn't say anything.

"You're not going to deny you saw the polar bears," Denny told Andy as if he were telling him what to do.

Craig changed the subject. "What is this one wanted for?"

"Kidnapping Helen for ransom money."

"She was in on it," Denny quickly said.

"You didn't say that when we arrested you the last time." But Andy knew why he had said she was innocent before.

Denny had hoped she wouldn't be handcuffed and could help free him when given the opportunity.

"Your buddies said otherwise," Andy said.

"Lionel? Teague? You got them?"

"We sure did, and they told us you were the mastermind." Andy was recording everything they said in case Denny told him the truth.

Of course, that wasn't what Lionel and Teague had said, but Helen proposed this fake kidnapping to get money from Pierre, then Pierre ended up taking charge of the plan.

"What the hell? No way," Denny said. "Who knew Pierre had money? I didn't. Sure, he had a nice home and car, but that didn't mean he had a lot of cash readily available. Helen came up with the plan."

Which sounded more like it.

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"I just went along with it once she convinced me she knew the real story."

"How come she knew he had a lot of money that was easily accessible?" Andy didn't think someone who had would tell someone he had just started to date.

"Sex, booze, drugs, and bed talk. He liked to brag about it—at least to her."

"What if it had all been just bragging?"

"Well, that's what I thought still. That it didn't mean that he had the money. Even so, it was too much to ignore."

"How much?"

"Five hundred thousand."

"And you got?"

Denny wouldn't say.

"Okay, listen, Lionel and Teague each got five thousand. I suspect there was a lot more that Helen, Wendell, and Pierre got."

Denny remained silent.

"So you go to Pierre's house, ready to implement Helen's plan, take her hostage, demand a ransom, and hide out at your neighbor's cabin. After that, Wendell and his

buddies go to Pierre's house to get the money. Then what?"

"The plan all changed when I went to grab Helen and demand a ransom. I'd already hit Pierre to steal Helen from him, though he looked reluctant to rescue her. That made me worried. What if he didn't care if she was rescued or not? I hadn't considered that."

Andy wanted to laugh at that. What a mistake that would have been.

"So he was on his back on the floor with a bloodied forehead where I'd struck him with my gun, and he had his hand up as if he were surrendering, and I'm free to take Helen. She's scowling at him, looking furious that he wouldn't try to rescue her."

"Even though she wasn't an innocent kidnapped victim."

"Right. It's easy to start having doubts in a case like that. Yeah, maybe he's a nonviolent person, though he's a big guy, so he doesn't look like he wouldn't be capable of fighting his way out of the situation, and he would have the advantage. When I first saw him, it gave me pause."

"So Helen didn't tell you the guy was a hulking brute."

"No. And truly, I figured I could manage anyone, so I sure the hell hadn't asked. Then, he came up with a different scenario. He said he had money he could access, but only if it was a real emergency."

"So then it was Pierre's plan."

"At that point, yeah. I told him I was listening. Then he said I could take Helen with me and pretend she was a hostage, send a ransom message, have some of my goons come pick up the money at his house?—"

"Not at some other location that would help disguise the fact they were coming for the money? Most ransoms work that way. The kidnappers have a place where the victim goes to leave the money. They don't want to be seen."

"Nah. He had it all planned. His security cameras wouldn't be working, and he said as long as they were wearing ski masks and hats—and in this bad weather, that was reasonable—no one would recognize them."

"What if he didn't turn off his security videos? What if he needed evidence of the crime being committed?"

Denny looked a little pale and appeared to be thinking about the ramifications.

"They might have been wearing masks, but if they spoke, the cameras would pick up their conversations and still show the men's clothes and sizes. Some other cameras along the road could have picked up Wendell's vehicle, and by timing, it would have been at Pierre's house, even if he had parked out of view of it. It would show he was there after Helen was abducted."

Denny mulled that over.

"Pierre needed to cover his ass. How else can he prove to the person who gave him the money to use in this emergency situation that there actually was an emergency?"

"Uh." Denny stopped what he was going to say.

"That's why I believe he had them come to his house. So he could prove everything. Including that you took Helen hostage."

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Denny cursed out loud.

“That’s what happens when crooks trust crooks. Do you know who was giving the money to Pierre?” Andy asked.

“No. I didn’t need to know who it was. Just that I was getting the money.”

“I want to know if Pierre thought he would get away with this scheme and no one would realize he was part of the mastermind behind it, why would he be in hiding?”

“Okay, Wendell, how much money did you get on this take?” Monica asked, as Rob drove Andy’s car on the snow-covered road, slipping on ice and correcting his direction, but not before Eloise gasped.

Wendell was quiet, still looking out of it as he rested his head against the window.

“Eloise? How much did you get?”

“I’m not saying.”

“You know, Helen and Denny got a big windfall. Knowing Denny, he’s going to want to be with the woman with the money,” Monica said, trying to stir up the pot.

Eloise’s lips parted, and then she narrowed her eyes. “How much did they get?”

“Fifty thousand each,” Monica said.

Eloise's face reddened. "No way. Denny told me he got five thousand like I got."

"Well, he lied. What about you, Wendell?"

"Five thousand. I would have gotten more if I hadn't taken Lionel and Teague. I would have gotten their shares. But Denny called me on Bluetooth with the offer, and both were with me then. I knew them well enough that if I didn't cut them in on the deal, they might have gone to the police."

Wow, so they weren't Wendell's buddies, as she thought. They were just a bunch of cutthroats.

Eloise was sitting in the corner, fuming.

"You know Helen hatched this plan to get back with Denny, don't you?" Monica rubbed the notion in, even if it wasn't true.

"She wasn't with him. I was."

"Oh, yeah, but that was soon going to change." Monica loved making stuff up as she went to throw her off-kilter and get more of the answers they needed. "He was just planning all this, so it looked like he was really with you, but as soon as he got his new passport, he would leave with Helen to go to Mexico."

"He already has a passport."

"Right, with a new name? You and the others wouldn't know where he went if you all got caught and he didn't. He and Helen could live nicely off a hundred thousand." Then Monica turned her attention to Wendell again. "So, where is Helen?"

“Okay, so where is Helen? Does Wendell have her stashed away somewhere?” Andy asked Denny as Craig stayed behind Rob, who was driving Andy’s SUV, only slowing when Andy’s vehicle took a minor icy detour. That held Andy’s attention, as he didn’t want him to drive off the embankment.

“What are you asking me for? I have no idea. We left for my place when Eloise came to our rescue after you stranded us at my neighbor’s cabin. Wendell’s truck was at my house, and Helen left with him, mad because I wouldn’t be with her. She keeps thinking we’ll work things out, but I’m not interested,” Denny said.

“So she for sure went with Wendell?”

“She stormed out of the house, and Wendell left right after. I assumed she was with him. She couldn’t have walked in deep snow anywhere. She would have frozen to death. Since she wasn’t with him when he got to my grandparents’ cabin, I assumed he had left her back at his place.”

Andy had an eerie thought about Wendell’s truck and how he had shoved it off the drive into the snowbank. She couldn’t have been in the truck, could she have been? Just waiting for Wendell’s return? Andy hadn’t looked in the back seat when he had driven it into the embankment. What if she had been hiding on the floorboard?

“Why did Wendell even go to see you at the cabin?”

“Hell, if I know. I wasn’t expecting it. He didn’t text or call. Unless...well, maybe he did, and it didn’t go through. But also, Eloise and I were in the shower when you broke into the cabin. I wouldn’t have heard it. My phone was downstairs, charging in the kitchen.”

She could freeze to death in the truck if she were inside it, and she wouldn’t have any way to get to safety. Well, no, she could go to the cabin. Even though Craig had

wrecked the front door, she could get warm in the upstairs bedroom. Andy felt a little better about that.

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He tried his phone as they approached where they'd had reception before, and was glad he could reach Monica. "Hey, Monica, I had an alarming thought. Denny said that Helen was with Wendell, he thought. What if she was out in his truck?"

"That you drove off the drive?"

"Yeah."

"Let me ask Wendell again. He seems reluctant to talk."

Monica prayed that Helen hadn't been in Wendell's truck, but what if she had been? What if she had been hiding there when they were about to leave? Or even sleeping and never knew they had taken everyone out of the house and left?

When Andy got into the truck and she saw that it wasn't Wendell, she might have lain down on the floorboard, not wanting to get arrested. Or she might have been in the camper. Wendell wouldn't have said anything, not wanting her to be arrested, either. Unless he'd been so out of it, he hadn't thought of her. Or she hadn't been in the truck at all.

The good thing was that she could go to the cabin and stay warm. Plus, there was food, water, and a bathroom, so it wasn't like she would starve or freeze to death.

"Wendell, this is important. Was Helen in your truck?" Monica asked.

He had his eyes closed and didn't respond. She shoved at him. "Wendell!"

He startled awake.

"Don't go to sleep on us. We need to check out your injuries." She hoped he didn't have a brain injury from being knocked out. "Was Helen in your truck when you went into the cabin?"

Eloise snorted. "I bet the dumb bitch was. She can't stay away from Denny."

"Wendell, was she?"

Wendell let out his breath. "I don't know where she is. I took her to White Bear, and she said she was going shopping. Then I went to the cabin to check on Denny because he said we had more trouble. That he didn't know where Lionel and Teague were hiding out."

"They're both in jail, spilling their guts."

Wendell's eyes widened.

"Okay, did Helen go with you to Denny's cabin? Don't feed me a line of bull about her shopping. She knows we're looking for her—either as a real kidnapped victim, which we don't believe, or the original mastermind of the crime. She wouldn't be out 'shopping' in White Bear. She's not that dumb."

"Says you," Eloise said.

Monica turned to her. "You know, the reason we handcuffed her in the first place when we found Denny and her was that she was having sex with Denny on the sofa in the living room at the neighbors' cabin." Monica figured she might as well set Eloise straight on the matter.

Eloise narrowed her eyes. "Denny better not have."

"How else would we have known it? As far as Pierre told me, she was kidnapped. But when we found them, the story was totally different."

Eloise clenched her teeth, and Monica focused on Wendell again. "Where is Helen?"

He wouldn't speak.

"Okay, look, we pushed your truck off the road, right? We flattened the tires on Eloise's car so they couldn't take off. A polar bear knocked the front door in and wreaked havoc in the cabin. It remains open to the world. So what if Helen gets to the house and finds all the food gone, there's no cell reception, and she can't keep any marauding bears out?"

Wendell frowned at her.

"I'm serious. What if one of them—there were two—came in and went up the stairs where she could retreat and stay in the bedroom, but he knocked that door down? Even if they didn't, she's still on her own out there with no way to let anyone know she's there. So you can either just leave her there and be considered for negligent homicide if she dies, or you can tell us, and we'll be sure to pick her up."

Wendell didn't say anything for a long time.

"Don't you care about her?" Monica suddenly wondered if something had happened between them, that they'd even had a falling out. Maybe something to do with the money?

"She was in the truck."

Eloise scoffed. "I knew she was trying to see Denny again."

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Monica immediately called Andy back. "Helen was in Wendell's truck."

"Okay, I've called Roger, and they're having some patrols coming to meet us."

"As soon as we transfer the detainees over to the patrol cars, and an ambulance is on the way for Wendell?—"

"I see one of the patrol cars now. His lights are flashing. There are two more, and an ambulance following them. Have Rob pull over, and we'll make the transfer. Craig and Rob can come with us with the additional patrol car, and we'll return to the house and grab Helen." Andy was concerned about Helen's health, but also wanted to get her into custody with her fellow co-conspirators.

"Pull over, Rob. We're going to transfer these two to the patrol car and the ambulance," Monica said.

"Gotcha."

"What about Helen?" Wendell asked.

"We're going back for her."

"What about Andy's car?" Rob asked.

"We'll take the two cars, and one of the patrol cars can come with us so that they can transport her to jail."

Then, the patrol cars pulled up alongside them, and the transfers began.

Smiling, Roger shook his head at Andy as the other officers transferred Denny and Eloise to separate patrol cars. EMTs checked out Wendell and then put him in the ambulance.

“I can’t believe you’re still on this case,” Roger said.

“You know me. Just like with the guy trapped in his vehicle that no one else could find, I was bound and determined to locate him. Are you ready to go with us to pick up the last of the perps in this case?”

“Yeah, sure.” Roger got back in his patrol car.

Though Pierre was really the last of them.

Andy and Monica climbed into his car and turned it around to return to the cabin. Craig and Rob followed behind the patrol car as additional backup if needed.

“I hope she’s not unconscious in the truck,” Andy said.

“Yeah, I know. I’m just glad we thought about it and questioned Wendell further. I thought Helen might have fought with him, or he was trying to protect her.”

“So Denny and Pierre still have a thing for her?”

Monica shrugged. “Some women have it. But boy, when I mentioned Helen was having sex with Denny, and that’s why we believed she wasn’t a kidnapped victim, Eloise was furious.”

Andy laughed.

“Also, she was angry that Helen would even go to the cabin. I’m really sure Helen planned to go inside, but once Wendell saw your car, he told her to stay put while he checked it out.”

They finally arrived back at the cabin. Monica and Andy exited the vehicle to check on Wendell’s truck and camper. Roger parked behind him and left his patrol car to help them. Craig and Rob quickly joined them.

The truck was now on its side, and Monica guessed it had slid that way afterward but had only been tilting in that direction before that. They opened the driver’s side door, but no one was inside. Maybe Helen’s moving around inside the truck had unsettled it.

They all returned to their vehicles and drove up to the cabin. Once there, they quickly left their cars, but as soon as they did, Helen opened the window above the patio and started to shoot at them, the bullets ricocheting off the trees nearby.

Okay, so Monica hadn’t planned for that to happen! The woman had just staged a kidnapping scheme for money. Now she was responsible for firing at law enforcement officers?

Monica was so perturbed. “You’re only wanted for a kidnapping scheme, Helen. If you pursue this, you’ll get many more charges tacked on.”

Helen had retreated away from the window. Right now, they needed a polar bear to take over. Which they could if they didn’t have Roger with them. She knew his vehicle was the perfect one for taking her into custody, which they needed, but?—

Then Andy said, “I’m going around to the back of the house.”

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“I’ll go with you,” Roger said.

“Uh, I want you to stay here,” Andy said. “Monica can go with me. She knows the layout of the house.”

“Do you want me to go out back and watch the house while Rob and Roger stay here to watch the front? That way, if Helen slips out unseen through the back door, one of us will be there,” Craig said.

Normally, that’s how they would conduct a mission, so Andy agreed.

Monica, Andy, and Craig made their way through the woods like Monica and Andy had done before, keeping out of sight of the cabin's windows.

Once they reached the back of the house, Andy said, “What about if I go in as a bear? You have a gun and can join me, Monica. If Helen tries to shoot me, you shoot her.”

“Let’s do it.”

“What do you want me to do?” Craig asked.

“Just wait here. If it sounds like we’re in trouble, come help us in any way you can.”

Which meant shifting into his bear if he had to, since he didn’t have a weapon to protect himself.

The back door had remained open since they left the cabin earlier. All three of them

waited at the back door, listening for any sign of anyone in the house moving about. Creaking on the floor in the bedroom revealed that Helen was still up there, probably with the door locked.

They all went inside, and Andy stripped off his clothes. He was so far away from the open front door that no one could see him. Even if Helen came to the balcony at the top of the stairs, she couldn't see him either. Then he shifted into his bear. He sprinted through the living room, still far enough back that Roger couldn't see that a bear was in the cabin.

Andy navigated the stairs, and of course, they had to creak, announcing he was on his way to the bedroom. Monica placed herself behind the couch, which gave her the perfect shot should Helen try to leave the bedroom and shoot at Andy.

He finally reached the landing. He didn't need to unlock the door, though his lockpick was with his clothes. All he had to do was break the door, having a more satisfying effect. Hopefully, he wouldn't get shot at right after he did it because she could shoot at him from the bedroom, and Monica wouldn't be able to get a shot off at her.

The stairs creaked behind him, and he turned. Monica was coming up the stairs with her gun readied. He did not want her to get shot. She nodded, indicating that he should go ahead and break down the door.

As soon as he moved toward the door, she followed him, and he realized she would shoot Helen if she had to. He ran to the door, bashed it in, and then backed away. He would have liked to have gone in and knocked her out, but he couldn't risk getting shot.

Monica rushed forward but was out of view of the inside of the room.

“Helen, come out with your hands up. Drop your weapon.”

Helen didn't comply.

Andy sat on his rump. He wanted just to go in and scare the hell out of Helen, but he was afraid she would start shooting. Certainly, he wouldn't blame her if she shot at a polar bear that looked ferocious and wanted to rip her to shreds.

Monica was poised, ready to end this. “Helen, I'm not waiting all day for you to comply. We've taken everyone to jail. You might as well give up before you get hurt. We're not leaving until you're in custody.”

They still needed to arrest Pierre, though.

“Everyone's saying you were the mastermind. You should at least have a chance to defend yourself against these allegations,” Monica said.

Silence.

Monica stuck her phone beyond the door frame to see where Helen was, and Helen fired her weapon. Monica yanked her phone back and then checked the recorded video. It worked better and safer when she attached it to a tire iron, Andy was thinking!

Monica began crouching like she would rush into the room and take Helen down. Andy couldn't allow it. He growled at Craig. Monica looked at the two of them, and as if she suddenly had a better idea, she quickly pulled out her phone and texted Andy.

Craig found his phone in his pants pocket on the floor where he'd ditched his clothes. He pulled out Andy's phone and texted Monica back.

Andy wondered what they had in mind.

Craig began looking through closets, finally pulled out a ladder, and headed out the back door.

After a few minutes, with his sensitive hearing, Andy heard the ladder lightly clank against the metal railing of the bedroom balcony out back. Anxious, Andy prayed Helen wouldn't shoot his brother. But he figured Craig would cause a distraction so Andy and Monica could take down Helen.

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Andy listened carefully but didn't hear anything more until something slammed into the glass, maybe the bedroom glass door with access to the balcony or one of the windows looking out on the scenery. Immediately, Monica and Andy rushed into the room as Helen fired at Craig. Anticipating the barrage of bullets, Craig had quickly moved down the ladder out of her line of fire.

Andy lunged forward without waiting for Monica to order Helen to drop her weapon. They'd already given Helen enough chances to give up. Fearing Helen would turn and shoot him because he looked so menacing, he charged into Helen. Her eyes were huge, and her mouth gaped wide as if she was about to have a heart attack.

He could smell her fear and panic as he struck her with his paw, trying not to hurt her too much, though deep down, he was angry that she had wanted to kill them.

Someone was heading up the stairs, and Monica glanced out the door. "It's your brother. He's bringing your clothes, which is good because I hear your cousin and Roger coming to the front door."

Andy shifted, and once Craig handed him his clothes, he dressed.

Monica checked on Helen. "She's alive."

"Good."

Then she handcuffed Helen. "We need to get her to Roger's patrol car."

"Is this the last of them?" Craig asked.

"No. We still need to apprehend Pierre." Monica holstered her gun.

Andy and Craig carried Helen out of the bedroom and down the stairs, where Roger and Rob were waiting.

"What happened to her?" Roger asked.

"I knocked her out before she could shoot Monica and Craig." Andy told Roger how Craig had created the distraction to give them time to apprehend Helen.

"That's good. I'm glad she didn't shoot anyone. Put her in my car, and we'll take her back to White Bear and have her checked out."

They carried her to the patrol car when Helen began to stir and tried to get free.

Roger glanced at her. "She looks all right to me." He sounded relieved. "But we'll still have her checked out."

"Ohmigod, where's the polar bear?" Helen asked in a panic, glancing around wildly, looking for any sign of the menacing bear.

"There are no polar bears around here," Roger said, but then he paused as they put her on her feet so she could walk the rest of the way to the car.

"Yeah, that's what knocked me out!" Helen looked at Monica. "You saw it! It broke down the bedroom door. You were right there when he broke it."

Monica shrugged. "I didn't see any bear. I certainly would have been talking all about it. If I did see one, I'm sure he would have hurt me."

Roger shook his head. "Absolutely." As if that decided that.

Helen said, "You can't be serious! The bear nearly gave me a heart attack. I would have shot it but was so shocked that I forgot to. And then he hit me. I don't remember anything after that."

"Have you been drinking?" Monica asked as they reached the patrol car.

"No, I haven't been drinking."

"Using drugs?"

"No. And you can't deny he was there. He broke the damn door down!" Helen repeated.

"That door was flimsy, and I kicked it in," Andy said. "And Craig broke through the back door that led out to the balcony after climbing a ladder. You don't think he was a bear, too, do you?"

"Of course not!"

Smiling, Roger opened the car door for her, but as soon as he and Andy tried to get her into the car, she was kicking and trying to bite them, totally resisting arrest.

Andy liked her better when she was knocked out. Roger went to the other side of the car and opened the door, then reached in and grabbed her from his side while Andy pushed her in from his side. They finally got her into the back seat and seat-belted her in.

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Andy shook Roger's hand. "Thanks for coming to our aid again."

"Just another day in the service of our citizens. I'm heading in with Helen."

"We'll interview her in a little bit," Andy said.

"Sounds good. When I have days off though, I'm taking them," Roger said.

Andy laughed.

Then Roger took off in his car and headed down the road.

Andy hugged his brother and cousin. "Thanks, Craig and Rob, for helping us with this."

"Our pleasure. We didn't want you and Monica out here alone, getting yourself into more trouble."

Andy smiled. "You just wanted in on the action." But he knew his brother and cousin had been worried about them.

For the next couple of days, they were both "grounded" regarding Craig's inability to fly on missions, though the sky was clearing, and he should be able to soon. Rob's tour group business was paused during the worst winter weather until it straightened out. So what was the next best thing to do? Track Andy and Monica's movements?

"Did you put a tracker on my vehicle?" Andy asked, amused.

“Yeah. Dad told us to do it,” Craig said. “Just to keep track of you. Mom and Dad want you all to join us at the tavern to have lunch with the family. They’re bringing in extra staff to do the lunch service.”

“That sounds great,” Monica said.

They got into their respective cars and followed Roger’s patrol car down the road.

“I take it this is a celebration for us, um, getting together?” Monica asked.

“Yeah. But our next issue is resolving where we live, if you’re thinking what I’m thinking.”

“I am. Okay, so I own a home in Anchorage, and you own one in White Bear. It’s about three hours to drive from White Bear to Anchorage. You work a week on and a week off. Initially, I thought you could stay with me when you’re off, and I’ll stay with you during the weekends when I’m off. But we wouldn’t be able to see each other for the week you’re working.”

“It’s a commute, but what if we bought a home or built a place halfway in between? That way, we would at least be together nights when I’m off.”

“Well, I had a more radical idea than that. Once I saw Alicia and the cubs out back and how you have all that acreage between you as a family, and how lovely it is to be with a big family like yours, I began revising my thoughts. What about your nephews and niece sitting? If I took you away from them, I would be the ultimate villain.”

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Andy wasn’t sure what Monica was getting at, but he didn’t want to give her up for anything.

“Instead, I’ll look for a job in White Bear.” Monica continued to talk about what they would do about being together before he could get a word in edgewise.

Andy hadn’t considered the impact moving would have on his family. He loved spending time with them; the older the niece and nephews got, the more fun he had with them. But more than anything, he wanted to be with Monica and have her for his mate.

“I don’t want you to have to give up your job to?—”

“Have a mate I adore? A family to make? An extended family to enjoy?” She smiled.

“No problem.”

“What about your parents?” He worried about the impact it would have on her parents when she left Anchorage, and he wasn’t sure she would be happy to give up her job after working so hard to get it.

“My parents love to travel, and that will give them an excuse to do so. But we need to meet up with them for dinner in Anchorage and let them know what’s going on.”

“Have you let them know what’s going on?” He hadn’t once heard her call them, and he wondered if she had. He hoped she had and didn’t hit them cold turkey like this.

“Nope. I’ve been busy. They’re busy, but before you say it, yes, we’re close, and if I had even hinted at seeing another polar bear, Dad would have had you investigated to the tenth degree. He’s a retired FBI agent. So this way, it’s a done deal. No one has any say in it but us.”

He smiled, glad she felt that way. “I can put in a good word for you at the police department.”

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“You mean you don’t want me just to be a stay-at-home mate?”

He laughed, recalling she’d said she would look for a job, but if she wanted to stay home, he was all for it. “I want you any way I can have you.”

She smiled. “Now you’ve said just the right thing. But you’re right. I’ll call Mom and tell her we have news.”

He wondered just how that would go over with her parents, never having met them and not getting her father’s approval.

“Hey, Mom, yeah, yeah, I’m all right. I’m putting this on speakerphone so you and Dad can listen to what I say.”

“Is it serious?” Mom asked.

“Well, yeah, but not a bad thing. A good thing.”

“Dad’s at the grocery store. I’m at an open house, dear.”

“Oh, well, I’ll make it brief then, and we can talk later when you’re both together at home. I’ve found my mate, and we’re getting married. No details on that, but I’ve met his whole family, and everyone is lovely. I’ll be selling my home, so I need you to list it, and I’ll know you’ll get the best deal ever.”

“Where will you live?”

Monica thought her mother would be more surprised! “In White Bear. You love to travel, and the whole family has homesand acreage enough for their parents, brothers, and cousins and their mates and their children.”

“What’s his name?”

“Oh, uh, Andy MacMathan. He has been working with me on a false kidnapping case. He’s a state trooper.”

“Oh. What about your job?”

“I’m giving two weeks' notice after I solve this case. I can’t leave it open like this, but when you meet your mate, he’s the only one for you. He can’t leave his family because he has adorable nephews and a niece of various ages that he loves to pamper, and I want to also.”

Monica smiled at Andy. He smiled back at her. She snapped a picture of him and forwarded it to her mom.

“Oh, he’s handsome.”

“He sure is, and he’s the best partner I’ve ever had.”

“What will you do when you leave the force?”

“I’ll decide that later. He has a week on at work and a week off, so I just want to be off to enjoy being a couple.”

Her mother started to cry.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Now, she hadn’t expected that.

“I’m just so happy for you. I never thought you would ever think of anything other than work. You’re so driven, you know. Are you sure you’ll be fine not working?”

Yes and yes! “After this case, yes. I’ve got to go. We’re almost to the jail and have to question some suspects.”

“I’ll tell Dad, and you can let us know when you can meet us. I’ll also send you a contract to sell your house.”

Now, that sounded like her mother, a top real estate salesperson.

“Okay, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, dear. And I’m very happy for you.”

They ended the call, and Monica gave a little relieved laugh. “From happy tears that I’m finally settling down—she never liked that I worked a high-risk job—to wanting to sell my house, and she’ll do so before I’ve even removed the personal things I want to take with me—that’s my mom.”

“That sounds like we need to get up there, pack your things, and have dinner with your family.”

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“Yeah, with my parents, they move quickly to get things done.”

“Sounds like us,” Andy said.

“You bet. That’s what makes us a dream team at anything we do.”

Hoping to get more of the truth this time from the co-conspirators in the faux kidnapping case, they finally arrived in White Bear and headed to the jail to further question Denny, Wendell, and Helen.

Roger waved at them. “They’re all sitting pretty in lockup.”

“It’s time to do some more interviewing.” Monica was eager to learn what she could and hopefully get to the truth. “Then we’re taking off to have lunch with Andy’s family.” She told the officer waiting to see who she wanted to speak with, “If you can bring Denny to an interview first, that would be great.”

Roger said, “Wendell was checked out. He’s okay. So is Helen.”

“Good. We don’t want them to get out of being questioned again.” Monica entered the interview room down the hall, where Denny was escorted.

Andy went with her to listen in.

“You would think you had talked to me enough by now.” Denny sat back in his chair, looking relaxed without a care in the world.

She started the recorder and read him his rights again. “Okay, so you say Helen oversaw the whole plan of kidnapping her because she told you Pierre had money, and it would be a great way to get hold of it. While I talked to her in the car, she said it was your plan.”

“No way in hell.”

“She said that you intimidated her, angry she had hooked up with Pierre and had money, and the only way you would go along with her being with him was if she forked over some of Pierre’s money in this pretend kidnapping scheme of yours.” Monica threw that out for him to mull over, though nothing she said was true.

She wondered if Helen had gotten involved with Pierre because she had realized he had money. Then Monica wondered how they had hooked up. Was it similar to how she and Pierre met at a coffee shop? Or had Helen come onto him?

“That’s a damn lie,” Denny said.

“Who is the jury going to believe? You have abused her before, and she has a court order to make you stay away from her. So you see the problem?”

Denny rubbed his chin, sweat beading on his forehead and dribbling down his cheeks. “She’s the one who came up with the idea, but after I struck Pierre, he told me his plan for the money. It was a win-win situation. He would get access to money that he couldn’t otherwise.”

The situation wasn’t looking good for Pierre.

After that, she had Denny returned to lock up and asked to see Helen. But Helen said nothing but, “No comment.”

When Monica had Helen removed from the interview room and brought in Wendell, he said the same thing, as if he and Helen had colluded in refusing to comment.

After they left the jailhouse, Andy and Monica had lunch with his family. Everyone hugged her as if welcoming her permanently into the family.

“Monica has already spoken to her parents, and we wanted to tell the rest of the family that we’re mating,” Andy said as the meals were served at the long table.

Everyone broke into cheers.

Genevieve got up from her chair and walked over to hug Monica again. “We’re so glad you’re mating Andy.

“I’m happy to join the family.” Monica hugged her back.

Genevieve retook her seat. “Everyone has been hoping for this.”

Monica smiled, glad she was being welcomed in such a lovely manner.

Andy rubbed her back lightly, always the gallant hero, showing how much he cared about her. “Alicia’s prediction came true.”

“And Andy got the woman, like I predicted,” Ben said.

Monica still couldn’t believe that Alicia had envisioned she and Andy would get together like they did. “I was glad Andy was there for me when I needed him the most. And now, I need him in a loving, mated way.”

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“Ditto for me. It was totally a mutual effort to keep ourselves alive in any number of situations.”

“We can see that there was so much more to it than that,” Margot said, smiling.

“Much more,” Monica agreed. “We just had this instant chemistry, even before this mission, when we had first met in White Bear.”

“Yeah, I was ready to bring her home to see the family until she told me she was dating a bear in Anchorage. And of course, her work commitments are there.” Andy kissed her cheek.

“We just needed to meet under more dire circumstances than changing a flat tire to make it real.” Monica lifted her glass of water. “To new beginnings and lots less danger.”

Everyone agreed.

During the meal, Andy asked Rob and Edward, “Hey, can we borrow one of your vans to help clean out Monica’s personal goods from her home? Her mother will jump in and sell it before she can. We’ll head there right after lunch, pack her up, stay overnight, and bring her things home.”

Rob said, “Yeah, we’re not going out for another week on a tour so today would be good for us.”

Edward chimed in, “Yep, I’ll clean the van out and have it ready.”

“Okay, great.”

“We’ll run by your house and follow you up there.”

Andy glanced at Monica to see if they needed them to help pack her items.

“Yeah, sure that will be great. I could leave the food for my mom and dad, but they don’t like half of what I eat. So we’ll need to pack all that.”

“We’ve got refrigerator boxes we use for our outings, so we’ll bring those for perishables,” Rob said.

“All my linens will go with me. Pictures, well, family photos only. I’ll leave the ones on display of Alaskan scenes for potential buyers, though knowing my mom, she will move my furniture and pictures to a resale shop or auction them, and then set up her own house display to make it appear uncluttered.”

“So you have a lot of knick-knacks?” Edward asked.

“You know, you never realize how much stuff you have sitting on shelves that are memorable to you, or important to you in some way, stuffed in drawers. Plus, my clothes. I haven’t moved ever, so I have no idea how much your van will accommodate.”

“We’ll bring two of them,” Rob said.

Once lunch was done, everyone congratulated Monica and Andy again for their announcement. When Monica and Andy arrived at his home, Rob, Edward, and their friend and partner, Casey Jones, drove up in their three vans.

Monica didn’t want them to waste their time if they didn’t need them. “It might be

overkill.”

“Better to have an empty van or two than your mom moving your stuff out before you can remove your things, and we can do it all in one fell swoop,” Rob said. “We’re beyond eager to get you moved down here permanently.”

“You don’t think I would change my mind, do you?”

All the guys smiled.

“Well, I wouldn’t.” She sighed. “I need to call my mother and tell her we’re going to my house to pack, and afterward, they can have dinner with all of us.”

Then she called her mom and said, “I’m going to my house to remove my things. I’ve got two of Andy’s brawny cousins and their equally brawny partner, who have three vans, and we’ll get all of it packed up and removed. We’ll stay the night, and you can do whatever you want with my furniture so that you can display your own.”

“Oh, great. I’ll run over to take pictures of your home, and you know I’ll do it just right.”

“I know you will, Mom.”

“Does that mean you will all have dinner with us?”

“Yep. Put on your best feast. We’re all going to be hungry tonight.”

Three hours later, they arrived at Monica’s one-story, ranch-style home, gray and white siding house. Her mom had already set up many lights to show it off. “Sorry, Mom, lights out when we sleep here tonight.”

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“About that,” Rob said.

“You’re staying with us. We’ll have breakfast in the morning and then return to White Bear. We’ll probably leave early before mom kicks us out with a furniture moving, cleaning, painting, and interior decorating crew.” Monica didn’t want them to have to do all that work and then drive home tonight.

They walked into the house and saw flat-packing boxes and tape all over the living room.

Andy smiled at his cousins.

Monica loved her mom. She was always ahead of the game. “I have four bedrooms and a fold-out sofa.” She motioned to the white sofa. “So there’s plenty of room to sleep comfortably in any of the bedrooms, plenty of baths to accommodate everyone?—”

Casey rubbed the back of his head. “I didn’t bring any overnight wear.”

“Us either,” Rob said. “We planned to pack up the place and then return to White Bear.”

“It’s too wintry out, and it’ll be too late for you to return. It’ll take us hours to pack everything and then have dinner with my parents. Besides, you’re part of the family, and they need to meet you, too.”

Once they packed everything up, which took a lot less time than she thought it would

with four big guys helping out, they drove to her parents' home.

Monica was both apprehensive and excited about her parents meeting Andy. She sure hoped they all hit it off. But Andy was so sweet, she knew he would make the best effort possible. And with a supporting cast of his family members and Casey, it should help ease the tension if any were to arise.

When they arrived at her parents' two-story, gray-and-white home, they welcomed them, hugging her first and then Andy without reservation. He gave them warm bear hugs, and she knew things would go well immediately.

Then, introductions were made as everyone moved into the warm house and removed their cold-weather outer gear.

"Well, we're so excited for you both," her mom said first. "We didn't think Monica would ever stop working her cases long enough so that she could find a mate."

"She didn't." Andy squeezed Monica's hand. "I was her backup on the faux kidnapping mission the whole way, and that's what made us know how good we could be together."

Her mom and dad laughed.

"Now that sounds about right," her dad said.

"We should have known," Mom said.

They served T-bone steaks, baked potatoes, thyme-seasoned green beans, and Cabernet Sauvignon. When they sat down to eat, her dad asked, "How did the two of you meet?"

Monica and Andy laughed. “In an unconventional way. Andy claimed I wanted to run him over to avoid getting a ticket.”

“I would have given her one if the situation hadn’t unraveled into a faux kidnapping case.”

“You mentioned you had met earlier,” Edward said.

“Oh, sure, but she had a boyfriend and was living in Anchorage,” Andy said.

“Neville was not the one for her. Is your place neat?” her mom asked.

“Yes,” Andy said.

Monica explained, “Andy’s place is beautiful. Neville was a hoarder. I couldn’t have lived like that.”

“But now you’re ready to give up your job and home to live in White Bear?” Monica’s dad asked.

“Absolutely. After this case is finished, I’m taking a break. Andy is off for one week and on the next, so we will have mini honeymoons every other week.”

Everyone smiled.

Her dad squeezed her mom’s hand. “This is going to work out all right.”

Relieved they had her parents’ approval, Monica mentioned the family gatherings in White Bear.

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“We have them often,” Rob said. “We’d love to have you join us anytime.”

“If you would like to take one of our Alaskan wilderness tours, we even have shifter tours,” Casey said.

“Now that sounds remarkable, if I could pry your mother away from selling properties long enough,” Monica’s dad said.

“Of course, I would love to do that. What fun. Do you have mates and children?” her mother asked Andy’s cousins.

“I have a mate and four children.” Rob told them their ages.

“That’s a handful,” Monica’s mother said.

“I’ve got a mate and two kids,” Eward said. “Andy’s brother, Ben, is still unmated, and his brother Craig and his mate Margot are working at it.”

Everyone looked at Andy and Monica. Her cheeks warmed. She shouldn’t have been embarrassed, but she and Andy hadn’t discussed children yet.

“In the works.” Andy grinned.

“But not right away.” Monica was glad she no longer had to take the muscle relaxant for her back because she was ready for lots more loving with Andy. “Everything is delicious, by the way.”

Her parents shared a conspiratorial look. Maybe they worried there was already trouble in paradise.

But Monica didn't see it that way. If she and Andy had a child or two earlier than she'd planned, she would be delighted.

Everyone agreed that the food was outstanding. After finishing dinner and visiting longer, they all wished each other goodnight. This time, her parents hugged Edward, Rob, and Casey also before they headed out.

When they arrived at Monica's home, it looked so empty. But she was ready for the move. She would remove the linens from the beds, her last act of packing up in the morning, as everyone headed to the bathrooms for showers, and she and Andy slipped into the master bedroom to shower together.

"Sorry about saying we were working on having babies." Andy sounded a bit contrite.

She kissed his chest. "If we do, we do. I would be happy just the same. But I'm serious about our mini honeymoons."

"I'm all for it."

"And I'll make you feel extra special when you come home from work. I know you'll be tired after dealing with out-of-sorts, cantankerous motorists and the like, so I want you to feel you can talk about anything and get it off your chest."

He kissed her mouth. "I usually bend my family's ears, so that would be welcome."

They finally fell asleep, but Monica heard pounding on a stake out front before she was ready to wake. "Mom."

“Putting out a For Sale sign?” Andy asked.

“Yep. Let’s get the bedding packed before my mom starts moving my furniture out from under us.”

The guys were already up when Monica and Andy joined them. They helped strip the beds and pack the bedding in boxes. Then they were on their way, stopping briefly at a pancake house for breakfast.

What amused Monica even more was when they were on the way to Andy’s home, she saw Genevieve and Ned driving toward Anchorage. The caravan of vehicles honked at them, and they waved in response, honking back. Ned got on the phone with Andy on Bluetooth. “Monica, your parents invited us for brunch, so we’re headed up there to visit with them.”

“Oh, wonderful.” Monica was thrilled that her parents could meet Andy’s and that they had made the gesture. She hoped they would all get along, though. Her dad thought he was the ultimate chef, and since Ned owned a tavern, he probably thought he was.

When they ended the call, she explained that to Andy. He just laughed. “A little rivalry between dads never hurt anyone.”

She wasn’t too sure!

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After the cousins and Casey unloaded the boxes of Monica’s household goods at Andy’s house, they left, and Monica and Andy tackled the contents, which seemed overwhelming.

Hours passed, and half-empty packing boxes still surrounded them. Monica sidled up to Andy and caressed his arm, kissing his cheek as he added some of her office supplies to his stash. “We’ve spent all day emptying boxes. Even though there’s much more left to do, do you want to play outside as bears?”

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He turned around and pulled her into a warm embrace. It was already dark out, and she just wanted to play.

“Just the same notion I had.”

“Yes!” She yanked off her shoes, sweater, and pants.

He was just as much in a hurry, ripping off his clothes even faster than her. She was glad he was eager to do this with her.

Naked, he opened the back door. She bounded out in her bear coat, and he closed the door, shifted, and joined her. The full moon lit the black sky, sprinkled with sparkling white stars.

The moon's light cast a beautiful sugary white over the fresh snow, hiding all the earlier tracks made by little cub feet, big bear feet, and bodies plowing through it.

Monica raced after Andy, but he clearly wasn't trying to stray far as they covered the twenty acres to his brother Craig's home. No indoor lights, but a few decorative security lights were on at the house. Undoubtedly, Craig and Margot were sleeping or doing more interesting things in the dark of the night. Something she wanted to do with her sexy bear now that her back and hand were feeling so much better.

As soon as they reached the property's border, which was marked by a few trees, the rest was left clear so the families could share all the acreage and play and have fun with each other, Andy whipped around unexpectedly.

She tried to turn as quickly as he did, but he had the advantage at once. He pounced at her and tackled her onto the snowy ground with his massive male body.

She went down with an oomph but immediately retaliated—play biting, not real bear fighting. It was a shifter's way of practicing fighting if they should ever encounter bears in the wilderness and had to defend themselves.

She was on her back, kicking at him. He was ready for her and tried to keep her pinned down so she couldn't bite him back. His instinct was not to hurt her or allow her to hurt him, but she also suspected he was trying to show her his strength, to prove he was the one for her. Protective, strong, yet kind and careful.

He was the one for her. He didn't need to prove it to her in the least. But she loved him for it anyway. Then he released her before he exasperated or made her mad, but she truly loved feeling his big bear pressing against her in a loving, fun way. To prove it, she didn't bite him in retaliation when he moved off her, but got up and nuzzled his face.

He smiled and nuzzled her cheek back. Then she nipped his cheek and tore off across the snow. She wasn't nearly as big as he was. She could run fast, but he was still faster. But she had an idea, if her plan worked.

She headed for Alicia's cub den while Andy huffed and puffed so close behind her that she could feel his hot breath on her stubby tail.

She needed him at the entrance of the den, not her. She imagined standing upright, pushing him in, and then getting the best of him this time, but she wasn't sure how to maneuver him to make that happen.

She was moving too fast, trying to stay out of his reach. Unable to turn, stand, or do anything else, she slid right into the den and landed at the bottom herself. The

cavernous snow cave loomed above her. She glanced over her shoulder, wondering how Andy viewed this.

Appearing worried that she was all right, he grunted at her. She grunted right back, telling him she was okay. She was a little embarrassed but not hurt.

Then he smiled and slid into the hole on top of her. She hadn't expected that! Only this time, they were face to face. Now, this was even better than what she'd planned.

Andy had so much to learn about Monica regarding bear play. He thought she was cute, looking surprised, maybe a little embarrassed that she had fallen into the snow cave, which made him wonder what her real plan had been.

He had the perfect solution to show her first how much he loved her: He slid into her, joining her. She immediately responded affectionately, nipping and kissing his face, any embarrassment over.

He loved this part of their polar bear halves when he'd never experienced such feelings or delight for another female. Even so, he was ready to have her as a mate and love her in a human way, so they needed to move this to the house and shift.

He moved behind her and rubbed his heavy erection against her bottom. Her pheromones and his were rocketing to the full moon and back. His testosterone was at full hilt, and he wanted her to know, if she was of like mind, he wanted to make love to her in the house.

She backed into him and rubbed against his erection, making him groan in desperation. She was ready. Then he came over her back, not entering her—it was something that civilized shifters didn't do except in the rarest of cases—and thrust but not penetrating her.

She let him, wiggling her butt against him like she was trying to line up to him, to make the connection between them. She wasn't making this easy for him! He backed off her and nipped her in the butt. She swung around and bit him in the cheek.

Then, she scrambled out of the cave and ran for the house. He struggled out of the cave, his erection full-blown, and he couldn't move as quickly as she could. She turned to see why he wasn't right behind her.

He stood up and showed her his massive erection. She looked like she wanted to laugh, smiled, huffed, and raced for the house.

Hopefully, she would be waiting naked for him in bed by the time he made it there. When he reached the house and shifted, she was standing in the living room with a white blanket embroidered with golden snowflakes covering her body, observing his erection.

Yeah, the cold did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm for her. He smiled, locked the door shut, grabbed her in his arms, blanket and all, and carried her into the bedroom.

"You are so impressive," she murmured, kissing his neck.

"You mean the world to me." Then he tossed her onto the bed. She bounced, squealed, and yanked off the blanket, exposing her beautiful nakedness to him.

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He covered her body with his. “I wanted you in the worst way. You made it impossible for me to separate our shifter halves from human ones.”

“Me too. I was willing to do it as bears.”

“This is way better.” He kissed her mouth, eyes, neck, and throat with reverence.

“Hmm...”

He moved her mouth to her breast and suckled her nipple. She ran her hand through his hair and gave him a gentle scalp massage that turned him on even more.

She smelled of the snow, crisp cold breeze, and wintertime. And sex, musky and needy, way past ready, very willing to finish what they had begun.

He trailed kisses down her flat belly until he made his way to her belly button and licked it, making her giggle.

He smiled. Then he used his finger to stroke her feminine bud, already dewy with moisture, her whole body screaming that she was ready to do it. But not before he brought her to climax.

That gave him great pleasure and his cock wasn't standing down either while he enjoyed this with her.

She began to arch her pelvis to get more contact with his finger, and he rubbed her harder. She moaned, her eyes watching his full-blown erection while concentrating

on her own climax.

He wondered what she was thinking as he dipped his finger into her channel for more moisture. He went deep and thrust as if he was pushing his penis into her, and her eyes widened.

He only meant to wet her bud so it would be easier to rub her into climax. But her lips parted, and she grabbed his hand and shoved his finger in deeper.

He could do better than that. He inserted a second finger, and she came with a cry of sweet success.

She immediately looked at his erection, not in the least bit waning. Seeing her come was just what he needed.

She parted her legs and pulled at his hips. He slid into her sweet, feminine slickness and felt deeply connected with her on so many levels.

Emotionally. Physically. In this plane of existence and another at the same time.

He thrust into her while she gyrated against him, helping him to feel the intense pleasure too. Then she wrapped her legs around him, and he burrowed even deeper.

He'd been so ready for her from when he tackled her the first time in the snow as bears that he couldn't hold off any longer. The explosion of seed burst forth, and he continued to thrust until he was spent.

To his surprise, he felt her muscles contracting around his erection and realized she had come again, which pleased him greatly.

He rolled off her, and she snuggled against his chest.

“Beautiful,” she murmured. “We are meant to be together.”

“I feel the same way.” He hated admitting he was worn out and ready to sleep, but she seemed to be too.

“Tomorrow we’ll catch up to Denny,” she said.

He chuckled. She was always enforcement all the way. “I agree.”

“And then we plan the wedding.”

Wedding? Of course. He just hadn’t thought of it like he should have.

“Right?”

“Yeah, right away.”

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Andy’s phone rang, jarring the moment as he was snuggling with the love of his life, glad he was off for a few more days to spend an almost pre-honeymoon with Monica.

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He and Monica groaned. He pulled the phone off the bedside table, saw it was work, and knew it couldn't be good news. "Yeah? What's up?"

"You need to come in to fill in for two troopers with the flu."

"Yeah, sure, I'll be right in." Andy climbed out of bed, wishing he hadn't had to leave Monica alone for the day. "Sorry, hon. A couple of the guys are sick, and I need to help cover for them."

"It'll be fine. I'll straighten up and break down the rest of the packing boxes. It drives me crazy when boxes are stacked all over the rooms. When you get home, everything will be neat and orderly." She stretched lazily on the bed, her naked breasts on display.

She was all his. He leaned down and kissed her mouth, then each of her breasts. "It will be a long day."

She cupped his face and pulled him down for a penetrating kiss. "That's okay. I'll visit with the ladies if I can arrange it. I'll keep busy."

"No going after Pierre on your own." Andy feared she would try to track him down. Though she didn't have a car here to go after him.

"Nope." She climbed out of bed in all her naked glory and hugged him. "You are my backup, always."

He hugged her back, wishing they could return to bed. But he had to get going. Then

she pulled out her clothes while he hurried to dress.

They made breakfast together: oatmeal topped with flax seed, bananas, and brown sugar, eggs over easy, pork sausage, and coffee. She made him a hot thermos of coffee while he set the table, glancing at her, wondering how he'd ever gotten so lucky to meet up with her again.

Before long, he was bundled up, kissing her goodbye, knowing that returning home would be a delight when he saw her, and not that he would return to a cold, empty house. What a wonderful difference she had made in his life. She had turned his life around into something extra special.

“Stay safe.” She hugged him as if she were in her bear coat.

He gave her one that was even firmer. “Call Roger, the family, anyone, if Pierre tries to get hold of you while I’m gone.”

“I will.”

“Maybe I should have Craig or Rob drop by and stay with you.”

“Absolutely not. I will see if I can visit with the ladies, which means no guys.”

He smiled. “All right. I’ll keep in touch.”

“You had better.”

Feeling some apprehension at leaving Monica alone while the situation with Pierre was unresolved, Andy had to get his mind on the game and waved goodbye, hoping he wouldn't get into trouble while on patrol!

Once Andy left, Monica cleaned up the breakfast dishes and was in a quandary about whom to contact to get together. Margo was childless, so it would probably be a more restful day. Alicia had two-year-old toddlers, and Robyn had her six-year-old twins and seven-month-old twins.

Yet Monica didn't want to exclude anyone. Some or none of them might be able to meet for an impromptu play date, either, so she decided to hold a conference call with all the ladies.

"Hey, it's me, Monica. Andy got called in for duty, so depending on your schedules, maybe we can get together and have brunch or lunch today at Andy's house?" That would give Monica time to finish unpacking and clearing the house, make a large lunch, and just enjoy the ladies and their children's company for a few hours.

"Yes!" Garrett and Bryan said in the background.

The older boys seemed to like her or wanted to leave their house for a while.

"Yes, that works well for me," Robyn said immediately. "We can take the kids out to play in the snow after the meal, give them some exercise, and then I'll take mine home to nap. I needed to have something to do for them today."

"Me, too," Alicia said. "I have the same routine with my kiddos."

"Well, I would love to. What do you want us to bring?" Margot asked.

Monica was delighted that everyone could do this on such short notice. "How does shrimp salad sound? Maybe crescent rolls and something to drink?"

"I'll bring some hot dogs for the finicky kids," Robyn said.

Monica realized that she would have to learn to adjust to eating meals somewhat when she had children.

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“I’ll bring cheese and crackers,” Alicia said.

“I’ll make us a refreshing hot beverage. The kids like apple juice and milk,” Margot said. “What’s the best time for us to drop by?”

“Eleven,” Robyn and Alicia chimed in.

“Then the kids can play and nap afterward,” Robyn said.

Once everyone agreed, they ended the call. Monica felt so lighthearted and excited to have a play date with everyone. Back home, she hadn’t had any real polar bear friends because she was such a workaholic as an FBI agent, didn’t have a husband, and had no kids. So, she was glad she seemed to fit in with the family.

Being with Andy was heaven, but having girlfriends was just as important. Of course, she expected fussy kids at times, and they still may be shy around her, but this was a great opportunity for her to get to know them better.

After a morning of unpacking the rest of her things and trying to find nooks and crannies to put everything away, Monica was exhausted. She realized she would need a nap as much as the kids did after lunch and playtime.

When everyone arrived with kids in tow, Monica began making shrimp salad. The older boys, already starving, soon helped set the table. Monica was making mental notes about how to raise her babies should she and Andy be lucky enough to have some.

Before long, the little ones were in highchairs that Andy had stored in a closet for when he took care of them. She thought the world of him for being a bachelor and helping with the kids. The older boys even put little polar bibs on all the babies, got them apple sauce packages, and then sat down to eat.

“Boy, you are helpful,” Monica praised Garrett and Bryan.

They beamed at her.

Moms cut up deconstructed hot dogs, cheese, and buns into finger-size bites for the little ones.

“They were thrilled to have a couple more brothers,” Robyn said.

“And cousins,” Bryan hurried to say.

“Yeah,” his brother agreed.

“So your house is up for sale,” Robyn said to Monica.

“Yes, and the way my mom sells homes, it’ll be sold before I know it.”

“That’s good. I hear the market in the suburbs of Anchorage is excellent for selling homes.” Margot took another bite of shrimp salad. “Just delicious. This is even better than how I make it. You’ll have to share your recipe.”

“I sure will. And yes, the market is just great for selling a home.” Monica took another sip of her hot tea. “This is delicious.”

“Cherry vanilla tea, my specialty,” Margot said. “Something special for the winter months, and the notion spring is on its way, and perfect for any celebration.”

Everyone agreed Monica's shrimp salad was the best, wanted her recipe, and loved Margot's tea.

"If you're all right with it, we'll share your shrimp recipe with Genevive, and they'll most likely add it to their menu," Alicia said.

"Oh, wow, what an honor. My grandmother made it for us, and I always made it the same way."

After lunch, they straightened up the kitchen, cleaned up the younger kids, and Monica asked, "Should we go as bears or?—"

"Bears!" Garrett and Bryan shouted at once and started to remove their clothes.

"There's our answer." Alicia removed Jenny's clothes while Margot helped remove Daniel's clothes.

Since the babies couldn't shift independently until they were five or older, sometimes younger or older, depending on the child's development, they would only shift when their mother did.

Monica undressed Lucas while Robyn stripped off Sawyer's clothes. Then the ladies hurried to remove their clothes and shift and went outside. Monica stopped to shift back, shut the door, and turned back into her polar bear.

The boys ran straight for the snow cave, making Monica think about how she and Andy had gotten all hot with each other as bears. Her cheeks warmed a bit.

The boys were play-fighting, snarling, and biting, being little boys. They were no longer on sibling duty. Likewise, the toddlers were stumbling around, nipping and tackling each other, and falling over without any effort.

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The seven-month-olds were watching the others, poking noses into snow holes, pawing as if trying to make their own snow caves, and bumping into each other as if they didn't quite have control over their cub legs.

All the ladies watched to make sure that no one wandered off, and after about forty-five minutes of rigorous outdoor play, the older boys didn't seem to be wearing down much. But the seven-month-olds were lying down on the snow, snuggling together, observing the wild older boys, tackling, biting each other, snarling, and growling. The toddlers were sitting or lying on the snow next to the younger ones, looking worn out.

Then Robyn grunted, and the women all ushered the little ones inside. Monica feared they'd have to carry the youngstones inside; they were moving so slowly. But they were too heavy to lift as polar bears at this age.

Once inside, all the ladies, Garrett, and Bryan shifted and dressed. Then it was time for fresh diapers for the little ones and dressing them. The ladies and older boys hugged Monica before they took the half-asleep babies and toddlers out to their respective vans, and then they drove home.

Now it was time for Monica to take a nap. She would make a nice dinner for Andy and make love to him if he wasn't too worn out. First, a call to him, though. She looked at her phone and saw he had called her several times while they had been out in the snow.

She quickly called him and headed for the bedroom. "Hey, you, is everything all right?"

He laughed. “My brothers and cousins told me you have a ladies' and kids' day out. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I'm as tired as the kids, and I'm going to nap. What would you like me to fix for dinner?”

“Beef stroganoff? It's great warmed up if I get in rather late. I've got a recipe in the book and all the ingredients.”

“You've got it. And if you're not too tired after that...”

He laughed. “I'm never too tired for that. When I can, I'll give you a call later.”

“Look forward to it. All of it!”

Monica was barely awake after a lovely nap when she thought she heard the Ring camera's fairy tune at the front door. She stretched and yawned, then got out of bed. Once she reached the door, she peeked out and saw a white Maine Coon kitten sitting in a basket filled with pink fluffy blankets and a card attached.

She knew to be wary of gifts like that, but the kitten was meowing, and it was too cold for her to be outside. Monica hurried to open the door. Pierre walked into view, his curly sandy hair a ragged mop on his head, but the telltale bruising and cut on his forehead made her realize he hadn't lied about Denny hitting him.

“Hey, Monica, don't be mad at me for not telling you what I couldn't before, but I'm a DEA informant, and my handler swore me to secrecy. I hope you're not allergic to cats. Snowflake is my peace offering to you. Can I come in and talk?”

“How did you know I was staying here?” She lifted the basket as gently as possible, so as not to startle the kitten.

“I overheard a couple of men at the White Bear Tavern saying that you had moved in with Andy and were going to mate him. I thought it was an odd way of putting it.”

“You have a lot of explaining to do.” She frowned at him. “How could you become an informant?”

“A friend of mine’s kid overdosed in Anchorage, the reason I relocated here. I wanted to help take down the bastards responsible. Believe me, I’m coming clean about all of it with you. I’ll be right back. I need to get her litter box and litter, play toys, climbing tree, and bed.”

She hoped Pierre was on the up and up and wasn’t trying to con her. But he risked coming to see her and being arrested, so she thought he might be telling the truth. She hadn’t smelled deception or fear on him. He just seemed relieved.

Thankfully, she wasn’t allergic to cats since she was a bear shifter. She hoped Andy wouldn’t be upset about having a cat as their first baby. Or annoyed that Pierre was the one who gave the kitten to her.

Pierre returned with armloads of gifts. “Where do you want me to put all this?”

She hadn’t expected him to purchase a pink princess bed for Snowflake surrounded by soft velour sides for a little cave-like appearance, a climbing tree meant for a much bigger cat, an enclosed cat litter box to keep mess down to a minimum, and a pink water and food dish covered in white snowflakes.

“These are just adorable. You can put the climbing tree over in the corner, and we can have her bed there for now.” She knew she needed to get to the business of what he had been up to, but taking care of the kitten was just too all-encompassing. “The litter box can go in the mudroom. She can easily access a quiet place off to the side.”

“Got it. A friend had kittens ready to go home to a new family, so I bought the prettiest little female just for you.”

“She’s adorable.” Then she sighed. “You know I’ve got to record all you have to say.” Monica tried to be as professional as possible as she sat on one of the recliners and cuddled the purring kitten on her lap.

Right away, Snowflake was kneading her lap and falling asleep. This was so nice. A great companion when Andy was away. Monica began recording the interview with Pierre, identifying him and the time, and said, “All right, go.”

“Yeah,” Pierre said, sitting on the sofa opposite her. “Okay, you know I really liked you when I met you at the café.”

“Yes, and we had a great time.” But it couldn’t have lasted because he wasn’t a polar bear.

“At the time, I couldn’t tell you I was working on a DEA case as an informant. I wanted to. You were an FBI agent. I thought I could, but my handler said no way. That he didn’t want you to be involved and hurt in the process.”

“Okay.”

“So then he said I needed to be in White Bear, closer to the action.”

Light dawning, she said, “No. This has to do with Harvey Marquart?”

“Yeah. So he was involved in some high-level drug trade, using his motel as a cover.”

She settled back in the recliner, the kitten not moving a muscle. “And the kidnapping scheme?”

“I knew Helen was Harvey’s cousin. So I befriended her at a café like?”

“You befriended me,” Monica said, amused.

“Yeah, but not for the same reason. She was a means to an end. I smooth-talked her into thinking I had tons of money.”

“Which you do, unless you bamboozled me.”

“I do have tons of money, and that’s why I was able to relocate here without any trouble. I had the notion that I could ‘get involved’ in Harvey’s drug trade since I had the money, but the payoff was really DEA money. The next thing I know, Denny arrives at the house with the scheme that he’s kidnapping her, and I’m paying a ransom. She’s Harvey’s cousin, so I wondered if that was another reason they came after me and the money.”

“Totally throwing off your drug deal.”

“Yeah, they just wanted the fast money and didn’t want me involved in their drug business. My DEA handler wasn’t happy.”

“I bet. Did you really give him five hundred thousand?”

“No. I told him I had to get the rest later. When Denny nearly cracked my skull in his faux kidnapping scheme, I thought he was going to hurt Helen. She told me he had a short fuse, and she had a restraining order against him.”

“Hmm, okay, so you think it was real, but you change up the scenario.”

“Yeah. I didn’t want her hurt, even though she was just a pawn in the scheme of things as far as the drugs went, since she was Harvey’s cousin.”

Monica was glad he was one of the good guys. She had thought he was until the story kept flipping around.

Pierre let out his breath. “When I saw you were in the vicinity with another kidnapping case, I thought that maybe, since you had taken care of four kidnapped victims without any harm to them in the past year, you could help save Helen. But Denny told me he would kill her if I called anyone. I knew you would handle it right.”

She didn’t want to tell him about the one she couldn’t save, which still haunted her. “Okay, so I went to get gas in White Bear, and when I was there, Teague cut my brake lines, so I would get far enough into the wilderness that it could be dangerous to me.”

Pierre’s eyes widened, and he ran his hand through his sandy hair. “Hell. You didn’t

tell me that.”

“I didn’t learn of it right away. But your girlfriend, Helen, was the one who put him up to it.”

Pierre rubbed his chin, staring at the floor, deep in thought. “Ah, hell. Here I was truly worried about Denny hurting her. I shouldn’t have been.”

“What about them picking up the money?”

“Oh, that. They wanted me to meet them at some isolated location. Lots of money? No witnesses? No way. All that was true. I told them they had to come to the house, and I’d disable the cameras. They weren’t the brightest bulbs in the box.”

“Did you disable the cameras?”

“Hell no. I ensured all the recorded video was in the cloud and turned it over to my handler. I had some fake cameras that looked like they were off, and they yanked them out just to be sure.”

It was good to know that Pierre had documented everything, though she couldn’t take his word for it.

“I guess you’re stuck on this Andy MacMathan.”

She paused the recording. “Yeah, we really hit it off. I met him a year ago when I went through White Bear and had a flat tire. He helped me with it, but I was seeing another guy at the time.”

“The guy you had ditched before I walked in on you at the café.”

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“Right. Back to the interview?”

“Yeah, sure.”

She restarted the interview. “Why did you disappear after we tried to haul Helen, Denny, and the rest in?”

“Oh, hell, well, Teague said he knew I had betrayed them and had sicced an FBI agent on them. My handler put me in a safehouse, and it was all hush-hush. Though I tried to contact you and got caught at it before I could get through to you.”

“Who is your handler?”

Pierre hesitated to say.

“I have to know who he is to verify all of this and believe you.” Snowflake stretched, licked her lips, and fell asleep again on Monica’s lap.

“He said he knew you. That you were a great agent, but I already knew that.”

She frowned. “Who?”

“Agent Elio Weland?”

Her eyes widened. “I worked with him.”

“Yeah, and he shot you accidentally. When I got you involved in the kidnapping case,

he was furious.”

“He’s DEA now?”

“Yeah.”

Okay, she trusted Elio. “He did it to save my life.”

“Not the way he tells it. He shouldn’t have shot you.”

“He saved my life, and it all turned out right.” Mostly because of her faster healing genetics. No way would she ever think of Elio as anything but her hero in that high-stakes situation of life and death.

Suddenly, Monica’s phone lit up. She glanced at the caller’s ID. “It’s Andy.”

“Answer it. I know he’ll want to come to your rescue. I sure wish I had been the one who had been your hero instead of putting you in harm’s way.”

She smiled. “Snowflake makes up for it.” She answered the call. “Andy?—”

“We’ve got the house surrounded.”

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Andy was on patrol, not seeing any issues, when Craig called, immediately making him worry that something was wrong back home. “You need to come home right away. A strange black Mercedes is parked about 350 yards from your house on the roadside. All the male members of the family set up a perimeter around the place.”

His heart racing, Andy turned his car around and raced home, breaking every speed

limit to get there. He asked for the license plate number and called it in to the police. Pierre Johnson. Andy immediately called Monica and told her the place was surrounded in case she was in trouble.

He got on his radio and said, “Roger, get hold of some officers and send them to my home.” He explained the situation.

“On it.”

Andy pulled up to the house where his brothers and cousins were blocking the Mercedes and parked around the front of the home. The house was quiet.

Sweating like crazy, Andy rushed out of the SUV without shutting the door, which could alert anyone inside that he was on his way.

“Is Pierre there with you? Are you hurt?” Andy still had an open phone line to Monica. He couldn’t keep the anger and worry out of his voice.

“Do not storm into the house with guns drawn,” Monica firmly told Andy over the phone.

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He assumed that meant she was being held hostage, and his skin chilled with trepidation.

“You’ll scare our new baby.”

He frowned. What was she trying to tell him cryptically?

“Yes, Pierre is here.”

Andy ground his teeth.

“He’s unarmed. Just walk quietly into the house. I’ve got his taped interview. I don’t want you to frighten the kitten he gave to us.”

Three police cars raced up the drive and parked.

Andy couldn’t believe Pierre was unarmed or that he had finally confessed to his role in all this. He motioned to the other officers to draw close.

“I mean it, Andy. Don’t scare the kitten. It could traumatize her forever. Pierre has been an informant for the DEA. Just quietly come in the door, frisk him, but don’t scare Snowflake.”

Now this case had to be one for the books. Why the hell was Pierre giving her a kitten? Did he still have an interest in dating her? Andy would let him know he had no chance of that in no uncertain terms.

With his gun in hand, Andy opened the door slowly.

Monica was curled up on the recliner, a tiny fuzzy kitten sleeping on a pink blanket on her lap. She smiled broadly. "Our case is solved."

Pierre was sitting on a chair opposite her, his forehead black and blue and cut from where Denny had pistol-whipped him.

Andy still couldn't believe Pierre was one of the good guys. "I need you to stand up so I can check to see if you have any weapons."

Roger and the other officers joined him and watched over the situation. He asked Roger if he could tell his family that they had the situation under control and they could leave.

That's when Andy saw the cat climbing tree, a pink princess bed, and pink food and water dishes covered in white snowflakes in the kitchen. What the hell?

Why hadn't Andy thought of doing something so sweet for her?

He made his own recording to check for discrepancies in Pierre's story and questioned him again.

After Andy had asked Pierre most of the same questions, a new agent arrived, and Monica said, "Elio!"

Who the hell was Elio?

"He's my former partner in the FBI," Monica discreetly said to Andy, without giving more details.

The agent who had shot her? Hell, Andy was ready to deck him.

Elio clarified the situation with Pierre, saying he was furious when he got Monica involved. But Andy still couldn't forgive the agent for accidentally shooting Monica, even if it meant saving her life. Andy would have done better.

After everything had been cleared up, Monica gave her boss an update and an apologetic two weeks' notice so she could leave the FBI. This surprised everyone in the house except Roger. He smiled in an all-knowing way.

Everyone finally began to leave.

"Thanks for the kitten as an apology." Monica squeezed Pierre's hand on the way out.

He smiled at her. "It was the least I could do." He glanced at Andy, who frowned at him, and said, "You are the luckiest man alive."

Then Andy smiled, feeling a little big-headed in truth. "I truly am. Thanks for coming clean with us."

"You caught all the bad guys. Elio said it was time to tell you what had happened and clear the air."

"And the kitten?" Andy wasn't happy that he had given Monica all the gifts.

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“A parting gesture to tell Monica I was sorry I got her involved.”

“Apology accepted.” Andy hurried him out along the sidewalk, not wanting them to have anything further to do with him.

“Thank you for Snowflake. We’ll cherish her as our first baby.” Monica sounded so happy, Andy again wished he’d thought of it.

Once everyone was gone, Andy returned to the house and peeled the kitten from Monica’s arms. He cuddled Snowflake and then kissed Monica’s lips. “I’m home early.”

“You sure are. My bear to the rescue.”

“You bet. When Craig saw the strange Mercedes sitting near our home, he called in the alert.”

“You were having me watched.”

“That’s what family does.”

“Okay, well, you cuddle with Snowflake further. You can show her where her kitty litter box is in the mudroom, and I’ll get us dinner.”

“And then, what do we do about the kitten?”

“She’ll sleep in her bed, and you and I have some making up to do.”

That night, after settling Snowflake in her bed in the living room by her climbing tree, Monica and Andy made love. But it wasn't long afterward that Snowflake meowed, joined them, and snuggled between them.

This wasn't going to work. Andy moved the kitten to the other side of Monica. No one was getting between him and his mate.

He was determined to convince the kitten she had her own bed. Only time would tell if she won out or he did.

EPILOGUE

Six months had passed since all the criminals were charged with various crimes. And with them all behind bars, most of the DEA money had been recovered. All of them were found guilty and were serving prison sentences. Harvey Marquart was found guilty of his drug involvement and attempt to kill Monica at the motel, resisting arrest, and other charges. Eloise, likewise, had taken money in a faux kidnapping scheme, drunk driving, and resisting arrest.

Denny was charged with pistol-whipping Pierre, taking money in a faux kidnapping scheme, and resisting arrest. Helen and Lionel had attempted to murder police officers, resisting arrest, and taking money from the faux kidnapping scheme, and received longer sentences. Harvey did too for trying to murder Monica and for all the drug charges.

Teague was charged with evading arrest, taking money from the faux kidnapping scheme, and tampering with Monique's brake lines, putting her in danger.

The Williamson brothers were returning to prison for their latest bank robbery.

Pierre was found to be innocent and an informant who had helped them with a major

trafficking and faux kidnapping case and was in Witness Protection.

And Monica had finally decided on a new car to replace the one she'd wrecked when she'd hit Andy's patrol car.

Only two weeks after Monica had given her mother the news that she was marrying Andy, the wedding had been spectacular—Monica's mother insisted they do it right away as she had sold Monica's home for top dollar. She wanted to legitimize this whole process.

Luckily, everyone got along, though Monica's dad often tried to outdo Andy's dad by bragging that he was a better chef, all in good fun.

Snow leopards, Arctic foxes, grey wolves, Arctic wolves, grizzlies, and polar bears were in attendance. Monica's parents were thrilled that she had found a mate, and they adored both Andy and his extended family, doting on the little ones as if they were their own grandchildren.

Genevieve had added Monica's shrimp dish to their menu, and Monica and Andy's oil portrait of them in their bear coats was now on the wall in the tavern, along with the rest of the family members, which had thrilled Monica and Andy.

Today was the Fourth of July, and everyone was there for the big celebration.

But they had more to celebrate today than family, food, and fireworks. Monica and Andy had news they needed to share. As everyone was getting hot dogs or hamburgers, feeding little ones, or eating their own food, Alicia kept casting surreptitious glances her way.

Monica wondered if she'd had a premonition about her pregnancy and was waiting for the announcement to prove her vision.

However, Monica was afraid to mention it because Craig and Margot hadn't had children yet, and they loved their nieces and nephews as if they were their own. But Monica and Andy had to share the good tidings, or everyone would know before long that she was pregnant.

Andy brought her a glass of milk. Subtle he wasn't. "Are you ready?"

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“You don’t think Craig and Margot will be too upset?”

“There’s no denying they want babies too and feel a little left out. I see Alicia watching you like a hawk. I suspect she envisioned you’re pregnant.”

“Well, you”—Monica shoved the empty milk glass at his chest—“couldn’t be more obvious about it.”

He smiled like a giddy boy. He was so excited to announce the news that he wasn’t waiting another day. “I want everyone to know.”

“You are a proud papa.”

“Certainly.” Then Andy cleared his throat and waved the empty milk glass. “We have an announcement to make.” He wrapped his arm around Monica’s shoulders and kissed her cheek. “We’re having twins at Christmas.”

Everyone clapped and cheered. Monica wanted to hug Margot, holding Lucas, one of the seven-month-old twins, on her hip. She smiled and wished them the best while tears dribbled down her cheeks.

Craig was holding Lucas’s twin brother, Sawyer, and rubbing Margot’s back consolingly.

Monica prayed they would have good news soon.

“You knew, didn’t you?” Andy asked Alicia as everyone gathered close to give them

hugs.

Alicia smiled brightly. “Why do you think I was building the snow cave? I felt compelled to do it because I saw Monica needed it for your twins.”

“Twins?” Andy beamed. He glanced at Rob. “And you too?”

“Yeah. Twice, our little Jenny pointed at Monica’s belly and said, ‘Babies.’ But luckily, you didn’t hear her. And her brother nodded, envisioning the same. We felt you needed to enjoy the experience of learning it for yourselves.”

“So your daughter and son do have premonitions.” Monica was really in awe.

“They do,” Alicia said.

Monica’s mom hugged her the most. “I’ve enjoyed being the top sales real estate person in Anchorage for years, but it’s time to let someone else hold the honor from now on.”

“You’re retiring?” Monica thought her mother would never leave the job because she greatly enjoyed it.

“No, honey. I’ll either work for another office in White Bear or start my own.”

Tears sprang up in Monica’s eyes. Her most fervent wish was that her parents would move down here to join them.

Her dad nodded and smiled. “We’ve talked to Genevieve and Ned about buying some of the extra land they reserved for family. Mom has shown them the house plans for the home she wants to build. We’ll buy the land and start building right away. We’ll be one strong bear force to reckon with, and it’s something we’ve never had. We

really look forward to getting to know everyone better.” Then her father gave her a big bear hug.

She loved his warm, sincere hugs and gave him one right back. “I’m so thrilled you’ll be here when the babies are born.”

“At Christmastime? You bet.”

Craig had given his charge to Rob and slapped his brother on the back in a fun-hearted fashion. “We’re so proud of you both.”

“We know how much you’re anticipating having babies too.” Monica tried not to sound regretful that they had good news and Craig and Margot didn’t. She would feel the same way if she were struggling to have children. Adopting a polar bear shifter cub was a rarity.

“Oh, the slow turtle wins the race,” Craig said. “We just need to play in the snow more, fall in the snow cave, and then that’s it!”

Monica’s jaw dropped. Had they seen them getting so amorous at the cave?

Alicia laughed. “Yeah, that’s the beginning of how it happened.”

Rob smiled. Had he seen it too?

Monica’s cheeks had to be rosy as hot as they felt.

Ben had his hands in his shorts pockets. “I should be the sad one here. I can’t even find a mate.”

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“Oh, she’s coming, and she won’t be anything you would ever dream of mating in a million years,” Alicia said.

Everyone waited to hear what else Alicia had to say about it.

Alicia shrugged. “I just see hazy visions. I know there will be trouble between you and a third party.”

When wasn’t a potential mate trouble for the MacMathans?

Alicia winked at Margot. “Don’t the two of you go to sleep right after the celebration tonight.”

Everyone smiled, realizing the obvious—they had to make love that night after their grand Fourth of July celebration, and that would do the trick. Margot blushed furiously. Craig grinned broadly, looking like he wanted to snatch Margot up and take her home to start early fireworks there.

After the games, food, and fireworks, everyone headed home with tired kids or without. Monica’s parents did not stay with Monica and Andy like they usually did when visiting them, so they could get busy with their plans to move to White Bear.

Andy and Monica showered together, made love in bed, and snuggled. “I can’t believe Alicia, Rob, and even their toddlers knew I was pregnant or how it all began.”

“They are truly remarkable. But I’m glad they didn’t let us in on the secret.”

“I guess Craig and Margot will make love, and they will conceive and have their babies three months after ours.” Monica kissed Andy’s bare chest.

“I figured that was what Alicia was trying to say.”

They closed their eyes, wanting to enjoy the moment together, when Monica’s phone rang.

“Hey,” Craig said, “put your phone on speaker. We’ve got a conference call to make. We’re pregnant!”

“What?” Andy asked.

“I’m sure you all thought that we had to make love to each other, but that wasn’t it. Margot just needed to test with a pregnancy kit again, and voila! Not that we didn’t also make love first.”

Everyone laughed. Monica was sure Margot wished Craig had skipped revealing that part. Margot was crying, saying, “They’re happy tears.”

“Of course they are, and we’re so glad for you.” Monica couldn’t have been more thrilled for them and wondered if their babies would come around the same time as hers and Andy’s.

Then everyone said their congratulations and ended the call to go to sleep.

Snowflake was in her bed until she missed Monica and Andy, and ended up in bed with them. Again.

But the next morning, bright and early, earlier than Monica and Andy had planned to get up, Craig called them again. “We went to see the doctor this morning. Our babies

are due about the same time as yours, but we're having triplets."

They laughed.

"Wow, that's terrific news." Monica was delighted to share the experience with them.

"Just like you, me, and Ben then," Andy said.

"Yeah, triplets. We're going to be overwhelmed. Three of everything. What a madhouse," Craig said.

Now it didn't matter, if it ever had, which babies came first. Triplets trumped twins.

"We'll have tons of caregivers to help us," Monica said, "but I'm so thrilled the little ones will all be about the same age. No details on what they are yet?"

"No, too early," Margot chimed in. "I'm nervous about having three to manage."

"We'll all help you out," Andy said.

"Okay, thanks, but you'll have your hands full, too. We've got to call the rest of the family with the update. We just called you first because we are due around the same time as you," Margot said.

"We'll have a joint baby shower if you would like to." Monica never thought she would have a sister-in-law experiencing the same adventure simultaneously, and she could just imagine what fun that would be.

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“Oh, I would love that, yes!”

Then they ended the call and Andy cuddled some more with Monica, caressing her arm, kissing her cheek. “I’m glad to hear the news.”

“They are over the moon, and I’m so happy for them. But what about Ben?”

“He’ll probably have to solicit our help to get him out of whatever pickle of a mess he will get into. But in the end?”

“He might have a mate?”

“You never know with Ben.”

The End