

Chapter 1

Bonnie Hanson stood frozen at the sound, uncertain where it had emanated. The sunlight had disappeared long ago, swallowed up by a heavy cloudbank that had moved in from the west. A distant rumble of thunder announced a coming rain.

The only light was now from two overhead lights in the parking lot some fifty yards to the south. And that light seemed to only make the shadows deeper, hiding what might be there.

Hanson wanted to step back into the small building she had just exited, turn on the light, and shut the door. She reached behind her, seeking the handle slowly. Her arm stretched as far as it could go, fingers searching for the knob. It was all the movement she dared to make. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway. She had locked it after stepping outside. She *always* locked it. And now, in the darkness, she would have to search for the key, and then try to find the lock. But she kept some small hope that, this one time, she had not locked the door while cursing herself for not being more insistent that the light above the door be replaced. She had mentioned it to her supervisor who told her, "*It's on the list,*" but that had been weeks ago. Replacing a light bulb was such a simple thing, inexpensive, and now it may cost her her life.

She willed her heart to slow, the pounding so loud she was certain it would be heard. Despite the cool night, she now wished she could reach up and unzip her fleece. That would be a mistake.

She rotated her head an inch at a time as her eyes strained to find something she did not want to see. A breeze from the west moved the branches of the tall pine across the yard in front of her

then rattled the new leaves on the poplar below it, obscuring the sound she sought, the sound she feared.

Hanson now realized the contents of the bucket she held in her hand, its scent carried by the breeze, would only make matters worse. The galvanized pail seemed to shine in the night, a beacon for the beast.

She bent her shaking knees slowly as she moved to set the bucket down before stepping back to try the door. That was when she caught a sound to her right and froze again. Gravel, crunching gravel. She was sure of it. On the path between her and the parking lot. There was nowhere to run now.

She turned her head to look in the direction of the lot and thought she saw a shadow out of place, but she couldn't be sure. All was silent again.

Her breaths were shallow, quick through her open mouth, as she considered her options. The chain-link fence ran from the corner of the building she had just exited for twenty yards then jutted out to the right ten yards further before taking another left. The forest had been cleared five yards out from the fence, but it was thick where it began. It was that way all around the clearing in front of her, coming to a few feet of the parking lot then leaning over the long driveway that led out to the road. She could make it to the woods, but in an instant, the brush and tree branches would grab her, tear at her, and hold her prisoner until the one searching for her closed in for the kill.

Hanson had always liked the closeness of the forest. It made her feel like she was part of nature when she walked through the compound. She had grown up in the city, an inner ring suburb of Minneapolis. She lived in a small rambler on a street of small ramblers, pretty much all the same, with small front yards with a tree or two, and then a larger yard behind, fenced in. Maybe

three trees there. Not much for her father to rake, and he would joke that, if he could just cut down the trees, there would be no need to rake or pick up an occasional branch at all. He wasn't serious, but his comments had stayed with his daughter, somehow shaping her.

The trees were important to her. Shade in the summer, home to squirrels and birds, and a place to climb. Then beautiful colors in the fall, especially one large maple. With her senior year upon her, she was uncertain what major to pursue and where to go to school, but a field trip to the Wolf Center in Northern Minnesota clarified her future.

Forest surrounded the center, more trees than she had ever seen. But it was not the forest that captivated her; it was the animal they built the center to study and care for—the wolf.

The wolves seemed to take no notice of the humans behind the glass wall observing them. Older pack members would rest in view while the pups would chase each other, disappearing into the woods then emerging again and again. Other students were captivated by the antics of the pups, but Bonnie was drawn to the large, mostly silver wolf resting to the side of the yard. He seemed uninterested in the activity in front of him, chin resting on his paws, but she could see his ears were alert, and his dark eyes remained open. For a moment, his head turned in her direction. He seemed to look inside her, and she found herself paralyzed until he looked away.

Hanson went to the University of Minnesota and became a biologist. She accepted a position with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in Brainerd, Minnesota, a place in Central Minnesota where she and her parents had visited on vacation. For three years, she worked out of the Brainerd office, the only woman on staff. They left her with the most menial jobs, both in the field and the office. But, in the evenings, she would walk through the woods and return to the Wolf Center on her free days.

There had been an opening at the Wolf Center. Hanson had applied and was accepted, taking a cut in pay and moving to Two Harbors in the dead of winter. Her friends and parents thought she was crazy, but this had been her dream ... until now.

The Wolf Center took in injured animals, abandoned pups, and captured wolves deemed to be a threat to human activity. One of these wolves was Lennie, a week-old pup when he had been brought to the center after his mother had been killed by a truck. Lennie had been bottle fed and raised by the head of the center, Shelia Austin.

Lennie was now a little over three years old, fully grown with a silver-white mane, a matching beard, and eyes as black as the darkest night. Standing nearly three feet tall and over one hundred and sixty pounds, Lennie was the largest of any at the center. A big wolf.

Austin was protective of Lennie because of the work she had put into him and because of her concern for the others who worked at the center. When Hanson started at the center, Austin gave her a tour. When they came to Lennie's enclosure, the wolf bounded up to the fence then bared its teeth. He ignored Hanson as if she wasn't there, his attention focused on Austin.

"He seems excited to see you," Hanson commented.

"Raised him since he was a pup," Austin said as she stooped to look Lennie in the eyes.

"Wow. He's like a pet, then?"

Austin was quiet for a moment then stood and turned to Hanson. "He'll never be anyone's pet. The other wolves will ignore you or turn and run, but he has no fear of humans. It's the ones that are raised by humans that you should be most afraid of." She looked back at Lennie, who was now pacing by the fence. "He'll likely kill me one day."

Hanson's heavy parka seemed to have lost all ability to keep her warm at that moment. She folded her arms across her chest as she watched Lennie compact the snow by the fence as he paced back and forth, his eyes fixed on Austin the entire time.

"We better go," Austin said. "We get occasional wild wolves that come up to the enclosures at night, testing the limits of their territories."

Austin was the only full-time female on the staff, besides Hanson, and she seemed glad to have another woman there, at first. She told Hanson the men on staff were good people, good to work with, but Hanson got the feeling it was difficult for Austin to be the boss of an all-male staff. She never picked up any negative comments from the men in her first weeks on the job, about her or her boss, but the looks she received brought back memories of her time in the Brainerd DNR.

Hanson found Austin to be demanding, watching her, never seeming to trust that she would do her assigned job in the manner instructed.

Hanson was a little surprised when Austin had come to her earlier in the afternoon, asking if she wouldn't mind staying late and feeding Lennie. Hanson had done it before but knew Lennie was ill and Austin was more protective of him. Austin told Hanson she had a meeting in Duluth with a potential donor.

"He seems to trust you," Austin said. "Maybe it's because you're a woman."

Lennie was on a diet of sorts, his feeding schedule altered so he could get medicine three times a day, something to help what Austin perceived to be a dull coat and a thinner body mass than he should have had by the summer. She prepared each day's meals every morning, leaving them in the refrigerator in the storage room Hanson had just exited.

Now Hanson was alone at the center. It had closed to the public at five, and the cleaning people had left an hour ago. There hadn't been a car by the entrance since they had left.

Wolf pups that had been heard yipping in the distance before the sun had set were now quiet, tucked in for the night.

Hanson chanced a slow look behind her, still seeing nothing. Maybe she could make it to her car. It was parked on the far side of the lot, out of her sight. But then she remembered her purse with her key was still in the center, the door now locked because Austin insisted it be locked at all times after hours. She would need to find the right key to open the door. Too long.

Another crunch of gravel. Soft, muffled, but it was there.

This was getting her nowhere. She had always gone her own way in life, trusting her gut, decisive. Quick to evaluate data and pick a path. She did that now.

The door was her best bet. One step, and she could at least check to see if it was locked. If that didn't pan out, she'd move to the edge of the storage building where the fence met the building. A light switch there would turn on a light on a pole that would illuminate the gate to Lennie's cage, and it would throw light back to where she now stood. The corner of the building and the eaves would partially block the light, but she thought it would be enough. As long as the light worked, she could find the key and get inside.

That would take a lot of time, especially if a wolf was already on the path behind her. Probably too much time. But, at least she would have light, enough to see her attacker. With the bucket, she would have a chance to fight it off, for a small amount of time, anyway. Hopefully, enough time.

She took a deep breath, as deep as she could handle, and prepared to back up to the door. But then there was a sound to her left, toward the fence. A primal murmur, deep and low, a predator closing in on its prey.

Lennie.

But was he inside his enclosure, or had he somehow escaped? Maybe he sensed an intruding wolf. Her boss's words about Lennie killing her someday echoed in her mind. And what of the sound between her and the lot? Likely a wild wolf, or maybe more than one.

Hanson strained to see anything moving and took a step back. All quiet.

She reached behind her, her fingertips sliding across the door until she found the handle. The knob wouldn't turn.

"Shit." The word came out as a hiss, and there was a responding growl. Definitely toward the light switch. She put her hand to the wall and side-stepped that way.

Hanson tried to picture the side of the building, but nothing came to her. Were there shrubs or rocks along the wall?

She brushed against something as she moved, the back of her jeans scratched by a shrub. Another growl ahead, but no sound from the direction of the lot. Hanson moved on, picking her legs up high now, one at a time, then slowly setting them down. She came down on a stone, and her ankle turned. She almost cried out as the pain shot up her leg, capturing the sound behind clenched lips, but she dropped the bucket with a clatter at the same time.

Now she doubted she could run if she needed to. The pain was significant.

Hanson grimaced, clenching her teeth. She leaned against the wall now, trying to take the weight off her ankle, listening again. Only the wind.

She sucked in a breath and took another step. The corner of the building had to be close. Hanson moved her injured leg, shut her eyes, then made a noisy move as she half-hopped. The growl was closer.

Hanson leaned against the building with her left hand then turned to face it. Her right hand found the wall, her head dropping as she tried to get a breath. Her heart was trying to escape out of her chest.

She leaned to the right, moving her hand along the wall, each inch increasing the pain shooting up from her ankle. Then her fingertip found the corner.

She winced as she leaned further, her fingers finding the conduit then sliding down to the switch. Tears leaked from the corner of her eyes. She held her breath and flipped the switch.

Her leg wobbled, the pain too intense to maintain her position. Head down, she walked her hands back down the wall until the pressure was off her injured ankle. Her breaths came hard until one caught in her throat at the sound of a growl that seemed to be at her side.

Hanson opened her eyes, stared at the ground for a moment, then slowly rotated her head in the sound's direction.

Another growl, but nothing there.

She pushed off the building, backed up a step, limping, saw nothing, then backed up another step out of the shadows. She froze.

The eyes were the first thing she saw, like two glowing lights. Then the lighter fur around the eyes and on his snout. Lennie's jaw opened, and his moist fangs reflected the light. His growl was softer this time, like he was thinking of the meal he was about to devour. Then, eyes still locked on her, he took several paces along the fence.

Inside the fence.

Hanson trembled as the reality hit her. The wolf was still in his cage.

“Christ.” The word came out in a raspy breath as her head flopped forward, eyes closed. Her heart pounding in her chest, she pressed her hands against her thighs as she tried to recover, like she had just finished a long run.

She was fine. It had been nothing.

Then there was the crunch of gravel.