



# Body Heat

DEVYN MORGAN

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# CHAPTER 1

NOBODY in their right mind would sit in an aluminum tree-stand while the snow kept coming down, not in this part of the mountains. The snowflakes stuck into clumps the size of quarters. They looked thick and heavy, yet there was little wind, and despite the encroaching dusk the temperature rose just enough to keep Nick from flexing his muscles on his small perch in an effort to keep his blood moving.

The Colorado spruce rose like immense sentinels up the hillside, the graceful swoops of their branches grasping the welcome bounty with their green, fragrant needles, their drooping shapes now limned in pale and rhythmic outlines against the hillside. Nick loved watching the billowy sheets of snow, like diaphanous curtains borne on gentle puffs of wind, and the way they ebbed and flowed through the clearing before him in a hypnotic, back-and-forward dance of open and expansive air, such as he'd never seen out East.

He stooped for his thermos, not caring much if he made noise and scared the deer away. Once again, he considered going back to camp.

Once again, he decided he preferred the solitude over his brother's uncomfortable silence and his brother's friends' gay jokes and jibes.

Just his luck, having Justin show up as Nick was putting the moves on his skiing instructor. Which is why he had moved out East to begin with. If he was away from his family, he didn't have to explain the difference between *gay* and *bi* and how he was working on figuring out where he fit in life. Although, Clay pointed him toward the man-loving end of the scale. Tall, rugged, handsome, but with just a bit of a swish to his gestures, Clay was endearing and competent and utterly kissable.

Push-against-the-car kind of kissable.

Instead of focusing on hunting, Nick leaned back and thought of Clay. What was he up to? Was he out skiing? Did their kiss haunt him as much as it haunted Nick?

He drank some warm mint tea and set the thermos down, dislodging his brother's spare bow in the process. The metallic chink of the weapon against the powder-coated aluminum of the bow rest sounded like an accusation.

Settled once again, hands gloved and the razor arrow nocked, he slowly scanned the clearing. He decided, just then and there, that he was done even pretending to be hunting today. He removed the arrow from the compound bow and clipped it into the attached plastic holder. Once again, he considered going to camp. The snow had kept his older brother and his two pals in the tent. Probably playing cards. Hopefully putting up some stew, too. His stomach rumbled at the thought. The stand had iced over a few hours ago and Nick had almost bailed, but the solitude of his tree perch was more pleasant than the usual manly talk his brother and his friends carried on.

That talk was now peppered with the occasional joke, a jibe, or a question so personal it made Nick blush.

His brother had to share Nick's business with his friends – not unexpected.

His friends weren't quite assholes, but they weren't casual about Nick turning out queer, either. And since they were stuffed into a cramped, claustrophobic tent, going hunting had been Nick's only escape.

Even though the visions of hot beef stew danced in his head, he knew he'd stay up in the tree. An unexpected gust of wind threw icy needles against his tender eyelids, which happened to be the only part of his head not covered by his face mask.

Just a while longer. Before he got caught kissing Clay in the parking lot, the crowded tent wouldn't have mattered. Now it did.

Timeless moments passed. The temperature dropped by at least ten degrees, and the snow had turned into a fine and bitter dusting that sifted from the sky like sugar, and as though the Colorado plateau was one big cookie sheet. Cookies meant home and warmth, and the memory made Nick smile. Those had been the better days, the days before he had to hide his true self from his homo-resistant brother and pretend he was a real he-man, ready for any rugged adventure, and giving a slow, mildly appreciative look to every woman within five years of his own twenty-seven.

Nick realized he had spaced out there for a while, letting stray thoughts take him to places he'd rather not visit, when a familiar shape moved down below.

A stately, tall buck with an eight-point rack moved through the heavy snow as though he were swimming. There was a deer path down there, Nick recalled. The buck paused within a clear line of sight.

He was standing broadside, and his brown coat formed a clearly visible target against the pristine snow. Maybe he was taking a break, Nick thought. Or maybe he smelled something.

Even after a four-day adjustment period at high altitude, Nick had a hard time snow-shoeing through heavy snow. Skiing worked a lot better, but even so he still had to take breaks up here in the hills, where the air was thin. Longer, harder outings still left him with a headache, unquenchable thirst, and poor sleep.

The buck didn't have any of those issues.

Nick lifted his bow and peered through the scope.

The buck turned his head, as though he knew he wasn't alone.

Had he been actually hunting, and provided he made his kill, Justin would just pass the bottle of rye, say something witty about Nick being a real man after all, and get off his back.

The buck also looked stately. Graceful. And it wasn't like they were short of meat.

He watched the buck toss his head into a gust of wind and move a few steps.

Such a small head, such strong neck. Amazing, how such an animal could support a rack like that, run with it, fight with it. He saw his ears flatten and twitch before he pushed through the snowdrift, chest deep, and disappeared behind a tree.

Just like Clay had disappeared behind a car. Once again, Nick thought back to the tall-and-handsome. How patient he had been with Nick's clumsiness while skiing. How helpful. The jokes he'd cracked when Nick face-planted in the snow over and over. Not mean jokes, just the sort of a thing that got Nick laughing, eager to try again.

All too aware of the night that was dogging his heels, Nick put the weapon down and covered the lens of its scope. Tomorrow was New Year's Eve and the last day of Colorado's bow season, and he sure as hell wasn't getting back out here to freeze his ass in the tree. No, tomorrow he planned to be in his room at the lodge, mingling with the locals. Hopefully running into Clay, that sweet and immensely athletic specimen of mouth-watering manhood, who had given him more than just the paid-for, half-day private lesson on the beginner slope.

As soon as they had set eyes on each other, their chemistry was undeniable.

Halfway through the lesson, they had gone to warm up in a lodge on the bottom of the slope. Clay had bought him a large hot chocolate. Part of the deal, he'd said.

They'd walked across the shoveled stone patio in their heavy ski boots. When they found a remote little bench by the wall, they had to squish together to fit.

Neither had flinched away from the heavy contact, nor from the shared body heat.

And when Nick handed Clay an extra napkin and their bare, gloveless fingers had brushed, Nick had felt a jolt of electric attraction zap him all the way down to his balls.

Judging from his startled expression, so had Clay.

When they were done skiing and Nick had to go meet up with Justin and get his hunting gear, it had been Clay who had suggested they exchange phone numbers.

It had been Nick who had pushed the somewhat taller Clay against one of the many snow-covered cars in the parking lot, and kissed him.

Clay had tasted sweet and hot and chocolaty, with a little spice Nick didn't expect.

Neither of them wanted to break for air when Justin honked from his car. Justin, who had kept his mouth shut while driving for the first time ever.

NICK HAD skied before, but it had been good fifteen years and since he had already lugged himself out here to bond with Justin for the holidays, he figured he might as well use the opportunity and get some quality instruction.

To Justin's great displeasure, as it turned out. Once Justin rediscovered his capacity to speak, he shared all kinds of opinions. Nick being an asshole for moving out East just so he could live his "gay lifestyle." Nick, who'd rather go skiing than spend all his time with "the guys." Nick, who had the poor taste to kiss Clay in public, and like that, too, tongue and everything. And Clay was too well-groomed for Justin, too soft-spoken. His smile was too quick. "A bit fruity, you better watch out," Justin had said.

Yet it was exactly that somewhat fruity looseness that had made Clay so appealing. Whether they were making careful turns going down the bunny slope or going back up on the lift and far away from judging eyes, it had felt so good to finally relax next to another gay dude and simply be himself.

No shit, no expectations.

Just company.

And with the static charge that hovered between them, Clay didn't look like he minded in the least. He'd been so patient with Nick's huffing and puffing, his constant breaks as he tried to suck in every available oxygen molecule.



“Sure you’re tired!” Clay had said it without laughter, for which Nick had been eternally grateful. “At least you’re not sick. Let me know if you feel dizzy or too short of breath, okay? Or if your headache gets past just the annoying stage. If you do, we’ll descend. Even driving down to the valley can make a difference, make you more comfortable.” The valley’s elevation was good thousand feet lower and its air would feel almost thick in comparison. Clay’s concern was touching, unlike the tough-it-out attitude Justin and his buddies put on.

Nick had been tempted. Just him and Clay, maybe some beer by a fireplace in one of the local joints.

But they didn’t. They kept skiing until dark. Justin had come to pick Nick up from the slopes and the only solace for Justin’s evil eye and poor disposition had been the knowledge that they had at least exchanged cell phone numbers.

Nick’s mind was on Clay’s capable shoulders and strong legs as he stowed his necessities into a backpack. Normally he’d have dropped the backpack off the tree, straight to the ground. The ten feet wouldn’t hurt it any. The memory of the buck wading through the snow gave Nick pause, however, and he looped the end of his utility rope around the backpack’s handle. Only then he tied his bow to it, and carefully lowered his equipment. This way, he wouldn’t have to dig it out of the drift.

The light grew gray and pale in the woods, lending the snowy trees an ethereal quality. It got harder to see, too, and the temperature dropped another few degrees. Nick rubbed his gloved hands to generate some heat. Once he got down and was ready to leave, he’d slip a pair of mittens over his thermal archery gloves.

He turned in the tree stand and braced his lower back into the bow rest. The contraption was the kind that let you climb up and down the trunk in it. Nick hooked his feet around the bottom brace, held onto the loop that had kept his back to the tree, and jerked his legs.

Few minutes later, when he was halfway down, Nick smelled the scent of sap and knew that, somehow, he’d popped

an old sap blister. There were no young branches to crush on a tree this size, not this far down.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “You’re a good tree. A strong tree.” He shimmied on, hop by hop, breathing hard.

NICK reached the snow, but the trunk continued farther and farther, and by the time he felt anything resembling solid ground underfoot, he was thigh-deep in the snow. His cross-country skis and ski poles stood half-buried in the snow next to the trunk where he had left them, and the sled he had leaned against them was almost covered by the new fall.

He looked uphill. There should’ve been a track of his skis and his sled, a sled heavy with a forty-pound climbing tree stand and his bow and his field dressing supplies.

A delicate undulation in the snow showed his passing in the ridge of the funnel that surrounded his tree. Now that was both good and bad. Good, because his trail was still visible and he knew he could get back okay. It was bad, though, because the light was falling and Nick knew he’d never find the same track back.

No matter. He took off his warm overshoes, shook them dry, and stuffed them into his backpack. He settled it onto his back, then he loaded up his gear onto his sled and tied it down with parachute cord. Only then he clipped into his skis. With a sigh of resignation he headed toward camp, his brother, and the guys.

## CHAPTER 2

THE DOUBLE pane window of the ski rental log cabin was framed in rustic timber and showed an idyllic outdoors scene of snow and play. The faltering light outside was boosted by artificial lighting just enough to be safe, but the dark sky and falling snow were still laden with a promise of the warmth by the fireplace and a hot dinner capped off with something strong. The air was thick with the stomping of snowy feet, the excited voices of children and the tired admonitions of their parents, and the low vibration of the ski lift engine that did the hard work in the adjacent hut.

“It’s coming down hard,” Clay heard Jason say. The snow hadn’t stopped all day long. That was a blessing for the slopes, surely, but it meant extra work. “The ski patrols are looking for stragglers, and when they’re in, I’ll be turning the lift off.” He tapped Clay on the shoulder. “Are yours all in?”

“In and accounted for. It was a good day.”

And it was. He taught mostly kids, which was a lot better than being stuck with their clumsy and out-of-practice parents. Kids, even the unschooled ones who’d never skied before, picked it right up. Bent knees, no poles, going down in a zig-zag choo-choo train at first and then getting braver and sliding down the hill in an almost straight line, and slowing down on the flat clearing as a group.

Kids were fun.

Adults, not so much. Except for Nick. Yesterday’s half-day private lesson had been an unexpected pleasure. Nick wasn’t any faster on the uptake than the other adults, but he was easy on the eyes, had a quick smile, and tried hard.

And, the kiss.

As soon as they first shook hands, Clay had caught Nick checking him out. He recalled the way their eyes met, and the endearing blush that crept up Nick's exposed cheeks. Clay had winked at him, and the ice broke. Just like that.

Nobody knew, just the two of them.

The hot gazes, the little touches. The way Clay gripped Nick's hips to show him how to move.

And Nick, at his five foot eight, with a good build and an even better wry grin, turned Clay's crank like nobody else had in quite a while. Maybe it was because he was shorter, or didn't look embarrassed when Clay began to gesticulate, or because the layers of clothing hid a strong and limber body which Clay wanted to unwrap.

Standing in the ski rental cabin and looking outside into what promised to be a formidable snow storm, Clay faced up to the fact that he wanted Nick bad. Preferably tonight, preferably for dinner. Or after dinner—it didn't matter, as long as he got his mouth all over that warm skin that covered so much strength, and that promised even more pleasure under bulky winter layers.

Nick was with a hunting party nearby, Clay recalled. They'd be done by now. If they were in town, he'd do his best to show the new guy a good time.

He pulled out his cell phone and typed a text. Then he got out into the snow and clipped his skis on. The distance from the rental down to the flat by the parking lot was short and smooth, and the slope was still lit for nighttime skiing. By the time Clay got to the bottom and onto the shuttle bus, he'd know if Nick was available for dinner.

THE SPACE around the tree trunk resembled a funnel created by the snow, and was deep enough to make Nick think of caves. His breath caught in his throat. He looked up, searching for the open sky and the space between the snow surface and the branches that bent under the weight of snow high above.

There was space.

This wasn't a cave, just a little indentation, a well around the tree trunk. Scrambling out of it had been a pain in the ass, and had it not been for the previous depression his skis had made, and the crusted layer of snow beneath it, Nick thought he might've never gotten out.

A strange thing, like a snow trap set by a mountain giant. The skis held him up, though, and as soon as he made it to what was now the snow surface, he tugged on the parachute cord he'd tied around his waist, and pulled the sled up and away from the tree. Its whoosh, and his own panting, were the only two sounds he heard in the silent snow globe that was the mountain.

He struck out up the hill and to the left, trying to retrace his steps, and being careful to avoid getting close to the trees so he didn't slide into their snow wells. As he pushed on through the knee-deep powder, he felt the headache coming on again. Cross-country skiing, going uphill, carrying a backpack and dragging a sled at a high altitude? Yep, a workout for sure.

He paused to catch his breath, and looked back. His tree was almost invisible behind him – that's how far he'd gone. He had two more miles to go.

He shouldn't be gasping for air now, and he shouldn't have this stupid headache.

And he should get a move on.

Thirst. That was his excuse for pausing in the clearing. Nick shucked his backpack and dug his thermos from the side pocket. It still had a third of warm, mint tea in it, but he wanted water now. Eating snow was supposed to be bad, but here he had a way to melt at least some of it. He stuffed as much snow as he dared into the tea, closed the bottle, and shook it.

The volume shrank.

He did it again.

Then he sipped the cool snowmelt, refilled the thermos with snow, gave it a shake, and stuck it back into its pocket.

Time to go. He pushed off, feeling the slick and easy snow slide under his rented cross-country skis. The snow was deeper

the higher he got, and not for the first time Nick thought of Justin and Paul and Jack, and how were they doing in their tent.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

Nick took the welcome break to stop and fish his phone from the inside pocket of his camouflage jacket, where it had been securely zippered. Justin, probably.

But no. Clay?

*“Are you free for dinner tonight?”*

Nick peered at his glowing screen, and cursed. Of all the nights to be stuck out here.

*“Still out in the woods. Will it snow more you think?”*

Clay responded immediately.

*“Shit man. You OK? What are the coordinates of your party?”*

Nick had to think about that. The cold, thin air made thinking slower.

*“Out coming from hunting. Hard going uphill on xc skis.”*

CLAY looked through the scarred surface of the parking lot plexi-glass shelter. The snow kept coming down, and he was, what? Dressed in his ski gear but changed into his winter boots.

Nick was out there. Alone, probably with a headache. Three days weren't much to adapt to altitude, especially not if he lugging gear through the back-country. Clay thought fast, and his mind was already bent toward a rescue expedition.

*“Make sure locations is turned on your phone and send me a selfie.”*

A minute passed. Clay tried to imagine Nick out there, wading his way through the treacherous back-country snow in inadequate clothing and with minimum supplies. He had to stomp hard on his tendency to spin out disaster scenarios.

Nick would be fine.

Probably.

His phone dinged, and two photos arrived. One of Nick against a white-and-gray backdrop of snow and trees. He looked bushed and his hat wore a white cap of its own. The second photo showed three guys standing by deer carcasses that were laying on the ground. There was a tent in the background.

Another ding.

*Having trouble going up the ridge. Snow too deep.*

Panic slammed Clay on Nick's behalf. He dropped his arms and stretched his back tall, shoulders wide. He invited the freezing air into his body, then released the calming breath in a loud whoosh. Panic kills, he thought to himself. The breath had taken just seconds and he tried to convince them they weren't wasted. A clear head was a good investment.

Then he opened his phone again, copied Nick's GPS coordinates from his photo, and plugged them into his map app.

A nondescript area showed with a creek and a road. That road was right under Clay's feet, the creek was west of Nick, so Nick needed to go south to make it down the hill. More importantly, he was right where the private game lands ended and the state park began. Going downhill would get him closer to Clay and well into the state park and its ski area, where help was better organized. If Nick could only make it to the middle of the outlying ski slope on the east edge of the ski area...

*"Go downhill. South. There's lights. We'll find you. Does your phone have charge?"*

A pause.

*"50%. Can't reach my brother."*

Clay hadn't forgotten about the idiots snow-camping up on the ridge.

*"It's OK I got his GPS. Send your location every 10 minutes as you go."*

Clay broke into a run with the backpack that contained his ski boots bouncing hard on his shoulders. The ski park was on state lands, and Clay was pretty sure the ranger's office would still be open.



## CHAPTER 3

THE TEXTS from Clay warmed Nick more than his brother's hot beef stew would've right now. The contact was tenuous and at the mercy of both his phone's charge and the local signal strength, but it was a contact with civilization. With someone competent, and with resources.

With someone Nick could care about.

And wasn't it so strange that now, as he fumbled his way through the ever-darker woods, he'd even think of Clay and what his company might represent? He pushed the thought away, took a picture, and sent it to Clay. Then he checked his map app. Yes, he was moving toward the green state park area and he was still aimed south. It wasn't downhill as much as a diagonal cross-hill, and considering the fact he was on cross-country skis, that was just fine by him. He didn't want to go fast, and he sure as hell couldn't afford to fall. With powder this deep, there was a good chance he wouldn't be able to get up.

The effort of keeping steady and passing between the solitary trees that dotted the slope was enough to keep him warm, even though the temperature was dropping like a rock. He stopped long enough to pull on his hunting balaclava again and then he shook the snow off his orange hunting cap and forced it on top. It helped some, and he hoped the safety orange would make him visible to rescuers.

Nick realized he could breathe better now. Even a descent of few hundred feet had made a difference in available oxygen. Clay had indicated as much before, and the confirmation of local lore made Nick perk up.

As darkness fell, he saw a glow of lights far away. Those would be the ski slopes, then, the ones he was supposed to head for.

He pushed off across an open expanse. His heart lifted. There was civilization there, and heat, and water to drink. Clay was out there somewhere, and enough resources to send out a search party to check out on Justin and Paul and Jack once the snow was done falling the next day.

Life was good.

There was hope.

He wavered as the ground gave under him. The hiss of skis on snow was accompanied by a panicked shout.

Falling, a weightless confusion.

Nick's leg jerked. He could almost reach the dark gray snow as he hung upside down in a cold, dark cave.

Panic suffused him. He started thrashing about. The screams he heard were his own, indistinct and lacking on power as the snow around him sucked out their punch.

Nick stopped.

The silence was a welcome change, but not so the fatigue and the drumbeat of blood in his eardrums.

He had to get down. Now.

He tried to jack up and reach his ski. The backpack weighed him down, though, and the repeat efforts had him sucking air again.

He flailed, this time in a more deliberate way, trying to work up a rhythm, aiming to direct the force he was generating. His right ski was stuck on something, and he could hang upside down only for so long without passing out.

He yanked harder.

His foot slipped out of his rented shoe and he fell, landing face first in the snow.

Drowning. Airless panic.

The snow was like one of those ball pits little kids love to jump into and disappear. He didn't want to disappear, not into this terrifying, enclosed space that was going to swallow him,

freeze him. And here he was, sinking into the soft, cold little crystals that stung his eyes and filled his nose, his mouth.

There was no air.

He tried to swim, and thinking of swimming, he flipped onto his back.

The world stilled.

Nick drew a grateful lungful of air, then another. The headache that had left half an hour ago was back in full force, but he kept breathing. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that he was missing a shoe, and missing a shoe was bad.

He blinked and tried to focus.

He seemed to be in a snow cave. The blackness surrounded him except for the hole where he fell through, which showed as a swath of dark gray sky. He hadn't seen the hole, in fact the whole plain had seemed perfectly even. Yet here he was.

The hole in the snow gave him hope. If he got in, he could get out—couldn't he? There had to be a way. A glimpse of the snowy sky around him took enough edge off the suffocating constriction of the small snow cave to keep his fear from rushing in, overwhelming him.

Panic kills, he repeated to himself as he breathed in and out, trying to will his headache away.

The freezing air began to gnaw on his right foot despite the thick, wool-blend socks he was wearing, and his gaze returned to the ski stuck overhead. The ski shoe still dangled down, attached by the toe and with the heel drooping toward him, tempting him. It was at least five feet up, maybe six. Just out of reach, and with the soft snow underfoot, he couldn't jump to retrieve it.

Shoes. But he still had his warm overshoes, and his waist was still tied to a sled that was somewhere on the surface.

First things first. Once he managed to sit up and extricate his phone out of his safely zipped-up inside pocket, he took a picture of the darkness above him and sent it to Clay.

THE INSIDE of the ranger station was warm and well lit, but Clay still felt chilled to his bones. Keeping still was a torture, and he tried to distract himself by pacing the worn pine floorboards in his socks. His snow boots were parked by the door along with his backpack and his parka.

Maybe a bathroom trip. No, maybe more coffee, or hot water. Or something. Anything other than this inaction.

Rick Jensen raised his head from the screen. “So here they are, just about. Come see.”

Clay did. They had a bead on the three stranded hunters in their little tent. They were on private land, just over the ridge and in a cell coverage shadow. “I just hope they know to clear the snow off the tent off so it doesn’t cave,” Jensen said. “And your other guy, Nick, he started out here—” He pointed to the pin in the map. “—and continued to here, and then here. So he’s in the trees somewhere, probably crossing this chute over here.” Jensen pointed to a flat area on the hybrid satellite map. The photo was taken during daytime, but it clearly showed a treeless scar where an avalanche had relieved the mountain of its excess snow and trees.

“That’s not good,” Clay said.

“No. You may wanna text him and tell him to dig in for the night.”

Just then, Clay’s phone dinged.

He plunged his hand inside his pants’ pocket and fished it out.

The photo was taken with flash on. Lots of white, a black trunk, and a black scar next to it.

*“I fell into some hole and I can’t get out. I’ll be staying the night.”*

“Fuck!” Clay tried to read between the lines. “Falling into some hole” covered a lot of scenarios, but the two brief sentences didn’t say whether Nick was hurt, or what resources he had on him, or whether he even knew how to dig in.

Jensen took his phone. “Oh, man. Let’s see where he is.”

Few minutes later, the coordinates placed Nick three quarters of the way across the chute. He had almost made it—but then what, with the night falling?

“At least we know where he is,” Jensen said philosophically. “Tell him what to do and let him know we’ll come for him in the morning.”

NICK’S phone dinged again, and he grinned, knowing it was Clay.

*“Do you know how to dig a snow cave to sleep in?”*

He texted right back.

*“Yeah, saw it in a book. I got a Mylar blanket and some food. Let me settle in.”*

Having dinner with Clay would’ve been so much better than being stuck in a hole in the ground. A cave, a small space where the uneven contours of the walls around him threaten to close in and trap him. Suffocate him.

*“Are you okay?”* Clay was insistent in his need to know for sure.

Minutes passed. Nick got busy pulling the warm overshoes over his cold feet, but the task was just a stalling tactic. He wasn’t keen on letting on he hated small spaces. Caves, elevators, blanket fortresses. Whining like a child wasn’t going to solve anything. He was stuck. Finally he decided on a decent response.

*Got my warm booties on. It’s small in here. Talk to you in an hour?”*

He sat there with his bare hand freezing, waiting for a confirmation. The phone was his lifeline, his safety blanket that reminded him of the vast space outside. Every text was a pat on the shoulders, a breath of the open air that filled the valley.

Clay wasn’t replying for quite a while. Nick was talking himself out of a fit of panic when, finally, the phone dinged with an incoming message.

*“The boss is making me go home, but I’ll be back. I’m coming to get you in the morning.”*

Morning. He’d have to endure the night. Staying warm wasn’t an issue, but the promise of silent solitude began to gnaw on him. He’d be here alone, all night long, stuck and invisible and forgotten. If he couldn’t get out in the morning, or if nobody found him, he was as good as dead.

But no sense dwelling on the negative. Nick forced a grin. The promise of Clay was better than anything so far. He replied with a brief “OK,” took a deep breath, and braced himself for taking care of his sleeping arrangements.

THE SNOW PACK around Nick varied in texture, and the tree trunk above him was thicker than a grown man and higher than he could reach. A few limbs branched out from the trunk and were now embedded in the snow that had swallowed him with such ease. The worst part was the shifting of the snow beneath him, and after some thought, Nick had decided to bring the sled inside. First he had considered leaving it out on the theory that it will be a visible marker, but he soon realized it would be covered in snow by morning.

He grabbed the sled rope and stepped to the side, tugging gently, reeling it in like a big fish. The sled’s shadow darkened the hole up above.

A tug. A crash.

The wooden toboggan fell into the hole and buried itself hard. It had been meant to carry both his gear and the deer he was going to shoot, which meant it was long enough to sleep on.

Nick took off his mittens, and in just his gloves he untied the bow and the climbing tree stand from the sled’s smooth surface.

The irony of having a climbing tree stand and being stuck under a fallen tree wasn’t lost on him. Had he gotten stuck in a regular tree well, there might’ve been a way to jury-rig something and get out. Hell, there were ways to string a line

and pull himself out using his hunting bow and the handy length of rope he already had.

Except the tree he was under wasn't standing anymore. In his current situation, the tree stand and the bow were just dead weight. On the flip side, the fallen tree and the snow that covered it provided Nick with a lot more shelter than a tree well would have.

Half an hour later, he had sculpted the snow using the toboggan's long side to make an even wall. He then used his long hunting knife to carve out an outline of a cave. He thought he'd need special tools, but the irregular layers of the snow pack came out in chunks, which Nick shoveled out with his hands and stomped into a firmer floor under his feet. Then, finally, he had a cavity six and a half feet long and three feet deep, with a ceiling that sloped from a three-foot opening to maybe half a foot toward the back of the cave, like a wedge. Nick thought of carving a domed surface, but he feared he might destabilize his roof. Having to endure the night in such a small, icy grave was bad enough. Getting buried while asleep would've been worse.

It was too small, he decided, and he dug another foot in, and shaved more off the ceiling for at least a semblance of head room. Two could sleep in that little cave now, especially if they liked each other well enough to share body heat.

The thought gave him pause. Suppose Clay had been there.

But, no. He wouldn't wish the snow cave upon his worst enemy, let alone someone he felt he'd gotten to know and trust, and maybe even understand.

Nick swept the last of the snow and ice chunks out of the cave with his gloved hands, and hoisted his sled into the sleeping nook. He sat on it. The ledge held up well under his weight, so he reached for his backpack and started pulling out items, one by one. Taking stock of his resources made him feel better. Not really in control, but at least he knew where he stood and what he could expect. Once he was done taking stock and setting up, he'd call Clay.

## CHAPTER 4

THE HOUSE felt entirely too quiet as Clay paced the length of his living room, wearing a track into the soft pile carpet. The little gas fireplace was on, but as his mind dwelled upon Nick and his fate, even the bluish flames seemed to be made of ice.

Normally he'd pour himself a whiskey. Not tonight, though—not when Nick was out there, in harm's way, and there was a good chance Jensen would call him in to help with the inevitable search and rescue. And that could happen at any time, it didn't have to wait till morning.

*Nick.*

Clay leaned his forearms against the bare wood window frame. The cold seeped in even through the double-paned thermal glass. He gazed into the darkness and watched the snow fall. Out there somewhere, near a small swath of woods that separated the easternmost ski slope from an avalanche chute, was a hole in the snow, and Nick was in it.

Freezing, probably.

Suffering.

Nick's GPS coordinates showed on the middle of Clay's three-screen computer setup. He had already checked the NOAA weather website and had scrutinized every possible variation for the next twenty-four hours. His map program showed the mountain topography, every ridge, and every rill that had carved a gorge into the mountain over a period of thousands of years.

He knew where Nick was, and he knew how to get to him once there was light. But would the soft Easterner survive the night?



Clay thought back to what he knew about him. A computer guy of some sort, not that he wanted to talk about it much. From Maryland, but he did commute to Washington, DC, every so often to meet with clients. He claimed to cross-country ski, but was pretty abysmal going downhill. Not too tall and not too broad, but strong and wiry. His hair was chestnut brown and cut short, and his face was shaved so smooth, Clay wanted to rub his cheek against it and purr.

And, oh, those eyes. Warm and brown and inviting, like molten milk chocolate with specks of golden light. The kind of eyes Clay could get lost in—and almost did, on the way up the mountain, as they shared a ski lift several times over.

Nick had a wry sense of humor and a kind smile. And lips—his lips stretched wide as humor teased his cheeks into dimples. Clay had plans for those soft, yielding lips. Just kissing them was only the first step. He had plans for the rest of Nick, and he'd go on executing them for as long as Nick was able and willing.

And he'd feed him. Not just a stale granola bar, which was all that Nick probably had on him. No, he'd make him a pot roast and buttered noodles and brownies and all manner of heavy, caloric sustenance that a man needed to survive if he wanted to be sleeping in the rough on a snowy mountainside.

And he'd help him breathe. Mouth-to-mouth, if need be. He'd make him gasp and writhe and pant with pleasure, and all that would help Nick adjust to the thin mountain air.

But all that was for later.

Now, he was just worried sick for him. He was twisted up in knots over a man he barely knew, one who paid him way too much for half a day of skiing before he disappeared into the wilderness.

Clay would do just about anything to see him safe—and he'd do it even if Nick didn't want his mouth-to-mouth resuscitation efforts and his food and his body heat. He'd do it because there was something about Nick, something special that harkened to him and drew him in as though he was a fish on a line.

His phone rang.

Clay pulled it out. Not a text, but a call from an unknown number.

He slid his thumb across the screen, and an ill-lit video popped up.

“Hi, Clay!” Nick’s face, bristly after his three days out, smiled on his screen. His camo balaclava was rolled up so it formed a tidy cap on his head. “I figured you must be as sick of texting as I am.” The lighting was harsh, as though he pointed a flashlight at himself and the excess light spilled upon the white wall of snow behind him, and reflected at the camera. He didn’t look frozen, or upset. Or hurt.

“Are you okay?” Clay had to ask. “No injuries, no fractures?” He perched at the wooden bar stool at his granite kitchen island and fiddled with his phone until he was sure Nick could see him. And, of course, he made sure he looked good, although that wasn’t important. Was it?

Nick grinned. “You look worse for the wear than I feel!”

“How cold is it in your snow cave?” Clay heard the trepidation in his own voice, and was surprised to see Nick shrug with indifference.

“Forty or so. Not bad,” he said. “But...” he paused just to glance around. “I wish there was more space, man.”

“A small space will stay warmer for you.”

Nick shook his head, and if Clay didn’t know any better, he’d have thought Nick had begun to panic. “No seriously, I’m calling because I’m bored, not because I’m in a bad situation.” His words spilled out way too fast for Clay’s liking, but before he could think of something light and encouraging to distract him, Nick’s gaze passed over things Clay couldn’t see, and a speculative gleam appeared in his eye. “In fact, I wouldn’t mind some company. It’s cozy up here.”

“How did you set up?” Clay wanted to know, not just to feel reassured that he wouldn’t be dragging a stiff body out of a snowdrift the next day—and considering Nick’s on/off attitude, he was intrigued.

“Well,” Nick said. “I’m sitting on a wooden toboggan, which is long enough to sleep on, and my sleeping cave is pretty deep. You know, for two.” He wagged his eyebrows. “It would be more comfortable with some sleeping bags, I admit.”

“And the heat?” Clay hoped Nick wasn’t burning wet wood and getting himself poisoned with carbon monoxide. Or melting the ceiling and ending up drenched in slush overnight.

“Oh, it’s elementary, really,” Nick said with what Clay suspected was false bravado, sounding like a kid who was explaining a remote control to his grandmother. “I carved some spikes out of the smaller dead branches and used them to stick the Mylar blanket to hang as a curtain over the cave. I’ll try to show you, but it’s reflective.”

Clay’s screen filled with a silver gleam that shimmered into an oversaturated white. “Oh I see. Good thinking.” He paused. Well, hot damn. “That’s pretty ingenious, if I say so myself. I just wish I could bring you some hot food.”

Nick’s face filled his screen again. “I’ll be okay,” he said in a tone that was much too careless to ring true. “I’ve got two apples and two protein bars.”

“You’re doing great,” Clay said in his reassuring, skiing-instructor voice. “Really, you’re set. You have water to drink? Eating snow can chill you.”

Nick pulled a limp plastic bag into the camera’s field of view. “I have a spare plastic bag. I can put the chemical hand warmers in there and pack it with snow. It’s all encased in a pouch, so I’ll be okay.”

“Great,” Clay nodded. Now it was time to distract Nick, so he changed the topic. “Did you get your deer?”

“No, that’s how come I have a clean bag for melting snow.”

Nick smiled, and Clay’s stomach flip-flopped. “But you don’t look too upset about that. Not getting your kill.”

Nick shrugged. “I don’t mind. I saw a buck, but... it wasn’t his time. It’s mostly my brother who wanted everyone to get some.”

“Yeah?” Clay softened. “So...” He didn’t want to drain Nick’s battery, but since Nick was all alone out there, Clay risked batting his eyelashes. “I’ve been hoping to show you a good time tonight. A nice dinner, a bottle of wine...”

“I’ll be happy to take you up on that,” Nick said, and that warm and enticing smile lit up his whole face. “But hey... I should be turning my phone off for the night to conserve the charge, okay? I should hang up. Just... what’s the weather gonna be like tomorrow, you think?”

The weather patterns were etched in Clay’s mind. “This snowfall is your normal seasonal bullshit, we get that all the time. You got stuck outside after dark, is all.” He paused and thought. How much time would they have? “I’ll come get you tomorrow morning. There’ll be a lull, and after the lull there’s gonna be a big one. We’ll be getting a hammering, could be anything between a foot to three feet tomorrow night.”

Nick’s lips thinned. “I have enough food for another day. I always pack for two, just in case. There’s snow for water, but I don’t have a heat source. Not really. Just a bunch of hot pockets, and the snow’s pretty insulating.”

“It is,” Clay said with a nod.

“But hey, before I hang up—what do you think are the odds of me being stuck in this hellhole through the snow storm?” A thin edge of desperate fear cut its way through Nick’s confident tone, and Clay came to realize Nick was doing his best not to show he was terrified. The man who wasn’t afraid of heights, who had pushed through altitude sickness and who had focused every fiber of his being to zoom down the bunny hill with confidence and poise, that man was gone. The new Nick was a scared little guy who used his resources to the max and who spent his time digging and setting up and eating and texting, because he couldn’t stand the inaction and the solitude of the snow well.

People died in places like that, and it wasn’t a pretty way to go.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you out.” Clay put every bit of his own determination into that statement. They would. Hell, he

would, and he'd do it personally.

“And my brother and his guys?”

“They'll send a snowcat up there, and two guys on snowmobiles will go and check them out.”

“Are you bringing a snowmobile?”

Clay shook his head. “No way. Not where you are. I hate to tell you, but you're in an avalanche area. There's enough snow to trigger something by being stupid.”

“Avalanche area?” Nick's eyes widened, and Clay instantly regretted his words.

“Yeah. But don't worry – it's nothing urgent. We are just playing it safe.” He smiled, hoping Nick won't see through his lie. “You're safe where you are, and I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Unless there's another storm and you can't find me.”

“I'll find you! I have your GPS coordinates. Turn your phone on first thing in the morning. I'll let you know when I'm getting close. You can ski, right? You're not hurt?”

“No,” Nick said with an irritated huff. “Just my ski got stuck up top, and my shoe, but I can see them.”

“Okay, no biggie. See you in the morning!”

“Till then,” Nick said, but before he hung up, he looked at Clay through his device, across a distance of many miles. “I just, I wanna thank you for being here for me. The snow, it's just so silent.”

“I know.” The rugged beauty of the mountains was harsh and unforgiving, but it had a way of getting to a man. Sometimes, when he stayed in the lonely wilderness of the back country for too long, it was easy to imagine he had heard or seen something that wasn't really there. A snow spirit, maybe. Isn't that how these stories got started? “I'll be here, and I'll have my phone plugged in, but turned on.” Clay leaned closer to the screen, as though he could feel Nick's breath that way and reassure himself he was all right. “Call anytime, dude. Seriously. Even if you don't have a reason.”

## CHAPTER 5

NICK drank all the tepid water from his plastic bag and added more snow to melt for later. He took three short steps and relieved himself in the far corner of his snow cave. In the light of his halogen flashlight, the snow looked more amber than yellow. He needed to hydrate more.

He wasn't cold, but even so he pulled out a spare thermal shirt and redressed himself. Layers of thermals, a sweater, and well-insulated hunting gear would, hopefully, keep him warm overnight.

The backpack made a decent pillow, just as his apple and one protein bar had made a decent dinner. There was no blanket. His little sleeping cave, cozy and fairly warm, looked inviting compared to the irregular, cold shapes of his snow well. Before he slid into his sleeping cave, he aimed the flashlight up, to the opening that only hinted at the promise of freedom. The bluish glare of his flashlight reflected off the snow ceiling that covered part of his hole. The opening itself was black in contrast, inky and endless, as though there were no clouds overhead. As though he were drifting through space on a frozen asteroid, silent and alone.

"Hey." He said it just to hear his voice, to hear anything at all. The meaningless quality of it scared him. Words were empty when he was alone. Out here, all alone in the wilderness, he held no meaning, no significance. The mountains were vast, almost endless, and so was their snow.

Nick shivered. The isolation and silence of nature, the very thing he had always sought out in the past in his to renew his spirit, now crushed him with merciless isolation.

He still had his flashlight, though, and he had his phone. Clay had said to call anytime, and for any reason. Or no reason at all.

He could—his phone was in his pocket.

Nick flicked the narrow beam around the cave and noticed his ski poles, all askew in a dark corner. He didn't want to lose those. In fact, getting out of here without them would be hard, if not impossible.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow Clay would come and help Nick get out of here. And even if Clay didn't make it, Nick already had plans. The fallen tree had to end somewhere. He could dig the snow from between the fallen branches, like a back door, and climb out—somehow, eventually—and ski across the hill and through the trees, toward the slopes where there was ski patrol and a hut with hot cocoa and real bathrooms.

Tomorrow would come in ten hours. Maybe sooner.

He took five careful steps over and bent to pick the poles up. His foot sank into the soft snow, and he quickly retracted it. Only a part of his floor was reinforced by the firm snow blocks that came out of his sleep cave. The perimeter was still treacherous and deep, like quicksand. He stooped and grasped one ski pole, then used it to fish the other out of the corner. The tree above him was sloping down in this area, too, and he couldn't quite straighten up. He saw the branches jut out of the trunk and enter layers of packed snow, however, and branches on a fallen tree were as good as rungs on a ladder.

This would be the place to start digging his way out tomorrow.

He pressed his lips together in a small, tight smile. The tree and its position, that was good news. Moreover, it was something Clay should know about, because Clay might trip over a branch that lurked right under the surface of the snow. Nick should send him a picture, let him know of the trunk's direction. Keep him from falling on his ass.

If he showed up.

It was possible he wouldn't. All manners of events could conspire to keep Clay away. Nick could only hope that Clay had shared his location with somebody else. He hadn't said so

overtly, although he did say somebody would go get Justin and the guys.

Nick felt a compulsion to call. He just had to. He'd take the picture of the fallen and mostly buried tree with his snow-cave in the shelter of its immense bole, though, and send it.

Sending the picture made for a good excuse. Otherwise, Clay might think Nick was being a needy bitch. Unable to take care of himself.

He fished for the phone inside his pocket with his freezing fingers. It slid into his hand, a dead, black rectangle of plastic and glass. A piece of magic, a link to the civilization.

*Hot chocolate, bathrooms, ski patrol.*

He pushed the button to turn it back on.

His fingers slipped.

“Fuck.” Nick realized he had almost no sensation in his cold fingertips. He couldn't wait to pull his gloves and mittens on, but the touch screen wouldn't respond to cashmere-lined deer hide and nylon.

His freezing finger slipped again, all pale skin and moisture and pain.

The phone tumbled out of his hand, flipping over and over. Nick helplessly watched it fall into the snow by his feet.

It disappeared.

He stood there in stunned silence. His first instinct was to drop to his knees and dig, but reason prevailed and Nick rummaged in the pocket of his jacket to get his gloves. He then took his ski pole and stuck it exactly where he thought the phone might be. Then he dropped to his knees, careful not to disturb the area.

He stooped and reached into the snow. His heart was pounding in his chest and he was hyperventilating with stress. Yet even so, he forced himself to sink his whole hand as deep as he could without tipping over.

He scooped, then dragged his hand back up.



Resistance – a slight bump.

There!

Nick was kneeling on the cold floor of his snow cave with the black rectangle of his phone in his hand. Gratitude rushed into his chest and came out his eyes in form of tears.

“My phone,” he whispered. Then he brushed the snow off, stripped his glove, and gently eased the phone under his thermal shirt.

Slowly, he turned and stumbled toward his sleeping cave. He brushed the snow off his legs and shoulders, pulled out a pair of chemical warmers, and activated them. Only then, with the sharp heat seeping through the suddenly too-thin fabric of his archery gloves, he climbed into his sleeping cave.

He did it quickly, not giving himself enough time to think about it. The space was small, restrictive. As he clicked his flashlight off, the cool air tumbled off the snow-packed walls, like a teasing current in the silence of the nothingness.

He was all alone. Alone, except for the phone and the tenuous link to Clay.

He would sleep, dammit. He was tired, he earned it. Tomorrow morning he needed to be rested for his journey back.

Back with Clay.

He spared a quick, guilty thought in the direction of his brother. But Justin was with the guys, and Justin was a lot more okay than he was right now. He hoped.

SLEEP JUST wouldn't come. The walls were closing in on him in the darkness. The snow pack didn't make a single sound, and the mountain was deceptively still. Clay had mentioned an avalanche, and Nick's imagination took off with that image, thinking to how his broken tree became that way.

Broken.

How the clearing became a long, tongue-like strip of land, a gash in the continuity of the forest. What did they call it? A chute?

Eternity continued to crawl by.

Nick clicked his flashlight on. The cave seemed stable enough and its concave, sloping wall was as far away from him as when he'd carved it.

He touched it. It felt cold. He was tempted to poke it just to reassure himself of its solidity, but then he thought better of it. Poking might move things, dislodge them. If he was going to ruin this deep air pocket in the seemingly infinite layer of powder snow, he'd do it in the morning, when he had full light.

His thoughts of light connected to his memory of Clay's patient smile. Clay's warm baritone, and the scent of hot chocolate and shampoo he'd picked up as he had leaned against Clay's shoulder during their break.

Being out here, in the dark and surrounded by freezing snow, scared Nick. Had it not been for his connection to Clay, he thought he'd go out of his mind.

Slowly, Nick reached inside his clothes and pulled out his phone. He turned it on and typed a quick text.

*"You still up?"*

Clay answered almost right away.

*"I'm here for you. What's up?"*

Nick wasn't going to fess up to his dark and irrational fears. He wasn't going to mention the well-founded ones, either. He thought hard. What to say?

*"Can't sleep,"* he typed finally.

His phone rang, and Nick answered.

"Hey," Clay said into his ear from miles away. "Maybe talking will help. If you want."

"Yeah, okay." Nick huffed, suddenly self-conscious. With Clay's voice in his ear, he almost felt the imaginary tendrils of his breath whisper down his neck. He shivered with pleasure.

"So... if you were here, what do you think we'd be doing?" Clay asked.

Nick smiled. “Kissing.”

“Yeah.” Clay cleared his throat. “That was... that was quite a kiss. I want more of that, definitely.”

“What do you think we’d be doing?” Nick asked, feeling brazen. Heat began to pool in his groin.

“We’d sit by the fireplace and sip something alcoholic, just to loosen the inhibitions. Because you’re way too handsome for me.” Clay cleared his throat. “And I’d slide my hand down your thigh, and then back up.”

“Shit.” Nick sputtered as his cock filled.

“You’d let me?” Clay asked on the other side.

The mountain, the snow, the cold – all that was now far away. There was just Clay and his voice, and the image of Clay’s broad, long-fingered hand sliding closer to Nick’s hard length.

“Yeah.” Nick’s voice came out all raspy.

Clay laughed. “Tell you what. I’ll go lie down on the sofa. You’re lying down, right?”

“I am.”

There was a pause, and just when Nick started to think their call got dropped, Clay hissed into his ear with pleasure. “I’m back, and I’m lying down on the sofa, and you’re on speaker phone.” Clay’s voice came across as just a bit breathier than before. A speaker phone seemed like a good idea.

Nick made the screen come to life and adjusted his settings. He put the phone on the sled, right by his ear. “You’re on speaker, too.” This was so hot. He was wondering what Clay was doing right now. He wanted to know what Clay looked like, and he was pretty sure Clay was as hot and bothered as he was.

“Good,” Clay crooned. “Now I’m gonna tell you what I’m doing, and I want you to do the same thing, okay?”

Were they really having phone sex? With Nick on the mountain and Clay in his centrally heated home? Was that even possible? He hoped his battery would last.

“I’d never done this before,” Nick said.

“Me neither. But think, it’s just to help you sleep, yeah?”

“Just that?”

“That, and I want to suck your cock right now.”

Nick groaned.

“Yeah, baby.” There was a grin in Clay’s voice. “I want you to undo your pants and whip your cock out.”

Nick unfastened the snaps and the zipper of his borrowed hunting bib pants. He had to loosen the suspenders to get enough room. “There’s a lot of fabric,” he said. “I’m pulling my thermal tights down, and my leg briefs.”

Clay gave him a few moments. “I can hear the fabric rustle,” Clay said. And then, “I’m taking the elastic of my underwear and putting it under my balls.”

Oh God. Nick thought he’d cum at the words alone. He loved that – he did that when he was jerking off at home. The pressure of the elastic against his sac was a bit like bondage, but there was no pain. Just pressure. He fished his cock and balls out and positioned them over his underclothes. “Me too.”

“How does it feel?” Clay asked.

“A bit cold,” Nick admitted. “But okay.”

“I’m stroking myself, Nick. I want you to stroke yourself, too.”

Nick did. “Uh, I still have my shooting glove on. It’s soft leather, though.”

“How does it feel? How does my gloved hand on your dick feel, Nick?”

And Nick shut his eyes in the dark, and imagined.

Clay’s hand, wrapped around his cock.

The butter-soft leather sliding, skin-warm from friction. And Clay, leaning over him and jerking him off.

“Faster,” Nick whimpered.

“I’m going faster.” Clay voice stuttered. “Touch... push under your balls with your... ahh... other hand!”

Nick did. He knew the place, the fuzzy taint that responded so well. Desire coalesced in his belly, swirling, aching. He was close, so close.

“I want you, Nick.”

Clay’s voice, rough with desire, got Nick thrusting into his gloved fist. “Oh, yeah!”

“Baby,” Clay crooned. “I’m tweaking my nipple. Ah! I’m close.”

The whirlpool of desire spun faster, Nick’s balls were tight, and his toes began to curl inside his boots. “Fuck me, Clay!”

Clay shouted into his ear, then whimpered. “Yeah, oh, yeah, still cumming!”

The sound of Clay’s pleasure tipped Nick over. All the nerves triggered. His cock, the zing of energy to his ass, the special, erotic warmth he got from pushing on his taint.

He held his breath, thrusting, fucking the tight, smooth leather of his gloved hand. “Yessss.”

“Don’t hold back. I wanna hear you.” Clay just about panted his words.

Nick opened his mouth. A thin, keening whimper filled his little snow cave. Pleasure flooded him, his back and legs, his twitching asshole, his pulsing cock. The sharp scent of cum filled the air and he was shooting up his chest, splattering his jacket in the dark. Then the sticky warmth coated his glove, and he exhaled with bone-deep relaxation.

“Wow, Clay.” He smiled, and knew his smile must’ve been audible on the other side.

“Yeah, I know.” Clay smacked his lips. “I tasted my cum. Next time, I want to taste yours.”

Nick, mindful to do everything Clay was doing, lifted his gloved hand to his lips. Bitter, salty musk and a hint of sweetness took over. “Yeah,” he said, working hard not to whisper. “Same here.”

A few moments of silence passed.

“I made a mess all over my brother’s spare gear,” Nick said, not knowing whether to be appalled or amused.

Clay laughed on the other side. “Zip up and go to sleep,” he said. “And turn your phone off. When you wake up, text me. Or I’ll text you.”

Nick did as he was told. The fatigue of the day was catching up with him. As he drifted into dreamland, it occurred to him he might be falling in love.

## CHAPTER 6

CLAY scrambled off the sofa and slid into his kneeling chair. He banished the post-orgasmic haze. Nick was still stuck up there, and Clay needed all the information he could get to plan his rescue.

He called up the raw weather data. Superimposed over the topographic map of the area, the map showed when it would snow and how much. The moist air mass pushed its way up the mountainside, cooling, expanding into the thinner air.

Water vapor turned to snow, and snow built up enough mass until it fell.

Elementary, really—he plugged in the adiabatic diagram function and ran several air mass temperature and humidity scenarios.

He frowned.

If that tropical depression pushed things along up from the Gulf, that meant warmer air, and warmer air carried more water. It produced more snow. And, with these wind speeds and barometric pressure differentials—well.

Clay was pretty sure the big storm would arrive a lot faster than tomorrow night. If someone had asked him why, he couldn't have quite explained it. He called it his gut feeling, and he didn't feel unjustified in doing so, because despite the massive improvements in data collection and processing, weather prediction still had an unpredictable “art as well as a science” element to it.

He liked what NOAA was putting out, but there were times when he trusted his own data interpretation more. And now, Nick, who was trying so very hard not to freak out and hold it all together in his capable and manly way, might get snowed in his little cave for days. Had it been anybody else,

Clay would've called Jensen and given him his expert opinion. With Nick's life and well-being at stake, though, he wasn't taking any chances.

TWO HOURS later, the small condo smelled like reheated pot roast, potatoes, and chocolate brownies, and his huge hiking rucksack was packed with everything he would need to survive in the wild for a week. He pulled his cross-country skis from the equipment closet together along with a length of climbing rope.

Clay's thoughts were full of Nick as he packed. His smile, the way he tried so hard to reclaim the little skiing he used to know as a kid. A triumphant grin as he succeeded, a wry one as he got up from a fall. The snowflakes that Clay wanted to kiss off his nose.

Nick had been hunting, which presumably meant warm clothes and good equipment. Their video call had given Clay a good feeling. Nick was inventive, had a general idea of what to do, and how to do it. He'd be okay in the short term, but... two apples and some granola bars wouldn't hold him through a major storm.

Their friendly, TMI, interactive phone call gave him an even better feeling. Being physically secure was key, of course, but a good mental state was essential as well. He had managed to provide for Nick in that respect. There was no doubt in Clay's mind that Nick would fall asleep, and get as much rest as his accommodations allowed.

Clay had been stuck in the snow before, and he had enough gear and experience to turn a survivalist mishap into a fun adventure. Being alone with Nick, unable to go anywhere. That, too, had potential. Clay reached into the cupboard and added a handful of chocolate bars to the bursting side pockets. Then he picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Hey, Brian. I'll need a favor, and I'll need it at five in the morning."

SINCE his alarm had gone off at four and Clay finished loading his gear on the back of Brian's snowmobile at five, he had to push through the metal morning fog caused by too little



sleep, lack of daylight, and no time for coffee. He settled behind Brian and lowered his snow goggles over his eyes.

“Okay, ready?” Brian asked, turning his head.

“Yeah!”

The engine revved a bit as they jerked forward, and the their headlights flooded the snow-packed condominium access road. They coasted down the hill to a trailhead, where Brian cut into a growth of aspens. A wide path showed tracks of frequent traffic in the packed snow. The woods were familiar to Clay. He and Brian knew the maze of trails up the mountains and across the ridges well enough to navigate them even when visibility was limited. This time around, since time was of the essence and they wanted to go reasonably fast, avoiding the roads and making good use of the snow, they had waited till the pallid light of dawn began to spill over the mountainside.

All along, Clay clung to the seat behind Brian, holding onto his hips and balancing the overloaded rucksack on his back. Every so often, he glanced back to make sure his skis and poles stood firm in snowmobile’s carrier. And with every glance at his skis, his mind flew to Nick and his one ski that had gotten stuck at the top of his snow well.

They would need that ski to get out of there.

AN HOUR later, Brian pulled up by the ranger’s office. The lights were on inside, and the small parking lot had been plowed. Brian pulled up on the packed snow, killed the engine, and turned around. “You still wanna do this on your own?”

“No other way,” Clay said. “You can’t bring the snowmobile onto the chute. And we have skis.”

“You want me to stick around once we get up there?”

Clay hesitated. “For a short while. The question is, can we beat the storm or not? And if not, I have enough supplies for two. We can hold out until it blows over.”

“I still maintain that hunkering down in a hole in an avalanche area is stupid. Especially with more snow coming,” Brian said. He scratched the edge of his jaw with his gloved

hand, mussing the short beard that had, presumably, protected him from the elements.

“Better than Nick being stuck out there all by himself,” Clay said.

“Oh, I see!” Now there was humor in Brian’s voice. “Is he the new flavor of the week?”

“Oh shaddap. It’s not like that at all. I just gave him a skiing lesson.”

“And you invited him to dinner.”

Clay punched Brian’s shoulder. “Asshole.”

“Get off,” Brian said. “And quit hittin’ me just because I’m right. Just because I’m your brother doesn’t give you privileges.” He couldn’t quite suppress the mirth in his voice. “At least this Nick sounds like a quality guy, if you’re willing to risk a spoiled New Year’s Eve even though you didn’t get laid yet!” Now that Clay swung off the machine and was walking to the ranger’s office, Brian could dismount as well.

“Oh my God, that’s what I forgot!” Clay halted in mid-stride. “Booze! I should’ve packed a bottle of bubbly.”

“You’re an idiot,” Brian said with a laugh. “What, you packed for five days or something? You really figure you won’t be able to get out of there?”

A tendril of cold fear twisted in Clay’s gut. He didn’t want to be stuck in a hole in the snow any more than Nick did, but he had learned early on to plan for every contingency. He had a first aid kit, a GPS locator beacon, condoms, and lube. He’d really hoped to enjoy Nick’s company by his small fireplace with a civilized snifter of cognac in hand, but in a pinch, he’d go to wherever Nick had to hole up at the moment. He shook his head. “It’s like bringing an umbrella, figuring if you don’t, it’s gonna rain.”

“Uh-huh.” Brian nodded. “Here’s a contribution to your preparedness fund, then.” He dug under the multiple layers of his jacket. “Here. I hope you won’t have any call to use it.” He held a beat-up, leather-covered stainless steel hip flask. He’d had it since he had turned nineteen.

“Seriously?” Clay choked up. “But man. Your flask!”

“Yeah. My flask, full of my home-doctored spiced rum.” He grabbed Clay’s shoulder and pulled him into a half-hug. “I want it back. In person, when you get off the mountain.” He pressed it into Clay’s chest, and Clay grabbed it and stashed it inside the zippered pocket of the fleece layer he was wearing under his down ski jacket.

“Thanks, bro.”

“It’s just a loan,” Brian reiterated.

“Yeah. I’ll return it. I promise.”

DRY WARMTH and the bright light of fluorescent overhead lights greeted Clay as he entered the familiar ranger outpost. Dick Stevens was there, wearing a green ranger-insignia sweater over a thermal turtleneck. Jensen sat slumped in Dick’s office chair with his wool-clad feet propped on the corner of Dick’s crowded desk. He was leaning back and nursing a cup of coffee.

“Hey, boys.” Dick slid them a look which told Clay he wasn’t happy to see them.

“Good morning, Dick,” Clay said as though this was a routine visit. “Is there coffee?”

“Help yourself.”

Clay did.

“So,” Dick opened up before the coffee even had a chance to hit Clay’s system. “Jensen tells me the weather looks both faster and heavier than it looked yesterday. Have you seen the updated forecast?”

Clay shook his head. “I ran my own. I figure it’ll snow hard, and come fast. By noon, maybe.”

“By ten.”

Clay looked up. “Shit. We better finish up here and go. What’s the status on the hunting party?”

“They’re okay,” Jensen said. “The outfit that owns that land? We called their landline. They’re getting them out on

snowmobiles, now that your guy is accounted for. His brother didn't want to leave without him until they explained it to him."

"That's good," Clay said. "Nick'll be happy to hear that."

"About Nick," Jensen said. "What's your plan?"

"He says he's uninjured," Clay said. "He says he can ski off. I brought my cross-country skis."

Dick looked at the stuffed rucksack that was leaning against the wall by the door. "You look like you're supplied for quite a while."

"Just in case," Clay said. "Like an umbrella."

"You'll just end up hauling all that back on your puny cross-country skis," Dick said. He didn't frown, though, and he didn't laugh.

Clay drank as much coffee as its temperature allowed. Then he stood up. "Let me get some water and use your john, and we'll be off. You know my GPS locator, it's the same one as before."

"Most people don't need theirs as often as you do!" Brian's words drifted after him, undeterred by the thin wood door of the lavatory.

It was true. Clay took risks—but it was always for a good cause.

## CHAPTER 7

HIS BODY roused him as he was all cold and curled into a ball, too close to the wall of snow, which made his bladder scream *red alert*. Nick groaned, moved the edge of his Mylar curtain aside, and slipped off the shelf he had carved the night before.

The snow cave where he had slept.

He grinned. Now, when the black hole overhead began to pale with the first dawning of the day, knowing that he'd slept outdoors and survived felt good in a hard-core sort of way. He always thought of himself as a soft computer jockey, but reading all those survival books and talking with the ex-military types who had actually done similar things must've rubbed off.

He emptied his bladder on the far side of the snow cave, covered the spot, and rubbed his hands clean with snow.

He ate some snow, working the cold slush along his gums and cleaning the fuzz off his teeth. A growly sound accompanied a mild cramp from his stomach.

Oh yeah, breakfast.

Nick had one apple and one protein bar left. He could either eat it all now, or stretch the food for later. It all depended whether or not he could get off the mountain today.

The memory of Clay's voice from last night eased some of his worries.

Clay would come. And if not Clay, then somebody else.

Nick turned his phone on. His battery was at twenty-one percent.

*"I'm awake and ready to go,"* he texted to Clay.

He waited.

There was no immediate reply, which probably meant Clay was still asleep, or in the shower. Nick summoned his reserves of patience as he dug out the protein bar. He ate it slowly, sipping the snow melt from his bag. Then, in a leap of faith, he ate his apple. He had nothing to pack, no bedroll, no suitcase. Just his backpack, hunting gear, and a few emergency supplies.

HALF AN HOUR later, Nick took down the Mylar sheet, shook it free of snow particles, and after much fumbling and rolling he managed to force it into the protective Zip-loc it came in.

He scrutinized the sleep cave. The snow that loomed over his head all night long was cold and naturally packed from the freeze-thaw cycles of the past two months.

He didn't need the space: he was alone. He did need the packed snow chunks.

Nick was bent on leaving today, and to do that, he had to reinforce the floor under the tree so he could gain purchase and dig his way out. The easy way to mine his paving materials would've been carving up his sleeping ledge and cannibalizing it. He didn't intend to sleep in the alcove again, but when he approached the surface he had slept on, he paused. This little hole in the snow helped him survive the night on the mountain.

And suppose he had to stay another night – then what? Try to balance his sled on a chopped-up ice surface?

Nick clenched his jaw at the thought of another lonely, sleepless night. Then he moved his gear out of the alcove and got to work, making the cave a little deeper. He carved carefully, tossing the chunks of granular, icy snow pack onto a pile. He'd use them to reinforce the floor farther out.

When his pile of hard snow took up as much space as three big backpacks, Nick straightened up and stretched his back. He dried his knife and put it away. His face was hot with exertion, thirst just about glued his tongue to the roof of his

mouth, and he could see better in the clear, gray light that poured in through the ceiling hole of the cave.

He sipped more of his snow melt and gingerly walked right under the opening.

The gray sky promised more snow. Clouds the color of his old Persian cat sat still above, seemingly still and watchful. He couldn't see anything else. No snow-covered peaks, no tall Colorado spruce with garlands of white weighing down their drooping boughs. Not even a dead tree limb stuck out of the snow within his limited line of sight.

## CHAPTER 8

SNOW flew past Clay's face even though he was hiding behind Brian, who was driving the snowmobile up the hill and toward the tree line. They were off the groomed slope now, entering a place where few dared to tread. Yet Clay knew there were paths in these woods, because he hiked them and biked them from spring till fall. He trusted Brian's recollection of their favorite haunts. The three aspen rising like sentinels further up marked the place where the trail entered the dark, brooding tranquility of the forest.

Clay gripped Brian's hips tighter in anticipation of speed, but Brian shook his helmeted head and carried on nice and easy. Just fast enough to remain afloat, supported upon the treacherous snow surface by the surface of the snow-go's skis and propulsion system. They traveled good four feet higher than usual. The branches that used to barely brush their hats in the summertime now threatened to whip their faces.

Brian slowed down some more.

A gambel oak reached its gnarled limbs from the right, forcing them to slow to a crawl while both he and Brian pushed the freeze-stiff twigs out of their faces. The path dipped into a gully dug by a creek, but the whole mess was snowed over now. Safe to cross on the snow-go or on skis, but not on foot.

Halfway there.

CLAY took a cleansing breath and steadied his hands on his brother's hips. He got Nick's text, but Nick hadn't responded to Clay's text, and the phone call went straight to voice mail.

He wondered how the soft low-lander managed overnight. He was alive. Maybe a little cold, stiff, hungry, and dehydrated. Clay hoped there'd be no frostbite, and he hoped



they'd find Nick's coordinates without him falling down the same hole and having to call for some kind of a dramatic rescue.

Clay had spent a night or two out in the wild all by himself before, sometimes by choice, and at other times by misfortune. He knew the silence of the snow, the howl of the wind, and the ominous crackle of breaking ice. Those could play games with any man's mind, toy with him, make him question his sanity.

It was almost eight o'clock, more snow was dogging their heels, and Nick hadn't answered his phone yet.

Clay swallowed thick spit. He'd focus on the positive. Brian would drop him off at the edge of the tree line, Clay would ski over, help Nick out of the hole and onto his skis, and they'd make it back for lunch.

No problem.

The rucksack weighed heavy on his shoulders. Clay tensed his back muscles and released them several times in a row. The discomfort reminded him of a safety-margin. If there was a problem, Clay was prepared to hole up in the snow for a while.

LIGHT filtered through the curtain of evergreen branches, which were bowing under the weight of snow. Their short needles looked almost black in contrast, lending a further monochromatic feel to the landscape around them. Brian coasted to a stop by the tree line and Clay let go of him. He moved the clear goggles off his face and up to his forehead.

With the engine off, the silence was deafening. The air was still, and the trees didn't whisper in their customary groans and sussurrations. It wasn't nearly cold enough for the inside of the boles to crack, and what birds were around this time of the year were out of sight, and silent.

"Okay, bro," Brian said. He, too, moved his goggles up. "Give me your backpack so you don't sink us in."

Clay shrugged his laden rucksack off, passed it to Brian, and planted his feet on the ski runners of the snowmobile. Then, very carefully, he stood up. Turning around and

loosening his cross-country skis and poles from the back rack took some balance and coordination, but Clay had those in spades. He also had experience, and the knowledge that if he managed to fall and get stuck in several feet of deep powder, he'd not only be the butt of his brother's jokes, he'd also slow down Nick's rescue.

With slow, controlled motions he lined the skis up and clipped in. They sank into the snow by half a foot.

"Wow. You sure you can carry all that shit with you?" Brian hefted his heavy rucksack. They both knew it would try to imbalance him, and it would drive him deeper into the layer of loose powder.

"Just in case," Clay said. "It's not like I'm here for a picnic."

"No," Brian said, his bearded face lighting up with an irreverent grin. "You're here for a piece of ass and you know it. How else would you have ended up with that guy's phone number?"

Clay didn't shrug as he carefully eased the rucksack onto his back. Its weight drove him so deep into the snow, his calves were already half-buried. The light was bright out here by the chute, too, unfiltered by the trees. He unzipped the chest pocket of his parka and pulled out a pair of polarized sunglasses.

"I'm off. Thanks, Brian!"

"No prob. Hey, go ahead, I'll watch you from here. You got your phone out?"

Clay would've smacked his head if he wasn't concerned about balance. "Details!" He pulled his smartphone out and slid the screen open. Still no response from Nick. He called up the map and zoomed in at the spot with Nick's GPS coordinates. "He is here, and we're here." He showed it to Brian.

"Don't drop your phone."

"I won't." Clay oriented himself, aimed his skis in the proper direction, and headed up and across the chute in careful

slides of his skis.

Anything could hide under the surface. He could fall in just like Nick had. The path that wended through the woods was buried under a layer of snow, and it shot pretty much straight across to the next tree line. Nick's location was further up.

A breeze picked up, cooling Clay's fresh-shaven, sunscreen-covered cheeks. He was glad for the sunglasses, because the UV was brutal at this elevation and he didn't want to end up lobster-red, not even on an overcast day.

Nick was holed up about a third of the way across the chute, and from what Clay recalled about this area, some of the trees that had been uprooted or broken by an avalanche from two years ago were still around. Some had been removed for lumber and as a fire safety precaution, but others remained, providing shelter to wildlife. The hillside now teemed with colonizing berry bushes.

Where was Nick?

Clay stopped, pulled his phone out, and checked the map. Nick's red dot was up and over a bit more, whereas his own blue dot was halfway between the tree line and his target. With a sigh of relief he zipped his phone into his pocket and skied a little closer.

Then he turned around.

Brian was still sitting at the tree line, perched on his snowmobile. His watchful presence was comforting. If they only dared bring the snowmobile over – but, no. Too much risk. He pushed off, then paused and fished the emergency whistle from under his parka, where it hung around his neck.

He blew four quick blasts.

Nothing.

He tried again.

Then he edged his way closer, listening to a response. Was it possible that Nick couldn't hear him? If so, was he asleep? Or injured? Or dead?

He clamped down on his too-vivid imagination, leaned forward on his poles, and listened. Then he blew the whistle again.

The light breeze whispered by his ears. Just when he was about to text Brian and hash out Plan B, a sudden movement caught his eye. A flash of orange was bobbing up and down in a field of white!

A hat on a ski pole, probably – and Nick had managed to push it up through the snow.

Clay turned to wave Brian good-bye, but Brian waved back at him, still sitting on his snowmobile. He was barely visible in the shadows, no more than half a football field away.

Brian was staying. Warmth filled Clay's heart. Of course he was staying – Brian always stuck around, just like Clay always guarded Brian's back. Suppose Nick had been hurt? Then having a snowmobile around would have been invaluable.

But he wasn't hurt. Clay stood still, calf-deep in snow, as the orange hat disappeared back under. So did the ski pole, but then the snow heaved. Chunks flew out, as though a kid building a fortress were removing the excess, one snowball at a time.

An arm emerged, dressed in hunting camo and mittens. A wave, a faint echo of a voice.

Clay was just about to edge a bit closer when Nick popped out. Only his head and chest were visible, and from the way his shoulders were straining, he looked as though he were wrestling something under the surface of the snow.

“Fuck yeah!” Nick's shout travelled across the snowy slope. “I did it! There's daylight!”

“Nick!” Clay stopped.

“Hey, Clay! You made it!” Clay looked past Nick's grin of bravado and saw relief and gratitude in spades.

“Good to see you! Can I get closer? Is that the hole where you fell in?”

“No,” Nick called out. “There’s a broken tree and I dug my way up. I’m kneeling on the trunk. Don’t go over there—” He waved slightly uphill. “That’s where I fell in.”

Nick pointed uphill and across, indicating just where Clay had been going.

Shit. Fuck. So lucky. “Thanks!” Clay yelled out. “So how do we get you out?”

“Through where I am. Except my ski is stuck over the hole up there, sort of breach.” Nick was visibly huffing, and Clay recalled that the thin mountain air was still new to his body. Even yesterday, skiing away from his hunting spot, Nick had admitted to headache and endurance issues. Digging his way out of snow must’ve been serious work.

## CHAPTER 9

NICK'S knee kept slipping off the damn trunk he was trying scramble up on. Without branches he could use as parallel bars, he'd have never even gotten to stick his head out. The other branches sloped down.

"Damn." His foot slipped.

Digging his way out had turned out to be harder than he'd thought.

Finally! Right knee on the trunk, Nick turned.

Clay began making his way toward him. He looked taller than before with the change of perspective, and in his heavy-duty gear and mirrored sunglasses, he reminded Nick of a fashion model from an Alpine resort advertising spread.

Nick's heart beat fast.

Clay did show up. Just like he said, he was here, and so was the other guy down the hill.

And now that the cavalry has shown up, Nick didn't see anything wrong with enjoying the view. He grinned as Clay's muscled thighs shifted under the smooth layers of his tights. It made him think of last night's call. Clay's olive green parka reached down past his hips, obstructing Nick's view. He suppressed a sigh.

"I'll pass my backpack to you, okay?" Clay called out. "It's heavy."

Nick shook off his reverie. "What do you want to do?"

"I need to get the extra weight off to get to that hole safely and rescue your ski. Then we're out of here!"

"Okay." Nick lifted his left knee up and, very carefully, braced his foot against the branch that he'd been gripping so

hard for the last two minutes. Balanced on a knee and a foot, he slowly straightened his spine and reached his arms to the side. The snow reached only to his waist now.

The *swish-swish* of Clay's skis was punctuated by Nick's labored breathing. "Don't come too close," he warned. "You'll collapse the hole!"

"Okay." Clay angled his skis parallel to the slope so as not to slide down, and stepped up the last few feet toward Nick. "I'll be careful. Is there a hole in the snow next to you?"

"Yeah. I dug it."

"Okay." Clay fished in one of his pockets and came up with a coil of yellow nylon rope. "I'll tie my bag to this, drop it down the hole, and give you the end. That way, we can pull it out if it gets buried.

Nick nodded. "Yeah." He swallowed. "But I could've caught it."

"No doubt," Clay said with a distracted nod. "You also could've gotten knocked off your tree and into the snow. Which would cause needless upset and exertion for both of us." He looked up, fixing Nick with a blank stare of his sunglasses. "I like to play things safe."

Then he shrugged his heavy bag off, swung it once, twice—and on the count of three he let it fly. It thunked into the snow next to the hole and plowed its way under the surface. Unconcerned, Clay coiled the end of the yellow rope. "Here, catch!"

He threw it. Nick caught it easily. "Okay. You want me here, or under the ski?"

Clay seemed to ponder for a bit. "Here, in case I fall through."

But he didn't fall through. Nick watched him slide up and down the hill around the hole where he'd fallen in less than twenty-four hours ago. He saw him bend and pull and dig.

"You sure I can't help?" he yelled, and damn if yelling didn't feel so good and so invigorating.

Clay stopped and looked his way. “I thought you couldn’t reach it!”

“I can’t.”

“So stay put.”

It took a good half hour, during which Clay stopped once to take a phone call. Nick watched him look toward the woods whence he came, and he saw him wave.

“My brother,” Clay said, once he ended the call and secured his phone in a zipper pocket. “He’s tempted to come over. I said no.”

“Avalanches?”

“Yeah.”

Clay bent down once again, and this time, he had the back end of an upside-down ski in his hand.

And then the whole ski, boot and everything.

He inspected it. “Shit, Nick,” he called out. “Bad news for you!”

“What?”

“Your ski’s broken.”

And sure enough, as Clay held the ski upright, the tip bent away from him. The wood that was the ski top was in two pieces, their jagged and splintered edges jutting out like the edges of a puzzle. Only the thin plastic runner was holding the whole thing together.

“I have duct tape!” Nick was pretty sure duct tape would fix anything. And they didn’t have to go far, did they?

As soon as he said that, the plastic runner peeled away from the bottom of the ski’s wood. The sound of it was like fabric ripping. For this, his little spool of duct tape just wouldn’t do.

NICK WATCHED Clay stick the ski into the snow right next to the hole and pull his phone out again. “Hey Brian,” he



said, presumably to the guy on the snowmobile. “This is the situation...”

He tried not to eaves-drop but dammit, Clay’s voice was so smooth and calm, so enticing. Nick had done okay for himself under the circumstances. He’d dug his cave, got himself situated – hell, he didn’t die hanging upside down, nor did he asphyxiate in the deep, fluffy powder. His thrashing to get loose and out was what had probably broken his ski to begin with.

Clay, though. With Clay around, Nick felt as though things would work out no matter what. Maybe it was not being all alone, or maybe it was Clay’s warm dinner invitation from before. And now, watching him strategize, poised on his skis like he’d been born that way. As though back-country rescues were a normal part of his life.

“Okay,” Clay said. “Visibility’s dropping already with the snow moving in... no. No, absolutely not. I don’t want you coming in through the trees on your own with extra skis.” Clay shook his head. “Brian, we’ll be fine. My phone’s charged. You know where we are, we’re supplied for a few days, we’ll just let it snow. Dick knows where we are, too. Go home and kiss the girls for me!”

By the time Clay finally put his phone away again, the dark clouds that had only threatened on the horizon half an hour ago loomed overhead, and even though it was still around ten in the morning, the air had acquired a dense and murky quality. Fat, fluffy snowflakes drifted down, settling on Clay’s olive jacket and bright blue knit cap.

The sound of a small gas engine starting up made Nick turn around on his precarious perch. Brian made a careful circle on his snowmobile to aim back into the woods and turned around to wave in their direction. The snow-covered trees swallowed him along with the sound of his snowmobile.

They were alone.

Nick waved at Clay to catch his attention. “So what’s the plan?”

Clay looked around the hole dubiously. “If I try to come in this way, I’m afraid I’ll collapse the air pocket and bury your gear.”

“My gear’s inside the sleeping cave,” Nick said. “Hand me your gear first!”

“What’s your plan?” Clay deferred to Nick, who knew the layout of his cave.

Nick thought. “I’ll go under, you hand me your poles and your skis, then come down. But be careful, it’s slick. The branches are here, and here.” He pointed with one hand. Then, carefully, he wiggled his knees off the tree trunk, held onto the right branches, and let himself fall in a semi-controlled way.

Something hard hit his left butt cheek. Harder than snow, anyway. Clay’s rucksack had buried itself in the snow as it had fallen through. The yellow rope it was tied to was loose, which indicated the bag wasn’t going to sink any deeper.

He left it where it was for now. It helped stabilize the floor. “Okay!” He yelled up through the small, cold opening above his head.

A ski pole dangled down. He took it and set it aside. Then another.

A pause.

Snow chunks started to fall in as the edges of his tidy snow opening started to crumble under the pressure of Clay’s skis.

He saw Clay’s booted foot aim down, hoping to land on the trunk. More snow flooded in, hitting Nick’s face. Then he couldn’t see anything, but he heard the sounds of struggle.

A ski came down, then another. Next, two feet, attached to legs that were covered in patches of snow.

Nick stepped aside. “All clear!” he yelled, not sure whether Clay could hear him.

Clay fell into the snow cave with a thud. He landed on his feet, wobbled, and fell onto his butt, driving his rucksack into the snow even deeper.

“Damn,” he said. “I felt like Winnie-the-Pooh, stuck in the rabbit’s hole!” He scrambled to his feet and started to pick chunks of snow from under his parka. “This was harder than I thought it would be, but here I am.”

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Nick said. He was going to wave toward the sleeping cave, but as he raised his arms, he ended up grabbing Clay’s shoulders instead. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Clay said so fast it was almost automatic. “You?”

“Yeah.” And he was, now that Clay was here.

## CHAPTER 10

PACKED snow sucked Clay's body heat even through his fleece underlayer. He unzipped his parka. The chill of the cave washed over him, but a temporary chill was better than having the snow he managed to gather inside his parka on the way down the hole melt and get his fleece and silk layers wet. He shook the down-filled coat out and reached to peel the freezing snow that had stuck to him.

"Wait, I got it." Nick was behind him now, one steady hand on Clay's shoulder, the other hand peeling chunks of the white stuff off his butt, his waist. Nick was fast and efficient, and his gloved hand on Nick's shoulder felt steady and reassuring.

Clay felt Nick brush down his back and legs. The ski pants were tight, wind proof, and he had two tight, snug layers of them on, but the snow did stick to them. Clay was grateful for that for the first time in his life, because the cold, white patches had compelled Nick to squat and brush his hands down Clay's hamstrings and calves.

His tired hamstrings and calves.

And the whispery rasp of Nick's insulated, leather archery gloves did absolutely nothing to soften his masculine touch. Clay felt blood rush to all the right places.

Then he was embarrassed for himself. Poor Nick, he'd been stuck here overnight, in a snow cave, all alone with just a dying cell phone for company. And all Clay could think about was Nick, and how he could make his way around, settle his knees in the pack snow, and service Clay's overactive libido.

He stepped away, and turned. "Thanks." He wanted to say more, but the words got stuck in his throat. He tried to swallow. A faint residue of coffee and mint reminded him how thirsty he was just then, and if he was thirsty, Nick might be,

too. He grabbed Nick's hand and pulled him up. "So it looks like we'll hunker down and ride it out, and the guys will come and get us tomorrow, or the day after."

"Shit." The way his face fell told Clay a lot about Nick's stay. And, really, that should've been no surprise. Clay had been in situations such as this one before. It didn't bother him much now, but the first time?

"Hey." He patted Nick's shoulder. "The first time I got snowed in, I was pretty freaked out. But it gets better. And it's always a lot better when you're not alone."

Nick straightened his shoulders, not quite dislodging Clay's hand, and forced a smile. "Yeah, I bet. And I'm glad you're here. It's just... it's creepy, I guess."

"Uh, huh. So, why don't you show me around? Then I'll show you what I brought, and we can decide how to set up."

"Oh, it's nothing. I got lucky, really." Nick gave a self-deprecating shrug, and pointed to an evenly carved snow alcove full of gear. "This is the sleeping cave."

Nick explained his process and reasoning, going step by step. He even pulled out the wooden pegs he had used to keep the Mylar sheet over the sleeping cave opening. That had been a smart move, it kept the heat in. One blanket wasn't quite big enough for a man to roll up in all the way, and it crinkled something fierce when the sleeper moved in the middle of the night. Considering Nick was still dressed in a warm, wind-resistant hunting outfit, this had been a good choice.

"And here's the water melting plant," he said. Then he bit his lip in a way that only accentuated his three-day beard. "I just drop a chemical hand warmer in the bag and pack it with snow."

"Great!" Clay turned the cheer up another notch. "I have a whole bunch of hand warmers. And an Esbit with a bunch of fuel tablets, so we are set for a while."

"Ass-what?"

"Esbit. A tiny camping stove. I got it from NATO surplus. It uses these little solid hexamine fuel tablets. We can heat

food and melt snow, but don't expect good, boiling-temperature coffee at this altitude. Even this little powerhouse has its limits!"

"NATO surplus, huh?" Nick eyed him with interest that made Clay shift uncomfortably. "You got any special survival training?"

"Not really." He wished he could say yes just for the cool factor. "You can get all this gear online, or in a good outdoors store. You're a hunter, you know that."

"I've never had to look for specialized stoves."

"Survival skills are just something you learn as you go along. From others, or people give classes, or, you know. You look something up."

"Just like I do, then," Nick said, and smiled.

AS MUCH as he tried, Clay couldn't see the two of them sleeping comfortably in that little alcove. Nick was right proud of his job carving it, though, and Clay was debating how to break the bad news to him. They pulled the buried rucksack out of the snow where it fell in, and they packed down the floor in that area. It dipped, but at least they weren't going to sink in any deeper.

"That cave, Nick."

Nick turned. "Yeah?"

"I have a tent. Because, you know, the two of us won't fit in there, and if we do, one will be pressed against a wall of snow. Or the other one will keep falling out."

"I made it a little deeper," Nick said with a frown, "but if we dig anymore, I'm afraid it could collapse."

Clay nodded. "That's right. Which is why I brought a tent."

And two sleeping bags, and more Mylar, and food, and that stove, and food, and... Clay didn't say all that. Instead, he threw his hands out, palm up. "I know, I know. You like it because you made it, and it worked, and it's a really good cave."

Nick kept staring at his snow-covered hunting boots.

“Really, it’s nice. And we can store our gear in it. It’s gonna be fine. This floor, it’s pretty level. We can level it some more and set the tent on top. The work will keep us warm and occupied, and we’ll sleep better tonight.”

Nick took a deep breath. It was hard for him, at this altitude, and he breathed again and again, like a man who had just finished a wind sprint.

Clay closed the distance between them, grasped Nick’s arms, and gently shook him. “Hey, you okay?”

When Nick lifted his face, Clay saw a myriad of expressions warring in his face. Uncertainty and hesitation. A bit of embarrassment. None of those could disguise the thinly-veiled heat of desire.

Nick swallowed. “You really want to sleep next to me?”

“Yeah.” Clay didn’t hesitate. “And after last night? You’d have to beat me away with a rolled-up REI catalog!”

Of course they’d be best off sharing body heat on a night like this. Up in the mountains, the temperature dropped like a rock once the sun licked the jagged horizon to the west. They’d be fools not to. That’s why he brought the two bags that zipped together.

Nick was cute and he was interested in him, but first and foremost, Clay was interested in both of them making it off the mountain with all of their fingers and toes.

He opened his mouth to explain all that, but his breath halted as his eyes met Nick’s.

The space between them evaporated.

In the dim light of the snow cave, Clay couldn’t see the color of Nick’s eyes, but he sure saw the intensity.

Their lips brushed, dry and roughened by the mountain air.

Then, wet. Wet and hot, tasting of morning cinnamon and something else, something Clay couldn’t, at that moment, identify.

They leaned, propping each other up. Clay wanted to shift and grab Nick's leg between his two, but he knew better than stepping blind on the uneven snow-cave floor.

Nick's tongue jutted forth once more, slithering in and leaving so much heat in its place, Clay thought he'd pass out.

They broke apart.

"I like a man who goes after what he wants." Nick's voice was breathy now. He probably felt as light-headed as Clay as he still balanced himself against Clay's arms.

"Good to know," Clay said. He was tempted to correct Nick, tell him it was just a matter of survival and body heat. Nothing more. He opened his mouth—then he shut it again, and smiled. Divulging that right now would probably be a mistake.



## CHAPTER 11

LOSING the cave to a tent felt like a bum deal to Nick. He thought back to how much work it took, carving the irregular snow pack with his hunting knife. Prying the chunks of snow, stomping them into the soft snow floor, smoothing the sleeping surface. The wall did emit cold, that much was true. And it would be easy for one of them to roll from a lover's embrace straight off the ice shelf and onto the cold, slippery floor.

Thinking of a lover's embrace had Nick think back to Clay's bold proposition, and then to their searing kiss. If long-distance sex was great, he didn't see how they'd keep their hands off each other tonight. "The tent sounds great," he finally said. Clay had trekked all the way here to be with him, and Nick wouldn't do a thing that might sabotage that.

He couldn't possibly squander the opportunity to snuggle up with him – could he?

It wasn't "too soon," was it?

They didn't have to do much. Last night's call was a proof of that.

For now, he and Clay were using the two large plastic throwing discs to dig snow, distribute it, and level the floor as best as they could. When Nick saw Clay pull the two orange and lime green Frisbees out of his bag, he'd decided Clay was a genius. They were made of light, durable plastic, they doubled as a shovel, a dinner plate, or a small table. They packed a lot smaller than a rescue shovel, too. Had Nick had one of those babies on him, his cave would've been finished in half the time.

"That looks good," Clay said after they had worked long enough for Nick to feel a thin sheen of sweat on his skin. "There's enough space for both the tent and a little walkway."

Nick nodded and made use of the fact that he, unlike Clay, could stand up straight and stretch his back. Clay, unlike Nick, was able to reach the snow that had constituted the opening of their ceiling hole, but had to walk around stooped, caveman-style. By mutual accord, they decided not to camp right under the ceiling hole. If Nick had fallen through it, somebody – or something – might fall in, too.

Raising a small nylon tent for two was a piece of cake, and half an hour later, Nick was sitting down a rolled-out sleeping bag. His cross-country ski shoes were by the zipped-up door, just like his warm shoe covers. Even better, Clay had brought an extra pair of wool-blend socks, and Nick's feet were warm in their fresh and cushy comfort.

“You doing okay? No headache?” Clay leaned closer to him, peering at Nick with clinical interest.

“I think I've been acclimatizing. It takes a few days, right?” Nick frowned. No headache, no nausea... “I couldn't sleep last night, but I don't think that was altitude sickness.”

“Oh yeah? What was it?”

Nick sighed. He'd been so freaked out, but now that Clay was here, it was even hard to figure out why. He shrugged. “Too quiet, I guess.”

Clay nodded sagely, and his expression softened to one of understanding. “Sensory deprivation. Betcha you'll have no problem with me snoring next to you. That will break up the creepy silence!”

Nick chuckled. “Maybe.” He looked at Clay a little closer. Clay was dressed in just one layer of ski pants now, a long-sleeve thermal top, and a fleece sweater. Nick had stripped off his external layers as well, and those were now assembled in an untidy sprawl next to their boots, since their outerwear had to dry out first. “Thirsty, though. I could do with some water.”

“Yeah. Let's make water.” Clay pulled out a metal contraption the size of a paper napkin, unfolded two hinged parts, and stood it on a folded hand-towel that he had placed inside a Frisbee. Then he put a small block of white solid fuel

into the stove, produced a folding aluminum pot with a holding handle on top, and turned to Nick. “You want to get us some snow?”

“Okay.” Snow he could do, and he did. Once he returned to the tent with a pot and a plastic bag packed with the white stuff, Clay covered the snow with a lid, set it on the dinky little folding stove, and lit the fuel with a gas lighter.

The flame was so blue as to be invisible.

“Is it even burning?” Nick asked.

“Yeah. Don’t touch it. Although it won’t do much at this altitude. You want coffee, tea, or hot chocolate?”

“You brought hot chocolate?” Nick heard awe in his own voice. Hot chocolate turned a mishap into an adventure.

“Yeah. It’ll be just tepid.” Clay peeked under the lid, and Nick saw half of the snow was melted already. “I’ll keep adding snow, okay?”

The amount of snow required to produce a quart of water amazed Nick. He had been melting snow in his bag, sure, but that process was happening out of sight, slowly. Seeing it like that was revealing. “I guess eating snow wouldn’t hydrate me too much, huh.”

“Not really,” Clay said, staring at the little stove as though the power of his concentration would melt the snow faster.

“Snow is mostly air. In a survival situation, you have to balance hydration with hypothermia. You managed to stay warm, so that’s good. And you had thought of reusing half-spent heating packets to melt snow. That’s better than getting chilled by melting a mouthful after a mouthful.” Nick saw Clay shudder.

“Have you ever done that?”

“Yeah. I didn’t have a bottle or a bag. They say to melt snow with your body heat, but on the outside. Like putting a container of snow between the layers of your clothes as you build your snow cave, since you’ll be getting hot and dumping body heat anyway, but those are ideal conditions.”

Clay added a lot of snow to the little bit of warm water they already had. He had fallen quiet, too, but Nick was burning up with curiosity. Clay was, it seemed, experienced.

“So what’s the worst thing that had ever happened to you? In the snow, I mean. You sound like you’ve done this before.”

“You’ll laugh at me.”

“No, seriously. I want to know.”

Clay sighed. “It was being unprepared, really. And careless. I’ve been spending the winter here for years, and I did grow up nearby, so you’d figure I know better, right? Every time I go out, I have all the right gear. A charged phone, few plastic bags, some food, hand warmers. Just the kinds of things that fit in my pockets. And a whistle around my neck.”

Nick did remember a whistling sound as he had been digging through the branches of the fallen tree. He remained silent, though, not wanting to disrupt Clay’s thoughts or words with his questions.

“I’ve been helping with snow rescues ever since I was a kid,” Clay finally continued. “Lots of people visiting here don’t know this, but twenty percent of all ski area deaths are actually snow drownings. And of every ten people who fall into a snow well, only one gets out without help. So your chances of survival are pretty low.”

Nick thought about that. He reviewed his own situation in his mind, quickly, and jumped in. “But wait. I did fall in and I’m still here.”

“Yeah, because this tree was broken by an avalanche and we’re right under it. So there was an air pocket, and you managed not to drown. You were lucky. I’m talking about the loose snow that accumulates around trees. Or in a gorge. Sometimes, people drown as fast as they would in water. Others will hold on for a while, but the snow’s too loose to build a cave. If nobody finds them, they die of exposure.”

Nick’s mind flashed to the trees marching down the hillside, where he had been hunting. Theoretically, he could’ve

taken a fall near a big tree with a deep-enough well, and died. “So, what? You just avoid big trees?”

Clay added more snow to the pot, which was now half-full, and replaced the lid. He finally looked up. “That’s the thing, Nick,” he said intently. “You avoid any ungroomed snow. Or any trees. And you don’t go in the back country without a buddy. Just two years ago, I was here for the winter and I had rented a small house. I had someone come plow the driveway, it was in an inhabited area, the works. I could see the neighbors, but they were pretty far. I had all the privacy I needed to get my work done without feeling isolated.” He sighed, then looked away. “You know, when you have all kinds of experience, it’s easy to get a bit cocky. The house had a yard which looked almost flat. I’d been sitting by the computer, writing code. I looked out the window and shit, man, I saw a fox! It was the biggest fox I’d ever seen in the area, so once she was gone, I got dressed, took my camera, and went out to take pictures of her paw prints.”

“How did you know it was a she?”

“I didn’t. Just guessing.” Clay peeked under the lid again. The neat, rectangular block of solid fuel was now reduced to a sputtering blob. Clay got another one out of a Zip-loc bag, impaled it on the tip of his knife, and carefully settled it on top of the old and almost spent lump of fuel.

“Should I go get more snow?” Nick asked.

“In a bit.” Clay stared at the block as it came to life. “Okay. So the yard had two big Colorado spruces, and I knew to stay away from those. It also had this little Christmas tree, which was just sticking out of the snow. The snow wasn’t too deep that year. I was able to wade out, it came to maybe mid-thigh. And I was right behind the house. So I waded out to where the fox had been and I took those pictures. The light was still decent. It had been a gorgeous day.

Except on the way back,” Clay continued, “I got distracted by getting so jazzed over the fox, I headed straight for the house. I should’ve followed my footprints, but I was thinking about downloading those pics, and, well.” He paused. “That

puny little Christmas tree? It was on the edge of a small hill, but the way the snow drifted, I didn't see it. I took one wrong step—there was nothing under my foot. Nothing. You know how snow is mostly air?"

Nick nodded.

"That's what was there, and normally I'd have been okay, but I overbalanced the wrong way and fell in. I grabbed the tree – it kept me from sliding down the hill, into the deeper stuff. But I was so fucked, man. I knew I was, because I couldn't make it back out. In my own fucking back yard, like fifteen feet away from the house!"

They remained silent for a while. Only the blue, barely visible flame hissed from its block of fuel that was slowly disappearing. Nick was the one to lean in and lift the lid and add a handful of snow. The pot was three-quarters full.

Clay stirred next to him.

"So how did you get out?"

"I kept yelling for help. One of the neighbors pulled me out."

"Oh." Nick sighed in relief, as though the happenings were still going on and the outcome was uncertain. "But that's good, right?"

"He and his wife went out after work and got home close to midnight. She drove, he was drunk. Funny how a guy stuck in the snow sobers you right up." Nick was surprised to see a shy smile manifest on Clay's face at the memory.

"But you're here now," Nick said. "And we're having hot chocolate."

"Yeah." Clay kept the water covered. "I'll let it warm up as much as possible, then add the mix." He fumbled in his well-supplied bag. "I'm here now and we're having hot chocolate, because I don't leave the house without emergency supplies. Not ever."

## CHAPTER 12

WHEN Clay chose to answer Nick's question honestly, he didn't realize how hard it would be to talk about that night. Those hours spent just fifteen feet from the house.

Not slipping down the hill.

Clutching the bending sapling, its evergreen needles bruised by his gloved grip, the scent of sap rising to his nostrils.

The cold, the hunger, the thirst.

Yelling his throat hoarse as he tried to reach someone—anyone—who could help him out. In that neighborhood, people drove up the snow-covered road, beeped the garage door open, and slid right in. They weren't going to hear him unless somebody had to get out of the house.

And maybe not even then.

As Nick had said, though, here he was now, and there was hot chocolate. Or warm chocolate, if he had to be honest about it, but it was a lot better than cold snow melt.

He dug through his rucksack and produced two cups made of sturdy, bright-blue plastic. "Here," he said as he passed one to Nick. "Hold these while I mix. The trick is not to spill on the sleeping bags."

Four envelopes of premium mix with marshmallows and a bit of half-assed stirring with a spoon later, he poured two cups of lumpy hot chocolate into the blue plastic cups. There was a bit left over in the pot, and he covered it to keep it warm.

"Cheers," he said, and raised his drink toward Nick.

"Cheers!" Nick smiled, inhaled the scent of chocolate and vanilla and dry milk, and took an experimental sip.

Clay watched him on the sly. Nick had great lips. Not too wide and not too thin, and despite the dryness caused by the weather, he already knew they softened into a welcoming kiss under the right circumstances. Their pink sheen was almost invisible in the darkening tent. Clay wanted to kiss Nick again, right now, kiss the sweetness off his mouth and taste the mash-up of flavors on his tongue. Marshmallows and chocolate and Nick. But he'd wait. Nick looked like a cat over a bowl of cream, savoring every little sip.

*No wonder, moron, Clay thought to himself. It's the first warm drink he'd had in at least a day. Maybe three days.*

"It's good," Nick piped up. Then he licked his lips and drank some more. "Delicious." He yawned, and Clay recalled that he didn't sleep much last night.

"I'll refill the snow bags," he offered generously. "There's no reason why you can't take a nap while the snow's melting. And it will, because we're keeping the inside of the tent warm."

"Okay." Nick blinked hard and yawned again. "Which side do you want?"

"Don't care. Although, these bags do zip together." Clay paused. Their eyes met and their gaze lingered as Clay held his breath. Nick let his air out in one big whoosh, which told Clay he wasn't the only one a bit nervous over the tension that was building between them.

"That... that sounds okay. It will maximize body heat." Nick's answer was all serious, like body heat was the only thing he was thinking of at the time. And maybe he was.

"Okay then." Clay slipped his boots and jacket on, grabbed the two storage-size Ziploc bags he had brought for the purpose, and slipped out of the tent. The zipper gave its high-pitched whine of being closed, and Clay realized it wasn't the only sound in the cave anymore.

Wind was whistling over the ceiling hole. He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter after two, which felt late since he had no idea they took this much time digging and setting up



camp. On the other hand, quarter after two was way too early the darkness to fall. The clouds overhead must've seemed almost black from afar, and only the dense snowflakes that danced in the wind kept its color in the mid-gray zone.

The ceiling hole seemed smaller than before, and a new layer of soft, virgin snow pooled by his feet. This fluffy stuff was more air than water, though. Clay knew that. He took few careful steps around the tent and to the sleep cave. Then he pulled out his knife and carved out the densely packed, almost granular snow from under the sled. He was going at it sideways, ripping out chunks and stashing them in his bags, careful not to poke a hole. That would've been a disaster. No water for them to drink and wet bedding or clothes inside the tent? No, thank you.

By the time Clay got back inside, Nick was snuggled inside the zipped-together sleeping bags and fast asleep.

A FEW minutes later, Clay was down to one layer of long underwear and socks. He made sure his flashlight was within reach in the tent wall pocket along with his phone, which he turned off to conserve his battery charge.

Every sound he made seemed so loud, Clay thought Nick was sure to pop right into full alertness.

But Nick didn't, and despite every raucous screech of a zipper, or a loud bump in the almost-dark, Clay was able to wiggle into the sleeping bag and zip it shut.

He planned to gently settle down on his back and listen to Nick's breathing. Clay was all too aware that nothing was going to happen. No romantic overtures, no hot dates. No matter how Nick had misinterpreted what Clay had said before about "sleeping together," there was no way Clay was going to take advantage.

The Mylar sheet between the sleeping bag and the tent floor rustled as Clay settled down. His shoulder leaned against Nick's, but seeing as he was already pressing against the zipper on the other side, there was no helping that.

Nick smelled good in that unwashed, manly kind of way. There was bad body odor, a result of stress and excess perspiration, but this wasn't it. The scent that wafted to Clay's nose from the sleeping bag reminded him of warm beeswax, musk, and just a touch of cumin. He pulled the padded edge of the bag over his face, and inhaled a little deeper.

Oh, yeah. So good, so warm. So animalistic and primal, his cock began to fill and his heart beat a wild syncopation for the man next to him.

There had been that kiss. Two kisses.

But despite the call and the pleasure they had shared long-distance, he couldn't. It wouldn't be right.

Nick stirred next to him. First he threw an arm across Clay's chest, then he wrapped his leg around his thigh as Clay remained laying on this back, all stiff and unmoving.

It was hard not to respond. So hard.

And Clay was hard, too, with his cock pushing against his briefs and tights.

Gingerly, not wanting to wake Nick up, he snaked his arm under Nick's neck. They didn't have pillows, and sleeping on his arm would make Nick more comfortable. Wouldn't it?

Nick melted against Clay in his sleep, and his small, satisfied grunts spoke of warmth and contentment. He was fully plastered against Clay now, and his thigh was so close to rubbing against Clay's hard-on he could feel Nick's body heat.

What to do, what to do?

Clay exhaled and closed his eyes. Being groped by sleeping Nick and not feeling right about responding was a sweet torture. Kind of like being edged, except not on purpose and not by somebody he actually knew.

He took a calming breath, then another. He didn't want it to stop, he wasn't going to wake Nick up, and he didn't feel right in escalating.

He was well and truly stuck. Nick was sprawled halfway over him, warm and smelling of animalistic body heat.

Nick's hand moved down, toward his waist. Clay's thermal top must've gotten untucked, because Clay felt a warm hand on his flank next.

A stroke, a caress.

Clay peered through the darkness. He couldn't tell whether Nick's eyes were open or closed, but the languid weight upon his chest and leg lacked that subtle tension of a man who was only faking sleep.

Nick shifted. His hand was still sliding over Clay's sensitive skin, but now he also felt Nick's hard cock against his hip. Rocking, rubbing against Clay through two layers of fabric in miniscule little thrusts.

Clay's libido skyrocketed. His already engorged cock got painfully hard, as though feeling the heat of Nick's erection ignited him despite his best intentions. The silence of the tent was rent by ragged gasps—his—and sweet little moans that dripped from Nick's slightly parted lips.

This was good, kind of naughty, and fabulously hot. Clay stiffened his back and legs just to keep his own hips still. He wondered how long they had been at it, but in order to glance at the glowing dial of his watch, he'd have to extricate his whole left arm from within the warm sleeping bag. The motion of doing so might spoil a good thing.

This was good, wasn't it?

He thought of peeling Nick off him, but the thought remained just that, a figment of what should be.

Nick's wandering hand grasped his cock.

Sensation exploded, but not Clay. Clay merely cried out.

"What?" Nick jerked his head up, suddenly alert. His hand was still on Clay's raging erection. They were both panting hard as the movement of Nick's hips slowly came to a standstill. "God. I'm so sorry."

"I'm not God," Clay rasped. "And you don't need to be sorry."

Nick let go of him. “Man,” Clay said, still trying to catch his breath. “That was so hot. Were you really asleep?”

“Yeah.” Nick now peeled himself off Clay and laid down on his back. They fit inside the zipped-together sleeping bags, but there wasn’t much room to spare.

“Sorry,” Nick whispered again. They were packed in tight, side by side, with their broad shoulders bumping and hands clumsily trying to avoid contact. And they were both hard. Clay knew he was tenting his side of the sleeping bag, and Nick must’ve been, too.

Tenting in a tent.

It suddenly seemed funny.

“Hey,” Clay said. “I bet with our dicks so hard, the sleeping bag looks like a circus tent. Y’know, the one with two poles?”

Nick snickered. “No way.”

“Yeah. Stay still, I’ll get a flashlight.” Clay wiggled his left arm out of the bag and, as he reached into the tent’s hanging pocket, he glanced at his watch. Three o’clock. Over half an hour of breathless frustration and sweet body heat.

He clicked the light on, and pointed.

“Not really,” Nick said. “They’re aimed up on a slant.”

Clay reached for his cock, adjusted his hips, and straightened it. “Go ahead,” he wheedled. “Let’s make a circus tent.”

“You’re crazy,” Nick said, but Clay could tell he’d been suppressing a giggle. “Seriously?” But Nick adjusted himself, and sure enough, the surface of the sleeping bag rose and attained a slightly different shape.

“Too puffy,” Clay said. “If we had a sheet instead of this down-filled bag...”

“Then we’d be freezing,” Nick finished. He shifted onto his side, and in the reflected light, Clay was taken aback by the seriousness in his face. “I’m really glad you’re here. And I’m

grateful you know how to pack for a snow-cave overnight, too!”

“Yeah?” Clay smiled. “I’m really glad I’m here, too. I’ve never snow-caved with company before. Or on purpose. Wait, scratch that. I did do some survival equipment testing, but that wasn’t nearly as much fun as this.” He smiled. The light was nice, but the batteries would die if he kept it up. There was another option, though. “Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

## CHAPTER 13

THE EMBARRASSMENT of having been caught humping his mighty rescuer's leg had almost paled, alleviated by Clay's silly circus-tent trick. Nick wiggled. He could, he was in the sleeping bag by himself. His hard-on was still halfway there, and his skin was alive with a desire to be touched. He was busy watching Clay bend over his rucksack, his flashlight in his mouth.

He held it in his teeth, but even so, his lips seemed to be wrapped around it in a most suggestive way. Clay bent more, and a slice of skin appeared between his tights and his thermal top. Nick's hand tingled with the memory of Clay's pale, smooth flesh. There wasn't much, he'd slept through it, after all. But there was enough for Nick to yearn for more.

A softer, yellower glow appeared. Like candle light—but Clay would never allow that, would he? When they were using the stove, they were both sitting and alert, and they had taken precautions.

“A candle?” Nick still had to ask.

“One of those electrical little votives,” Clay said, and there was a hint of smug satisfaction in his voice. “They're light and they last for over eight hours. I got a whole bunch. And I got these.”

“Wow.” Nick smiled. The unshielded little light bulb was pretty neat on its own, but when Clay fished out a stack of paper drinking cones, like the ones people used at water coolers, the warm light diffused through the thin, waxed paper and softened.

It looked almost romantic.

Clay straddled Nick's legs and knee-walked his way up, settling over his groin. He put one little light by Nick's side,

and as he leaned and shifted, his weight caressed Nick's sensitive cock and made him gasp. Clay's expression turned from mischief to relief. "Yeah?" he whispered, meeting Nick's gaze.

Nick nodded.

"Good," Clay said, and set the other light by his side. "This way, we can see what we're doing. Or not doing." He pulled out a strip of condoms and one small tube of lubricant.

An electric jolt of anticipation had Nick jerk his hips up. The heat of Clay's body was above him. He felt the contours of Clay's crack through the sleeping bag, as well as the heat of his heavy cock on Nick's belly.

Clay wiggled on top of him, then bent down and brushed their lips. "Nick," he whimpered. "Please..."

"You want me inside you?" Nick's eyes were wide open, taking in Clay's expression. The darkened eyes, the shortened breath.

"Yes. Last night, on the phone. I've been fantasizing of you fucking me."

"Yeah?" Nick almost gasped for air. "How do you want it?"

"Deep and thorough." Clay wiggled on top of Nick again. "Please."

"I'd love to." The words tumbled out of Nick's mouth fast. He didn't even have to think about it. Clay was a gorgeous specimen of manhood. His ass looked firm and well-muscled under his tights, and his legs were strong from being outdoors. He was kind and considerate, he had a silly sense of humor, and he had trekked all the way up the mountain just to make personally sure Nick didn't have to be stuck here all by himself, in case a rescue effort failed.

He knew that now. Clay could've just dropped off the supplies and skied off to the snowmobile, and gone home.

But he didn't. He was here now.

“Did you have any plans for the New Years?” Nick asked, suddenly realizing he wanted to know more about the man he was about to fuck. Because, if he knew more about him, it wouldn’t be just an empty hook-up in a snow cave. This could be more, so much more. And what were the odds of Nick finding a man he could perhaps even love, a six-hour flight away from home?

Clay rolled off him and slid back into the warmth of the sleeping bag. He felt colder now, and Nick draped himself over him in an effort to warm him up. “So. New Year’s plans, Clay.”

“The usual,” Clay said slowly, as though he were thinking. “My brother throws a good party, and my parents usually come up from Florida. I suspect the weather delayed them this time around, though.” He frowned. “Better safe than sorry.”

“So you’re from Florida?”

“They moved down there. A retirement thing, although they found jobs just to keep busy. I go down there in the off-season, work remotely from my office in their spare bedroom, do some water skiing.”

“And you gave that up just to, what, be here?”

Clay slid his hand under Nick’s neck again, the way he had before. He pulled him closer in, stroking his back. “Every regret in life so far was something I failed to act upon,” he whispered into Nick’s close-cropped hair. His warm, moist breath made its way to Nick’s scalp, his ear, his neck.

Nick shivered.

“I wanted to be with you. Even when I started teaching you how to ski, even before we got that hot chocolate, I knew you were more than the usual tourist, and... Nick. I feel something, Nick. It’s like a connection I can’t explain, and I don’t know whether things will work out between us, but this is something I’d regret.”

“Not trying?” Nick asked, as he molded himself even closer to Clay.



“Yeah. Not trying. So my family can wait. Spending time with you, even here, in a snow cave, that’s like a gift. And you’re okay, and that’s a gift, too.” Nick felt Clay’s moist lips touch that sensitive place under his ear. Nick gasped as electrons fired. That little patch of skin had direct line to his cock, and within seconds, Nick was hard against Clay’s thigh.

Like before. Except he was all awake now, feeling every nuance of their touch. Pressure coming and going, Clay’s cock filling and brushing his knee, Clay sucking on his neck and making him writhe with frustrated pleasure.

“I want you, Clay.” The confession floated on a mere breath of air, and Nick wasn’t sure whether Clay even heard him.

“And I want you,” Clay whispered into his neck. “Will you take me?”

“Yeah. Pants off?”

They struggled out of their long, thermal underwear and the briefs both of them wore underneath. Nick ran his leg up Clay’s again, taking in the sensation of hair catching against hair, skin soft and warm and inviting, legs parting.

Their lips met and their kiss grew deep and long in its languid protraction. There was no rush, no danger of anyone walking in on them. They could take all the time in the world, exploring the little erogenous zones they both had tucked away in secret places.

“Shirts off?” Nick said when they broke for air. “We can dress again later.”

“Okay.” Clay tugged on the bottom of Nick’s shirt. “But we keep them in here, nice and warm.”

In the warm glow of the improvised electric tea-light lanterns, Nick saw Clay slip his long-sleeve shirt over his head. “Oh yeah,” he gasped as he glimpsed the expanse of Clay’s chest. “Gorgeous.”

They spent forever exploring, hands skimming over the planes and ridges, the jutting-out hip, the nipples that were sensitive after only a bit of teasing.

Then Nick boldly ran his hand down Clay's ass. He cupped it and rolled them, ending up under Clay but within reach of his target.

"Spread your legs for me," Nick said, and Clay did. He planted his knees on each side of Nick's ribcage. His cock rubbed Nick's chest, up and down, apparently enjoying the bare patch between his two whorls of dark chest hair.

"Stay still." Nick grabbed his ass, and the rocking ceased. Now it was his turn to play. He ran his fingertips under Clay's ass, just where the buttocks joined the hamstrings. Lightly, teasingly—yes! This was one of those fun, sensitive places, if Clay's groan and jerk was anything to go by. Some of that, then up his crack, slowly, feeling his way.

"Nick," Clay whimpered. "So good."

"Yeah. So good." The puckered skin of Clay's hole came and went under the blind touch of Nick's fingertips. "I wish I could see you," he whispered hoarsely. "Next time I'm gonna lick right here, and here—" Nick brought his fingers to his mouth and wetted them. "Like this."

Clay howled.

"I'll run my tongue around your hole, and I'll stick my tongue inside it. Like this." He pressed, easing his way in a wiggle.

"Oh God!" Clay started to pump his hips again, rubbing his cock against Nick's chest. He was close enough for Nick to smell his musk. He knew Clay must've been sticking halfway out the sleeping bag, but what was another minute? He slithered down and slurped Clay's cockhead inside his mouth, pushing his fingertip up Clay's ass at the same time.

"Niiiiick!" Clay screamed. "Stop, stop or I'll cum!"

Nick stopped moving, and to his surprise, Clay pulled out of his mouth and slithered down his body.

"Baby," he said once they adjusted themselves and their faces were even again. "Baby, just take me. Please."

“But prep!” Nick’s words were ragged, tripping over the trace of salty, bitter musk Clay leaked onto his agile tongue.

“No need. Toys. Before.”

The words lit Nick up with urgent need. “Turn away from me,” he said. “Where are the supplies?”

They fumbled for what seemed forever. Nick rolled a condom on without looking, because really, they needed to stay inside the sleeping bag for warmth. It took a while. He realized Clay had been doing the same thing.

“You?” Nick asked.

“Just so we don’t leave a wet spot,” Clay said over his shoulder. “And so I don’t blow as soon as you breach me.”

Nick growled an incoherent response. His fine motor skills were shot, and getting lube out of the tube turned out to be harder than ever before.

“Please,” Clay whispered. “Nick! I want you in my ass. Your big, fat cock, pushing in. Stretching. Filling.”

Nick found Clay’s hole and lubed it, feeling the ring of muscles pulsate open and shut. “I wanna see your ass next time.” A breathless admission.

“Nick!”

“Yeah. Right here.” Nick grabbed the top of Clay’s hip with one hand, and held his cock in the other, aiming, searching in the dark. The crack. Then...

“Lower.”

He adjusted his course, and there it was, the pulsating asshole that begged to be filled. He pressed against it experimentally.

“Just ram me, baby!”

Nick did, hard.

Clay screamed.

And Nick, who liked it slow, dragged his dick back out, feeling every hot and quivering contour of Clay’s channel.

“More,” Clay gasped, but the way his whole body shivered gave the game away.

“No. I’ll fuck you long and slow.” Nick forced each word out through gritted teeth, trying not to shoot his load just yet. “And when I’m ready, you gorgeous incredible hunk, then I’ll fuck you so hard and fast you’ll cry!”

A bubble of whimpery laughter escaped Clay. “Promises, promises!”

Nick sheathed himself again, slow, agonizingly slow.

Then pulled out fast, leaving just his cockhead inside Clay’s welcoming ass.

He mixed it up, slow and fast, hard and gentle. When Clay reached for his cock, Nick grabbed his wrist and gently twisted it behind his back.

“Nick,” Clay gasped. His whole passage quivered with fast spasms that told Nick he was ready to blow big and hard. He gripped Clay by his hips, not caring that his left hand bore the brunt of Clay’s weight.

Hard.

Hard.

Harder, like Clay wanted.

Liquid heat of silver and blue coruscated up Nick’s back and down his legs. He bowed, clenched Clay’s skin hard, and buried himself so deep his balls slammed into Clay’s hard ass with a shock.

He came silently, biting Clay’s shoulder, trying desperately not to draw blood. Clay’s ass clenched, his whole channel spasmed, and Clay let out a keening wail.

With his last available brain cell, Nick reached around and held Clay’s condom on. His cock throbbled with heat and cum and a rapid, fluttering heartbeat in Nick’s hand. Nick pumped Clay’s cock gently. “Oversensitive?”

“Oh yeah.” Clay laughed. “Oh my God.” he gasped. “This was just fucking incredible.”

Nick's pulse was still way up there and his heart was beating like a hammer against the wall of his chest. He felt the echoes of that heartbeat in his cock, which was still buried in Clay's ass. He started to pull out.

"Hey, wait," Clay said. Nick did.

"I can feel your heartbeat in my ass." Or for his ass. Or for Clay himself, but Nick didn't want to say anything rash in the heat of passion. The wonder of their connection made his chest tighten—he didn't know what to say. So he just bit his lip and slowly, carefully, he disengaged. "You're incredible," he said instead. It wasn't a lie.

## CHAPTER 14

BY THE TIME they woke up again, the tent was pitch black, illuminated only by the yellow glow of two electric tea lights. Clay checked his watch. Eight o'clock.

His stomach rumbled, and he thought back to his little stove and all the food he had packed. Not bad for a New Year's Eve party – and he even had the spiced rum he got from Brian.

Speaking of Brian, he should call him.

Clay snaked his arm out of the sleeping bag, extricated his phone, and turned it on. Three text messages from Brian appeared. He had arrived safely, and twice he inquired about Clay's status.

He dialed the number. It didn't take but two rings for Brian to pick up. "Yo?"

"Yo, bro," Clay said, trying to be reasonably quiet. "We're fine."

"How's the flavor of the week?" Brian sounded amused, and happy. Really happy.

"Drinking already, huh?"

"Dude. We're here with the neighbors. Mom and Dad stayed in Florida this year, the weather's just impossible. They figure they'll make it next year."

"Thanks for the rum," Clay said, aware that his smile carried through his voice. "You're the best."

"That's 'cause I'm the oldest, and don'tcha forget it!" Brian slurred a little. "I figured I'd cut loose since you're staying overnight."

"Yeah." As Clay said that, Nick stirred against him.

“Who’s that?” Nick’s voice carried.

“Oh, is that Nick? Hi, Nick! I’m Brian, Clay’s brother! Are you guys enjoying your cave?”

“Um...” Nick was, apparently, lost for words. Not an uncommon phenomenon for those who encountered Brian’s enthusiasm for the first time.

“I can put this call on video,” Clay offered seriously. “You’ll get to see our tent setup. We just woke up.”

Nick groaned.

“Dude, don’t,” Brian said quickly, back-peddaling. “I don’t need the details, nor the visual. That’s what the Internet is for!”

“Seriously now,” Clay switched topics. “Once we have visibility tomorrow, I’d like to get out of here. This means new skis for Nick. I’ll text you what he has now.”

“Okay, do that.” Brian quit joking around as the conversation turned serious. “I know where you are, and we’ll be there.”

Clay felt Nick poke his side. “My brother,” he whispered.

“Oh yeah, what’s the deal with Nick’s brother?”

“They’re okay, they’re off the mountain. They’re in a motel, his brother lives like half an hour away, but the roads were real bad.”

“Thanks!” Nick called out.

“Sure, anytime. Take care of Clay, he’s a big lummoX.”

“Thanks, bro,” Clay said, feigning exasperation. “My charge is good, I’ll leave my phone on overnight. Let me know when you guys are setting out.”

“Okay, sleepy bear!” Brian ended the call.

“Sleepy bear?” Nick mumbled into his shoulder. “You?”

“Yeah. We won’t see the sun come out. It’s easy to lose track of time when you’re snowed in like this. It’s dark, warm,

kind of isolated...” He put the phone away, wrapped his arm around Nick, and pulled him in. “Plus there are distractions.”

Their lips met in the semi-darkness, soft and sweet. Clay rolled on top of Nick, elbows under him, resting his groin against Nick’s lightly.

Nick wiggled under him. “Mmm. Nice.”

“Yeah?”

“Can’t wait till we get out of here,” Nick said in a breathy voice. “Into civilization, where there’s salad, and grilled fish. And showers. And when I’m ready, I’ll want you to pin me down and fuck the living hell out of me.”

The image of pinning Nick down in his big king-size bed sent heat to Clay’s cock.

“And when you come to Maryland, we’ll hike the hills. Come in the summer, there’s a creek with a good swimming hole. Nice and remote so we can go naked.”

Clay rested more of his weight on Nick. He felt his hot, hard length press through two layers of fabric and right into Nick’s hip. “Never been to Maryland,” he said in a husky voice. “What do you do there?”

“IT security,” Nick said with a gasp. “Big companies.” He thrust up into Clay.

“You?”

“I write apps,” Clay said as he pounced on Nick’s exposed neck. Oh, the skin. So warm, so sweet. He sucked on it, knowing it would leave a hickey. “I can do that from anywhere.”

“So you’re here? In Colorado? I thought you were a skiing instructor.”

Clay smiled into Nick’s hair. “I also work from Florida, go there in the summer. You should come with me.”

Nick spread his legs and wrapped them around Clay’s butt. His heels pressed on his butt cheeks, pulling them apart and



renewing the slight ache that Clay still felt after Nick plowed his ass just hours ago. He moaned.

“Want more?” Nick whispered.

“I want to be inside you,” Clay whispered.

Nick gave him a saucy smile. “You don’t want to wait for a comfortable bed?”

“Not really. This is good.” He kissed him, brushing his lips against Nick’s scruff. “So sexy.”

NICK’S cock rose between their bodies in parallel to his own. The heat of it seared its way through Nick’s thermal underwear, and their combined musky scent wafted toward Nick’s nose, sweet and spicy and full of promise. He knew he’d probably regret it later since it’s been a while, but he opened his mouth anyway. “I want you to fuck me, Clay. Hard.”

“Yeah? You sure? Because you weren’t too sure a while ago.”

If anything, Nick’s cock was trying to burn through the fabric now and he felt his hole open and close in anticipation. “Yeah. Just take it slow. I didn’t get to play with toys in a while.”

Clay’s eyes looked like pools of molten chocolate in the dim light, warm and sweet. “Okay then. Flip over, pants off!”

They switched positions in that awkward back-and forward roll that sleeping bags seemed to encourage.

“Spread your legs, like that. Bend your knee.” Clay coaxed Nick so he was belly down, ass exposed, with one knee up to part his cheeks. Nick’s hard cock stroked the smooth nylon of the sleeping bag, and he didn’t fight the small, delicate thrusts that felt so good. Clay’s warm hand stroked his flank, his hip, his ass.

“You’re so beautiful,” he heard Clay whisper by his ear. Moist breath titillated his ear, and Nick groaned with impatient desire.

“There.” Now thick fingers ran up and down his crack, over his hole. Still dry, teasing the nerve endings of the surrounding skin. Reaching to his balls, cupping them, caressing gently. The sweet torture seemed to go on forever and ever and when Nick thought he would cry tears of frustration, Clay rubbed a dollop of cold, slick lube over his hole.

Nick gasped.

“Sorry,” Clay whispered. “Cold, I know. It’ll pass.” Then, a finger up his ass. All the way up, in one easy push. Clay stroked in and out, then pressed his finger just so –

“Ohh!” Nick gasped and bit his own wrist. “Don’t! Don’t or I’ll cum!”

The stretch and fullness, the gentle, teasing prep that Clay did was sheer torture.

“Fuck me now,” Nick whimpered.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” More fullness, more thrusts against the soft sleeping bag. Nick was torn between what his dick wanted and what his ass craved.

“Clay. I want you so bad you’re killing me!”

“Can’t have that,” Clay said. Sudden emptiness in his ass made Nick feel bereft, but he knew the good stuff was coming. He heard Clay tear the foil of the condom wrapper.

Nick stilled. Waited.

Blunt, wet cockhead pushed against him.

“Oh yeah,” he sighed.

Past his guardian muscle. It stung, and the stretch was hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. His breath stuttered, and Clay froze.

“I’ll wait. Tell me when.” Clay’s voice was tense.

Seconds passed, and the sting of the stretch abated, giving way to delicious fullness.

“More.”

And Clay gave him more. Nick felt the strong grip of Clay's left hand on his left shoulder, and his right hand on his hip. Clay was driving him into the snow floor under the tent with every thrust, hitting that special place inside, making him gasp and see stars.

"I'm close," Clay grunted, plowed into Nick's ass a few more times, and froze. He howled his release, convulsed, and bit Nick's shoulder.

The pain of the bite broke Nick's focus. A starburst of light exploded from his center in a shockwave of sweet energy. He cried out, over and over, saying the same thing as Clay slowly rocked his still-hard cock in and out of his ass.

They stilled.

"Baby," Clay said in a tremulous voice. "Nick. Turn over."

"Can't," Nick rasped. "Sorry... there's a wet spot."

Clay pulled out of him and fumbled around, presumably taking care of the condom. Then he turned Nick over onto his warm and dry side, and settled on top of him. "Baby," he said again. "You screamed my name."

"Did I?" Nick pulled him into a languorous kiss.

"I think I love you," Clay said when they broke for air. "I know it's too early to say anything like that."

Nick kissed the back of his neck. "It's not too early. If it was too early, I wouldn't be feeling it too."

## CHAPTER 15

Nick snuggled Clay so hard, Clay thought his heart would explode. They had made love again. It wasn't just sex, or a random hook-up, or a result of a high-stress survival situation. Although having to rescue Nick might have helped.

Clay woke up relaxed, hungry, and thirsty. They did set up more snow to melt, which meant Clay could prepare the stove again and heat up some pot roast. That, fresh bread, fruit and cheese would keep them sated and warm inside and out.

But to cook, he had to get out. And to get out, he'd have to wake up Nick.

How does one rouse Nick from his post-coital slumber? Clay enjoyed feeling their tangle of limbs and the shared body heat.

His stomach rumbled.

With a sigh, Clay leaned over and kissed Nick's brow. "Hey, wake-up time!"

"Uh."

"Nick, I'm starving! You can nap, but I want to heat up the pot roast."

Nick's eyes popped open, glistening in the dim light of the electric tea lights. "Pot roast?" he croaked.

"Aha! That's how I get your attention, sleepyhead!" Clay leaned over to kiss him again, only to get drawn into a protracted affair that sent blood south again. "We can do a repeat, but after dinner, okay? I haven't been this horny since I was a teenager."

"That's what, ten years ago?" Nick's voice teased, but his eyes were serious.

“I’m thirty-one. You?”

“Twenty-seven.” Nick sighed. “Okay. I guess we better get dressed, since I won’t have you for body heat!”

Clay fished his thermal undershirt and ski tights the bottom of the sleeping bag, pulled them on, and got busy. Soon they sat on top of the sleeping bags and observed the small lump of solid fuel burn with its eerie, barely-blue flame, as the tent filled with the delicious smell of beef and thick gravy.

“Here, we can start on this.” Clay produced what he would call “the civilized basics.”

“You are incredible, truly,” Nick said with a gleam of astonishment. “I sort of expected MRE’s, or more protein bars.”

“They have their use, but I did invite you out to dinner, didn’t I?” Clay huffed. “I have my standards.”

They ate the roast beef straight out of the pot using camping sporks, sharp knives, and bits of bread to sop up the hot gravy. When they were truly full, Clay put the food and stove away, and pulled out a small, aluminum pan of brownies and a hip flask with Brian’s spiced rum.

“Dessert? Really?”

“And toast. Happy New Year!”

“That’s right,” Nick said. “I just plain forgot!” He leaned over and kissed Clay. “Happy New Year!”

Clay knee-walked over to the utility pocket and fished his phone out. “Not just yet, it’s only ten thirty.” He eyed Nick with a speculative gaze. “You know,” he said, “if we dress up and climb out the gopher hole, we’ll be able to see the fireworks in the valley.”

“That means what? Get all geared up and scramble up the tree? In the dark? Just to balance up there and watch?” Nick’s expression was neutral. Not a thrilled yes, but not an outright no, either.

“Come on. When was the last time you got to see fireworks?”

Nick thought. “A few years, I guess. The traffic is always ghastly, little kids end up crying when it gets too loud...”

“See?” Clay crowed. “This is probably your one and only opportunity to enjoy the silence of the snow along with a professional fireworks display!” Clay thought a bit. “That tree, the branches are sprawled under the snow. It’s like a safety net. We don’t really have to stay balanced on the trunk, you know.”

Nick wavered. “Won’t it be dark?”

“I have more of those little tea lights. Trust me, Nick.” He leaned in close, almost touching nose to nose. “Will you trust me?”

Few beats of silence passed before Nick nodded. “I already do.”

HALF an hour later, Nick was dressed in full hunting gear while Clay was getting a few things together. Another thirty minutes, and they were out the snow cave’s back door and seated on a cleared-off section of the tree.

“I promised you lights,” Clay said. He took one of the plastic throwing discs they had used to dig their tunnel wider and their perch on the tree comfortable, and pressed it into the snow so it wouldn’t slide down the hill. He took three electric tea lights, turned them on, and set them into the secure curve of the plastic disc.

“Wow.” Nick had never been outside like this. Not in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, with snow glistening all around him. The little tea lights lit up the snow, making its fine crystals sparkle. “That’s so pretty!”

“Give me the other disc. I have more.” Clay set up another three lights and set them downhill, so they could both see.

“And now what?”

“Now we wait.”

Silence of the night was punctuated by light conversation. Nick loved learning about Clay, about his family and how he had grown up in these parts as a boy. And Clay seemed equally interested in his own crazy family.

“So you’re not out to them?” Clay asked.

“I wasn’t till now. Now that Justin saw us, and the guys know, it’s inevitable for the news to spread.” He glanced at Clay’s frozen expression. Frozen but not inscrutable. This was a man Nick could grow to love. Maybe it was time to own up to who he was, and take some risks. “You know, Clay,” Nick said, drawing his words out in that slow way of his he used when he was measuring his words carefully. “It’s good Justin saw us. It’s time.”

Clay’s mask began to thaw.

“Had he not seen us, we might have never gotten together like this. I should send him and the guys a thank-you card!”

They leaned together. Clay slid his gloved hand up Nick’s neck, his cheek. He caressed his jaw and pulled him in for a soft kiss. “You’d come out for me?”

“I already have,” Nick said. “Now it’s just a matter for everyone getting used to it.”

“I do love you,” Clay blurted out, just as a rocket screamed into the air in the valley and burst into a constellation of sparking red stars in the air.

“Oh, the promised fireworks,” Nick murmured into their kiss. “I love you too. And, is it Happy New Year yet?”

“Uh-huh,” Clay said. “Come lean against me. I have a treat.”

Nick angled himself on the log, eyes fixed on the burst of color in the valley below. “We are higher than the fireworks, Clay,” he said. “This is the first time they aren’t overhead.”

“It’s all a matter of perspective, I guess,” Clay said while struggling with an old, beat-up hip flask. He sipped some. “As good as ever. Here, drink this.”

Nick did. The warmth of rum, clove, and cinnamon inundated his mouth and the sharp bite of alcohol almost took his breath away. “Wow. Your brother makes this?”

“Family recipe.”

“That’s good.” Nick was quiet as the circle of green specks in the sky turned into scintillating, sizzling starburst of gold. “Hey, I just realized,” he said. “Now that I’m out, I really don’t have a reason to be living out East anymore. I can do my work from pretty much anywhere.”

He felt Clay’s arm around his chest squeeze him tighter.



## CHAPTER 16

NICK stirred and woke up to a light filtered through the pale green walls of Clay's tent. A silver light, brighter than the day before. Its cool luminescence was nothing like the warm glow of the impromptu lanterns with wee little batteries that lasted only overnight. The silence of the snow would've been deafening, had not Clay broken it with his gentle snoring.

He smiled and bent down to Clay's lips, and kissed them. "Good morning." Nick pulled away as he said it, just in case Clay flailed in surprise and whacked him by accident. Clay cracked his eyes open. "Morning," he said as he pulled Nick down for a kiss. "This is nice."

"Yeah. There's a lot to say for body heat," Nick commented. "We're snow camping, but naked!"

"A shower would be nice," Clay said. "Although we can just take a snow-bath, seeing as we're naked as it is!"

Nick shuddered. "No way! That's cray-cray. Who does that sort of a thing?"

Clay sat up and unzipped his side of the double sleeping bag. "I do, at the beginning of every year. It's a good way to get things started, y'know? Refreshing and bracing and sort of badass."

"Like mind over body?" Nick knew a lot about that, but he didn't see a need to let on. Surely Clay didn't intend to roll in those deep, dangerous drifts naked?

"Come on, we'll get all refreshed, and then we'll get in the sleeping bag again, if you really want!" Clay was standing as straight as the tent allowed, meaning he had to hunch over. "Do it with me, Nick! Just this once, and if you don't like it, you don't have to ever do it again!"

It was kind of badass. They had a warm tent and warm sleeping bags. Dry clothes. Why would a bit of snow matter? “I will if you make coffee afterward.”

“Deal.”

They tiptoed out of the tent buck naked and barefoot. “Ahh,” Clay said with a sigh of wonder. “Look! The hole in the ceiling’s bigger than yesterday!”

And it was. Between the weight of the extra snow and the wind, the edges had crumbled, and a solid pile of snow had fallen to the floor of the snow cave.

Nick shifted his weight from foot to foot. The tamped-down snow made his feet cold. “So what do we do?” he prodded, trying to get this crazy ordeal done and over with.

“This!” Clay belly-flopped into the snow pile. He yelled, he hollered, he laughed as he flipped onto his back and made a snow-angel. Then he knelt and rubbed his body with handfuls of clean snow. His face, then arm pits and arms. His groin came next.

“You’re nuts,” Nick said.

“But I’m clean, and I won’t get sick for the rest of the year!” Clay stood up, shook the snow out of his hair and brushed it off his sparse body hair. “Come on, tough guy!”

If Clay was so happy doing it, it had to be good. Even if Nick was never going to do it again, he at least wanted to know what the draw was, what it felt like.

He took the leap.

Frosty snow enveloped his skin. Drove air out of his lungs.

He shouted.

But Clay had done it. And... and Nick could get out. This wasn’t like falling in the first time and hanging upside down. No, he was in control now, and if he wanted to stay, he could.

Or not. “It’s fucking freezing!” he yelled as he flipped over like Clay had, and then stood up, still knee deep in freezing

powder. And no, he wasn't going to scrub his balls and ass with snow. "You're fucking crazy!"

Nick jumped out, and Clay grabbed his hand. "Tent! Quick!"

"Damn straight!"

Nick stepped onto the sleeping bags and made space for Clay, who had to turn around to zip the door shut. Clay then grabbed his thermal shirt, landed on his knees behind Nick, and rubbed the snowmelt off his back and shoulders.

"Just a little clean-up before we dive under the covers," he murmured.

Just one minute, and they were burrowed with the zippers shut all the way up, huddling and exchanging a moist, somewhat cold hug.

"So how are you doing?" Despite his smile, there was a trace of concern in Clay's voice.

Nick took stock of his body, his mind, and his spirit. It wasn't bad, actually. Crazy? Sure. Nutso? Absolutely. Alive? Hell yeah, and more so than when he set out on this trip. "Pretty good," he admitted. "You aren't one of them adrenaline junkies who'll smash his skull open on the slopes, are you?"

A guilty look crept into Clay's eyes. "Well..."

"I don't want to lose you to some crazy stunt, now that I've found you."

"No?" Clay's eyes brightened, it was as though sunshine came out again.

"No." Nick pulled him in and kissed his stubbly jaw. "If you ever do an asshole thing like that, I'll hunt you down and kill you myself!"

"Truer words of love were never spoken." Deadpan.

"Asshole."

Clay propped himself up on his elbow, letting cool air into the sleeping bag. "I could make a crass innuendo right now,

but I won't."

Nick was still hunting for a retort when Clay's phone broke into a jaunty melody. Clay reached for it and swiped the screen on.

A video of a man somewhat older and heavier than Clay showed up. "Rise and shine! We're about to come and get you guys, so be packed. There's brunch waiting at my house!"

"Brian," Clay said with a smile. "Happy New Year! Did you jump?"

"No, you jackass, I didn't jump. Can't go naked with guests in the house."

"Guests?" Nick detected eagerness in Clay's voice.

"Justin and his two friends. They made their way over, and that's a whole another adventure. Too bad your phone was turned off last night, I tried to keep you up to date."

"You must've called while we were out, watching the fireworks," Clay said, as though their situation was entirely normal.

"Is Justin okay?" Nick cut in, and Clay stretched his arm out of the sleeping bag so that both of their faces were in the picture.

"Hi, you must be Nick. He's fine, they just saw reason and came in to join the party." Brian frowned. "Why do you two have wet hair? Are you still in bed?"

"We jumped in the snow," Clay said. "Now we're just sharing body heat."

Nick saw the video feed jump around. Justin's face popped in. "Nick, are you okay?"

The concern was real. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'll tell all when I see you later, okay?"

Justin's eyes grew big. "You two are naked? Oh my God. The gay shit's for real?"

Nick felt Clay next to him stiffen. "It's for real. And Clay was kind enough to keep me company last night." Nick leaned

over and pecked Clay cheek. “And now he’ll be so kind and make me coffee, since he made me jump into the snow naked!”

“Oh hell, Nick! If you two are tough enough to do that, then I guess you’re okay after all.” Justin’s eyes narrowed speculatively. “How much do you bet I can do the same thing?”

“A cup of coffee?” Nick and Clay’s laughter reverberated within the small tent and mingled with the several laughing voices on the other side of their connection. Justin turned away for a moment, then turned back. “Brian says we’ll be up there in an hour and a half, maybe two. So pack up, you two snow fairies!”

“Love you too, jackass,” Nick said with a smile.

Clay ended the call, put the phone in the tent pocket, and turned to Nick. “We can be dressed and packed within twenty minutes. A coffee will take ten. So...” He smiled and raised his eyebrows.

“So we have an hour to blow.” Nick grinned. “And we’re clean now, and it’s warm in here...”

Clay unzipped his side, making it open all the way down. He flipped around, and as he buried his face in Nick’s groin, Nick gasped in both pleasure and anticipation. He reached for Clay and pulled his hips closer to his face, adjusting until they were both snugly aligned and more or less covered up.

He licked Clay’s cock and sucked it in just as Clay did the same to his. The heat on his cold, shriveled cock was so intense and so good, he knew he’d grow big and hard, and just as he’d thought that, he felt Clay’s cock swell and pulse with life on his own tongue.

Him and Clay, in Maryland. In Colorado, in Florida. They were both freelancers. They could both work from anywhere.

Cold air made Nick gasp as Clay pulled off him. “Oh, one more thing. The first one to cum is a rotten egg!”

# THE END

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Brad Taylor's been left at the altar. He'd take the honeymoon alone, but his non-refundable tickets are for a newlyweds-only cruise. Brad needs a spouse to get on that ship, so he asks his best man (and best friend) for a quickie Vegas wedding. Now they both can have the time of their lives in the Caribbean.

Best man Cameron Hines has never been able to say no to Brad's hare-brained schemes, but this one takes the cake! The truth is, Cameron would be happy to be Brad's husband - for a lifetime. But pining after a straight man is the road to heartbreak. Better to go play in the sun with his best friend and

resign himself to ending the charade once they return to their regularly scheduled lives.

Brad knows he's not gay, but he's not entirely straight either. Playing the happy honeymooning couple with another man is the perfect opportunity for some sexual experimentation. It's just a shipboard fling—it won't wreck a friendship as strong as theirs. Or will it?

Can the salt sea air and island cruise magic transform this sham marriage into the type of happily-ever-after that comes with knowing that “Today I married my best friend”?

***Honeymoon Hoax** is a standalone gay romance with a HEA ending.*

Get your copy of ***Honeymoon Hoax*** here!

([http://www.amazon.com/Honeymoon-Hoax-Devyn-Morgan-ebook/dp/B01B6KXT5A/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid](http://www.amazon.com/Honeymoon-Hoax-Devyn-Morgan-ebook/dp/B01B6KXT5A/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid))

*“Perhaps it was the Christmas tree twinkling or the snow swirling, but there was magic in the air.”*

**Best friends Darcy and Mason** have known each other since a pen pal project in elementary school. They attend the same university, and it was a no-brainer to live together. Yet, Mason crossed the country to choose this school over a more prestigious grad program. He always told Darcy it was because of the extracurricular opportunities. Darcy wonders: did Mason move for *him*? They cuddle now and then... but Darcy's always assumed his best friend was straight.

Darcy isn't looking forward to a lonely Christmas. His parents won a Christmas cruise they've been looking forward to forever, but it's for two people. Meanwhile, Mason's flying thousands of miles across the country on Christmas Eve to be with his family. That leaves him alone for ten days. The news of a freak storm sweeping in off the Atlantic shouldn't excite Darcy as much as it does...

When the planes are grounded, the roads are a mess, and the airports close down, Darcy and Mason are snowed in together. Now, with the magic of Christmas in the air, they can

connect on another level. But can their relationship as best friends withstand the drastic change as sparks fly?

*Dream by the Fire* is a standalone story with a HEA ending.

Get your copy of *Dream by the Fire* here!

([http://www.amazon.com/Dream-Fire-Devyn-Morgan-ebook/dp/B019S6BH0S/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid](http://www.amazon.com/Dream-Fire-Devyn-Morgan-ebook/dp/B019S6BH0S/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid))

Caught up in living the glamorous, big city life, novelist Jason Corlin didn't mean to neglect his family. He's only been away a few years, but his grandfather has...changed. Sure, he's a little forgetful, but an old folks' home? For the rock of his childhood? Not if Jason can help it. How hard can it be to look after a senior? Surely Richie's exaggerating every aspect of the old man's care.

Caring for a dementia patient like Gramps is more than even health provider Richie Miller can manage at home. If the elderly gent needs 'round the clock supervision at Serenity Gardens, that's where Richie will be too. Gramps is a handful for professionally trained staff, let alone a grandson who waltzes back home, convinced he can turn back time.

If Richie wasn't so stubborn about Gramps's needs, they'd be dating, not fighting. Or—if Jason wasn't delusional about his grandfather's abilities, they might find a future.

Reality checks for Jason devastate Richie: what if the caregiver needs to be cared for?

*TAKING CARE* is a standalone gay romance with an HEA.

Get your copy of *Taking Care* here!

([http://www.amazon.com/Taking-Care-Devyn-Morgan-ebook/dp/B016XD4RH4/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid](http://www.amazon.com/Taking-Care-Devyn-Morgan-ebook/dp/B016XD4RH4/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid))