

**WOLF RUNNING**

**by**

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This is dedicated to...

My cats, for making sure I never spend too much time writing.

My parents, for showing me how to survive the worst things life will throw at you.

But most of all, this is for my mother.  
You've never given up on me, you've always supported me, and you are my best friend.

One more thing-  
Wyoming is a beautiful state, and to the best of my knowledge has no zombies.  
Werewolves, on the other hand...

## Prologue

A thin Wyoming winter moon ghosted through the gathering storm clouds. The wind, tasting of snow and cold, led the storm over the mountains and down into the prairie valley below. The ranges funneled the wind, giving it speed, and by the time the air currents hit the valley floor they were moving like wild horses, stampeding through stands of Douglas firs and maples, hurling leaves and snow up into the lowering sky. Birds and tumbleweeds both fled before the tempest.

Winding down from the Vedauwoo mountains to the east, Interstate Highway 80 cuts through the valley to gradually climb back up into the Snowy Range to the west. On its way from the eastern mountains, with its collection of smaller, softer hills, to the higher, sharp-peaked western ranges, the highway runs through the city of Laramie. The black road splits into ever-branching streets and side-streets before gathering the wayward parts of itself back together and leaving the city behind. Beneath the fading moon the houses and buildings lay dark and quiet. Snow from a heavy fall the previous week still covered the streets and sidewalks, undisturbed except by the wind and the wildlife.

A wolf, a large female, trotted down the dark highway towards the outskirts of the city. She had spent the last three days in the eastern foothills, hunting what game was available, steadily working back towards Laramie. She moved at an easy, relaxed trot, but her ears were pricked for sounds and her nose filtered the air constantly, letting it speak of what moved and lived in the world around her. Her large eyes ticked sharply back and forth through the surrounding countryside. Snow skimmed across the highway before her and merged with high drifts that stretched from the road's edge to the wire fences that kept the prairie back.

The wolf could sense the strength of the approaching storm and she increased her pace to a smooth lope, eager to reach the safety of her den. The wind was behind her now, pushing her onward and giving speed to her feet, but the race was never in doubt and she still had several miles to go when the snow began to fall in earnest, a ghostly veil that hid the rough prairie.

As the wolf got closer to the city white-shrouded boxy shapes began to materialize on the highway, scattered across the road like discarded toys. The wolf weaved between these shapes until she came to a massed pile of them. She leaped up, landing on a surface that shone red through a thin cover of snow. Her claws ticked on the metal roofs of the cars as she maneuvered through and over the pile-up. At the highest point, an eighteen-wheeler that had tipped on its side, she paused and looked around.

The snow and the wind had combined to form swirling white sheets that moved across the countryside, alternately obscuring and revealing. Between the screaming wind and the snow the wolf's senses were almost completely cut off. She was on edge now, inclined to be more cautious as she approached town but feeling also the incipient danger from the blizzard that was overtaking her. Uncertainly she shifted her weight from one front paw to the other. She had a vague sense that something was wrong.

With a low whine the wolf jumped from her perch, landing in a drift that came up to her chest. Another jump and she was back on the road, shaking snow from her heavy black fur. She slipped between the abandoned cars, a black-and-white ghost.

Once free of the pileup the wolf headed for a small building, just barely visible through the blowing snow, that sat alone on the prairie. She had been here before – the brick structure, not much bigger than a simple shed, kept bales of hay,

buckets, and other tools ready for some rancher to come back and claim them – and knew that the stable door at the front was kept closed by a length of old rope. The blizzard was ramping up in force, the gale-like winds blowing skeins of snow sideways, and the wolf decided to settle for the immediate shelter of the old building rather than push on into the town. She belly-crawled under the fencing and trotted through wind-sculptured drifts to the shed.

The front of the building faced away from the wolf, and as she came around from the back side she stopped in her tracks. There was a vehicle in front of the shed, a large truck slanted sideways, battered and beaten from a rough trip across the open grassland. Snow was just starting to pile up along the base of the oversized wheels.

The truck had not been here the last time the wolf made this trip. She lifted her nose to the sky and inhaled the cold air, searching for anything suspicious. All that came back to her was the smell of snow and dead grass. Cautiously, her ears twitching like antennae, the wolf moved forward.

The land up here was rough, dotted with rock formations both large and small. Near the back end of the truck was a snow-covered low-lying mass, slight in comparison to the other outcroppings. The wolf headed toward this rise. From there she could leap to the back of the truck and survey her surroundings for any movement. Whoever had driven here might be somewhere nearby. She threw a glance at the closed shed door as she passed. She jumped lightly onto the mound and turned for the truck bed. Without warning the surface beneath her shifted violently and she was thrown to the ground. She landed hard, rolling over in a cloud of snow and grass.

A hand wrapped around the wolf's right front leg and clenched, hard. She yelped and leapt backward but the grip was tight, and all she accomplished was

dragging the body along the ground after her. It was a man, grey-haired and wearing a red jacket and blue jeans. His scuffed cowboy boots dug into the ground as he pulled back on the wolf's leg. He lifted his head and fixed frost-glazed eyes on his captive. His face was a mottled blue-grey-green color, and dark blood oozed from his mouth as the man lunged forward, yellowed teeth snapping.

The wolf snarled. Her head darted forward and she sunk her teeth into the dead man's wrist. She worked her jaws back and forth, sawing through fabric and flesh. Foul-tasting blood squirted into her mouth, coating the inside. From the corner of her eye she could see the dead man pulling himself closer, his own mouth working the air in anticipation. Desperate now, the wolf shook her head back and forth, feeling the thin bones of the wrist crunch between her teeth. Suddenly the hand released its grasp and the wolf sprung backward.

Panting from her efforts, the wolf watched the dead man for a moment. His right hand dangled from his wrist, connected by a few strands of flesh. Dark blood dripped into the snow from the wound. He was struggling to his feet, his efforts hampered by the wind. The wolf backed away a few steps. The man was unsteady and it would be easy to knock him down. But the snow-covered mound she had first mistaken for rocks was shifting behind him, and two more people were slowly climbing out.

The wolf whirled and ran, bounding through the snow. Then she was on the road and heading downhill, fighting through the raging tempest. She ran full out, lungs working like a bellows, muscles bunching beneath the black fur, dodging cars when she could and leaping up, on, and over when she couldn't. The highway now rose up one last time before her and then fell away steeply.

The wolf was on the very outskirts of the city, where rural and suburban began to merge, when she turned off the highway and onto a gravel road, heading toward a small wood-sided house that sat a ways from its neighbors. The wolf

circled around to the back of the building where the snow lay smooth and undisturbed. Here she plunged her head into a drift right against the wall and came up with a rope in her mouth. She walked backwards, pulling on the rope, and a wooden door rose out of the snow, offering access to a small cellar. Still clutching the rope in her mouth the wolf soared through the opening and down a short flight of stairs. The door slammed shut behind her, muffling the wild wind.

The wolf was on the ragged edge of exhaustion. She stood for a moment, head down and sides heaving. Nothing smelled or sounded different here than from her last visit, so this shelter was still secure. Snow flew from her heavy black fur in clouds as she shook herself.

The wolf shivered. Ripples ran through her like ocean waves and she groaned, once, the sound escaping through her tightly clamped jaws. She began to change. The thick black fur was drawn back into the skin. The long, sharp claws shrank back into paws that were now half-human feet and hands. She groaned again as the shape of her body shifted faster now, the wolf subsumed in a flurry of cracking bones and stretching skin, and when it was all over a woman stood naked in the cold and the dark.

She called herself Nowen, and she had been born into this life as the world was dying. The only things she knew for sure about herself was that she had black hair, amber eyes, and a wolf lived inside her. The only things she knew for sure about the world around her was that everything had changed irrevocably ten months ago, all that had been passing away in blood and chaos and death. Her memories of before the day she awoke in this strange reality were gone. Her memories after that day were all too fresh and raw.

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