

**THE
SIMPLE
WILD**

ALSO BY K.A. TUCKER

Ten Tiny Breaths

One Tiny Lie

Four Seconds to Lose

Five Ways to Fall

In Her Wake

Burying Water

Becoming Rain

Chasing River

Surviving Ice

He Will Be My Ruin

Until It Fades

Keep Her Safe

THE SIMPLE WILD

a novel

K.A. TUCKER

ATRIA PAPERBACK

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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First Atria Paperback edition August 2018

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Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tucker, K.A. (Kathleen A.)

Title: The simple wild : a novel / K.A. Tucker.

Description: First Atria paperback edition. | New York : Atria Paperback, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018016363 (print) | LCCN 2018019930 (ebook) | ISBN 9781501133459 (eBook) | ISBN 9781501133435 (pbk.)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Love stories.

Classification: LCC PR9199.4.T834 (ebook) | LCC PR9199.4.T834 S56 2018 (print) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018016363>

ISBN 978-1-5011-3343-5

ISBN 978-1-5011-3345-9 (ebook)

*To Lia and Sadie,
The best things in your lives will never come simply.
They'll always be worth it.
But, ideally (for my sake), they'll have nothing to do
with small planes.*

Prologue



November 15, 1993
Anchorage, Alaska

Wren sets the two navy suitcases next to the stroller and then reaches for the cigarette precariously perched between his lips, taking a long, slow drag. He releases smoke into the frigid air. “Just these?”

“And the diaper bag.” I inhale the musky odor. I’ve always hated the smell of tobacco. I still do, except on Wren.

“Right. I’ll go and get that,” he says, dropping the cigarette to the snowy ground and crushing it with his boot. He clasps his callused hands together and blows into them as he rushes back out to the tarmac, shoulders curled inward, to where the Cessna that delivered us here awaits its hour-long flight home.

I quietly watch, huddled in my plush, down-filled coat against the icy wind, fiercely holding onto the resentment I’ve been carrying for months. If I don’t, I’ll quickly be overwhelmed by the pain of disappointment and impending loss, and I won’t be able to go through with this.

Wren returns and settles the hefty red bag on the asphalt, just as a grounds worker swings by to collect my belongings. They exchange pleasantries, as if this is just any other passenger delivery, before the man shuttles my things away.

Leaving us in tense silence.

“So, what time do you get in?” Wren finally asks, giving the perpetual brown scruff on his chin a scratch.

“Noon, tomorrow. Toronto time.” I pray Calla can handle ten

hours of traveling without a meltdown. Though, that might distract me from having my own meltdown. At least the next plane is substantial, unlike the tiny things Wren insists on flying. God, how on earth did I *ever* think marrying a born-and-bred bush pilot was a good idea?

Wren nods to himself, and then pulls our sleepy daughter out of the stroller and into his arms. “And you? Are you ready for your first big plane ride?” His wide grin for his daughter makes my heart twist.

For the hundredth time, I wonder if *I*’m being the selfish one. If I should grit my teeth and bear the misery, the isolation of Alaska. After all, *I* made the bed I’m running from now. My father was quick to remind me of that when I admitted to my parents that life with Wren isn’t as romantic as I’d convinced myself it would be. When I admitted that I’ve cried at least once a day for the past year, especially during the painfully long, cold, dark winter, when daylight is sparse. That I hate living in the last great American frontier; that I crave being close to my family and friends, and the urban bustle of my childhood. In my own country.

A deep frown line forms in Wren’s forehead as he plants a kiss on our happy, oblivious seventeen-month-old’s nose and sets her onto the ground. She struggles to toddle around, her stocky body bundled in a thick bubblegum-pink snowsuit to keep the icy wind at bay. “You know you don’t *have* to leave, Susan.”

As quickly as I’d been softening, I harden again. “And what? Stay here, and be miserable? Sit at home with Calla under a happy lamp while you’re out, risking your life for a bunch of strangers? I can’t do it anymore, Wren. Every day is harder than the last.” At first I thought it was postpartum depression, but after months of flying back and forth to Anchorage just to talk to a therapist and refill a prescription for antidepressants that did little more than make me sluggish, I’ve accepted that it has nothing to do with hormones. And here I was, naïve enough to think Alaskan winters would be

manageable, having grown up in Toronto. That being married to the love of my life would outweigh the challenges of living here, of having a husband whose chances of dying at work on any given day are alarmingly high. That my adoration for this man—and the attraction between us—would be enough to overcome *anything* Alaska threw at me.

Wren slides his hands into the pockets of his navy checkered down vest, focusing his attention on the giant green pom-pom atop Calla's knit hat.

"Have you at least *looked* into flights over Christmas?" I dare ask, my last-ditch attempt.

"I can't take that much time off; you know that."

"Wren, you own the company!" I throw an arm toward the plane he brought us to Anchorage in, to the ALASKA WILD logo across the body. There are plenty more with the same emblem that make up the Fletcher family business, a charter company left to him after his dad passed away five years ago. "You can do whatever the hell you want!"

"People are counting on me to be here."

"I'm your wife! I'm counting on you! *We* are counting on you!" My voice cracks with emotion.

He heaves a sigh and rubs the wrinkles from his brow. "We can't keep going 'round in circles like this. You knew when you married me that Alaska is my home. You can't just change your mind now and expect me to up and abandon my entire life."

Hot tears burn against my cheeks. I furiously smear them away. "And what about *my* life? Am I the only one who's ever going to sacrifice in this relationship?" I never planned on falling head over heels for an American charter pilot while I was in Vancouver for a bachelorette party, but I did, and since then, it's been all on me to keep us together, and I've done it with the reckless fervor of a woman madly in love. I moved across the country to British Columbia and enrolled in a horticultural program, just so I could be

closer to Alaska. And then, when I found out I was pregnant, I dropped out of school and moved to Wren's hometown, so we could marry and raise our child together. Only, most days I feel like I'm a single parent, because Wren's always at the damn airport, or in the air, or making plans to be.

And what am I left with? Dinner plates that grow cold from waiting, a toddler who asks for "Dada" incessantly, and this inhospitable subarctic soil that I'm lucky to grow weeds in. I've just kept on giving this man parts of me, not realizing that I was losing myself in the process.

Wren looks past me, watching a commercial plane as it takes off from the nearby international airport. He looks desperate to be back in the air, away from this never-ending fight. "I want you to be happy. If going back to Toronto is what you need to do, then I'm not going to stop you."

He's right; we can't keep doing this, especially if he's not willing to sacrifice *anything* to keep me around. But how can he just let us go like this? When I announced that my ticket was one-way, he did little more than grunt. Then again, I shouldn't be surprised. Expressing feelings has never been one of Wren's strengths. But for him to simply fly us here and set our belongings on the cold, hard ground next to us . . .

Maybe he doesn't love us *enough*.

I hope that my mother is right, and a few months without a wife to cook his meals and warm his bed will jog a change in perspective. He'll realize that he can fly planes *anywhere*, including Toronto.

He'll realize that he doesn't want to live without us.

I take a deep breath. "I should go."

He settles those sharp gray eyes on me, the ones that ensnared me four years ago. If I'd had any idea how much heartache the ruggedly handsome man who sat down next to me at a bar and ordered a bottle of Budweiser would cause . . . "So, I guess I'll see you when

you're ready to come home." There's a rare touch of hoarseness to his voice, and it nearly breaks my resolve.

But I hang onto that one word to give me strength: "home."

That's just it: Alaska will never feel like my home. Either he truly doesn't see that or he simply doesn't want to.

I swallow against the painful ball in my throat. "Calla, say good-bye to your daddy."

"Bye-bye, Da-da." She scrunches her mitten-clad hand and gives him a toothy grin.

Obliviously happy as her mother's heart breaks.

Chapter 1



July 26, 2018

That calculator's not mine.

I smile bitterly as I peruse the contents of the cardboard box— toothbrush, toothpaste, gym clothes, a tissue box, super-size bottle of Advil, cosmetics bag plus four loose lipsticks, hairspray, brush, and the six pairs of shoes that I kept under my desk—and note the pricey desktop calculator included. I convinced my manager that I needed it just last month. The security officer who was tasked with clearing out personal effects from my work space while I was busy getting fired from my job obviously mistook it for my own. Likely because “Calla Fletcher” is scrawled across the top in permanent black marker, an attempted ward against theft by my sly coworkers.

The bank paid for it, but screw them, I'm keeping it.

I hold onto the tiny shred of satisfaction that decision affords me as the subway sails through the Yonge line tunnel and I stare past my reflection in the glass, out into darkness. Desperately trying to ignore the prickle lodged in my throat.

It's so quiet and roomy on the TTC at this time of day, I had my pick of seats. I can't remember the last time that happened. For almost four years, I've been squeezing into jammed cars and holding my breath against the melding of body odors and constant jostling as I rode to and from work in rush-hour commuter hell.

But today's trip home is different.

Today, I had just finished shaking out and savoring the last drops of my Starbucks latte—venti-sized—and clicked Save on my morning Excel files when a meeting request with my boss appeared

in my in-box, asking me to come down to the Algonquin Room. I didn't think much of it, grabbing my banana and my notebook and trudging off to the small conference room on the second floor.

Where I found not only my boss, but my boss's boss and Sonja Fuentes from HR, who held a thick manila envelope between her swollen hands with my name scrawled over it.

I sat across from them, listening dumbly while they took their turn giving a prepared speech—the bank recently introduced a new system that automated many tasks in my role as a risk analyst and therefore my position has been eliminated; I'm an exemplary employee and this is in no way a reflection of my performance; the company will provide me with ample support during the "transition."

I might be the only person in the history of mankind to eat an entire banana while losing her job.

The "transition" would begin immediately. As in, I wasn't allowed to go back to my desk, to collect my things, or to say goodbye to my coworkers. I was to be walked down to the security desk like a criminal and handed my belongings in a box, then shown the curb. Standard protocol when letting go of bank employees, apparently.

Four years of fussing over spreadsheets until my eyes hurt and kissing egotistical traders' asses in hopes that I could count on a good word come promotion time, staying late to cover for other risk analysts, planning team-building activities that didn't involve used bowling shoes and all-you-can-eat MSG-laden buffets, and *just like that*, none of it matters. With one impromptu fifteen-minute meeting, I'm officially unemployed.

I knew the automated system was coming. I knew they would be reducing the number of risk analysts and redistributing work.

But I stupidly convinced myself that I was too valuable to be one that they'd let go.

How many other heads rolled today, anyway?

Was it just mine?

Oh my God. What if I'm the *only* one who lost their job?

I blink away the sudden swell of threatening tears, but a few manage to escape. With quick fingers, I fish out tissues and a compact mirror from the box and set to gently dabbing at my eyes so as not to disturb my makeup.

The subway comes to a jolting stop and several passengers climb on, scattering like alley cats to grab a spot farthest away from anyone else. All except for a heavysset man in a sapphire blue uniform. He chooses the cherry-red seat kitty-corner to mine, dropping into it.

I angle my knees away to avoid them rubbing against his thigh.

He picks up the crinkled copy of *NOW Magazine* that someone cast aside on the seat next to him and begins fanning himself with it, releasing a heavy pastrami-scented sigh. “Maybe I should just hang out down here, where it’s cool. Gonna be a real stinker out there, with this humidity,” he murmurs to no one in particular, wiping at the beads of sweat running down his forehead with his palm, seemingly oblivious to the annoyance radiating off me.

I pretend I don’t hear him, because no sane person makes idle conversation on the subway, and pull out my phone to reread the text exchange with Corey from earlier, as I stood in a daze on Front Street, trying to process what had just transpired.

I just got fired.

Shit. I’m sorry.

Can we meet up for a coffee?

Can’t. Swamped. With clients all day.

Tonight?

We’ll see. Call you later?

The question mark on the end makes it sound like even a quick phone call to comfort his girlfriend is not guaranteed at this point. Granted, I know he’s been drowning in pressure lately. The ad agency he’s working for has had him slaving around the clock to try and appease their biggest—and most unruly—corporate client, and he needs to nail this campaign if he ever has a hope in hell of getting the promotion he’s been chasing for almost two years. I’ve only seen

him twice in the past three weeks. I shouldn't be surprised that he can't just drop everything and meet me.

Still, my disappointment swells.

"You know, on days like this, I wish I were a woman. You ladies can get away with wearing a lot less."

This time, the sweaty man *is* talking to me. And looking right at me, at the bare legs my black pencil skirt has afforded his view.

I offer him a flat gaze before squeezing my thighs together and shifting my body farther away, letting my long cinnamon-brown hair serve as a partial curtain for my face.

Finally, he seems to sense my mood. "Oh, you've had one of *those* days." He points to the box of belongings on my lap. "Don't worry, you're not alone. I've seen more than a few people get walked out of office buildings over the years."

I'd peg him for his early fifties, his wiry hair more salt than pepper and almost nonexistent on top. A quick glance at his shirt shows me a label that reads WILLIAMSONS CUSTODIAN CO. He must work for one of those cleaning businesses that companies like mine contract out. I'd see them when I worked late, leisurely pushing their carts along the cubicle aisles, trying not to disturb employees as they empty waste bins.

"I quit," I lie as I slide the lid back on the box, covering it from his prying eyes. The wound to my pride is still far too fresh to be casually talking about it with complete strangers.

He smiles in a way that says he doesn't believe me. "So, what'd you do, anyway?"

"Risk analyst for a bank." Why am I still humoring this man's need for conversation?

He nods, as if he knows exactly what that means. If you asked *me* what that meant four years ago when I was collecting my degree from the University of Toronto, I couldn't have told you. But I was excited all the same when the job offer came through. It was my first step as a young professional female, the bottom rung of a corporate

ladder in downtown Toronto. Half-decent pay with benefits and a pension, at a big bank. Plenty of boxes to check in the “good career” department, especially for a twenty-two-year-old woman, fresh out of school and good at math.

It wasn't long before I came to realize that all being a risk analyst entails is throwing numbers into spreadsheet cells and making sure the answers that the formulas spit out are the ones you want. It's little more than monkey work. Frankly, I'm bored out of my skull most days.

“So why'd you quit then?”

“I didn't,” I finally admit through a shaky sigh. “You know, restructuring.”

“Oh, yeah. I know it well.” He pauses, studying me intently. “Did you love it, though?”

“Does *anyone* actually love their job?”

“You're too young to be that cynical.” He chuckles. “Did you at least like the people you worked with?”

I think about my group. Mark, my micromanaging boss with chronic coffee breath who books meetings simply to validate his purpose and makes note of the minute you leave for lunch and the minute you return to your desk; and Tara, the obsessive Type A with no life outside of her job, who spends her weekends sending long-winded emails about process improvement suggestions with “Urgent! Action Required” subject lines to hijack everyone's in-box first thing Monday morning. Raj and Adnan are nice enough, although they've never gone out for drinks after work and can't accept a simple “Good morning, how are you?” from me without their faces turning beet red. And then there's May, who sits one cubicle over, who *never* sends her dailies on time and who eats fermented cabbage at her desk, even though there's an HR policy against bringing strongly scented food into the office. I have to leave my desk or spend ten minutes gagging.

Every.

Single.

Damn.

Day.

“Not really,” I admit. To be honest, I can’t remember the last time I didn’t have to drag myself out of bed, or didn’t watch the hours pass. I loved the feeling that came as I switched off my computer and grabbed my coat each night.

“Maybe being forced out is a good thing, then.” He grins at me.

“Yeah. Maybe.” Davisville station is approaching. With a sigh of relief that I can end this conversation without being overtly rude, I slip out of my seat. Balancing the cumbersome box in one arm, I hold onto the bar with a tight grip and wait for the subway to stop.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it. You’re young.” The guy hefts his body out of his seat as the car comes to a jarring halt. “Those jobs are a dime a dozen. You could be swiping your access card at another bank in a couple weeks.”

He’s just trying to make me feel better. I offer him a tight but polite smile.

The doors open, and I step out onto the platform.

The man lumbers close behind. “You know, I was you, fifteen years ago, carrying my own box of things out of my downtown Toronto office. Sure was a big hit to my ego, but it was also a kick in the ass. I decided to take the severance and start a cleaning business with my brothers. Never thought that’d be my calling, but turns out it’s the best thing that ever happened to me. And I wouldn’t want to be doing anything else, even on the worst days.” He winks and waves the rolled-up newspaper in the air. “This is fate. You’ve got bigger and better things ahead of you, pretty lady. I can feel it.”

I stand on the platform, hugging my cardboard box, watching the enthusiastic custodian stroll toward the exit. He’s whistling as he tucks the paper into the recycling bin on his way, as if he’s *actually* happy with a life of cleaning toilets and mopping floors.

Maybe he’s right, though. Maybe losing my job today will end up being the best thing that could ever happen to me.

Giving my head a shake, I begin heading for the exit. I make it three steps before the bottom of my box gives way, scattering my belongings over the dirty concrete.



My skin is coated in a thin sheen of sweat by the time I trudge up the stone walkway of our house, a ten-minute walk from the station. Mom and I have lived here for the past fifteen years with my stepfather, Simon, who bought it at below-market from his aging parents, years before. A smart investment on his part, as the value of houses in Toronto continues to skyrocket. We routinely get real estate agents cold-calling us, looking for a chance to sell the substantial three-story Victorian, clad in brown brick and well situated on a sizeable corner lot. It's been fully renovated over the years. The last appraisal put the place at over two million.

It's almost noon. All I want to do is take a long, hot shower while I cry, and then crawl into my bed and avoid people—well-meaning or otherwise—until tomorrow.

I'm almost at our front steps when the side entrance that leads to Simon's psychiatry practice opens and a mousy, middle-aged woman in an ill-fitting black pantsuit darts out, sobbing. Our eyes cross paths for a split second before she ducks her head and runs past me toward a green Neon.

She must be a patient. I guess her appointment didn't go well. Or maybe it did. Simon always says that real breakthroughs don't come easily. Either way, it's comforting to know that I'm not the only one having a shitty day.

Once inside the house, I kick off my heels and let the faulty box fall to the floor, glad to finally be rid of it. Two of my forty-dollar lipsticks smashed on the concrete platform, and my left running shoe—from a brand-new pricey pair, no less—is still lying next to the subway tracks. I briefly considered climbing down to retrieve it, but then I

imagined the ensuing headline: “Dejected Risk Analyst Leaps to Her Death,” and I decided that that’s not how I want to make the news.

“Hello?” my mom calls out from the kitchen.

I stifle my groan as my head falls back. *Crap.* That’s right, it’s Thursday. She doesn’t go into the flower shop until two on Thursdays. “It’s just me.”

The hardwood floor creaks as she approaches, her rose-colored wrap skirt flowing breezily around her ankles with each step.

Simon follows close behind, in his usual plaid sweater vest, button-down, and pleated khaki pant combo. It doesn’t matter how hot it is outside, he keeps the air frosty in here.

I stifle a second groan. I expected him to be home—he’s almost *always* home—but I hoped he’d be tied up with his next patient and not hear me come in.

“What are you doing here?” Mom’s frown grows as she looks from my face to the box on the floor. “What’s that?”

Behind her, Simon looks equally concerned.

I’m forced to replay the dreadful morning for them, handing over the envelope with my severance package details, the lump in my throat swelling as I talk. I’ve done well, up until now, but I’m struggling to keep the tears at bay.

“Oh, honey! I’m so sorry!” My mom spears Simon with a glare and I know exactly why. Simon’s best friend, Mike, is a VP at the bank. I got this job because of him. I wonder if Mike had any idea that I was on the chopping block. Did he warn Simon? Did Simon know how my day would turn out when I dropped my breakfast dishes into the dishwasher and waved goodbye to him this morning?

Simon has already put his reading glasses on to scan the severance paperwork.

Meanwhile, Mom wraps her arms around me and begins smoothing her hand over my hair, like she did when I was a small child in need of consoling. It’s almost comical, given that I’m three inches taller than her. “Don’t worry. This happens to all of us.”

“No it doesn’t! It hasn’t happened to either of you!” Simon keeps complaining that he has more patients than he has hours in the day to treat them, and Mom has owned a successful flower shop on Yonge Street for the past eleven years.

“Well, no, but . . . it happened to your grandfather, and Simon’s brother, Norman. And both sets of neighbors, don’t forget about them!” She scrambles to find examples.

“Yeah, but they were all in, like, their *forties*! I’m only twenty-six!”

Mom gives me an exasperated look, but then the fine lines across her forehead deepen with her frown. “Who else lost their job?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see anyone else at security.” Is the rest of my team sitting around their desks, whispering about me at this very moment? Did *they* see it coming?

Her slender hands rub my shoulders affectionately. “Well, the place is *obviously* run by a bunch of idiots if they would let go of their best and brightest employee.” Another eye-spear cast Simon’s way, meant for Mike.

Of course she’s going to say that. She’s my mom. Still . . . it makes me feel marginally better.

I rest my head against her shoulder, finding comfort in the delicate scent of her floral perfume and the softness of her sleek, chin-length golden-brown bob, as we quietly watch Simon peruse the paperwork, awaiting his verdict.

“Four months’ pay with benefits . . . retraining with an employment agency . . . looks fairly standard,” Simon says in that charming Hugh Grant–esque British accent that still lingers, even after thirty-odd years of living in Canada. “You’re in a good situation. You don’t have rent or a mortgage to worry about. Your bills are minimal.” He slides his glasses to the top of his thinning gray-haired head and settles his shrewd blue eyes on me. “But how does this make you feel?”

Simon is big on asking me how things make me feel, especially when he knows I don’t want to talk about it. He’s a psychiatrist and

can't help but psychoanalyze everything and everyone. Mom says it's because he's teaching me to always be comfortable with expressing my emotions. He's been doing it since the first day I met him, when I was eight and he asked me how the thought of my mom having a boyfriend made me feel.

"I feel like I need to be alone."

He nods once, in understanding. "Quite right."

I collect my severance package and head for the stairs.

"Susan? Isn't there something else you ought to mention?" I hear him whisper.

"Not now!" she hisses in response.

When I glance back, the two of them are communicating through a series of glares, waggling eyebrows, and pointed stares. They're notorious for doing this. It's amusing . . . when it has nothing to do with me. "What's going on?"

Mom offers a tight smile and says in a light voice, "It's nothing. We can talk about it later, when things have settled down for you."

I sigh. "Just tell me."

Finally, Mom relents. "There was a call today." She hesitates. "From Alaska."

Unease settles into my spine. I only know one person in Alaska, and I haven't talked to him in twelve years. "What does he want?"

"I don't know. I missed getting to the phone, and he didn't leave a message."

"So then it's nothing."

Her tight brow tells me she doesn't think it's nothing. Even when we were on speaking terms, my dad was never the one to make the effort, to work out the time difference and pick up the phone to say hello. "Maybe you should give him a call."

"Tomorrow." I continue up the stairs. "I can only handle so much disappointment for one day."

And my father has already delivered enough to last me a lifetime.

Chapter 2



“Going out?” Simon checks his watch. He can’t fathom the idea of leaving the house at eleven p.m. to see friends, but he’s fifty-six years old and doesn’t leave the house much, period, unless my mother forces him. His idea of entertainment is pouring himself a glass of sherry and catching up on the latest BBC documentary.

“I figured I may as well.”

Simon peers over his glasses at me, doing a quick, fatherly scan of my outfit before shifting his gaze back to his book. I decided on my shortest, tightest black dress and my highest heels for tonight. In any other situation, the combination would be considered escort-worthy, but on a sweltering Thursday night on Richmond Street in July, it’s practically standard uniform.

Simon rarely comments on my clothing choices, though, and I’m thankful for that. Lord knows what meaning he could find in tonight’s ensemble. An ego boost after my pride’s been trounced? An outcry for love and attention maybe? Deeply seeded daddy issues?

“With the usual suspects?”

“No. They’re all away. Just Diana tonight.” And Aaron, I’m sure. One can’t be at a club for too long without the other. My best friend will demand a girls’ night out and then act like it’s a complete coincidence that her boyfriend shows up, even though I watched her text him our exact location a half hour before.

“No Corey?”

“He’s working late,” I mutter, unable to hide my annoyance. He wants to hook up on Saturday, though. So we can “de-stress,” his latest text said. That’s code for “get laid.” Normally, a message like

that wouldn't bother me. But today is different. Today, it bothers me. The fact that he can't even spare ten minutes to call and make sure I'm okay after getting the axe is a growing thorn in my thoughts. When did he become so focused on his career, in his bid for promotion, that I became a clear runner-up?

And how hadn't I noticed it sooner?

Simon's mouth curves into a frown. "I saw that photograph in the rubbish. The one of you two from last summer."

"It got mangled when the box broke."

"It's a nice picture."

"Yeah." It was taken last June at my friend Talia's cottage on Lake Joe, the same cottage where Corey and I had met a month before when he was visiting a friend's place three doors down for the long May weekend. We crossed paths on kayaks early that Saturday morning, in a quiet part of an otherwise bustling lake, slowing to float beside each other and exchange "gonna be a great day!" pleasantries. It was his silky blond curls that caught my attention; it was his mesmerizing smile and easygoing laugh that held it. I was even more thrilled when I found out he lived in High Park and worked only eight minutes away from my office.

By the time we paddled back to our respective shores side by side, we'd made plans to meet up for lunch. By the time the bonfire in Talia's pit was burning that night, we were playfully smearing melted marshmallow across each other's lips.

In the picture, we're sitting on a pile of craggy gray rocks that creep out into the lake. Hundred-year-old pine trees tower in the background. Corey's long, lanky arms are wrapped around my shoulders and we're both smiling wide, completely enamored with each other. That was back when we saw each other at least four times a week, when we'd make all our plans based around each other's schedules, when he responded to my texts with cheesy quips within thirty seconds of me hitting Send, and he'd order flowers from my mom's florist shop every week and have her put them by

my bedside table—which solidified her adoration for him almost instantly. Back when I had to push him away—giggling, of course—as he stole another last kiss, no matter who was watching.

But somewhere along the line, things have changed. The flowers don't come every week anymore; the text responses sometimes take hours. And the kisses only come as a prelude to more.

Maybe we've just grown comfortable in our relationship.

Maybe *too* comfortable.

Maybe Corey and I need to sit down and have a talk.

I push that thought aside for another day. "I can always print another one."

Simon looks at me again, his narrow face hinting at mild concern. He adores Corey, too, possibly more than my mother does. Then again, they've always welcomed my boyfriends and there have been more than a few coming through our front door over the years.

Corey is the easiest to like, though. He's intelligent, soft-spoken, and easygoing. The corners of his soft hazel-green eyes crinkle with his laugh, and he is a master at giving you his undivided attention. He cares what other people think of him, but in a good way, a way that holds his tongue even when he's angry, to avoid saying things he'll later regret. He has always treated me well—never uttering a word of complaint when I hand him my purse to free my hands, holding the door for me to pass through, offering to stand at crowded bars to get my drink. A true gentleman. *And* he's hot.

What parents wouldn't want their daughter to be with a guy like Corey?

And why, as I stand here mentally going through Corey's best attributes, do I feel like I'm convincing myself of them?

"Well . . . Guard your drinks and stay together," Simon murmurs.

"I will. Kiss Mom good night for me." With the wedding season in high gear, she's already fast asleep, needing her rest before an early-morning rise to finish this weekend's bridal bouquets.

I make it all the way to the front door before Simon calls out, “Don’t forget to take the rubbish to the curb.”

My head falls back with my groan. “I’ll do it when I get home.”

“At three o’clock in the morning?” he asks lightly. Knowing full well that the last thing I’ll be doing when I stumble up the steps at three A.M. is hauling the medley of garbage, recycling, and composting bins to the curb.

I open my mouth, about to plead for my stepdad to do it for me, just this once . . .

“Putting out the rubbish once a week as your *only* contribution to this household seems like a good substitute for paying rent and utilities, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes,” I mutter. Because it’s true. We have a housekeeper come twice a week to clean and run laundry. Mom has our weekly groceries dropped at our door and ready-made dinners delivered from an organic, grain-fed, hormone-free, gluten-free, dairy-free kitchen, so I rarely have to shop or cook. And I always slide my blouses and dresses into the pile when Simon takes his sweater vests and pleated pants in for dry cleaning.

I’m a twenty-six-year-old woman with no debt, who has been living on her parents’ dime despite earning a decent salary for the past four years, without a complaint from either of them because they love having me here and I love the lifestyle I can afford by living at home. So, yes, the least I can do is put out our “rubbish” once a week.

That doesn’t stop me from adding, “You’re just making me do it because *you* hate doing it.”

“Why else do you think we’ve kept you around this long?” he calls out as I’m pulling the front door shut behind me.



“I’ll meet you down there.” The wheels on the compost bin rumble against the pavement as I drag it to the curb by one hand, past Mom’s

Audi and Simon's Mercedes, my phone pressed to my ear. We're one of the few houses on the street that has a driveway, and one large enough to fit three cars. Most everyone is stuck battling it out for street parking, which is an especially prickly situation come winter, when there aren't just other cars but four-foot snowbanks to contend with.

"We're not going to get in anywhere if you don't hurry up!" Diana yells over the crowd of noisy people around her, panic in her voice.

"Relax. We'll get in somewhere, like we do *every* time we go out." Somewhere where we can flirt with the doormen and, worst case, slip them a few bills to let us bypass the line they've manufactured to make their club look like it's packed. Meanwhile inside it's a ghost town.

But being two attractive, young women has its benefits and I plan on taking full advantage of them tonight. For as crappy as I feel on the inside, I've compensated by making an extra effort on the outside.

"My Uber's on the way. Just pick a place and text me. I'll see you in fifteen." More like twenty-five, but Diana will abandon me if I tell her that. Setting down my phone on the hood of Simon's car next to my purse, I lug the recycling bin to the curb, careful not to chip a nail. Then I make my way back to tackle the gray garbage container.

Movement catches the corner of my eye a split second before something soft brushes against my leg. I leap back with a startled yelp, only to lose my balance and, stumbling over the curb, land flat on my ass next to an especially thorny rosebush. An enormous raccoon scurries past me. A second one follows quickly behind, chattering angrily at me.

"Dammit!" The touchdown was hard and I'll likely be bruised, but right now what hurts most is the four-inch heel lying next to my foot, snapped off the base. I peel the ruined Louboutin stiletto off my foot and aim for the raccoons, throwing it with all my

strength. But they've already safely settled under the car, and now they watch me, the stream of light from the porch glinting off their beady eyes.

The front door opens and Simon appears. "Calla, are you still here?" He spots me sprawled out in the garden and frowns.

"Tim and Sid are back," I mutter. The pair stopped coming around last month, after frequenting our property every Thursday night for the better part of a year. I assumed they'd either found another family to terrorize or had been hit by a car.

"I had a feeling they'd return." He holds out the receiver. "From Alaska."

I shake my head, mouthing, "I'm not home," though it's already too late.

Simon's bushy brows arch as he waits, his arm outstretched. He'd never cover for me anyway. The psychiatrist in him believes in facing problems, not avoiding them.

And my biggest problem, according to Simon, is my relationship with Wren Fletcher. Or lack thereof, because I hardly know the man. I *thought* I knew him, back when I'd dial his number and listen to the ring, imagining the room and the house and the man on the other side. Of course, I knew what my real father looked like. My mom had shown me pictures of him, of his shaggy peanut-butter-brown hair and his soft gray eyes, wearing a navy-blue-and-black plaid jacket and jeans in mid-August, standing proudly next to a row of planes. She called him ruggedly handsome, and I somehow knew what she meant without understanding it at my young age.

Sometimes he wouldn't answer, and I'd be bereft for the entire day. But other times, when I was lucky, I'd catch him coming or going. We'd talk for fifteen or so minutes, about school and my friends, or the hobbies I was into at the time. It was mostly me speaking but I hardly noticed, happy to prattle on. Mom says Dad never was a big talker.

She also said that we would never live together as a family. That my dad's life was in Alaska and ours was in Toronto, and there was no way around that reality. I learned to accept it early on. I didn't know any different. Still, I'd always ask him to fly out to visit me. I mean, he had all these planes to choose from, so why couldn't he just hop in one of them and come?

He always had an excuse, and Mom never tried to coax him. She knew better.

Me, though? I only ever saw him through the enchanted eyes of a little girl who desperately wanted to meet the quiet man on the other side of the phone.

I pull myself up and dust the dirt off my behind. And then I hobble to the front steps in my one shoe, glaring at my ever-understanding and patient stepdad.

Finally, I take the phone from his hand.

"Hello."

"Hello. Calla?" a woman asks.

I frown at Simon. "Yeah. Who's this?"

"My name is Agnes. I'm a friend of your father's. I found your number among Wren's things."

"Okay . . ." An unexpected spark of fear ignites inside me. What was she doing in his things? "Did something happen to him?"

"I guess you could say that." She pauses, and I find myself holding my breath, dreading the answer. "Your father has lung cancer."

"Oh." I take a seat on the top of the steps, suddenly feeling wobbly-legged. Simon eases down onto the step beside me.

"I know things have been difficult between the two of you for some time, but I thought you'd like to know."

Difficult? More like nonexistent.

There's a long pause. "I only know because I found a copy of the test results in his pocket when I went to do his laundry. He doesn't know that I'm calling you."

I hear what she doesn't say: He wasn't going to tell me that he has cancer. "So . . . how bad is it?"

"I'm not sure, but the doctors have recommended a treatment plan." She has a reedy voice and a slight accent that reminds me of my father's, from what I remember of it.

I don't know what else to say except, "Okay. Well . . . I'm sure the doctors know what they're doing. Thanks for calling and letting me know—"

"Why don't you come here for a visit?"

My mouth drops open. "Here? What, you mean . . . to *Alaska*?"

"Yes. Soon. Before treatment starts. We'll pay for your ticket, if that's what it would take. It's high season right now, but I found an available seat to Anchorage for this Sunday."

"*This* Sunday?" As in three days from now?

"Jonah could bring you the rest of the way."

"I'm sorry, who's *Jonah*?" My head is spinning.

"Oh." Her laughter is soft and melodic in my ear. "Sorry. He's our best pilot. He'd make sure you got here safe and sound."

Our best pilot, I note. *We'll* pay for your ticket. She said she was a friend, but I'm gathering that Agnes is more than that.

"And Wren would love to see you."

I hesitate. "He told you that?"

"He doesn't have to." She sighs. "Your father . . . he's a complicated man, but he does love you. And he has many regrets."

Maybe this Agnes woman is okay with all the things Wren Fletcher *doesn't* say and do, but I'm not. "I'm sorry. I can't just hop on a plane and come to Alaska . . ." My words drift. Actually, as of this moment, I have no job or other major commitments. And as far as Corey is concerned, I could probably fly to Alaska and come back without him ever being the wiser.

I *could* just leave, but that's beside the point.

"I know this is a lot to take in. Please, think about it. You'd get the chance to know Wren. I think you'd really like him." Her voice

has grown husky. She clears it. “Do you have something to write with?”

“Uh . . . yeah.” I pluck the pen from the breast pocket of Simon’s button-down shirt—I can always count on him to have one at the ready—and jot down her phone number on the back of his hand, though it’s likely already on the call display. She also gives me her email address.

I’m in a daze when I hang up with her. “He has cancer.”

“I gathered it was something along those lines.” Simon puts an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him. “And this woman who called wants you to visit him.”

“Agnes. Yeah. *She* wants me to visit him. *He* doesn’t want me there. He wasn’t even going to tell me. He was just going to go and die, without giving me *any* warning.” My voice cracks. This man who I don’t even know still wounds me so deeply.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“How do you *think* that makes me feel!” I snap, tears threatening.

Simon remains calm and collected. He’s used to being yelled at for his prodding questions—by my mom and me, and by his patients. “Do you want to fly to Alaska to meet your father?”

“No.”

He raises an eyebrow.

I sigh with exasperation. “I don’t know!”

What am I *supposed* to do with this information? How am I *supposed* to feel about possibly losing a person who has only ever hurt me?

We sit quietly and watch as Tim and Sid venture out from beneath the car, their humps bobbing with their steps as they head for the bins at the end of our driveway, standing on their hind legs to paw at the blue one, attempting to knock it over with their weight. They chatter back and forth to each other, only bothering with an occasional glance at their audience.

I sigh. “He’s never made an effort to get to know me. Why should I bother making the effort now?”

“Would there be a better time?”

That’s Simon. Always answering a question with another question.

“Let me ask you this: Do you think you could gain something from going to Alaska?”

“Besides a picture with my mom’s sperm donor?”

Simon grimaces his disapproval at my poor attempt at humor.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I guess I just have low expectations for a man who hasn’t cared enough to meet his daughter once in twenty-four years.” He was supposed to come to Toronto. He called me four months before my eighth-grade graduation, to say that he was coming for it. I started crying the moment I hung up. All the anger and resentment that’d been building up over the years, for all the birthdays and holidays he’d missed, disintegrated instantly. And I truly believed that he’d be there, that he’d be sitting in the audience with a proud grin on his face. I believed it, right up until he called, two days before the ceremony, to say that “something” came up. An emergency at work. He wouldn’t elaborate.

My mother called him back. I heard her seething voice through the walls. I heard the ultimatum she delivered through tears—that either he sort his priorities out and finally show up for his daughter or get out of our lives for good, monthly child support checks and all.

He never showed up.

And when I stood on the stage, accepting my academic award, it was with puffy eyes and a forced smile, and a silent promise to myself that I would never trust him again.

Simon hesitates, his wise gaze peering out into the darkness. “Did you know that your mother was still in love with Wren when we got married?”

“What? No, she wasn’t.”

“She was. *Very* much so.”

I frown. “But she was *married* to you.”

“That doesn’t mean she didn’t still love him.” A pensive look fills his face. “Do you remember when your mother went through that phase, when she changed her hair and started working out almost every day? She was *highly* irritable with me.”

“It’s fuzzy, but yeah.” She dyed her hair platinum blonde, and started going to yoga obsessively, reversing the softening effects of middle age and turning her body hard again. She was throwing petty jabs at Simon between sips of morning coffee, picking at his personal faults over lunch, sparking colossal fights over everything he *wasn’t* by dinner.

I remember thinking it was odd, that I’d never seen them fight at all, let alone that frequently.

“That all began after Wren called to say he was coming.”

“No, it didn’t,” I begin to argue, before stopping myself. Simon would have a much better grasp of that timeline than I would.

“When your mother left Wren, she did it hoping that he would change his mind about staying in Alaska. He never did, but she never stopped loving him, despite it. Eventually she knew she had to move on. She met me, and we married. And then all of a sudden he was coming here, back into her life. She didn’t know how to deal with seeing him again, after so many years. She was . . . conflicted about her feelings for the both of us.” If Simon is bitter about admitting this, he doesn’t show it.

“That must have been hard for you.” My heart pangs for the man I’ve come to know and love as a more than suitable replacement for my birth father.

Simon smiles sadly. “It was. But I noticed a change in her after your graduation. She was less anxious. And she stopped crying.”

“She was crying?”

“At night, when she thought I’d gone to sleep. Not often, but often enough. I’m guessing it was guilt over harboring feelings for him. And fear for what might happen when she saw him again, especially so soon after marrying me.”

What exactly is Simon suggesting?

He presses his thin lips together as he wipes the lenses of his reading glasses on the cuff of his sleeve. “I think she finally accepted that neither of you would ever have the relationship you longed for with him. That wanting someone to be something they’re not won’t make it happen.” Simon hesitates. “I’ll selfishly admit that I wasn’t entirely unhappy that he never came. It was clear to me that if Wren were willing to give up his home, my marriage to your mother would have dissolved.” He toys with the gold wedding band around his ring finger. “I will always play second fiddle to that man. I knew that the day I asked her to be my wife.”

“But why would you marry her, then?” As glad as I am that he did, for her sake as well as mine, it seems like an odd proclamation.

“Because while Susan may have been madly in love with Wren, I was madly in love with *her*. Still am.”

That, I know. I’ve seen it, with every lengthy look, with every passing kiss. Simon loves my mother deeply. At their wedding, my grandfather gave a mildly inappropriate speech, commenting on the two of them being an unlikely pair—that my mother is this vibrant and impulsive woman, while Simon is a calm and practical old soul. “An unexpected match, but he’ll sure as hell make her much happier than *that last one*” were my grandfather’s exact words over the microphone to a room of a hundred guests.

The old man was probably right, though, because Simon dotes on my mother, granting her every self-satisfying whim and wish. They vacation at expensive, all-inclusive tropical resorts when he’d rather be visiting dusty churches and ancient libraries; he’s her pack mule when she decides she needs a fresh wardrobe, schlepping countless bags through the streets of Yorkville; he humors her love of Sunday road trips to country markets and then comes home sneezing from the dozen allergens that plague him; he’s given up gluten and red meat because Mom has decided she doesn’t want to eat them. When we redecorated the house, my mother chose a

palette of soft grays and pale mauves. Simon later confided in me that he despises few things and, oddly enough, the color mauve is one of them.

In the past, I've found myself silently mocking the gangly Englishman for never putting his foot down with my mother, for never showing a spine. But now, as I gaze at his narrow, kind face—his feather-thin hair long since receded from his forehead—I can't help but admire him for all that he's put up with while loving her.

"Did she ever admit her feelings to you?" I dare ask.

"No," Simon scoffs, his brow furrowing deeply. "She'll *never* admit any of this to me and don't bother confronting her about it. It'll only stir up guilt that does none of us any good."

"Right." I sigh. "So, should I go to Alaska?"

"I don't know. Should you?"

I roll my eyes at him. "Why can't you be a normal parent and *tell* me what to do for once?"

Simon grins, in that way that tells me he's secretly delighted that I referred to him as a parent. Even though he's always said that he sees me as his daughter, I think he would have been happy to have children of his own, had my mother been willing. "Let me ask you this: What was your first thought when Agnes told you your father has cancer?"

"That he's going to die."

"And how did that thought make you feel?"

"Afraid." I see where Simon's going with this. "Afraid that I'll miss my chance to meet him." Because no matter how many times I've lain in bed, wondering why my father didn't love me enough, the little girl inside me still desperately wants him to.

"Then I think you should go to Alaska. Ask the questions you need to ask, and get to know Wren. Not for him, but for you. So you don't find yourself ruled by deep regrets in the future. Besides . . ." He bumps shoulders with me. "I don't see any other pressing matters in your life at the moment."

“Funny how that worked out, eh?” I murmur, thinking of the chatty custodian on the subway earlier today. “It must be fate.”

Simon gives me a flat look, and I laugh. He doesn’t believe in fate. He doesn’t even believe in astrology. He thinks people who follow their horoscopes have deeply repressed issues.

I sigh. “It’s not like he lives in the *nice* part of Alaska.” Not that I remember *any* part of Alaska from my brief time there—nice or otherwise. But Mom has used the words “barren wasteland” enough to turn me off the place. Though she tends to be dramatic. Plus, she’s a city lover. She can’t handle the Muskokas for more than a night, and not without dousing herself in mosquito repellent every fifteen minutes while reminding everyone incessantly about the risk of West Nile.

“I’ll think about it.” I mentally start reorganizing my schedule. And groan. If I leave on Sunday, I’ll miss next week’s hair appointment. Maybe I can beg Fausto to squeeze me in Saturday morning. Highly unlikely. He’s normally booked four weeks in advance. Thankfully I have a standing nail appointment on Saturday afternoons and I had my eyelashes done last weekend. “I *just* paid for ten more hot yoga sessions. And what about squash? Mom would need to find a replacement partner.”

“All things you managed to work around when you went to Cancún last year.”

“Yeah . . . I guess,” I admit reluctantly. “But Alaska is a million hours away.”

“Only half a million,” Simon quips.

“Will you at least give me a script for Ambi—”

“No.”

I sigh with exaggeration. “What fun is having a stepdad with a prescription pad, then?” My phone starts ringing from its resting spot on the hood of Simon’s car. “Crap, that’s Diana. She’s in a line somewhere, mentally stabbing me.” As if on cue, a black Nissan Maxima coasts up to the curb in front of the house. “And that’s my

Uber.” I look down at my missing heel and my soiled dress. “And I need to change.”

Simon eases himself off the step and heads toward the waiting garbage can. “I suppose I can manage this last one for you. Just this once. After all, you *have* had quite the day.”

He charges forward in a funny shuffle that sends Tim and Sid scurrying into the hedge before struggling to wheel the can into place. For all that makes Simon endearing, he is neither coordinated nor strong. Mom has tried and failed to get him to a gym to add some muscle to his spindly arms.

A thought strikes me. “What are you going to do about garbage day if I go to Alaska?”

“Well, of course your mother will take care of it.” He waits a beat before turning to meet my doubtful smirk, and mutters in that dry British way he has, “That would be a bloody cold day in hell, now wouldn’t it?”

Chapter 3



“You *have* to go!” Diana yells over the throbbing bass, pausing long enough to flash a pearly white grin at the bartender as he sets our drink order on the bar. “It’s beautiful up there.”

“You’ve never been to Alaska!”

“Well *yeah*, but I’ve seen *Into the Wild*. All that wilderness and the mountains . . . Just don’t eat the berries.” She makes a dramatic show of placing a ten-dollar tip down so that the bartender notices. A trick for priority service the next round.

Meanwhile, the bartender’s eyes are busy dragging over the plunging neckline of my cobalt-blue dress, the first thing I yanked out of my closet in my rush to change and get out the door. He’s cute but short and brawny, with a shaved head and a full sleeve of ink—not my tall and lean, clean-cut, inkless type—and, besides, I’m not in the mood to flirt in exchange for free shots.

I humor him with a tight smile and then turn my attention back to Diana. “It’s not like that on the western side of Alaska.”

“Cheers.” We down our shots in unison. “What’s it like?”

The sickly sweet concoction makes me grimace slightly. “Flat.”

“What do you mean? Flat, like the Prairies?”

“No. I mean, yeah, it’s probably flat like there, but it’s *really* cold. Like, *arctic* cold.” Whereas our midwest provinces are home to the vast majority of our country’s farmland, nothing thrives where my dad is from, the growing season’s too short. That’s according to my mom, anyway, and the woman has a bachelor’s degree in Plant Science from the University of Guelph. If anyone would know, I’d think it would be her.

“Arctic?” Diana’s cornflower-blue eyes widen with excitement.

“Seriously, think how amazing that could be for Calla & Dee. You’re the one who said we needed to find an original angle. *You* said we need to get out of the city.”

“I was thinking more a trip to Sandbanks or Lake of Bays.” New pretty and picturesque places that we can get to within a few hours by car.

“What’s more original and out of the city than a lifestyle blogger in the *arctic*?” Diana’s matte mauve-colored lips curl into a hopeful smile as no doubt a spiderweb of ideas is spinning in her head.

Last year, we started a small website aptly named Calla & Dee, an avenue to share our passion for the latest lipstick shades and shoe styles, just for fun. I should have known when Diana asked me to split the cost of a website designer that she already had lofty goals and that this hobby was going to grow legs of its own.

Now we exchange texts about the site *all day long*—ideas for future posts and who’s doing what that seems to be working. Instead of a simple blog, we have entire sections—fashion, food, beauty, entertainment—and a strict weekly schedule to adhere to. I spend my commutes and lunch hours scrolling through newsletters and blog posts in order to educate myself on the latest—retailers announcing sales, fashion industry leaders announcing the latest trends, other lifestyle bloggers who we befriend online in the name of networking. My evenings are for updating links, loading content, tweaking aesthetics—tasks that Diana abhors but I don’t mind and am actually good at.

Diana and I meet up in a new restaurant every Thursday night to bounce around ideas and taste-test appetizer menus for our “Grazing in the City” section. One Saturday a month is for scouring discount racks for trendy clothes to style ourselves with, and every Sunday afternoon we hunt for the perfect settings in downtown Toronto—colorful graffiti in alleyways, the spring cherry blossoms of High Park, the Distillery District’s picturesque Christ-