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The carriage's wheels slide at dangerous angles along the snow-thickened landscape. The front of the vehicle creaks and groans as we shift sideways. I peer around the door and witness the shaft keeping the horses attached to the buggy busting in half, and we're tossed the other way. Another creak, and the shaft snaps to pieces, straps flying in every direction. Freed, the horses thunder off together.

The motion and slick snow keep the carriage sliding around, and fear spreads like spilled oil through my being as the driver curses his luck. I spy the driver's white-knuckled hand on the bar above the carriage used to hold luggage. The vehicle slips sidelong, and the trees are now coming at me directly. I have no choice. I have to jump. Clutching my belongings, I take a deep breath and throw myself out into a mountainous snowdrift. Like jumping into a river, I'm engulfed in a pool of cold whiteness.

A holler pierces the air as the side of the coach crunches into a massive fir tree, throwing the driver off. He lands with a

grunt against the next trunk, not far from where I lay. Snow swirls in the wind above his crumpled body.

Snowflakes gather against my eyelashes, blurring the sight of the rumbling transport as the remaining intact portion splits open against a thick bank of oaks.

Silence.

Has the driver survived? How will we get out of here?

My feet slip as I stand, and I sink back into the bitter cold cushion of snow up to my waist. I've lost my pillow and blanket, but I use the suitcase to help me stand, and I fight my way through the snowdrifts to make my way over to the wheels' path and then beyond to the driver. He's sprawled and twisted—dead amidst the jagged remains of his seat. His mouth is wide open in a silent scream.

I cover my eyes, remembering Mother's torn and twisted body. I bite my lip against the tears which threaten to come and raise a shaking hand. No one deserves to be left like this, so I *call* the snow to bury him under a blanket of white. "May you meet your Kinsman this day, and may it be a blessing."

I wade to where the carriage wheels shuffled the deep snow aside, so I can stand. I mentally check each part of my body. A few bruises, to be sure, but nothing seems broken or sprained. The cold wind creeps through my wet clothes, and I shiver uncontrollably. I've never seen it snow like this before. Ever.

I wonder how far from the estate I have traveled. The sky above me is a haze of white, giving no indication of time. I massage the skin at my collar to lessen the hot barbs of fear that sprout up my neck.

Brushing the snow from my cloak, I stamp my feet to remove the clumps under my skirt that cling to my stocking-clad legs. If only I owned a pair of boots instead of my shoes,

worn through in several places. My toes are already soaked and frozen, despite my wool stockings.

“You’ve been in worse situations. Keep your wits.” I imagine Mother, who was never one to back down without a fight, saying the words I speak aloud to myself.

The stark white landscape blinds me. Closing my eyes, I reach out instead with my abilities to feel for signs of a cottage or barn. I *call* for something. Anything. A log. A rope. Boots.

A soft object touches my hand. I open my eyes and see ... the quilted pillow and the blanket? Not at all what I’d expected, but I’m grateful to have them, along with my ring, back. Another try brings me a soggy envelope. I turn it over. The ink is blotchy from wetness, but it is a letter addressed to the Magistrate.

Well, maybe the Kinsman does answer prayers after all. Should I leave it in the snow? Perhaps I can figure out a way to gain my freedom with it. I fold the paper, tuck it safely inside my chemise strap, and say a quick prayer to the Kinsman for safety.

The spark of joy I had when I called the letter dies as I turn in a circle trying to gauge where I am. I remember overhearing about hunting cabins in the woods not far from the mansion. I refuse to return to the estate and perish in the stocks. If I’m going to die, I will do so trying to get free.

A biting wind blows, and I struggle to breathe as I move through the drifts. Thankful once again for the cloak Nellie gave me, I tuck my pillow inside and button the cloak tight over it. I drape the blanket over the hood to hold as a shield for my face against the biting flurries. Standing as I am, my sleeves barely cover my hands. Without gloves, I can feel the cold down to my bones. It won’t be long before they turn numb, which will lead to frostbite. I consider leaving the case behind, but I will need a change of clothes wherever I end up.

Around me, the wind whirls the flakes in waves as they fall, the patterns moving as if chasing me. A bird cries above me, and I look up into the dark undersides of the tree branches, a stark contrast to the whiteness. Somehow the bird's squawks sound like my name. I stumble but manage to catch myself, though I drop the blanket.

Another gust of wind jars me with its force, and crystals pelt my face. A dark shadow moves out of the corner of my eye. I sense it hovering over me. I shake the blanket free of the powder and thrust it back over my head to ward off whatever otherworldly beings might attack. Maybe the forest *is* haunted. *Nonsense, keep your head!*

I place a trembling hand on the hard bark of a nearby tree. The solid sturdiness of the trunk grounds me, slowing my churning thoughts to a more sensible pace. I gather the brown cloak closer and slog back to my case. Only the handle shows above the solid blanket of white. I can still see the broken pieces of the carriage, but they're quickly becoming covered. It won't be long before I lose any sense of direction. With my jaw set, I trudge through the white fluff with my head down to ignore the lurking shadows.

My body soon numbs to the cold. On and on, I plow through a thick ocean of cold, silently praying I'm not moving in circles.

At last, the wind dies down, and the snow eases up. Sunlight struggles to pierce through the dying storm. The trees thin out and I dare a glance up from the ground. Ahead, dark against the waning light, stands a cottage. Without smoke or lamplight, it appears to be unoccupied.

My hands and feet are frozen, so instead of knocking, I bang the case against the door. There's no answer. Could it be one of the hunting cabins I'd overheard the maids talk about?

Chitter. Chatter. Rustling feathers dart beside me.

A magpie. Surely not the same one from the estate. It can't be, can it?

My heart pounds in my ears. "Shoo, you beast!"

As I thought—it had been a bad omen.

Mustering up all my strength, I shove my shoulder into the heavy door. It gives and I tumble inside, bumping my head on the doorframe as I do so. I kick the door shut before the bird can follow and plunge into stale darkness.

A few moments and several blinks later, my eyesight adjusts. Slivers of light frame the window shutters. I open one. There's no glass to keep the draft out, or as I realize belatedly, creatures.

Outside on the windowsill, the magpie perches, staring at me. It pecks at the weathered frame, stretches his long black wings, and hurls his body at me, claws first.

I scream and slam the shutters.

A wintry stillness rests upon the inside of the house. Any noise, save the bird, is shielded by the thick mounds of snow beyond the log walls. I can make out the shape of a table and chairs, the fireplace, and a ladder that leads into a loft. Picking up my belongings, I dust off the table as best as I can and set them on top.

My hand brushes against cold glass in the middle of the table. A lantern! I spy a darkened room behind the table and the light cast from another shuttered window. Gritting my teeth, I slowly unlock and open these wooden shutters. No birds. Nothing shrieking at me. Though the light is dim, it helps me see well enough to inspect the cottage.

First is the kitchen, and I find several containers and bags of supplies with small amounts of flour, salt, and oil. Garlic and some root vegetables hang on a nail on the wall. They're dried up but surely still edible. I smile. My luck has changed. This little house has everything I need. More than I've had for

years. And more dust than I'd seen in years as well. Possibly it had been abandoned in haste and forgotten—or the owner died, leaving no one to claim his property. I search every corner, pleased to discover a pile of dry wood and the flint and steel needed to start a fire, and so I do.

Within no time, the warmth of the crackling fire loosens my stiff hands, and I get to work. As I gather snow in a large kettle, I catch sight of a scrubby pine limb to scour away the wet footprints from the now-muddy dust that's thick everywhere. The lantern is full, so I have plenty of light to check out every dark corner while leaving the loft for when the cottage warms up a bit more. Though it's chilly in the cottage, I'm energized and work up a sweat. I strip down to just my chemise and underwear while searching and scrubbing.

I melt snow and add it to the flour, salt, garlic, and oil for a simple flatbread to ease my empty stomach and decide to rehydrate the vegetables later for a soup. The last time I'd eaten was the eve before the escapade with the eggs. That had been only a few scraps taken when Adelia hadn't been looking to supplement Cook's favorite meal for the indentured servants: cold cabbage and turnip green hash. While the dough cooks beside the hearth, I gather snow to heat in the kettle to wash my clothes.

I could stay here until my birthdate. It makes perfect sense. I clutch the drying missive from Mrs. Calvin. The script is mostly blurred except for my name and her signature. If I played it right, I could convince them I'd served the end of my indentureship without incident, and then I could be free.

I had days until my birthdate, so I just needed to wait it out and not starve to death while doing so. I've lived on less than what is here.

Luckily, this cabin looks to have been abandoned for a while, so I don't believe I'll have any interruption now with

the storm burying the woods. Not even the heartiest of hunters would dare go out in this mountain of snow until a good thaw.

Soon I'm exhausted from hauling snow to boil to wash my clothes. I decide to bathe. It has been months since I'd last bathed and longer since I last washed my long hair. Though still silver, my scalp is coated with coal grime, and the tresses are greasy. I scrub hard, ruining my stockings doing so, but it's worth it to feel tingly and clean once again.

I study the silver strands of hair from one side of my head in the glowing firelight as it dries. It's almost as if it reflects light itself and my lips twist painfully down. Mother had brown hair and brown eyes, and I'd always teased her I was a changeling left by a fairy. She'd counter that I'd been born of the stars and that the moon had left me at her door on the eve of the brightest night. I was her starlight princess. A tear glides down my cheek at the bittersweet reflection.

The scent of bread browning against the warm hearthstones breaks my reverie and, shaking off the memories, I flip it over so it doesn't burn.

Satisfied with the fruits of my labor, I change into my extra shift, now-dried dress, and stockings, and am toasty warm at long last. I lay down on my freshly washed and dried blanket and pillow, and I'm lulled into a doze.

Bang. Thud. Something knocks against the front door.

I jolt, my heart beating hard and fast. I search the room for the makeshift broom made from the evergreen branch. The magpie, after making a ruckus for a time, has long since disappeared. Could this be the owner or another soul wandering the forest?

The door handle moves. There is no board for the latch. Why had I been so naïve to believe I was safe?

My breath hitches as the door opens. Wind whistles

through and snow spirals in, becoming slush on the warmed wooden floor.

The magpie flies in, slipping through a hand-width opening. *Scream! Squawk!*

“Oh, no. Not you again.” I chase the bird. It must be ill because it doesn’t fly. It runs from me, leaving wet footprints to pool on the wooden floor. “Shoo! Be gone, you monster!”

Wings flapping and beak wide, the magpie hurtles at me. Feathers graze my face in a soft, yet determined attack as it screeches. I flail and jerk away from the crazed assault, only to trip over the makeshift broom. I fall and land on my bottom, my long hair flying crazily over my face. I hastily brush it away so I can see. Anger burns in my chest as I grab the branch and swing. I land a square hit.

The bird skitters across the floor and over the threshold into the snow. I stand and quickly run for the door to jam it shut.

I lodge the thick evergreen limb into the bar brackets on each side of the frame. I *call* a heavy, wooden bench from across the room and prop it against the door. I barely notice my strength weakening from using so much of my ability as the blood pumps furiously through my veins.

The scratching against the front door stops, and my breathing eases. Moments later, however, something hits against the back door, and my fear rekindles. I *send* the iron kettle across the room to block the door. It lands on the floor with a thunk and dirty water sloshes over the side of the heavy pot. Sweat beads on my forehead from the effort.

The noise stops. After a lengthy silence, I open the window not far from the door and glance outside at the doorway. No bird. Maybe the vile creature finally flew away.

I turn to gather the kettle to dispose of the dirty wash water outside and slip in a puddle. My feet fly out, and I land

with a gasp on the hard floor. I can already imagine the bruises I've undoubtedly gained. The bird flies in the open door, cawing at me as if laughing.

Instead of diving at me, it swoops up, clasps the handle on the door with its claws, and shuts it with a bang. Its dark outline expands into something much bigger.

Terror crawls up my spine.

Oh, Nellie, I was wrong. So very wrong.

There are ghosts in this forest.