

Snowbound Hearts

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Chapter One

The old hunting cabin creaked in a strong gust of winter wind. A biting chill hung in the early-morning air, making the prospect of getting out of the warm bed unappealing. Stephen pulled the covers over his head, leaving only his face exposed, and went back to sleep. By the time he looked outside, a foot of snow had already fallen and was drifted several feet deep in places.

The power had gone out during the night, but luckily, he had spent the previous two days cutting firewood and repairing the backup generator that had gone on the fritz. An old wood-burning stove sat in the middle of the main room near the dining table. It was mostly used for heat, since the cabin had a modern kitchen, but could still be used for cooking in a pinch. He

stoked the fire, tossed in a couple logs, and put a pot of water on to boil. There was no way he was going out in a blizzard to crank the generator without having a cup of hot coffee waiting when he got back.

Snow had begun drifting up against the door to the outbuilding housing the generator. Stephen shoveled it clear and went inside. He had enough fuel to last for a few days. His friends were on the way to meet him and would probably bring gas for their ATVs. Even with no juice from the power company, they'd still have all the comforts of home for the week. He held his finger over the starter button, hesitating for a second, took a deep breath, and pushed. The generator purred to life as easily as it had two days earlier when he finished cleaning the varnish from the carburetor.

If the weather had been clear, his friends would have been arriving at any moment, but given the blizzard conditions, he could only sip his coffee and hope they'd show. He had already spent two days alone and was going nuts for some company. His life back home consisted of a failed relationship, a dead-end job, and an empty townhouse. The only thing he had to look forward to was hanging out with his buddies, getting drunk, and dreaming of a better future. When the opportunity had come to get off work a couple days early, he jumped at it and headed to the backwoods of Virginia to await his friends.

That unique crunching sound freshly fallen snow makes when it gets compacted came from somewhere near the cabin, accompanied by the faint noise of an engine revving and tires spinning. The snow had too much of a muffling effect for him to distinguish one friend's truck from another, but that didn't make much difference. Someone had finally arrived, hopefully the one with the beer and cigars.

Stephen hurried to the door, taking a look toward the driveway, but no one was there. A blast of wind-driven snowflakes stung his face. If George were the first arrival, like usual, he was probably sitting at the bottom of the steep drive, fighting to lock the worn-out manual hubs on his battered old *Chevy* pickup. He'd have two big adjustable wrenches, one on the hub and the other slotted on to the first for leverage, but brute force never worked on the stubborn things. It took a measure of finesse Stephen had in abundance, but George could never manage in a stressful situation, like when he was stuck in the middle of a blinding snowstorm. Stephen quickly bundled-up and made his way outside.

The hollow moan of the wind whipping through the trees, sent a chill up his spine that had nothing to do with the cold. He'd never make it as a loner. If George were really there, he should have been swearing loud enough for half the state to hear him. Apparently, one of the other

guys had beaten him, but that didn't explain why no one had driven up the hill to the cabin. Stephen carefully made his way down to the end of the steep, winding driveway. A single set of tire tracks cut through the deep snow covering the road. They were too narrow to have been made by a truck. He flipped his sock cap up off his ears and held his breath. Nature in all her wintry glory made the only audible sounds.

Leaving home early and driving his car instead of his old four-wheel drive pickup had been a mistake. The truck wouldn't start, and he hadn't wanted to work on it. The weather forecast for the area had been clear and cold for the next week. No one had predicted the freak snowstorm. Probably the only other person within miles had just driven away without even knowing he existed. He shivered and pulled his jacket tighter around his neck.

Despite the fact some brave soul had just gone by, the road looked too treacherous for a car. Getting his little *Honda* down the hill without crashing would be nearly impossible. If his friends didn't show, he'd have no choice but to stay. His laziness had gotten him stranded.

Dark, low-hanging clouds blanketed the sky, turning the world into a perpetual twilight of gray on white. The deluge of wet, heavy snow obscured everything more than a hundred feet away. A brutal gust of wind penetrated his jacket,

chilling him to the bone. He trudged slowly up the hill to the cabin and stood gazing at the door to what might as well have been a solitary confinement cell. His circumstances gave him little choice but to go back inside where food, warmth, and loneliness were waiting. The whole point of making the trip to the Blue Ridge Mountains was to spend time in the company of good friends. If he had wanted to stare into empty space surrounded by four walls, he'd have stayed home.

The one hard and fast rule he and his friends abided by for their annual outing was no cell phones. In retrospect that was a bad rule. The landline phone was dead, so calling someone to come rescue him was not an option. He was a full thirty miles from the nearest gas station, so hiking out to civilization was off the table as well.

Hanging out alone for a few days until the snow melted wouldn't have been such a terrible punishment, but there was almost nothing for him to do. He hadn't even bothered bringing a book to read. He had a deck of cards because the plan had been to play poker, smoke cigars, and drink beer for the week. If the weather had been nice, they would probably have ridden four-wheelers and done some target practicing, too, but all he could do to keep his sanity was play solitaire. Luckily, he had been in charge of the food, so at least he

wouldn't starve. He would be sober, nicotine free, and bored senseless, all on a full stomach. He picked the deck of cards off the table and began shuffling.

Someone banged on the cabin door. Stephen's heart jolted so hard he wasn't sure it hadn't stopped for an instant. He jumped up and bounded over to greet his friends, pumping his fist along the way. "Well, you sorry sons of bitches, you finally showed up!" Stephen said, swinging the door open wide.

"Excuse me?"

The pretty face of a young woman with big brown eyes and rosy cheeks peeked out from under the snow-dusted hood of a full-length red wool coat. Stephen stared in amazement, trying to make sense of the sight before him. The guys weren't on the porch, no trucks were in the drive, and a beautiful woman was standing there, grinning at him. "Oh, sorry. I thought you were my friends. They're coming to meet me. What are you doing out in this mess?"

"Freezing my tits off," she said with an uneasy smile.

Stephen burst out laughing and stepped aside. "Come on in. Sorry, I didn't mean to laugh. I guess you're really cold. It's just—I didn't expect you to say that."

She peered past him, surveying the room, and hesitantly stepped inside. "It's okay, I was making

a joke, sort of. I ran my car off the road. I was staying in a cabin a couple miles back, but when I realized the snow wasn't going to stop, I decided to get out of here. I didn't want to get stranded all alone. My girlfriends headed home yesterday. I should have gone with them, but I wanted a day to myself, just to think."

"Are you hurt?" Stephen checked her out from head to foot. She didn't have any obvious signs of injury, but her coat could have been hiding anything.

"No, I'm okay, but my car is really stuck. It's nearly buried in a snowdrift. The driving conditions are terrible. Everything is so white. I thought I was following the road, but I drove right into the ditch. When do you think they'll run a snowplow?"

Obviously, she hadn't spent much time away from civilization. "As far as I know, they don't run snowplows this far out. The nearest full-time residents live about thirty miles away, toward town, so I guess there's no need to keep these back roads clear."

She sighed heavily, scowling. "Well, how are we supposed to get out of here?"

"Once the snow stops, I'm sure guys will be out riding the road with four-wheel drive trucks. Whenever we've had snow in the past, that's what happened. We can probably flag down someone and have him ride escort for us, you know, to pull

us out if we get stuck. My buddies love that sort of thing. Helping stranded motorists makes them feel like heroes, I guess."

She glanced around the cabin for a moment as if deciding what to do. "May I borrow your phone? I lost mine outside somewhere. I searched all around, but I couldn't find it."

Stephen shook his head. "The phone went out when the power went off."

Her shoulders slowly sagged. "Oh, you're running a generator. I saw the lights and thought your power hadn't gone out. My cabin has one, but it wouldn't crank. I yanked the pull cord until my arm felt like it would fall off."

"I had to work on this one to get it fired up. If it's not going to be used for a while, the gas should be drained from"—Stephen shrugged, as it dawned on him her only interest was getting home—"well, that's not important."

"Don't you have a cell phone?" She narrowed her eyes, furrowing her brow.

Heat rose into his cheeks, imagining her reaction to his story about the phone rule. Given the suspicious look on her face, she'd probably wouldn't believe him. "We made this stupid rule not to bring phones with us. My friend, Terrance, keeps his stuck to his head pretty much 24/7. And when he's not talking, he's texting, or surfing the web. It gets annoying. We figured a few days a year without it would do him good. Show me

where you dropped yours. Maybe I'll have better luck searching for it."

She rolled her big brown eyes. Stephen regretted offering to help find her phone, as if a man would succeed where a woman had failed. Not that he considered being a man an advantage, but her apparent annoyance hinted she had taken his offer that way. "It's back at my cabin."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Stephen, by the way."

Her demeanor instantly changed from the caution of a stranger in an unfamiliar place to the comfort of someone returning home after a long holiday. "Hi, Stephen, I'm Audrey."

Nothing had happened to account for her suddenly being so at ease, but all the previous tension had faded from her face. "I would take you back to your cabin, but I doubt I could get my car down the driveway without putting it into the trees. I'll be happy to walk with you, if you want."

"Forget that. It's two miles. The wind is blowing so hard I would have frozen to death if I'd had to stay out there another minute. The snow is already too deep to walk in without snowshoes. I nearly busted my butt three times coming from just down the road. That hill is awfully steep. Unless you want me to leave. I guess I could go back and wait in my car. The engine was still working." Audrey took a step toward the door.

Stephen grasped her frigid hand. "No, you're more than welcome to stay. I'm happy to have the company. I thought I'd to have to sit here for days, playing solitaire by myself."

Audrey grinned and raised an eyebrow. "Well, I guess this is your lucky day. You don't have to play with yourself anymore. Now you can play with me."

Her devious grin sent a tingle up his spine. All sorts of games he could play with Audrey came to mind, and none of them involved cards. Suddenly, being stranded in the woods wasn't such a bad thing. "Okay, that sounds like fun. I'm glad you stopped by."

She stood motionless, still peering at him from underneath her hood. "Where can I hang my coat?"

"Let me take it for you." Stephen released her hand.

She pushed the hood off her head, letting her long auburn hair flow free. Stephen swallowed hard to clear the lump that popped up in his throat. The faintest hint of recognition came to him from somewhere deep in the back of his mind. It could have been a real memory or maybe just *déjà vu*. She unbuttoned her coat and turned away allowing him to grasp it as she slipped it off her shoulders. Her faded blue jeans hugged her curvaceous rear end, leaving little need to imagine what she'd look like without them.

When she turned to face him, the loud drumming of blood pulsing in his ears was all he could hear. Her red wool sweater conformed perfectly to her ample breasts. The urge to caress the soft fabric and squeeze the even softer parts it covered, nearly got the best of him. He drew a ragged breath and released it slowly, willing his heart to stop pounding so hard. Raising his gaze from her chest required all the effort he could muster. The disapproving smirk he found waiting for him on her lips, assured him she'd noticed his stare. His embarrassment must have shown in his apologetic shrug, because her expression softened as if she were letting him off the hook.

Had he put in a custom order for his perfect woman, Audrey would be her. He couldn't believe such a fantastic little hottie had just appeared on his doorstep. The best explanation was he had fallen asleep and dreamed her. Regardless, he began devising a plan to get her clothes off, because he really wanted to see her naked before he woke up.

"Are you going to hang up my coat?" Audrey pointed to the rack.

"*Um*—coat, yeah." He wandered slowly to the rack and hung her coat, taking a moment to clear his head.

"Do you have anything warm to drink? I'm chilled all the way through."

Stephen turned back toward her, amazed to

find her still standing there and still looking as beautiful. Dreams rarely remain consistent for any length of time. She should have already morphed into an evil troll or disappeared altogether. "I don't know where my manners are. I wasn't expecting a"—he couldn't say red-haired goddess who had been sculpted from a solid block of sexy and thoroughly doused with irresistibility—"a guest. My head is spinning. How about coffee? It's instant, but it'll warm you up."

"Yeah, that would be great." She bit her bottom lip, hesitating for a moment. "Something *else* to warm me up."

"I—I didn't quite get that last part," Stephen stammered.

Audrey gave him a sultry smile that sent a tingle racing into his groin. "The fire in the stove, silly. What did you think I meant?"

"Um"—he tilted his head toward the stove, mesmerized by her sensuous expression—"yeah, the fire, of course that's what you meant."

Her smile slowly faded as she stared deep into his eyes. "Maybe that's all I meant."