**Chapter Four**

“What do you think?” Gen asked Rabbit. “Wash every item in my extensive wardrobe for the trip? That is two of my three pairs of jeans and all three of my other shirts? Five pairs of socks.” She turned to the little dog in front of the stove. “Should I take off my long underwear and wash those too?”

The little dog lifted her head and panted.

Gen nodded. “You’re right. They wouldn’t be dry before your master comes back and seeing my *unmentionables* might be more than he can handle.”

She laughed at her own silliness and grabbed the copper tub to scoop up snow to melt on the stove. It was the easiest way to get water to wash her laundry. She belted out *Jingle Bell Rock* while she gathered her dirty clothes and shaved curls off the lump of homemade lye soap she kept in a box. Twenty-four hours ago, she had worried about how low her food supplies had gotten, and how few household items she had, like wood for the fire and soap for washing. She had dreaded having to go to Broken Bow to barter for more supplies. One, she didn’t have much to barter with, and two, she would probably run into Mike Johnson. Magically, those worries had evaporated in the last hour. She was not a good singer, but her light heart made her enthusiastic.

The Beagle got up on her own and went to the door. Gen let her and Rabbit out and stood by the door to keep an eye on them. She had no concerns about Rabbit, but The Beagle might try to run away and find Laura. After making a small yellow stain in the snow, The Beagle followed Rabbit back in. Gen praised the little dog lavishly and stirred a teaspoon of beef broth into a cup of warm water and poured it into the dog dish. The dog lapped up about half of it before returning to her nest.

“You are a tough little survivor, aren’t you?” she said, scratching behind one floppy ear. “What a good girl. In a couple of days, we will be going south, and I will see people who will know where I am from. *When* I am from!” She giggled giddily and burst into *I’ll be Home For Christmas*.

The soap flakes were dissolved in the simmering wash water, and she was just about to put her clothes into the tub when Rabbit exploded in a frenzy of barking. Was Laura back so soon? Would Rabbit bark for Laura? Gen reached for the rifle.

A careful look out of the front window sent her stomach plummeting to her feet. Mike Johnson swaggered through the snow, flanked by four other men, two on each side of him, and he was wearing those damned jeans Laura had returned just this morning. She slid the barrel of the rifle out the peep and sited on that stupid red flannel heart below Mike’s belt buckle. Such a tempting target. Gen sighed and withdrew the rifle before opening the window an inch. She made a sign to Rabbit, and her down subsides into low growls. A quick glance at the Beagle showed she was on her feet, panting. Poor little dog was scared, probably wondering where Laura was. Well, she wasn’t the only one.

“Good morning, Mr. Johnson,” Gen called through the window. “What can I do for you this morning?”

He didn’t stop walking, coming right up to the door. His henchman hung a couple of yards back. Mike angled his head so he could look at her through the glass.

“Good morning, Mrs. Oliver. It’s a beautiful day for mid-December.”

The sky had cleared a bit, but the sun was weak, half hidden under lead gray clouds. Still, it was probably around freezing, so not as cold as it could be but cold enough. That made Gen wonder how cold it would be when she and Laura walked to Kearney. The thought that she would soon be leaving Broken Bow helped her relax. Mike Johnson wouldn’t be her problem much longer.

“Yes,” she responded, careful to be politely impersonal. “It’s very nice.”

Mike Johnson was silent for a minute, just smiling at her. He was a good-looking man around thirty years old. His dark blond hair was thick and worn a little long, brushing his shoulders, which were broad and thickly muscled. Gen had never seen him shirtless, but she thought he had a good build. She mentally compared him to Laura and found no comparison. Laura was built exactly the way she liked a man to be built: broad in the shoulder, narrow in the waist, and with legs that went on forever. Add those thick-lashed dark eyes and that sinfully plump mouth … And even better, he was nice. Kind of shy and hesitant, so different from what his harsh, brutal appearance would lead one to expect. The total opposite, also, of Mike Johnson’s brash, demanding attitude. Gen sighed, waiting for Mike to come to the point of his visit.

He did, widening his smile while hooking his thumbs in his belt loops and spreading his fingers as if he was pointing at his groin. Which made her remember that same red heart shifting over the zipper when Laura wore them. She jerked her gaze back to Mike’s face, struggling to keep a polite smile on her face.

“I worry about you out here all by yourself,” Mike said. “How long has it been since your husband died?”

*And so it begins,* thought Gen. *I thought I’d have a few more weeks*. “It’s been almost four months.”

“So it has,” Mike agreed genially. “A long time for a lady to be alone. Are you low on food?”

Yes, but she wasn’t going to tell him that. “I have enough for my needs.”

“You’re not skimping on the eggs and bacon I gave you, I hope. There’s plenty more where they came from. I don’t like the idea of you going hungry.”

“Thank you.”

If it wasn’t for Laura, that hint of food might have swayed her. In the Times Before she hadn’t appreciated how easy she had it when it came to food. There had been a grocery store only a few blocks from the clinic. She stopped there two or three times a week on her way home from work. If she didn’t feel like cooking, she could hit a fast food drive through. And cooking had involved a microwave more often than not. Now, fast food was something she didn’t have to shoot, butcher and cook herself over a fire. Shopping involved walking five miles to Broken Bow with the leather backpack Dean had made her, and hoping the little store had some food for her to barter for. Since she had to carry it home, she could never get too much at a time. A ten-pound sack of flour, a box of powdered milk, and a couple pounds of dried meat and fruit was a lot to carry. Mrs. Mike Johnson would have all food she wanted, and her husband or his employees would haul her groceries home and even carry it into the kitchen or pantry for her.

She dragged her attention back to Mike, wondering why he didn’t have a wife. He could provide for a wife and children. It was true that she was literally the only female within ten miles, but Mike could go further away to find a wife. Mason City was pretty close. Or Ansley. Did they have women there? Maybe the closest bigger town would be North Platte. Or Kearney? If he showed the littlest bit of humility and genuine affection, she could have fallen for him.

As she met his gaze she saw not a drop of affection or respect on his face. She shook her head, bracing herself to get this over with. “What can I do for you, Mr. Johnson?”

“I think we both know that it’s what *I* can do for *you* that’s important here. I understand that a widow needs some time to mourn her husband, so I’ve kept back aside from being neighborly, but the time has come for you to move on.”

Gen sighed. “You know,” she said conversationally, “you are a good-looking man, with a successful farm and a good house. I wonder why you haven’t married.”

He preened. Gen had seen roosters cock their heads at just that angle before they strutted through the barnyard. He opened his mouth, but Gen cut him off.

“I suppose it’s because there are no women around here. You should go to North Platte or somewhere and find yourself a good woman to be your wife.”

Mike Johnson reared back, his shocked expression turning to anger. “Here now. No need for me to go off when there is a fine woman right here. You need a husband and I need a wife. We can be married next week. You could be my Christmas bride.”

“No, thank you.”

It was like he didn’t even hear her. “Maybe you’d like a fancy ceremony with flowers and all that. We could do that in the spring, before planting season.”

Gen raised her voice. “I said, no, thank you!”

“We could send for a priest to come do the wedding. He won’t mind if your belly sticks out a bit.”

If her belly … *Pregnant*? Gen said through clenched teeth, “That’s all you want from me. You don’t care about me. You just want a woman to sleep with, take care of your house, and push out your babies.”

Surprise crossed his face. “Yeah, I want a wife.”

“And any woman will do. So go find another woman somewhere else.”

“Why would I do that? You are right here.” He straightened and tried to open the door. “Come on, Jenny, let me in.”

Gen glared, even though he wasn’t looking through the window now. “That’s a proposal?”

He turned his head to smile at the window. “You want a proposal? I wore my courting jeans and everything, so sure, sweetie.” He dropped to one knee. “Sweet Jenny, will you marry me?”

She ground her teeth at the nickname. She was not and never had been a Jenny. “You’re not welcome, Mr. Johnson. I decline your very flattering offer. You just turn around and march your courting jeans back home!”

“Aw, don’t be like that.” He gave the doorknob a harder twist. Gen saw it turn on her side and breathed a sigh of relief that she had locked it after the dogs had come back in. “Let me in so we can talk a little.”

A new and very welcome voice doubled Gen’s relief.

“You heard my mate. Leave.”

The window was too small to allow her to see Laura, but she saw Mike wheel around to face the newcomer.

“Who are you?” Mike demanded.

“You should leave now, while you’re still able.”

The rough, hard voice didn’t sound like the Laura she knew. That voice went with the brutal face.

“Who *are* you, dammit?” Mike yelled. “And what are you doing here?”

Gen yelled, “That’s Lau-- Lobo.” She swallowed, her mind settling to comfortable calm as her feelings and intentions clicked into place. She knew who Laura was. “My fiancé.”

Mike jerked around to stare at her through the window. “The hell you say.”

“I don’t appreciate your language!” she snapped.

“You better get used to it,” he snapped back. “Because you’re marrying me, not him.”

Someone shouted derisively, “Kinda cold out to be taking your clothes off, man.”

A sound between a howl and a roar exploded outside. Beside her, Rabbit’s growling rose to new heights. The Beagle added her yips. Mike turned away from the window, his back ramrod straight under his heavy coat.

“What is that?” Mike’s voice was almost a scream. “Shoot it! Somebody shoot it!

Another man said, “We didn’t bring guns! We just came with you to fetch your wife. Oh, God!”

Gen couldn’t see anything. Mike flung himself at the door, hammering his fists on it and screaming at her to let him in. She backed away, almost tripping over The Beagle, as male shouts turned to screams outside. Gen wasn’t sure how long the scuffling and screaming lasted. A minute? Ten minutes? She clamped her arms around herself, fighting the urge to open the door to see what was happening. Was it a bear? No, bears hibernated in the winter. It couldn’t be … No, it couldn’t be Laura.

After a mini eternity passed, she heard Laura’s voice close outside the cabin. It was a lethally hard voice. “That’s right. You leave and don’t come back. If I see you sniffing around my mate again, I’ll kill you.” A minute passed. Two. Then Laura spoke again, more quietly, voice warm and gentle. “Gen? It’s me. Will you open the door?”

She opened the door. Laura stood buck naked on the front step. She gaped at him for a split second before jerking her gaze to his face and fixing it firmly there. That split second was enough to tell her he was unhurt. Also, his physique was as mouthwatering as she expected.

“Where are your clothes?” she asked, shivering a little in the breeze.

He jerked his head behind him. “I left them out there. I suppose I should get them.”

He turned and walked away, presenting her with a clear view of the world’s best male posterior. This time she allowed herself to look. Yep, that was absolutely the world’s finest male butt, tight and round.

The Beagle darted past her to follow her master. Gen reached for her but missed. That was all right though. If the dog was well enough to trot along in the snow, let her. Gen leaned against the frame of the open door and watched Laura walk to the edge of the creek and gather up some slender logs that were twice his height. He dragged them to a puddle of color in the snow and bent to pick up what she recognized as Dean’s clothes. He didn’t put them on before strolling back to the cabin and the frontal view was very nice too. The heat of a flush in her cheeks might have been caused by the breeze. Yep, it was the breeze. Totally.

Laura handed her the clothes and lined the logs up against the cabin wall. She stepped back to let him and The Beagle in. He closed the door behind him and stood staring at her. The flush burned hotter, and this time she kept her gaze on his face.

“Did you mean it?” His voice was low.

Gen could have played dumb, but she knew what he was asking. She’d called him her fiancé. She looked away and let out a slow breath. “Honestly? I need a little more time to decide for sure. I’ve known you for less than 24 hours.” She raised her eyes to meet his gaze. “But I’m willing to date you. Er, let you court me.”

That luscious mouth tilted into a small grin. “Even though I don’t have courting jeans?”

A gurgle of laughter bubbled out of her. “You don’t have any jeans right now.”

He nodded, still smiling. “I’ll get dressed.” His smile faded into seriousness. “Gen, I think we better leave for Kearney right away. Those men will come back with guns. I don’t want to have to kill them.”

She inwardly flinched. “Would you kill them?”

“To keep you safe? Yeah.”

This was not the bashful, hesitant man she knew. She remembered the hard tone he used when talking to Mike Johnson and shivered. She had thought he was a little goofy, a little shy, not like his brutal appearance. But that must be only with her. Was it strange that she felt safe with him?

“Okay.” She nodded. “Good thing I didn’t actually start washing my clothes.” She glanced at the copper tub simmering on the stove. “You won’t mind if I get a little ripe, will you?”

“Nah. You smell good. You’ll always smell good to me.”

“Ha! We’ll see if you still think so in a few days!”

“I will.” He took Dean’s clothes from her and turned to put them on. “I’ll get started on the travois. You decide what you need to bring to Kearney.”

A shadow of her earlier excitement welled up. Wearing dirty clothes or not, she was going to leave this place and find people who could understand her!