**Chapter Two**

Gen realized her mouth was hanging open when cold air hit her teeth. She snapped it shut and simply stared at this rugged mountain of a man who calmly claimed to be a werewolf. “What?”

It wasn’t a shriek. She was proud of herself for managing a casual tone. It was probably because shock numbed her. Comprehension of his second statement burrowed into her stunned mind and her voice rose at least two octaves. “*What?”*

Lawrence looked hesitant. “The Wolf Clan is a family group, part of the Lakota tribe, and some of the men have the spirit of a wolf inside them and—”

She waved her hands with great vigor before clenching them against her waist. “Not that part. I’ve heard of you.” What she had heard from Dean might not be true, though Dean hadn’t been a liar or a teller of tall tales. Still, she’d always taken his stories of Native American werewolves with a grain of salt. “The *other* part.”

“The, um, part about, um, you being…” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down his throat, before finishing in a rush. “You being my mate?”

“Yeah, that part.” She folded her arms again, staring at him while her fingers tapped into her arms. More like, they jabbed into her arms, she realized with a private wince. She clenched her hands on her arms instead. “Where the hell did that come from?”

His face couldn’t be called handsome, but his eyes were beautiful. Gen found herself staring into them, noting how thick and long his lashes were. And his mouth looked soft compared to the rest of his face. No one would ever call him a pretty boy, but she could see a certain appeal.

“My wolf,” Lawrence said. “He chose you as soon as I came into the cabin.”

“That’s just weird.”

Lawrence —and she couldn’t imagine anyone who looked less like a Lawrence— shrugged. He was about to speak when the dog whined. Gen mentally slapped herself. She had completely forgotten her patient. The big man edged around her to the table to put a hand on the dog’s head.

“My good, sweet girl,” he murmured.

Gen stiffened. He was petting the dog while he spoke, but he was looking right at her.

She jabbed a forefinger at him. “One, I’m not yours. Two, I am not sweet.”

“I was talking to my dog.”

Gen snorted. “Right.”

A blush rose to his lean cheeks. His complexion was dark, even months after summer ended. His smile was hopeful. “But are you good?”

“*What did you say?*” This time Gen’s voice rose only one octave. “You — You—” Wordless, she ended with a short scream that made both dogs whine.

His face fell into a confused expression. “Was that a wrong thing to say?”

Gen shook her head in disbelief. He couldn’t be that naïve. Could he? But he looked anxious and worried now, not snarky or teasing. “Yes!”

“I’m sorry.” He looked down at his dog, smoothing a hand over her head and neck. “Will she be okay?”

It took Gen a moment to wrestle herself back under control. She lifted one shoulder. “I can’t make guarantees, but I think she will. The important thing is for us to get her to drink.” A quick, bitter longing for the lab equipment back home stung her. What she wouldn’t give to set up an IV. “Dehydration is a real concern.” She took the three steps needed to reach the shelves that held her meager cookware and grabbed the soup pot. “Could you get some clean snow?”

He nodded seriously, taking the pot. Once he had left, Gen took a deep breath. The cabin seemed suddenly ten times bigger without him in it. She looked at the dog on the table, who whined a little, watching the door her master had left by.

“He’ll be back,” Gen crooned to the little dog.

And then what would happen? Mate, he had called her. Was he serious? He had looked serious. A little embarrassed too, but intense. He looked like a brutal thug, but he seemed hesitant and bashful. So which was he? Gen couldn’t decide.

What did ‘mate’ mean to him? Gen didn’t know. Was he a better choice than Mike Johnson? Dean had talked about the Lakota Wolf Clan. They were badasses in a fight but they took care of their women. If Mike Johnson had his way, the time was coming very soon when she would be forced to make a choice about her future. Mike thought he was her only choice. Maybe he had a surprise coming.

Lawrence came back in with snow mounded in the pot. “Should I put this on the fire to melt?”

Gen edged out of the way so he could get to the stove. “Yes.” She watched the play of muscle in his back as he bent to set the pot on top of the stove. The light from the lamp made his back a gilded work of art. When he straightened and turned to her she found her gaze skimming over the hard curve of his pecs and the ridged six-pack above the waistband of his borrowed jeans. He wasn’t traditionally handsome, but he had a perfect physique. Gen made herself look away.

“Could you put a shirt on?” She heard the annoyance in her own voice and hurried to add, “Just looking at you is making me feel cold.”

He blushed. “I don’t have one.”

Right. He had found the jeans in a barn in town. So where were his own clothes? Had he been strolling around naked in this weather? One of Dean’s stories about werewolves crossed her mind, but she shook it off. It was too farfetched to be real. Men couldn’t turn into wolves. It was a whatchamacallit, a simile. No, a parable. Like, words used to convey a thought through symbolism. Lawrence didn’t turn into an actual wolf. He was just as fierce and wild as a wolf.

Right?

She turned to the trunk at the foot of the bed and opened it. All of Dean’s clothes were still in it, under her two spare outfits. She dug a blue plaid flannel shirt out and a pair of jeans. Dean had been a bit wider in the waist and shorter in the leg, but the things should fit Lawrence well enough. She studied Lawrence’s feet. Bare and wet with melting snow. She bent back over the trunk and dug out a pair of wool socks and the leather house slippers Dean used to wear in the cabin. They were made like moccasins. In fact, Dean said he had bought them from a native woman in South Dakota.

She held the bundle of clothes out to her guest. “Here. You can wear these.”

He took them with a small frown that grew when he sniffed them. “Who do these belong to?”

The snarl made her back up a step. In the corner, Rabbit growled, but it was half-hearted. Her mutt must not think Lawrence was bashful or hesitant. He had thoroughly cowed her guard dog without doing a thing. “Dean. My …” She trailed off. Everyone in Broken Bow thought Dean was her husband, but he had been a friend, like a protective uncle who had looked out for her. “He’s dead.”

He nodded once and tugged on a belt loop of Mike’s jeans. “I should return these to the barn where I found them.”

“Good idea. I’ll turn my back while you change.”

Red crept into his cheeks again, and under her gaze the red flannel heart over his crotch shifted when something moved behind the zipper. Even through the thick denim, his growing erection was obvious.

She stepped back so sharply that she almost fell into the trunk. “Stay back!” she shrieked, shooting a glance at her rifle by the door. Too far, dang it. “Don’t come near me!”

The clothes dropped forgotten from the hands he reached to her. At her shriek, he fisted them at his sides. “I would never hurt you,” he said hoarsely. “I will never lay a hand on you if you don’t want me to.”

The horror on his face made her believe it. She cautiously straightened. “Ever? Like never, no matter what?”

“Never, no matter what.” His tone was final. “I’ll go outside and change, and then run back to town to give the jeans back. I’ll be back in less than an hour.” He bit his lip as he studied her. “I swear, I won’t force you to do anything. You’re my mate. I want that real bad, but I won’t force you to accept me. Please, don’t be scared of me.”

She watched him pick up the clothes and moccasins, bend over the dog to stroke her head tenderly, and leave, closing the door behind him gently. “Be sure it lock it,” he called, his voice muffled by the wood.

Yeah, yeah, like she didn’t know how to protect herself. Except, did she? She had let a man into her cabin, watched while her trusty guard dog cowered from him, and when she offered him clothes, he got turned on. Smart, Gen, real smart. Somehow, though, she believed him when he said he wouldn’t force her.

She checked the pot. The snow wasn’t melted yet, so she went to the dog and laid a hand over her head. His hand had been there a minute ago, so gentle with a dog he obviously cared for that Gen almost wanted to cry. If she accepted him, would he be as gentle with her?

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Lobo wedged the clothes his mate had given him carefully in a tree by the creek. The scent of another man riled his wolf. Who had he been? Her husband? It made sense that a woman would not still be single at her age. He wasn’t sure how old she was. Not a teenager, but not middle-aged either. Maybe around his own early thirties. Whoever the man had been, he was dead now, so no threat to his mate claim.

But something else was a threat. Him. His mate was afraid of him. He jerked the borrowed jeans off so hard he nearly ripped the sturdy seams. He glared at his dick. Betrayer. The scent of his mate’s fear had flared only when his body had reacted to the idea of being naked with her. His poor mate didn’t trust him yet. It made him wonder if her dead husband had mistreated her. Dark fury surging, his fingers gripped the denim so hard his knuckles hurt. Since the man was dead his rage had nowhere to go.

He made himself shake out the jeans. When he got back, he would talk with her. He would convince her that no wolf warrior would harm a woman, and especially not his mate. She was his whether she accepted him or not. He would protect her, his sweet … Amy? Kate?

His gaze went the dim glow of lamplight at the one window beside the door of the cabin. *What was her name? Why didn’t he know her name?*

He wanted to rush back to the cabin and demand to know. Instead, he knotted the jeans around his neck, let his wolf out, and ran to town on four fast paws, the jeans dragging in the snow. He and his mate had a lot to talk about and the sooner he was back the sooner they could talk.

It was almost dawn when he slunk into the barn he’d taken the jeans from. Where had the night gone? He shook his head violently to slide the jeans from his neck and pawed some loose hay over them. He could have put them back on the nail he’d found them on, but why take the time to shift? As he turned to trot out he heard voices outside. He went belly down to the darkest corner to avoid the notice of the two men who entered the barn.

“Today’s the day,” one of the men said, raising his lantern to look around. Lobo sidled further into the corner. “All I need are my courting jeans and a wagon to fetch her home.”

The other man laughed as if that was funny. Lobo was puzzled. There were jeans just for courting? Did he need to get some in order to woo his mate? No, surely not. Shadow rarely wore jeans at all, and he’d won his mate.

The men went further into the barn, passing Lobo’s hiding place without a glance. He heard a thud and then the rhythmic squirt of milk hitting a pail. Both men were milking. He should slip out now while they were busy. But more conversation made him pause.

“After chores, we’ll have breakfast,” the first man said, “Then we’ll go get her.”

The other man wasn’t laughing now. He said, “What if she says no?”

“She can’t say no. I’ve given her plenty of time to get used to the idea. I’m the best choice around. She’ll be lucky to be my wife. I’ve got a good house and plenty of livestock. She won’t go hungry as my wife, and I won’t go roaming around and leave her undefended. It’s about as much as a woman can expect.”

Lobo bristled on the unknown woman’s behalf. She might not go hungry, but this man said nothing of cherishing her. His mate wouldn’t go hungry either, but she would have his devotion, and hopefully someday they would love each other.

“If you say so, Mike. But there are other men around she might want to marry.”

The milking stopped. “Who would go against me?”

“I dunno.” Lobo could almost hear the man shrink. “Just thinking.”

The milking started up again. “Don’t think,” Mike ordered. “Just keep working. I want this done before noon today.”

“Yeah, Ok, sure. You’re the boss.”

Feeling pity for the unknown woman, Lobo stealthily left the barn and headed back to his mate.