



Thanksgiving Groom (Alaskan Bride Rush)

By Brenda Minton

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Heiress Penelope Lear came to Treasure Creek, Alaska, in search of adventure. And to prove to everyone she's more than just a pretty face. But when she gets lost in the middle of the wilderness—in chilly November—Penelope needs help. Her rescuer? The mysterious man who's been missing from town for months.

Tucker Lawson, a handsome former lawyer, is now a man of the land—and doesn't want to be found. As Thanksgiving approaches, he promises to lead Penelope back to Treasure Creek.

But will he go as her groom?

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Editorial Review

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Lost in the Alaskan wilderness.

Penelope Lear's great adventure was not supposed to end this way, with her standing on a shadowy path in the middle of nowhere. Mountains surrounded her, cutting her off from the rest of the world. She was completely, utterly alone in a world so huge she didn't know in which direction to turn.

What had started with her brilliant idea that she could find the treasure and save the town of Treasure Creek was now looking like a news alert. All because she was positive she'd seen a clue from the treasure map. Just days ago when she'd taken a hiking tour of the area, she really thought she'd seen the rock formation that people were talking about. Her dad would have told her she was less than a week in town and already in over her head.

Instead of the confidence she had started out with, she was picturing the headlines that would be splashed across newspapers tomorrow morning. Or whenever they finally realized she was missing.

"Penelope Lear, Heiress, Lost in the Alaskan Wilderness."

She didn't want to think of other headlines, worse headlines. But she couldn't stop herself from thinking about what would happen if someone didn't find her. If they didn't find the Jeep and her note that she was hiking out, heading south toward Treasure Creek, what would happen?

As for heading south, she hoped she was heading south.

She glanced at her watch and then looked west, where the sun would have been setting in an hour, if not for the mountains encircling her. At least she *thought* she was looking west. She had a compass in her bag, but she didn't know how to use a compass. It had been part of the equipment she'd bought at the general store.

The clerk had grinned at her when she'd bought supplies. Either because he was single and enjoyed all the single women trotting through Treasure Creek and his store, or because he thought she was another clueless city slicker.

Fortunately Joleen Jones had bounced into the general store in time to take some of the pressure off. Joleen with the hair, the clothes and the personality to draw attention the way sugar drew ants. Joleen, like so many other women, had come to Treasure Creek looking for the hunky tour guides described in the *Now Woman* magazine article.

In the short amount of time Penelope had been in Treasure Creek, she had realized she wasn't the only woman who had shown up to see what the men of Treasure Creek were all about; if they really were different.

Penelope insisted on being married to the man of her choosing, rather than the man with the right business portfolio.

Cold seeped into her bones, pulling her back to the present and her horrendous situation. Penelope pulled her coat a little closer and took a few careful steps on the trail.

November in the Alaskan wilderness. She'd lived in Anchorage her entire life. Even if she had spent her time in the city, she should know something about the Alaskan wilderness, something more than the fact that it was cold. And dark.

Yeah, she should know something—like stay home where it was safe and warm.

She hitched her backpack over her shoulder. At least she had jerky to eat, a few bottles of water and a rain poncho. And matches. If it came down to it, she could build a fire.

A noise, just a rustle or maybe rocks shifting under someone's careful steps, caught her attention. She froze, and then turned cautiously, carefully. Chills were sweeping up and down her spine, tingling through her scalp and arms. She didn't want to be dinner for a bear. Or a mountain lion.

How far back had she left the Jeep? It had to be miles. She'd been walking for hours. Not that going back would do her any good. Something had run out in front of the vehicle a few hours ago and she'd veered, sending the blasted thing over a small ledge and into a ditch. It wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

If only she hadn't allowed herself to get distracted. But instead of paying attention to the trail that passed for a road, she'd been daydreaming about the Chilkoot Pass, an icy trail over the mountains that had claimed many lives back in the late 1800s as settlers hurried to Alaska, hoping to find gold. Instead they'd found greedy traders, icy trails and death.

She'd been imagining that trail, with steps cut into the ice. She'd been imagining how her ancestors might have felt as they walked into this frozen land, and how it might have changed their lives. She had imagined wagons and livestock left behind.

She hadn't imagined crashing a rented Jeep or getting lost.

She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and she lifted it, hoping for a signal and still not getting one. So what was her story going to be, since "lost because of her imagination" didn't work?

Maybe people would believe her if she said Bigfoot ran across the trail in front of the Jeep? She shivered again, imagining Bigfoot. Of course that was just a story. Bigfoot wasn't real. She was sure he wasn't. More than likely. She peeked around again, just to make sure she wasn't being followed.

The November wind whipped through the pass, straight through her coat. She wasn't one of those settlers looking for gold in the Yukon, looking to make her fortune. She was a Lear, daughter of Herman Lear, one of the wealthiest men in Alaska. Or maybe *the* wealthiest man in Alaska. She didn't need gold.

She needed a map.

She knew how to read a map. She knew more than anyone had ever given her credit for. She wasn't arm candy or an empty-headed socialite.

That thought brought back leftover anger and her brother's words when he'd heard her plan. He had told her he didn't believe she could survive a day in the small town of Treasure Creek, let alone in the wilds of Alaska. But she had insisted she could. She didn't need fancy boutiques. She didn't need pedicures.

At the moment she needed help. She yelled again, hoping she'd hear more than her own voice echoing back.

Good gravy, Miss Mavy, what a mess. But surely someone would come looking for her. Amy James, the owner of the Alaska Treasure's Tour Company. Or that police chief; if he wasn't too busy trying to keep

people from stealing maps. If he wasn't too busy looking for Tucker Lawson—the last person to go missing in the Alaskan wilderness. Someone would realize she didn't come back to the Inn. Maybe the receptionist who had invited her to church when she first showed up in town. It had amazed her how easy it was to get to know people in a small town. Until someone rescued her, she'd do her best to get herself out of this mess. And then, when they found her, the headlines would be about the heiress who survived the wilds of Alaska, not the heiress who got lost.

And eaten by bears.

She shivered and started walking again. The trail she was on seemed to go south. Or she assumed she was heading south. With mountains towering around her, how was she supposed to know?

She'd stay on the trail heading "south" and she'd pray.

And she wouldn't get distracted. She wouldn't stop to look at trees that reminded her of the Treasure Creek treasure map that Amy's boys had found by accident several months ago.

She picked her way along the trail that grew narrower as she walked. And it didn't look like the path most taken. It looked like a forgotten trail to nowhere.

She was surrounded by high peaks, towering pines and shadows. A branch cracked somewhere in the brush to her left. Penelope stopped, frozen to the spot. She held her breath and waited.

What if Bigfoot was real, not a legend?

A mountain goat crashed through the brush and hit the trail twenty feet ahead of her. Now she knew who had made this trail. And it wasn't a guide or hikers.

She kept walking, keeping her gaze on the trail, listening to the rush of a stream bouncing off rocks. Something crunched under her foot. She glanced down at the white stick and shivered. What if it had been the poor, lost lawyer, Tucker Lawson?

He'd disappeared months ago. She'd heard all about him when she'd eaten dinner at Lizbet's Diner. She had loved sitting with the crowds that gathered there. She loved pretending to be a part of the community, a part of their group of friends. They had shared stories with her about the town, about the treasure they hoped to find, and the struggles they'd seen of late. She'd learned that Amy's husband had died suddenly a few months ago, leaving the town and Amy in mourning. She'd also heard how Tucker Lawson had come home to see his dying father but hadn't made it in time. Tucker had been flying his small plane when it crashed somewhere in the wilderness.

According to the folks at the diner, the one good thing that had happened was an article about the town that had been meant to bring in tourists and instead it had focused on Treasure Creek's hunky bachelors bringing swarms of single women to the tiny town of seven hundred.

Penelope had listened, thankful that they hadn't known who she was, because had they known they wouldn't have shared. But Penelope's heart had been touched by their plight and by the desire of the community to keep their little town strong.

And she knew that she could help. Her family and small circle of friends thought that she was really only good for spa days and charity functions, but that's because they didn't understand her heart and how much she really wanted to help others.

No one had ever really understood her. Obviously her dad understood her less than anyone, or he wouldn't have taken it upon himself to find her a husband, to insist that it was time for her to settle down.

Treasure Creek had given her a chance to be the person she always wanted to be.

Penelope stopped to brush stray tears from her cheeks. It was getting cold and she'd have to find shelter soon. And she could do that. She'd watched those survivor guys on TV. She had matches. She had food, water and a rain poncho. Little children survived in the mountains, surely she could, too.

She could even fish. She'd done that on the guided tour she'd taken a couple days after getting to Treasure Creek. Oh, but one little problem: no fishing pole this time.

A shadow flashed on the ground in ...

Users Review

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