

Survival Instinct

Roxy Harte



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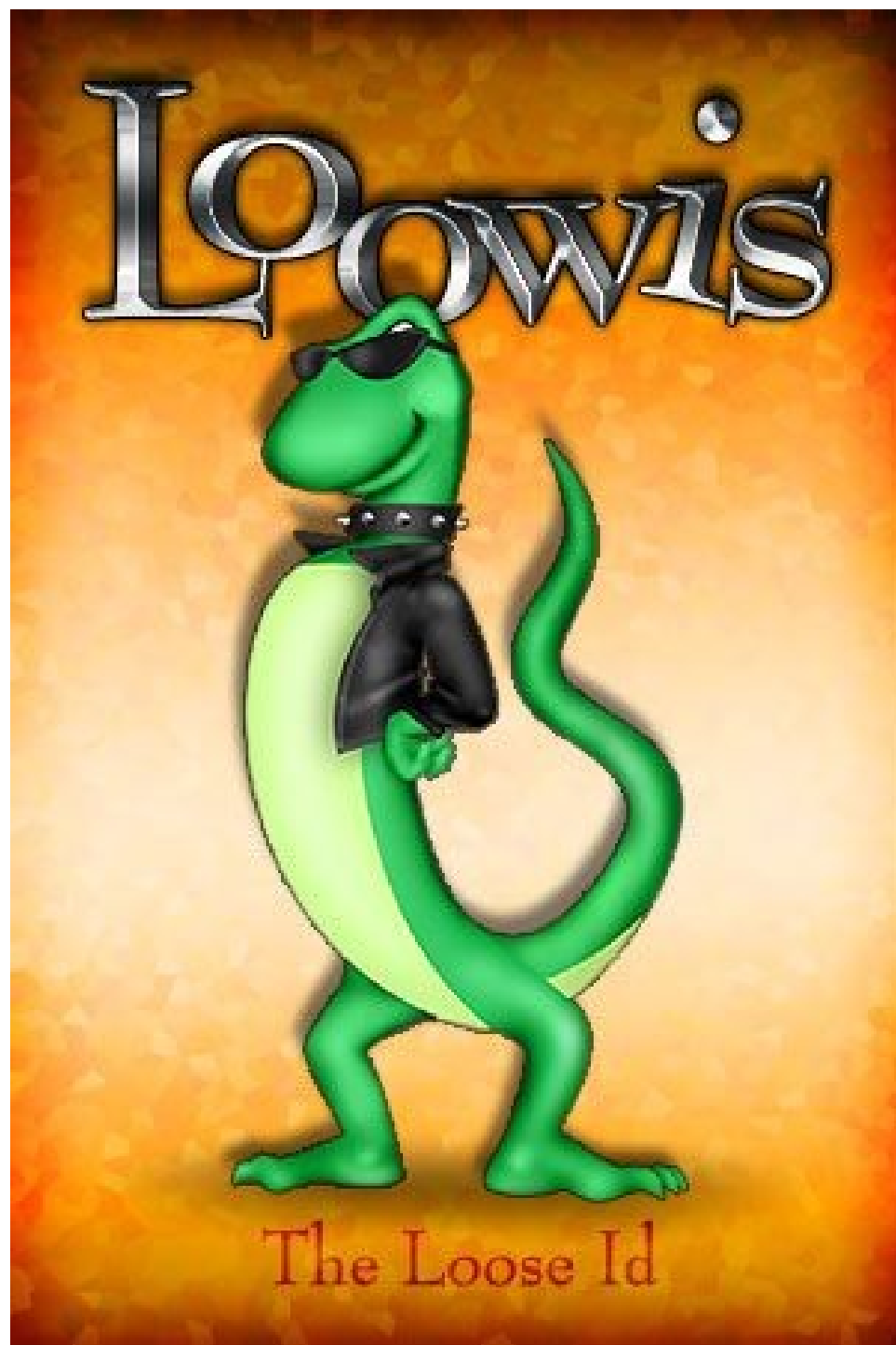
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Chapter One

Tobias Red Hawk flicked his flashlight over the man's ashen face. Seeing his color, Hawk realized how serious the situation was. "Nobody's dying on my watch, pretty boy, so just you hang in there."

He'd asked two of the town's deputies to ride with him. Todd was only a step behind him as he leaned into the vehicle. With a light smack to both cheeks, Hawk tried to wake the driver, coaxing only a soft sigh from his perfectly shaped cupid lips. *God, I should not be noticing how fucking hot he is.*

"Come on, dude, wake up." He smacked him again. This time the man moaned.

Elijah walked around to the other side of the car and pulled the registration packet out of the glove box. "Hey Toby, car's registered to a Brian Van Zant."

Hawk shifted the man and tried to lift him from the Jeep, but it was an awkward lift. It finally dawned on him the man was clutching tightly a canvas bag, stuffed beneath his sweatshirt. Not nearly as heavy as he'd first thought. Hawk tried to pull the bag away.

The man opened his eyes, and Hawk's breath caught. Forget pretty boy; the man was the most handsome man he'd ever seen. Wild panic filled the man's eyes as he clutched the cumbersome bag closer.

"Brian? Is that your name? We're here to help you. You've been in an accident. Where do you hurt?"

"N-not i-injured. J-just c-cold."

"I need to get you inside the warm vehicle. Do you understand?" Hawk tried again to pull the bag out of his way to make picking him up easier. To Todd he asked, "Can you grab the cervical collar?"

"I-I'm not injured. Just cold." Brian stuttered, but he managed to hold the bag tighter as he frantically insisted, "C-can't leave behind. T-they'll f-f-freeze. B-be ruined."

Hawk sensed his frustration and tried to comfort him. "It's okay. Whatever it is isn't nearly as important as you."

"P-p-paint!"

Hawk thought maybe he'd misheard. The man mumbled, his eyes fluttering shut once more. Someone not trained to spot the symptoms at a glance might have misunderstood his mumbled words as drunkenness. Hawk knew better. Hypothermia. "Fine, give me the bag. I'll see that it comes with you. But we gotta get you warm—now."

Todd returned with the cervical collar and a backboard just as the patient lost consciousness. Hawk knew he was out of time and hoisted him into a fireman's carry. He hurried through the knee-high snow to the Rover, ignoring Todd's grumbles. "Gee, man, thanks for getting the collar and board from the Rover."

"Todd. Just shut up and drive."

As Todd and Elijah climbed into the front, Hawk dropped his patient into the backseat and settled in next to him. He was glad he'd asked the deputies to ride with him. He'd need help getting off the mountain.

Hawk took in the young man's attire: T-shirt and shorts. Fool. Hawk blinked, feeling the air leave his lungs as he took in the full length of the man's legs. *Damn. I really need a date.* "Get us off this mountain, Todd."

Hawk pressed his fingers against his patient's throat, checking his pulse. He worked on autopilot, pulling the Res-Q-Air unit and hot packs from his backpack, then moved immediately to check the man's vitals. He stayed detached as he determined that Brian's core temperature was only ninety-two point nine degrees Fahrenheit, his carotid pulse forty but strong and regular, his pupils constricted but equal and reactive to light. He sighed, noting the man's respiration at eight and shallow. This one was out of time. He wished he had a medevac closer, but as fast as the storm was moving, he would have been hard-pressed to get one to fly out. Without wasting any more time in thought, he applied the heat packs and started administering the warm, moist lifesaving air from the Res-Q-Air unit.

* * *

"I woke up this morning with the feeling something exciting was going to happen today."

"Ah, Joan, that's just your arthritis."

“No, Cole, Joan's got it right. Road's closed on account of some fool tourist flipping his truck on the mountain.”

“Is he dead, Paul? I heard he's dead.”

“Don't know, Leroy. Could be.”

The gossiping crowd was gathered inside Sarah's Diner when the alarm on her weather radio sounded. By the time everyone quieted down enough to hear the announcement, Sheriff Dodd had already appeared in the doorway. “Time to head home, folks. The streets are officially closing in thirty minutes. We've got us a major blizzard heading our way.” Tipping his hat back, he set his sights on Sarah. “And don't you even think about clearing a single plate. I'm here to see you home.”

“Now, Sheriff, don't you go bossin' me. I've seen my share of bad weather, and whether I'm stuck at home or stuck here makes nary a difference to me. Besides, I got Toby tucking that poor tourist in the bed upstairs.” Sarah fussed, clearing dishes as she passed empty tables. The room had emptied in a matter of minutes, and a pile of bills lay neatly stacked next to the cash register, everyone having paid on the honor system as they'd fled for the warm safety of their own homes. A blizzard warning on the mountain was always taken seriously when minutes and simple precautions could make the difference between life and death.

Sarah didn't give the money a second thought, knowing every penny owed would be accounted for. There were still some advantages left to small-town living. It was the meddlesome sheriff who was going to give her fits.

“Elijah said he looked bad,” Sheriff Dodd stated, stepping into her path, then taking the plates out of her hands. “You see him?”

“To be honest, I didn't get that close of a look,” Sarah muttered, trying her best to pass her plump figure between the sheriff and the counter.

“You don't say. Elijah said he was young.”

Sarah shrugged. “All I know is he wasn't wearing a wedding band.”

“Not married?”

Suddenly, Sarah caught the twinkle in Sheriff Malcolm Dodd's eye. “Do not go running your mouth. I don't need every single woman from three counties breaking down my door for a look at the new guy.”

“It would be good for business.”

“Having Tobias hold down my counter is good for business too.”

Dodd snorted. “But if the women get a sniff of fresh meat—willing and able—if you get my drift.”

Sarah slapped her hand over his mouth. “I told you my suspicions in confidence.”

“I’m not going to ever say a word about *that* to anyone. It’s just with this blizzard moving in it’ll be days before that Jeep comes off that mountain, maybe weeks. And then there will be parts to be ordered—that is, if it can even be salvaged. No, Sarah, it isn’t likely that young man is going anywhere anytime soon. Maybe just enough time in close proximity with a stranger for Toby to fess up to his true feelings.”

Sarah looked at the ceiling, remembering the grimace of fear etched into Toby’s features as he’d carried the young man up the stairs. She lowered her voice to a whisper even though they were alone. “You’re forgetting something, Sheriff. It takes two. What if he isn’t gay?”

The sheriff grinned, making Sarah look harder at his face. “What do you know?”

He chuckled. “Todd said the bumper of that boy’s Jeep was so plastered with gay-rights stickers, you’d be hard-pressed to find the metal underneath.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s gay. Lots of straight people support gay rights.”

The old man shrugged. “Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t. Time will tell either way.”

She stuttered. “I-I’m not even certain Tobias is or isn’t. Ohhh. I shouldn’t have ever said anything.”

The sheriff pulled her to his chest. “You worry too much, old woman. Why don’t I see you home safe?”

Sarah pushed him away, flustered, still worried she’d betrayed Tobias’s trust. Not all her neighbors were as open-minded as Malcolm, and she certainly didn’t want to cause the stranger trouble he hadn’t come looking for. “I think I should stay here. That man was still unconscious. What if Toby needs some help?”

“Seems to me a mountain man like Tobias Red Hawk would know plenty about curing hypothermia, Sarah, and the fact that they are alone would just make it easier for him to take care of that stranger *properly*.”

“Sheriff!”

“Now, there you go, Sarah. You and that overactive imagination of yours. I swear for an old woman, you do have a filthy mind.” Sheriff Dodd swatted her bottom. “That’s one of the many reasons I love you.”

Blushing, Sarah grabbed her coat off a hook and bustled toward the door. “You going to get me home before that blizzard hits, Sheriff? Or are you going to keep yakking until we’re all trapped in this diner?”

* * *

Hawk checked the vital signs of the unconscious man on the bed. He had seen his share of hypothermic tourists and mountain-climbing weekenders. Hawk had never seen one so underclad and unprepared for the weather. He tried to stay detached as he cut off the man’s T-shirt and shorts, but as the fabric rent, revealing perfect six-pack abs and amazing glutes, he sucked in a deep breath. The man wasn’t overmuscled, merely perfectly made.

“So, you bike? Swim?” He didn’t expect the unconscious man to answer. It made him feel better to have a conversation while he worked, even if it was one-sided.

He snickered, seeing the back piece of a black silk thong. Not because the man was wearing a thong, but because in the top center a small, hot pink bow decorated the fabric. “I’m guessing not one hundred percent straight.”

He attached the face mask of a Res-Q-Air unit and applied heat packs at all the main artery points. Then all Hawk could do was wait.

He pulled up a small chair and sat.

The world around him became silent and still as time became measured in five-minute increments, every core-temperature reading a step closer to life or death. Ten minutes into the treatment, the man’s back arched with convulsions, each lasting thirty to forty seconds. Hawk counted each second, praying that the next core-temperature reading would put him out of the danger range.

Ten minutes passed, and his veins were still too cold to accept the IV fluid. Hawk popped a fresh instant-heat pack and placed it directly over his forearm. He layered on more blankets and played the waiting game. After five minutes he pulled the pack from the man’s arm and found a willing vein.

After another twenty minutes, Brian's core temperature finally evened out at ninety-five, but Hawk knew better than to breathe a sigh of relief yet. It was still early in the game; core temperature after-drop was still a life-threatening concern.

And he still hadn't come around.

Shadow whined and paced in front of the bedroom door.

"Lay!" Hawk knew without looking that the dog had obeyed immediately. A side advantage was that his sternly voiced command had also awakened the patient. He struggled to be free of the blankets, and a trembling hand reached to pull away the face mask. He mumbled, "Hurts."

"Easy, now." Hawk knew the man would awaken in pain. His whole body would feel like it was on fire and there wasn't a damn thing Hawk could do about that except reassure him.

Brian's eyes grew wider, not recognizing his surroundings. "Where the fuck am I?"

Hawk tensed, not wanting to restrain the man. He outweighed him and was confident in his abilities to do so, but it always helped to have a cooperative patient. Hawk tried to put himself in the man's shoes, seeing himself through his eyes. He looked rough. He'd been on the trail for almost a week. Ponytail. Unshaved. Faded flannel shirt, buckskin pants, and lace-up hiking boots. Brian probably thought he'd been kidnapped by a backwoods lunatic.

"Shh." Hawk comforted the man, patting his shoulder as he pushed him back into the pillows. "I'm a park ranger, and right now I'm trying to get you warm. When you were rescued you were half frozen."

"I remember. I hit a tree. So goddamn cold. Tried to walk out but didn't get far. I went back to the Jeep and just couldn't get warm."

"I need you to relax and tell me when you start to feel a tingling sensation in your hands and feet."

The man fell back against his pillow, and Hawk guessed he was too exhausted and dizzy to do much else.

"All right now?" Hawk asked softly. Brian's teeth chattered in response, and Hawk smiled for the first time in two hours.

“Chattering is a good start; shivering would be better. You have hypothermia,” he explained. “Getting you warmed back up to ninety-eight point six is gonna be an all-night process.”

* * *

Brian woke up, remembering snow. A whiteout. Something had darted across the road. Something big. He realized two things at once: his head was pounding, and a mask was covering his nose and mouth. He knew he wasn't in a hospital. The room felt homey, except for the mounted moose head over the fireplace, and that was just *strange*. He was in someone's bedroom and he wasn't alone. A man kept taking his pulse while muttering to himself.

Brian tried in vain to get the man's attention, but either the man wasn't listening or he wasn't paying attention to him as he took his vitals. The room swam before him and then went dark.

He whipped the steering wheel, trying not to hit the brown blur that had bolted in front of his Jeep. On the snow- and ice-covered road, the Jeep went into an immediate, uncontrollable slide, spinning in a full circle before making sudden, abrupt impact with a tree.

He'd never seen a storm claim the land so quickly. One minute there had been bright sun, blue skies, and the next, churning gray clouds and falling snow. He stepped out of the vehicle and sank into ankle-deep snow. “Shit, shit, shit!”

Snort.

With a painful grimace, he turned his head to see what it was. The red flare of taillights revealed a moose. Not a deer, but a very large angry-looking moose. The animal's nostrils flared, and he emitted another loud snort. Brian's concern over possible whiplash was quickly replaced with full-fledged panic, making him jump back into the Jeep. Hand on the gear shift, foot on the clutch, he had every intention of getting the hell out of Dodge, or at the very least off the side of a rabid-animal-infested mountain. The Jeep didn't budge.

Moo-oo.

Brian's head snapped to attention. The moose mooed? Well, maybe not rabid. Cautiously, he rolled down the window and said, “Shoo!”

The moose stepped closer.

"No! Shoo shoo. Go away."

The moose blinked at him. Feeling around in his cup holder for his cell phone, he remembered belatedly he'd tossed it out of the car. That was brilliant.

"Nice moose." He timidly cracked open the door and stepped slowly out, prepared to jump back in if the animal made any move to charge. His flip-flops promptly sank back into the snow. He hopped from foot to foot. "Ow! Cold cold cold. Nice moosey-moose."

Circling the vehicle, keeping solid steel between him and the moose, he quickly discovered why the Jeep wasn't moving. The right front tire sat at an unusual angle. Getting on his bare knees in the snow to wiggle his head under the frame was not the highlight of his day. Darkness was falling fast around him, but it wasn't so dark he couldn't determine he'd broken the axle. He was worse than stuck.

Pulling himself from the snow, he brushed his legs fiercely. "This is all your fault."

He glared over the hood at the moose.

Moo-oo. Snort.

"Don't you growl at me, Mister. I don't like men very much these days." God, what a magnificent animal. Not expecting an answer, he asked, "I don't suppose you could point me to the nearest town?"

Beyond the moose lay miles and miles of pines. Brian turned, facing what he assumed was west. Miles and miles of snowcapped granite. He turned back to the animal.

The moose dipped his snout into the snow before flicking a fair amount into the air.

"Oh, give it up. Yes, it's snowing and you almost got hit by a big yellow chunk of metal, but really, I'm having a worse day—forget day—I am having a worse year than you."

The moose bellowed and rolled his eyes. Brian read, I doubt that.

"No, seriously. I have dibs on worst possible everything."

The moose offered him what appeared to be a shrug before he turned and disappeared into the forest.

"Well, be that way!" he shouted after him, but a distant howl scared him into not saying another word. Wolves? Shivering, mostly from cold but also from fright, he scurried back into

the Jeep. He had no intention of becoming dog food. What now? He could freeze to death and die on this mountain and no one knew he was here.

Brian woke with a jolt, realizing his toes hurt.

And his fingers.

“Is it frostbite?” he asked, panicking and pulling the mask from his face. He didn't want to lose his fingers or toes. Well, he didn't want to lose his fingers, especially because he'd no longer be able to wield a paintbrush, but he was also kind of attached to his toes. He thought he had sexy toes for a guy. That was one reason he wore flip-flops most of the year. “I can't lose my fingers. Save my fingers.”

The man lifted a finger to his lips and met his gaze. Brian shook his head with confusion when he got lost in the depth of his rescuer's dark brown eyes and discovered as long as he focused on the flecks of gold in the deeper pool of brown, the painful fire wrapping his body disappeared.

“A few more minutes and I'll take the mask off to understand what you're saying, but right now the warm, moist air filling your lungs is the most important thing.”

Brian nodded, mesmerized by the man's deep, lyrical voice, jumping when a big dog nosed in under the palm of his hand with a loud sniff.

“This is Shadow.” The man scruffed the fur around the big dog's neck. “Do you think you'll be all right with her for a minute while I run down to the kitchen to get you something warm to drink?”

Brian nodded.

“Shadow.” Hawk said the dog's name sternly when the dog kept pushing her nose under Brian's hand. The big animal sat, her nose still under Brian's hand. “I'm sorry; it isn't like her to disobey. Shadow, go lay down!”

Brian sighed, suddenly exhausted. He lifted the mask off his face, realizing he could feel his fingers again and that they no longer tingled with the pins-and-needles sensation. “No. She's fine.”

“I'll leave you two to get acquainted then. Don't take off that air mask; don't mess with your IV tube, and don't even think about standing up. I'll get you some tea. Agreed?”

Brian wasn't sure he liked the man's bossy tone, but he nodded his agreement to the terms. Not that he believed he could manage standing. He knew better. It was only after the man left the room that he realized he was naked beneath the sheets. Well, almost naked. The black silk thong he was wearing didn't exactly increase his comfort level.

A hundred worst-case scenarios filtered through his brain. It didn't help that a small voice in his head kept reminding him he wasn't in a hospital and the man who had just left the room was no doctor. The fact that he was utterly gorgeous didn't go unnoticed but left him feeling no better. Handsome men could be even more dangerous than homely ones, and downright deadly to an unsuspecting heart. Brian panicked. He ripped off the face mask and jerked out the intravenous needle.

The man hadn't seemed dangerous, but the truth was he could be a serial killer.

A voice in his head tried to reason with him. *If he is a serial killer, would he take the time to get you warm first?*

As he threw his legs over the side of the bed, the dog pushed her muzzle into his lap and whined. Brian clutched his head and blinked rapidly. The room was spinning. He put his hand on the dog's head to scratch behind her ears and ended up using the furry skull to hold his balance. "Good doggie. Don't move."

Standing, or trying to, he discovered his legs weren't quite working yet and managed to fall facedown onto the wood floor. Shadow whined louder before letting out a loud bark. "Oh hell."

"Whoa, cowboy." His caretaker pushed in through the door, carrying two steaming mugs. Brian looked up at him from his prone position on the floor, wondering if he'd already been drugged. He sure as hell felt weird.

The man lowered the two mugs to a nightstand beside the bed and patted his dog on the head. "Good girl."

He walked over to Brian, his boots inches away from his face. "You, on the other hand, don't obey very well."

Squatting down, he put his hands under Brian's shoulders and hefted him to his feet. He joked, "You look a lot lighter than you really are."

"Sorry," Brian apologized, but then for the life of him couldn't remember what for.

His rescuer got him tucked back into bed. “Hypothermia is a serious condition. I don't want to scare you, but there can be life-threatening complications, and I need you to keep your ass in bed. You don't want to die, do you?”

Brian's fear fled. Knowing this man didn't want him dead was a huge relief. The man lifted a mug. “Tea?”

“Who are you?”

“Tobias Red Hawk, mountain rescue ranger, Glacier National Park.”

“How did I end up in your bed—naked?”

“I stripped you. The heat packs work better next to bare skin, and that isn't my bed. Belongs to Sarah, the woman who owns the diner downstairs. She rents the upper rooms out sometimes, and tonight this was the closest, fastest shelter I could provide.”

“If hypothermia is so serious, shouldn't I be in a hospital or something?” Brian grumbled, savoring the first few swallows of warm tea that slid down his throat, but then as his taste buds woke up, he gagged. “Christ, what is this? It's horrible!”

“Mostly herbs.”

“And?”

“Some things you just don't want to know. So, what should I call you?”

Taking in the man standing over him, he decided he really didn't believe the man planned to poison him. “My name's—” He stumbled over his name, not wanting to reveal too much, finally saying, “Brian. Just Brian.”

“Well, Just Brian, you probably should be in a hospital, but that's not exactly possible at the moment. What's the last thing you remember?”

“S-snow.”

Hawk smiled, pulling the blankets back up to Brian's chin. He sat down on the edge of the bed beside him before saying, “I'm actually glad to see you shivering. It's a good sign. Keep drinking, and I'll try to fill in the blanks. Where are you from?”

“Ohio. Cincinnati.”

“So you've been on the road a few days?”

Brian nodded. “Drove straight through.”

Hawk was surprised. "Straight through? That's got to be close to twenty-five hours on the road. Maybe you fell asleep behind the wheel and hit the tree."

"No. I remember. It was a moose..." Brian knew he hadn't fallen asleep, but he might be sleeping now, because only a dream could be responsible for the man staring into his eyes. God, he was gorgeous. His long, dark hair was held back in a ponytail, but even so, it reached almost to his waist. High cheekbones, dark eyes, bronze skin. He was a walking, talking wet dream. He wore a flannel shirt tucked into buckskin pants that molded to his hips and thighs, making it impossible for Brian to concentrate on what he was trying to remember.

The man reached out and ruffled his hair. "Sleep. We can figure out what happened when you wake up."

Chapter Two

If Hawk ever experienced a worst worst-case scenario in his life, he couldn't remember it. One moment his patient was sleeping peacefully, and the next he was convulsing. Hawk knew without even taking a reading he'd experienced core-temperature after-drop, a condition that was often fatal even under the best medical conditions. And he definitely didn't have prime conditions.

Hawk was determined to keep him alive. In the half hour they'd been talking, he had proven to be smart, funny, and full of spunk. He liked him. He wasn't going to let him die.

Hawk lunged for the Res-Q-Air unit. Seeing the dial read LOW BATTERY, he rigged up the AC adapter with a trembling hand and put the face mask over Brian's nose and mouth. He grabbed his pack and rummaged. No heat packs were left. He'd already used them all. "Damn!"

I don't have time for this. He won't survive this.

A brilliant flash of white filled the room, followed almost immediately by a crack of thunder. The lights went out.

"No. No. No." From past experience Hawk knew the town's transformer had been hit. He waited for the backup generator, but it didn't kick on.

"Shit!" He ran his hand through his hair. Thinking quick, he ran through the dark room by memory and into the bathroom. Blindly he filled the tub with tepid water. While the tub filled, he ran back to the bedroom for Brian. A strobe of lightning filled the room, and Hawk saw that his eyes were open wide and large. Thunder rumbled through the Bitterroot Valley with ghostly echoes.

"Brandon?"

"No, it's Hawk."

"Why, Brandon? Why? How could you do that to me?"

“Hang on, pretty boy. Just hang on.” Hawk lifted Brian into his arms and ran through the dark room with him clutched to his chest. *Shit!* “Stay with me, buddy.” As carefully as he could, he laid Brian into the tub of water and said, “I’m sorry; I’ve gotta do this. This is gonna hurt.”

Brian fought and clawed to get away from the water even before he was submerged.

Hawk closed his ears and heart to the man's screams. He only had one goal—to save Brian's life. To him the water felt barely lukewarm, but he knew to his patient it felt like he was being fed into raging flames.

Hawk stayed strong against his struggles, wondering how such a squirrely guy could be so damn strong. It finally took him climbing into the tub with Brian and straddling him to keep the man submerged.

Brian's sobs racked his entire body. Hawk buried his face against his neck, saying over and over again, “It's okay. It's okay.”

“P-please l-let m-me out-t. P-p-pleeease.”

“Oh, man, you're killing me,” Hawk whispered softly, knowing he wouldn't hear. It was so much easier when the hospital took over and he could put it in the hands of the doctors. This man's life rested solely on his shoulders, and he couldn't afford to lose his head now.

Another bolt of lightning struck, and the room shook.

“Shit!” The lightning had likely struck many of the rods rising from the roofline. He risked both their lives staying in the tub of water.

Brian shivered and chattered beneath him. Taking it as a good sign, he sloshed from the tub. His clothing streamed a pool of water across the scarred wood floor. Brian lay shivering and wide-eyed against the back of the tub, too weak to move. In four quick moves Hawk was out of his wet clothing: shirt pulled over his head without unbuttoning, pants dropped, boots and socks ripped off. A second later Brian was back in his arms and carried back to the bed where Hawk rubbed his skin hard, drying and warming him at the same time.

Brian's shivering and curses reassured him. Finally he was dry enough to tuck under the covers. Hawk followed him in, wrapping as much of Brian's body with his as he possibly could. As an afterthought he lifted the edge of the pile of blankets and called, “Shadow, here, now.”

* * *

“Nothing can really end a marriage like finding out your husband is sleeping with your identical twin. Nothing quite puts a damper on perfectly good divorce negotiations like death.”

Brian jotted his latest thoughts into his notebook before dropping it into his sweatpants pocket. He sat bleary-eyed in front of the TV, intent on the movie that had just started. His youngest sibling, Jake, kid number twelve in the line-up, effectively blocked the TV long enough to royally piss him off when he entered the room.

“You been up all night?” Jake mumbled between bites of doughnut as he flopped on the couch beside him.

“I don't know. I guess. Couldn't sleep.” Brian sighed. “Christ, Jake, you're getting powdered sugar everywhere!”

“Do you have to watch this movie again?”

Brian ignored his sarcasm, brushed crumbs off the couch, and pulled the pillow he had been leaning on out of crumb range. “Damn it, Jake. Get that thing away from me!”

Brian pulled his eyes away from the movie he'd memorized word for word over the last few months, The Last of the Mohicans, long enough to pummel Jake with the pillow. In retaliation Jake blew powdered sugar off the next bite of doughnut, efficiently covering his brother's bare foot. Brian cursed and wiped.

“Go to bed, Brian. You look like hell,” Jake insisted.

“Gee, thanks.”

“It's the truth,” his father volunteered when he poked his head in to see what the commotion was about. With an aggravated sigh Brian pushed the Power button on the remote, deciding it would be easier to watch television when the room was empty again.

His father added, “You have to pull yourself together. Why don't you get dressed and go into town today? I'm sure the natural history museum would love to have their favorite curator back.”

“I've already talked to the museum.”

“Great! When do you start? Work will make you feel better, take your mind off your problems.”

“I don't have a job, Dad. I refused their offer.” Brian sighed, not meeting his dad's eyes.

"You did what?"

This was the moment Brian had dreaded. He knew it was tough enough on his parents, raising one son who refused to grow up. Having another grown son move back in was definitely cramping their retirement. Brian tried for sympathy. "They hired Jonathon Wells as museum director." He didn't think he had to say more than that. Ex-boyfriends could never be acceptable bosses. Period.

"Whatever happened between you two, it's time to get over it."

"You know I can't work with Jonathon! It's too complicated." He certainly wasn't ready to jump back into a relationship with Jonathon, and the phone call they'd shared had been laden with innuendo.

"If he was good enough to sleep with once—" Jake said sarcastically.

"Jake," their father said warningly.

Jake didn't let it go. "At least he didn't have an affair with one of your brothers. Who cares if he had sex with everyone else in town who was willing?" Jake smacked his own ass and scrunched his face in ecstasy.

"Screw you, Jake." Brian flipped his brother off, then realizing his dad was still watching, sniffed indignantly. "I just lost my husband. I don't think seeing Jonathon in any capacity is appropriate right now."

"Give it up, Brian. No one wants a martyr in the family, and you have been prima drama queen for months," Jake grumbled. "Jonathon Wells wouldn't take you back if you were the last man on earth."

"Excuse me?" Brian asked shrilly, wondering why his dad wasn't jumping in to rescue him yet.

"It's getting old."

Brian fought back tears.

"Look, you've been hogging the sofa for almost two months. Get out of your pj's and do something. I, for one, am sick of looking at you." Jake left the sofa in a whirl of flannel robe and powdered sugar as he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Seconds later

Brian heard the telltale thump of the basketball on pavement and the distinctive ring of the ball piercing the metal hoop.

Brian skittered to the open window, shouting out, "Why? Because I took your throne, Mr. Unemployment? Do I bow to you now or after I slap you silly, King Can't Keep a Job?"

Flannel swirling, Jake managed to shoot, flip him off, and do a bare-kneed victory dance all in one motion. Brian flipped him back.

"Brian, that's enough. This just isn't working." His dad broke the silence. "You've lived on your own too long. Maybe coming back home wasn't such a good idea. Maybe you should move back out on your own."

The dream house on the river had sold to someone else, and he'd leased the condo to a friend during a moment of grief-filled fog. He sure wasn't moving into an apartment. Wait. What? Brian stood absolutely still and drop-jawed silent. His father stood in the middle of the room, looking dead serious.

"You want me to move out?"

His father looked sad and didn't answer, instead walking away.

Brian hurried to the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. "You're throwing me out?"

"Martin?" Brian's mom interrupted with a steel calm, finally making an appearance. Brian knew she'd heard every word; it was impossible not to in the house of his childhood with paper-thin walls. Finally, someone on my side. Go Mom!

His father whispered harshly, "It will hurt me as much as it will you, Ellen. But look at him! If we don't do something drastic, I don't know what's going to happen. I'm worried about the boy."

"We agreed to wait until after Friday."

Brian swiveled his head, eyes narrowing. Friday? So this had been discussed and it had been agreed to wait—until after Friday? Why not just say "we don't want to put a damper on Alex and Alexandra's thirtieth birthday celebration"? Sure, the first set of twins takes precedence over the second set of twins' drama. "Jake gets to stay, and I have to go? I'm not even believing this!"

“Jake has never lived on his own, dear. He doesn't have any experience in what it takes to be on his own, not like you. He's not domestic. When he finds a wife—”

So, because I'm gay, I'm domestic? Well, I am, but that's not the point. “Wife?” Brian interrupted his mother. “Who would have him? He's twenty-eight years old, didn't finish college, can't keep a job... You're admitting he's an incompetent loser!”

“Brian, now that's enough!” his father said.

“No, Dad, not nearly. Just because I moved out—”

“Oh, tell me I'm missing the 'It's-time-for-you-to-go' speech.” Jake chose that moment to come back inside, voicing his opinion with a laugh.

“Shut up, Jake!” his mother said crankily.

“He was privy to the fact that you were going to ask me to move?” Brian couldn't believe it.

“Look, Brian, it was bad enough with you two fighting all the time growing up. Now—it's just impossible,” Brian's mom tried to explain. “You and Jake just can't be under the same roof.”

“I'll try harder,” Brian begged. “Really.”

“No, dear, move on. It's time for you to face life again.” His mother smiled slowly. “You need to see what you're capable of in this lifetime. Maybe you could do some fieldwork. I'm sure archaeologists are needed all over the world.”

All over the world. Right. Did his mother just say that?

Brian felt a moment's pang of envy as Jake and his father split the newspaper Jake had carried in with him, both sitting down at the kitchen table. He'd never had that kind of relationship with his father. Sure, his father had taught him to hike and rappel and shoot—all manly skills—but he'd just never been tough enough to suit him. He watched as his father signaled to his mother it was time to serve them their breakfast and remembered exactly why they'd never bonded. If rude and inconsiderate was what it took to be a real man, he wasn't interested.

Jake made a face and mouthed, Tough love, Bri. Get over it or—

Brian's heart stalled in his chest, remembering the roughhousing of their youth. They'd all played hard, and when one of them got hurt, the others would tease, "Get over it or die." Was that the bottom line here?

Jake stood and dropped the paper, his face stricken as he realized too late what he'd said, or almost had. "I'm sorry, man."

Brian held up his hand, silencing him. "Too late."

* * *

Brian woke up to liquid-chocolate pools, flecked gold. Believing he was dreaming, he snuggled deeper into the heavy mound of blankets, expecting to stay snared in the dream he'd been having. Instead he found himself in a furry tangle of arms and legs. *Fur?*

Bolting upright he found himself nose to nose with a not-very-friendly-looking canine. Dog? Wolf? He couldn't really say. The animal let out a low warning growl. *Oh shit! Oh shit. Oh shit.*

"Shadow. Down."

The dog hopped off the bed and walked to a corner of the room. With a heavy thump and a disgruntled-sounding sigh, she lay down and curled into a ball. Brian breathed easier once he felt less menaced and turned his attention to the one who'd issued the command. He didn't expect the person to be a naked man in bed with him.

"Good morning, Just Brian."

Startled, he looked into the honeyed brown eyes of his dreams. *Oh God, I didn't dream him.* He was in bed with a stranger. A man he'd place as Native American by his features: long black hair, and a necklace made of bits of what looked like bone. That couldn't be. He was definitely still dreaming.

The man didn't move. He was reclined against his pillow, the sheets low on his waist, and from what he could see of the man—bare, deep bronze skin, well-defined chest bereft of any body hair, and a deep V of abdominal muscles that led—He'd bet money he was naked. "Okay, I have positively watched *The Last of the Mohicans* one too many times. I really need to wake up from this dream."

“Wrong tribe, wrong time zone.” He chuckled. “And you're awake. Finally. It's been a long couple of days.”

“Days?”

“Yes.” Hawk sat up and lifted his wrist to take his pulse. That didn't make Brian feel any better. He jerked his hand away.

“Sorry. Habit developed over the last few days. I should have asked. May I take your pulse?”

“My pulse is fine.” Brian had no doubt about that. His heart was pumping like a racehorse at the derby. *God, the man is hot.*

Hawk shrugged. “As you wish, Just Brian.”

“Why did you call me that?” But even as he asked it, the conversation they'd shared returned to his mind. He'd only asked his name, but with the question had come the memories. His brother, Brandon. His husband, Michael.

“Is there another name you prefer?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Just Brian is fine.”

“Good. *Just Brian* it is then. My name is Tobias Red Hawk. Call me Hawk.”

Flustered, Brian barely made note of the introduction. “No, I meant you can just call me— Brian.”

“Two nights ago your spirit called to you, and you renamed yourself. Here you are among people who understand your need to be Just Brian, even if it is only for a time.”

Brian looked at the man like he was insane. He should be panicked, terrified. He was in bed with a stranger. *Holy fuck.* He wanted to plaster his body next to his and lick him from head to toe. And that was just for starters. He had to focus on what Hawk was saying. “Do I need to call your wife? Let someone know where you are?”

Brian jerked. Wife? What? “No.”

Heart pounding, he didn't want to give the guy a coronary, but he only had one personality. Bold. Gay. And outspoken. “I'm not married. Not anymore. My *husband* died.”

He watched the hellaciously sexy Indian's mouth open and close before he managed to say, “Your husband?”

Guess he'd never met a gay man who was actually married. Obviously, Montana wasn't as evolved as other parts of the nation.

"Is there anyone else I can call for you?"

Brian caught his lip between his teeth and shook his head. "What day is it?"

"Friday."

"Shit."

"Is that a problem?"

Brian nodded. "I'm missing my brother and sister's surprise birthday celebration, and I didn't even call them."

"You can use my cell if you like." Hawk reached over and lifted his cell from the nightstand. Brian reached for it but then withdrew his hand without taking it. Swallowing hard, he said, "Maybe later."

Hawk laid the phone back on the table. "Whenever you're ready."

Brian decided he'd made him uncomfortable enough. "I should get dressed. I should go."

Hawk tossed his hair off his shoulder. "Relax. Don't get in too big a hurry. The storm dumped a blizzard in our laps. Whiteout conditions the last two days. No let up."

"Oh." Brian grew more worried. "My Jeep?"

"Still stuck on the mountain where we left it."

Brian scratched his neck, determined to not totally freak out. "Okay. So. If you can just tell me where my clothes are?"

"I cut them off of you." Hawk chuckled, and the sound was sensual. "Not that what you arrived here wearing would be suitable."

Brian shifted nervously under the blankets, realizing he was growing hard. He gasped when his bare knee bumped into Hawk's bare knee and his erection stood up at full attention.

"Why did you cut off my clothes?" He tried to not envision the scene and failed miserably, an erotic movie playing in his head of how the scene could have gone down if he'd been wide awake and Hawk had been willing.

Something flashed in the depth of his eyes as the man answered, "I was keeping you alive."

Brian asked, "Bathroom?"

Hawk pointed, leaving Brian in a quandary. He needed to piss; he really needed to be alone to think. And to do either he would have to walk across the room naked. Hawk was going to see his erection plain as day. *Oh hell.* "Could you close your eyes?"

That made the too-sexy-for-words Indian laugh at him. Out loud. Rolling laughter. "I have seen you naked." And if that reminder wasn't bad enough, he added, "Every inch of you."

When Brian jerked his head around to give him a piece of his mind about being terribly unprofessional, he saw Hawk had already closed his eyes as asked. So he stayed silent, racing to the bathroom. Watching his urine stream into the toilet, he worried about what to do. He was stranded in a strange place with an incredibly sexy man. Probably a straight-as-an-arrow man. Not that he wanted to be involved with any man ever again. Just sex. No relationships. He would never ever allow his heart to ever feel anything ever again.

"God, is he straight? Would you really be that cruel? Putting me in bed with the sexiest man I've seen west of the Mississippi? Really? And an Indian too? Like the whole Native American fetish thing wasn't a tragic enough gift to bestow on me along with the homosexual thing?"

On the other side of the door, Hawk cleared his throat. "I can hear you."

"Oh shit!" Brian shook the final drops of piss from his penis into the toilet and pushed his forehead against the wall. He banged his head a couple of times just because. Mortified, he opened the door a crack and peeked out. "You heard everything?"

The man nodded, standing. His erection pointed straight at Brian.

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

Hawk pulled on a flannel shirt. "I'm going to make some pancakes. Think you can eat?"

Lost in the golden, perfect lines of Hawk's body, it took him a second to respond. "I could eat." *Every. Inch. Of. You.*

Chapter Three

“Hope you're hungry.”

He jumped, not realizing Hawk had entered the room. He'd been sitting and looking through the room's small window at swirling snow. He'd wrapped himself in a blanket but still felt incredibly naked. And embarrassed. He couldn't believe he'd said all that out loud. *Hell.*

The room filled with the scent of crisp bacon, melted butter, and maple syrup. His mouth watered. Turning his head to see Hawk carrying a tray with two stacks of pancakes, he forgot all about food when he again got lost in the solid make of the man. He'd pulled on a pair of jeans along with the flannel shirt, but he hadn't buttoned the shirt at all. God, the man knew how to do *sexy*. Swallowing hard, he said, “I am.”

His answer earned him a slow, easy smile. “That's good. *Just Brian.*”

He liked the way the man said his name like that—thick, sensual—making him feel like he was a mystery to be discovered. He closed his eyes against the brilliance of him. No man had a right to be that gorgeous. “Tell me again why you're calling me Just Brian?”

He heard a shift of furniture. Hawk had settled the tray on a small side table before pulling a second chair forward. He sat and smiled, making Brian's heart react in triple time. He felt a sudden urge to flee, knowing his heart couldn't take many more smiles like that one before it caved. By the time he was handed a plate of cakes, a fork, and a cup of coffee, he'd almost forgotten his question when Hawk spoke. “Your soul demanded a new name.” He was close, closer than any man since—God, he wouldn't think about that—so close his warm breath fell against Brian's cheek. His lips were so close, Brian fought the urge to close his eyes and tilt his head in invitation even though his scent, warm and manly, invited just that. He forced himself to listen. “When you crossed the mountain onto sacred land, the Great Spirit spoke to your soul, giving you permission to begin again as a new being. A part of you, silent until now, spoke, renaming you—Just Brian. It happens here sometimes. Many people give themselves new names

during times of life-changing events. It is an Indian custom. For now, you need to cling to your new name and let it heal that part of you in need.”

Brian blinked. “I have definitely watched that movie too many damn times. I'm delirious right now, right?”

“Sorry. Sometimes I lapse from Tobias, park ranger, into Hawk, medicine man.”

“Medicine man?” Brian chuckled. “Now you're messing with me.”

Hawk shrugged and sat, then picked up his own plate of hotcakes. He drizzled maple syrup over the pancakes and dived in. Between bites he explained further. “Medicine-man-in-training. My grandfather is the tribe's current shaman, and it is a role I will assume someday. I've been groomed for the task since the day I was born, but I am in no hurry.”

“Wow. I don't know what to say to that.” Brian took a bite of pancakes. “Oh my God. These are amazing.”

“Indian fetish, huh?”

Brian choked, not believing he'd asked. He hid behind his cup of coffee, swallowing several gulps before saying, “I can't complain. It steered my studies. I became an archeologist.”

“Like Indiana Jones, huh?”

Brian chuckled, realizing the man was joking with him, following his own movie comparison. Stereotype. “Touché. Not quite Indiana Jones. No one has ever tried to kill me over treasure. I do have a really great field jacket though.”

“Ah. For me it was the brown fedora. Do you have one of those?”

Brian laughed out loud. “As a matter of fact.” He watched Hawk blush and wondered what he was thinking. He was glad the man couldn't read his mind, though, because he couldn't stop imagining what it would be like to rip off that flannel shirt.

They both grew quiet, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Quite the contrary. Lost in their own thoughts, they ate, unable to take their eyes off each other. Hawk excused himself to go retrieve the coffeepot, explaining, “I should have just brought it with me. I'll be right back.”

* * *

Hawk scanned the dark night sky. Before him lay the granite peaks of the Bitterroot Mountains, behind him the ridges of the Sapphires. The storm was directly overhead, and

visibility on the new-moon night was zero, but he didn't have to see the crags and spires of the mountains to know they rose around him like sentries.

The man upstairs had been a momentary distraction from what he was supposed to have been doing, which was to investigate the weird lights his grandfather had seen on the mountain earlier. Now that his patient was out of the woods, Hawk looked at the mountain with interest.

The town had already labeled his grandfather as senile, so it was no surprise to anyone when he started ranting about lights in the sky over the mountain. Pretty soon UFO jokes were standard diner fare.

Hawk sighed, and his breath was visible in the cold night air. He knew he needed to get up the mountain and investigate; his grandfather wasn't crazy. He kicked himself for procrastinating so long on something that was obviously important to the old guy and acknowledged he was going to have to face the reason he was purposely avoiding that particular ridgeline. Erik Dahlstrom. Last summer's big mistake, a foreign tourist with white-blond hair and ice blue eyes. His mind drifted, remembering Erik asking, *"What's this trail?"*

"Lolo," he'd answered.

"I like the way that word rolls off your tongue. Lolo."

It had been obvious the man was flirting with him, and Hawk had been having a hard time denying he was turned on by the Swedish man's accent as well. Erik had hired him as a summer guide to show him around the surrounding mountains. A foreign filmmaker, he'd been doing research for a Lewis and Clark documentary.

"Say it again," Erik had teased.

"Lolo."

He hadn't expected the man to duck nearer, but he couldn't say the kiss was a complete surprise either. The kiss was short but promised more if Hawk was interested, and he definitely had been. Few on the mountain knew he was gay, so most of his hook-ups had been fairly quick and dirty, far enough away from his real life so as to not bring unwanted attention. His one attempt at marriage a dozen years ago had been disastrous, and the divorce that had followed only a few months later a salvation. Meeting Erik, a man so far from his own home, seemed serendipitous.

They'd walked for hours under a blazing sun, a constant ascent. Hawk had pointed out archeological and historical points of interest. Erik had taken notes and drawn sketches. Upon reaching the high, flat clearing, Erik had pulled off his shirt, displaying his pale, hairless chest. The metal piercings in his nipples had glinted in the sun as he'd spread his shirt on the ground before sitting and then lying back. He'd patted the ground next to him. "*Rest awhile, Mr. Park Ranger.*"

"*Only if you start calling me by my name,*" he'd answered.

The Swede had smiled at him, and Hawk had read challenge in his expression. In answer, he sat. Ankles crossed, he wrapped his arms around his knees. He'd been wound tight, feeling nervous. He'd had so many excuses why what he was thinking was such a really bad idea, his main objection being that while he was in uniform, he was also on the clock, and he shouldn't even be thinking about sex, let alone giving his client a mental blowjob. There was no harm in sitting, *right?* He sat.

"*See? Much better.*"

Hawk had looked at him, allowing their gazes to collide, and seeing his relaxed indifference, allowed himself to lighten up. He'd watched the bright summer sky, trying to ignore the pounding of his heart by watching an eagle floating on a thermal updraft.

"*Lose the hat,*" Erik had commanded.

Hawk had looked over at him and the vision of the man lying in the grass, shirt off, pants unbuttoned, had made his mouth go dry. His brain couldn't conjure a single excuse, so he'd taken off his park ranger hat and set it on the ground next to him.

"*That's better,*" Erik had said just before he pulled Hawk down on top of him and kissed him deeply, his tongue filling his mouth and his fingers wrapping into his ponytail.

Hawk had felt Erik's erection pressing into his thigh and given himself a hundred reasons he should not be kissing a client, but then Erik hadn't been shy about expressing his needs and had quickly unzipped Hawk's pants, finding him equally ready, and Hawk had forgotten every single *shouldn't*.

The German Shepherd woofed under her breath. His K-9 companion was solid black except for her tan underbelly, making her almost invisible in the dark. "I know, girl. I want to get back to that ridge too."

The dog circled and went to the back door.

“You want to go check on the stranger?”

Woof.

“All right.” Hawk opened the door, and Shadow raced inside and back up the stairs.

Hawk shook his head and turned his attention back to the mountain. Snow was still falling and showing no signs of letting up.

By the time Hawk returned to the bedroom, he found Brian sitting in the window seat, staring out the window, and Shadow had staked ownership on the man's lap.

“You know that dog is too big to be treating it like a baby. She's a work animal, not a lap dog.”

He hated admitting he was jealous of the dog. It wasn't a proud moment. He was certain if he had met Brian under any other circumstances, he doubted Brian would be affecting him the way he was affecting him. He blamed it on Erik's abrupt departure.

“Shadow. Here.” He saw Brian's back stiffen, but he continued to stare out the window. The dog didn't come to him. *What the hell?*

Brian buried his face in Shadow's neck, and Hawk realized he was crying. He sat down beside him but didn't say anything. He let the dog comfort the man and fought the instinct to wrap him in his arms, to kiss him and make promises that whatever was wrong he could help him resolve. Or kiss him long enough to take his mind off his problems. He had to remain professional. Detached. Definitely not sexual.

Looking through the frosted panes at blowing snow, he knew they were going to be stuck for several days. Alone. Together. His dick strained at the front of his jeans, painful after only a few hours' temptation. Why now? Why this man? Sure, it had been a while, but with his life, his lifestyle, it was always a long while between men. He had better self-control than this.

“The snow...” Brian said, wiping the tears off his face. “It reminded me of someone.”

“Brandon?” Hawk asked softly.

“How did you know?” Brian gasped, turning around so quickly he almost toppled himself and the dog off the narrow ledge seat. His eyes sparkled. The dog hopped off his lap and paced nervously.

Hawk was fascinated by the myriad emotions that played over Brian's face. "You must have called out to him a hundred times over the last two days. It was an easy guess. Your husband?"

"No. Brandon was my twin brother, and the asshole I found out was sleeping with my husband. I would never call out for Brandon's help."

Hawk's jaw dropped. He blinked. "I'm sorry." The ramification hit him hard. His twin brother and his husband? "I don't know what to say."

"They were both bastards. What's there to say?"

Hawk ignored the comment and patted his leg so Shadow would lie down. He pointed out the window. "Look there."

An elk walked through the center of town like he owned the place. In some places the snow drifted chest level on him and he waded through it with great difficulty; in others it was barely ankle deep. And still the forceful wind sent eddies of snow swirling into ever-deeper drifts.

"My God. It's the same animal that ran me off the road."

"I doubt it's the same one. There are hundreds of elk in these parts."

"I thought it was a moose." Brian sniffed. "Brandon died too. He was in the car with my husband."

Hawk kept his eyes trained outside on the moose.

"I discovered their affair, and we were in the process of separating when they both died."

Hawk lifted an eyebrow and met Brian's gaze. "Was this recent?"

"Three months ago."

Not nearly enough time for the pain to be easing. Hawk stayed silent and moved only enough to refill their coffee mugs. Handing him a mug he cautioned, "Careful. It's hot."

Brian accepted the cup and buried his nose in the rising steam. "I thought the betrayal was as bad as it could get."

"It's hard losing someone you love. You lost the two most important people in your life," Hawk said.

"I lost them both long before the accident," Brian said sadly.

Hawk thought his sorrow made him seem so fragile, and he wanted no more than to kiss the furrowed lines from his brow. He gripped his coffee mug harder. “Perhaps, but the accident prevented you from having closure.”

Brain shuddered, whispering, “You're right about that; there was no closure. Only anger and disappointment. I hated Brandon. I hated Michael too, but mostly Brandon, for allowing it to happen. He was my brother. My twin. God. How sick is that? My husband had an affair with a carbon copy of me.”

Hell, what could he say to that? How had he ever believed that lending a sympathetic ear would make Brian feel better?

“They both called me moments before they died. I didn't answer. I let their calls go to voicemail. They were both begging me to answer the phone. They were both telling me how much they loved me and how they'd never meant to hurt me. I don't want to live if I'm going to hurt this badly.”

Without thinking, Hawk grabbed his shoulders and jerked him hard. “Don't say that!”

Brian's eyes widened, fearfully. “I don't plan on offing myself. I just want the pain to go away.”

“Grief takes time,” Hawk told him, not knowing what else to say. He realized his fingers were still digging into Brian's arms, but his brain was slow to respond to the command to let him go. The fact of the matter was he didn't want to let him go. He pulled Brian to him and kissed him, roughly. A voice of reason screamed somewhere in his head. He shouldn't be doing this. It was unprofessional. It was unethical. *Sex is not the answer to grief!*

Brian responded with an equal intensity, his lips pressing hard, harder, until the kiss was painful. Hawk fell back against the icy window, allowing Brian to take the lead. The chill cooled his passion, but only enough to think clearly. *I want this man now* warred with *I shouldn't be allowing this to happen*.

Brian unbuttoned Hawk's flannel shirt and his mouth followed his hands, licking, kissing, biting as he revealed bare skin. Hawk tensed under the onslaught. Brian didn't slow down as he reached the waistband of his pants, unbuttoning, unzipping.

“Wait.” It took every ounce of his willpower to say that single word as Brian loosened the fabric enough for his erection to spring free. Brian's hand had already closed around the base, and his mouth was descending. He swallowed hard as Brian met his gaze.

“You don't want this?”

Hawk gasped at the despair in Brian's eyes, understanding without knowing any more of his story than he did that Brian was feeling rejected. Again. He shook his head slowly. “I want this very much.”

Brian smiled lazily. “Then why wait?”

“You might not be feeling what you think you're feeling. I rescued you, and—”

Brian laughed. He slid his hand slowly up Hawk's hard length. “You think because I'm stranded here with you in the middle of a blizzard, and because you happened to be the one who saved my life, I may be blinded by gratitude?”

Hawk nodded.

Brian's grin widened. “Or I might be taking advantage of the situation because we are snowed in and, at least for the next few hours, I have you at my mercy.”

This was a side of the man he hadn't expected. Hawk was more intrigued than ever. He managed to stutter, “V-validation. You've been hurt by two men, and I'm—”

“A walking wet dream.” Brian interrupted. “And yes, you're right. I definitely want to feel sexy and desirable again, but that isn't the reason I'm going to give you a blowjob.”

Hawk inhaled sharply as Brian's mouth went down over the head of his penis. He closed his eyes and felt his eyes roll back in his head with ecstasy as Brian swirled his tongue around the sharp ridge of his glans. “It isn't?”

Brian's mouth vibrated over his flesh as he laughed. He cupped Hawk's balls and squeezed softly as he separated his mouth from Hawk's dick long enough to ask, “Did I mention I have a Native American fetish? I don't want to offend you, but I'm having a really hard time being in the same room with you. Do you know how hot you are?”

Hawk stiffened. He didn't like being seen as a stereotype, but then Brian's mouth went down over him again, hard, fast, and deep. The back of his throat squeezed around his length as he swallowed him. *Holy fuck*. He closed his eyes and decided he could be offended later.

Brian worked him hard, sucking deep, withdrawing only long enough to lick the ridge on the underside from bottom to top before plunging his length into the cavern of his throat. “Oh, God, Just Brian. Oh God.”

He felt his load rising.

“I'm going to come!”

Brian didn't release him; he just kept sucking.

Hawk tried to hold back, but his semen spewed down the man's throat. “Oh oh.” He growled and shook. “Damn.”

It took several minutes to recover enough to open his eyes, and when he did he was embarrassed. Things had moved so swiftly. He hadn't expected Brian to give him a blowjob; he hadn't even suggested a condom. Not that there were any in the room. Maybe Brian had some in his bag? He could have asked. He should have asked.

No. He shouldn't have allowed it to happen in the first place. *Shit.*

Brian pushed himself up and, as he stood, he allowed the sheet he'd wrapped around his body to fall. Hawk didn't have to be a mind reader to know the man was hoping for reciprocation. He admitted, “I've never been fluid bonded with anyone. I shouldn't have—”

“Oh.” Brian joined him on the narrow window seat. “I assumed you're clean.”

“Clean?”

“Disease-free,” Brian clarified.

“Oh. Yes. Disease-free. But you wouldn't have known that.”

Brian shrugged. “A moment ago you got really pissed when you thought I might be contemplating suicide. Call me crazy, but I think you would have stopped me if you were afraid you'd give me something. Right?”

Hawk nodded. “Don't assume with anyone else. That's very dangerous.”

Brian reached over and stroked his cheek. “You're absolutely right, and it seems very dense of me to admit I didn't even think about it. I guess I was with the same man so long, I forgot what it was like to have casual sex.”

Hawk didn't know what to say, so he leaned forward and kissed him. Slower and more gently than their first kiss. He worked hard to silence the million thoughts rushing through his

mind. All the reasons this was such a bad idea and how none of them had to do with being professional and everything to do with the fact he saw Brian as vulnerable, easily taken advantage of, easily hurt. Against all reason, he whispered against Brian's cheek, "I'd really like to fuck you. If that's okay?"

Chapter Four

Brian trembled, his bravado quickly fading now that he was on the receiving end. Hawk had taken the lead, and his kisses were smoother than satin, well practiced, perfect. His nervousness wasn't because of fear, but doubt. It had been a long time since he'd been intimate with anyone except Michael. He felt like he was walking a tightrope as Hawk led him back to the bed.

He sat on the edge, and Hawk leaned over him, kissing him. "Don't move."

Brian watched him leave the room. He heard rummaging but didn't know where or why. He shook harder, a dozen thoughts going through his head. Mainly memories of Michael, but also doubts. If he couldn't survive this one man, how would he ever survive the dozens he hoped to seduce in Seattle? He laughed at himself. He was such a loser.

I am no seducer.

That blowjob wasn't so bad, though...

Shit. Now what?

He wrung his hands and waited, his erection not so erect anymore. Eventually Hawk returned. It seemed like forever, it was probably closer to seconds. He held up a tube in explanation. "Lube. Had to rummage through the trauma kit."

Lube. Yeah. Hawk's answer didn't decrease his nervousness.

"I'm more prepared at home." He smiled and revealed he also carried two condom foils. "I did find these though."

Brian nodded and forced himself to breathe regularly. Hawk sat down on the bed next to him and cupped his face. "Where were we?" Hawk claimed Brian's lips, making Brian forget all about breathing.

Hawk maneuvered Brian into the center of the bed and pushed him back against the pillows. With a swipe of his hand he tossed excess sheets and blankets out of the way. To Brian the room seemed suddenly too warm, even though the fire in the fireplace was burning low. Hawk commanded, "Relax," but Brian felt there wasn't a chance in hell of that happening.

"Did you change your mind?" Hawk asked, softly. "It's okay if you did."

Brian let out the breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding and shook his head. *Wait! That was my out. Why didn't I say I changed my mind?*

Hawk smiled and lowered his head, kissing Brian softly. "Good. I think we're both going to enjoy this. A lot."

Brian swallowed. Maybe that was what he was afraid of. He had been enjoying Hawk's kisses. It seemed wrong. His husband only dead a few months, and already he was moving on. He was finding pleasure in another man's arms. He held back a sob, trying to not completely freak out.

"I want you, Just Brian," he said softly, sensually, seeming to restrain feral need. Brian's insides quaked in response. Meeting Hawk's gaze, he felt the color rise in his cheeks. Hawk assured him. "This is going to be okay. Trust me?"

His hand caressed Brian's cheek as he held his gaze. Brian somehow knew he was giving him time to back out if he wanted to, but he didn't want to. He really, really didn't want to. He reached up and stroked Hawk's chest, the first active participation since coming to the bed. His skin was warm, silken, and he thought he could feel the fast thud of Hawk's heart beneath his fingertips. Was it possible he was nervous too?

"I'll take the lead?" Hawk asked, making Brian doubt what he'd assumed was a given. Was he asking for permission?

Yes. Yes. Fuck me senseless. Make me forget. Everything. Hawk's breath felt warm over his skin, making every nerve more aware. "That would probably be best."

Hawk moved farther onto the bed and as he moved closer, Brian became conscious of his thudding heart, his aching skin. He wanted to be touched, stroked, kissed. Everywhere. But he didn't verbally direct; he couldn't ask. This man wasn't Michael. Instead he waited to see what Hawk did.

Hawk stretched out beside Brian, smoothing his hand over his pecs and abs. His hand slid lower to find him only semierect. Embarrassed, Brian flushed, but the fact didn't seem to slow Hawk's exploration. He moved his hand lower, cupping Brian's balls. Stroking them, squeezing them. His fingers slid lower, teasing the flat, smooth skin of his perineum. Brian's heart sped up and his penis stiffened, definitely interested.

Hawk's hand moved to his thigh, stroking, rubbing his fingers through the fine blond hair covering his thighs. "I like this. You're hairier than I am, Just Brian."

Raw need shot up Brian's spine and his erection jerked, needy, ready.

Hawk chuckled, his hand returning to Brian's shaft. He squeezed his stiff length. "Don't get in a hurry. I want you to enjoy this."

Brian squirmed, his hips bucking. "I don't want to wait."

"Are you always in such a hurry?"

"Not always," Brian admitted. "I just really want to get to the main event."

A glint of darkness flickered through Hawk's brown eyes. "Afraid you're going to chicken out if we go slow?"

"No," he lied.

"Good. I really like foreplay. I really want to find out what does it for you. What makes your blood boil. What it will take to make you scream like a girl."

Brian forgot how to breathe again. His asshole clenched. "Are you trying to frighten me?"

"Not at all." Hawk looked down at him with intensity, and Brian forced himself not to jerk his hands from the man's chest. He focused on his nipples, circling, pinching, pulling. He pinched both of Hawk's nipples hard, making the man suck in a breath. He liked making him react.

"Do you ever scream, Hawk?"

He laughed at him. "I've growled, maybe howled. I don't think I've ever met someone who could make me scream like a girl."

Brian pinched harder, earning a jerk and wince. He thought he heard Hawk's soft moan. "Maybe I can be that someone."

A look crossed Hawk's face, toughness or challenge, but before Brian could tease his body with further pain, Hawk moved his legs, spread his thighs, and then crawled over his body to fill the space between his legs. Brian expected Hawk to go down and suck him as Hawk forced his knees to bend, but then the man lifted his ankles onto his shoulders and smeared his ass with the lube he'd found.

Lying back against the pillows, his ankles supported by Hawk's broad shoulders, Brian watched him tear open a foil packet and slide the condom over his shaft. He was nervous. Missionary wasn't a position he'd ever done. He'd always been bent over something or on his hands and knees. He wasn't sure how this was going to work or if he'd like it. Hawk locked his gaze on his and he realized he was about to find out.

He felt the tip of Hawk's penis press against his puckered rim and tensed. He didn't look away, though. He knew he was breathing hard, knew the man hovering over him had probably guessed he was terrified, but he didn't care. "God. Do it."

Hawk chuckled. "Patience, Just Brian." Holding his gaze, he pushed into him. Slowly. So fucking slowly, Brian wanted to scream and cry and cuss, not because it hurt, but because it felt so damn good. Because it was so intimate, having him look deeply into his eyes, into his soul, as he stretched him slowly and filled him completely.

"Oh. God. Damn."

Hawk kept hold of his gaze as he withdrew just a little and started again the slow, steady push, the slow, intimate stretch.

"Fuck."

Hawk smiled, making Brian's entire body start trembling with need. "Fuck me, Hawk. Please fuck me."

"I am."

"Hard. Fast," Brian begged.

"In time," Hawk promised, his head dipped lower. He claimed Brian's mouth, kissing him deeply. He sucked his tongue and stroked the inside of his mouth as he moved over him slowly, pushing deeper, so slowly.

Brian opened his eyes and saw his knees were hooked over Hawk's shoulders and pressed almost into his own chest. The man was so deep inside him, he could feel his erection throbbing deep within.

Brian bucked his hips, and his penis slid between his abs and Hawk's. His need built to a painful intensity. He knew he was going to come quickly. It was just too much need, too much sensation. He whispered, "Please," knowing he was done for. His shaft throbbed, his ass pulsed around Hawk's dick, and his orgasm tore through him. "Ohhh Gggooooodddd!"

Hawk responded, pushed his body up, and thrust hard, harder, forcing Brian's orgasm to spiral higher and higher.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck!"

Hawk used him hard, riding him long enough that waves of orgasm crashed into him, through him, one becoming another. He screamed. He didn't know if he was screaming like a girl, but he definitely screamed, and then he realized that the man above him was growling and finding his own release.

It was a long moment later when Brian realized Hawk's weight was heavily draped across his chest. Both men were breathing hard. "Too heavy. Can't breathe."

Hawk rolled off of him. "Sorry."

"No, no. Don't be sorry." He laughed. "That was amazing."

The shadows in the room were lengthening; morning had turning into midday. Hawk's face was in shadow, but Brian could tell he was smiling. Hawk agreed.

"Don't say it," Brian ordered.

"What?"

"I screamed like a girl, but we don't have to talk about it."

Hawk grinned wider. "I didn't say anything."

* * *

Brian was snoring softly, but Hawk couldn't sleep. It bothered him that a storm and a man had completely made him forget about the lights on the mountain and his grandfather's concerns. He stared at the mountain through frosted windowpanes, watching and waiting. Two a.m. Three

a.m. Nothing. He assumed the weather was keeping whatever had been going on up there from happening tonight. It didn't make him feel any better. At his feet, Shadow whined.

"I haven't forgotten. Something weird's going on, and we're going to figure out what."
Blizzard or not.

Hawk closed his eyes when Brian's hand rubbed his shoulder. "Can't sleep?"

"No."

"Anything wrong?"

Hawk heard nervousness in Brian's voice. He turned and took his hand to reassure him. "Something's wrong, but not with your being here. Don't think that."

Brian sat down beside him. "Anything I can do?"

Hawk shook his head. Shadow came loping into the room, her fur cold and snow covered. Hurrying to grab a towel to dry her, he explained, "Doggie door, downstairs. Sarah had it installed two decades ago for her own dog. She never boarded it up after Bear died."

"Bear?"

"Tibetan mastiff. Huge animal. He once took down a doe by himself and carried it home."
Hawk chuckled at the memory as he finished cleaning up the snowy mess.

He returned to the chair and sat, the tight square of his shoulders making it obvious he was still tense.

Brian kneaded both shoulders, his hands a warming comfort in the cool room. "So what's wrong?"

"I wish I knew." He pointed through the window. "See that highest peak out there, between the pines?"

"Uh-huh."

"There's been reports of weird lights. The night of the blizzard I was supposed to be heading up there to check it out."

"UFO?" Brian teased.

When Hawk looked back at Brian, he wasn't looking at the mountain. He was looking at *him*. Seeing lust in Brian's gaze, Hawk's heart tripped over itself. "I don't believe in UFOs."

"No?" Brian leaned nearer.

Mesmerized, Hawk shook his head.

Brian whispered, "Kiss me."

Hawk licked his lips, thinking he shouldn't, but Brian's mouth was so damn tempting. He kissed him gently, testing the attraction, and discovered Brian's mouth fit his perfectly.

Brian wrapped his hand into Hawk's hair, pulling, hurting a little, trying to take control of the kiss. Hawk fought him for it, wrapping his fingers into Brian's hair. They fell against a wall. Brian pushed Hawk's shoulders back against the floral wallpaper and dropped to his knees so fast Hawk wasn't expecting it.

As Brian's lips closed around his dick, Hawk realized he still had his fingers wrapped in the man's golden mane. He used it to his advantage, pulling Brian's head forward and back, not letting Brian control his pleasure, but taking what he wanted. He heard the man gag around his cock as he bumped into the back of his throat again and again. He liked the sound. He commanded, "Swallow me," and gave Brian enough slack to angle his penis and do as he was told.

Brian swallowed, taking his length, gagging, and then doing it again. And again.

"Holy fuck, Just Brian. What. You. Do. To. Me," he said between gritted teeth as he shot his load.

Chapter Five

Hawk left man and dog sleeping in the bed and found himself standing outside in the snow a second time. It was going to be a long, long night. What had he just done? Hadn't he spent an hour in the cold berating himself for getting involved with a tourist? Couldn't he have learned his lesson?

Damn it. "I did not love Erik."

So, why's it still hurt so bad to think about him?

"Rejection. Obviously. He's the one who crept off in the middle of the night," he muttered to himself under his breath. "I cannot do this again."

Too late. Idiot.

"Fuck."

Hawk scrubbed his face with his hands, his exhaustion catching up with him, but he didn't know if he could crawl into bed beside Just Brian. He already cared for the man more than he should. Shaking his head, he dropped his head back and stared at the night sky. Unexpected movement flying over his head had made him duck. He felt ridiculous when he blinked, seeing nothing. "I need sleep."

The night sky shifted in front of him.

He scowled, looking hard at the sky. There weren't any lights, but there was definitely something skimming along the treetops, flying low. Something big and silent.

Crossing the yard, he kept his eyes on the sky until he reached his truck. Hurrying, he rummaged through his equipment in the back and grabbed his night-vision binoculars. Taking a look, he had his answer: a helicopter. *A stealth helicopter*. As he watched, the helicopter dipped behind a granite crag.

"Damn, Grandfather. You have the entire town worked up over a military op?"

Suddenly, lights went up, backlighting the mountain. The lights almost immediately went back out. Anyone watching, without realizing there was a helicopter on the other side of the mountain, might have grasped for explanations. Lightning. Or a UFO.

“That's not official business.”

Keeping his eyes on the sky, he dug out his cell phone and called his grandfather. “I've discovered the mystery on the mountain and I'm afraid you aren't going to like it. Looks like some kind of military op, but feels more like trouble has come to town.”

His grandfather's heavy sigh made him feel like he'd have been happier if it had been a spacecraft. “I'm calling the sheriff now. As soon as this snow lets up, I'll go up the mountain and find out exactly what's going on.”

True to his word he called the sheriff next. “Remember the lights Grandfather told you about?”

“Sure, the UFOs.”

“Not unidentified at any rate. Comanche stealth helicopter, if I had to bet money.” Hawk headed back to the diner, shaking off snow and kicking his boots on each step as he climbed to break off the packed snow.

“Military? You think they're running night ops?”

“No. I don't think the government has anything to do with what's going on, but whatever is, I plan to figure it out unless you have an official explanation why the military would be up there.”

“Nope.”

“Then I think someone's up to no good, and I intend to find out what.” He opened the door, and the heat from inside slapped him in the face. Hurriedly he shrugged out of his jacket.

“Now, Toby. Don't go rushing into anything. I'll make some inquiries. Not much can be done until the weather clears anyway.”

“Whoever's in the helicopter isn't waiting on the weather.” He hung up on the sheriff and finished the business of getting out of his snow-covered clothing, deciding he was going up the mountain at first light, blizzard or no.

Mounting the stairs that would lead him back to Just Brian and the mistake he had made with the man seemed harder than facing the elements. He almost wished he could leave without explanation. But that's what Erik had done to him, and he wouldn't leave anyone else with such miserable self-doubt.

Luckily, both man and dog were still snoring. He climbed into bed as gently as he could to not wake them. Shadow opened one eye and yawned. Hawk forced himself to relax against the pillow.

"Everything okay?"

In the dark Hawk turned toward Brian's voice. "Nothing to worry about. Work. Stuff." He tried to ignore his tightening groin. He wanted him. Again. Maybe if he just looked at it as a fling, because he couldn't ignore his body's reaction to this man. He definitely didn't want to consider he might be getting emotionally involved with another man who was merely passing through town and would leave without a note or even a good-bye. He did want to enjoy every inch of his body while he had him around, though.

Reaching out, he stroked his face.

"The UFO? I guess we did get sidetracked when you were telling me about it before. When you left the room, I was afraid you were regretting—"

No. The denial caught in his throat. He couldn't give Just Brian assurances he wasn't ready for. Pulling away, he climbed out of bed and walked to the window. "Come here."

Brian climbed out from under the blankets and joined him. Hawk pointed at the mountain. "While I was outside a helicopter flew over and hovered just on the other side of that ridge."

"And that isn't supposed to happen?"

"If it was the middle of the day, I might say it was a sightseeing tour, but at three a.m.? No, definitely odd. And definitely rules out a UFO."

"That rock face is granite, right?"

Hawk nodded. "Yes, fairly inaccessible without climbing gear. There are a few category-four trails, but still a tough climb."

"You're thinking someone wanted to get to the top faster than climbing. It's not flat enough to land on."

“Right, but someone could rappel down from the helicopter to the peak.”

“Why would someone do that in the middle of the night? Seems fairly dangerous. Unless they didn't want anyone to know they were. But why? What could be up there?”

“That's what I intend to find out. I was thinking I might head out before dawn and get to the top now that the winds have stopped. If they come back, I plan to be there when they do.”

“You'll camp up there? That sounds crazy. You won't go alone, right?”

Hawk froze, hearing concern he hadn't expected. “I'll be fine.”

“I could go with you. Winter camping isn't unfamiliar, and I can climb. Granted, my climbing experience is limited to a gym, but I can handle it.”

Hawk turned around to look at him, all lean lines and sex appeal. Desire made him hard. He wrapped his hand around the back of Brian's neck to pull his face nearer. Hawk hovered, nearly kissing him, but not. “Why can I not get enough of you, Just Brian?”

“You'll take me with you?”

“No. It might be dangerous.” In the moonlight streaming through the window, Brian looked crestfallen, and Hawk knew he was done for. His voice cracked as he admitted, “I spent days saving your life. I'm not going to let anything happen to you.”

Brian smiled. “I'm not some wussy boy that can't take care of himself.”

Hawk laughed. “I'm the one who cut off the thong with the pink bow.”

Brian batted his eyes. “No one ever said tough and pretty couldn't come in the same package.”

* * *

Hawk stood in Sarah's kitchen loading ice axes and rope into a backpack. Outside he heard stomping feet before Sarah and the sheriff bustled through the door. He hid his smile. Though it was nice seeing the two old birds together, he wouldn't mention his suspicions that their relationship had recently changed to something more intimate.

Dodd stopped abruptly, seeing him kneeling on the floor, loading the last of his gear. Sarah bumped into his back.

“Sheriff. Sarah,” he greeted them.

“Looks like you have something big planned,” Dodd commented.

“Uh-huh.”

“Care to share, Toby?”

Pushing back her parka hood, Sarah turned her rosy face to him. “Oh, Toby! I haven't been able to get you out of my mind for three whole days. How's the tourist?”

Hawk stood and smiling hugged her. “Oh, he's alive enough.” He helped her shrug out of her parka and placed it on a coat hook.

She smacked at him playfully, truly relieved. “Well, I never doubted that for a minute.”

Dodd shook his head. “I would have. I didn't think he had a chance without a medevac.”

Hawk scratched his head. “Two days ago I would have begged for one. I guess he wasn't as bad as we thought.”

“Or tougher than you believed,” Brian announced, coming around a corner. His hair was still damp after his shower, but he looked warm enough, wearing the flannel shirt and jeans Hawk had laid out for him.

Seeing him, Hawk smiled, caught himself, and went back to packing gear. “Tough and an eavesdropper. I see the clothes fit.”

Brian stopped next to him, lifting one foot. “Boots are a little big, but they'll do. Thanks for the loan.”

Hawk met his gaze. The heat was still there, that indefinable current that ran between them, making him want him, even in broad daylight. Even outside the privacy of the bedroom. “Couldn't have you running about town naked and barefoot.”

Sarah rushed forward, not bothering to introduce herself before she hugged Brian. “Well, aren't you just an absolute doll?” She lifted his left hand. “And single. Just wait until that news makes its rounds.”

“Oh, please. No,” Brian begged. “I'm not...available.”

Hawk tensed and hoped Brian had the good sense to keep his mouth shut about personal stuff. “Hey Brian, give me a hand?”

Brian announced, “I'm gay.”

Sarah's eyebrows went up, and she blushed. “Well, well.” She cleared her throat. She looked from Brian to Hawk, and Hawk didn't like the fact she'd already added two plus two and

envisioned them having sex. He didn't doubt she'd stay quiet, but he worried about the gleam in her eye. "I'll just make coffee. Crowd will be here soon enough."

The men watched her mutter as she strode off into the walk-in pantry. Dodd said, "That woman is insufferable. As soon as she heard the road crews were headed out, she insisted I get her down here so she would be ready when they started showing up for lunch."

Hawk snickered, doing his own math. So they had been together for the brunt of the blizzard.

"Tobias," the sheriff said warningly, "I saw *that look*, and yes, we've been stuck together at my place. When we left here it got so bad so quick, I just couldn't get her up to her cabin, but nothing happened."

"Too bad," Hawk said. "You'd make a cute couple."

Dodd shook his head. "We both know that isn't possible."

Hawk cracked an evil smile, knowing just how much the overly domestic Sarah might cramp the loner sheriff's style, but he didn't say a word. He also knew Dodd would feel uncomfortable making a move on his best friend's widow, but John had been dead five years, and he thought they'd both mourned his passing long enough. "It is if you both let it happen."

Sarah bustled back into the room, carrying coffee and flour. Brian hurried to help her, making Hawk realize his instincts were on target: Brian was a nice guy. Maybe too nice for the likes of him, but that wouldn't matter, would it? Soon as the roads were cleared he'd leave town. That thought didn't thrill him.

At his feet Shadow paced and whined. Hawk lifted two fingers to his mouth and the dog instantly stilled, sitting, then lying down, curling into a ball. Hawk heaved his bag onto his shoulder. The sheriff didn't miss the opportunity to change the subject. "So, what's this?"

"Want to get an early start up the mountain."

"Roads aren't clear, Hawk. Give it a day."

"I don't plan on taking the road, and you made it here easy enough."

"Hell, wasn't nothin' easy about it, but another day trapped with that woman fretting over what was going on here in town and I'd have lost my mind."

Brian brought both men mugs of steaming coffee. He caught and held Hawk's gaze and Hawk only realized after he'd walked away, he was still staring. Under his breath, the sheriff whistled. "Is it contagious then?"

"Contagious?" Hawk asked.

"Homosexuality."

"I think you're safe, Sheriff."

"Ha-ha." The sheriff resumed their previous conversation. "How many men do you need?"

Hawk jerked his chin and, seeing Brian was lingering near enough that he might be eavesdropping, sent him a warning glance, hoping he realized it wasn't open for discussion. He said loudly, "I'm going alone."

Brian left the room in a huff, leaving Hawk confused as to what he should say or do. Yes, they'd had sex, but they weren't in a relationship, and this was work, possibly a dangerous day on the job. It felt wrong to leave without a good-bye though. That's what Erik had done.

Leaving his gear on the floor, he followed the man. He found him sitting on the stairs, scratching Shadow behind the ears.

"I'm sorry," Brian said.

Hawk frowned and leaned back against the wall, arms crossed. "That's supposed to be my line."

"I get it. You have a job to do."

"Yes."

Brian sighed heavily.

"So, what's really wrong?"

Brian stared him down. "Are you gay, or was I just an experiment?"

The wind went out of Hawk's lungs. He'd never said it out loud before. "I'm not exactly out of the closet, Brian. Rural Montana isn't like other parts of the country. Besides, why does it matter? You're just passing through. Right?"

He patted his thigh, calling Shadow to him, and left without a backward glance. Why avoid the inevitable? After a few days on the mountain, Brian would be gone to wherever he'd been heading in the first place.

* * *

Brian sat, stunned. He didn't follow Hawk back into the kitchen. He heard the rough canvas of his gear bag scrape across the ground when he picked it up and the few words exchanged. The sheriff insisted he take a few men. Hawk's voice was raised and harsh. "No, Mac." Sarah begged him to be careful, and it sounded like she was crying.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry."

Brian hugged himself, not sure why he was so upset, tears close to the surface as he imagined him hugging Sarah good-bye. Transference? Fear he wouldn't return at all? Like Brandon and Michael?

The kitchen door closed with finality. Brian sucked back the unexplainable emotion he was feeling, reminding himself he'd cried enough the last few months. Tobias Red Hawk was a trained professional. He would be fine.

"I'll be fine too. I just need to get out of this town." Standing, he rubbed his face and joined the sheriff and Sarah in the kitchen. Sarah turned her back, hiding the fact she was wiping her face before she poured more coffee into mugs. Brian asked the sheriff, "Who should I call to see about getting my Jeep off that mountain?"

"Jenkins should be able to handle the tow and repairs."

"How soon do you think I can make that happen?"

Sheriff Dodd rubbed his chin. "Roads are clear. Maybe a few hours."

"Sounds perfect."

"Can't say what his timeframe will be on repairs though. He's the best in town. Stays fairly busy."

Four hours later it was evident perfect was not in the cards. Matthew Jenkins, local mechanic, had just given him the verdict. "The cracked radiator isn't a big deal. I can order the parts."

"Great. I was afraid it was a broken axle."

The mechanic made a face, indicating the worst was yet to come. "Well—"

"It's a broken axle too?"

"More or less, and a bent frame."

“Fuck.”

“That about sums it up.” Jenks handed him a written estimate on time and cost that sent his heart into his throat. He took a deep breath and reached into the Jeep for his backpack, which held his laptop. “Wi-Fi anywhere in town?”

Jenks nodded. “At the diner.”

“Let me think on it.” Brian walked away and sloshed through knee-high snow. He kept walking until he reached the end of town; then he turned around and walked the four blocks back to his Jeep. Seeing it bent and broken, he didn't stop. He just kept walking until he reached the other side of town. His eyes went to the granite ridge rising into a dark gray sky. There was another storm coming, and he sure didn't want to think about being snowed in any longer than necessary. He. Did. Not. Want. To. Think. About. The. Man.

“Fuck!”

Sheriff Dodd came up behind him and put his hand on his shoulder. “You going to be okay, son?”

Brian turned to look at him but didn't say anything. His attention was drawn to the small crowd gathering around his Jeep.

“I heard the Jeep is going to be a pretty expensive fix and that you might be staying in town a little longer than expected.” He shrugged. “I'm not trying to get into your business, but I'm fairly certain Sarah won't be too hard to coax into letting you borrow that upstairs bedroom awhile longer, in exchange for some handyman repairs or *something*.”

“I can handle a hammer, if you're worried.”

“I didn't—”

Brian interrupted, “Look Mac, no disrespect intended when I tell you this: I might be gay but I'm no namby-pamby boy.”

Dodd stuck out his hand. “I think we might have gotten off on the wrong foot. You can call me *Sheriff Dodd*.”

Brian accepted his hand and shook it. “*Sheriff Dodd*. You can call me *Dr. Van Zant*.”

The muscle in the sheriff's jaw tightened. “Doctor you say?”

“Doctorate of archaeology, University of Cincinnati, former curator of the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, and currently between positions.”

“Huh.” The sheriff withdrew his hand. “Can I buy you a cup of coffee, Doctor?”

Brian laughed. “Why don't I buy us both some lunch, Sheriff?”

“Well, I won't say no to that.”

At the diner, Brian settled in with a cup of coffee and his laptop but soon found himself surrounded by new faces, everyone wanting to meet him. Assuming Hawk's worries were founded, it wasn't exactly the reception he'd expected once word got out he was a gay man in town. As soup and sandwiches arrived, a thin, petite redhead approached the table with her business card extended. “Well, hi there! You must be our stranded traveler. I'm Rose Akins, Bitterroot Valley Real Estate.” She took a seat between him and the sheriff without being invited to do so.

The sheriff hid a chuckle behind a big bite of roast beef on rye slathered with horseradish.

“I'm not one to miss an opportunity, and whether you are considering building your dream home or just thinking about a small getaway cabin, I'm your girl.” She flagged down one of the waitresses, asking, “Can I get some iced tea?” without ever really leaving her sales pitch. “You know, by getting a cabin and putting it on a rental program, you can get the full enjoyment of mountain living while you're on vacation and while you're away profit from rental fees that will have it paid off in a matter of years instead of decades. Whether you consider it your retirement home or nest egg, you can't go wrong. Equity is equity. You'll be set in your later years.”

Brian pulled his gaze from hers long enough to look at the sheriff and found the man amused. Rose patted his hand, making him look back at her. “Now, I know what you're thinking. You're young, you have plenty of time, but honestly the time to start thinking about your silver years is now.”

The waitress brought Rose her tea. “Oh, thank you.” She took a long sip. “I'm sorry; I really needed that. I get so dry. Now, where was I?”

“You were at the part where I politely decline your services.”

Sheriff Dodd let out a big belly laugh. Rose's eyes widened.

“Not that I wouldn't love to live on this mountain. It really is beautiful here. It's just that at the moment, I'm currently without a job and not quite certain which direction my life is going to

take next.” He dramatically pulled his wallet out of his pants pocket and tucked her card inside. “But if I do decide to buy or build, you’ll get my business, Rose Akins.” He smiled widely and tucked his wallet back into his pocket.

Rose’s mouth opened and shut twice, making Brian think she wasn’t used to being shut down so abruptly. He felt bad about being rude but he certainly didn’t want to lead her on. He definitely didn’t want her to know he’d managed to save a substantial nest egg over the years or about the additional funds he’d received from Michael and Brandon’s life insurance policies, which had named him sole beneficiary. Truth was, he could buy a house anywhere in the country if he wanted to and be mortgage free.

He took her hand, trying to soften the blow. “I do love meeting new people, though, and I would love to hear all about you. Did you grow up around here?”

The sheriff gasped, and Brian knew by his reaction he could stop worrying about how he was going to spend the rest of his afternoon. He’d bet every dime he had on the fact Rose Akins was a talker, knowing he wouldn’t lose. Rose brightened considerably. Smiling, she admitted, “I did!”

The waitress came by with their checks, and Dodd grabbed his and stood quickly, announcing he needed to get back to the station. Brian turned to Rose, pointing to his still-filled plate. “Have you eaten? Could I buy you lunch? I do hate to eat alone, and maybe we could share a dessert. I hear the caramel cake is wonderful.”

“Oh, it is! If you haven’t tried it, you really should, and I think I would like some lunch, but I insist on paying. You are the visitor, after all.”

Rose placed her order and then, seeing two women she recognized, called them over to the table. “This is Cheryl Henry, the mayor’s wife and best seamstress we have in town if you ever have need, and this is Lila Jenkins. I believe her husband is working on your Jeep.”

Brian shook their hands and invited them to sit. Laughing, he said, “I doubt he’s doing much work on my Jeep, though. It’s totaled.”

“I’ve never seen anything my husband hasn’t been able to fix with enough time,” Lila volunteered, then blushed. “I guess it depends on how attached you are to it, if you want to put the time and money into saving it.”

Brian thought about that. He did want to save it, and what else did he have to do?

Whether he was meeting people in this town or another, it wasn't like Seattle was going anywhere. The point was to get away from Cincinnati. He'd done that. He was definitely moving on with his life. Here or there, he could focus on his art. He'd originally thought of the west coast when he'd considered moving because he could see himself starting over as an artist there. A new life demanded a new career, and although he'd only painted landscapes as a hobby, he didn't doubt his talent. He'd thought seascapes would be relaxing, but mountains would prove just as calming and twice as challenging.

He tried to imagine himself painting the Bitterroot Range but failed, seeing only the man who'd gone to climb it. If he stayed, it wouldn't be for the view. It would be for the man.

Thinking about Hawk alone on the mountain, he certainly wasn't leaving things the way they were. Hawk had hurt his feelings, and he was at least going to get in a last word. "I guess I need to talk to your husband."

"But not before cake," Rose insisted.

"Oh definitely not before cake, *and* you still have your life story to tell. If you ladies don't mind, I'd love to learn more about you too."

The women all smiled, nodding and leaning closer as each started revealing the turning points and heartbreaks of their lives. The afternoon flew by, and before Brian realized just how quickly the day had passed, the dinner crowd was filling the diner. "I guess we should give up our table."

"Nonsense," Rose said. "I'm staying for pot roast, so you might as well just sit right there because you know everything there is to know about us, but we don't know anything about you."

"Oh, I'm staying too if we get to hear your story," Cheryl announced. "I could go for some pot roast."

They all looked at Lila. "I'll call Matthew and tell him we're eating dinner here tonight. That way you can ask him about fixing your Jeep, too. But before he gets here, maybe you can tell us about how you discovered you were homosexual."

Cheryl gasped, and Rose choked on an ice cube she'd been sucking, but Brian only laughed.

“Well, I can't help being curious, and Matthew was no help at all when I asked him about you.” She defended herself to her friends. “It's not like we have hundreds of people organizing gay-pride events around these parts.”

Brian assured her she wasn't out of line in asking. “I'm a very up-front guy about being gay. It isn't a secret, and people can either take me or leave me. I can't change who I am.”

“That's the way it should be,” Rose encouraged.

* * *

Hawk strapped on his cross-country skis and traveled up Forest Service Road 500, not expecting to see anyone, and seeing not one but two men *hiking*, not together but a mile apart, marked them as lookouts, not nature lovers. That was all he needed to confirm something was definitely going on. He decided to go back to town for help. The sheriff had been right; he should have brought a few deputies with him, but in his pigheadedness hadn't. He'd been too distracted by Brian.

They hadn't parted on the best of terms. Still, he felt like crap. He blamed his lousy mood on the men on the mountain, on the cold, and on pure exhaustion. He needed sleep. Since rescuing Brian off the mountain, he'd had very little, only a few hours spread over the course of days. The sun was setting as he hit town, and it was a toss-up between going to the diner for food and going straight home to sleep. Seeing a bright yellow Jeep he knew could only be Brian's in Jenks's lot made the decision for him.

The sight made his heart leap in his chest, and he realized he'd hoped Brian was still in town. He had to see the man before he could either eat or sleep.

Getting closer to the vehicle, he realized the bumper was covered with gay-pride stickers. Stunned at the passionate display promoting gay marriage, equality, and tolerance, he stopped and stared.

Wiping his grease-stained hands on a shop rag, Matthew Jenkins came up to stand beside him. “I heard you saved the boy's life.”

“It was touch and go for a while, but he got through it.” Hawk thought Matthew might make a comment about the bumper stickers or about Brian being gay, but he didn't, and so Hawk didn't mention it either. He asked, “Is it salvageable?”

“Could be, but not bloody likely. It's gonna take more money to repair than it's worth. He's over at the diner trying to decide whether he wants to save it or scrap it. Right now I'm in limbo. No point ordering parts yet.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cell and read a text on the faceplate. “Guess I'm joining my wife at the diner for dinner in a bit. Want to join us?”

“Sure. Meet you there?” He left Jenks standing vigil over the car to find the man.

He hitched his gear bag a little higher on his shoulder as he crossed the road to Sarah's. At his side Shadow quickened her pace. “You're anxious to see him too, aren't you, girl?”

Shadow woofed her agreement.

To keep from running he counted down the final ten paces. “Ten, nine, eight...breathe.” He felt like he was being watched through the large picture windows that lined the front of the diner. “Six, five, four, three, this is fucking ridiculous.”

“Hey, Toby!” Mrs. Phelps called out to him, holding the door open for him as she exited, a carryout bag in her hand.

He grabbed the edge of the metal-frame door. “Thanks.”

“How's your grandfather? I haven't seen him in town lately.”

Of course she wanted to make small talk. “Oh, he's fine. Ornery as ever. Won't take his medicine. Thinks the old ways are better than modern advances in science.”

She laughed. “Didn't he name you his successor? You will be a horrible medicine man with that attitude, Tobias Red Hawk.”

“Let's hope there are many harvests before I stand in his stead, but he understands I have room in my mind for both the ways of old and new.” Hawk waved and took the final step into the diner. It only took a second to find Brian in the crowded room. He was sitting at a table with five women, all laughing and joking. He recognized Matthew's wife and the mayor's wife, but the rest of the women had their backs to him. Not wishing to intrude he crossed the room to take an empty seat at the bar. Of course it had to be next to Sheriff Dodd. “Don't you ever work out of your office?”

“Nothing ever happens there. This is the heart of the town.”

“Sure it doesn't have anything to do with the woman behind the counter?” The woman in question put a cup in front of him and poured coffee without being asked, before topping off the sheriff's cup. She winked at Hawk before turning back to her other customers.

Dodd harrumphed.

Nodding over his shoulder toward Brian's table, Hawk stated, “I guess word got out there was a new bachelor in town.”

“Doctor.”

Hawk choked on his first sip of coffee. “Doctor?” Brian hadn't mentioned *that*.

“Archaeology. PhD, not MD.”

“Huh.”

“He told them.” The sheriff took a long swig of coffee.

“That he was a doctor?”

“No. That he was gay.”

Hawk's eyebrows went up. “And they're still flocked around him?”

“I know. Weird.”

Hawk asked Sarah as she passed, “Got any of that caramel cake left?”

She stopped in front of his seat and wiped away imaginary crumbs with her damp cloth. “I made a fresh one this morning, but first you're going to eat a real meal. All day on the trail, you need more than cake.”

Hawk snorted and tossed a meaningful glance over his shoulder. “I wouldn't say cake was the only thing that drew me back to town.” He met her gaze, realizing that was as close as he'd ever come to admitting he was gay in open company. Her smile reassured him.

Leaning forward, she whispered, “I'd say the feeling's mutual, honey. He hasn't taken his eyes off you since you came through that door.”

Hawk smiled, feeling better. He looked over his shoulder and met Brian's gaze. He lifted his chin. Brian winked, and the gesture made him feel warm and fuzzy on the inside.

“What'd you find out, Toby?”

The sheriff pulled his attention back as Sarah put a big bowl of steaming chili and a slab of caramel cake in front of him. He pushed a big bite of cake into his mouth first and received a stink-eye from Sarah. Defending himself, he said, "The soup has to cool."

Walking away, she chuckled. Hawk looked at the sheriff. "I think there's big trouble happening on that mountain right under our noses. Off the main trail it looked like there was a cave."

Dodd shook his head. "Nope. I've hiked every inch of those trails. No cave."

"Well, there is now. Maybe that last avalanche triggered a rockslide. No way could a man open up the side of that mountain without making some serious noise." He took a bite of chili. "There were two men guarding the entrance."

Sheriff asked, "Did anyone see you?"

"There was a man on the trail, pretending to hike, but I'd bet money he was a lookout. I whizzed by him and kept going. We exchanged nods. I don't think I made him too nervous. About another mile in there was a second man, same story."

"So what's up there? And don't give me any of your grandfather's delusional stories."

"It may be nothing, but if it's trouble, I'd like to have some backup. Won't know until I get into that cave."

"When you want to head out?" Dodd asked.

"I'd like to wait until middle of the night. Maybe one?"

"I can get you Elijah and Frank, maybe Steve."

"I'll take 'em. Tell them to meet me here at midnight. After I eat, I need to get some real shut-eye."

Sheriff laughed. "Snow travel gets harder the further you go past forty."

"Hey! Watch that. I'm not there yet."

"I've never climbed granite, but I can scale a five-twelve in a gym," Brian announced from behind him, startling him. Hawk rubbed his hand over his chin, not believing he was even considering taking him.

"I'm volunteering for purely selfish reasons, though. I did some online research while you were away. It's been rumored in the scientific communities for years there is a lost city in the

Sapphires, but nothing has ever been discovered. What if it was only a mountain range over? You might have professional treasure hunters up there looking for Native American artifacts.”

The thought had crossed Hawk's mind as well. Along with a hundred other suspicions—all of them illegal. He met Brian's gaze, maybe trying to scare him off the subject with danger, but maybe not. “Can you shoot?”

Brian didn't flinch. “Yup.”

The sheriff interrupted. “Huh-uh, no way. No tourists.”

Hawk challenged him. “You coming?”

Dodd wasn't a professional archaeologist, but for an amateur Native American researcher, he knew enough, and Hawk would have welcomed his knowledge. The sheriff hem-hawed around. Hawk knew he wouldn't go near the Bitterroots after a snow storm. John had died in an avalanche, and although Dodd had been with him, dug with his bare hands in the snow until they were shredded and bloody, he hadn't gotten him out in time. John had smothered in the white.

“Look, Mac, I need an expert, and taking Brian saves the time of waiting for the Montana Center for Archaeological Research to get someone up here.” Standing, Hawk left money by his empty bowl and grabbed what was left of the cake in his hand. Looking at Brian, he asked, “Walk with me?”

Stepping outside into the cold, bright day, they both pulled up their collars. “You don't have to do this.”

“I want to.” Brian assured him.

Hawk hitched his chin. “Well, come on. We need to get you outfitted for a snow climb.”

Together they walked up the block, wading knee-high snowdrifts. “I can't believe the diner is that crowded the day after a blizzard. Snow like this back home would paralyze the city for weeks.”

Hawk chuckled. “Guess we're used to it. Can't let a little snow keep us inside or we wouldn't see our friends and neighbors till the spring thaw. Now, that's not to say there aren't some homesteaders up in the mountains that won't be trapped for months.”

“I'll bet it's beautiful up there.”

"It is." Hawk agreed, watching Brian as they walked. There was more to Brian than just being a handsome man. His eyes held pain that went deep, though his smile was easy. There was a tightness to his jaw that made him look years older. "So, where's home?"

"Cincinnati," Brian answered. "Or it was until a few days ago. I'm not sure where I'll call home once I leave here. I was headed toward Seattle when I had the encounter with the moose."

Hawk shuddered. "Rainforest."

"I hadn't thought about that, but yeah, I guess it will rain a lot there."

"Dreary too."

They both looked up at the dark sky and saw stars that seemed close enough to touch but not a single cloud. Approaching the outdoor outfitters building, Hawk opened the door. "You might want to give the mountains a few more days before you head off. Maybe you'd like it here enough to stay." *God, why did I say that? I sounded... desperate.* He led Brian through clothing racks, grabbing snow gear, then waved at the checkout girl to get her attention and pointed toward a changing room.

"Help yourself, hon. I'm the only one here tonight and can't leave the front."

Hawk pushed Brian toward the back of the store. "Mind if I help?"

Once out of sight, Hawk pushed Brian into the changing room cubicle, then shut and locked the door. Hawk could hear the cashier humming, and his heart started pounding triple time. What was he thinking? Could he and Brian... Here? Now? He didn't know what it was about the man, but he knew two things for certain: when he was near him, all he could think about was fucking him; and when he thought about Brian leaving, it was too painful to think about. He was a piece of work. They'd only just met. What did he care if Brian's future was in Seattle?

Brian winked and pulled off his shirt. "Guess I should actually try a few things on."

Hawk reached between his legs and found him hard. At least he knew they were both thinking along the same lines, and Brian didn't exactly resist as Hawk pushed him against the wall. Brian's hands wrapped around the lapel of Hawk's jacket, pulling him nearer, and then their mouths were pressed hard together, stealing each other's breath as their teeth and tongues collided. It was just rough enough. Hawk liked rough, but it wasn't something he'd ever ask for. With Brian he didn't have to ask. Brian just seemed to know what he needed.

Brian wrapped his hand into Hawk's ponytail and pulled his head back, baring his neck. He bit down, not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough that Hawk hissed. "God, Brian."

Brian pulled back to gaze into Hawk's eyes. Hawk met his gaze, and it seemed an electric current passed between them. White. Hot. Need. Brian continued to hold his ponytail taut. "Tell me you don't like it."

"I like it. I like it too much," he admitted in a whisper. He could still hear the cashier humming and he worried about her coming to investigate.

Brian bit him again, sinking his teeth into his pec. Again, biting hard, hard enough to bruise, but not hard enough to break skin. Hawk's knees went weak under the assault. "Damn, Brian. What you do to me."

Brian lifted his face, and Hawk saw he was smiling. He also whispered, asking, "So pain does it for you just a little?"

Hawk didn't want to admit it, but the truth of the answer was evident. "Maybe a little."

Brian trailed his fingers down Hawk's shirt, reached his waistband, and started undoing his belt, button, and zipper. Pushing his hand deep within the fabric, he cupped Hawk's balls, squeezed hard and then a little harder, making his point. "Maybe a lot?"

"Now, Brian. I need to fuck you now."

Brian pulled his ponytail back, stretching his neck. "Maybe I want to fuck you this time."

Hawk stilled beneath his gaze. He wanted it. Really wanted it, but could he admit it? Could he allow this man to fuck him up the ass?

Brian released his ponytail and used both hands to jerk down his pants. Before Hawk could argue, he had spun him around to face the dressing-room mirror and bent him double. Hawk pushed his hands against a built-in bench. He didn't like looking himself in the face, so he focused on the man behind him. Brian was unbuttoning his own jeans, freeing his cock. Their gazes caught in the mirror's reflection.

Brian dropped to his knees, then ran his hands up and down the fronts of Hawk's thighs. Hawk closed his eyes, sensations and need boiling through him. *If you're going to do it, just do it. Do it! Before you lose your nerve.*

Brian separated Hawk's ass cheeks and pushed his face between the mounds of flesh. Hawk felt the flick of his tongue against his anus. "Oh God."

Brian kept licking, lubing him with his saliva and tongue before adding his finger. Hawk tried to concentrate on the differences in sensation. Slick, wet tongue. Slick, wet finger. Tongue. Finger. Tongue. Finger.

Finger. Finger. Fingers. Stretching. Hawk opened his eyes, looked at his reflection as Brian finger-fucked his ass. His hips were bucking when Brian stood. He tried to stand steady but his hips were in an unstoppable rhythm. He needed to be fucked. He watched as Brian tore open a condom wrapper and slid the lubed latex in place. Their gazes caught a second time in the mirror as Brian pressed the cool, damp tip against his asshole. He pressed only a little, giving his body time to accept the intrusion. Hawk tensed, gasping. Brian grabbed his hips and held him, not taking his gaze away for a second as he entered him slowly. Meeting resistance he whispered, "Relax."

Hawk let out the breath he'd been holding, and Brian kissed his cheek. He ran his hands under Hawk's shirt, teasing his skin. "Tell me you want this. Tell me you want me to fuck you."

Brian slid his hands lower to find his erection still hard.

Hawk's dick throbbed in Brian's hand. *God, yes.* "Fuck me."

Brian pulled his hips back hard and fast, sinking deep, stretching him in every direction. Hawk forced himself to not cry out. It wasn't painful, or at least not a lot of pain. It was heaven. Pure and simple. He'd never felt so filled, so opened, so connected to anyone in his entire life as he held Brian's gaze and let the man fuck him.

Brian grabbed his chin and forced his face around to kiss him roughly. Teeth and tongues unable to get enough of each other. Hawk cursed into his mouth, the pleasure too great, his need building too fast. Brian whispered into his open mouth. "That's right. Take it. Take all of it."

He thrust deeper, setting up a rhythm as he continued to kiss him. Brian's hand was still wrapped around Hawk's cock, pumping him as he slammed into his ass.

"You like this?" Brian asked.

"Yesss."

Brian chuckled and commanded, "Come for me, Tobias Red Hawk. Come for me now."

Hawk didn't make him wait; his warm cream shot out.

He held Brian's gaze, watching as bliss washed over Brian's face.

They were both breathing hard as they hurriedly fixed their clothing and gathered up the warm clothing for purchase without trying any of it on. Hawk started laughing, and Brian joined him. He asked, "Ever done it in a changing room before?"

Hawk shook his head. "Nope. That was a first."

Brian winked. "I'd say a couple of first experiences."

Hawk blushed and glanced away. Brian wrapped his hand around his jaw and forced him to look at him. "Don't be embarrassed. I liked it. Thank you."

It seemed to take forever for the girl to check them out. Hawk wanted to be alone with Brian. He wanted him. Again. Now.

He'd never felt so out of control, and it felt good.

When they finally stepped out into the cool night air, a light fog was filling the valley. The streetlights had golden halos. Hawk grabbed Brian's hand and pulled him into an alley, pushed him against a brick wall, and wrapped his fingers into his hair so that he couldn't pull away from his mouth. "I can't get enough of you."

Hawk crushed his mouth, licking, biting, sucking, their teeth clashing. Steam from their warm breath on the cooler air puffed out around their faces. Hawk tasted blood but wasn't certain whether it was his own or Brian's, and any worry as to the damage they were inflicting on each other was lost in the intensity of another kiss.

Eventually, Hawk pulled away. "If we keep this up, I'll be taking you home with me, and I really need some shut-eye before I climb that mountain again. We're taking the rougher route. We'll need ice axes, rope, and every ounce of energy I can manage."

Brian kissed his cheek lightly. "I understand."

"No, I mean it. I. Want. You. Again and again and again. So after tonight, once we're back down that mountain, I want to take you to my cabin and keep you there for a few days. What do you think about that?"

Brian smiled. "Will rope be involved?"

Hawk didn't have time to hide his surprise. "If you want."

“I think I'd really like to be tied up and helpless in your cabin. You can do whatever you want to me.”

Hawk laughed. “You might regret saying that.”

“I won't. I trust you. Besides, I'm going to demand equal time. I'd really like to see you bound in my ropes.”

Hawk shuddered. He hadn't really expected this game, but he sure wasn't turning away from the opportunity. “It's a date then?”

“Definitely.”

Hawk winked and left him in the alley, leaning against the brick wall. He walked away, saying over his shoulder, “Dress warm. I don't want to have to save your life again, tourist.”

He hurried toward the diner, wanting to go back with every step he took away from the man. He knew he couldn't go back. He had to be patient. The night in front of him was going to require strength, energy, and focus. Having sex with Brian, and all thoughts involving the man naked, was going to have to take a backseat for a while.

He didn't know for sure if Brian would be a help or a hindrance, but something in the man's eyes told him if it came down to it, he'd fight.

Shadow was waiting inside the door of the diner.

“Next time the dog goes too. She's done nothing but whine ever since you forgot her,” Dodd called from the counter. Hawk thought he must be on his two hundredth cup of coffee by now.

“I didn't forget her.” Hawk scratched Shadow behind her ears. “Ready to go home?”

Holding open the door, he led Shadow out, not believing he'd forgotten his dog.

Jeez.

Climbing into his Range Rover, Shadow followed him in and settled on the backseat. Hawk pulled out of his parking space onto the main road. As he drove, he hit Speed Dial on his cell phone to call his grandfather. “Tell me about the mountain.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want to know why it's special. I want to know what's up there that men are going to a lot of trouble to keep their exploration up there secret. Why are you so worried about men trespassing there?”

“There are secrets that must not ever be discovered. Do you remember the stories I told you as a child?”

“Secrets? Stories?” Hawk thought back to the mountain hikes he used to take with his grandfather, remembering the way the sun had warmed his back had made sweat trickle down his neck. God, how he'd used to complain. He didn't know how the old man scrambled over the rock faces. He'd been young and in good shape but could barely keep up as his grandfather talked incessantly. “*Our ancestors hung their memories in the clouds, and hid their most sacred possessions in the stone.*” He'd thought the old man was crazy then, and that had been three decades earlier. Remembering, Hawk started wondering about the value of what might be hidden.

Chapter Six

Brian's head was reeling and his balls ached. Stomping snow off his boots at the back door to Sarah's, he wondered what his chances were of getting upstairs unnoticed. It wasn't that he was trying to be unsociable; he just needed time to think. Alone.

He didn't want to admit he'd only started toward Seattle to prove he could. He wouldn't go so far as to say he would have eventually settled there or even hit the club scene to find some rockin' hard abs to take his mind off his sadness. Now, here...

He closed his eyes, not wanting to overthink the moment, just wanting to enjoy whatever it was that was happening between him and Hawk. It was crazy insane, but he felt like he was supposed to be here. In this place. In this moment. With Hawk.

Why? He certainly wasn't a believer in predestination.

Stepping out of his boots, he tiptoed across the linoleum to the staircase. Relieved, he made it all the way up the stairs and into the bedroom without anyone noticing. He could hear Sarah in the kitchen banging pots and pans, and immediately felt guilty because he wasn't down there helping her clean up after the rush. She was letting him use the upstairs bedroom for free, after all.

With a heavy sigh, he sat down on the bed, dropped his purchases on the ground, and lay back. Unconsciously he rubbed his dick through his jeans, thinking about the way it had felt to bend Hawk over and use his ass. *So good. So damn good.*

He wouldn't think about how badly he missed Michael and Brandon, though they both passed through his mind. He pushed the thought of them away and focused on the chocolate brown of Hawk's eyes and the golden flecks that brightened his irises.

Should he stay awhile? Just to see what happened? Was he ready for another relationship so soon after losing Michael...and Brandon?

The smart thing to do would be to leave town with his heart still intact.

He pulled the bedside phone onto the bed and Jenks's business card from his jeans pocket. The phone was attached to the wall by a cord, and the receiver was attached to the main housing by a curly line. He reminded himself he might want to go ahead and order a new cell phone as he dialed the after-hours number. "Hey, Matthew. This is Brian. I wanted to give you the go-ahead on the Jeep. Whatever it takes to fix it. Do I need to bring you a deposit down in the morning to get things started?"

Jenks told him he'd start ordering parts if he could bring down half of the estimate in the next day or so.

"I can do that."

Brian housed the receiver and relaxed. That decision wasn't nearly as hard as he'd thought it would be. Smiling, he told the empty room, "I guess I'm staying awhile."

He lifted the phone back to his ear and dialed his parents' house number. His mother answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mom."

"Brian? Oh my God." She yelled, "It's Brian!"

His father picked up the extension. "Where are you? Why haven't you called?"

He wasn't sure he wanted to give them the whole story but, knowing they'd been worried, figured he owed it to them. "I'm fine now. I had a little accident, got stranded in a blizzard, and was treated for hypothermia."

"Oh, Brian." His mother sounded devastated.

"Do you need us to come and get you?" his father asked.

"No, no. Everything's fine. I'm staying at a little B and B in Montana while I wait for the Jeep to get repaired."

"Montana?" his mother asked shrilly. "What are you doing in Montana?"

"Actually, I'm doing some consulting work, checking out a site to see if it's a viable dig."

"Oh, Brian! That sounds wonderful."

He was glad he'd stretched the truth a bit when he heard the relief in his mother's voice.

"Son, do you need anything?" his dad asked.

“No, sir. I just realized I haven't called. With the accident and the blizzard and being laid up a few days, time just got away from me. Oh, and I lost my cell phone. I'll get you a new number as soon as I can get a phone.”

He considered telling them about Hawk and just as quickly decided against it. Just the thought of saying *I met someone* made his heart leap into his throat and pound like crazy. It was too soon to admit to himself he might be feeling anything other than raw lust, let alone admit such a thing to anyone else. He pressed his lips together and listened to his mom's voice. She told him about the twins' birthday party, his sister Jessica's promotion at work, and the story about how his nephew, Nathaniel, had fallen face-first off his tricycle and chipped a tooth. In the background he heard Jake's hoot and the soft dribble of a basketball.

When he hung up the phone several minutes later, assured nothing had changed at home and that everyone there was fine, he felt better. He was smiling. It was good that he was here and not there. It was good he was moving on.

Rolling onto his side, he decided to ask Sarah if he could rent the room until his Jeep was repaired. Tomorrow. After he took a little nap. It was still hours before he'd need to get ready to meet Hawk and the deputies for the climb up the mountain.

* * *

A loud knock at the door woke Hawk from a deep sleep. He imagined he'd overslept and the sheriff's deputies had driven out to get him, but as he approached the front door he saw a familiar profile lit by the porch light. His heart tripled its pace. *Erik*. He paused midstride, considering not opening the door. How could he not open the door? *Jesus. It's Erik*.

He hurried across the great room and opened the door. Erik barreled into him, then wrapped him in a tight bear hug. “I should have called. I wanted to surprise you.”

Shadow raced out the door. She'd never really liked Erik, so Hawk wasn't terribly surprised by her reaction.

Stepping back, Hawk admitted, “I'm surprised. I thought I'd never see you again.”

Erik sighed, looking repentant. “I didn't handle my leaving very well. I'm sorry. I've just never been very good at saying good-bye and I had no idea when I would be able to return. It seemed like a good idea at the time to make a clean break.”

Hawk didn't know what to say.

“You're angry. I should go. I really should have called first.” Erik turned to leave, but Hawk stopped him with a touch on his shoulder. Yes, he was angry and still hurt, but he couldn't just let him walk out again.

When Erik turned back around, he was smiling. He stepped nearer. “I've missed you.”

Hawk felt something like fire ripping through his gut. Something wasn't right. He took a step back. “I have to be honest. Your timing couldn't be worse. I was just getting ready to leave. I have to work tonight.”

“You look like you just crawled out of bed. If you like, I could crawl back into your soft, warm bed with you.” He stepped into Hawk and wrapped his arms around him, angling his mouth to kiss him.

Hawk stopped him by turning his face. Erik's lips grazed his cheek. “I can't.”

“You really have to work? You're not just brushing me off because you're angry?” Erik pouted, but the expression rang false. The fire in Hawk's belly grew brighter. It was a warning. He tried to pull away but Erik kept him in a tight embrace.

“It's no coincidence you're here *tonight* is it, Erik?”

His lips twitched. “When I first met you, I knew you were too smart. I knew you were going to be a problem. Eventually. When my men reported seeing you on the mountain earlier, I didn't believe it was a coincidence.”

Hawk swallowed, but it hurt like he was swallowing gravel.

“It isn't too late. Maybe we can work something out.”

“You just want me to turn my head while you steal the history of my ancestors to take back to your country?”

“Ah, so you've seen inside the cavern. I'd hoped you hadn't. It's easier to give away what you've never made an attachment to.”

Hawk hadn't seen inside the cave but decided Erik didn't need to know that.

“Regrettably, I knew you would never cooperate. You're too much of a Boy Scout. Too honest.” He said that like it was a bad thing just before Hawk saw stars.

* * *

Screaming pain in his head was the first noticeable indication he was still alive. Struggling against ropes holding his shoulders and legs tightly to a wooden chair, he wasn't sure how long he would stay that way. He'd been an idiot letting Erik get close enough to him to have the upper hand. He hadn't even seen what he'd struck him over the back of the head with, but imagined it had to have been a gun. Opening his eyes to the glaring light of the room he asked, "So what now?"

Erik scratched his jaw. "You get to stay here like a good little Boy Scout. I have a cave to plunder."

"You can't do that!"

"Are you worried about the artifacts? I assure you every piece will be very well taken care of. There will be a huge museum display. This will be a very important exhibit."

"Why? Why would a museum in Sweden want Native American artifacts?"

Eric laughed at him, and it sounded condescending, like he was finding humor with a small child not savvy in the ways of the world. "Does your Smithsonian not have a Viking display? Cowboys and Indians are very popular right now. Very hot. I'll get a big fee for this delivery."

"I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to allow you to make that delivery." Brave words for a man tied to a chair, Hawk decided a moment after the words were out of his mouth.

"*Tsk, tsk.* I was hoping this wouldn't be an argument. *And* I was so hoping that with your cooperation we could pick up where we left off. I've missed you more than I ever imagined I would, and as it happens it will take several weeks, maybe months to secure the items. We could have had such a grand time together."

Hawk ignored the innuendos, both the intimate and the perilous. He would not even consider that Erik might be pondering how best to kill him. "You will take that many artifacts?"

He shrugged. "I've seen more; I've taken less. This is perhaps my most difficult endeavor to date. The mountain itself is a problem and, well, you've seen for yourself the challenge I'm faced with."

Chapter Seven

Brian opened his eyes to find Shadow pacing beside the bed, whining. Brian's gut told him something was terribly wrong. Looking at the grandfather clock in the corner, he realized it wasn't even eleven yet. Still hours before their scheduled meet. Scratching behind Shadow's ears he asked, "Where's Hawk, sweetheart?"

Shadow pawed the floor and let out a concerned *woof*. She looked over her shoulder at the open doorway, but the man didn't appear. Brian really wanted him to.

"Is he downstairs?" Rolling off the bed, he walked to the small window that looked out over the front street. If Hawk was here, his Range Rover would be parked at the curb. "Tell me he did not head up that mountain again by himself."

Shadow barked and started toward the door. She turned back around and sat down. Her eyes seemed full of worry.

"Oh hell. You want me to go with you?"

Shadow stood excitedly, tail wagging. Turning toward the staircase she waited for Brian. He didn't follow her right away. Going to the bedside phone, he called Sheriff Dodd.

"Shadow is here and Hawk isn't. It may be nothing, but I'm concerned."

The sheriff assured him he would look into it, but after hanging up the phone, Brian wondered if he really took the call seriously. He'd have to, right?

He remembered Hawk being irritated the sheriff hadn't taken the lights sighting up on the mountain seriously. *Oh fuck*. Chewing a nail, he went back to the telephone and dialed 911. When dispatch answered, he recognized the voice as Todd's. He explained what was going on and asked if there was any way a deputy could check on Hawk's place.

There was a long pause, but Todd answered, "It's a slow night. I'll get someone over there to check it out."

Brian paced and waited, waiting for what, he wasn't certain. It wasn't like dispatch was going to call him back right away with news. Sitting down in front of his laptop, he logged on and searched for Tobias Red Hawk. He almost shouted for joy when a directory listed his home address, even though there was no phone number listed. Without a second thought he took the stairs two at a time, Shadow barking excitedly at his heels.

Out on the street he was glad to see Sarah's old Chevy truck. The sheriff must have given her a lift home. Again. Looking inside the glove box, there was no GPS inside, but he did find a set of car keys. He drove to Jenks's lot, got the GPS out of his Jeep, and plugged it into the Chevy's lighter socket. He didn't breathe until the screen lit up and showed it had acquired satellites. He hurriedly typed in the address.

Beside him, Shadow watched anxiously through the window, and Brian found himself wishing he could read her mind or that she could communicate telepathically. Anything would be better than not knowing why she was so worried.

He drove as fast as he dared on the ice and snow-covered back roads. Of course, Hawk wouldn't live in town. It couldn't be *that* easy. The GPS led him up the mountain to a place with no discernable driveway. He drove forward twenty feet, then remembering a break in the trees, drove in reverse thirty feet. Looking through the opening in the undergrowth, he felt doubtful. There were definitely tire tracks through the snow, but he had no way of knowing if Hawk's Range Rover had made the tracks.

"Is that the way home, girl?"

Shadow whined.

Brian backed into the low brush and got out of his car. "I hate to do this, sweetheart, but I'm leaving you in the car. Don't make a sound until I come back for you. Understand?"

Shadow growled under her breath.

"Don't do this to me. I just want to sneak in and make certain everything is hunky-dory; then I'll come back for you."

Shadow lifted her paw and patted his sleeve.

"I know you want to come, but it might not be safe, and as much as I hate to say it, every inch of me is screaming there's danger in those woods."

Remembering seeing Hawk lift his fingers to his mouth as a command when Shadow was restless at the diner, Brian imitated the motion and watched with amazement as Shadow dropped to the floorboard and curled into a tight ball. He let out a sigh of relief. "Okay, then. I'll be back."

Reaching into the truck, he lifted a high-powered rifle from the gun rack mounted inside. "Little ol' Sarah doesn't mess around, does she?"

A small voice in the back of his head started listing all the possible dangers he might be facing. *Bears. Mountain lions. Rattlesnakes. Tomb raiders.* God, if there were really treasure hunters, they'd have weapons too.

"If you want to beat them, you have to learn how to stay covered." The memory of Brandon teaching him to evade capture or a death hit on the paintball range when they were kids filled his mind. His heart clenched. It felt as if Brandon was standing there beside him, protecting him, encouraging him.

"Like this. Press your back up against the tree trunk. Keep your weapon flat against your chest."

God, they'd played for real back in the day, and Brian had always been the first one taken out until the day Brandon had taken pity on him and taught him how to move through the course. Together they'd become invincible. They were smaller and faster than their quarterback-size siblings. God, he wished Brandon was here. A whisper of wind carried the memory of his voice. *I've got your back, bro.*

Clutching the rifle lengthwise against his chest, finger ready on the trigger, Brian zigged and zagged from tree to tree, hiding and stopping to listen before moving to the next shelter.

He was leaving a trail through the snow, but that couldn't be helped. Despite stepping as lightly as he could, the snow still seemed to crunch with the loudness of cannons.

In the distance an owl hooted and a twig snapped. He stayed hidden until he was certain he wasn't hearing sounds made by a person. He breathed a sigh of relief when lights came into view. A cabin stood sheltered under towering pines. He knew it was Hawk's. It couldn't not be Hawk's. Seeing Shadow's trail leading from the door through the snow, he was even more certain.

He wished he'd been invited to the cabin under better circumstances. The scent of a wood fire led his eyes to the smoking chimney, and he prayed that was a good sign.

He hurried across a clearing to the shelter of the house and flattened his back against the wall. The rifle was pulled close to his chest, but his finger was on the trigger, and as hard as his heart was pounding, he was ready.

Brian looked through the cabin window and found a frightening sight. Hawk was tied to a wooden chair in the center of the room, and as much as it would kill him to know he was playing bedroom games with another man—or woman—he would rather that than the alternative.

A foreign voice carried to him on the wind, and he instinctively ducked back into the shadows cast by a tall spruce. Peeking around the edge of the house, he saw the glare of a bright red cinder at the end of a cigarette. He followed the glowing tip as it lifted to a man's lips. The inhale made the small dot of light flicker brighter. The man exhaled smoke, and his voice filled the night air again. The man was speaking on a cell phone. "The ranger isn't going to be a problem."

There was a break in the conversation as Brian only heard one side. "The watch said he was checking trails for debris following the storm, but I'm not taking chances. He knows about the cave, and in my mind that is knowing too much."

Brian didn't like the way the conversation was going, and that was before the man said, "There won't be enough pieces left for anyone to find."

Oh shit.

Brian looked at his wristwatch. The damn cavalry should have been here by now. Wasn't there a time limit on how long an emergency response should take?

Hearing the creak of a door, Brian looked back through the window in time to see a tall blond man enter the cabin. He slapped Hawk in the face twice to revive him and said something, but the windowpane distorted the sound too much for Brian to understand what he was saying. Whatever it was, Hawk wasn't impressed, because he fought against the ropes tying him to the wooden chair. His struggles made the other man laugh.

Brian didn't find any humor in the situation when the blond withdrew a bowie knife from a sheath on his belt. He crouched and duck-walked under the window, making his way to the door. He quietly tried the handle, and the door pushed open easily.

He didn't wait to hear the creak. He burst through, aiming the rifle. "Drop the knife."

Outside, the sound of two vehicles driving over the gravel of the rustic driveway came to an abrupt stop. The man asked, "Do you think it's my friends or yours?"

Brian didn't move from his position, rifle trained on the stranger who was pushing the knife against Hawk's throat hard enough to cut. Blood trickled down Hawk's throat. Brian saw red but didn't fire. Through the open door he heard voices speaking rapidly in a foreign language. *Not the cavalry*. He met Hawk's gaze and didn't find the terror he thought would be reflected in his eyes. Was he ready to die? That didn't matter; Brian wasn't taking a chance. "Last chance. Drop it."

The man laughed at him.

Brian pulled the trigger, and as the man hit the floor, Brian dived, slamming his shoulder against Hawk to push the chair to the ground. Reaching blindly for the bowie, he grabbed its handle and started cutting the ropes that held Hawk's wrists and feet.

Just as two men came through the front door, Hawk and Brian were able to crawl to the far side of the sofa. Hawk hissed. "You could have broken my damn arms with that move!"

"You're alive, aren't you?"

Hawk smiled. "Yeah, I am, thanks to you."

Brian went up on one knee and sighted the two men coming through the door. "Drop your weapons."

The two men ducked outside, but there was another command over a loud speaker. "The house is surrounded. Come out with your hands in the air."

* * *

The arrival of the both the sheriff and his men couldn't have been more perfectly timed, but as Erik's two accomplices were handcuffed and taken away and Erik was unceremoniously zipped into a body bag, the rescue seemed anticlimactic. Frustrated, Hawk said to the sheriff, "I'm going to the cave. Now."

"No way, not a chance."

Hawk shouted back at him, "Don't you understand? These are not the same men from the trail. That means they're still up there. We can't let them get away with whatever they're doing!"

The sheriff grabbed his jacket when he would have pulled away. “This is bigger than what we can handle. I’ve already called the FBI, and we’re waiting for them.”

“That could be days!”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“You and I both know that won’t happen. Be reasonable, Mac.”

“I’m being very reasonable. You could have been killed tonight. Brian too. Only a miracle or luck kept that from happening, and I’ll be damned if I let you run blindly in. I said we’re waiting for backup, and that’s the end of it.”

Brian left Hawk and the sheriff nose to nose in a shouting match he believed could be heard all the way back at town. Remembering the dog he’d left behind in the truck, he hurried back through the forest, thinking if he retrieved her and brought her to Hawk, she might be a calming influence on her master. Shadows danced under the trees, and he imagined two boys playing, hiding from their older brothers. Emotion caught in his chest as he remembered Brandon. They’d been young, small. They were quiet, but not quiet enough. Their shrieks and giggles could be heard echoing around the paintball course. It became clear to his adult mind that his older brothers would have heard him and Brandon a mile away. *Damn, they let us win.*

Chapter Eight

Riding in Sarah's truck, Hawk stroked Shadow behind her ears, knowing if it hadn't been for her going to get help he would be dead. And Brian. He'd come when others might not have.

Gratitude made his throat feel like it was swelling closed. He couldn't express how he felt, not yet.

Beside him, Brian drove. He was taking him to Sarah's, where they'd sleep until morning or the arrival of the task force, whichever came first. Not that he believed he'd sleep. Or that the FBI would ever arrive so quickly.

He couldn't stay at the cabin. Not only was it a crime scene, but now he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to enter his living room without remembering Erik holding a knife to his throat or the look on Brian's face when he'd pulled the trigger. He hadn't hesitated.

Damn, he was an excellent shot.

He didn't have to look to know the bullet had gone through the center of Erik's forehead. He'd sighted and fired. Erik had dropped to the ground, and then Hawk had been falling too. Brian had used his body to protect him.

He whispered, "Thank you," looking up to catch Brian's gaze on him.

"You going to be all right?"

"Yeah."

He wasn't surprised when Brian asked, "You want to talk about it?"

"Not yet."

Hawk was glad when Brian respected his silence and just kept driving. He was even gladder when Sarah's diner came into view. He planned on standing under a shower for hours, or until he felt clean again. He'd led Erik right to the treasure. Without even knowing it was there, he'd all but drawn him a map. God, he was such an idiot.

After climbing out of the truck, he went through the back door and mounted the stairs two at a time. He was naked and wet by the time Shadow caught up. Brian never came up the stairs, leaving him disappointed but also knowing it was for the best. The man was respecting his wishes, his privacy, and if anyone deserved to know the truth, it was him. He'd saved his life. Twice, the way he saw it.

The hot water turned cold before he actually climbed out. He didn't feel any better, but at least he was no longer covered with blood. His own or Erik's.

He wondered when he was going to stop feeling like a fool.

Damn Erik.

Drying off with a towel, he debated not going down the stairs at all. He heard the voices of the sheriff and at least six others. The smell of coffee was too hard to resist, but honestly he needed to see Brian and make sure he was still real. Still in town. It almost seemed too much of a coincidence an archaeologist would arrive in town the same time as treasure hunters. Wasn't it a standard movie plot to have opposing groups of treasure hunters converge on their target at the same moment?

"Brian is not involved in this!"

God, please don't let Brian be involved in this.

Shadow rolled her eyes up to look at him and called him an idiot with her expression.

"I know, I know. I am." Hawk started down the stairs with his dog on his heels. He found Brian sitting in a corner booth. Alone. His head was dropped back against the wall, and his eyes were closed, but Hawk knew he wasn't sleeping. He grabbed a mug of coffee and walked to the corner table. "Mind if I join you?"

"No," Brian answered without opening his eyes. Hawk saw that the mug of coffee sitting in front of him hadn't even been touched. He went ahead and sat opposite him.

"Are you okay?"

Brian opened his eyes; they were red rimmed, whether from lack of sleep or because he'd been crying Hawk wasn't sure. He whispered, "I'm okay," then cleared his throat and sat up a little straighter. "I should be asking you that. Think your neck is going to need stitches?"

"Nah, it's nothing."

“Looks like something.”

Hawk shrugged.

“I've killed before—hunting—but I never dreamed I'd be able to kill a man that easily, without thought, without regret. I'm not sure how I feel about that.”

“I'm glad you were able to. You saved my life.”

“And that's why I'm okay with it.”

Hawk lifted his mug to his lips, saw that his hand was trembling, and hoped Brian didn't notice. He must have, because he commented, “It was a tough night for you too.”

Hawk nodded, sipping, hiding behind the curve of the mug. He looked at the coffee inside the cup to keep from meeting the eyes of the man until he had no choice but to lower the container and meet his gaze. “I knew him.”

Brian didn't say anything; he just sat there quietly, waiting for Hawk to get up the nerve to say the rest. At least that's the way it felt.

“We were lovers last spring. I guided him all over the Bitterroot Range, telling him stories and myths. I led him to a treasure I didn't even believe existed.” He felt both relieved and worse, admitting the truth.

“So, it's your habit to seduce unsuspecting tourists?”

Hawk tensed until he realized Brian was messing with him. Brian cracked a smug grin, and the mood at the table lightened considerably. Hawk shook his head. “I was an idiot.”

“There was no way for you to see his diabolical plan. Besides, treasure hasn't even been confirmed. What if all of this has been for nothing? There may be nothing of value up there.”

“Or anything of value up there could have already been completely cleared out.”

Brian caught his gaze over the table. “I'm glad the sheriff pulled rank. I don't like the thought of you facing any of those men, especially alone. Waiting for a tactical assault team seems like a better plan.”

Hawk let out a heavy sigh. “I hate waiting.”

“I know,” Brian assured him and then spent the rest of the night sharing his misery. Hawk would pace awhile and then sit and drink coffee awhile. To Brian he seemed like a caged tiger,

raw power wanting to be free. He touched the top of his hand. "Let's go to bed. It's going to be hours."

"I couldn't sleep."

Brian winked. "I didn't say anything about sleeping."

Hawk allowed himself to be led upstairs and even managed to sleep a few hours despite Brian's best efforts to keep him awake, but morning brought back the agonizing wait. Neither he nor Brian talked. They sat in the diner, drinking too much coffee, not eating.

Hours past daybreak, a shadow fell over them. Sheriff Dodd walked over to their table. He had a man with him who was obviously FBI. "Dr. Van Zant, this is Agent Miller."

Brian stood and shook his hand. Agent Miller announced, "I've been informed you volunteered to ascend the mountain in a professional capacity."

"That's correct."

"We can't guarantee your safety, but we will do everything we can to make certain you stay clear of any direct line of fire."

"I understand."

The agent turned to face Hawk. "And you must be the ranger the sheriff has been telling me about."

Hawk didn't stand or extend his hand in greeting. He felt his jaw tightening.

"Since you know these mountains better than anyone, I'd like to ask you to act as our guide."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really." The agent returned to his men without a backward glance.

Smiling, Sheriff Dodd leaned on the table and winked. "I appreciate your cooperation with this, Toby."

Hawk shook his head. Politics. But he couldn't complain since he'd been officially asked to assist. "Like I'd miss out on the fun?"

* * *

Brian was dressed in snow pants, a lightweight long-sleeved shirt, a heavier sweater, and a subzero jacket. He was still cold. He remembered his naïveté when he'd thought about climbing

down the mountain in flip-flops after his crash. He'd quickly decided against it, fearing he might lose his toes. Now, wearing wool socks and appropriate footwear, he wasn't so certain his toes were any safer.

They'd ridden as far as they could in snowmobiles, traveled for a while on cross-country skis, and finally, attached sharp metal cleats to their boots for the last of the climb and started climbing. During summer months it might be a scramble, but following the earlier blizzard they'd need ice axes, harnesses, and rope. Once begun, the ascent seemed never ending.

Hawk was directly above him, belaying him, so he at least had a nice view. The man inspired him to keep moving, making every inch of the climb seem effortless. He threw his axe into the ice, pulled up. He climbed about twenty feet fairly rapidly, and then suddenly the ice gave way, cracking, and Hawk was free-falling. Brian braced for impact as the man fell toward him but watched amazed as Hawk swung his axe and anchored in the ice, stopping his free fall. He looked down at Brian and smiled widely. Brian thought he heard him laugh as he resumed his ascent.

Effortless.

Brian's muscles screamed, so he knew that part was a lie, an optical illusion. He hoped he looked as skilled to the agents below and running a line parallel to them, but guessed he didn't. One thing was clear in his mind: cliff climbing was definitely tougher and more unpredictable than gym climbing.

"Almost there," Hawk encouraged, and Brian pitched his axe into ice and pulled his weight up. Reaching a ledge, they rested. The snow-covered valley below was beautiful, a winter wonderland.

Brian looked at Hawk and realized that although they were climbing to face almost certain danger, he was at total peace. He seemed immersed and entranced by the natural beauty surrounding them, granite peaks iced white with snow, towering pines, and bright blue skies.

He knew his own face was probably etched with worry. He suddenly wished they were alone, because he longed to kiss him. Hawk caught him looking at him and pointed in the direction he was gazing. "Do you see them?"

Brian looked at a nearby slope and saw movement. He tensed until he realized it wasn't men. The shapes were bighorn sheep. A sudden crack, sounding almost like thunder, rent the silence as two males collided horns. Hawk laughed. "The snow hasn't dampened their spirits."

Brian couldn't believe the animals were so near and he'd been oblivious to them. He'd been so focused on the trail forged by Hawk, he hadn't thought about the rest of the range. Just because he hadn't seen any tracks on the mountain didn't mean there weren't any. There were several alternate faces anyone wishing to ascend the peak could climb. And if they could see the sheep so clearly, anyone looking would obviously see them. "Are we safe, out in the open like this?"

Hawk looked at him, seeming surprised. "I was just thinking that very thing. We should move into the shelter of the scrub. It won't be perfect coverage, but we won't be as open as now."

"Do you really think there is someone else up here?"

"I think men could have rappelled in before the storm, but I'd be very surprised if they'd been able to get out before the storm hit. Erik was meeting someone up here today."

Brian saw the dark look that flashed through Hawk's eyes. Meeting Hawk's gaze, he asked, "You all right?"

"I will be, as soon as we get all these scumbags behind bars." Hawk gathered their gear and announced loud enough for the agents to hear, "We should keep moving."

Less than thirty minutes later, they reached the mouth of a cave, and it was evident by the packed snow that someone had been going in and out. Perhaps many. Hawk lifted his finger to his lips, signaling for them to remain silent. He mouthed, *Stay here*, before disappearing inside. It was obvious to Brian the agents weren't impressed, but also evident they respected him enough to do as he asked.

Hawk returned less than a minute later. "Three men, inside."

The agents lifted their weapons, ready to enter, but Hawk shook his head and lifted his chin to look at the sky. The sound of helicopter blades came to them on the wind and all nine men pressed against the rock face. They backed away from the entrance and ducked into heavy brush. As they watched, a helicopter dropped into sight. Ropes dropped, and a lone man rappelled down. When he was safely on the ledge, he lifted his hand, and the chopper flew off.

He disappeared into the mouth of the cave. Shouts came from inside. “What do you mean the objects aren't ready for pickup?”

“There was a blizzard, if you didn't notice.”

“What does that have to do with anything? The objects are here; you are here.”

“You really have no concept of what is in here, do you?”

Agent Miller motioned his men to follow him, his glance command enough for Brian to stay behind. Hawk stayed beside him, and Brian knew by his expression he would rather have led the unit. Hawk shielded him when raised voices came from inside the cave, but it soon became obvious the men inside were surrendering. Outnumbered. Outgunned. The agents appeared suddenly in the mouth of the cave with their prisoners.

“That was quick and easy,” Brian commented, slightly disappointed there hadn't been a little more excitement. It felt like he was pumped up on adrenaline for absolutely no reason. The letdown was overwhelming.

Agent Miller waved him toward the cave. “Dr. Van Zant, I think you'll want to take a look inside.”

Brian exchanged glances with Hawk before entering the cave. Hawk followed closely, and as the swell of darkness surrounded them, Brian felt Hawk's fingertips brush the inside of his palm, just a touch to let him know he was there beside him, but one of intimacy. A smile touched the corners of his mouth as large flashlights flared to life. Agent Miller led the way to a narrow passage they would be forced to squeeze through. He handed Brian a flashlight. “After you.”

Brian wasn't sure what he expected, maybe some scattered shards of pottery or even a preserved room—he'd discovered both in his career—but as the beam of light swept first the floor in front of him and then the walls, his jaw dropped. He didn't move farther into the wide cave. Hawk bumped into his back. “Aren't you going in?”

“Not yet.”

Brian called over his shoulder to Agent Miller, “Is there some way to block off this corridor? Until I can get a field team in here, I need this area secured.”

“I'll take care of it.”

“And a SAT-phone. I need to make some calls.”

Behind him, Hawk grew impatient. "Brian?"

"Give me a minute." Brian rubbed his hand over his mouth, trying to take in the extraordinary importance of the archaeological find he was facing...and the damage already inflicted by the idiots who had been in the cave trying to steal it. He was overwhelmed, completely overwhelmed. Mentally. Emotionally. He stepped forward, allowing Hawk enough room to step into the cave room with him, but keeping a restraining arm across his chest to keep him from going farther in. He lifted his flashlight beam to one of the walls.

"Cave drawings?"

"Stay here." He moved closer to the wall, angling the flashlight. In awe he said, "God. My God," as he moved around the circumference of the room. He shook his head as he shuffled slowly around, muttering to himself.

From behind Hawk an agent said, "You asked for a SAT-phone?"

Brian pulled himself away from the wall and joined Hawk and the agent. He took the phone as the agent explained, "You can get a signal on the ledge outside."

Brian nodded, took the phone, then hurried toward the bright opening. Out in the cool, fresh air, his head cleared and giddiness rose to the forefront. He held himself in check from breaking out in dance in front of the agents, but his mind was doing backflips. Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he calmed enough to dial information and request assistance connecting with the University of Montana's Center for Archaeological Research. He asked for Howard Whitehead, hoping the man hadn't retired. They'd met while he was in Cairo, and Brian had been very impressed with his knowledge. He was put on hold without any indication if he would be connected to Howard or someone else.

"This is Howard Whitehead."

"Howard! Thank goodness you're there. You may not remember me, but we worked together a bit in Egypt. Brian Van Zant?"

"Brian. Of course I remember. How could I forget you?"

Brian breathed a sigh of relief. He remembered him and he hadn't retired yet. Now the big question was, would he support him or bulldoze him and take credit for the find himself? He was taking a chance sharing any information at this early stage, and this discovery was going to be

the pinnacle of someone's career. "That's great news, because I have a favor to ask you. I need a second opinion on something, and I think you're going to need to see it in person."

After a bit of schedule comparing, and coaxing on Brian's part that he should make the trip a top priority, Howard determined he could make the trip in a couple of days.

Brian was nervous as he disconnected.

"What's wrong?"

Brian jumped, not realizing Hawk had come up behind him.

"Politics. Someone is going to get credit for this find because of its sheer significance. I'd really like that person to be me."

Hawk crossed his arms. "No one ever needed to know this site was here. This is sacred land."

"Yes. It is. I can see that. I respect that. But the reality is this cave entrance is exposed. People know about it now. You, me, the nine agents here now, the men arrested last night, the men arrested this morning, the helicopter pilot—"

Hawk raised his hand to silence him. "I get it. The only way to keep it preserved now is to protect it with bureaucracy."

"Exactly."

"This Howard can do that?"

Brian shook his head. "Howard lends extra legitimacy. With his expertise authenticating the site, money will become available to make this a national protected site, but that only means it will be a felony to deface the rock. I have enough contacts to get a steel gate up here to prevent trespassing, but the more serious threat is the one posed by Erik—and the people he worked for."

"Meaning they'll be back."

"Yes." Brian motioned for Hawk to follow him and led him deep into the cave. With the beam of his flashlight he brought his attention to the tools and damage already inflicted on a three-feet-by-four-feet section of rock they'd been trying to break free. "See this fissure? They were attempting to break free a solid block, but it cracked, making it less valuable. Still worth a lot of money, but not worth nearly as much as it was. I'd say someone halted the chiseling to try to recalculate and salvage what they could. Fortunately, they started with a lesser drawing."

“Less?”

“This one is probably between five hundred and a thousand years old. Carbon dating will be more accurate, but that's my best educated guess. It depicts what looks like birds and a mountain goat. In my mind it is priceless, but in a collector's mind, a million dollars. Intact. Broken, worth a quarter of its original value.” Brian walked three feet to the left. “Now this one. It's clearly older.”

Hawk cocked his head, and Brian could tell to his untrained eye they looked identical.

“Trust me on this. It's *older*. See how it is divided into three parts? Clearly a sacred image. The top two parts, obviously representative of earth and sky, fairly typical, but this third layer is not typical...at least in this part of the world...representing *below earth*. It may be representative of the underworld. I'd have to research local myths and legends to know for certain, and that is one reason in particular I called Howard. He'll know. But back to value—to me—priceless. To a collector—*priceless*. Getting it out of here intact, potentially impossible, but when enough money is offered men will try.”

Agent Miller cleared his throat. “Sorry to interrupt, Doctor. We're ready to take the prisoners down.”

Brian looked at him, confused.

Hawk interpreted. “I think he's asking you if you are ready to go down as well.”

“Hell no, I'm staying right here.” To prove his point, he rummaged in his backpack and pulled out his camera to start documenting. Hawk walked over to the agent and explained he would stay with the doctor and accompany him down when he was finished. Brian smirked, wondering how much trouble Hawk was going to give him when he explained he wasn't leaving.

Chapter Nine

Hawk paced the small antechamber. He was seeing a new side to Brian Van Zant: focused, über-intelligent, anal-retentive, obsessive, and stubborn as a mule. He started to go back inside the deeper cave but stopped himself and counted to ten. He turned around and looked out over the mountain range. Inhaled. Exhaled. Snow flurries filled the air, and based on the position of the sun, night would descend in a matter of hours. They should already be climbing down and would be, but Brian was refusing to leave.

Hearing Brian's boot crunch on the hard packed snow at the entrance, Hawk closed his eyes. He didn't want to argue with him. *Again.*

Brian came up behind him and rubbed his shoulders through his down parka. "I'm sorry. I just feel like I need to stay here. Tonight. In the morning, I'll climb down with you and get adequate supplies together for a field office."

"A field office?" Hawk asked through gritted teeth.

"Discovery and documentation isn't an afternoon gig. I'm here for the duration or until I'm replaced by someone more capable."

"It's thirty-one degrees. When the sun sets, you're looking at a ten- to twenty-degree drop."

"It's warmer inside the cave," Brian argued, wrapping his arms around Hawk's waist.

He could feel Brian's warm breath against his cheek, and as much as being trapped in the cave overnight held a certain amount of allure, the dangers outweighed any romantic leanings. Besides, a hot meal and a soft, warm bed waited at the bottom of the mountain. "Barely, and you refused to let me start a fire."

Hawk wasn't cold. He'd layered. He'd planned for every emergency, including being trapped on the mountain for several days. He just didn't feel good about staying overnight. Maybe his fears were unsubstantiated, but after the last twenty-four hours, he was on edge. The bad guys might all be in jail, but—

“I can't risk contaminating the wall. It will distort the carbon-dating results. I explained my reasons.” Brian slid his hand under the bottom edge of Hawk's parka to find the soft, warm fleece layer beneath. His hand didn't stop there. He pulled the edge of his sweater to reveal the thermal underwear shirt beneath. Another tug and his bare stomach became exposed. Cool air blew over his warm flesh. Hawk closed his eyes as Brian's glove-warmed hand slid over his bare skin. *When did he take off his gloves?*

“You'd risk freezing to death on this mountain?” He turned to face him. Brian pouted, not begging, not saying please, but looking like he might. That look, that pouting, needy expression, made fire race through his veins. Not anger. Need. Raw, all-consuming lust. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He'd never felt so affected by anyone. “One night, Brian. We break camp first thing in the morning.”

Brian smiled widely, hugging him close. “That's all I asked for.”

Hawk could feel Brian's happiness and satisfaction roll off him in waves. He grabbed the neckline of Brian's jacket and pushed him backward until he was pressed against the rock face of the cave entrance. He wrapped his other hand into his short, curly hair so that when he leaned in to kiss him, he could control him. He didn't want him pulling away; he didn't want him in control of the situation at all. He wasn't sure the previous night's switch-up was a onetime thing, but he did want Brian to know he was in charge. He knew he'd made his point when Brian's eyes widened. He was anticipating his roughness.

“*Will rope be involved?*” The question Brian had asked yesterday—before Erik arrived at the cabin—kept rolling through his brain. Did Brian like it a little rough sometimes? It seemed like he did, considering the pinching and biting, the innuendoes.

Hawk crushed his mouth against Brian's, licking, biting, sucking, their teeth clashing. He was on fire for him as he reached for the zipper of his parka and unzipped, exposing layers of warm clothes. He pushed his hands under his shirts, finding his nipples tight buds, which seemed to be begging to be pinched. He complied. Pinching, pulling, making Brian gasp and moan and writhe beneath the onslaught of painful attention.

Hawk reacted strongly to his response, wanting more, needing more. He grabbed his jaw and pinched it between his fingers, forcing him to meet his gaze. “You like it rough, Brian?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted.

Hawk released his jaw and smacked Brian's face, then gripped his jaw again, holding his face in a position where he could make him look at him even if he didn't want to. Brian wasn't fighting; he was panting with need. He tried to push his face closer to kiss Hawk, but Hawk didn't let him, controlling the distance between their mouths. "I like to be a little rough, but I'm just not sure you can take it."

"I can," Brian promised, reaching for Hawk's belt buckle, his hands doing the work to expose him, to expose himself. Hawk felt his success when Brian's hand dipped into his pants and wrapped around his hard cock. He squeezed and pulled. Hawk didn't make any move to stop him. He kissed him hard, harder, demanding access to his tongue.

Hawk grabbed blindly for Brian's cock and balls, stroking down his hard length to his balls and squeezing a yelp out of him.

Brian tried to pull his mouth away, but Hawk wouldn't allow it. He kissed him deeper, squeezing his balls enough to hurt and then stroking the pain away, again and again. He had Brian trembling with need and he liked it, liked it too much. It was one of the reasons he didn't date on the mountain. No one knew he was gay. No one suspected he was kinky. He whispered against Brian's face, "I like feeling you tremble beneath me."

Brian closed his eyes. "Oh God."

Hawk squeezed his cock. "You're so turned on, you could come right here, right now, couldn't you, Brian?"

"Yes," he hissed as Hawk squeezed harder.

"Not yet." Hawk pulled his cock straight down, making him moan. "I want you to suck me first."

Brian slid down the rough wall and dropped to his knees in front of Hawk. His hand was still wrapped around Hawk's cock. He closed his mouth around the circumcised head and sucked, pulling him deep.

Hawk moan. "Fuck, yeah. God, Brian, oh God." He didn't let Brian suck him long. It felt too good and he didn't want to come yet. He grabbed Brian's hair and brought him to his feet. "You are too...damn...good...at...that."

Brian laughed in the face of the compliment. "I do what I can to please."

"Yeah?" Hawk asked.

Brian smiled smugly.

Hawk kissed him fast and hard. "Then get on your knees. I want to fuck you now."

Brian didn't waste any time dropping to his hands and knees.

Hawk walked around behind him and squeezed his ass cheek through the slick fabric of his alpine pants. With a fast jerk, he pulled the pants down over his hips, baring Brian's pale skin. He rubbed his hand over the smooth bottom. "We could have been in a soft, warm bed tonight."

He slapped Brian's bottom, leaving a handprint. "I think I want you to remember how displeased I am with having to bunk on a hard, cold stone floor tonight. What do you think about that?"

"God, yes."

"Yes, what, Brian?"

"Spank me."

Hawk closed his eyes, drinking in the pleasure of the moment. He liked to be asked to inflict pain. He really liked hearing the sounds people made when he hurt them, the gasps, the high-pitched whines, deep-in-the-throat growls.

He spanked Brian, hard, because he wanted it to hurt. He wanted him to cry out, to sob his name, to beg him to stop. He somehow knew Brian wouldn't beg him to stop.

He left his ass rosy pink, and when he pressed his thighs against the warmth, Brian sighed. He pushed his cock against Brian's anus. "Do you want me to fuck you now?"

"Please. Fuck me hard, Hawk. I need you to fuck me hard."

Remembering watching Brian's reflection in the mirror, how it felt to lock gazes with him during the intimacy of penetration, Hawk grabbed his hair. "Look back at me."

Brian turned his head as far as he could, making eye contact with Hawk.

"That's it. That's what I want. Look at me." Hawk held his gaze as he pressed slowly into him. Brian's jaw relaxed and dropped open. He gasped as he was stretched and filled. "Oh God."

Hawk maintained the slow slide into him until he couldn't go any deeper. He withdrew almost completely before pushing back in, knowing the sensation was driving Brian crazy. "God, oh God."

He didn't look away.

“Touch yourself while I fill you.”

Brain broke eye contact for just a moment while he rearranged the layers of clothing to expose his cock. Hawk jerked his face around by tugging his hair. “I didn't say you could look away.”

“I'm sorry.”

Hawk thrust in hard and fast. “Don't do it again. Now jerk yourself off while I fill your ass.” He held Brian's gaze as he thrust. In. Out. Harder and harder. Brain's own jerks kept pace. His eyes rolled back as he started to orgasm, and the primal growl of release and satisfaction ripped through Hawk, bringing his own orgasm.

Sometime later, darkness filled the cavern. Neither man had moved to turn on a flashlight. Brian lay stretched out on the earth-covered stone of the outer cave, looking relaxed and at peace, and although he'd adjusted his clothing, Hawk knew he had to be freezing. By the light of a penlight, he rummaged in his pack, pulled out a microthin all-weather tarp, and went to work securing it as a flap over the narrow entrance to the main chamber. He wasn't happy about it, but he'd had all afternoon to come up with a suitable alternative to freezing to death. Once the main chamber was adequately sealed off, he said, “Now, I make a fire.”

Brian opened his eyes and started to object, but Hawk stilled, listening. He lifted two fingers to his lips for silence.

Brian mouthed, *What?*

Hawk squatted fast, pulling Brian with him, and clamped his hand hard over Brian's mouth to keep him quiet. He pointed for him to go under the tarp flap and followed when he did so. Leaning close to Brian's ear he whispered, “Stay here,” and disappeared back to the other side.

He didn't take any time getting out onto the main ledge, knowing he would only have one shot at stopping whoever was trying to come in. From a cover of low-growing scrub, he watched the helicopter move closer. It wasn't the copter from the morning run; it was the stealth flyer he'd seen several nights before. It had been bothering him that the men they'd arrested with Erik weren't the two men he'd seen on the ridge. They weren't with the three left collecting artifacts in the cave either. That meant Erik's main buyer was still waiting and had knowledgeable guides to escort more artifact gatherers right to the front doors. He guessed this was the next wave.

A spotlight scanned over granite, and Hawk pulled in tight against the rock. He had a plan. It was a one-shot do-or-die plan, but if it worked...

The light sighted on the entrance of the cave, and four ropes dropped, two from each side of the bird. Men braced on the sides to drop. They would have to rappel simultaneously or risk putting the helicopter off balance. That's what Hawk was counting on.

He kept his eyes on the men as he slipped out of his hiding place. They had assault rifles strapped to their backs. For treasure hunters, they knew how to arm themselves. He knew the moment he was sighted. Rapid popping of automatic fire filled the air, and ice sprayed by his feet as bullets sank into the snow-covered ledge, but he didn't stop moving. He grabbed for the two nearest ropes, swinging in a far arc off the cliff and circling over the second set of ropes on his return fall. He dropped hard on the ledge, still holding the ropes. He ran, pulling the ropes into the scrub. He looped them around the base of a pine and tied off, anchoring the helicopter. He didn't stop moving. He ran back onto the ledge, drawing fire. The men were trying to maintain their timed rappel, but the machine was already swaying.

Hawk ran, bullets raining down around him. Jumping off the ledge he grabbed the second set of ropes and kept arcing, pulling the ropes in an opposite direction as he hit the ground on a farther ridge. He tied off on a boulder while the helicopter tried to lift. The rotors whined, the vehicle in obvious trouble. A second later the helicopter fell from the sky and crashed in a ball of fire. The repercussion of the explosion slammed Hawk against granite, knocking the wind out of him. He hit his head hard and saw stars.

Through the shadow of black clouding his vision, he saw one of the men climbing up the ice covered rock face. He was injured, but not so injured he wouldn't reach the mouth of the cave before Hawk.

He tried to stand and weaved, dizzy. He forced himself to keep walking, keeping his eye on the treasure hunter.

* * *

Brian backed into the farthest corner of the cave, a natural indentation he fit perfectly inside. Huddled and waiting, he listened to the rotating arms of the helicopter. *Damn, how did Hawk do that? Hear what couldn't be heard?*

Fear made his blood turn to ice. There were no voices, only the rotation and then gunfire. “God. Hawk.” He started to leave his hiding place but didn't. Revealing himself would only get him killed sooner rather than later. *Fuck!*

The rotation of the helicopter was a constant *fwhop, fwhop, fwhop*.

A shrill scream rent the darkness—not human, metal. An explosion followed. Brian stood, no longer caring if he was discovered. Feeling his way around the dark cave, he found the tarp-covered opening. He wanted to run to the cave's main opening, but he edged slowly around. The darkness was broken by the brilliant red flames of a fuel fire. He saw the gun barrel rising above the rock edge before he saw the man.

He left his hiding spot at a dead run, then grabbed the barrel and jerked up hard and fast. The man screamed from pain, not surprise. Brian squinted at him, realizing the man's arm was dislocated and he was scrambling over the ice using his one good arm and feet to climb.

Disarmed and injured, he was definitely at a disadvantage, but Brian stepped backward and sighted him. “Let's take the rest of this climb real slow.”

The man glared at him.

“You speak English?”

“Yes.” The man's accent was thick.

“Anyone else flying in tonight I need to worry about?”

“Go to hell.”

Brian nodded, keeping the rifle trained on him. He scanned the ridge, but Hawk was nowhere in sight. The man in front of him grunted, sliding on the frozen steep grade. Brian backed up, pressing against the granite. If there was anyone else alive from the crash, he didn't want them sneaking up on his backside. “Damn it, Hawk. Where are you?” He wouldn't allow himself to believe he was part of the burning wreckage on the side of the cliff.

A snapped twig to the far right drew Brian's gaze. Hawk came into sight. He was limping and had his hand pressed to the back of his head, but he was alive. Brian rushed to his side and helped him walk the final few yards. “My God, are you okay?”

“I'll live. I'd really like for this night to be over.” He nodded with his chin to the man still trying to lift himself over the edge one-armed. “You gonna help him?”

“Nope. He told me to go to hell, so I thought I'd give him a chance to get there ahead of me.”

Hawk laughed, then clutched his head. “Oh God, that hurts.” He laughed harder.

A few hours later the FBI and local police finally arrived to rescue them. Brian and Hawk argued for hours about whether or not Brian was going to leave the mountain. Brian agreed to go once he had a steel gate up.

“That isn't going to stop a dedicated treasure hunter. They'll just blow through the bars.”

“You're not helping your case for getting me off the mountain.”

“The type of gate you're suggesting could take days, maybe weeks.”

Brian didn't give an inch. “Then I guess I'm going to need supplies.”

* * *

Twelve days later, Brian reluctantly returned to town for a shower and shave. Hawk had helped him establish a camp, brought him a SAT-phone, set up a rough field office, and basically made his every need a top priority. He made sure he ate and slept in addition to working. He also guided the group from the Montana Center for Archaeological Research up to the cave. They'd taken the long trail around the mountain and up, which meant two full days walking and a night of winter camping, but there was no climbing involved. Just a slow steady walk, and since Howard Whitehead appeared to be as old as time, Hawk hadn't wanted to take any chances. As a consequence Brian and Hawk hadn't had a moment alone together.

With the steel gate installed and two volunteers, armed Native Americans from the local tribal council, standing guard, Brian allowed himself to be dragged off the mountain. He did a fair share of griping about it, though. Hawk convinced him when he said, “Man, you stink.”

He couldn't deny the truth. He did.

Showered, shaved, and wearing clean clothes, he forced himself to go downstairs and attempt being sociable—even though the soft bed at Sarah's diner was calling to him. He found Hawk and Shadow at the bar. The diner was completely deserted. “Where did everybody go?”

Hawk looked up from his bowl of chili, which he'd been contemplating instead of eating. “Storm coming.”

“No way,” Brian exclaimed. “That's why you forced me off the mountain today?”

“Yep.”

“The snow just melted.”

“I know.”

“Damn it.”

Hawk shrugged. “I didn't think you'd leave if you knew another blizzard was predicted, and I couldn't risk you getting trapped up there.”

“But the skies are blue. There's no wind.”

“Animals told me.”

Brian laughed out loud. “Right. Don't scare me like that. Seriously, where are all the customers?”

“I'd say they're stocking up on basic supplies.”

“Because you told them a storm was coming?”

Hawk didn't comment. Sitting on a bar stool, Brian rolled his eyes, but looking over his shoulders through the large café window, he saw a front of low, dark clouds moving in. Great. He was suddenly glad he wouldn't be spending the night on the mountain but immediately became concerned about the men they'd left up there. “The two guards—”

Hawk interrupted him. “Were instructed to leave the mountain as soon as we were out of their sight. The storm coming in is much bigger than the last one. No one will chance a break-in, and as soon as the storm clears, the guards will be back in position.”

“But what if someone tries?”

“They'll die on the mountain.”

His answer held so much conviction, Brian believed him. He caught Hawk's gaze and waggled his eyebrows. “I no longer stink.”

Hawk leaned over and sniffed his neck. “Nice. Cologne, too. Hot date?”

“Hope so.”

Hawk bit his neck. “God, I've missed you.”

Brian pulled back, looking surprised. “We've been together every day.”

“We haven't exactly been *alone*.”

Brian smiled, blushing. "I was thinking dinner and a movie."

Hawk reached between his legs and grabbed his crotch. "I got your dinner and a movie."

Brian snickered. "Eat a little cock, reenact *The Last of the Mohicans*?"

Hawk slid off his bar stool and pulled Brian into his arms. "Something like that."

A graveled throat cleared behind them, making them both jump. Turning around, Brian faced a wrinkled old man with long white hair. Hawk stood. "Grandfather."

The old man leaned heavily on a roughly carved walking stick. Angrily he dropped a newspaper on the bar in front of Hawk. "You did not tell me about this."

Brian glanced at the headline with surprise. Hawk didn't even look down as he attempted to soothe his grandfather. "Very powerful men have decided they want the rock for themselves. As long as it was a secret, it was in danger of being stolen. Now, it will be protected."

"The cave is sacred land."

"It will always be so."

While the two men argued, Brian picked up the newspaper and started reading.

BITTERROOT ROCK ART DISCOVERY

The Montana Center for Archaeological Research has announced a major archaeological discovery in the Bitterroot Mountain Range in Montana: a deep cave filled with hundreds of drawings, carvings, and pottery shards. It was not disclosed as to whether any human remains were found. Dr. Brian Van Zant, a visiting archaeologist from Ohio, made the discovery of a lifetime when he stumbled upon a site being destroyed by vandals. Local police and park rangers were called in to secure the area while Van Zant contacted the Montana Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Montana.

The site was visited by MCAR's Regional Archaeologist Howard Whitehead. "This is a stunning find," commented Whitehead. "The walls and ceiling contain hundreds of drawings, documenting day to day tasks, planting, hunting. Some of the panels depict what would be typically seen as women's work: beading, basket weaving, and in one instance a very clearly pregnant woman and what can only be described as children playing at her feet while she works. Remarkable, just remarkable. This is the most significant discovery in MCAR's history."

Photographs were not being permitted at the time of this writing, and it is believed it may be several years before the public is given a glimpse of the true wonder hidden in the cave's deepest recesses. In the interest of security, the location of the cave is being kept secret.

It is expected radiocarbon dating will mark the drawings at being over a thousand years old. It is interesting to note these drawings are beyond the reach of natural light, suggesting they were drawn by torchlight with confirmed remnants of bark torches also discovered.

Jason Moyer, Director of MCAR, stated, "The full impact of this discovery has yet to be determined but I am pleased to announce that Dr. Brian Van Zant has accepted the position as chief archaeologist and will be putting together a team. This will be a painstaking process projected to take many years to discover all the secrets hidden in this cave."

Discovered only a hundred yards from a main trail forged by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in the early eighteen hundreds.

The argument ended suddenly, drawing Brian's attention to the abrupt calm. The old man led Hawk to a table where they sat. They spoke softly and briefly before his grandfather stood and walked away from the table and left the restaurant. Brian's gaze went back to Hawk; a pouch lay in the center of the tabletop. Hawk picked it up and closed it in his fist before slamming his fist down against the Formica.

Brian stood and hurried to join Hawk. Tears were sliding down his face. Squatting beside him, Brian rested his hand on Hawk's knee and looked up into his grief-stricken face. "What is it?"

"He said if I am going to make decisions for the tribe, it was time I wore his mantle." He opened his hand to reveal the small pouch. "This was his way of transferring his authority to me."

Brian tried to understand why Hawk was so upset and failed. "You said yourself you have been trained your entire life to follow in your grandfather's footsteps as your tribe's medicine man."

"Yes." Hawk closed his eyes. "He has gone to take a final walk across the ridge."

Brian started to remind him of the impending storm and to tell him he should stop his grandfather, but then the brunt of what Hawk was telling him hit him. *He's going up the mountain to die.*

A solemn quiet filled both of them as they sat in the empty room. Outside the window a fine sleet was falling at a hard angle and the darkening sky cast a shade of gray through the diner. Brian got up, then went to sit in the chair beside Hawk. He'd pulled himself together, but his sadness was touchable. Brian asked, "Shouldn't we try to stop him?"

"No. Whatever comes of this night will...regardless of whether his spirit decides to fly from a snowcapped mountaintop or from the softness of his warm, comfortable bed."

Brian slumped forward, feeling defeated.

"I guess I'll owe you dinner and a movie another night."

Brian nodded, not at all surprised when Hawk pushed out of his seat and left the dining room. Shadow trailed behind him. A steady creaking of wood told him Hawk was climbing the staircase with the weight of the world on his shoulders. He wasn't sure if he should follow him or not but decided to give him a few moments alone.

In the gloom, Brian sat, rereading the newspaper article. His life had changed so much in the last few days, he'd barely had time to take stock, but it was official: he was staying on for a while. He had a job, and not only that, he'd been given full credit for the archaeological discovery. It was quite a feather in his career cap. He missed having Brandon to share the adventure with. Somehow he felt like he knew—that he'd somehow been watching over him all along. Closing his eyes, he tried to make peace with the fact that his brother had betrayed him and found he wasn't quite there yet. Someday, but not yet.

Michael he didn't want to find peace with. Maybe that was a horrible attitude, but he just didn't care. What Michael had done had almost destroyed him, and until recently he'd believed he would never love again because he would never be able to trust again. *So, how am I falling in love with Hawk?*

He let out a deep breath, not certain he could ever trust completely again but very sure he cared for Hawk. That in itself was a problem. He'd come out of the closet a long time ago; he sure couldn't go back into it. And he couldn't force Hawk into opening up about his sexuality publicly if he didn't want to. They needed to talk and soon if he was going to try to make a home here on the mountain.

Brian sighed heavily, deciding to join Hawk upstairs. It wasn't like he could ruin his reputation if no one was looking.

Chapter Ten

Hawk lay in bed, but he wasn't sleeping. He'd left the light on for Brian, expecting him to follow, and was relieved when he finally heard his footfalls on the stairs. He sat up, plumping a pillow behind him. Brian looked surprised to see him awake.

"I was trying to be quiet."

Hawk shrugged. "I'm not sleeping." He patted the space on the bed beside him, and Brian sat. He wrapped his hand around Brian's neck and pulled him close, then kissed him softly. "Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry."

"Sleep with me?"

Brian stood and started taking off his clothes. "Gladly. It's been more than a week since I've had anything that even closely resembled a good night's sleep."

Hawk chuckled. "The hard ground gets old quickly."

"That and I'm not twenty anymore. My bones ached a little more every day." Brian climbed beneath the blankets, discovering Hawk was naked as well. They lay side by side, both looking at the ceiling. Brian broke the silence. "Your grandfather didn't react to us hugging. Do you think he didn't notice?"

Hawk rolled onto his side and traced Brian's bare shoulder with his fingertip. The touch drew gooseflesh and he guessed if he reached between Brian's legs, he'd find him hard. "I think he noticed. Our culture doesn't put as much emphasis on homosexuality as yours."

"White man's sin?" Brian quipped.

"Something like that." He shrugged. "Religion attributes sin to many natural acts. He wouldn't see our hug as taboo or even worthy of comment."

"Yet you're still in the closet."

“It's complicated.”

Brian rolled to face him and scooted close enough their stomachs were pressed flat against each other. He wrapped his leg around Hawk's. He hadn't been erect, but with his touch he grew hard and ready. Brian noticed and smiled wickedly. He reached between their bodies to stroke his length. Hawk closed his eyes as pleasure washed through him. “I love it when you touch me.”

“I know. That's why *this* shouldn't be complicated. For me, as soon as I realized my family accepted my sexuality, I stopped giving a damn what the neighbors thought.” Brian slid down his body, and although Hawk knew what was coming, the added jolt of pleasure he felt when Brian licked his hard length made him cry out. Brian circled his glans with his tongue before sucking him deep into the back of his throat. The rhythmic pull of his sucking tongue pushed Hawk to the edge of need quickly, too quickly. Embarrassed, he admitted, “I'm going to come if you don't stop.”

Brian's response was to suck a little deeper, a little harder, making it impossible for Hawk to hold back. “Oh God. Oh oh oh!”

When he recovered, Brian was lying next to him, stroking his chest, smiling.

“You are a very naughty boy.”

Brian laughed. “I'll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.” He didn't beat around the bush, because playing games wasn't his style. He blatantly asked him, “So how kinky are you?”

Brian drew in a shuddered breath. Hawk really knew how to blow him away. One minute he was hiding who he was, and the next he was asking him questions most people wouldn't. He decided honesty was his best response since hiding who he was from Michael had only left him frustrated, and in the end it probably wouldn't have mattered anyway. Except Michael may have moved on more quickly. They might have never gotten married. “Years ago I played publicly: fetish clubs, bondage parties. When I met Michael, I found out he wasn't into kink, so I kept my past secret. I won't make that mistake again.”

“Wow. That's surprising.”

“I was head over heels and didn't want my depravity to scare him off,” Brian explained dramatically. Hawk rewarded his honesty with a hard pull on his cock. Brian moaned and lifted his hips off the mattress.

“Like that, huh?”

“God, yes.”

Hawk chuckled. “I am so glad you wrecked on my mountain. I think we can have a lot of fun together.” He knew he'd said something wrong because the mood went from light to tense in a heartbeat. He guessed, “You're leaving town?”

“No!” Brian sat up. “It isn't that. We need to talk.”

Hawk sat up too, not liking the tone.

“I'm *out*.” His facial expressions were dramatic, making Hawk laugh even though he didn't want to.

“Yes, I know. The entire county knows. What does that have to do with us having fun together?”

Brian rolled his eyes, and Hawk understood. “You think I won't want people to guess our relationship, so we'll have to play it cool in public, whereas you would normally flaunt the relationship you're in.”

“Won't you?”

Hawk leaned forward and kissed him lightly, nipping his lip playfully. “Do you know how many times I've wanted to do that in the crowded diner? Or to just reach out and touch your hand or your thigh? Having you here, I'm not going to be able to keep holding back, and that's okay. I think I'm ready for the world.”

“I don't want to push you into doing something you aren't ready for, and I'm gonna be honest—I'm pretty audacious. I don't want to embarrass you.”

Hawk stroked his jaw. “You never could. I've fallen in love with you, and I haven't said it because you're still moving through the stages of grief, and it seems so unfair, so wrong, to push you into a relationship before you've healed. I want you to know when you're ready, I'll be ready.”

Brian looked at him doubtfully. Hawk whispered, “I promise,” and snuggled close. “I should let you sleep.”

Brian stretched out, luxuriating in the softness of the mattress, and yawned. "I could sleep, but you have to promise we'll continue this talk in the morning. I still don't know how kinky you are."

Hawk kissed his shoulder, then bit it hard enough to leave his teeth print in his pale flesh. "Oh I can be as kinky as you want me to be."

Beside him Brian smiled and turned his face to look at him. Meeting his gaze he said, "I won't deny I'm still grieving but I want you to know I've fallen in love with you too."

Hawk traced Brian's lips with his fingertips. "How tired are you?"

"Not *that* tired."

Hawk kissed him gently. "I love you."

Brian kissed him back just as softly. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but it feels very strange to be saying I love you to someone other than Michael. I feel it, though, and I want you to know that."

"I can live with that." Hawk intensified the kiss, rolling on top of Brian. "God, I want you. I can't get enough of you."

"I lust you, too."

While kissing him, Hawk pushed his thigh between Brian's knees, spreading his legs. He slid his fingers down his crack, finding him moist and ready. Brian lifted his knees to his shoulders, opening himself wide. "Don't wait. Fuck me."

Hawk flattened himself over Brian, not thrusting inside him. Their hard cocks collided as Hawk lowered his mouth to Brian's, the kiss excruciatingly gentle. Hawk ran his hand down Brian's chest, finding his nipple. He tweaked it just hard enough to make Brian suck in a breath between his teeth. "God, Hawk. Yesss. I need you."

His hand slid lower, moving between them to find Brian's erection. He squeezed, then twisted his hard shaft, dragging a moan out of Brian as he did so. "You need me?"

"Yes, yes. Please. Fuck me."

"Uh-uh. Later, after we have the kinky talk, I'm going to fuck you senseless. Tonight, I'm making love to you." He kissed and nipped his way down Brian's chest, alternating gentle kisses and stinging bites that made Brian's hips buck. He finally settled between Brian's thighs and took

his length into his mouth. Keeping his gaze locked on Brian's, he licked the tip of his cock, rimming his piss hole. Slowly, he slid his tongue around and around his cut head before drawing his tongue down the ridged shaft.

"You're killing me, Hawk."

"Yeah?" he whispered around Brian's dick as he continued to lave it with his tongue.

"I've never been really big into foreplay."

"No?" He kept licking, still not taking his full length into his mouth.

"No. Not. At. All."

Hawk sucked his length deep into his mouth.

"Oh God. That's good. That's really, really good."

Hawk took his shaft deeper, the muscles of his mouth and throat trapping him in a vise grip of pleasure. "Holy Jesus, Hawk."

Brian moaned and twined his fingers into Hawk's hair, trying to force him to slack off. Hawk sucked harder. "Please, Hawk, please."

Brian's hips bucked, but Hawk didn't give him the release he was looking for. In his own time, Hawk released his flesh and looked at him over the ridged line of his firm stomach. "Tell me what you need."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Fuck me. I need you to fuck me."

Hawk shook his head slowly. "That isn't what you need."

Their gazes locked as Hawk crawled up his body. He could feel Brian trembling with need and emotion as he whispered, "Ask me for what you need."

A sob caught in Brian's throat. "Make love to me."

"That I can do." Stretching with his other hand, he rummaged in the top drawer of the nightstand for a condom. Finding one, he grabbed it, ripped it open, and slid it down his cock.

"Thank God, I can't wait any longer."

Hawk didn't rush to fill him. He pressed slowly into him. "I want you to remember tonight."

Brian raised his hips. "There hasn't been a moment we've been together I'm willing to forget."

“Good.” Hawk sank deep. “Remember every second.”

Brian moaned and closed his eyes.

Hawk moved slowly over him, kissing him. He increased his rhythm as he felt Brian's need rising. “Remember what it feels like to be made love to.”

* * *

A sharp rap on the bedroom door startled them both awake. They'd left the lights on, both too bone weary to get up and turn them off, and the drapes were pulled over the window so it was impossible to tell if it was night or day. Without invitation, Sheriff Dodd opened the door and stood in the threshold. “Get your clothes on, boys. Brian has visitors in the dining room.”

“What?” Brian asked, scrubbing his face with his palms to wake up. “What time is it?”

Hawk thought it was odd he didn't ask who. Picking up his watch, he read the face and found it read 10:00. “Is it morning?”

“Of course,” Dodd exclaimed. He clapped his hands. “Come on. Chop. Chop.”

“Who?” Brian managed to ask as he pushed his legs into his jeans.

“Your parents.”

Brian looked at Hawk, surprise evident on his face; then he broke into a wide grin. “Well, come on. You get to meet Mom and Dad!”

He grabbed his shirt off the ground and raced from the room shirtless and barefoot, pulling the shirt over his head as he barreled down the stairs. Hawk let out a heavy sigh and looked at the sheriff. He was still buck naked with a strip of sheet barely covering his parts.

Dodd lifted an eyebrow but didn't say anything. He closed the door, giving him privacy to get dressed.

“Welcome to day one of being completely out of the closet.” Hawk shook his head, surprised that he didn't feel terrified. He actually felt relieved. Besides, it wasn't like folks in town didn't suspect; they were just too polite to talk about it. He hurriedly pulled on his pants and shirt, then took a little extra time to lace his boots and brush out his hair. He didn't tie it back, but rather left it in long waves over his shoulders. As an afterthought he picked up the amulet his grandfather had bestowed upon him. The small beaded-leather pouch hung on a long leather thong. He put it over his head, wearing it as a necklace on the outside of his shirt.

Seemed like it was the first day for more than one life change. He hoped he was ready for the challenge. Taking a deep breath, he descended the stairs.

Sarah saw him first, noting the pouch around his neck immediately. Her hand flew to cover her mouth. Her eyes filled with concern. "Oh, Hawk. Did your grandfather pass?"

"He's walking over the ridge; he passed his burden to me." Looking through the window to the outside he commented, "The storm wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be."

"Oh, it's coming. The National Weather Service announced a real doozy is on its way, moving slow, going to hit in waves. Good thing Brian's folks hit town this morning. I'd hate to think of them getting stranded on the mountain too."

"Yeah," he agreed absentmindedly. "I guess they'll probably want to stay awhile."

Sarah nodded. "Hotel's full."

He knew what he needed to do. He just hated the thought of returning to his cabin. He hadn't been back since Erik was shot in the middle of his living room. He felt Sarah must have been reading his mind because she said, "The sheriff had your place cleaned while you were up on the mountain with Brian. It's spick-and-span if you want to invite them to stay with you. Or I can have you carry the cot down from the attic, and they can take the main bed, and Brian can be a little less comfortable for a few nights."

Hawk nodded, feeling dazed. Hell if he knew what to do. Going home didn't feel like an option, though he knew he'd have to face the place sooner or later. Sarah shoved a mug of coffee in his hand. "Go say hello. They seem like real fine folk."

She pushed him toward the dining room, but he stopped walking and looked down at his feet. "Where's Shadow?"

Sarah chuckled. "With Brian, where else? I think you've lost your dog. She's fallen for the new boy in town."

Hawk smiled sheepishly, admitting, "I know the feeling," as he headed into the dining room. There was a small crowd, only a half dozen customers, but then by town standards it was fairly late in the morning, too late for breakfast, too early yet for lunch. He walked over to the table where Brian was entertaining his parents with stories about the dig site. His enthusiasm was evident, making him talk with his hands as much as his mouth. When he saw Hawk, he stopped talking and stood, reaching out his hand.

This is a test. He stepped closer, placing his hand in Brian's and Brian flashed him a brilliant smile as he introduced him to his parents. "This is Tobias Red Hawk. I call him Hawk. Most everyone in town calls him Toby, so I'm really not sure how to introduce you."

Brian's father stood and held out his hand. Hawk took it and shook. "My family calls me Hawk. I guess I'd like you to call me by that name as well."

"Hawk. I'm Martin, and this is my wife, Ellen."

He smiled, seeing immediately where Brian got his pretty face. She was a beautiful woman, and Brian looked a lot like her, having the same curly blonde hair and blue eyes surrounded by magnificent long lashes. "It's nice to meet you both."

They all sat. His mother admitted, "We just needed to see him. It's one thing to be told he's doing well and another to see it with our own eyes, and honestly I haven't slept a wink since we asked him to move out."

Hawk raised his eyebrow, then glanced at Brian. He looked like he wanted to crawl under the table and die. He quickly explained, "After the funeral...it was tough. For months I stopped living. I watched *The Last of the Mohicans* back to back, day after day. I ate a lot of potato chips and ice cream. The day Mom forced me to look at what my life had become, I got pissed off at myself, packed my bags, and left my old life behind." He looked at his mother. "I know that was hard for you to do, and I appreciate the fact you loved me enough to do it."

A tear slid down his mom's cheek as she mouthed, *I love you.*

"You ended up here," his father said.

"Yes, and almost died. Thanks to this man, I didn't." Brian squeezed his knee under the table. Hawk boldly laid his hand on top of the table in plain sight, an obvious offering for Brian to take it, and was glad when he did. Their gazes met over the table, and they shared a smile. Brian admitted, "For a few moments, I really didn't know if I was going to live."

His mother gasped, and Hawk nodded in agreement. "It was touch and go. He's a fighter all the way."

"Maybe it's survival instinct." Brian reflected. "Maybe it was something else."

Hawk squeezed his hand.

Sarah chose that moment to bring around the coffeepot for refills. She asked, “Should I have the cot brought down from the attic? The storm is picking up speed. Looks like it's going to be here in a matter of hours.”

“Oh dear, we picked the perfect time to come to the mountains, didn't we?” Ellen asked her husband.

Martin looked at Brian. “Is there a hotel near? We didn't really plan; we just knew we needed to come.”

Hawk interrupted before Brian could answer. “If you'd like, you are welcome to stay at my place. If you won't mind being snowed in for a few days with me and Brian.”

Shadow whined.

“Her too, but she doesn't steal covers too bad,” he joked, scratching her behind the ears. He met Brian's gaze and saw the note of surprise. Squeezing his hand, he tried to reassure him it would be fine, but then started to question himself. Was that a stupid thing to do?

Ellen and Martin shared a look themselves, obviously surprised their son was in a relationship so soon after the death of his husband. They didn't say anything out loud, but the question was in their eyes. They were worried.

Brian saw the look as well and said brightly, “*We'd* love to have you, and there'd hardly have been any point of you driving all this way if you're snowed in miles away from me.”

That seemed to settle the discussion as they finished their coffee and bundled up. As they went outside, Brian's dad asked, “We'll follow you?”

Hawk nodded. “Perfect.” He leaned over and whispered in Brian's ear, “You should probably grab your own bags from upstairs. And some shoes.”

“Oh hell,” Brian muttered under his breath, looking at his feet. “Are you sure about this?”

“I'll distract your parents. Go get your stuff.” He ruffled his bangs. “I've never been surer about anything.”

“Are you forgetting something?” Brian's eyes held doubt. “Maybe we should *all* stay at a hotel.”

“Do you really think I'd drag your parents into a crime scene? The sheriff had the place scrubbed down while we were gone.”

“God, Hawk, I don't know.”

Hawk leaned his forehead against Brian's. “I have to face what happened there sooner or later, and I'd rather not be alone when I do. Maybe having your parents along will be enough distraction that it's just okay.”

Brian took a deep breath. “I hope you're right, and they can definitely be a distraction. You may hate us all by the time the snow clears.”

Hawk laughed. “Will you please go get your bags?” He walked away, leaving him to do it and approached Brian's parents' car. Ellen rolled down her window as he approached. Hawk leaned in the passenger side window and explained, “He's been up on the mountain so long he forgot his bag is here.”

Brian's father got right to the heart of his concerns. “My son's husband and brother just died. I'm not certain he's in the best frame of mind for beginning a new relationship.”

Hawk nodded. “I understand your concerns, but I'm in love with your son.” *God, did I really just say that? Fuck.* “And I certainly won't treat him as poorly as his husband did.” He backed away from the window just as Brian came back outside. He met him at the Range Rover.

Brian asked over the roof of the vehicle, “My dad got under your skin already, didn't he?”

Hawk met his gaze. “I can't fault your father for loving you and being concerned about you.”

“Oh hell, what did he say?”

“Nothing. It's fine.” Hawk opened the door to the backseat so Shadow could jump in before opening his own door and climbing behind the wheel.

Brian opened his door and scratched Shadow behind the ears before tossing his bags on the floor. Closing the door, he climbed in the front and buckled up. Hawk saw him glance over his shoulder nervously, making certain his parents were prepared to follow. He squeezed Brian's knee reassuringly.

“God, why are they here?”

“I think the answer to that is very clear. They love you.” Hawk watched emotion travel over Brian's face. He closed his eyes as the SUV pulled away from the curb.

“Tell me again why we're going to your cabin.”

“Sarah only has the one upstairs bedroom, the only hotel in town has zero vacancy, and honestly, this is a good opportunity for your parents to get to know me. After last night, I assumed we are going to be taking our relationship to the next level.”

Hawk felt Brian jerk and when he looked over at him his eyes were wide. “What next level?”

Hawk started doubting everything he believed a moment before. “The whatever comes next after two people say the words *I love you*?”

“I might have said I lust you.”

Seeing Brian was grinning, Hawk relaxed and returned his gaze to the road. “I think you said that too, but first you said 'I love you' and that's why I feel comfortable asking you a question I've been considering asking you for the last two weeks. Move in with me?”

Chapter Eleven

Brian went still, not believing Hawk had just asked him to move in with him. He'd thought it, dreamed it, and even pretended it was already so—immediately feeling so damn guilty he couldn't stand himself. How had Brandon managed to not feel guilty? How could he even consider a committed relationship with another so soon after losing Michael? He should be in deep mourning.

"I shouldn't have asked that." Hawk turned the wheel, and Brian realized they were off road, taking the rutted dirt drive toward the cabin. His mind spun, and he only half-heard Hawk rambling. "I'm sorry. I'm rushing you, being pushy, after I promised you last night I'd take it slow. I mean, God, we've only known each other—"

"Yes."

Hawk pulled up in front of the cabin and parked. Brian unbuckled and crawled onto his knees, moving half into Hawk's lap to press his face between his palms. He kissed him, nodding. "Yes. I don't want to think about it or wait for a sufficient time of mourning. I want to live every second of my life to the fullest. In the last week I've almost died or been in danger of being killed more times than I want to think about. When that helicopter crashed, I thought you'd died. So don't take back your offer. I. Want. This."

Brian kissed him, not caring that his parents had already climbed out of their car and were walking toward the Range Rover. Let them think what they wanted. Let everyone think what they wanted. He didn't care. Releasing Hawk's face, he saw he was smiling. He smiled back, while his parents stood waiting in the falling snow.

Hawk winked. "We should go inside before your parents freeze to death."

Brian giggled and slid back across the seat. He felt like he was floating in a surreal dream as he grabbed his bags and followed man and dog up the steps to the cabin. Then he stepped

inside and seeing the wood floor Erik had died on, the sofa they'd hidden behind, the dream of happily ever after started to unravel.

It would be hours before he would be alone with Hawk in the bedroom. Snow was falling harder. They were going to be trapped. Then the worst possible thing happened: he started hyperventilating.

Hawk rushed to his side. "Are you all right?"

"Panic attack." He doubled over, closing his eyes.

"Because of Erik?"

Brian nodded, trying to breathe. His mother and father crowded close, muttering anxiously. Hawk revealed the whole story, and Martin exploded. "What were you thinking bringing my son back here to the scene where he killed a man? Ellen, get in the car. Brian, come on. I'll get you out of here."

Ellen and Martin supported their son between them, heading him toward the door. It was only when the cooler outside air hit him in the face that Brian was able to steady himself. "Stop. Stop. I'll be fine. I overreacted, it was just a shock stepping back inside, remembering. I need to face it and move on."

"That's insane," his mother cried out.

"Why would you want to face something like that?"

Brian squared his shoulders and met his father's judgmental gaze. "Why wouldn't I? I killed the man who held a knife to Hawk's throat. If I hadn't killed him, he would have killed Hawk. Seriously? Out of all the tragic moments I need to face, that is one moment I do not regret. I regret not answering the phone the last time Brandon called. I regret not answering the phone when Michael called. I will never have the chance to say I love you to either of them again. Come inside and get to know the man I've fallen in love with or drive back into town. Either way, I'm staying here and facing what happened."

Pushing around his father, he met Hawk in the threshold. Hawk whispered, "We don't have to stay."

"This is our home. Yes, we do."

Hawk kissed his forehead and allowed him to pass. Brian crossed the room, looking at it from a different angle. He forced himself to look at the artwork, the curtains, the fireplace, anything but the space on the floor where Erik died. He heard Hawk call out to his parents, "Please stay," and he looked at him in time to see him stretch out his hand welcomingly.

He waited with bated breath until Hawk and his parents came back inside.

The first few minutes were tense, but gradually Ellen and Martin relaxed, seeing their son really was fine. Brian settled into a chair at the table situated between the open kitchen and the great room. At the counter, Hawk started dicing vegetables for dinner. Brian watched him, hoping to see the tension leave his shoulders and praying that being snowed in with his parents didn't ruin everything. His mother joined Hawk in the kitchen. She asked, "Need some help?"

Oh hell. "Mom, you don't have to. I can help Hawk."

"It's okay, Brian. I'd love to have your mom's help."

Brian chewed a cuticle as he watched his lover and his mother lean close, dicing, chopping, seasoning. Talking. *What are they talking about?*

His father stayed in the background, watching. Brian found himself wishing they had something in common they could talk about.

Hawk called from the kitchen. "Eleven siblings? You didn't tell me that!"

Brian opened his mouth and closed it again. What was there to say to that? They'd been too busy fucking like bunnies to discuss family? He didn't even know if Hawk had parents living in the area. He knew about his grandfather, who could be dying on top of the mountain at that very moment. He tried not to think about it, wondering how Hawk was able to make conversation at all.

"I was married once."

Catching Hawk's voice, Brian's ears perked up. *What? Wait.* "Married? You were married?"

"We were only married two months after being high school sweethearts for three years. We figured out fairly quickly we weren't meant to be a couple," Hawk explained as he pushed a casserole dish into the oven.

Brian frowned, trying to understand but not really.

Hawk set a timer. "We were more like brother and sister than husband and wife, but the bigger problem was my attraction to men."

Ellen stood stark still, a bottle of wine in her hand. She started laughing. "That would be a problem." She laughed harder. Hawk and Brian laughed too.

Martin joined them. He wrapped his arm around Ellen's waist and kissed her temple. "It's good to see you laugh again."

She nodded, and Brian saw that her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. Brian stood, walked over to her, and took the bottle of wine. Hugging her, he promised, "It will stop hurting so much. It just takes time. At least that's what I keep telling myself."

"It helps seeing that you're okay."

Hawk took the bottle from Brian's hand, opened it, and poured four glasses. He handed each of them a glass and lifted his in a toast. "To a happy future."

"Yes," Ellen agreed, touching her glass to his. Brian and his father lifted theirs as well.

Shadow whined and turned in a circle. Hawk scratched her behind her ears. "No wine for you."

She barked and went to the door.

Martin announced, "I think there's someone on the porch."

Brian looked at Hawk, fearful. Hawk squeezed his arm as he passed. Seeing who it was through the window, he broke into a smile and opened the door. A mound of snow-covered furs stomped through the threshold. A glove-covered hand pushed back the hood, and Brian saw it was Hawk's grandfather. He raced forward and pushed by Hawk to hug him. "Thank God you're alive!"

The old man looked at him hard, then broke into a smile. "It was not my day to die after all."

Hawk helped him with his fur parka. "Thank God." He lifted the pouch from his chest. "Please tell me you came back to get this."

“No. No.” He held up his hand in refusal. “That is yours. I’m just here for dinner.” He looked around the room. “I’ll take a glass of that wine too.” He hobbled slowly to the table and sat, waiting. He told Ellen and Martin, “My grandson doesn’t stock the cheap stuff. He considers himself a wine connoisseur.”

Brian looked at his lover. “*Really?* He knows wine and he cooks? That might have come up in conversation at some point.”

Hawk looked at him sheepishly. “Uh-huh.”

Ellen sat down, swirling her glass of wine. “It doesn’t seem like you two talk very much.”

Brian blushed, looking away. Hawk came up behind him, resting his hands on his shoulders as he tried to assure Brian. “We have time. The winters are long up here. There will be lots of nights where we’re snowed in with nothing to do but talk.”

Ellen looked at him and quipped, “Not bloody likely. Talking will be the last thing you two consider doing.”

Hawk’s grandfather chuckled and tipped up his glass.

Martin joined them at the table. “The way that snow is coming down, I think we’re all going to get to know each other fairly well.”

Brian met his father’s gaze. “That will be nice. I’m looking forward to it.” Saying it made it feel right. He did want to get to know his father. It was about time.

* * *

Hawk lay in bed with Brian, but he stared blindly at the ceiling. The room was dark, but a full moon reflecting off a snowy ground outside made the room bright. Absently he trailed his fingers over Brian’s abs.

“Regretting it already?”

Hawk jerked, hearing Brian’s voice, and looked into his eyes. He forced himself to smile reassuringly. “I was only thinking.”

“No kidding.”

Hawk held his gaze and kissed him tenderly on the lips. “My grandfather is alive and snoring contentedly on the sofa, your parents are sleeping in the spare bedroom, and you are in my arms. My life has not been so perfect in a very long time.”

“But?”

“I keep seeing Erik,” Hawk admitted, letting out a heavy sigh.

“You loved him?”

“I thought I did—once.”

“I killed him.”

Hawk snorted, then laughed, inappropriately but uncontrollably. “You are the most blunt person I have ever met and I think I love you for that more than all of the other reasons put together.” Sobering, he took Brian's face between his hands. “His death was necessary, but the truth is, so much has happened. I hardly know what to think, but one thing I am certain of is wanting to live with you, share our lives, build a home together. I know it's crazy. I've only known you a few weeks, but I feel like you are the piece of me that has been missing my whole life. I just hope I'm not pushing you too hard, too fast, to commit to another relationship.”

Brian tried to shake his head, but Hawk held his face tightly. “I can't live here. Not with Erik's ghost everywhere I look. I think if anyone can understand that, it's you.”

“Of course.”

“But for at least a few days, we're trapped here. So if I seem distant—”

“You're asking me to not take it personally?”

“Right.”

Brian kissed him. “How would you feel about house-hunting together? I'd kind of like to be a little higher in the mountains and I have a little cash set aside. I could probably buy us a pretty great view.”

Hawk didn't know what to say. He was feeling a little uncomfortable, a little out of his element. He allowed Brian to keep kissing him, listening to his reassurances. Being in his arms felt so right. He didn't want to question anything. “I do think house-hunting is in order and maybe we can share the cost of the view?”

Brian nodded, and Hawk noticed his eyes had filled with tears.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

“It's like you said. My parents, your grandfather. You. I feel complete. Like my family is finally complete—I'm so fucking happy—but Brandon and Michael aren't here to share it. It's hard not having closure, but I'm ready to move on. I'm ready to live. I'm ready to love again and I'm very glad I found you to love.”

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Roxy Harte

Control
Edge
Painted Lady
So You Want a Job?
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Voyeur

“Submission”
Part of the anthology *Dom/sub*
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Roxy Harte

Roxy Harte lives in a small, southwestern Ohio town with her husband, teenage daughter, two boisterous dogs, and two independent cats, where they are serenaded at night by coyotes and wakened each morning by geese flying overhead.

She describes herself as an avaricious reader, and likes to garden, hike, and climb rocks, and longs to travel to Ireland and Italy.

She prefers microbreweries and imported ales over domestic, and given a choice between eating out or in will choose IN every time (unless it's to go to The Pub that has a really hot bartendress there), or to the Hofbrauhaus in Newport because they brew on site.

She's a firm believer that weekends were made for Renaissance festivals, and she loves to hear from her readers! You can email her at roxyharte@gmail.com, or subscribe to her blog at <http://www.roxyharte.blogspot.com>.