

## Prologue

*August 2018*

“I’m in love with you. Haven’t you figured that out yet, you big dummy?” The stark declaration competes with the crunch of gravel beneath my boots as I trudge toward the steel-gray building. Nearby, an Otter’s propeller hums, preparing for takeoff. At least the fog that stalled my flight from Anchorage this morning has lifted, but the sky is murky, and the drizzle has me squinting.

I release a shaky breath, my heart racing. Am I *really* doing this? After practicing some iteration of those words in front of my mirror countless times, will I *finally* work up the nerve to say them out loud to Jonah’s face?

I’ve only been secretly pining for him for a few *years*.

Ever since that day I walked up to the red Cessna, my veterinarian bag in hand, to meet the bushy-faced pilot. I felt the spark instantly. There was no mistaking the returning interest in those stunning blue eyes, the color of an Alaskan sky on a cloudless winter’s day. And, by the end of those two days, flying to remote villages to vaccinate and treat animals in need, all while contending with Jonah’s piercing gaze, barking laughter, and flirtatious banter, that spark had erupted into a smoldering fire.

I knew I was in trouble, the diamond engagement ring heavy on my finger, outweighed only by guilt for my disloyal thoughts.

I said goodbye to my pilot and flew back to my side of Alaska, convinced myself that the attraction would dwindle, that what I was feeling would vanish. I already knew that was a lie, one I clung to for an entire year, while quietly falling in love with a man who *wasn’t* my fiancé

under the cover of providing philanthropic aid to the villagers and their four-legged family members.

The thing is, Jonah is one of the smartest men I've ever met, as well as the most perceptive. Deep down, he knows how I feel. He *must*. I've dropped enough hints over the years. All our late-night phone calls and days spent flying together. For God's sake, I *kissed* him once, that night so long ago, emboldened by liquid courage and the knowledge that he had hopped in his plane and flown *hours* over the mountain range to see me the *very* same day I told him I'd ended my engagement. As if he'd been waiting for his chance.

I didn't imagine the chemistry, either; it wasn't one-sided. I felt the way Jonah responded—those seconds that still burn in my memory, his lips eager against mine—before the worry of destroying our strong friendship ruined the moment.

He acknowledged his attraction to me. He told me he thought I was beautiful, kind, and brilliant.

And then we both agreed to put aside those feelings for the sake of our friendship. Just box them up, pretend the kiss didn't happen, and go on being Jonah and Marie. Best friends.

It's been years since that night, and I've honored that promise, gritting my teeth while watching him cycle through shallow relationships with women who never had a chance of keeping his interest. But my feelings have only grown stronger. Lately, they've become unbearable, bottled up like this.

Jonah is my person. I can read every glower, every smirk, every grunt. I can call him on his bullshit when he's being an ass and sink into his arms when he's showing his gentler side. He's the first one I call when I need to talk, the only one who knows me better than I know myself, the one I miss terribly whenever I'm not here.

He's the man I want to experience the rest of my life with.

He is *it* for me.

And after receiving the stomach-curdling message from Agnes about Jonah's plane crash, I decided it's time I said all this out loud. Maybe hearing it will make the brute finally put aside his fear and see what he'll be gaining rather than risking.

The aqua-blue Alaska Wild sign looks more vibrant than usual, but that could be the adrenaline coursing through my veins. Swallowing my nerves, I wipe away wet tendrils of hair that cling to my forehead and push through the door. The familiar and welcoming smell of coffee fills my nostrils.

"Marie!" Sharon shrieks, her hand on her swollen belly as she charges for me. I should have expected this greeting; I wasn't supposed to arrive until Monday, and I didn't tell anyone except Crystal, the local animal rescue group leader who lets me crash in her guest cabin while I'm in town.

Alaska Wild's pregnant receptionist seems to have doubled in size since I last saw her. I drop my bag, my attention stalling on her only for a split second before traveling beyond, to the brawny frame leaning against the reception counter, the grinning, handsome face I've been aching four long weeks to see. Except ... I frown. Jonah's wild blond mane and beard that I tease him about regularly have vanished, replaced by a tidy beard a fraction of its original size and shorter hair that looks styled with *product*?

Sharon throws her arms around my neck in a fierce hug. "Did you just land?"

"Uh ... yeah. Rough flight." I struggle to keep my focus on her, my attention veering back to Jonah frequently. What possessed him to do that? "Okay, first of all, wow, look at that belly! And it's only been four weeks since I saw you last."

“*Only*, you say.” Sharon’s hands slide over her stomach with a loud groan.

No longer able to ignore it, I march toward the counter. “And *you*. *What the hell*, Jonah?”

Not a beat passes before his strong arms pull me against his chest. I inhale the comforting scent of woody soap, relishing these few moments as I do every time we greet. If all goes as I hope it does this trip, maybe I won’t be staying at Crystal’s cabin anymore. Maybe I’ll have a warm bed with an even warmer body next to me from now on.

“What the hell, indeed.” His raspy voice is gravelly against my ear. “Hey, Marie.”

With reluctance, I peel away, only to reach up and smooth my fingers over his groomed beard, the prickly ends tickling my skin. I’ve touched his beard before, usually with a teasing tug. It was always so scruffy. “I like it.” I more than like it. I *love* this new look. It allows me to see so much more of that face I adore.

I’m temporarily distracted by the track of black stitches across his forehead, the only visible proof of his plane crash, and then Jonah moves away—too soon for my liking—to lean against the counter again, his attention shifting behind me. “I was the victim of a cruel and vicious prank.” He chuckles. “I probably deserved it.”

“Probably,” a female answers dryly.

I turn toward the voice. I hadn’t noticed the woman standing at the counter before, too enthralled with Jonah’s new image. How hadn’t I noticed her before? I can’t help but gawk. She’s stunning, her long, cinnamon-brown hair touched with flattering blonde highlights, her large hazel-green eyes lined with full, dark lashes that flutter at Jonah. She has flawless, glowing skin and an athletic figure—on display in a fashionable tunic and leggings.

The kind of body I know Jonah appreciates.

“This is Wren’s daughter, Calla. She’s here visiting,” Jonah says by way of introduction.

“I didn’t realize Wren had a daughter.” Why hasn’t Jonah ever mentioned her before? Why hasn’t Wren? Jonah told me that his boss had been married once, many years ago, but that’s all I’ve ever heard, and I’ve gotten to know the owner of Alaska Wild fairly well. He’s a kind, quiet man. That he has never mentioned his own daughter seems odd.

I finally remember my manners, smiling at Calla as I reach forward. “First time in Alaska?”

Her hand is cold against mine, her manicured nails long and even and artificial. “Yeah.”

“I picked her up from Anchorage last weekend. It’s been ... interesting, so far.” Jonah’s attention is locked on the beautiful face across from him as he flashes a flirtatious grin, and they share a secretive look.

An unpleasant feeling skates down my spine and settles in the pit of my stomach. Calla certainly doesn’t seem like she’s from around here. Those sculpted eyebrows must require meticulous grooming, but she looks like the kind of girl who sits in front of a mirror for hours each day, perfecting herself.

I’ve never been one to spend too much time fussing over my appearance, embracing a more natural, low-maintenance look that works well with my busy veterinarian practice and outdoorsy lifestyle. But suddenly, I regret throwing on the first shirt I pulled out of my dresser, and perhaps I should have made better friends with my hairbrush. Not that the rain wouldn’t have undone that, anyway. But next to Calla—she’s, what, in her midtwenties?—I look every bit the frumpy and weathered thirty-six-year-old.

It’s beginning to make sense now. Calla must’ve had a hand in Jonah’s new style. I can’t imagine the conversation that led to that—or what it led to after.

“So, where are you from?” I hope they can’t hear the strain in my voice.

“Toronto.”

A city girl. Yeah, that explains a lot. “Oh, that’s far.” Thousands of miles away. Hours of commercial flying. A whole other country. Too far for Jonah, who isn’t a fan of relationships of any kind, let alone long-distance ones. He wasn’t willing to attempt it with Teegan, and they dated for months before she moved back to the lower forty-eight. “And how long are you here for?”

“Another week.”

“Okay ...” Relief washes over me. A week. Barely more than a one-night stand for him. Whatever’s going on here, it’ll be over soon. Then I can profess my undying love for this man, and we can move on as if she doesn’t exist.

“Unless I decide to stay longer,” Calla says abruptly, her focus darting to Jonah, as if to check his reaction to that suggestion.

As if his response will be the deciding factor.

His eyebrow arches.

I know Jonah too well to mistake that look for anything other than excitement, anticipation.

Determination.

He *wants* Calla to stay. Quite badly, I’d guess. He can’t even peel his eyes from her anymore. It’s as if he’s ensnared, and they’re the only two people in the room.

And that expression filling his handsome face right now?

A numbing dread sinks deep into my bones. Jonah has *never* looked at me that way before.