HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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Alaskan Sanctuary

Teri Wilson

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A Change of HeartPiper Quinn is fighting for the future of her wolf sanctuary. A painful childhood has taught her to be more comfortable with animals than humans —especially the beautiful wolves of Aurora, Alaska. So when reporter Ethan Hale arrives to cover her struggling shelter—and deems the wolves a danger to the community—she's ready prove him wrong. A former park ranger, Ethan's seen just enough tragedy to support his claim. Soon their difference of opinion is front-page news. And Piper and Ethan must reconcile their opposing views with their stubborn hearts that are quickly finding refuge in each other.

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"Ethan, why are you here? You never told me."

"I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd go for a drive. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay up here."

"But the police are keeping an eye on things." Her lips parted ever so slightly, and the ache in Ethan's chest became an actual physical pain. "Tell me the real reason."

Of course there was more to it than that. More than he could admit even to himself. More than he could articulate.

Time was running out. He needed to put a stop to this. Now, while he still could. "It's late, and you can stop looking at me like that. I'm not one of your wolves, Piper."

She flinched. His words had hit their mark with the desired effect. "I don't… I mean…"

What was wrong with him? He was an idiot. Such an idiot that he kept talking when he should have shut his mouth. "I don't need a champion, Piper. And I don't need saving."

TERI WILSON grew up as an only child and could often be found with her head in a book, lost in a world of heroes, heroines and exotic places. As an adult, her love of books has led her to her dream career—writing. Teri's other passions include dance and travel. She lives in Texas, and loves to hear from readers. Teri can be contacted via her website, teriwilson.net.

Alaskan

Sanctuary

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"The wolf and the lamb will feed together…

they will neither harm nor destroy

on all my holy mountain," says the Lord.

—Isaiah 65:25

This book is dedicated to the people and wolves at the Colorado Wolf and Wildlife Center in Divide, Colorado.

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Chapter One

“Who’s afraid of the big, bad wolf?”

Piper’s heartbeat hammered against her rib cage. There was just something about looking into the eyes of a wolf at close range, something thrilling that brought about an instinctual response. Breathtaking. Primal.

The animal stood less than a foot away, one hundred forty pounds of sinuous muscle, gleaming white teeth and ebony fur. A timber wolf, with penetrating eyes the color of Klondike gold.

He took a step closer.

Breathe. Just breathe.

The wolf blinked once, twice, three times. Then, without breaking eye contact, he rose up onto his powerful back legs, planted his front paws on her shoulders and licked the side of her face.

Who’s afraid of the big, bad wolf? Tra la la la la.

“Big and bad, my foot.” Piper gave the wolf a generous rub behind his ears. “You’re a marshmallow, Koko.”

Koko showered her with more wolf kisses, heedless of the fact that it took every ounce of Piper’s strength not to shrink beneath the weight of his massive frame. At only a year old, Koko was still very much a pup and seemingly unaware of his size. And his power. Not to mention the intimidation factor that came with being a wolf.

Stature, strength and piercing gaze notwithstanding, he didn’t frighten Piper. She couldn’t remember a time when any of the wolves did. Years ago, perhaps. Before she’d ever had the idea to start the sanctuary. Before the first rescue.

Before.

"Piper! We've got a visitor." Caleb White, the one and only paid employee that she could afford, stood outside Koko's enclosure, eyeing their interaction with curiosity. Koko swiveled his massive head in the teenager's direction and dropped back down to all fours. "I think it's him."

Him.

Piper didn't need to ask whom Caleb meant. There was only one him whose arrival she'd been anticipating, only one him who mattered at the moment. "I'll be right there. Give Mr. Hale some hot cocoa while he waits, okay? With marshmallows."

"Sure thing, boss." Caleb's feet crunched through the snow as he followed the trail back in the direction of the tiny log cabin that doubled as the visitors' center and Piper's living quarters. For now, at least.

Once she got the sanctuary certified by the National Nature Conservatory and secured one of their coveted grants, all that would change. She'd have the funding she needed to make this place everything she dreamed it could be. And the first step in making that happen was to get the support of her new home, Aurora, Alaska.

That's where Ethan Hale, a journalist for the Yukon Reporter newspaper, came in. Or so she hoped.

She fastened the double gates of Koko's enclosure and gave the wolf a final wave. "Wish me luck."

Koko loped to the fence and poked his slender muzzle through the chain link. Piper felt the wolf's gaze on her back for the duration of her walk to the visitors' center. Of all the animals she'd rescued—from the turtles she'd gathered from the middle of the Colorado streets and carried to safety at the side of the road when she was a little girl, to the wolves she'd driven hundreds of miles to pick up and bring back to the sanctuary—Koko was her favorite. He was special. He'd needed rescue, perhaps more than the rest. He remembered where he'd come from.

Wolves never forgot. Neither did she.

When she reached the log cabin, she brushed the snow and straw from Koko's paws off the shoulders of her parka and sent up one last silent prayer. Please, God. We need this. Then she pushed open the door, prepared to greet Ethan Hale with her warmest, most welcoming smile.

He stood inside the cozy cabin, clad in a brandy-colored parka with a fur-trimmed hood, frowning into his cocoa. Piper felt like frowning herself at the sight of that fur. It looked an awful lot like coyote. Or possibly even wolf, which was too revolting to even consider.

But this was Alaska, not a fashion runway. Things were different this close to the Arctic Circle. She knew that. Still...

She averted her eyes from the parka's hood. "Good morning. You must be Mr. Hale."

He looked up and pinned her with an impassive stare from the most luminous set of eyes she'd ever seen. They were a mysterious, fathomless gray, set off by lashes as black as raven wings. It was rather like looking into the eyes of a wolf. Not just any wolf, but an alpha.

Cool. Confident. Intense.

She blinked, and felt fluttery all of a sudden, as if she'd swallowed a jarful of the Arctic white butterflies that sometimes drifted on Alaska's purple twilight breeze.

That was odd. Odd and more than a little bit unsettling. She'd never reacted to a man on first sight in such a way before. Certainly not in the months since Stephen.

Her heart gave a little clench. Now was not the time to examine such things. And this man in particular should not be giving her butterflies. First off, there was the matter of the suspect fur-trimmed hood. Secondly, he was here to be wooed by the wolves. Not her.

"You're Ms. Quinn, I take it?" he asked flatly. Clearly he was in no mood to be wooed. By anyone.

"Call me Piper. Please." She smiled and waited for him to reciprocate. He didn't. "So, um, thank you so much for coming. I'm thrilled that the paper has agreed to run a story on the work we do here at the Aurora Wolf and Wildlife Sanctuary."

He said nothing, just kept appraising her with those enigmatic eyes of his. The mug in his hand was piled high with an almost comical tower of marshmallows. They'd begun to melt, drip over the rim and onto Ethan Hale's massive hand. Good old Caleb. The boy was such a sweetheart. He even picked flowers from the grounds on occasion and brought them to her. The vase of violet bell-shaped blossoms resting in the center of her kitchen table was just such a bouquet.

She reached for a napkin, handed it to the reporter and tried to imagine him picking flowers for someone. Not likely. "Sorry. I think my helper may have gone a little overboard with the marshmallows."

"Thanks." He traded her the mug for the napkin and dabbed at the sticky mess. "Your helper? Singular? You have no other employees?"

"No, just the one." Why did she feel the need to apologize? Again. This time, for her lack of help. "For now. Although the youth program at Aurora Community Church has been a real help since I've moved in. They spent an entire Saturday here last week putting up the fences."

"High school students? You plan on staffing this place with minors?" He reached into his pocket, pulled out a notepad and wrote something down.

Piper couldn't bring herself to look and see what that something was. "A larger staff is one of the improvements I plan to make once we've been accredited by the National Nature Conservatory."

He lifted a dubious brow. "Your facility has been open for only five days, and you already meet the standards for an NNC grant?"

She'd expected to have to explain what exactly the NNC was and the types of monetary aid they provided for ecological programs that qualified, but it appeared Mr. Hale had already done his homework.

Good, she told herself. Maybe this means he understands how important this is. He gets it.

"Not yet." She cleared her throat. "These things take time. I'm still putting together the necessary paperwork. But applying for certification is my immediate goal, because once we have NNC approval, we can provide care for animals on the endangered list."

He crossed his arms. She'd just confessed her dearest wish, and he didn't look the least bit impressed. "So you intend to bring more species into the area."

"I hope so."

He glanced out a frost-covered window toward the enclosures. "Will these additional animals be dangerous predators, as well?"

Dangerous predators?

Maybe he didn't get it, after all.

"While wolves are indeed predators, I wouldn't be so quick to call them dangerous. Particularly rescued wolves living in captivity." Her hands were shaking. She forced a smile. "Unless you're a bunny rabbit."

"Or a child." A muscle in his jaw twitched, and suddenly it seemed as though the most dangerous predator in Alaska was Ethan Hale himself.

How was this interview going so horribly wrong when he'd yet to set eyes on a single one of the animals?

Yes! That was the answer. He simply needed to see the wolves for himself, then he would realize they weren't the ravenous, bloodthirsty monsters that he was apparently imagining.

"Why don't I give you a tour of the sanctuary? I think that will put to rest any worries you might have." At least she hoped it would. At the rate things were going, she wasn't quite sure.

He walked wordlessly out the door and into the snow. Piper took a deep breath and followed. The crisp morning air swirled with snowflakes as she led him down the path toward the wolf

enclosures, their footsteps muffled by a blanket of pine needles. When she paused at the first metal gate and turned to look at Ethan Hale, snow had already begun to frost the tips of his dark eyelashes. He looked less angry out here, beneath the snow-covered blue boughs of the hemlock trees. As if he belonged here, in Alaska's white, wild outdoors.

She wished he were less handsome. Disliking him would have been easier, and so far, he hadn't given her much reason to like him.

She looked away and focused instead on the white wolf peering at them from behind the chipped gray bark of an aspen tree. "This is Tundra. She's an Arctic wolf, and it looks as though she's decided to play hard to get."

He squinted into the wind. "I don't see anything."

"She's behind the tree. Look for the pair of copper eyes blinking back at you."

"There she is. Her white coat is quite striking in the snow." A hint of a smile creased his rugged face and then vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Those annoying butterflies began to dance again. Piper assured herself they'd reappeared only because she'd succeeded in drawing a smile from him, if just for a fleeting moment.

"She's a beauty." Piper reached into her pocket for a chunk of dried meat. "Here, toss this over the fence."

He eyed her open palm for a second before reaching for the treat with fingertips that felt unexpectedly warm in the frosty air.

"Go ahead. Give it a good throw."

He did, and Tundra charged out from behind the aspen tree in a flurry of kicked-up snow and powder-white fur. She leaped a foot off the ground, a flying snow angel, and caught the treat midair.

"Impressive," he said.

"Would you believe that until three months ago, she'd never been outdoors? A pair of college kids in Canada got her as a pup from an illegal breeder and decided to keep her as a pet—" Piper paused "—in the bathtub of their dorm."

Ethan Hale's brows rose. "The bathtub?"

"The bathtub. They fed her mainly pizza and leftovers from the dorm cafeteria. They thought it was cute. Then she grew into an adolescent wolf." Piper watched Tundra make a sweeping circle around the perimeter of her enclosure. Piper could have stood in the same spot all day, watching this wolf run. Free at last. "Tundra has no idea how to live in nature like a real wolf. She'd never survive on her own. But wolves are wild animals and aren't meant to be pets, either. Wild is wild. This place is her last resort."

"How'd she get here?" he asked.

"I drove to Edmonton and picked her up."

The corner of Ethan's lips quirked up. It was only a half smile this time, but she'd take what she could get. "You drove to the middle of Canada to rescue a wolf from a dorm bathroom?"

Piper shrugged. "How else was she going to get here?"

He looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite decipher. "I suppose you have a point."

"Come on, I'll show you the others."

As they walked from one enclosure to the next, she gave him a brief history of each wolf—its age, type, where it had come from and the circumstances that had led to its rescue. She explained that so far, the sanctuary was home to two wolf species—the Arctic and the Timber. Once the rescue center was accredited, she planned to provide sanctuary for the Mexican Gray wolf, as it was in serious danger of extinction. There were only seventy-five of them left in the wild.

If this sad fact tugged on Ethan Hale's heartstrings in any way, he gave no indication. Piper was beginning to wonder if he even had a heart.

But she'd saved the best for last—Koko. He pranced right up to the fence to greet them, ears pricked forward, ebony coat dusted with snow. Beside her, the reporter tensed as Koko pushed his muzzle through the chain link.

"Are they always so...so..." Ethan frowned. Piper wouldn't have thought it possible for a face so handsome to frown any harder. Yet somehow the tense set of his stony jaw made him appear even more mysterious. Impassioned. Alpha-esque.

Good grief. What was wrong with her? She'd been hanging around wolves too long. Clearly.

"I suppose the word I'm looking for is agitated." Something flickered in the restless depths of his moody gray eyes. "They seem borderline aggressive. Are the wolves always this wound up?"

Are you?

"Actually, a more appropriate description would be playful. Not agitated." Piper smiled as sweetly as she could manage, given the circumstances—the circumstances being that the future of her wolf sanctuary, her lifelong dream, now rested on whatever this...this arrogant jerk decided to write in his newspaper.

How had it come to this? She'd packed up and moved from Colorado to Alaska with little more than the clothes on her back and a trailerful of rescued wolves. She'd spent every penny she had on this place. She'd taken a leap of faith. Didn't God normally like that sort of thing?

She hadn't been running away, no matter how badly things had ended with Stephen. She'd been running toward something. Her future. And now a very large part of that future depended on this interview, this interview that was going so horribly wrong.

She lifted her chin and did her best to ignore the way Ethan Hale was looking at her as if she'd lost her mind. "And the answer to your question is no. They're not always this active. It's the weather. Wolves love a pretty snowfall. Doesn't everyone?"

Ethan scribbled something in his notebook, again without cracking a smile.

Not everyone. Obviously.

Piper couldn't let the tour end this way. She just couldn't. This man needed to meet a wolf, one on one. He needed to look into Koko's eyes and see him the way that she did.

"Let's go." She unfastened the lock on the first gate, held the door open and waited for Ethan to follow.

"What?" He stood rooted to the spot. "Where is it that you think you're going?"

"Inside, of course." She motioned toward Koko, watching the two of them with keen interest. "And you're coming with me."

* * *

Ethan stared at Piper. Standing in the snow with her blond hair whipping in the wind, framed by evergreens and wolves moving among the shadows, she looked like Red Riding Hood come to life. Then again, maybe her crimson parka was messing with his head.

"Come on." She beckoned to him, as if he'd been waiting his whole life to follow her into a wolf den.

"Right." He rolled his eyes. She couldn't possibly be serious.

By all appearances, she was. She stood staring at him, holding the first of two metal barred gates open. Waiting.

"I don't think so," he said grimly, and turned to leave, to go back to his cubicle in the newsroom where he couldn't feel the kiss of snow on his face or smell the perfume of alder wood and forest that had once clung to his skin, his hair and every piece of clothing he'd ever worn. Back to a place where he wouldn't be forced to remember things best left forgotten.

"Suit yourself," she called out from behind him.

He heard the gate clang closed. Good, she'd come to her senses and was back on this side of the fence, where any reasonable person belonged.

He kept walking. He'd already been here too long. Where had the day gone? He'd unwittingly spent more than three hours listening to Piper wax poetic about her wolves. How on earth had he let that happen?

Without turning around, he held up his hand in a parting wave. "Goodbye, Ms. Quinn."

"I asked you to call me Piper, remember?" She sounded farther away than she should have.

Then Ethan heard the jingle of keys.

Gut clenching, he turned around. Sure enough, she was unlocking the second gate, about to step right inside the enclosure. With the wolf. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I told you." She shrugged. "I'm going inside."

"No, you're not." Ethan had no intention of watching her walk in there by herself. Alone. Behind two locked gates where he couldn't get to her if something went wrong.

Leave it. She's a grown woman.

Clearly she'd done this before, and she'd lived to tell about it. But wolves weren't pets. They weren't dogs, cats or harmless little hamsters. They were wild animals. Wild is wild. She'd said so herself.

"I know what I'm doing, Mr. Hale. There's nothing to be afraid of." An unspoken challenge glimmered in her eyes. Eyes the color of glaciers in springtime.

Afraid? What did she think he was afraid of? Death?

Death would have been easy. Survival, on the other hand, had been far more difficult. Even now, five years later, he still wished it had been him. It should have been him.

He crossed his arms. "Do I look scared?"

The only thing he was afraid of was watching her put her life on the line. He'd seen this sort of thing go badly before. Once. And once had been more than enough.

"Actually, no. You look angry." She turned the key. Even from where he stood, Ethan could hear the padlock release. "You know, the company of an animal is scientifically proven to lower blood pressure."

"I highly doubt that applies to wild animals. Kittens, yes. Wolves, not so much." Nor pretty blonde animal rescuers. In fact, right now, it was a toss-up as to which one of them was a bigger pain in his neck—the wolf or Piper.

"You'll never know unless you give it a try." She glanced at the dark wolf standing just on the other side of the unlocked gate.

Ethan stared at Koko.

The wolf looked back at him with the same cool detachment Ethan had seen in the eyes of other wild animals. Wolves. Mountain lions. Bears. One bear in particular.

Bile rose to the back of Ethan's throat.

"I'm going in. It's now or never." Piper raised an expectant brow.

As much as Ethan wanted to leave, to climb in his car and head back down the mountain, he couldn't. Not if it meant leaving her locked in a pen with a wolf.

"Fine." He stomped back toward the enclosure.

Piper beamed at him, entirely too pleased with herself. Ethan just shook his head and tried to slow the adrenaline pumping through his system. Every nerve in his body was on high alert, prepared to deal with the worst.

She locked the first gate behind him, and suddenly it was just the two of them in the small fenced-in space between the double entrances. She stood close enough for him to see tiny flecks of green in her blue eyes. Nature looking back at him. Her hair whipped in the wind, a halo of spun gold.

Ethan nearly forgot about the wolf standing behind her.

"There are a few rules before we go inside." Her voice went soft, as if she felt it, too—the unexpected intimacy of the moment.

The wolf moved behind her, a shifting shadow in the violet Alaskan light, catching Ethan's eye. "I'd imagine there are."

"When we walk inside, just ignore him. Let Koko come to you on his own terms."

In other words, don't go chasing the wolf. "Got it."

"He may get up on his hind legs and put his front paws on your shoulder. This means he's curious, not aggressive. Whatever you do, don't push him away."

Ethan didn't have a problem with this particular rule, either. If the wolf wanted to slow dance with him, so be it. At least it meant he would be the only one in harm's way. Not her.

"And he will definitely lick your mouth."

Ethan rolled his eyes. "Oh, joy."

"It's how wolves greet each other. Just keep your mouth closed, and you'll be fine. Don't turn your face away under any circumstances."

Now the rules were getting a little strange. "You're telling me to stand there and let a one-hundred-and-twenty-pound wolf kiss me on the mouth?"

"One hundred and forty," she corrected.

"Even better."

She ignored his sarcasm. "And yes, let him lick your face. It's customary wolf behavior. Koko's an alpha. If you turn away, he'll be highly offended."

And would that really be such a tragedy? "Got it."

"Good." She shot him a dazzling smile. "Then we're ready."

She turned around to slide the padlock off the interior gate. Without even realizing what he was doing, Ethan reached for her elbow. His touch said what his lips wouldn't.

Don't.

Stay here. With me.

But she didn't notice. The moment his fingertips brushed the rich red fabric of her parka, she moved out of his reach. The look on Piper's face—the rosy cheeks, the slight parting of her lips, the breathless anticipation—it wasn't about him. It was about the wild animal waiting on the other side of the fence.

He'd mistaken the moment for something it wasn't. Which was fine, really. He had nothing to offer anyone. Not anymore. Not even the first woman to capture his attention in as long as he could remember.

Anyway, attention and attraction weren't one and the same. Sure, he found Piper Quinn interesting. Who wouldn't? He also found her headstrong and impetuous. He knew her type. She was a crusader.

So was he, and the two of them happened to be on opposite sides of the crusade.

Fine. This whole ordeal would be over within a matter of minutes. Once he'd seen her walk safely back to her little log cabin, he could drive away, write his article and forget he'd ever set foot in her wolf sanctuary.

"Hey there, Koko." She spoke in matter-of-fact tones to the wolf, as if the two of them were old friends.

Koko gave her a cursory glance and then trotted straight for Ethan. He barely made his way inside the enclosure before the wolf rose up on his back legs, just as Piper had predicted, and planted his massive front paws on Ethan's shoulders. It had been less than five minutes since she'd talked him into this escapade, and already there was a wolf breathing down his neck. Literally.

Ethan didn't feel panicked. Nor particularly threatened. The creature was simply curious, just as Piper had said he would be. Ethan knew as much. But that didn't mean he enjoyed it.

"Magnificent, isn't he?" she asked.

Once Koko had dropped back down to all fours, Ethan responded, "He's something, all right."

"Come sit down." She strode toward a fallen log near the center of the enclosure.

He followed, took a seat beside her on the log and braced himself for another lick on the face. But Koko seemed more interested in Ethan's feet. The wolf systematically sniffed his right shoe from toe to heel, then moved to the left. Once he'd thoroughly inspected that one, he returned to Ethan's right shoe and began the behavior all over again.

Piper laughed. "Wow, he really likes your shoes. Do you have pets at home? A dog maybe?"

"No." Ethan shook his head. "No pets."

The wolf began to tug on one of his shoelaces. He took a bite, and the lace snapped in two. Ethan didn't particularly care. Although he was slightly worried about losing the entire shoe, his foot included.

"I'm sorry." She frowned. "I haven't seen him do that before. He's not hurting you, is he?"

"No." Ethan shook his head. Koko pressed his nose so hard against his ankle that he could feel the heat of the wolf's breath beneath both his wool sock and the leather of his hiking boot.

Ethan grew very still. His thoughts were beginning to spin in a direction he didn't like.

No. Impossible. It can't be.

Then he looked into Koko's eyes, and knew that however much he tried to pretend that the wolf's interest in his shoes was arbitrary, that wasn't the case. His odd behavior was no coincidence.

The wolf knew.

A chill ran up and down Ethan's spine. He pulled his foot away, but Koko's jaws had already clamped down. Hard. The hiking boot slipped right off.

"Oh, no." Piper paled, but she didn't make a move to retrieve his shoe.

Good. Ethan doubted Koko would willingly let it go. In any case, he didn't want it back.

The wolf knew.

It didn't make sense, but Ethan was convinced that was what was happening. Maybe it was some sort of animalistic sixth sense. Or maybe the wolf just recognized the scent of blood. And fear. And death. And grief. So much grief.

The wolf could have the shoes. Both of them.

Ethan pulled off his remaining hiking boot and tossed it to Koko. An offering to the ways of the wild.

"What are you doing?" Piper asked.

Ethan shrugged. "What am I going to do with just one shoe?"

"This is highly unusual. Koko doesn't make a practice of devouring shoes. Shasta maybe, but not Koko." Piper tore her attention away from the wolf and fixed her gaze with Ethan's. "Please believe me."

For the briefest of moments, looking into those earnest blue eyes of hers was almost like looking into a mirror. "I believe you."

She blinked. "You do?"

"Yes, I do." He believed. He believed in her passion. He believed in her commitment to the wolves. He believed that even though they were on opposite sides, he and Piper Quinn had something in common.

Something had happened in her past to make her identify with the wolves and care for them the way she did. She was their champion. A warrior. And warriors were seldom born. They were made. Ethan knew this all too well, because he was a warrior himself. He'd had his defining moment, and she'd had hers. Whatever had happened to her had cast her on the opposite path. The pendulum had swung the other direction. She couldn't walk away from the past any more than he could.

That didn't mean he would write the things she wanted him to write. He wished he could. Gazing into her looking-glass eyes, he wished it very much.

But he simply could not.

Chapter Two

The cursor on Ethan's laptop flashed on-off, on-off, taunting him. Daring him to write. He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting at the Northern Lights Inn coffee bar, staring at his blank Word document. Definitely long enough to down several cups of coffee beneath the watchful eyes of the giant stuffed grizzly bear in the corner.

Ethan was less than fond of the bear. But given that it no longer possessed a heartbeat, he preferred it to Piper's wolves. Besides, he was in Alaska. Stuffed and mounted wildlife wasn't exactly an oddity. He couldn't even grocery shop at the corner store without rolling his cart past a moose head.

Even so, he'd chosen the seat farthest away from the bear. Unfortunately, that meant he was situated directly beneath an enormous bison head. Because, again, this was Alaska. He should have been grateful he wasn't given an antler to use as a stir stick.

He glared at the bison head. Bison were deadly. So deadly that they'd killed more people in Yellowstone National Park every year than bears had. Most people didn't know this. But Ethan knew.

Four years as a park ranger in Denali had taught him a thing or two. But it had been a while since his park ranger days. A lot had happened. Too much. Five years was a long time, but it wasn't long enough to erase the sight of a little girl being torn apart by a bear. It wasn't long enough for him to forget the sounds of her screams. And it most definitely wasn't long enough to forget the remorse he'd felt at his failure to save her.

Of course, he probably could have sat beneath the mounted bison head without revisiting his past if he hadn't just spent the afternoon locked in a pen with a wolf.

He hadn't been ready to go home after leaving the wolf sanctuary. He wasn't sure why. If he thought hard enough about it, he'd probably realize that his reluctance to return to his quiet, empty house had something to do with the memories that had been unlocked by looking into the cool, dispassionate eyes of a wild animal. The scent of pine, the wind in his hair. The enigmatic Piper Quinn.

And his hiking boots. The hiking boots.

They'd been the shoes he'd worn the night of the bear mauling. They'd been at the back of his closet for years. When he'd left the park service in the wretched aftermath of the bear event, he'd traded cargo pants and hiking boots for more proper office attire. Knowing he'd likely be tramping through the forest today, he'd grabbed them and put them on this morning without thinking. Without remembering. And now everything had conspired to make him do just that. Remember.

The last place he wanted to be was someplace empty and quiet. Someplace like home. He needed distraction and conversation, and the Northern Lights Inn coffee bar was typically one of the busiest spots in Aurora. Which was why Ethan wasn't the least bit surprised when his friend Tate Hudson plopped down on the bar stool beside him, even though they'd had no plans to meet.

"Hey." Tate nodded at Ethan's blank screen. "Don't tell me you've got writer's block."

"Something like that." He clicked his laptop closed. Why was he having such difficulty writing this thing? The wolf sanctuary was a bad idea. The worst. Case closed. His article should be writing itself.

The wolves were an accident waiting to happen. He'd decided as much before he'd ever set eyes on Piper Quinn and her collection of sad rescue animals. Not that wolves typically preyed on humans. Ethan's rational self—the former park ranger that still lurked somewhere beneath his bruised and brooding surface—knew this.

Things happened in the wild. That's what made it wild. Just because wolves didn't make a habit of harming human beings didn't mean it would never come to pass. As Ethan saw it, the potential risk to the townspeople was reason enough for the wolf sanctuary to be shut down. And if it wasn't, he was certain the owners of the nearby reindeer farm would have an opinion on the matter. While the fair citizens of Aurora might not be on the typical wolf menu, reindeer most assuredly were. In recent years, the reindeer farm had become one of the town's most popular attractions. And its favorite resident was a certain reindeer named Palmer, who was something of an escape artist. Ethan ought

to know. He'd penned his fair share of articles for the Yukon Reporter about Palmer's legendary antics. So this piece on the wolves should absolutely be writing itself. He wasn't sure why the words wouldn't come.

Tate ordered a plain black coffee and turned his attention back to Ethan. "You're starting to worry me, friend."

"Because I haven't finished my column?" He shrugged, even though his untouched Word document was starting to become cause for concern. He had a midnight deadline, after all.

"That—" Tate shot a bemused glance at Ethan's feet "—and the fact that you're sitting in a public place without shoes on your feet. In the dead of winter, I might add."

Ethan didn't feel like explaining his missing shoes any more than he felt like writing about them. Piper had given him a pair of silly-looking bedroom shoes so he wouldn't be forced to leave the sanctuary in his sock feet. He'd deposited them by the door of the hotel on his way in because he'd rather sit at the bar in his socks than too-small bunny slippers.

"Are you going to arrest me, Officer? Aren't you taking the whole 'no shirt, no shoes, no service' thing a bit far?" He looked pointedly at the shiny silver badge fixed to Tate's parka.

His friend shrugged. "I'll let it slide this time."

"Gee, thanks." Ethan stared into his empty coffee cup.

"Seriously, though. What gives with the socks?"

Ethan sighed. "I had a run-in with a wolf."

Tate's grin faded. "A wolf? Are you okay?"

Ethan pretended not to notice when his friend's gaze flitted briefly to the stuffed grizzly bear in the corner. Tate was one of the few people in Aurora who knew about what had happened in Denali. Since his work as a state trooper sometimes took him to other parts of Alaska, he'd known Ethan back then. Before. He was the only person Ethan still communicated with who'd been part of that world. He was a trusted friend. But that didn't mean Ethan wanted to have another heart-to-heart about his past.

He didn't want Tate's sympathy. He didn't want sympathy from anyone. He just wanted to write his piece and move on to something else. Another assignment. Something involving politics or sports. Or anything else he could write about without feeling as if he'd been emotionally eviscerated.

He gritted his teeth. "It wasn't like that."

The wolf had put an untimely end to his hiking boots, and Ethan had been a little rattled. That's all. Once his article was written, he'd forget all about Piper and her wolves and get on with his life.

Unless something happens to her.

"I'm doing a story on the new wolf sanctuary. Have you heard about it?"

Tate nodded. "A little. They just opened, right?"

"She just opened." They wasn't exactly accurate considering Piper's rescue center was essentially a one-woman show.

"She?" Tate's eyebrows rose. "Interesting."

"Anyhow, I'm fine." Ethan swallowed. "For the most part."

"If you say so." Tate studied him for a moment. Then, apparently convinced that Ethan wasn't on the verge of some kind of breakdown, he blew out a breath. "Try not to break any more laws, though."

Ethan slid him a sideways glance. "So going without shoes is, in fact, illegal?"

"Could be." Tate shrugged. "Should be, seeing as it's twenty degrees outside. Either way, just don't give me a reason to arrest you. I wouldn't want to have to take back the stellar job recommendation I gave you."

Ethan paused. Job recommendation? "The Seattle Tribune? You're kidding."

"Nope. Not kidding. They called me yesterday afternoon."

The Seattle Tribune. Finally. For almost a year now, Ethan had been applying for jobs at bigger newspapers. It was time to leave Alaska. Past time. But finding a newspaper job when print journalists were somewhat of a dying breed wasn't easy, especially given the fact that Ethan's only work experience was for a small regional paper.

His entire higher education had been designed to get him out of Manhattan and into the Land of the Midnight Sun. While his prep school friends had gone on to earn business or law degrees, Ethan had studied forestry and ecology, despite the overwhelming disapproval of his father. Ethan couldn't have cared less what his dad thought. Every move he'd made since he'd been old enough to formulate a plan had been designed to get him out of New York and into the wilds of Alaska. And he'd actually managed to do it.

For a time, life had been perfect. But then those wilds had gotten the better of him.

Of course, if he'd wanted to leave badly enough, he could have gone back to Manhattan. It's what his ex-wife had wanted. She'd begged him to leave Alaska and take the job his father had waiting for him in New York. Alaska had never been Susan's dream. She'd wanted to be a Madison Avenue wife and believed that once he'd gotten his Alaskan folly out of his system, they'd pack up and move back home.

Home.

New York had never felt like home. Not even when he was a kid. Growing up in his father's luxury hotel in the heart of Midtown, Ethan had had everything any boy could ever want. Except a backyard. Or a tree house. He'd spent the majority of his childhood indoors under the watchful eyes of the Pinnacle Hotel staff. He lived for outings to the park and rare weekends at the beach. He'd craved a place where he could see shooting stars at night and feel damp grass on his bare feet. Wide-open spaces where snow fell with a whisper of silence instead of the incessant cacophony of sirens and car horns.

In Alaska, he'd found the place of his dreams. Then in one tragic moment that dream had become a nightmare. The bear mauling changed Ethan. Or so Susan said when she'd packed her bags and gone back to Manhattan without him. Ethan didn't know what to believe. Not anymore.

"Yesterday? The Seattle Tribune called you yesterday, and you didn't think to mention it?"

"I'm mentioning it now, aren't I?" Tate drained his coffee cup and handed it to the barista for a refill. "Don't worry. I said only nice things about you, despite the fact that I think it's a mistake."

"It's not a mistake." It was a way to leave Alaska on his terms. Not his father's.

Of course, that was assuming Ethan got the job, which was an enormous assumption, considering he hadn't even been able to land a face-to-face interview. Yet. But this time they'd actually called his references. That had to be a good sign.

Tate swiveled to face him. "You belong here, Ethan. You always did, and you still do. Give it time, man."

Time.

Five years had already passed since the mauling in Denali, and it still felt as fresh as yesterday. He was beginning to give up on the notion that time healed all wounds.

"Can we not discuss this now?" Ethan ground out the words.

"Fine. But this isn't over. I'm not letting you pack up and move to the Lower 48 without having an actual conversation about it." Tate sighed, then mercifully changed the subject. "What's she like?"

"Who?" Ethan asked.

"The wolf woman."

Ethan paused. He'd been fully prepared to write the director of the Aurora Wolf and Wildlife Center off as hopelessly naive, or possibly even crazy. The drive from the Yukon Reporter offices to the thick forest of fir and aspen trees that covered the southern slope of the Chugach Mountains had been a long and winding one. There were moments when his SUV had hugged the edge of the cliff so closely that his speed didn't crawl above a cautious thirty miles per hour. The experience had

afforded him plenty of opportunity to think about what kind of woman moved to a secluded spot halfway up a mountain with a pack of wolves.

But all the time in the world couldn't have prepared him for the reality of meeting Piper Quinn.

She was quite a bit younger than he'd expected. She couldn't be more than twenty-five, yet somehow she'd found the funding and ambition to open a thirty-five acre wildlife rescue center. He couldn't help but be impressed, despite the fact that he considered her project ill-advised at best, and at worst, just plain dangerous.

For starters, the sanctuary was too close to Aurora. The heart of the town was nestled right at the foot of the mountain. It might have been a slow crawl for an SUV, but an escaped wolf wouldn't need to travel the paved roads. A wolf could charge straight down the slope.

And then, while melted marshmallows had been dripping down his arm, she'd talked to him about saving species on the endangered list, the ecological importance of wolves and the National Nature Conservatory. Once upon a time, words such as those had been Ethan's vocabulary. He'd all but forgotten what it felt like to be passionate about nature, the bounty of the Alaskan wilderness and the beauty of creation. He'd forgotten pretty much everything, other than existing from day to day. And the things he would have given anything not to remember.

But he could see sparks of his former life in the fire that burned in Piper Quinn's eyes. He got the feeling she'd done more living in her twenty-something years than most people did in a lifetime. She was smart. And she cared. Deeply.

What was she like? Brilliant. Brave. Lovely.

Something moved in Ethan. An ache. A different kind of ache than the hopeless regret that had become like a second skin. Different, but just as dangerous. Maybe even more so.

He swallowed. "She's interesting. Quite interesting, actually."

Not that it mattered.

Come morning, the lovely Piper Quinn was sure to despise him.

* * *

Piper didn't sleep a wink the night after Ethan Hale's visit. Instead she stayed up until all hours worrying about what he might write in his article. He'd been forced to leave the sanctuary in his sock feet, for goodness' sake. It was beyond mortifying. The man was probably suffering from frostbite now, and it was all her fault. She buried her head under her pillow, but it was no use. Not even a thick layer of goose down could keep the worry from finding its way into her thoughts.

Even the wolves seemed to sense that something was wrong. When Tundra let loose with a mournful howl right around midnight, the others didn't even bother chiming in. They were quiet, too quiet. Like the calm before a storm. A typewritten typhoon penned by Ethan Hale.

Sometime around one in the morning, she gave up the fight and made a batch of chocolate chip cookies. When that failed to make her drowsy enough to fall asleep, she whipped up a few dozen oatmeal raisin. Then molasses. By the time a misty violet dawn descended on the mountain, Piper couldn't tell if she was running a wildlife center or a bakery.

After checking on the wolves, she packed up the cookies and headed for the church. She would never manage to consume the fruits of her anxiety-fueled baking spree on her own, and she figured teenagers might be the only creatures walking the planet who were more ravenous than wolves. Besides, she owed the youth group a culinary thank-you for helping put up the fencing last week.

She pushed through the door of Aurora Community Church's fellowship hall with a nudge of her hip, her arms piled high with plastic bins.

"Piper, here. Let me help you." Liam Blake, the youth pastor, grabbed two containers from the top of her teetering stack.

His wife, Posy, a willowy ballerina who ran Aurora's one and only dance school and sometimes taught ballet at the church, snatched the rest. "Hi, Piper. What a surprise. What is all of this?"

"Cookies. Just a thank-you for the kids in the youth group." Arms free at last, Piper loosened the scarf around her neck and stomped the snow from her feet. Then she followed Posy and Liam to the youth pastor's office, where her Tupperware pretty much took up the entire surface of the desk.

So many cookies, so little sleep.

"This really wasn't necessary, although I'm sure they'll appreciate it." Liam opened one of the containers and popped a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth.

"If there are any left once school gets out," Posy teased.

"I couldn't plow my way through all of these if I tried." Liam laughed. "But I just might. They're delicious."

"Thanks. I'm glad you like them." Piper smiled. It was nice to have new friends. Different, but nice.

She was consciously aware of the fact that she spent the majority of her time with wolves. For the most part, she preferred it that way. Wolves were easier to understand than most people. Wolves had an organized, predictable social structure. You knew where you stood with wolves. Wolves didn't lie. And they didn't keep secrets.

Not that they were particularly noble. Like other animals, they were simply incapable of deception. What you saw was what you got. Their emotions showed clearly in their body language. Piper could tell if Koko was happy, sad, fearful or angry just by the way he carried his tail.

She'd often thought life would be so much simpler if the same could be said for people. It sure would have saved her the pain and heartache of getting involved with a man who specialized in secrets.

Piper's chest grew tight.

She didn't miss Stephen. She knew this now. Letting him go had been easy once she'd discovered the truth. Giving up on the idea of a home and a family—a real family—had cut closer to the bone.

She'd never had a family. The succession of foster homes where she'd grown up didn't count. Neither did the four brief years she'd lived with her birth mother. Was a mother really a mother when you could no longer remember her face, or her voice, or what it felt like to be held?

A child needed a mother. A home. Children needed structure. They needed to know where they fit in the world.

So did wolves. It was in their nature. That was one of the things Piper liked best about them. Every wolf had a place in the pack. Every wolf belonged. So eventually she'd become one of them, an honorary wolf. It was easier than trying to fit into the regular world. Most people thought wolves were dangerous, but those people hadn't grown up the way Piper had. Humans could be far more dangerous than wolves. And the damage they could do to a child's heart was immensely greater than bodily injury.

She should have known things would end badly with Stephen. She'd been so foolish to think she'd found a man who actually wanted to build a life with her and the wolves. She'd thought she had. He'd slipped an engagement ring on her finger, and she'd believed. She'd believed her pack would finally be complete. At last.

And then she'd found out that Stephen already belonged to a pack, complete with a wife and two children.

"How are things up in the mountains? Everything at the sanctuary running smoothly?" Liam asked, dragging Piper's attention back to the present.

Thank You, Lord.

She didn't like to dwell on the past, on Stephen's deception nor on her family. Most of the time, it didn't bother her that she lived a solitary life. Because she had the wolves, and they were like family. They were her world.

But her thoughts had begun to wander all over the place since yesterday. Since Ethan Hale.

"Great. Just great." She pasted on a smile. "At least I hope so."

"You hope so?" Posy glanced quickly at Liam and then back at Piper.

"I had a visitor yesterday—a journalist from the Yukon Reporter. He's doing a story on the sanctuary." She sank into one of the chairs beside Posy, opposite Liam's desk. Just thinking about the newspaper again hit her with a wave of exhaustion that made it difficult to stand up straight.

"Things didn't go well," Liam said. It was a statement, not a question. Piper was so preoccupied that she hardly noticed.

"It was a disaster. I just don't understand what happened. It was almost as though he'd made his mind up about the sanctuary before he'd even seen it." Yet there'd been a moment or two when she thought she'd spied a glimpse of a different Ethan Hale, a man who understood why she loved the wolves the way she did. Elusive, fleeting glances of a man with pine needles in his hair and the scent of wild things on his shoes instead of the gloomy journalist with storms in his eyes.

She swallowed around the lump that was quickly forming in her throat. "I'm worried about nothing. Maybe. Probably. I mean, surely things didn't go as badly as I think they did." She thought about mentioning Ethan's shoes, or lack thereof, but it was too mortifying to talk about.

Posy and Liam exchanged another glance.

The lump in Piper's throat grew three times larger. "Then again, perhaps I do have a reason to be worried."

She prayed with every fiber of her being that either Posy or Liam would say something reassuring.

Neither of them did.

"Actually, the article came out in this morning's paper. I have a copy of it right here." Posy bent to unzip the large black dance bag at her feet.

Piper felt sick as the woman extracted a copy of the Yukon Reporter and unfolded it to the proper page.

"Here." She handed it over.

Piper had to force herself to look at it.

Just rip it off. Like a Band-Aid.

She took a deep breath and started reading.

At first, things didn't seem so bad. Ethan wrote that her wolves had seemed obviously well cared for and that her dedication to their plight was admirable.

So far, so good. Piper allowed herself to breathe. Maybe this wasn't going to be as bad as she'd expected.

But then she read the next sentence, in which Ethan called wolves predatory and carnivorous. Which was technically true. But he'd gone on to include an entire paragraph on wolf maulings without mentioning that such attacks were rare. So rare that Alaskans were infinitely more likely to be attacked by their family dog than a wolf.

Worse, he then pointed out that the sanctuary was inadequately staffed. The staff that she did have were legal minors who lacked the proper training to interact with wild animals.

Also technically true. But he'd made things sound so much worse than they actually were. The kids didn't interact with the wolves. They helped with things like fencing, preparing meat, landscaping and cleaning pens. Empty pens. She'd never allow one of the teens from the youth group to enter an enclosure without her close, personal supervision. She'd told Ethan as much.

This was bad. Really bad. Her panicked gaze flitted around the page, snagging on words like clear and present danger. Awful words. And apparently her wolves weren't just a threat to the people of Aurora. He mentioned the neighboring reindeer farm, as well.

That was the final straw. Piper sniffed, and the black newsprint swam before her eyes. She stopped reading, and an awkward, uncomfortable silence fell over the youth pastor's small office.

Not that Piper blamed the couple for going quiet. What were they supposed to say to the woman who'd apparently brought wolves to the area in order to ravage the townspeople and all of Santa's reindeer?

She hoped barefoot Ethan Hale did have frostbite. She hoped all ten of his toes fell off.

"We're so sorry, Piper," Posy said. "We were there. We saw the work that the kids did. We know they weren't any more in harm's way than if they'd been anywhere else outdoors in Alaska."

Liam leaned across his desk, his face so full of concern that it made Piper feel even worse. "What can we do to help?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. It was too late for help. The damage had been done. People all over Alaska were reading Ethan's damning words right this very minute. "I just can't believe it. This isn't even a news article. It's an attack on the sanctuary. It's full of opinions. Biased, inflammatory opinions with no basis in fact. I thought journalists were supposed to be impartial. He can't do this, can he? He just can't."

But he already had.

"It's an op-ed piece. That's why it's in the editorial section." Liam nodded at the top of the page, where EDITORIAL was printed in large block letters.

Piper blinked back a fresh wave of tears and glanced at the articles surrounding Ethan's piece on the sanctuary. "But I don't understand. Mine is the only negative article on this entire page."

"I know. I've actually never seen such a strongly worded piece in the Yukon Reporter." Posy turned toward Liam. "Have you?"

"Not that I recall," he said. "Something just doesn't seem right with this entire scenario."

Nothing was right about it. Absolutely nothing. "This will destroy me. People won't want to come see the wolves anymore. Not after this. And I can kiss my donations goodbye. Who in their right mind would want to give money to an organization that 'poses a clear and present danger to the community at large'?"

Nobody. That's who.

Beside her, Posy sighed. "Maybe it's not as bad as it seems. It's an op-ed piece, as Liam said. By definition, that means it's an opinion. And this reporter is only one person."

"But he's one person with a voice that can reach the entire town. Folks know him. They respect him. Other than you two and the kids in the youth group, I don't really know people here. I'm new in town, remember?"

Posy's delicate eyebrows furrowed. "What you need is another voice, one to tell your side of the story. A voice that can explain why the wolves are important and why they aren't dangerous."

Liam nodded. "Posy's right. Maybe you can contact the editor and ask him to send another reporter out to the property. Actually, I know someone who used to work for the Yukon Reporter. Ben Grayson. He's a dog musher now, so he might be a little more sympathetic to your cause."

It was a kind offer, but it would take too long. Something needed to happen. Now. Before Ethan Hale's ill-formed opinion became accepted as truth. "You're right. What I need—what the wolves need—is another voice."

"Do you want me to give Ben Grayson a call?" Liam reached for his phone.

Piper lifted her chin. She'd driven all the way from Colorado to Alaska with a trailerful of wolves. She'd put the sanctuary together from the ground up. She could do this. "Thank you, but no. After this fiasco, there's only one person I trust to tell my side of the story."

Liam set his phone down. "Who?"

"Me." It was the perfect solution. Who was she kidding? It was the only solution. "I'm going to write the article myself."

Chapter Three

The morning after his op-ed piece on the wolf sanctuary appeared in the Yukon Reporter, Ethan began his day as he always did. He got ready for work, then drove the twenty miles from his

cabin near Knik all the way back to the coffee bar at the Northern Lights Inn. Aurora was in the opposite direction of his office, which meant he was spending an extra half hour or so in his car just for coffee. But it was worth it. The coffee at the Northern Lights was that good.

Besides, he was up earlier than usual. He hadn't exactly gotten a good night's sleep after he'd finally turned in his article.

"Morning, Ethan." The barista slid a coaster across the smooth walnut surface of the bar and grinned. "What can I get you this morning?"

"A large Gold Rush blend. Black, please," Ethan said. "Thanks."

"Sure thing." The barista smiled again. Either Ethan was imagining things or Sam seemed more outwardly cheerful than usual.

"So everyone in Aurora is talking about your article. You know...the one about the wolves." Sam eyed him over the top of the espresso machine.

The one about the wolves. It had to be that one? Couldn't they talk about the piece he'd written about the upcoming city elections or the one about Arctic ice melt season?

"Is that right?" Ethan shifted on his bar stool.

He shouldn't feel uncomfortable about what he'd written. He absolutely shouldn't. He'd been doing his job. That was all. His extensive knowledge of Alaskan ecology and wildlife was one of the reasons he'd landed his job at the paper in the first place. They'd asked him to write an educated opinion on the wolf sanctuary, and he'd complied.

He'd done the right thing. The safe thing. The town would be better off without the wolves. So would Piper Quinn. She just didn't know it.

"Oh, yes." Sam let out a laugh. "Your article already caused quite a stir around here, and now this morning—"

Ethan's cell phone rang, cutting the barista off.

It was just as well. Ethan may have had no reason to feel bad about what he'd written, but that didn't mean he wanted to discuss it with Sam. Or with Tate, who'd left a few voice mails the day before.

Ethan couldn't keep avoiding his closest friend. Tate probably wanted to make sure he was okay after losing his shoes to a wild animal. There had been an underlying note of concern in his voice in the messages he'd left.

That hint of worry was exactly why Ethan had been reluctant to return his calls. Couldn't he leave the past dead and buried, where it belonged?

Dead.

Buried.

Ethan's temples throbbed. He glanced at the display on his phone, expecting to see Tate's name. It wasn't. LOU MARSHALL. His editor. "Hello, Lou."

"Ethan, I'm glad you picked up. I need you to get into the office early today." He sounded urgent. Even more urgent than he usually did, which was extremely urgent. He was, after all, a newsman.

"How early?"

"As soon as you can get here. We need to talk about this wolf woman. Immediately. Just get here."

The line went dead.

We need to talk about this wolf woman.

Super.

Ethan sighed. "Sam, I'm going to need that coffee to go."

Half an hour later, after breaking as few traffic laws as possible, he plunked two cups of Gold Rush blend down on Lou Marshall's desk and pushed one toward his boss. "Morning. You said we needed to talk?"

Lou took a gulp of coffee and nodded. "Yes. Have you seen the paper yet this morning?"

"No. I just got here." He frowned at the copy of the Yukon Reporter early edition in Lou's hands and remembered Sam's line of questioning at the coffee bar. "Has there been a new development in the wolf story?"

"You could say that." Lou tossed the newspaper at him.

Ethan caught it with one hand.

He died a thousand deaths in the handful of seconds it took for him to find the "development" that Lou had referred to. A thousand deaths in which he imagined every potential tragedy, every conceivable fatal accident that could have taken place. Escaped wolves. Wounded people.

Not her. God, please. Not her.

The hasty prayer caught him nearly as off guard as Piper's letter to the editor on page three. Ethan couldn't remember the last time he'd prayed. Actually, he could. It had been on a cold Denali night five years ago when the world had fallen apart. He'd screamed to the heavens that night as he'd tried in vain to put it back together, mistakenly believing that there was a God somewhere up there who listened. Who cared.

He stared at the letter, and the panic that had caught him in its grip morphed into irritation. Piper hadn't been hurt. She was perfectly fine. So fine that she'd been busy writing a letter to his boss. And Lou had printed it in the paper.

"You've got to be kidding," Ethan muttered, scanning the contents as quickly as his gaze could move over the page, catching glimpses of words such as yellow journalism, unfair reporting and retraction.

Blood boiling, he wadded the paper into a ball and pitched it into the trash. Retraction? She wanted him to take his words back? Out of the question. "If you've called me in here to demand that I print a retraction, you're wasting your breath. I won't do it."

"I wouldn't dream of making such a demand." A smile creased Lou's face and he calmly raised his coffee cup to his mouth again.

Then what was Ethan doing here? He was almost afraid to ask.

As it turned out, he had reason to be afraid. "On the contrary, I want you to write whatever you like about Ms. Quinn and her wolves. Repeatedly. The paper is sold out all over the state. This wolf thing is moving papers faster than we can print them. I want you to keep writing about the wolves, provided you do so on location."

Ethan froze while reaching for his coffee. "On location?"

"Yes. On location. I've already arranged everything. You're to spend the next two weeks volunteering at the Aurora Wolf and Wildlife Center alongside Ms. Quinn. You'll document the experience in a daily diary that will run on the front page of the Yukon Reporter." Lou slung back the final dregs of his coffee. "It's genius, don't you think?"

Volunteer at the wolf sanctuary? For two weeks? With wolves?

With Piper?

Ethan had plenty of thoughts on the idea. Genius was nowhere on the list.

"No." His temples throbbed harder. The notion of facing Piper after the things he'd written about her—not to mention the things that she'd written about him—was enough to give him an aneurysm. "Just...no."

"You heard me say that your daily diary will run on the front page, right?" Lou waggled his eyebrows.

"Why? I've been asking you for a spot on the front page for months." That was an understatement. He was certain it had been a regular topic of conversation for the better part of a year. "Why now? Why this?"

"Because the readers are eating it up." Lou threw up his hands and laughed. "Since her response to your op-ed came out this morning, the phone hasn't stopped ringing. People love it. You and Piper Quinn are all that anyone in Alaska can talk about."

This cannot be happening. Ethan was supposed to write the article. Piper was supposed to close her doors, and that would be the end of it.

He should have known she wouldn't give up this easily.

He breathed out a sigh. "But I don't want people talking about Piper and me. Not in the same breath, anyway."

"Too late. Just do a Google search of yourself. The first two screens are chock-full of results about the war of words between you and the wolf woman."

A Google search? "No, thank you."

Lou shrugged. "Suit yourself, but get packing. I've already made a reservation for you at the Northern Lights Inn. That way, you can spend as much time as possible on the property."

At least he'd be in close proximity to great coffee. If he agreed to this nonsensical plan, which he wouldn't.

He shook his head. "No."

"The front page, Ethan. It's all yours. Every day, for fourteen days straight." Lou tapped a finger on the newspaper that lay on the desk between them.

The front page.

For two solid weeks.

If that didn't get the attention of The Seattle Tribune, nothing would. It was a reporter's dream. His dream.

Then why did it feel so much like a nightmare? "Where on the front page?"

"Bottom right-hand corner. Twenty inches of space per day."

"Above the fold. Twenty-five inches." If Ethan was going to agree to this nonsense, he would make sure it was worth his while.

"Deal." Lou slapped his hand on the desk in triumph. The coffee cups jumped in time with the throbbing of Ethan's headache. "You'd better get packing. The clock is ticking. Your first diary entry is due no later than midnight tonight. Ms. Quinn is expecting you."

Piper was expecting him.

What have I done?

"Get cracking, son." Lou shooed Ethan out of his office. "And don't look so worried. This is going to be the highlight of your career. Think of it as being embedded, like a reporter in a combat zone."

A reporter in a combat zone.

Why did Ethan get the feeling that the comparison wasn't too far off the mark?

* * *

Piper was ready and waiting when she heard the tires of Ethan's SUV roll up the sanctuary's snow-covered drive. She closed the field notebook where she recorded daily observations about each wolf's behavior patterns, climbed down from the large flat boulder overlooking the property and was standing, arms crossed, toe tapping, by the time her nemesis-turned-volunteer climbed out of his car.

"You're late," she said by way of greeting. She wasn't wasting her time with marshmallows and small talk this time. A fat lot of good that had done.

"Piper." He nodded. "We meet again."

He looked as stone-faced as ever, which pretty much confirmed that he hadn't lost one minute of sleep over the hurtful things he'd written about her. Not just her, but the wolves, the sanctuary, her goals and dreams. Basically, everything she held near and dear.

Unbelievable.

The email she'd received the night before from Lou Marshall at the Yukon Reporter had been nothing if not concise. He'd received her letter and would be printing it in the early edition. No apology. No retraction. But her letter would appear in the paper. She'd been appeased. For the most part.

And then the impossible had happened. Only a few hours after the early edition of the paper had been released, Lou Marshall had called and asked if she'd be interested in Ethan volunteering at the sanctuary for two weeks and chronicling the experience in the newspaper. Of course she'd said yes. Another article from a different perspective was exactly what she'd demanded. What Marshall was offering her was above and beyond that. Fourteen articles. Plus two weeks of free labor.

It was an offer she couldn't refuse, even if it did mean spending approximately eighty hours in the presence of the self-righteous Ethan Hale. As much as she hated to admit it, she could use the help. Especially help from someone as physically strong and capable as Ethan appeared. There were plenty of chores around the sanctuary that required an able body. Just yesterday poor wiry Caleb had nearly collapsed under the weight of a cord of firewood.

Not that she'd noticed Ethan's broad chest. Or strapping shoulders. Or thick, muscular forearms.

Okay, so maybe she'd noticed those things, as well as his other knee-weakening qualities. Such as the way his piercing gray eyes looked almost blue beneath the shelter of the hemlock trees. And the way he somehow seemed at home here among the woods and the rocks and the snow flurries. Like the wolves—untamable, yet not wholly wild.

It was a ridiculous notion. He didn't deserve to be compared to her beloved wolves, even in the secrecy of her thoughts. Because those arms, those shoulders and those extraordinary lupine eyes were all attached to his impossibly stubborn head.

She looked up at him now, towering over her with his chiseled features arranged in an expression of distinct displeasure. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, obviously longing to be someplace else. Anyplace else but here.

What was I thinking, agreeing to this? It's a terrible idea.

After getting the phone call from his editor, she'd actually wondered if maybe the arrangement had been Ethan's idea. That maybe, just maybe, he regretted dragging her name through the mud in one of Alaska's biggest media outlets. Perhaps he'd felt remorseful after he'd read her response in her letter to the editor.

Judging by the look on his face, clearly not.

She swallowed. This could be a mistake. And she couldn't afford another mistake. But really, what else could he write that could make things worse?

Mistake or not, if he thought she was going to bend over backward in welcome again, he had another think coming. She wasn't the only one making mistakes lately. Ethan had underestimated her before. He hadn't taken her at all seriously. That was a mistake she aimed to fix.

She crossed her arms again and pinned him with a stare. "I repeat—you're late."

She had a tour arriving in less than ten minutes. How was she supposed to get him properly trained to do anything of any value while she was lecturing her guests and showing them around? Over half her scheduled visitors had either canceled or no-showed so far today, thanks to him. Those who still wanted to see the wolves were getting the royal treatment.

"Your editor told me to expect you nearly an hour ago."

"My apologies." His mouth curved in an obviously disingenuous grin. "I had a pressing errand to run on the way here."

"And what might that have been?" Had he stopped to picket the local animal shelter or something? Had he been busy kicking puppies?

He crossed his massive arms. Honestly, how did a man with a desk job end up with such nice biceps? "If you must know, I had to stop and buy new shoes."

She glanced down at his feet, clad in a pristine pair of North Face all-weather hiking boots, and her cheeks grew warm. "Oh. I see."

"So am I forgiven?" He lifted a single, bemused brow.

"For the tardiness, yes. For everything else, no. Not even close."

"I can live with that. Somehow."

Could he be any more smug? “I honestly don’t know how you manage to sleep at night.”

“I manage.” He shrugged, then his gaze fell on her notebook. “What’s that you have there?”

“My field notes.” She held the book tighter to her chest. “A written record of the daily behavior patterns of my subject. In this case, the wolves.”

“I know what a field notebook is. Does that surprise you?” He planted his hands on his hips, and Piper vowed not to look at his arms again.

Half a second later, her gaze zeroed in on his forearms. She cleared her throat. “Actually, it does surprise me. Quite a bit.”

“May I have a look?” he asked, gesturing to her notebook.

“Certainly.” She offered it to him. Maybe if he realized how seriously she took her work with the wolves, he’d relent and give her at least an ounce of respect.

He flipped through the pages and glanced up only when he’d reached the end. “Impressive.”

“Thank you.” Heat rose to her cheeks. One kind word from Ethan Hale, wolf hater extraordinaire, and she was blushing like a schoolgirl. She’d never hated herself more in her entire life.

“Is this part of your paperwork for the NNC grant?”

“Yes, it is.” How in the world could he possibly know that? Why would he be familiar with NNC grant requirements?

“I see,” he said, cryptic as always. Good grief, he could be annoying.

She held out her hand. “Now give it back, please. I have a tour to conduct, and you have work to do.”

Field notes back in hand, she turned, stomped through the snow toward the wheelbarrow that was propped beside the log cabin, and wheeled it back toward him to park it at his immaculate feet.

He eyed it with trepidation. “What’s this?”

“It’s your first assignment.” She smiled. She was enjoying herself. Too much, probably. But she couldn’t help it. “I’d like you to clean up Tundra’s enclosure. The pitchfork is leaning against the fence. And don’t worry. I’ve relocated her to a different pen for the time being so you can move about without fear of being eaten alive.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “You want me to clean a wolf pen.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I want you to clean all the wolf pens.”

Ethan narrowed his gaze and released a controlled breath. “All of them?”

“They’re not going to clean themselves, are they?” She was fully aware he would write about this. And she didn’t care. Anyone who’d read his less-than-flattering portrayal of her life’s work would understand. “Start with Tundra’s enclosure. Just remove the dirty straw and replace it with fresh. New bales are piled behind the cabin. Your main job is to remove all of the soiled material.”

“Soiled material,” he repeated. He didn’t sound the least bit amused anymore. In fact, he sounded angry.

Good.

“I’m referring to animal waste.” She smiled sweetly.

He glared at her. Hard. “Believe me. I know exactly what you’re referring to, Piper.”

“Excellent. I’m so glad we understand one another.” Since we’re going to be spending so much time together...

The flicker in his gaze told her that he was thinking about the same thing she was—hours, days, weeks in one another’s company. She already felt distinctly ill at ease after little more than three minutes.

“Piper...” His voice grew soft, almost tender.

If she listened closely, she could almost hear an unspoken apology. Almost.

She wanted to tell him not to bother. It was too little, too late. The damage had been done. Words had created this mess. Words could fix it...maybe...but those words were going to have to be addressed to a bigger audience.

Besides, she didn't like hearing him say her name like that, as if he knew her. As if he cared. It was confusing. And she'd had more than enough confusion in her life.

"I think it's best that you go back to calling me Ms. Quinn, since you're working here now." Maybe she was pouring it on a little thick. Then again, maybe not.

Ethan's gaze hardened. "Is that what the kid calls you?" He jerked his head toward Caleb, who was busy filling water buckets. "He works here, too, doesn't he?"

Ethan sounded almost jealous, which was just plain ludicrous. Almost as ludicrous as the way his potential jealousy made her feel all warm inside, despite the snow flurries enveloping them both.

She squared her shoulders. "Caleb calls me Piper. And yes, he works here. But he's also managed to refrain from slandering me to the greater Alaskan population."

She glanced down at the wheelbarrow, then at Ethan's shiny new boots. Footwear that would likely be unrecognizable by the end of the day. He'd probably also acquire a blister or two. Such a pity.

She beamed up at him. "Enjoy yourself. I have a tour to give."

* * *

Ethan stood seething as Piper strode through the snow toward a small group that had assembled by the log cabin headquarters while they'd been exchanging pleasantries. Not that their interaction had been entirely pleasant. Or pleasant at all, for that matter.

He wasn't an idiot. He'd expected Piper to be angry. Just not quite this angry.

He had a diary entry to write at the end of the day. No, not a diary entry. A newspaper article. For all practical purposes, she'd just demanded that he spend the afternoon cleaning a thirty-five-acre litter box. If she thought he wouldn't write about this, she was fooling herself. How exactly did she expect to gain the respect of his readership when she was behaving this way?

More importantly, how was he supposed to write eight hundred words about such a repugnant task?

Ethan pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. He'd been nursing a headache since the moment Lou had dumped this crazy assignment on him. Ethan was embedded all right. And now that he'd arrived in enemy territory, the pounding behind his eyes had intensified tenfold.

He huffed out a breath. He needed to forget about trying to write something riveting about cleaning up wolf pens. He just needed to report the sloppy truth. And he really needed to stop worrying about how that truth would make Piper look. Let her shoot herself in the foot. At least her public humiliation wouldn't be his fault. This time.

He grabbed the handles of the wheelbarrow and aimed it in the direction of the enclosure. The first gate to the pen stood propped open with a pitchfork. Ethan took it, gripping the handle a little too tightly as he unlatched the second gate and stepped inside. His gaze swept the snow-covered ground, the pale bark of the aspen trees and the silver slate rocks that punctuated the landscape. So much white.

The memory of Tundra's snowy coat crept into his consciousness. His throat grew tight, and he searched the area for a glimpse of lupine copper eyes. Just in case.

Get on with things. The wolf's not here.

He thrust the pitchfork into a pile of snow near the fence and went back for the wheelbarrow. As he maneuvered it inside, the gate slammed shut behind him with a clang of finality. Ethan reached again for the pitchfork. If he didn't get started, he'd be here all night. But before his hand made contact, he heard a rustling in the distance.

He paused.

And waited.

Just when he'd convinced himself that he'd been hearing things, a twig snapped somewhere behind the tree line. His head jerked in the direction of the noise. Another memory washed over him. Not so much a single recollection as a collection of sensations—a stirring in the alder thickets, a dizzying brown blur exploding from the brush, an upturned basket of wild blueberries, the hot breath

of the bear on his neck, then the sticky sweet smell of blood. Ethan's hands balled into fists, his body preparing for battle as he fought against the pictures in his head.

A breeze blew through the enclosure, sending snow tumbling from the boughs of the evergreens. It fell like a heavy, frozen curtain. Ethan saw nothing but white. He blinked against the assault, eyes stinging in the Arctic wind. Shaken by his memories, he couldn't be certain what was real and what wasn't. Had he really heard a creature in the enclosure? Was the ghostly shape he thought he saw moving among the trees really the elusive white wolf, Tundra, or was his tortured mind playing tricks on him?

His answer came in the form of a tiny white fluff ball that hopped out from between two hemlocks. A rabbit. Specifically, a snowshoe hare with a winter-white pelt and dark, watchful eyes. It blinked at him, twitched its quivering nose and hopped out of view.

Ethan released the breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. He felt off-kilter, dizzy. He'd been completely unnerved.

By a bunny.

He glanced over his shoulder in search of Piper. Relief swept over him when he spotted her in the distance, surrounded by a small group of people wearing puffy coats, mittens and rapt expressions. He wondered what she was saying that had them so enamored. Not that it mattered. He was going to be around for a while. Days. Weeks. He'd hear her spiel eventually. In the meantime, he should just say a silent prayer of thanks that she hadn't witnessed his moment of panic.

Her words from three days ago came back to him.

While wolves are indeed predators, I wouldn't be so quick to call them dangerous...unless you're a bunny rabbit.

The sentiment, which he'd merely found annoying at the time, now seemed prophetic. Uncomfortably so. Because in his wildest dreams, he'd never imagined that he himself would be the bunny rabbit in this scenario.

He was afraid.

Of what, he wasn't even sure. It wasn't the wolves. His feelings were more complicated than that. It was his past, the memories, the wolves and nature itself all rolled together in a tangle of anger, regret, dread...and loss. Loss of life. Loss of control.

So much loss.

He was broken. Broken and bitter. That much he'd known. But he hadn't realized that his fury was also suffused with fear. It was a sobering realization. The wind, the snow, the slender pine boughs were all things he'd once loved. Before the bear attack, he'd slept outside during the summer months, under the stars, more often than he'd lain in a bed at night. That's why he'd come to Alaska all those years ago. He'd wanted to a build a life in the most majestic place on earth. The kid who'd spent his childhood with his face pressed against hotel windows had beaten a trail to the Last Frontier as quickly as he could.

Where had that fearless soul gone?

Ethan stabbed at a pile of straw with the pitchfork and heaved it into the wheelbarrow. Then he did the same thing again, and again. With each jab, he felt the muscles in his arms and back loosen, then begin to burn. But it was a good burn, the kind of sharp ache that came with physical work.

He made short work of cleaning out Tundra's pen. Piper seemed genuinely surprised, and possibly even a little impressed, when he told her he was ready to move on to the next enclosure. She even smiled as she escorted Tundra back to her pen. And the way she did was altogether different from the sassy grin she'd greeted him with earlier. This was a genuine smile, full of sweetness and light. Looking at it brought about an ache in the center of his chest that made him forget the burn in his biceps.

But Ethan knew better. The smile was for the wolf. Not for him. What he didn't know was why it made him feel so empty inside.

Chapter Four

"Is this true?" Posy lowered the morning edition of the Yukon Reporter and, mouth agape, stared at Piper. "Did you really make him clean out the wolf pens?"

Piper swallowed. "He put that in his article?"

"Yes. It says so right here." Posy tapped the front page with her index finger.

Piper hadn't been able to bring herself to read Ethan's account of his first day volunteering at the sanctuary, even though procuring a copy of the newspaper was precisely why she'd driven into town.

That had been the plan, anyway, when she'd headed down the mountain. She'd intended to grab a newspaper at the corner store and then head right back up. Instead, she'd found herself at the church with three coffees in tow—hers, plus one each for Liam and Posy. The church had been quiet, though. The parking lot had been empty and the doors locked.

She should have headed straight back to the wildlife sanctuary. She had work to do. Loads of it. But when she'd driven past Posy's ballet school and seen the warm glow of light through its windows, her car had somehow parked itself in the closest parking space.

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