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**An Excerpt From: HERO UNMASKED**

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“Cam,” she breathed and opened the door to shout, “Cam.”

He lifted a hand and hurried his steps.

“Why are you letting the cold air in? You’ll freeze,” he said as he neared. Once inside, he shut the door and pulled the drapery closed. “Do you have a towel? I don’t want to track water everywhere.”

“Yeah. One second.” She ran to the bathroom for the cloth. “Is everything all right? Why are you here? Not that I’m sorry you’re here.”

“Thank you.” He nodded and took the towels from her. He had toed off his boots and socks, which made her smile. Of course he’d have big feet. Large, strong, gnarly man-feet with scars and bumps. The feet of a soldier. “How are you faring?”

“Fine, all things considered. I have heat. That’s more than some.”

“True. True. Even I’m finding the cold too much to bear.”

“Well, come closer to the fire. How long have you been out?”

“Most of the night.” He blotted at the snow covering his head and shoulders. “One accident turned into two, then ten, then when the wind picked up, the trees began to come down. I’ve never seen trees explode in such a fashion before. The willow tree in the middle of the square split right down the middle. The trunk splintered like toothpicks.”

“Oh no. I love that tree. It’s been there since time began.”

“Unfortunately, it’s one of the many causalities of this storm. I’m afraid once this snow has cleared, Cedar won’t appear as it once was. Your shop is fine, but the roof collapsed on the shops on the other side of the street, and I’ve lost count of the number of homes that have been damaged.”

“Has anyone been hurt?”

“Physically? Nothing that won’t heal in a day. Emotionally? Well, only time will tell.”

“God, I hate snow.” She gestured to the pot of water bubbling on the stove. “Would you like some coffee? How about soup? I can feed you something hot.”

“Coffee sounds wonderful.” He settled back into his chair with a chuckle. “Look at you. French press. Heavy skillets. You’re a regular pioneer woman. Ready for anything.”

“I know wood-burning stoves are considered retro now, but the power goes out at least once a year and with a regular fireplace you have to sit in the hearth to feel any heat. I’ll take a good ole potbellied monster anytime.”

“The Anderson’s home was blazing bright when I passed by there earlier. I heard part of their remodel included two generators.”

“You know a lot for a person who lives in the shadows.”

“The shadows keep the best secrets.”

What she wouldn’t give to learn what he did in the shadows. “I’ve thought about getting a generator, but then part of me thinks I’m just asking to lose power if I do. How do you take your coffee?”

“Slightly sweetened.” He took the offered mug and sniffed appreciatively. “This smells fantastic. We don’t have sugar where I’m from and it’s now my favorite food group.”

“No sugar? You mean you didn’t have desserts or candy? I can’t imagine a world without sweets.”

“We had confections, but nothing like here. If you brought your talents to my planet, you would be worshipped like a goddess.”

Heat from his smile warmed her cheeks. “You liked my brownies?”

“Loved them. I made the mistake of sharing them with the officers I was working with last night and almost didn’t get one. You have many fans.”

His compliment filled her with pride like no other she’d ever received. Why was that? Was it because she valued his opinion more than others, or was it pure attraction that made her want to lay her head in his lap like a puppy and beg for more attention?

Outside the pop and crackle of tree limbs bursting and crashing to the ground quieted and the hush rolled into the house. Unable to remain still, she reached for the poker and opened the front hatch to prod at the blazing logs.

“So.” She licked her lips. “When is the sheriff expecting you back? Hopefully you’ll get the chance to rest.”

“I’ve been instructed to not show my face for a while. Besides, I don’t think there will be a soul outside now that the sun is setting. It will be too foolish. My time is my own, for now.”

“Oh.”

She turned away to prevent him from seeing the delighted grin stretching her lips from ear to ear.

Crap, he probably sensed the zing of excitement that shot through her. *Relax. Relax. Relax. Do not think about Cam and you. Alone. In a blizzard.*

Hysterical laughter tickled her throat, threatening her attempt at appearing blasé.

“What’s so funny?”

Damn. This empathy thing was maddening. “Nothing.”

“Tell me. Your humor feels like bubbles against my skin. What is it?”

“It was nothing, really. Just a silly cliché.”

“I don’t not know this word, cliché. What does it mean?”

“Well, it’s a phrase or idea that has been overused so when it’s spoken, everyone can finish your sentence for you.”

He leaned forward in his chair and rubbed his hands together. “Now I am curious. What was this cliché?”

“It was stupid.” As she talked she felt her cheeks burn as if she set them directly on the hot hearth. “Just. You know. Here we are. A girl and a boy.” Boy. She mentally snorted. Ha! “Trapped in a storm. Whatever shall we do?” she finished in a singsong voice.

“Hmm.” He stroked his chin. “I know I’d like to have sex with you.”

The poker dropped from her hand and bounced as it hit the carpet with the same boy-oy-oying sound that echoed inside her skull. White dots floated in her vision and from a distance she barely heard his sharp command.

“Breathe, Fiona. Breathe.”

Like a goldfish flopping next to its bowl, she sucked in a mouthful of air and warbled out a weak, “What?”

“I am certain you heard me.”

“But—uh. Why?”

He rose to his feet and stalked toward her with slow, lazy steps. “Ah, Fiona. I heard you were a woman who liked a man who was direct. I thought it was because you are a person who likes to get right to the point, but now I realize it’s because you don’t believe what is right before your eyes.”

“And what is that?”

The flames in his eyes glowed brighter than the candles surrounding them. The pads of his thumbs ghosted across her lower lip as he cupped her face. “A man who wants you so desperately, I swear I can already taste the salt of your skin on my tongue.”

*Yeaaahhh. That’s so hot.*