WILBUR SMITH

WITH CHRIS WAKLING

SHOCKWAVE



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PRESS

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For all our young readers and their families
Wilbur Smith & Chris Wakling

1.

The snow crust broke before I'd even cut my first turn down the slope. More fissures immediately shot out from the first. As I saw the whiteness around me shatter, I heard the electric crackling of the snow slab breaking up.

I'd triggered an avalanche.

It looked beautiful: like a spider's web spreading out down the mountainside. But the cascading snow was behind me as well as in front of me, and although I tried to ski across it – that's what our instructor Sylvan had told us to do if we found ourselves in this *très grave* situation – the white wave immediately engulfed me.

I was upended. The snow ripped my skis from their bindings. I was swept away.

Sylvan had also told us to jettison our ski poles if an avalanche struck. So, as I was rag-dolling my way down the slope, blinded, carried by the roaring snow, that's what I tried to do. The pole straps were looped around my wrists. I somehow managed to shake one free. It took a ski glove

with it. But I couldn't get the other pole off. It spun with me as I cartwheeled down the mountain.

How could this be happening?

We'd been so careful. I'd studied the forecast, read the snow, checked everything.

It didn't matter. The avalanche was in charge now.

Where was Amelia? She'd dropped onto the slope ahead of me. Would she have had time to veer out of the path of the thundering wall of snow? You can't outrun an avalanche. Just like with a rip current in the sea, your best bet is to go at right angles to it and hope you can reach its edge. At least Xander was safe on his outcrop of rock. I didn't know which way was up. It was like being mashed up on the beach by a surf wave, but much, much worse.

As I was punched forward, I had time to think that Xander, piloting the drone, would be filming the whole thing from above, just as the GoPro on my helmet was capturing every millisecond of what I could – or couldn't – see.

We were in the Alps to make a film for a project called On the Brink. It was one of Mum's eco-initiatives. She'd taken a bit of convincing that epic shots of us carving fresh Alpine powder fitted with On the Brink's save-the-planet ethos, but I'd eventually managed to persuade her that showcasing some of the world's most beautiful – and threatened – landscape with a bit of extreme sports action, rather than just showing another scrawny polar bear on a melting ice floe, would add an unexpected angle.

Also, since we were young, any halfway-decent film we made for the cause might generate a bit of publicity. This

wasn't exactly the footage I'd planned on capturing, but as long as I survived it would make for interesting viewing.

What else had Sylvan told us about avalanches? First, get the right gear. That included transceivers, extendable probes and snow shovels. Also, inflatable backpacks. We had all of that.

Second, learn how to work the gear. He'd demonstrated how to use the backpack on solid ground. I was still somersaulting inside the snow wave, but I knew what to do and managed to grab the toggle on my shoulder with my free hand.

Instantly the top of the pack blew itself up into an air-filled pillow. This was supposed to lift me up through the moving snow, so that when the avalanche finally came to a halt I'd be at the surface. Sylvan had also told us to try to 'swim' upwards. That was easier said than done; I still had no idea which way was up. I thrashed about instinctively anyway, and I took another piece of his advice while I was at it: holding my breath so as not to fill my lungs with powdered snow.

The avalanche couldn't have lasted more than thirty seconds, but it seemed to go on for hours, days, weeks. I tumbled along with it, lungs burning, arms and legs and head yanked this way and that, hoping against hope that I wouldn't hit a rock or tree. A quarter of all avalanche victims are killed that way. Most of the others who die suffocate when the snow stops. Would the backpack save me from that? The chaos ripped off my ski goggles. Finally, the frothing snow slowed down. I saw brightness above me.

It was full of white mist at first, but as I came to a stop and craned my neck, I glimpsed blue.

The sky! I'd never been so pleased to see it.

Why was it so difficult to move though? My arm with the ski pole attached to it was wedged behind me, and my legs felt as if they were set in cement. I tried rocking my body forwards and backwards to free myself, but the snow, full of air and energy one minute, had instantly solidified when the avalanche stopped. I could move one arm at least, so I tried to gouge away the snow and dig myself free with gloveless fingers.

What was that impatient buzzing? It took me a second to recognise the noise. I couldn't see far enough behind me to spot it, but it had to be Xander's drone. With his eye in the sky he'd surely spot me quickly and come to help dig me free.

But just as I deciphered it, the buzzing was drowned out by more rumbling, which made no sense at all. The avalanche was over. I'd come to a halt. All I had to do was free myself and make sure that Amelia was safe. Hopefully she'd pulled her own airbag toggle, or been able to avoid the whole thing.

The rumbling swelled to a roar. I turned my head to look back up the slope. What I saw simply couldn't be true. I was still wedged tight, unable to get up, let alone run away, from a *second* wave of snow that was racing towards me. Sylvan had said nothing about this! But it can happen: one slab of fresh snow breaks from the slope and disturbs another, which follows it down. I'd survived the first onslaught, but

I was encased in snow, powerless to escape the billowing second wave.

It really did look like white water tumbling over itself as it roared down the mountain, terrifyingly beautiful. I used the last piece of advice I could remember before the snow reached me, and tried to hold my arm in front of my face to create an air pocket. The roar of the second wave was jet-engine loud. It ran straight over me, a great obliterating wedge of whiteness, burying me alive.