**Prologue**

The man who called himself Lobo rubbed a hand over his shaved scalp and squinted at the horizon. The sunset painted deep shadows over the snow, silhouettes of the bare trees that lined the creek. There was a town about five miles north of here. Broken Bow was the biggest town in fifty miles, but with fewer four hundred residents it was still a small town. Did it have a doctor?

A whine from the dog at his feet dropped him to a crouch. His scarred, callused hand was gentle on The Beagle’s head and neck as he stroked her fur. Even in the cold December air, her ears were hot with fever.

“I’m gonna find you help, girl,” he promised her.

Where he would find help for a sick dog in the wilds of Nebraska he didn’t know. Eighty miles south he could find help at Kearney. He had kin near there, and the town was big enough that they had a doctor. But The Beagle wouldn’t make it that far, so Broken Bow it was.

Broken Bow was pretty close, but it presented a few challenges. He glanced down at his bare body. Clothes, for instance. Most towns expected visitors to wear pants. He and his kin rarely bothered with clothing when they traveled in their wolf form. A bundle of clothes, no matter how light, got uncomfortable when strapped to their backs or hanging from their necks. Well, he would find something to wear in town.

Another challenge was money. He had no money to pay for The Beagle’s care. He shrugged, an irritable jerk of his shoulders. Work didn’t scare him. He was strong. There would be something he could do to pay off the doctor’s bill.

If there was a doctor. That was the biggest challenge. If they were closer to Kearney… He shook his head, lips in a tight, flat line. Wishing didn’t change anything. Broken Bow would have to do. There had to be someone in that little town who could help.

The Beagle whined again as she sank onto her side in the snow. Lobo wasn’t a man who feared much, but the prospect of losing his companion, the best dog a man had ever had, turned his heart to a ball of ice in his chest.

“Can you go a little further?” he coaxed. “Just a little way, girl.”

She lifted her head, moving her paws weakly in a valiant attempt to rise. She fell back with a whine that hurt him. So instead of letting his wolf out to take over the gathered The Beagle up in his arms and ran to Broken Bow.

**Chapter One**

Genevieve Fisher should have been asleep. Her ugly mutt, Rabbit, was restless. He paced the entire length of the cabin, all nine feet of it, pausing at the door and under each of the two windows to sniff and growl. Gen had learned when that dog prowled around her tiny one-room cabin, whining and growling, sleep should be abandoned in favor of self-protection. Something was out there. If it was an animal, Gen could go back to sleep. If it were some of the men from the nearby town looking for a good time… Gen devoutly hoped it was an animal, but after the warning Mike Johnson and his crew had given her last week, she couldn’t be too careful. Her scornful grunt was louder than Rabbit’s growl. As if she would ever marry that jackass! Coming under the cover of darkness didn’t seem like Mike’s way of doing business, though. It wasn’t like he needed to hide his actions. Every unmarried man in town would stand behind him if he forced her to pick a husband. Gen drew a slow breath and let it out. No, not if. *When* he forced her to pick a husband.

She wasn’t sure what time it was, since she didn’t dare light a candle to check her windup clock. There had been a time when she would have looked at her watch or phone to see the time. Those days were long gone. With no electricity in this crazy world to power her charging station, her smartwatch had died, along with her cell phone and laptop. That had been years ago, after the plane crash. Another world. Another life. God, she missed it. And Dean. She missed him too. While he was alive the morons in Broken Bow hadn’t bothered her.

Clutching her rifle, she leaned a shoulder against the wall next to the narrow window and peered out into the night. She saw nothing moving. No animal stood dark against the snow. The only movement she saw was the sway of the bare branches of the trees by the creek. That didn’t mean anything. Rabbit was not an alarmist. Something was out there.

She skirted the table and stepped softly to the other window at the back of the cabin to look out. Over the past three years, she had cleared all the scrubby trees, rocks, and vegetation in a quarter-mile radius around her cabin. Dean had helped when he was around. It had been back-breaking work but necessary if she wanted to keep herself safe from unwanted visitors. Now no one could sneak up on her by skulking in the shrubbery. The windows were glass, but only ten inches wide and twelve inches high. Too small for anyone but a cat to get through. She scanned the yard carefully for any sign of something out of place. It was dark so she could miss somebody sneaking up, but the snow was a pale background and she saw no dark shape outlined against it. Dang it. What had Rabbit riled up?

She circled back to the front window just as Rabbit, lips peeled back and ruff raised, gave a guttural growl. A voice called softly, almost drowned out by the growl, but the sound of the gravelly bass sent a shudder through her.

“Ma’am? Excuse me, ma’am? Are you awake?”

Rabbit turned into a barking machine. If she hadn’t been awake already, she would have been then. Hands ice cold on her rifle, she peered out the front window. And stared. What the heck? It was close to zero degrees out there, and that guy was wearing only a pair of jeans? Too short jeans, so his bare ankles hinted that his feet were bare under the snow. He was bald, the weak moonlight gleaming faintly on his scalp. His chest was bare too, mostly hidden under something he held cradled in his arms.

What was he doing? A thought struck her, pulling the rifle she’d allowed to sag down back up. Was he a decoy to distract her from other men creeping up the back? She whirled, lunging for the other window, expecting to see men rushing the cabin. No, she saw no one.

“Ma’am? Please, I heard you can fix sick or hurt animals. My dog is real sick. Please help her.”

Rabbit howled. Gen went back to the front window and turned her head to glare in the dark toward Rabbit. “Shut up, you mangy mutt,” she hissed.

“Ma’am?” The bass voice sounded bewildered. “We don’t have mange. I don’t know what it is that made my dog sick, but it’s not mange.”

Gen blinked. How could he have heard that? She was inside and he was at least twenty yards away. Unless he was closer? She peered out the window and saw he still stood at the edge of the creek. The bundle in his arms squirmed a little bit, and some small flap of something dropped to hang from the side. An ear? He had a dog? Gen chewed on her lower lip. It could be a trick to get inside her cabin. Everyone in a fifty-mile radius brought their sick or injured animals to her to heal. Or it could be a sick dog, and back in her old life, she had been a vet tech. Turning a sick dog away wasn’t something she was willing to do.

She gently fed her rifle barrel through the oval slot beside the window. “Come forward a little bit,” she said in a conversational tone. “So I can get a look at you.”

He heard that just fine too. Slowly, as if trying to not scare her, he took careful, measured steps through the snow. When he reached a spot where moonlight gave her a clearer look at him, she told him to stop. He did, and she looked him over. There was nowhere he could hide a weapon, but he was big enough and muscled enough to *be* a weapon. The smallish dog he cradled in his arms had a whipcord tail hanging limply over one of his forearms. A beagle, maybe. Her eyes narrowed as her gaze zeroed in over the crotch of his pants. She knew those jeans. Every time Mike It’s-Time-To-Pick-A-Man Johnson came out to her place he hooked his thumbs in his beltloops and spread his fingers to point to the red flannel heart sewed over the zipper.

“Why are you wearing Mike Johnson’s jeans?” she shouted.

One broad shoulder lifted in a shrug. “Found them in a barn.”

Did that make any sense? At all? She didn’t recognize him, so maybe he wasn’t part of Mike’s group. Even in the moonlight, she couldn’t make out his features, but he was tall and broad, too big for her to have overlooked him in town. Gen chewed her lower lip. He could be a lure to get her to open her door so Mike could grab her. She drew a slow breath, willing herself to calm so she could get a sense of him. Whatever the men of Broken Bow said, she wasn’t a witch, but she trusted her instincts. What did they say about him?

“Ma’am, please, my dog’s been sick for the past three days. Can you help her?”

Gen’s compassion warred with her sense of self-preservation. “I don’t know you,” she said, needing more from him so her instincts could decide if it was safe to let him in.

“No, ma’am, I’m not from here. But I promise I won’t hurt you. I just need someone to help my dog.”

The underlying note of desperation in his voice triggered her instincts toward trust. Hoping her instincts weren’t failing her now, she jabbed a finger at Rabbit, silently ordering her mutt to stay back. “Ok,” she said when Rabbit’s bulky shadow retreated three steps to the pot-bellied stove in the corner. “Come in slowly. No sudden moves.”

Good lord, she sounded like a cop. A grouchy cop. She cracked the door and backed away, holding her rifle steady. The door gently swung open and the man entered, taking small, careful steps. He stopped, and although it was too dark to make out his face clearly, she could see he was looking around.

“Can I light the lamp?” he asked.

“Ok.”

She was about to tell him where the lamp was when he reached unerringly to where her old-fashioned oil lamp stood on the table under the window. Shifting the dog to one shoulder, he opened the matchbox one-handed, flicked the head of the match against his thumb, and applied the flaring match to the wick. The window must have given just enough light for him to see the lamp. Either that, she thought with nervous sarcasm, or he could see in the dark.

Gen was careful not to let the rifle sag when she reached behind her for a blanket on the bed and tossed it in his direction. “Spread that over the table and put the dog on it.”

He obeyed, soothing the dog with a huge hand on her head when she whined. The look of concern on his face contrasted oddly with his brutal appearance. In the lamplight, she could see him clearly. Big, yeah. She was a tall woman with broad hips and shoulders, but he was easily eight or nine inches taller. She had lost quite a bit of weight since the plane crash but even at her heaviest, he would have outweighed her by at least fifty pounds. He wasn’t fat. His lack of a shirt showed a heavily muscled physique a bodybuilder back home would have killed for. It wasn’t his size that made him look brutal. Or not only his size.

 It was his shaved head, broken nose, and the scars on his face, chest, and back that made him look like a mafia thug. She took a step toward him and stopped when his nostrils flared, and his head jerked around so he could pin her with eyes so dark she couldn’t tell where his pupils ended and his irises began.

“Mate,” he growled. “Mine.”

Mate? Gen blinked. She must have misunderstood. “Excuse me?”

The little dog whined again. Rabbit echoed it, a duet that scraped against her nerves. Again, the man’s harsh face shifted to worry, almost erasing brutality from it. He calmed the squirming dog with tender hands and turned a pleading look on Gen.

“Can you help her?”

Gen made a decision. She leaned the gun against the bed behind her and stepped forward. “I sure will try.”

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Lobo watched his mate hungrily as she bent over The Beagle. Mate. He’d never expected his wolf to pick a mate for him. The wonder filling him was almost painful. He remembered the dull envy weighing down his stomach when he listened to his cousins discussing the moment their wolves had chosen a mate. He hadn’t fully understood the certainty they’d described until this moment. There was no doubt in his mind that this woman was his mate.

She was so beautiful. Her hair was twisted into a thick, messy braid that reached past her waist, and it glinted reddish gold in the lamplight. Her eyebrows were darker in the creamy perfection of her face, her cheekbones high and rounded, her jaw a straight line over an elegantly long throat. Her mouth was wide, with a full lower lip that he wanted to touch. Was it as soft as it looked? With an effort, he kept his hands by his sides. He let his gaze slip past the firm, square chin down the long throat to the collar of her dress. He blinked. It was thick flannel, but not thick enough to hide the shape of her full breasts, especially when they swayed as she bent to press her ear to The Beagle’s side. A swirling mess of emotion swamped him. Horror, anger, protectiveness?

“You let a strange man into your cabin at night?” he demanded. “When you are dressed for bed? *Are you crazy*?”

She waved a hand at him. “Shh, I’m listening. Wish I had my stethoscope.”

He wished she had common sense. How could he keep her safe if she let strange men into her cabin? Outrage climbed up his throat. “You let me in! I could do anything to you.”

She lifted her head from The Beagle and slanted him an unimpressed glance. “Don’t you know? I’m a witch. You couldn’t hurt me if you tried.”

“I would *never* hurt you. I would never even try.”

She rose to her full height, which was impressive for a woman. “What’s your dog’s name?”

“The Beagle.”

“I know she’s a beagle.” Slight exasperation colored her voice. “What’s her name?”

He shrugged. “The Beagle.”

More exasperation. “OK. What’s your name?”

“Laura,” he mumbled.

“Lawrence?” Her eyes—he now saw they were a beautiful green, like the first leaves in spring—went from his head to his toes. “OK, Lawrence, what do you feed her?”

Lawrence was better than Laura, but not right. He debated correcting her, but she was waiting for an answer. “She eats whatever we hunt.”

She asked more questions about The Beagle’s symptoms and when she’d started to display them and several other things. Lobo did his best to answer quickly and concisely but stumbled over some of his answers. Not because he didn’t know the answers but because he found himself tongue-tied in her presence. Why, he asked himself in despair, couldn’t he just talk to her like an intelligent man? Words had never flowed for him as they did for some of his cousins, but this was worse than ever before. It was the wonder and joy of speaking to his mate that tangled him up. She probably thought he was an idiot. His cheeks burned at that thought.

It would be rude to stare at her when she was in her night clothes, so he forced himself to look away. The cabin was painfully neat, except for the rumpled bed –No, don’t look at the bed! Swallowing hard, he dragged his gaze away and saw the stove. Was it cold in here? Was his mate cold? He dared a glance and saw she wore heavy boots on her feet. Moccasins lined with rabbit fur or sheep’s wool would suit her better indoors.

“I’ll build up the fire,” he offered.

She waved a distracted hand. He had to maneuver very close to her to go to the stove, and he drew in one long, luscious breath of her natural fragrance as he passed by her. It was a complex, womanly scent. The yeasty scent of baking bread clung to her, mixed with the smell of roasted meat, and beneath that was her. Some undefinable scent of femaleness. His eyes flared when he sorted through the scents of her emotions. He wasn’t Tracker, but he could recognize some smells like fear. His mate looked supremely unconcerned, but she was afraid. Of him? Unacceptable!

Lobo opened the stove, raked the ashes away from the warm coals with one hand, and blew over them to revive them. When red glowed, he laid a few small sticks over them. He focused fiercely on building up the fire while he struggled to force his own emotions down. The first thing he needed to do was prove to his mate she didn’t need to be afraid of him. He would never hurt her. He would kill anyone who hurt her.

The Beagle yelped. Lobo straightened so fast that he almost bumped into his mate. He caught himself with a hand on her back. He stared at the smudge on the shoulder of her nightgown from the fire ashes on his hand. Shame flickered in him at his pleasure in seeing the print of his hand on her body. She jerked sideways so violently that she almost fell.

“Sorry!” he said, snatching his hand back and raising both in surrender. “It was an accident.”

“Don’t touch me,” she snarled.

He swallowed. “I won’t. It was an accident.” He snuck an anxious look past her to his dog. The Beagle lay on the table without moving. When he saw her rib cage rise and fall he breathed out a sigh of relief. “Is she okay?”

“I’m still examining her. It would help if you stayed out of my way.”

The sharp snap of his mate’s voice hurt him. He looked around for a place to stand that would put some distance between them, but the cabin was too small.

“I could go outside,” he offered.

His mate snorted. “You’d freeze your tail off out there. Just stand back.”

He edged his way to the opposite wall and put his back against it to give her as much room as possible. Her dog was staring at him from the floor beside the bed, head cocked as if confused by this man who smelled like a wolf.

“You said she’s been vomiting?”

“Yes.” Lobo grimaced when he remembered washing the vomit off his bare body with handfuls of snow. That wasn’t all he’d had to clean off. “Diarrhea too.”

“Bloody?”

He tried to remember. “No.”

“Has she been around other dogs lately? Were any of them sick?”

“No.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped the fingers of one hand against the opposite arm. “Hm. Any wolves or other wild animals?”

Lobo shifted weight, wondering if the cousins that he’d visited a couple of weeks ago counted. “Well, some wolves, but I know all of them and I don’t think any of them was sick.”

One of her pale red brows rose. “Oh, you know these wolves personally, do you? Wild wolves?”

Lobo began to deny that his cousins were wild but considered their actions. “Yeah, kinda. Mostly.” He looked at The Beagle. Did she look a little more alert?

His mate’s fingers tapped again. “Yeah, you kinda know them? Or yeah, they’re kinda wild?”

He looked away from The Beagle to study his mate. A corner of her soft mouth pinched upward in a shadow of a smile. Was she flirting with him? She couldn’t be. “I know them. They are my cousins. Some people might think they are wild.” Watching her mouth drop open, he hesitated, wondering if stories about his kin had gotten to Broken Bow. “Maybe you’ve heard of us. We’re the Lakota Wolf Clan.”

He checked her expression, relieved to find her face set in a mildly interested expression. He braced himself and blurted in one breath, “And my wolf chose you to be my mate.”