

JODI
PICOULT

Lone Wolf



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Allen & Unwin
Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland, London

83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia

Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

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For Josh, Alex, and Matthew Picoult
Your aunt loves you. Lots.

PROLOGUE

All stories are about wolves. All worth repeating, that is. Anything else is sentimental drivel. . . . Think about it. There's escaping from the wolves, fighting the wolves, capturing the wolves, taming the wolves. Being thrown to the wolves, or throwing others to the wolves so the wolves will eat them instead of you. Running with the wolf pack. Turning into a wolf. Best of all, turning into the head wolf. No other decent stories exist.

—Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (2000)

LUKE

In retrospect, maybe I shouldn't have freed the tiger.

The others were easy enough: the lumbering, grateful pair of elephants; the angry capuchin monkey that spit at my feet when I jimmed the lock; the snowy Arabian horses whose breath hung in the space between us like unanswered questions. Nobody gives animals enough credit, least of all circus trainers, but I knew the minute they saw me in the shadows outside their cages they would understand, which is why even the noisiest bunch—the parrots that had been bullied into riding on the ridiculous cumulus-cloud heads of poodles—beat their wings like a single heart while making their escape.

I was nine years old, and Vladistav's Amazing Tent of Wonders had come to Beresford, New Hampshire—which was a miracle in its own right, since nothing ever came to Beresford, New Hampshire, except for skiers who were lost, and reporters during presidential primaries who stopped off to get coffee at Ham's General Store or to take a leak at the Gas'n'Go. Almost every kid I knew had tried to squeeze through the holes in the temporary fencing that had been erected by the circus carnies so that we could watch the show without having to pay for a

ticket. And in fact that was how I first saw the circus, hiding underneath the bleachers and peering through the feet of paying customers with my best friend, Louis.

The inside of the tent was painted with stars. It seemed like something city people would do, because they hadn't realized that if they just took down the tent, they could see real stars instead. Me, I'd grown up with the outdoors. You couldn't live where I did—on the edge of the White Mountain National Forest—and not have spent your fair share of nights camping and looking up at the night sky. If you let your eyes adjust, it looked like a bowl of glitter that had been turned over, like the view from inside a snow globe. It made me feel sorry for these circus folks, who had to improvise with stencils instead.

I will admit that, at first, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the red sequined topcoat of the ringmaster and the endless legs of the girl on the tightrope. When she did a split in the air and landed with her legs veed around the wire, Louis let out the breath he'd been holding. Lucky rope, he said.

Then they started to bring out the animals. The horses were first, rolling their angry eyes. Then the monkey, in a silly bellman's outfit, which climbed onto the saddle of the lead horse and bared his teeth at the audience as he rode around and around. The dogs that jumped through hoops, the elephants that danced as if they were in a different time zone, the rainbow fluster of birds.

Then came the tiger.

There was a lot of hype, of course. About how dangerous a beast he was, about how we shouldn't try this at home. The trainer, who had a doughy, freckled face like a cinnamon roll, stood in the middle of the ring as the hatch on the tiger's cage was lifted. The tiger roared and, even as far away as I was, I smelled his bouillon breath.

He leaped onto a metal stand and swiped at the air. He stood on his hind legs on command. He turned in a circle.

I knew a thing or two about tigers. Like: If you shaved one, its skin would still be striped. And every tiger had a white mark on the back of each ear, so that it seemed like it was keeping an eye on you even when it was walking away.

Like: They belonged in the wild. Not here, in Beresford, while the crowd shouted and clapped.

In that instant two things happened. First, I realized I didn't much like the circus anymore. Second, the tiger stared right at me, as if he had searched out my seat number beforehand.

I knew exactly what he wanted me to do.

After the evening show, the performers went down to the lake behind the elementary school to drink and play poker and swim. It meant that most of their trailers, parked behind the big top, were empty. There was a guard—an Everest of a man with a shaved head and a hoop ring piercing his nose—but he was snoring to beat the band, with an empty bottle of vodka beside him. I slipped inside the fence.

Even in retrospect, I can't tell you why I did it. It was something between that tiger and me; that knowledge that I was free, and he wasn't. The fact that his unpredictable, raw life had been reduced to a sideshow at three and seven.

The trickiest cage to unlatch was the monkey's. Most, though, I could open with an ice pick I'd stolen from my grandfather's liquor cabinet. I let out the animals swiftly and quietly, watching them slip into the folds of the night. They seemed to understand that discretion was in order; not even the parrots made a sound as they disappeared.

The last one I freed was the tiger. I figured the other animals ought to have a good fifteen minutes of lead time to get

away before I released a predator on their heels. So I crouched down in front of the cage and drew in the soft dirt with a pebble, marking time on my wristwatch. I was sitting there, waiting, when the Bearded Lady walked by.

She saw me right away. "Well, well," she said, although I couldn't see her mouth in the mess of the whiskers. But she didn't ask me what I was doing, and she didn't tell me to leave. "Watch out," she said. "He sprays." She must have noticed the other animals were gone—I hadn't bothered to try to disguise the open, empty cages and pens—but she just stared at me for a long moment, and then walked up the steps to her trailer. I held my breath, expecting her to call the cops, but instead I heard a radio. Violins. When she sang along, she had a deep baritone voice.

I will tell you that, even after all this time, I remember the sound of metal teeth grinding against each other as I opened the tiger's cage. How he rubbed up against me like a house cat before leaping the fence in a single bound. How I could actually taste fear, like almond sponge cake, when I realized I was bound to get caught.

Except . . . I didn't. The Bearded Lady never told anyone about me, and the circus roadies who cleaned up elephant dung were blamed instead. Besides, the town was too busy the next morning restoring order and apprehending the loose animals. The elephants were found splashing in the town fountain after knocking down a marble statue of Franklin Pierce. The monkey had made its way into the pie case at the local diner and was devouring a chocolate dream silk torte when he was caught. The dogs were Dumpster diving behind the movie theater, and the horses had scattered. One was found galloping down Main Street. One made its way to a local farmer's pasture to graze with cattle. One traveled over ten miles to a

ski hill, where it was spotted by a trauma helicopter. Of the three parrots, two were permanently lost, and one was found roosting in the belfry of the Shantuck Congregational Church.

The tiger, of course, was long gone. And that presented a problem, because a renegade parrot is one thing, but a loose carnivore is another. The National Guard was dispersed into the White Mountain National Forest and for three days, schools in New Hampshire stayed closed. Louis came to my house on his bike and told me rumors he'd heard: that the tiger had slaughtered Mr. Wolzman's prize heifer, a toddler, our principal.

I didn't like to think about the tiger eating anything at all. I pictured him sleeping high in a tree during the day; and at night, navigating by the stars.

Six days after I freed the circus animals, a National Guardsman named Hopper McPhee, who had only joined up a week earlier, found the tiger. The big cat was swimming in the Ammonoosuc River, its face and paws still bloody from feeding on a deer. According to Hopper McPhee, the tiger came flying at him with intent to kill, which is why he had to shoot.

I doubt that highly. The tiger was probably half asleep after a meal like that, and certainly not hungry. I do, however, believe that the tiger rushed Hopper McPhee. Because like I said, nobody gives animals enough credit. And as soon as that tiger saw a gun pointed at him, he would have understood.

That he was going to have to give up the night sky.

That he'd be imprisoned again.

So, that tiger? He made a choice.

If you live among wolves you have to act like a wolf.

—Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet premier, quoted in *Observer*,
London, September 26, 1971

Part One

CARA

Seconds before our truck slams into the tree, I remember the first time I tried to save a life.

I was thirteen, and I'd just moved back in with my father. Or, more accurately, my clothes were once again hanging in my former bedroom, but I was living out of a backpack in a trailer on the north end of Redmond's Trading Post & Dinosaur World. That's where my father's captive wolf packs were housed, along with gibbons, falcons, an overweight lion, and the animatronic *T. rex* that roared on the hour. Since that was where my father spent 99 percent of his time, it was expected that I follow.

I thought this alternative beat living with my mom and Joe and the miracle twins, but it hadn't been the smooth transition I'd hoped for. I guess I'd pictured my dad and me making pancakes together on Sunday morning, or playing hearts, or taking walks in the woods. Well, my dad did take walks in the woods, but they were inside the pens he'd built for his packs, and he was busy *being* a wolf. He'd roll around in the mud with Sibog and Sobagw, the numbers wolves; he'd steer clear of Pekeda, the beta of the pack. He'd eat from the carcass of a calf with wolves on either side of him, his hands and his mouth bloody. My dad

believed that infiltrating a pack was far more educational than observing from afar the way biologists did. By the time I moved in with him, he'd already gotten five packs to accept him as a bona fide member—worthy of living with, eating with, and hunting with them, in spite of the fact that he was human. Because of this, some people thought he was a genius. The rest thought he was insane.

On the day I left my mom and her brand-spanking-new family, my dad was not exactly waiting for me with open arms. He was down in one of the enclosures with Mestawe, who was pregnant for the first time, and he was trying to forge a relationship with her so she'd pick him as the nanny for the pups. He even slept there, with his wolf family, while I stayed up late and flicked through the TV channels. It was lonely in the trailer, but it was lonelier being landlocked at an empty house.

In the summers, the White Mountains region was packed with visitors who went from Santa's Village to Story Land to Redmond's Trading Post. In March, though, that stupid *T. rex* roared to an empty theme park. The only people who stayed on in the off-season were my dad, who looked after his wolves, and Walter, a caretaker who covered for my dad when he wasn't on-site. It felt like a ghost town, so I started hanging out at the enclosures after school—close enough that Bedagi, the tester wolf, would pace on the other side of the fence, getting used to my scent. I'd watch my father dig a birthing bowl for Mestawe in her den, and meanwhile, I'd tell him about the football captain who was caught cheating, or the oboe player in the school orchestra who had taken to wearing caftans, and was rumored to be pregnant.

In return, my dad told me why he was worried about Mestawe: she was a young female, and instinct only went so far. She didn't have a role model who could teach her to be a good

mother; she'd never had a litter before. Sometimes, a wolf would abandon her pups simply because she didn't know better.

The night Mestawe gave birth, she seemed to be doing everything by the book. My father celebrated by opening a bottle of champagne and letting me drink a glass. I wanted to see the babies, but my father said it would be weeks before they emerged. Even Mestawe would stay in the den for a full week, feeding the pups every two hours.

Only two nights later, though, my father shook me awake. "Cara," he said, "I need your help."

I threw on my winter coat and boots and followed him to the enclosure where Mestawe was in her den. Except, she wasn't. She was wandering around, as far from her babies as she could get. "I've tried everything to get her back inside, but she won't go," my father said matter-of-factly. "If we don't save the pups now, we won't have a second chance."

He burrowed into the den and came out holding two tiny, wrinkled rats. At least that's what they looked like, eyes squinched shut, wriggling in his hand. He passed these over to me; I tucked them inside my coat as he pulled out the last two pups. One looked worse off than the other three. It wasn't moving; instead of grunting, it let out tiny puffs every now and then.

I followed my dad to a toolshed that stood behind the trailer. While I was sleeping he'd tossed all the tools into the snow; now the floor inside was covered with hay. A blanket I recognized from the trailer—a fluffy red plaid—was inside a small cardboard box. "Tuck them in," my father instructed, and I did. A hot water bottle underneath the blanket made it feel warm like a belly; three of the babies immediately began to snuffle between the folds. The fourth pup was cold to the touch. Instead of putting her beside her brothers, I slipped her into my coat again, against my heart.