

Wild At Heart by K.A. Tucker

(uncorrected proof)

Chapter One

November

“So ... I guess I’ll see you when I see you.”

I can’t manage words around the flaring lump in my throat, and so I simply nod. The past four days with Jonah in Toronto have been a blur. A bliss-filled blur that I’m not ready to let go of yet. The Uber driver shuttling me home after this parting will have the privilege of a sobbing mess in their backseat.

An unreadable look flashes across Jonah’s icy blue eyes. I still haven’t grown accustomed to seeing him without a beard, though I’ll admit I’ve enjoyed admiring that chiseled jawline and those dimples. He takes a deep breath and turns away, his carry-on slung over one broad shoulder, his boarding pass and passport dangling from between two pinched fingers.

I watch him hand his documents to the agent at the US-bound entry gate, who spends all of one second reviewing them before waving him toward the glass security doors. On the other side is his fourteen-hour flight home. In seconds, Jonah is going to be out of sight, gone.

Who knows when I’ll see him again? He flew here to tell me in person that he’s been miserable these past two months since I left Alaska, that he doesn’t want to be a carbon copy of my father—spending his life pining over my mother—that he wants to find an “us” that will work. That he wants me beside him.

I haven’t given him an answer yet, too afraid to leap.

Until now.

I feel the word rising inside me—an emotion about to erupt. “Yes!” My pulse pounds in my ears.

Jonah turns to regard me with a raised eyebrow.

Am I crazy? Maybe.

But I’m fully committing to it now.

I take a step forward and swallow my nerves. “I’ll come back to Alaska.” Because being with Jonah again—laughing and reminiscing, having him in my space, waking in his arms—has only confirmed what I’ve suspected for months: I’m deeply in love with him, and living in Toronto when he’s not here doesn’t make sense to me anymore.

I’m done saying goodbye to this man.

Jonah leaves the line and retraces his steps to close the distance, dropping his bag by his feet. It’s five A.M. and we’re creating an obstacle, forcing travelers to weave around us on either side to get to their flights. Their grumbles touch my ears, but in this moment, I don’t care.

The severe frown cutting across Jonah’s handsome forehead as he stares down at me says he doesn’t, either. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “Yeah. I mean, if you’re serious about moving to Anchorage—”

“When?” he demands to know, his voice suddenly gruff.

“I don’t know. As soon as I can?” How long does it take to pack up your life and move to a different country? Granted, a country I was born in and still have citizenship with but haven’t lived in for more than two decades.

His eyes spark with determination. “Come for Christmas.”

I laugh. “That’s like *a month* away!”

“So? What else you got goin’ on?” It’s a challenge, delivered in Jonah’s typical blunt style. “I’m not going to see my mom in Oslo anymore. And Aggie and Mabel would love having you there. Especially since it’s the first one without Wren. You should come.” His Adam’s apple bobs with his hard swallow. “Come.”

Somewhere in between his words and his tone and the way he’s looking at me, I hear the silent plea. In truth, the idea of being near the people closest to my late father for the holidays sounds more appealing—and more feasible—by the second.

“Okay?” I say on an exhale, my voice shaky. “If I can figure it out, I will. I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

He pulls me into his firm body, leaning down to press his forehead against mine. “Damn, Calla, you know how to make a guy sweat.”

I grin, reaching up to skate my fingertips over his stubbled jaw. I hid his razor two days ago to stop him from shaving. The act screamed of poetic justice to me, after he hid my cosmetics bags in his ceiling for all those weeks during the summer. Unfortunately, Jonah doesn’t seem bothered. “Sorry. I only decided a few seconds ago.” Though in truth, I think I’ve known all along.

“Are you sure, though? Because you can’t tell me something like this and then chicken out. I’m gonna have to put the house up for sale *now* if we want any chance of being out of there by next summer—”

“I’m not going to *chicken out*,” I promise. “I’m one hundred percent sure that I—” I bite my lip to stall the declaration that nearly slips out, my cheeks flushing.

Jonah’s jaw tightens as he peers intensely at me. “You what?”

I love you. Those three words have been on the tip of my tongue since the second I heard his laughter from our porch, and yet I can't find the nerve to tell him. Crazy enough, I *have* found the nerve to move to Alaska for him. Probably because he asked me to. If Jonah told me he loved me, the same sentiment would fly from my lips in a heartbeat. But he hasn't said it yet, not in so many words.

"I'm sure," I say instead.

His gaze narrows in that assessing way of his, as if he's trying to read my mind. "Okay."

"Okay." I let out a nervous laugh. "Holy shit, we're doing this!"

"We are and it'll be great, you'll see." He kisses me again, slowly and deeply, his palm cradling the back of my head, his fingers weaving through my loose hair.

Someone grumbles, "Get the fuck out of the way," and Jonah breaks away to shoot a menacing glare. The small, pinched-faced man ducks his head and pretends it wasn't him.

"I should go." Jonah glances at his watch. "I'm already cuttin' it close. Plus, I think we've pissed off half the airport."

I stretch on my tiptoes to steal just one more kiss. "Call me as soon as you land."

I get one of his crooked smirks in return, the kind I used to want to slap off his face but now clamber to catch a glimpse of. "Have fun tellin' Susan."

Chapter Two

December

“I guess this is it!” my mother announces with a degree of finality, her hazel-green eyes glossy as they roll over the US-bound entry gate sign. Even at this ungodly hour, hordes of holiday passengers amble toward it.

“*Mom.*” I give her a look. “I’m not dying.”

“Of course, I *know* that. It’s just ...” She catches a tear with her freshly polished nail—cranberry, for the season. “I finally understand that look on my mother’s face all those years ago, when I told her *I* was moving to Alaska. I should probably phone her and apologize.”

My heart races with anticipation. It’s been four weeks, five days, and twelve minutes since I said goodbye to Jonah in this very spot after his surprise visit to Toronto.

Since then it’s been a flurry of preparation: copious forms, signatures, and exorbitant rush fees to renew my US passport; hours spent online learning about Anchorage; a myriad of “are you *really* sure you want to do this?” questions and cautionary “what if he’s after your inheritance?” discussions with my mother that sparked more than one catastrophic fight; and carefully worded, psychoanalytical conversations with Simon over his secret stash of instant mashed potatoes—about how my feelings for Jonah *could* be a residual of our deep connection after facing my father’s death together and, *if so*, not a strong foundation upon which to begin a life together.

And, of course, countless texts and phone calls to Jonah as I packed and planned and counted down the days.

And now here I am, standing in Pearson International at 5:17 A.M., gripping my phone that holds three boarding passes for three flights that will close the thirty-four-hundred-mile

distance between me and Jonah's arms, because it's the only way I'll ever know where this can lead.

What would you think about this turn of events, Dad?

It's been over three months since Wren Fletcher passed away, and I still think of him daily. My chest still aches with each fond memory. My eyes still water when I flip through countless pictures from my time in Alaska this summer. My throat still clogs when I speak his name.

To think he was virtually a stranger in July—a man estranged from me since I was fourteen and nothing more than a distant voice over the telephone before that—and yet he has inadvertently shaped a future in Alaska for me.

Jonah was like a son to him. He'd be thrilled about this, I'm sure of it.

"Susan, we *really* ought to think about catching the train to our terminal," Simon warns in that gentle Hugh Grant-esque British accent of his, patting her shoulder while stealing a pointed glance my way. We all knew saying our goodbyes in the airport wasn't a smart idea. That didn't stop Mom from booking their flight to Turks and Caicos to leave twenty minutes after my flight, thus guaranteeing we'd be in this exact situation.

She adjusts the wide-brimmed sun hat perched atop her head as it was far too fragile to pack in her suitcase. My own hat much like it—the one I foolishly wore on my flight to Alaska the first time—is hanging on a hook in Jonah's house. I left it there, both to remind Jonah of me and because I was uninterested in the tedious effort of flying home with it.

I'm much more practically dressed this time, in leggings and a loose, cozy sweater, and suede hiking boots that will be a pain through Security but are otherwise perfect for a day of travel.

“I wish you guys would reconsider spending the holidays with us,” Mom mutters.

“It’s a bit too late for that.” On December 23, I doubt there are any seats to Turks available anymore. Certainly not ones that don’t cost five thousand dollars per ticket.

But I know my mother isn’t holding out hope for a last-minute switch. Jonah’s not going to change his mind about needing to be with Agnes and Mabel this year.

And I’m not going to change my mind about needing to be with *him*.

“I’ll text you when I get to Jonah’s tonight,” I promise. The guy *finally* invested in internet at his house.

“And call me as soon as you wake up.”

“Yes, yes ...” I wrap my arms around my mom’s shoulders, pulling her into me. “Have a merry Christmas, beachside.”

Her returning embrace is fierce for such a slight woman. As she squeezes me tight against her, I inhale her floral perfume. So apropos for a florist. “I’ll pray that the snow holds off until you get there,” she whispers, and the hoarseness in her voice makes the knot in my throat flare. “Say hello to Jonah for me.”

“Will do.” I peel away from her, shifting my attention to Simon, who’s been relegated to suitcase lackey and is busy tugging on the collar of his winter coat, his face flush from heat. Ever since I came back from Alaska in September, I’ve noticed his age that much more—the lines marring his forehead and mouth, his wrinkled hands, his sparse, graying hair. He was the only father figure I could turn to for twelve years of my life. Now that I’ve lived through the pain of losing my real father—a man I learned to love again—I’m acutely aware that I’ll have to live through losing Simon one day, too.

I’m banking on that happening *many* years from now, though.

“Work on that tan, will ya?” I tease. Simon will no doubt spend his days hiding beneath the largest umbrella he can find, slathered in SPF 100, with a stripe of zinc down the bridge of his nose for added protection.

“You, too.” I laugh as he pulls me into a tight hug. “She’ll be fine. I won’t let her mope,” he says, too low for anyone but me to hear. “You do this Alaska thing with Jonah for as long as it makes sense to you, but you’ve always got a place here, if you find you need it, with no questions asked. Well ... maybe a few.” He winks.

“I know. Thanks.” My stomach stirs with butterflies as I hike my backpack over my shoulders, relieved that the three suitcases containing everything I need to survive are already funneling through security for the plane to Chicago. “Okay, so ... talk to you guys soon?” What else do you say to your parents on the day you move to the other side of the continent?

Mom’s head bobs up and down, her throat shifting with a hard swallow, her hand blindly pawing for Simon’s.

“I’m just a phone call or text or Facetime away,” I assure her, the soles of my boots sliding across the polished tile as I edge away. “Safe flight.”

“You, too.” Simon offers an encouraging smile.

Fishing my newly issued US passport out of my purse, I trudge forward to hand it to the stone-faced man in uniform. It’s the first time I’ve flown as a US citizen in over twenty-four years. He barely eyeballs it before thrusting it back, admitting me with a head nod.

I turn back one last time to see Simon’s lanky arm encircling my mother’s shoulders, pulling her tight to his side. She wasn’t anywhere near this emotional the last time I left for Alaska. Then again, that was temporary. That was for my father. And for me.

This time ...

I'm moving to Alaska for Jonah.

The blunt, abrasive yeti who made my life hell, who I *hated* only months ago, who I've been through so much with since.

Now, I'm leaving everything I know behind to be with him.

With a deep breath, I step through the sliding glass door.

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"They've *already* canceled it." I glare at the red word flashing on the screen next to my flight from Anchorage to Bangor, set to leave in four hours.

"Yeah, I saw. It's been snowing like crazy since last night. Way worse than they were forecasting. Everything's grounded on this side of the state," comes Jonah's gruff response in my ear.

I peer out the expanse of windows that overlook the runways. Nothing but blue skies and a crisp, white snowy vista, and a frosty coating around the windowsills to emphasize the cold temps. "There's *nothing* here."

"Well, there's four hundred miles and a mountain range between you and this apocalypse."

Jonah had mentioned the possibility of "some snow" in the forecast. At no point did he ever use the term *apocalypse*. "Do you think there's any chance it'll ease up?" We had decided it would be easier and cheaper if I grabbed a commercial flight rather than make him come all the way here to pick me up. But given the situation, maybe he could jump in a plane and—

"Not with the way it's lookin' right now. Supposed to keep going well into tomorrow."

"*Tomorrow?*" I feel my shoulders sag. And here I was, thinking how smooth today's travel was going so far. "This sucks!"

“Relax. It’s the way it is around here. You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t want to get used to it,” I say, pouting. Three airports, two planes, and eleven hours later, my frustration is swelling. More than anything else, I’m desperate to see Jonah.

He chuckles. “Yeah, well ... Let’s hope your plane takes off tomorrow.”

My jaw drops. Tomorrow is the twenty-fourth. If it doesn’t take off ... “Oh my God. I’m going to be *alone* in an airport on Christmas Day, aren’t I!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. Things can change on a dime around here. Listen, I went ahead and grabbed you a room at the Lodge down the road. It’s nothin’ fancy but most places are booked up, with it being the holidays. I know the owners, Chris and Andrea. They’re good people. There’s a shuttle that’ll take you there.”

“Thanks,” I offer with resignation.

“You’re welcome, Barbie.”

I grin despite my sour mood. I used to hate it when he called me that. “Have you grown your beard back yet?” I keep asking and he keeps evading. I hope he has—a wish I never thought I’d be making.

“Guess you’ll have to wait and see. Go. Grab your twenty-five overweight suitcases and head on over. Call me later.”

“Kay.” I bite my lip against the urge to utter those three little words that I held back at the airport gate a month ago, that I hold back with every phone call, having convinced myself I can’t say them for the first time from thousands of miles away.

But, deep down, I’m fearful Jonah doesn’t feel the same way. Not yet, anyway. I’m confident his feelings for me are strong—we wouldn’t be doing this otherwise. But, if Jonah is

anything, it's blunt and undaunted, and he has yet to tell me that he loves me, which makes me think maybe he's not sure yet.

So I *can't* be the first one to say it.

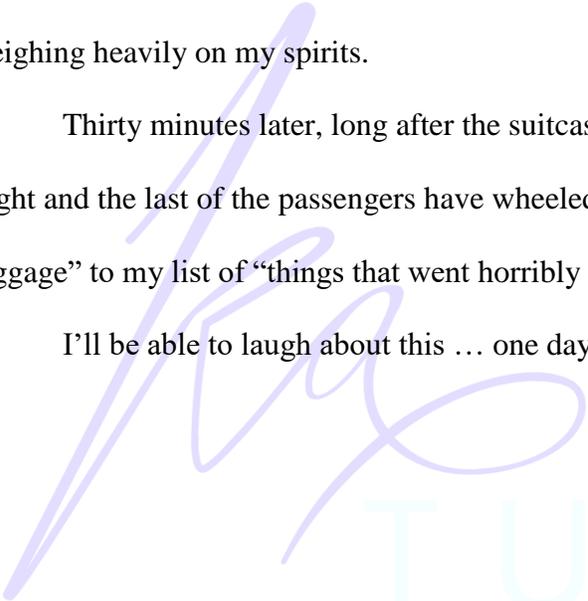
"I'll talk to you soon?"

Jonah chuckles softly. "Yeah, for sure. See you soon, Calla."

I try not to drag my feet as I head for the luggage carousel. Thankfully, the belt is churning out suitcases from the Chicago flight. I don't see mine on the conveyor belt yet, so I stand and wait, my disappointment with being stuck in Anchorage for a night—sans Jonah—weighing heavily on my spirits.

Thirty minutes later, long after the suitcases have stopped sliding down the shoot for my flight and the last of the passengers have wheeled their belongings away, I add "missing luggage" to my list of "things that went horribly wrong when I moved to Alaska."

I'll be able to laugh about this ... one day.



TUCKER

Chapter Three

“What does Alaska have against me having clothes?” I accept my glass of red wine from the server—a man with unkempt brown hair and a black button-down shirt—with a nod of thanks, my phone pressed to my ear.

“You do look pretty good without them,” Jonah says wryly.

My cheeks flush. The last time I was without my luggage was thanks to him and that tiny tin-can plane he came to get me in, back when he thought I was nothing more than a spoiled brat in need of a hard lesson. “Did you have something to do with this?”

He chuckles. “I wish. Have they located them yet?”

“*Apparently*. They got shuffled in Chicago because of some glitch with the overweight baggage. They said they’d have them on a late flight tonight and they’d get them to the hotel by tomorrow morning, first thing.” I don’t know if I believe them. The airline attendant apologized and offered to refund my exorbitant fees before offering me an emergency care pack of a cheap, disposable toothbrush and pint-sized tube of toothpaste. Fortunately, I packed my toiletries and cosmetics in my carry-on. Between that and the night shirt I grabbed at the Walmart down the road, I’ll be fine for the night.

What I’m concerned about, though, are the Christmas presents I packed. “What if they don’t arrive in time? My flight leaves at three.” I spent two hours on the phone with the airline from my hotel room to secure that seat.

“Don’t worry. You’re not gonna need any clothes for a few days, at least.”

My blood surges with Jonah’s unspoken promise of what’s coming, delivered in a huskier tone.

This last month may have seemed frantic at times with all the preparation for my move, but it also dragged. We went from essentially living together during those last weeks before my dad died to parting ways on a chilly day in Anchorage with no plans to continue our relationship, to reuniting two months later over a four-day-long-weekend visit.

In my third-story bedroom, directly above my mom and Simon.

Not exactly conducive to the kind of intimacy we were both craving, though we made the best of it. But this month-long wait has only left me with an unending ache of frustration.

Hearing Jonah say things like that doesn't help.

I *cannot* wait to be alone with him.

I swallow a gulp of wine. "Is it still snowing there?"

"*Still* snowing. How's the hotel?"

I drop my voice to a whispered hiss. "Aside from all the *dead* animals?" The lobby is full of bear skins and deer heads and stuffed fish. Pelts of every color and size adorn the walls of the hallways. A chandelier made from mismatched antlers—forged in the woods or the prize of several kills?—dangles from the foyer, the dim light it casts adding to the eeriness of the place. "There's a freaking *water buffalo* beside the front desk."

"That's a musk ox."

"*Whatever*. This place is a wild animal tomb."

"Yeah, it's kind of their theme. Andrea's a taxidermist."

I feel my eyebrows pop. "*She* stuffed all these things?"

"*And* hunted most of them. You should see their house. They've got a full-grown male grizzly bear standing in the corner."

“That sounds delightful.” I cringe, trying to picture the kind of woman who’d find pleasure in gutting animals and measuring their eye sockets for the perfect glass balls. Something tells me we won’t be swapping favorite nail polish colors.

“You’re in Alaska. People shoot and stuff things around here, and not only the men. It’s the way things are. Get used to it.”

I groan. “Get used to it” seems to be Jonah’s new favorite slogan. “As long as *you* never bring home a carcass and ask me to clean and cook it.” I know Jonah hunts. I’ve seen the collection of rifles and shotguns in his safe. I’m just not sure how I feel about it yet.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I hear the smile in his voice. “The restaurant’s cozy, though, huh?”

“Yeah,” I admit. It’s plainly decorated in dark wood paneling and warmed by a rustic stone fireplace that blazes in a nearby corner. Picture windows overlook a frozen, snow-covered Lake Hood, cast in shadows of an afternoon sunset, all white save for the colorful small-engine planes, wearing skis in place of wheels. On the other side of the lake are humble brown-brick apartment buildings. Beyond them, in the far distance, majestic white-capped mountains loom.

I survey the tables with a curious glance. A third of them are occupied. How many of these people are also stranded, waiting to get somewhere?

“So, what’re you gonna order?”

“I don’t know.” I flip through the pages. It’s mainly pub fare, with a prime rib special. “A lot of wine, to drown my sorrows?”

“Go sit at the bar, then. Chris should be there.”

My gaze wanders to the long, stately dark walnut counter—the fanciest thing in this place—and to the tall man with wiry gray hair. “Big, bushy mustache?”

“Yeah, that’s him. He’ll talk your ear off all night. Ask him about his huskies. He’s got a dogsled team that their son races in the Iditarod every year. And get the burger. Andrea makes the patties herself.”

“With *real* beef?” I ask pointedly. I’ve learned my lesson.

Jonah chuckles. And doesn’t answer, I note. “Also, the butternut squash soup is good.”

I grimace. “I hate squash.”

“*What?* No, you don’t.”

“Yeah, I do. It makes me gag.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Why are you arguing with me about this? Yes, it does! Same with beets. They taste like dirt.”

Jonah groans. “Jesus. You’re as bad as Wren was.”

I feel a prick in my chest at the mention of my dad, who, in many ways, Jonah knew better than I ever will. “That’s not true. He wouldn’t eat a single vegetable. I only won’t eat squash and beets.” I add after a lengthy pause, “Or cabbage, or mushrooms. And I hate strawberries.”

“*Strawberries?* Man, what have I signed up for?” There’s a teasing note in his tone.

“Okay, Barbie, give me the rundown. What else are you gonna be difficult about? Wait, wait ... lemme get a notepad. I have a feeling this is gonna be a *long* list.”

I’m picturing him stretching out on his sectional in a pair of baggy jeans, a sinewy arm tucked under his head, a simple cotton shirt stretched across his broad chest, unintentionally showing off the many hard ridges that sculpt his muscular body.

I should have been lying on top of that body tonight, I think bitterly.

“Let me see ...” I settle into my own seat, propping my hiking boots up on the chair opposite me, and grin. “For starters, hairy, obnoxious men and cheap beer.”

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“*Nooo!*” I moan into my pillow as the news headline flashes across the bottom of the TV screen, claiming the worst snowfall in southwestern Alaska in nearly fifty years. The accompanying videos and pictures from yesterday—snow blowing sideways, four-foot drifts over roads, cars buried—do well to emphasize that statement.

Worse, the weatherman, dressed in a red, fur-lined parka, his face hidden within the cove of his hood, is promising that Anchorage is going to catch a ribbon of that inclement weather beginning this morning. I checked in on my flight and it’s already marked as delayed by an hour.

Dragging myself out of bed, I head for the window, the cool air chilling my bare legs an odd comfort for the dull ache in my head. I took Jonah’s advice last night and shifted my pity party of one to the bar to strike up a conversation with Chris, who turned out to be as nice as Jonah promised, albeit a bit awkward, telling stale jokes about Canadian accents and our horse-riding Mounties. Andrea made an appearance around nine and proved to be nothing like I imagined the killing, trophy-stuffing woman to be, her pixie-like face framed by a pale blonde bob, her wide smile offering nothing but warmth and friendliness.

They fed me red wine—a few glasses on the house—and entertained me for hours with stories of her hunting exploits and the lodge’s crazy customers, until my body buzzed and my stomach hurt from laughing and I had earned myself an invitation to Christmas dinner, should I find myself stuck in Anchorage.

It was after eleven by the time I staggered to my room, but I forced myself to stay up, watching movies and plugging away at my computer until almost two A.M., trying to reset my internal clock against the four-hour time change.

I still woke up at six this morning.

I peel back the curtain and greet a sea of black nothing, the sun far from rising. The few dim streetlights that shine down over the parking lot show nothing of any falling snow. If clouds are rolling in above us, I won't see them for a few more hours.

But, with the way my luck is going so far, I fear I'll be spending Christmas dinner with strangers.

I stumble back to bed, dismayed, to check for a response to my "are you awake yet? How bad is it?" text that I sent to Jonah the moment my eyelids cracked open.

Jonah: *It's not looking good for today. Heading to Wild to help sort out the mess.*

I sigh heavily. He refuses to call my dad's charter company anything but, though the planes and small terminal have been sporting the shiny new crimson-and-blue "Aro" logo for weeks now. That's the only thing that's visibly changed so far, from what he's told me. The new owner has been focused on getting the business's technology up to speed, with plans to freshen up the office and waiting area in the summer.

We will have left Bangor by then, if we can find the right place near Anchorage.

And if it *ever* stops snowing.

With my spirits low enough to threaten tears, I wash down a few Advil with a mouthful of water and burrow under the comforter.

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The shrill sound of the hotel phone pierces the silence, stirring me from a restless sleep before noon. It's the front desk, telling me that my luggage has arrived. Relief amid frustration. It doesn't last long, though, as I check my flight on my phone to see that it's been delayed *another* hour. On the bright side, it hasn't been outright canceled. Yet.

There are no more texts from Jonah, though I'm not surprised. I don't normally hear from him when he's at work. Still, it doesn't help my mood. Neither does my growling stomach.

There is, however, a text from my mom, with a selfie of her and Simon on the beach, toasting to the camera, pasty-white-skinned and smiling.

Maybe I should have listened to her and gone to Turks. I wouldn't be spending Christmas with a stuffed grizzly bear watching over me while I eat.

I push that sour thought aside and get ready—yanking on my same traveling clothes from yesterday, brushing my teeth, pulling my hair into a quick topknot, and swiping my mascara wand across my lashes.

How funny it is that I wouldn't be caught dead barefaced six months ago, before Jonah intruded on my life. My appearance seemed vastly more important to me in the grand scheme of things then than it does now.

I throw open the door, intent on grabbing breakfast along with my things.

And gasp at the scruffy-faced male figure leaning against the wall, his tall, muscular body draped in a heavy plaid winter coat overtop layers of fleece, his ash-blond hair capped with a black beanie. His piercing icy blue eyes are locked on me.

“What are you doing here!” I exclaim, as waves of relief course through my limbs.

“Take a wild guess.” Jonah's gruff voice rattles in my chest. God, I've missed hearing it in person.

“But I thought ... the storm—”

“There was a decent break, so I took it, flew low, and prayed it would hold.” His gaze skates over my hair, my nose, my mouth, stalling there.

“Was it bad?”

“Would you get over here already?” He heaves himself off the wall, taking a step toward me.

I dive into his chest, savoring the feel of his hard body against mine and the smell of him—spearmint gum and woody soap—as our lips find each other in a welcoming kiss. “My flight’s delayed.”

He curls his arms around me and pulls me tight to him, his bristly hair scratching against my skin as he bends to dip his face into the crook of my neck. He inhales deeply and then lets out a contented sigh. “I know. The airport’s a mess. Tons of people trying to get places for Christmas.”

I close my eyes. “I can’t believe you’re here.” Suddenly, spending our first Christmas together at the dead-animal hotel doesn’t seem so appalling.

“Of course, I’m here. As if I was gonna let you get stuck, alone, on Christmas.”

“So, I’ll fly back with you, then?”

“We’re not going back that way today.” There’s an edge to his voice, one that makes me think the trip here over the mountains was far worse than he’s letting on. And Jonah is fearless when it comes to flying.

A part of me wants to reprimand him—what if he had crashed?—but a bigger part is overwhelmed with emotion that he made the risky trip for me.

“I love you,” I blurt before I can give it too much thought.

Several beats pass before Jonah pulls away, far enough to meet my gaze, a curious look in his.

I hold my breath, suddenly afraid that I'm going to have to add this moment to the top of my growing list of things that have gone terribly wrong so far with this move.

"I was wonderin' how long it'd take you to get up the nerve to say it. Especially after you chickened out at the airport." He brushes an errant strand of hair off my face. "Thought I might have to wait forever."

My mouth hangs open for a moment. "You knew?"

"You Fletchers never have been good at speakin' your mind." A soft, crooked smile curls his lips. "Of course, I knew."

I roll my eyes even as my cheeks flush. In the dingy Anchorage Lodge hallway, being chastised by Jonah for how much like my father I am is *not* how I was envisioning this moment going. "Well ... great." What else am I supposed to say, especially since he hasn't echoed the sentiment?

His mouth splits into a perfect, white-toothed grin. "You're cute when you're vulnerable."

My indignation flares. "You know what? I take it back."

"Nah. You don't."

"Yeah, I do. In fact, I think I *hate* you right now." I make to pull free from his arms, but they coil tighter, keeping me in place.

"Look at me," he demands softly.

After a moment of reluctance, I do. His blue eyes are severe as they pin me down. "I can't remember what it feels like *not* being in love with you, Calla."

My pulse pounds in my veins.

He leans in, presses his forehead against mine. “I can’t remember what it’s like to wake up and not have you be the first thing I think about. Every morning, I roll over in bed to check for a message from you. Every night, I go to bed annoyed because you’re not beside me. Because you’re so far away. I need you in my life like I need to fly. Like I need this Alaskan air. *More* than I need this air.”

“Wow. That’s ...” I swallow the lump in my throat, about to float away on a euphoric high from his tender admission. *That’s way better than just blurting out “I love you.”*

He cups my chin with his palms. “You were made for me. I am madly in love with you, Calla Fletcher.” His mouth catches mine in a deceptively soft kiss that threatens to buckle my knees. It draws a moan from deep within me, the agonizing month-long wait to feel Jonah’s lips against mine finally over.

I grab hold of his forearms for support, my hands tightening over them, reveling in their strength. I ache to feel his corded muscle and smooth skin and soft hair beneath my fingertips again, to feel the weight of his body sinking me into a mattress.

Between us, the hard ridge of his erection presses against my stomach, taunting me.

A throat clears, pulling us apart. A housekeeper smiles sheepishly as she edges past to get to her cart on the other side.

I nod to my open hotel room door behind us. “Maybe we should take this inside?” Because I’m about five seconds away from unfastening his belt buckle, audience be damned.

Jonah takes a step forward, but then stops, shaking his head firmly. “If we want to make it out of here today, we need to go *now*. That system is movin’ in slow, but it’s comin’.”

I frown. “I thought you said you weren’t flying back today.”

“We’re not, but we’re not staying here.”

“Where are we going, then?”

“To see Santa.”

“*What?*”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yeah, of course, but—”

“Kay, then stop talkin’, get ready, and meet me in the lobby. I’ll check you out of your room.” He plants a last, chaste kiss on my lips and strolls away, whistling “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

“But my suitcases—”

“They’re at the front desk,” he hollers over his shoulder, adding in a booming voice, “but I told you already, Barbie, you’re not gonna be wearin’ any clothes for a few days.”

My cheeks burn as I seek out the housekeeper, hovering by her cart with her head down, pretending she didn’t hear that.

And then I rush inside to pack my things.

TUCKER