

Chapter One

A really bad day

Beth took a deep breath of the cool Alaskan air. She was standing on the veranda of a stone house overlooking a small stand of trees with a brook beyond. It was a glorious view.

"I love it," she said to the man standing beside her.

"I have one more house I'd like to show you," her realtor said.

"You've hit the mark with this one, Roger. It has everything I had on my wish list."

"Humour me. This property just came on the market. I think it'll blow your mind," he insisted.

Beth shrugged and allowed him to lead her away to his car. They'd been looking at houses for more than a week. He knew her tastes. If he thought another place would 'blow her mind', she'd go see it.

They got back in his SUV and drove back to the highway. The highway turned into a gravel road after twenty minutes.

"Roger, just where is this house? I said I wanted privacy, not isolation."

"It's just a little further. Trust me, it'll be worth it," Roger insisted.

Beth sat back and looked at the passing trees. She really wasn't comfortable surrounded by all this wilderness.

"Roger, I think that we should turn around."

"Why?"

"If the house is this far out, it's too far from town. I wanted seclusion, not isolation," she repeated.

"We're almost there. You'll see. It's perfect."

Roger turned off the gravel road onto a rutted dirt road that twisted and turned. She didn't like this at all.

Roger stopped the car when the road ran out.

"We have to walk the rest of the way," he said, getting out of the car. He came around and opened her door.

"Roger, I don't think so. I'm not ready to live this far out. I want to take pictures of the wilderness, not live in it," she explained calmly.

Roger grabbed her arm and pulled her out.

“What are you doing?”

“Women like you want to live on the wild side, and I’m happy to show you.” He pulled her into his arms and mashed his mouth against hers. Her arms were crushed between them. Fortunately for her, her hands were up high. While he pinned her against the car and rubbed himself on her, she grabbed his collar in a cross-arm position and pulled on one side while pushing her forearm against his throat. She had enough leverage to choke him. Roger pulled back but she followed until he was clawing at her hands to release her. She released him and the distance gave enough space to knee him in the groin. She was on target. He grabbed at her coat as he fell to the ground. She let it slip off while she took off running.

“You’ll pay for that. You hear me bitch, I’ll make you pay,” he choked out.

She didn’t stop and just ran. She could hear Roger coughing and ran harder. She dug deep and pulled all the strength she could muster into getting away. She jumped over roots and vaulted over fallen logs for the first few minutes. Fear provided her the adrenaline she needed to do it, but it was quickly exhausted.

She slowed to a jog but didn’t stop. She thought she was in the clear when she heard a wolf howl. She took off again. She tumbled down a small embankment into a shallow stream. She slipped on the rocks and fell into the cold water.

She stumbled to her feet and weaved across the knee-high water until she was on the other side. The wolf’s howl seemed closer. It prodded her into a fast lope.

She was tiring and the cold was sapping what energy she had left. She wasn’t going to make it, but she wasn’t going to make it easy.

She broke into a large clearing with a single large oak. It sat in splendid majesty, at least a hundred feet across and probably just as high. The bole of the tree had to be five feet in diameter. Several broken branches were low enough to make it climbable if you were light enough.

She hurried over and was dismayed to discover that the lowest of the branches was at least eight feet off the ground. Beth walked around the tree, hoping there were low enough branches on the far side. Nothing. She thought about going back into the forest to find something, anything that she could stand on. The howling of the wolf decided her actions. She looked for handholds on the bole and found what she was looking for in the bark. She rubbed her hands together, stuck her hand in the fissure, and pulled. It held.

It required more upper body strength than she'd imagined, but she reached the lowest broken branch stub. She kicked and wriggled and was finally leaning her stomach against the branch. She grinned in triumph and paused to catch her breath before moving upwards. Her elation was short-lived: the wolf had found her and was pacing into the clearing.

She swung her foot up and scrambled to stand. She reached for the next branch just as the wolf howled. She swallowed hard and kept moving, cringing with the wolf's every howl.

She was soon high in the canopy. Her thighs clenched the limb, and the knuckles of her hand whitened under the grip she exerted. She watched in dismay as the wolf paced around her refuge.

Beth had watched documentaries on wolves before coming to Alaska, but she'd never expected to encounter one. Correction, she'd never wanted to be in a situation where she'd encounter one.

The wolf sniffed the ground, obviously trying to find her scent. He came right up to the tree and looked up. She heard the triumph in his howl. Beth shuddered under the intelligent awareness in his eyes. The wolf knew. He might not be able to come up, but she couldn't come down. Eventually, fatigue would make her fall, and he'd have her.

The wolf growled while circling the tree. If he was trying to freak her out, it was working. He eventually howled one last time before settling down to wait. Beth's nerves were finally settling down enough so that she could think. Why me? she thought. She wondered which god she had offended in a previous life. She'd escaped a sexual predator only to be chased by another, the four-footed kind.

First Roger and now a wolf.

"And everybody said that Alaska was safe, ha!" she muttered.

She slowly eased herself back to the tree trunk and sat back. Now what? She felt a lump on her side and reached to remove the discomfort in her sweater pocket.

"My phone!" she yelled in excitement. She didn't remember why she'd put it there instead of her purse. "Thank you, God," she whispered fervently.

She brought it out and groaned in dismay: she had minimal power and no bars.

"This is so cliché. Of course, I have a phone; of course, I can't use it."

The wolf coughed in response to her words. It almost sounded like sniggering. Beth stared down at the wolf. "You're probably Roger's pet. It would just be my luck."

She frowned as the wolf dropped his jaw in lupine amusement. "He can't possibly know what I'm saying," she mumbled.

The wolf sat up on his haunches and howled over and over. It was an eerie sound that sent shivers up her spine and raised the hair on the back of her neck. His call was answered by two polar bears who charged into the clearing.

"Ah. Come on. Not fair," Beth groaned.

The bears looked up in unison and then over to the now quiet wolf. They moved towards the wolf in what could only be described as a menacing stalk. The wolf whined and took off. One of the bears chased after him.

"Wow. I didn't know bears could move that fast," Beth said, shaking her head in amazement. The only polar bears she'd ever seen were at the zoo or on TV documentaries. They always seemed to be great lumbering beasts. As if to make her point, the second bear lumbered over to the tree and stopped just below her perch. He stood and put his paws against the tree and looked at her. He had to be almost ten feet tall. Beth had thought she was high enough but quickly reconsidered and climbed a few more feet until it was unsafe to climb any higher.

The bear sniffed the air, grunted and then fell back on all four. It circled the tree and apparently found a comfortable spot. It flopped down, lowered its head onto its paws, and settled in.

Great. How many predators does it take to ruin a woman's day? First Roger, then the wolf, now bears. Really big polar bears.

Wait. Didn't bears climb trees? She'd never heard of a polar bear climbing trees, but there weren't too many trees on the tundra.

She sighed. "All I wanted was to find a nice house with some privacy and a view." She leaned forward. "Can't you go home? I promise I'm not good to eat."

The bear lifted his head. Beth thought it was in response to her plea until she also heard it: a wolf howling in pain.

The sound echoed through the forest and then was abruptly cut off. The sudden silence was more disturbing than the howl had been.

"Nature in the raw," she whispered. She assumed that the bear had killed the wolf. She hoped its appetite was sated so that a small human wouldn't be on the menu.

"Go share the wolf," she said to the polar, using shooing gestures to get him to go away.

The bear looked at her and tipped its head as though she were talking nonsense.

Beth leaned back against the tree. Her shivering was making it hard to stay centered on the branch. Her wet clothes were endangering her life as much as the predators.

She pulled out her phone and stared at it, hoping for bars, for more power, for ... something. She sighed in despair and put it back in her pocket, at least she tried. Her hands were shaking so violently that she dropped the phone.

"Nooooo." Beth watched in horror as it struck the bear on its back and bounced in the dirt.

It reared up and backed away. It looked at her and seemed to accuse her.

"Sorry. I dropped it. I wasn't trying to hit you. Really. Please, Mr. Bear, just go away," she pleaded.

The bear snuffled as though accepting her apology. It walked back to the base of the tree but stopped before reaching it. It turned its head to look around at something she couldn't see; moments later, a man came out of the trees.

"Get away," she yelled. "There are polar bears."

The man stopped and looked up. "I can see that. Thank you for the warning, though." He turned his attention to the bear. "Go," he said forcefully.

The bear stared at him for a moment but slowly moved away.

Beth watched in disbelief. "That's it? That's all you need to do?" she mumbled.

The man moved closer until he stood at the base of the tree. "It's okay. You can come down now."

"Who are you?" Beth called down.

"Sorry, I'm Tyler White. My brother Luke and I were out looking for samples, and we heard the wolf. What's your name?"

"I'm Beth Smith."

"Smith?"

"Yes. I know, but there has to be some of us."

"Okay, Beth Smith, you coming down?"

Beth just sat where she was.

"What's wrong?" Tyler asked after a minute.

"I can't come down," Beth admitted.

"Are you stuck on something?"

"No. I'm not stuck. I'm just shivering so hard, I'm not sure I can hang on to the branches," Beth said, looking down at her trembling hands. She had core shivers as well.

"It's not that cold. Are you going into shock?" Tyler asked.

"No. Yes. Maybe. Look, I fell in the river and I'm soaking wet."

"Okay. I understand. Can you stay there for a few more minutes? Luke should be here soon, and we can go up and get you."

Beth nodded her agreement. She was so tired.

"Talk to me. What's your full name?" Tyler asked as he circled the tree looking for handholds to start the ascent and, more importantly, for the descent.

"Elizabeth Heather Smith."

"What are you doing here? I mean, other than climbing trees to get away from wolves?"

Beth smiled. "I came to take pictures."

"That's good. I bet the view is great from up there."

Beth looked out. "No. The composition is all wrong. It's just a high vantage p-p-point."

Tyler realized that she was getting colder. He had to go up now. "Beth, I'm coming up now."

"Me too. Hey Beth, I'm Luke. I'll be your rescuer today."

Beth knew that the two men were trying to lighten the moment, but she was just too tired to reply. She watched them climb. They didn't seem to have any difficulty making

the leap to the first branch, and, in moments, they were just below her position. She looked from one to the other. "Tell me you're t-t-twins."

"We're twins," they answered in unison.

"Oh g-g-g-ood. I th-th-thought I was seeing d-d-d-ouble," she said, exhaling in relief.

"Do you think you can climb down onto my back and hang on? Luke asked.

Beth looked at him and looked down. She looked at her hands and shook her head. "I d-d-don't think s-s-so." She was shivering hard enough to move her around, and her hands were numb.

"Okay. No problem. That would've been the easiest way, but we can get you down another way," Luke told her. "I'm going to get behind you and lower you to Tyler."

"Then Luke will go down a branch, and I'll lower you to him," Tyler explained.

"We'll do this back and forth until we're all down. Okay?"

Beth nodded, and Luke inched his way to get behind her. He had to move slowly: she was sitting on a branch that wouldn't hold both of them. He was able to stand and still be able to reach out to pluck her from her perch above. He stopped just before touching her and inhaled the scent tantalizing him. She smelled of sunshine, peaches and something else, something he'd been waiting for his whole life. He steeled himself and he put his arm around her. He was shocked at how cold she was. She was stronger than she looked. He nodded to his brother, who reached up to take Beth into his arms.

Tyler accepted the soft bundle and gasped when her scent hit him. He looked at Luke, who nodded.

The twins shifted Beth back and forth until they reached the lowest branch. Tyler jumped down and waited while Luke lowered her enough that he could drop her into his arms.

He didn't wait for his brother but started walking into the forest. Their truck was a mile away, and time was of the essence.

Beth curled against her rescuer, trying to steal as much body heat as possible. She was handed off to Luke at some point, and the trek through the woods continued. She drifted in and out until she was set down, and they tried to remove her clothes.

"No. No," she yelled, battling ineffectively at their hands.

"Beth, you need to take off those wet clothes," Luke said calmly.

"You're shivering is slowing down, and that's a bad sign. You're going to go into hypothermic shock," Tyler explained, hoping she'd understand.

The men had already stripped down to their underwear. Beth was terrified. She didn't have the strength to fight them. They took off all her clothes, stripping her bare. They laid her down, and Luke wrapped his arms around her from behind while Tyler moved into her arms. They tangled her legs to get skin contact, but the most important was to get her core warmed up. Between them, they generated a lot of heat.

Beth could feel the hot bar of their erections, but they weren't touching her inappropriately. She relaxed as best she could and let them warm her. They sensed her acceptance and started to rub her skin to aid circulation. It felt like hours later that she was warm enough that they pulled back, and she missed the heat. Luke wrapped her in

a blanket and carried her to the back seat of the truck. They each took a foot and rubbed until she didn't feel as though she had a block of ice attached to the end of each leg.

Luke slipped his t-shirt over Beth's head and helped her pull her arms through the sleeves. Tyler then wrapped his flannel shirt over her shoulders and repeated Luke's movements to get her arms into the sleeves. The brothers each took a side and rolled the sleeves until they could see her hands.

"Better?"

Beth wrapped her arms around her torso and nodded. She watched while the men dressed. She was almost too tired to admire the view. Almost. Both men were tall, broad-shouldered, with narrow hips. Each sported a blond beard a few shades darker than their ice blond, shaggy hair. The beards were thick and long enough to hide their necks. She was surprised since they had little body hair.

Her body was slowly coming back to life, and she buttoned the shirt that Tyler had donated. She knew it was Tyler's and not Luke's; they were twins, but she could tell them apart.

Tyler picked up her wet clothes and tossed them into the truck bed. Luke opened the front passenger door before lifting her into the front bench seat and sliding in after her. Tyler pulled himself into the driver's seat and turned on the engine.

"Where to?"

"What?" Beth asked.

"You need a hot shower and some clean, warm clothes. Where to?" Luke repeated.

"I like seeing you in my shirt, but I think you need something more," Tyler said with a teasing smile.

"Right," Beth said, returning the smile. "My RV is parked at the Creekside RV Park. She settled back and enjoyed the heat the brothers were still generating. "You guys are so hot."

"Well, thank you. I'm glad you think so," Luke said with a broad grin.

Beth blinked a few times and then blushed as she realized the innuendo. "I meant temperature. Not hotness as in cute..." she replied, floundering. "You know what I mean."

"We're not cute," Tyler said seriously. "Men are not cute.

"That's right," Luke concurred. "We're handsome or attractive or ... hot."

Beth smiled at their teasing. They were good men. She trusted them. There was no reason for it, especially considering the day she was having, but she did. She closed her eyes and let her exhaustion overtake her. She knew she was safe.

"She's out," Luke said quietly.

"She's a cute little thing," Tyler said, glancing over.

Luke rolled his eyes. "Cute."

Tyler expressed his concern. "Do you think we'll be able to convince her to stay?"

"The wolf was Roger Maitland," Luke said. "He's a realtor. If she was talking to a realtor, she's looking for a house. So, I'd say chances are good she'll be around."

"What did you do to Roger?"

Luke grinned. "I batted him around a few times, dragged him through the creek, and dropped him into the current. He didn't have the bulk to keep himself from going over the waterfall. It won't kill him, but he'll have a few bruises."

Tyler kept his laughter soft: he'd never liked the wolf. "Oh, man. I wish I could have been there."

"I wonder why he had her pinned in the tree,"

"It couldn't have been good. He took off as soon as he saw us." Tyler looked over at the woman sleeping between them. "I'm sure she'll tell us."

"You think?"

"She's sleeping between two big guys who could easily hurt her...."

"We'd never hurt her," Luke said adamantly. Beth stirred, and he repeated in a softer voice. "We'd never hurt her."

"I know that, and you know that, but she doesn't. I was trying to say that she must trust us already."

"This is a good thing," Luke said with a smile.

"It's a very good thing," Tyler agreed.