

Forever Wild

by K.A. Tucker

Chapter One

December

“She out there again?”

“Somewhere. Those are fresh tracks.” The mama moose hasn’t been seen much around here in the last few months. I assume because of a certain wolf dog that has made a second home of our property. But she’s been coming around again lately. I’ve watched her nibble on frozen branches every morning this week, unaware—or more likely unperturbed—by my looming presence at the bay window. I’ve even managed to snap a few photos to stock my Alaska-centric Instagram feed.

I sip my latte, savoring the warmth that flows down my throat as I admire the vast frozen expanse. A fresh coat of snow fell overnight, for the fourth night in a row, blanketing our little home just outside the small town of Trapper’s Crossing in white.

“I probably scared her away with the plow.” Jonah leans in to press a morning kiss against my neck, his scruffy beard tickling my skin.

My nose catches the scent of woody soap, and I inhale deeply. In the weeks leading up to the busy holiday season, this has become one of my favorite parts of the day. The quiet calm before the flurry of daily tasks, when there’s nothing but the sound of crackling logs in the hearth and I have a few moments of Jonah’s undivided attention. We’ll both be running soon enough. Or flying, in Jonah’s case.

I close my eyes and dip my head to the side, to give him better access. “You were up early this morning.”

“It got cold last night. Wanted to make sure everything was running all right.”

Jonah was up early because he was tossing and turning all night, *again*. I know it has nothing to do with the frigid temperature and everything to do with his mother and stepfather’s arrival from Oslo today. While he’s excited to see Astrid, the same can’t be said for Björn.

“Everything will be *fine*,” I promise for the umpteenth time, reaching up to smooth my palm across his cheek. I nod at the small cabin peeking out from the trees on the opposite side of our private lake. “They’ll be *all the way over there*, sleeping off twenty hours of travel for the next couple days. By the time they wake up, my mom and Simon will be here.” Exhilaration flares in my chest. It’s been almost a year to the day since they dropped me off at the airport with a one-way ticket to my new life in Alaska. A lifetime ago, it seems. “And then Agnes and Mabel will be here on *Monday*. There’s plenty of buffer between you and Björn.”

“A buffer isn’t going to stop him from treating my mother like a damn servant,” he mutters.

Aside from the long list of grievances Jonah has with his stepfather, including general laziness and incessant complaining and nitpicking, his biggest issue with Björn is the expectation he has set for Astrid, to cook and clean and keep the house in order. This is his second marriage, and their civil ceremony happened just three weeks after the divorce from his first wife was finalized—according to Jonah, his stepfather can’t survive being single. He couldn’t find his way around a kitchen if his life depended on it.

If half of what Jonah has told me is true, I’m not thrilled to be spending two weeks with the chauvinistic, old-fashioned ass, either, but I won’t feed Jonah’s anxiety by admitting that.

“I promise, this Christmas will be *perfect*.”

Jonah’s derisive snort says otherwise, but I sense the tension in his body relaxing a touch.

“Well, *I*’m excited. It’s our first Christmas in this house. And, I mean, *look* at it.” I’ve spent the last month mining for creative holiday ideas, foraging for supplies, and burning my fingers with hot glue late into the night. From the twelve-foot spruce that Jonah cut and dragged in from the woods, to the mammoth fieldstone fireplace adorned with an evergreen wreath and surrounded by old-timey lanterns, to the inviting reading nook beneath the stairs, decorated in buffalo plaid cushions and blankets, our home is dressed to the nines for the festivities.

The rustic house that we strolled into last March, cluttered with dead animals, shabby furnishings, and the remnants of a thirty-year marriage, has given way to a cozy, chic log home that I’m proud of, that we’re about to welcome our families into for the first time. Even Muriel declared it belongs in “one of those overpriced magazines.” Literally, the only thing it’s missing to be the perfect Christmas home is a mantel. I’ve hung our stockings off hooks on the windowsill for the time being.

More important than how it looks is that it’s a home I now long to return to each day.

But not nearly as much as I long to return to this man cradling me in his arms each night.

“Told you that \$3000 antler chandelier was perfect for this room,” Jonah quips.

My glare earns him boisterous laughter.

“You did good, Barbie.” He steals a quick kiss. “Okay, gotta go. Too much shit to do before I head to the airport. Rick’s probably already waiting for me.” Rick, the scout who has paid The Yeti a large sum to tour frozen Alaska the past week, looking for ideal filming locations.

While I'm happy Jonah has had steady work through our little charter company since his arm healed, a part in my stomach clenches every time he flies. "You filled out an itinerary, right?"

"It's on your desk."

"Stick to it." My voice takes on a now-familiar warning tone. While Jonah's been much better about keeping schedules and calling in, he still gets caught up sometimes and forgets.

"Yeah, boss." He gives my backside a firm squeeze before marching for the front door.

"That's workplace harassment!" I holler after him.

He pauses to offer a sly smile over his shoulder. "And what do you call what you did to me in the office yesterday?"

"Your Christmas bonus."

His deep, grating chuckle warms my heart.

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Oscar and Gus charge for my Jeep, their tails wagging, barks wild with excitement. Oscar's limp from his bear-trap injury is still pronounced, but it doesn't seem to slow him down much. He reaches me as my boots hit the snow only a second later than Gus, both wolf dogs sniffing my mitten in greeting.

I give them each a head scratch. "Where's Roy, huh? In the shop?" I don't need an answer from them—not that I would get one. The curl of dark smoke from the chimney pipe is answer enough. If the sixty-something-year-old man isn't tending to the animals, he's in there, sawing and hammering and sanding wood with the deftness of a true craftsman.

The chickens cluck noisily inside their warm coop as I pass, reminding me that I need to add eggs to my grocery list. We're running low and Roy's hens aren't producing much these days, with the long nights and cold days of the Alaskan winter.

I yank open the sliding barn door, quickly closing it behind me to trap the warmth.

"You didn't tell me you were comin'!" Roy's Texan drawl is gruff as he hastily drapes a sheet over his woodworking creation, fussing with a corner to cover it completely.

"When do I ever?" Whatever he's building, he doesn't want me to see it. If I didn't know better, I'd think it might be a Christmas present. I stifle my smile and inhale the familiar smell—a blend of wood shavings and goats, infused with lingering smoke from the blazing fire in the small black stove—as I wave the envelope in my hand. "Your check came." It was waiting in our mailbox, along with a small stack of Christmas cards—mostly from customers of The Yeti—and a package from Diana.

His frown is deep, bordering on a scowl. "What check?"

"Remember? Liz sold the octopus a few weeks ago. I told you about it." The elaborate wood carving—one of countless Roy has carved over the years of living his best hermit life—was the last one on consignment at the Anchorage art shop. It fetched a mint, too. The owner is already asking me for more pieces.

His frown somehow grows deeper, his steel-gray eyes drifting over the plastic bag dangling from my fingertips. An extra loaf of banana bread I made during my baking frenzy.

"Right."

"The woman who bought it is looking for a dolphin sculpture. She asked if you'd consider carving one for her. I guess she has a thing for marine animals? Anyway, she offered to pay half down in a deposit."

I expect Roy's usual refusal, his bark of "I don't do custom!" But he shakes his head and says, "I can't remember what's on the shelf. I might have one already. I'll take a look later."

It's my turn to frown. "You feeling all right?"

"Yeah. Fine. Why?"

"You seem ... distracted."

"Just busy," he mutters, rubbing his brow before looking at his soiled hands and then at the clutter of tools and dust, as if searching for something.

"Okay. Well, I'll leave the check on your counter. I'm heading into town for some last-minute groceries. You need me to pick anything up for you while I'm there?"

"No. Thank you."

Roy uses that word sparingly and always as an afterthought, as if he has to prompt himself to remember his manners. He's definitely off today.

I'm at the door when I decide to give it another shot. "You sure you don't want to come to Christmas—"

"No."

It's not the first time I've invited Roy to Christmas Day dinner over the last few weeks. The answer is always the same. I don't let that deter me. "We have plenty of room and food. And a *huge* turkey. I told Jonah twenty pounds, tops, and he went and ordered a *twenty-five* pounder. And you'd get to see us try out that table you built." A true piece of live-edge art that competes with the floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace as the focal point of our main floor.

Roy rifles through his toolbox but doesn't seem to be looking for anything in particular.

"I'm good here."

"Alone?"

“I’m not alone. I’ve got the goats and the chickens, and the hounds. They’re all the company I need.” He pauses in his tinkering to cast a cutting look my way. “At least they won’t talk my ear off.”

I make sure he sees me rolling my eyes. “Suit yourself.”

“Don’t let the cold in behind you!”

I use all my strength to pull the barn door closed, hoping it’ll shut with a bang, but the door isn’t built for theatrics and it glides smoothly into place. I settle for stomping up the porch steps, pausing only long enough to fish out the miniature potted Christmas tree from my Jeep.

There was a time when Roy didn’t allow anyone inside his rustic one-bedroom cabin. While he’s still guarded, he no longer flinches at me coming in and out as I please, delivering food and perusing the wooden carvings that line the beautiful custom bookshelves.

I set the loaf of banana bread next to his stove and prop the check next to the can of beef stew he’s set out for that night’s meal. At least I know he won’t miss it that way. With that done, I search for the ideal spot to set the tree. The old trunk by the window, next to the framed picture of Roy’s daughter and ex-wife, seems the most ideal. I plug in the strand of white twinkle lights and then step back to admire it. I doubt this place has seen any festive joy since Roy moved here from Texas, thirty-three years ago.

Hopefully he doesn’t toss it out.

A Christmas card on the kitchen table catches my eye, next to a small pile of unopened bills. My curiosity over who might send the curmudgeon holiday greetings gets the better of me. With a quick glance out the window to ensure Roy isn’t on his way in, I peek inside.

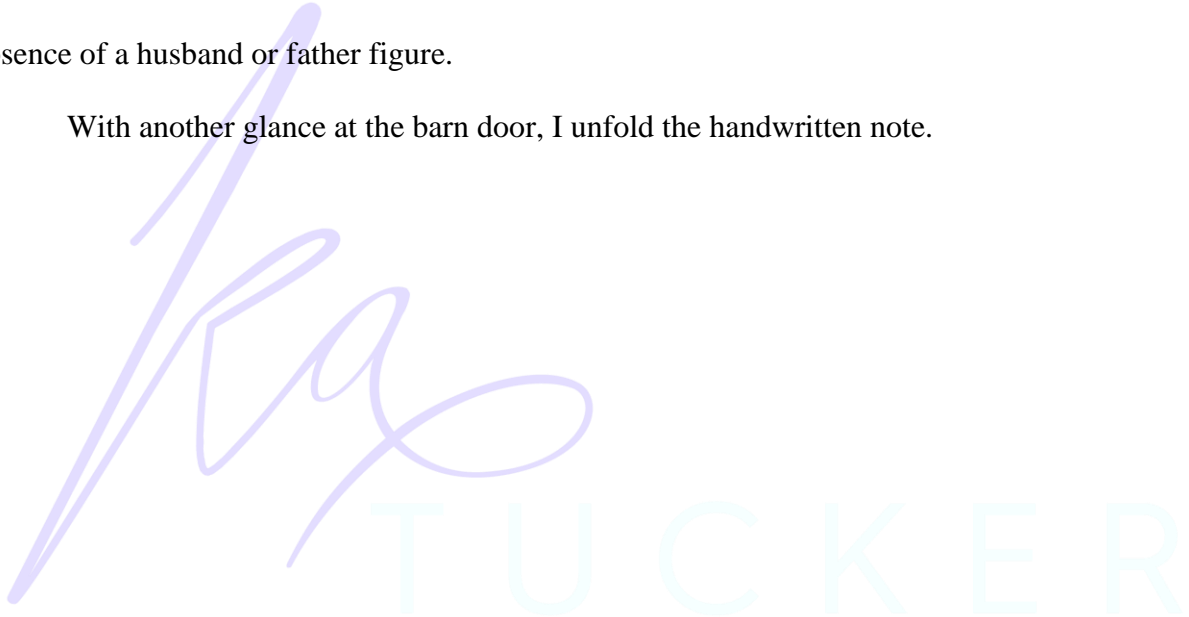
My heart skips a beat at the flowery signature on the bottom.

Delyla.

His estranged daughter sent him a Christmas card? Roy told me, on one of the rare occasions he's ever mentioned his family, that they weren't on speaking terms. Was he lying? How often does Delyla send him a Christmas card? Does she do it every year?

A picture and a note lay atop the torn-open mailing envelope. I check the picture first. It's of a stunning blonde, perhaps in her thirties, dressed in black jeans and a white cable-knit sweater. Her arms are wrapped around two young children, a boy and girl, each in matching black pants and white sweaters. All three are wearing festive red cowboy hats to mark the family holiday photograph. They look the part of a perfect, happy family, though I don't miss the absence of a husband or father figure.

With another glance at the barn door, I unfold the handwritten note.



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