Chapter Three

After Lawrence had left, Gen dressed in her clean jeans and a sweater, missing the convenience of washers and dryers. Laundry day now was a day-long nightmare, especially in the winter. She coaxed Lawrence’s dog to drink a little and then carried her outside to see if she would piddle. She didn’t, but there was no sign of continuing diarrhea, so Gen got her settled in a nest of blankets in front of the stove. Amazingly, Rabbit seemed to like the little dog. Gen expected him to be jealous and defensive of ‘his’ human, but her ugly shepherd-cross settled down with the sick visitor and kept her company.

Petting and coaxing the little dog to drink gave Gen time to think about Lawrence’s proposal. Or non-proposal. Or whatever it had been. Mate sounded uncivilized, like she wasn’t even a person, but just an appendage of the man. But that wasn’t how Lawrence looked at her. He saw her. He recognized that she had feelings, which was a heck of a lot more than Mike Johnson did. Gen was certain that when Mike looked at her, he saw a housewife and a babymaker, not someone who missed washing machines and hot showers and used to love her job at the Big Muddy Vet Clinic. Would Lawrence care about that?

Gen was pretty sure Mike would make his move in the next week or two, so she was running out of time to decide what to do next. A day ago, she’d been debating whether to try to move to a new town or just accept being Mrs. Mike Johnson, barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen for the rest of her life. Of course, a new town would probably have presented her with the same problem. Someone there would have wanted to marry her. Maybe someone better than Mike, and maybe someone worse. Now she had a possible escape. Would being Mrs. Lawrence … What was his last name? Would being married to a werewolf be better or worse than being married to Mike Johnson? Gen was pretty sure it wouldn’t be worse. She liked dogs, and wolves were kind of like dogs, right?

The sun was almost entirely up when a rap on the door sent her lunging to her feet. She knew it was Lawrence even before she looked out the window. Rabbit hadn’t howled. The familiar plaid shirt stretched over his broad chest made her breath catch. For a moment he looked like Dean. She wiped a hand over her mouth and unbarred the door.

“You’re back.”

“Yeah.” He stepped into the cabin, making it shrink by at least half. He glanced around until he saw his dog in front of the fire. “How is she?”

“Maybe a little better. No worse at least.”

“That’s good.” He took the three steps required to crouch over his dog and scratch her ears. When he stood and turned to her his face was serious. “We need to talk.”

Swallowing hard, Gen nodded. “We do, but I’m hungry. Let me make breakfast for us first, then we can talk.”

She opened the trap door in the floor opposite the stove and went down the wooden ladder to the subterranean room Dean had called the larder. Her great grandparents would have called it a root cellar. She collected the last of the eggs and bacon Mike Johnson had gifted her. As one of his courting gifts, the basket of food had been effective. Here, she couldn’t run to the grocery store to buy food and as a successful farmer, Mike had access to pork, beef, milk, eggs, and vegetables. But even a steady supply of food wasn’t enough to make her want to marry him. It suited her to feed his rival with the food he had given her.

She couldn’t quite keep the smirk off her face when she fried up the bacon and eggs and served them to Lawrence. It depleted her stores of protein, but she figured it was worth it to see Lawrence enjoy the food. Which he obviously did. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him, but he was a big man, and he could put food away like nobody’s business.

While Lawrence washed the dishes –and she wanted to applaud a man who volunteered to do it without her even suggesting it—she gave The Beagle more water. Then with nothing else to do, she sat down at the table and waited for Lawrence to join her.

When he’d sat down and arranged his long legs under the table, he looked at her with a smile that looked a little hesitant while he rubbed his hands over his thighs. The thought that maybe he was a little nervous eased some of Gen’s tension.

“You have questions?” she said boldly. “So do I. You first. Fire away.”

“What is your name?”

Gen stared. She hadn’t mentioned her name? Huh. “Gen. Genevieve Fisher. What’s your last name?”

He shrugged. “Don’t really have one. Mostly we use Wolfe with people outside the Clan.”

“Lawrence Wolfe. Okay.” It was a good enough name. She could be Gen Wolfe.

“No. Not Lawrence.” His Adam’s apple bobbed when he swallowed. “It’s Laura. My mom wanted a girl and she wanted to name her Laura. She died when I was born, so my dad called me Laura. It’s what she wanted.”

Gen had to stifle a giggle. “Even though you were a boy?”

“Yeah. It was just a baby name.”

The way he blushed and looked down at the hands he folded on the table was adorable. Gen was touched that this big, mean-looking guy could blush. He wasn’t what his appearance suggested. Instead of a thug, he was a teddy bear. A shy, uncertain teddy bear.

 He cleared his throat. “In the Clan, when a person gets a little older, they get an adult name, so it wasn’t so bad.”

“Uh-huh. What’s your adult name?”

He rattled off a bunch of syllables she couldn’t possibly repeat. He must have noticed something in her expression because he smiled again. “It’s Lakota for Wolf Alone. Solitary Wolf. Like that. I tell people to call me Lobo.”

Gen examined him from his shaved scalp, which was beginning to show a five o’clock shadow, past the wide shoulders to his narrow middle. The table cut off the rest of her view. He definitely looked like a Lobo, but she kind of liked Laura. “I’ll call you Laura.” She tilted her chin challengingly. “You okay with that?”

Red flowed more brightly into his high cheekbones. “You can call me Laura if you want.”

“I want. Where do you live?”

He gave another shrug. “Nowhere really. I travel around.” He added quickly, earnestly, “But if you accept me, we can live wherever you want. The Clan has started building wood houses in our winter campground. I could build you a house there. Or we could live with Taye’s Pack near Kearney. Or we could live in the Plane Women’s House in Kearney. There are other women at all of those places, so you could have friends nearby.”

Gen’s heart jumped at the thought of other women nearby. She hadn’t even seen another woman since Grandma April had died a year and a half ago. She mentally added a checkmark to the pros of marrying Laura, and a check to the cons of marrying Mike Johnson.

“Okay.” She looked directly into his eyes. “Big question. Do you turn into a wolf?”

“No,” he said instantly. “I have a wolf who lives inside me. Sometimes I let him out. But he’s not me. I’m not him.”

Blinking, Gen blurted, “That makes no sense. Are you a werewolf or not?”

“No. It’s not like in the stories. I am me, and my wolf isn’t me.”

“O-o-o-kay.” Gen drew the word out. “If you say so.”

He began to stand, hands reaching for his waistband. “I can show you.”

Gen shot out a hand. “No! Not right now.”

He sat back down. “Okay.” He swallowed, looked away, and brought his gaze back to her. “Will you tell me about your husband? When did he die? Did you … Did you love him?”

“Dean?” She swallowed too. “First of all, he wasn’t my husband. I loved him like he was my big brother or a favorite uncle.” She looked away now, studying the grain in the oak table, wondering how to explain this. “I guess it was a little over three years ago. October of … 2064. I was hurt and alone and Dean found me and took care of me. When he realized I had no one, he brought me here and we pretended I was his wife so men wouldn’t bother me. But …”

She licked her lips. This was harder than she thought it would be. He wouldn’t believe her. It was crazy, and if it wasn’t her own real-life story, even she would think she was crazy. But what the heck. He was a werewolf. Crazy was probably normal for him. She looked up and stuck her chin out. “Actually, the story starts in 2014. I got on a plane. You probably don’t know what that is. It’s like a mechanical bird that people rode in to go far away. It fell out of the sky, and before it hit the ground it broke open. I was sucked out. I don’t remember very much of it. I passed out before I hit the ground. When I woke up, I hurt terribly. My head, my legs, my back, all one giant ouch. I kind of remember seeing black smoke in the distance. That was probably the plane. But I passed out again and when I woke up Dean was there.”

Lawr—Laura leaned forward, face avid. “You were on the plane?”

She leaned back. “You know about the plane?”

“Yes! My cousins mated with some of the women from the plane.”

Her breath caught. “There were survivors?”

“Yes. About two dozen women.”

Emotion rose up in her like a tsunami, forcing her to her feet. “I thought I was the only one!”

He stood too. “No. There are more. Most of them are only eighty miles away, in Kearney.”

Her hands were shaking, so she clenched them together over her heart. “So close.” In her old life she could have driven eighty miles in less than an hour and a half. Now, on foot, it would take days to get there, and winter was here. “*So close*.”

He reached out his hands, even larger and more callused than hers, and wrapped them around her fists. “Whether you accept me or not, I will take you to them. Carla is Taye’s mate. She will welcome you. Or there is Connie at the Plane Women’s House. She will find a place for you.”

“The Plane Women’s House.” She shook her head numbly but laughed a little, pretending tears weren’t burning against her eyelids. “Of course.”

He squeezed her hands. “You okay?”

She looked up into that craggy, concerned face and saw escape from a lonely, horrible life as Mrs. Mike Johnson. “Yes.” A fat tear made its appearance and rolled down her cheek. She wiped it impatiently away with the heel of her hand. Laura let her other hand go and stepped back. Gen attempted a smile at him. It wobbled but held. “I’m not a weeper,” she told him fiercely.

“No,” he agreed. “You’re strong.”

Rabbit came to her and whined. She patted his head. “I have so much to think about. When can we go?” She glanced out the tiny window, seeing the leaden sky that threatened snow and her heart sank. “I suppose spring.”

Laura rubbed his hand over the stubble on his head. “If you want to wait for spring we can. I’d rather leave as soon as The Beagle is up to it. How long do you think that will be?”

Hope ballooned in her throat. “She’s better, but not well yet. Maybe three or four days. We’ll need food, and a tent. And … And …” She threw her hands up. “I don’t even know what all we’ll need to travel that far in winter.”

“I do.” He wasn’t boasting, just matter of fact. “We won’t want to carry too much. I can hunt along the way. Do you have a horse?”

She shook her head. “I sold Dean’s horse when he died.”

“A hand wagon?”

She shook her head again. “I have a backpack I use to go into town.”

“I can make one. Like a travois, but I’ll pull it instead of a horse. If you get tired, you can ride on it. I think we can be there by Christmas. Since Carla came the Den is always decorated nice for Christmas. I saw some cottonwoods a little way down the creek. Can I use your axe?”

She pointed to the axe hanging by the stove. “Sure.”

He nodded decisively. “I’ll go now and cut some cottonwood to make poles for the travois.” He lifted the axe from the wall and went to the door. “I’ll be back before lunch.”

Gen smiled at him like he was Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the Easter Bunny all wrapped up in a single package. “Thank you. Really, thank you.”

His smile was bashful. “I’ll be back before lunch,” he repeated and left. “Lock the door!”

Gen did, and then wrapped her arms around herself and swayed to contain the fierce joy bubbling up inside. Laura was her absolutely most favorite person in the world right now. For the first year after the crash, she had dreamed that somehow, by some miracle, she would get back to 2014. This, being reunited with other people stranded from the past, was the next best thing. The best Christmas present ever. She would leave Mike Johnson behind. For that alone, she was half in love with Laura.

Humming *Jingle Bells*, she turned to check on Laura’s dog.

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Lobo strode to the cottonwoods with a light step. He had made his mate happy. Nothing made a wolf warrior feel greater than that. He couldn’t wait to bring her to Taye’s den. Even if she never accepted him as her mate, he would be happy knowing she was safe with his cousins. Taye would look out for her. If she chose to live with the other women from the plane at the Plane Women’s House, he knew Des would take care of her. She would be safe with them. He wasn’t giving up on her though. He would court her until she told him to go.

He cut down three young cottonwoods and trimmed their branches before heading back to his mate’s cabin, dragging them behind him. He was still half a mile away when he heard voices. Men’s voices. Half coaxing, half threatening. Vaguely familiar. And then his mate’s voice, strong and sure.

“You’re not welcome, Mr. Johnson. I decline your very flattering offer. You just turn around and march your courting jeans back home!”