

Steve springs from the shed.

“Hey there! Welcome to Amarok Sled Dog Kennels.”

I feel my body sigh with relief. But my stomach tenses up at the same time.

I force a smile when I approach the group. A feeling of panic settles in over me. I’m not good with kids. I’m fine with what I have to do for animals, or dogs, but kids? Every babysitting job I’ve had was a disaster.

“This is Simone.” Steve motions with his hand. “She’ll be your kennel tour guide today.”

I swallow hard and bite the unside of my cheek. I can’t believe he’s doing this to me. He never took the time to show me how to do a tour.

“Hi.” Again I force a smile and try not to look nervous.

The kids stare at me, or at least it feels that way, waiting for my next word. I think they like me, but I’m not sure. The two chaperones look like college students. One of them is super foxy.

“This is Simone’s first day, so maybe I’ll tag along.” Steve walks over to Siku who’s howling. I think he knows the routine.

Two of the kids pull away from the group and stand on either side of me. The girl reaches for my hand. I look down at her and smile. If I were to guess, I think this group of kids are about ten or eleven years old.

“The dogs are really noisy,” the girl says.

“They are, aren’t they?” I look down at her. “It’s just their way of talking, that’s all.”

The boy looks up at me and smiles.

“This dog here is my lead dog when I run the sleds in the winter. His name is Siku,”

Steve scratches him selectively behind one ear.

Right away one of the kid's raises her hand. "What does Siku mean?"

"Siku is an Inuit word for ice-blue eyes, like he has."

Another kid raises his hand. "How much does he weigh?"

"He weighs just about seventy-five pounds. He's a Siberian husky, fast, and strong."

Another kid raises her hand, but Steve ignores her.

Malik barks and pulls hard on his chain. I can tell he just wants to see the kids. It makes me realize that dogs need to be with people. I guess it's just different here.

"Malik! Settle down!" Steve roars. The two kids who are with me lean closer. "Over here, we have another Siberian husky named Gizmo." He rubs into Steve and tries to reach up for a kiss. Steve pushes him away. "This guy is the clown of the bunch. Is there anybody at school that's a clown sometimes?"

The kids all laugh.

"Yeah!" One of the boys raises his hand.

The girls roll their eyes and shake their heads.

"Well, that's this guy. He's a real clown. He loves to play, but he also loves to pull the sled."

Steve walks over to a small white husky who just came out of her wooden house. "And this is Snowflake. Do you know why I named her Snowflake?" He gives her a good rub down.

One of the girls raises her hand. "Because she's all white like the snow?"

Steve looks at her. "No. It's because snowflakes keep me in business in the winter when we run the sleds for three months, without the snow, I'd have to close."

I think to myself, *that's a pretty lame answer*. Especially to a kid.

"Any other questions?"

A boy raises his hand. "How many dogs are there?"

Steve looks at me.

"There are eighty-nine dogs here." I look at Steve, then back at the kids.

"Who gets to pick up all the poop?" A kid in the back of the group laughs.

The group breaks out in laughter.

"Me." I wave.

"Wow. That's a lot." The cute college chaperones says.

I smile.

"Before you go boys and girls, I have a little surprise for you." Steve announces. "Did you know these dogs love to sing?"

The dogs start to howl and bark, like they're tuning up.

The kids look at each other and shrug.

"Can we sing today? Can we have a little song?" Steve doesn't sing along this time.

The kids are still and quiet as the dogs sing. Finally, it's like the dogs know when to stop and settle down on their porches within a few minutes.

"How was that?" Steve asks.

"That was so cool!" one of the kids says.

"On your way out, I'll show you what a dog sled looks like." Steve leads the group toward the shed. But as the kids leave the kennel, I hear a growl. Then a scream.

Steve immediately turns around and rushes back. He grabs Diablo's chain and pulls him to the ground. Diablo whimpers. I squeeze my eyes shut. The kids leave my hands and I hear the rest of the kids screaming. I open my eyes to see Steve threaten to take a back-hand swing at

Diablo's head as the defenseless dog whimpers and hides in his doghouse. "Get in there and lie down!"

The group of kids run up the hill for the school bus. One of the chaperones looks back and struggles to smile. I run up to the house. I'm too freaked out to stop and say anything to Steve. My heart aches for Diablo.

I retreat to my room. It's the only place where I can find peace. I shut my door, bury my face in my pillow, and scream until my throat hurts. *Why? Why did he have to be so mean to Diablo? Why?* I want to run away from here and never look back. But I want to stay, I need to stay for these defenseless dogs.

I sit up in bed. I pull my diary out from underneath my pillow and wipe my tears and nose on my sleeve. I have to be strong. I just have to. It's not about me anymore. I turn the pages of my diary until I find a line written by Kahlil Gibran, a poet who helps me understand life catches my eye. "*Some of us are prisoners with windows, and some of us are without.*"

I find my pen nestled in between the pages from yesterday.

Saturday, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1978

*I'm so scared. I'm scared of what Steve is capable of doing, but mostly what he could do to me. I'm also scared to say something to him, but I'll have to if I want to help these dogs who can't speak out...*