# Chapter One

*January 19, 2065*

*The Plane Women’s House*

*Kearney, Nebraska*

Sherry was so lovely. Jumping Stag of the Wolf Clan paused outside the big room of the Plane Women’s House to let his eyes soak in the beauty of his unclaimed mate. He hadn’t seen her in nearly four weeks, since the day after he’d made human wedding vows to her averted face and hunched shoulders. Those vows meant nothing to her. They’d been sitting with the congregation, not standing in front of the priest with the other couples, so perhaps the vows he’d made weren’t official, but he meant every word he’d echoed quietly as the priest said them. For him, they merely put into words what she was to him: the woman his wolf had chosen to be his mate, the woman he ached to share a bed with, the woman he would die to protect. She had told him to go away for a few weeks so she could have a chance to consider if a relationship between them was possible while she talked with counselors. It had nearly broken his heart, but he’d left her, and now he was back, desperately hoping she was open to his love.

Strangely, the room was empty but for Sherry. Usually it would be crowded with some of the other two dozen women who had survived the plane crash at the end of October, plus some of the men from Kearney who were working to put the apartment building back into livable condition for them. Stag was glad they weren’t here. He savored this chance to watch Sherry without interruption. Her straight black hair lay over her shoulders, reaching the middle of her back. Her dark skin had lost its gray cast and glowed with health. She was even more beautiful than he remembered. Stag had never seen a woman who looked like she did. Her skin was darker than his, her eyes tilted up at their outer corners. She wasn’t black, nor Asian, but a perfect blend of the two races.

She sat before one of the wood stoves with the cane he had carved for her leaning against her chair, long slender fingers busy with knitting needles and wool. Quiet satisfaction flooded him when he saw that her left hand was bare of the ring her late husband had given her to mark their marriage. Stag had resented that overgrown diamond from the moment he recognized it as a wedding ring. His hand lifted to the small buckskin bag he wore on a leather thong around his neck, thinking of the simple ring his mother had worn.

He should go in and greet her, but he remained in the hall, watching her hungrily. Her face was defined by high cheekbones flowing to a perfectly shaped mouth and an elegant jaw. Even if she’d not been his mate he would think her beautiful. She was still far too thin, though. In the Times Before the nuclear attacks that began in 2014, slender women had been considered the most beautiful. Stag couldn’t imagine why. Sherry was stunning like this; with a little more weight to soften her narrow frame she would be even more gorgeous.

Sherry gave her ball of yarn a little jerk and it leaped from her lap to roll toward him. She swore under her breath, shifting to get up. He walked in silent moccasins still wet from the snow outside to pick the yarn up and hold it out to her. The gaze of her dark, exotic eyes fixed on the ball of yellow yarn and then lifted to him. He braced himself for the familiar mix of fear and repugnance to fill their liquid brown depths. It flared, but like an unruly dog called to heel, the emotions stopped and faded to a barely noticeable level. Was there something else in her face? Her plump, wide mouth trembled into a smile that looked determined, almost forced. It hurt to see it even as his heart soared.

“Stag, you’re back.” Her voice held that same determined, strained welcome. Even her accent, an exotic blend of the south and something he didn‘t recognize, couldn’t hide how she forced herself to be pleasant. “How are you?”

He blinked. The wolf within him danced happily at what it perceived as a welcome, but the man was all too aware of her clenched teeth. “I’m good. How are you?”

“Good.”

He saw her hand close so tightly over her wooden knitting needle he wondered why it didn’t snap. The urge to haul her slight body against his was overwhelming, but he controlled himself. It had been three weeks since he’d seen her. Three weeks of missing her and seeing her only in hot, forbidden dreams. In none of his dreams had she turned away from him, calling him a perverted animal. No, in those dreams she had always been warm and welcoming. Was it too much to ask that she at least smile at him as if she meant it?

Stag pulled his thoughts away from that. She had greeted him. Forced or not, it was the first time she had spoken to him first, and she hadn’t quite flinched away from the sight of him. He smiled at her. “I’ll go put my gear away. I’ll see you at supper?”

The relief in the back of her eyes hurt him. “Sure, I’ll see you then.”

Stag turned and walked out the door he had come in. The other door into the big room, the one on the opposite side of the room that led to the kitchen, creaked open and Stag paused at the sound of a voice. He couldn’t see through the half-closed door he had just passed through, but he recognized the voice. It wasn’t one of the other women who lived here. It was Kearney’s big blacksmith, Bill Russell. Stag’s lip curled in a silent snarl. Sherry was *his*; no other man should be alone with her! Remembering Sherry’s furious denial of his right to restrict other men’s access to her, Stag made himself stay still and listen instead of charging back into the room to kill Russell. His wolf ears were plenty sharp enough to hear the low-voiced conversation in the big room.

“He’s back?” Russell asked.

“Yeah,” said his mate with a tremble that ended in a soft sob.

“Here, I’ve got you, sweetheart. Just lean on me.” Russell’s voice turned violent. “Did he hurt you?”

Stag’s snarl almost covered the sound of nearly silent feet coming down the hall toward him. His friend Des, the Alpha of the new Plane Women’s House Pack, put a hand on his arm, halting his incipient leap to kill the blacksmith.

“Relax,” Des murmured. “It’s not what you think.”

What was he to think but that while he had been away —to give his mate the time alone she’d requested!— she had found a new lover? Stag’s wolf wanted to taste the blacksmith’s blood, to rip his throat open.

“It’s not a romance,” Des told him, keeping one hand clamped on his arm. “They’re kin of some sort. Sherry’s father’s family name was Russell, and they come from the same town. The blacksmith treats her like his little sister. He’s courting one of the other women.”

One kink at a time, the knot of hurt fury in Stag’s heart untwisted itself. The blacksmith was tall and burly, with a wide mouth and skin as black as night. Sherry was tiny compared to him, and her skin was more golden brown than black, but though her mouth was more delicately formed, it was the same shape. Stag could believe they were related.

“You know I won’t let him hurt you,” Russell was saying. “No one will let him hurt you. I don’t much like those wolves, but even his own kind will protect you from him.”

“I know.” Sherry’s voice was so quiet that Stag had to strain to hear her. “I don’t really think he’ll hurt me. He never has, even though I’ve been a bitch to him. I’m just lost. Part of me was actually glad to see him. It’s just … Everything’s so different since the plane crashed. I keep thinking I’ll wake up and be back in 2014, with electricity and running water and LeRoi. I hate it here. I want my old life back.”

Bill Russell made a soothing noise. “Aw, it’ll get better.”

“I know,” Sherry said again. “I’m kind of getting used to living in the Dark Ages. What really sucks is I feel like I’m six years old again. It’s just like when I first came to America. Lost and scared. All I ever wanted was to have control of my own life. I grew up dreaming of the day when I could be on my own. I gave that up to marry LeRoi and you know how *that* turned out.”

The pain in Sherry’s voice made Stag want to kill something.

“I’m not saying I’m glad your husband is dead,” Russell said in a cautious tone. “But leopards don’t change their spots. Now you can start fresh.”

“Fresh?” Sherry’s muffled voice said. “I guess that’s one way to look at it. I don’t need to worry about my future with LeRoi. That’s been decided for me. I should be relieved. But am I? No. I cry, like I did when I was a lost little six-year-old.”

The blacksmith made more crooning noises.

Stag felt his nails dig into his palms. Sherry should be telling *him* these things. *He* should be holding her in his arms and making those quiet, soothing noises. He wanted Sherry to tell him everything about her life. He wanted Sherry to accept him as her mate.

“And a werewolf thinks he owns me!” Sherry wailed, as if that were the icing on her cake of misery. “Why can’t I just be single?”

“Because men want wives and children,” the blacksmith said reasonably.

“And sex,” snapped Sherry.

“And sex,” Russell agreed. “Will you do what Dixie and Jodi said?”

There was a pause, while Sherry sniffed loudly and blew her nose. “Yes. I’ll be fair. I’ll sit with Stag at supper tonight and try to get to know him better.”

“Good. And remember, if you decide you don’t want to be mated to him, you can tell him no. You have the right to do that. Then you can take your time finding a man you can marry.”

“Thanks, Billy.”

Stag’s eyebrows shot up. *Billy*? The blacksmith was three times her size and ten years older and she called him Billy?

Des chuckled almost soundlessly beside him. “C’mon. We’ve done a little room re-arranging since you were gone. Faron and Donna got married and they live at his place now. You’ll have his room. It’s a little bigger than the one you had.”

Stag turned his back on his mate and her kinsman. He needed some time to compose himself before supper. Des led the way to the stairs that went down to the basement room where Faron Paulson had stayed. Paulson was the sheriff of Kearney, in charge of the town’s security, an important position that made him the mayor’s second in command.

“Is Paulson coming back to help guard the women during the day?” he asked.

“Nah,” Des answered. “Our Pack is in charge of the women now.” He flipped a grin over his shoulder before opening the door to Faron’s old room.

It was larger than the nook Stag had slept in. The light from the narrow windows running along the top of the wall illuminated the broken tiles of the floor. A small bed was neatly made up against the wall. He stepped into the room and inhaled the scent of Kearney’s sheriff on the sheets and blankets. His wolf whined. The wolf wanted the scent of their mate on the bed. Those sheets would have to be changed before he lay down to sleep tonight. Des lifted a brow, silently asking what disturbed him. Stag shook his head, declining to explain. He’d told Sherry he would put away his gear, but he had none. The only reason he was wearing this breechcloth and leather leggings was because he’d kept a few things stashed in the shed in the yard of the Plane Women’s House.

“I heard about the trouble with that rancher,” he said now to Des. “Any more problems from that?”

Des leaned his shoulder against the door frame. “Nah. We’ve made some little changes. Taye’s keeping some extra security around the den, and we’re careful about who we let in on visiting nights. But no one’s bothered us about it. Dan and his mate are real happy. They’re staying at the den until spring.”

Stag nodded and opened the top drawer of the bureau just to keep himself busy. “Good. Those cowboys got what they deserved. People will remember that if they try to attack us again.” He examined the empty drawer with faked interest. “Where is everybody? How come the Big Room was empty?”

Des grinned. “Training. After that mess when the den was attacked, Taye decided that all the women had to learn to use a knife and a gun. So three days a week Taye sends some guys to collect about half the women and take them out for fighting lessons. They alternate who goes which day.” Des chuckled like he couldn’t keep it in. “Your Sherry is wicked with that cane you made her.”

Stag’s head jerked up to stare at Des. Tiny, fearful Sherry, fighting? “What?”

“Taye insisted. Didn’t like seeing his mate bruised after that fight at the den. All the women are learning to defend themselves.”

“But…” Alarm struggled with disbelief in Stag’s gut. “Women shouldn’t fight! They could get hurt!”

“My mate says that’s male chauvinism. Women can fight just as good as any man.”

Stag clenched a hand on the edge of a drawer. “Yeah, I’m sure they can, but that’s not the point. How many women can we afford to lose because they get killed in a fight?”

“How many can we afford to lose when they get stolen because they don’t know how to protect themselves?” Des countered.

Stag stared at his friend and cousin. “I’ve never heard you talk like that before.”

“I never had a mate before. A man learns a lot about women once he has one of his own. Connie is an independent woman.” Des smiled fondly at some unspoken memory. “She’s not stupid, though, so she knows she can’t do all the things she did in the Times Before. Did you know that back then women did everything men did? They had jobs and they went alone to their work every day. They traveled hundreds—thousands!— of miles from home by themselves. They didn’t need a man to escort them everywhere. They were even in the Army!”

That just didn’t seem right to Stag. “Men didn’t steal them?”

“Guess not.”

Stag remembered the Grandmother, the elderly woman who was the matriarch of the Wolf Clan, saying that when she was young, women outnumbered men. Maybe with so many women to choose from men didn’t need to steal a wife? Stag wondered if Sherry had had a job? He would have to ask her. But this whole conversation unsettled him. The very thought of women risking their lives in a fight terrified him. In his mind, women were too precious to jeopardize. Anything else was upside down. Was this what Sherry meant when she told Russell she was lost? He shook his head and moved the conversation to a less confusing topic.

“We got three packs now, huh?” he asked. “The Clan out on the prairie, Taye’s Pack at the den, and now this little one. We’re growing. That’s good.”

“Yeah. We’ve taken more mates in the last three months than in the past fifteen years combined.” Des looked directly at him. “I’m Alpha of the Plane Women’s House Pack. That gonna be a problem for you?”

Stag shoved the drawer shut. It reluctantly closed with a squeal that hurt his sensitive ears. He shook his head. “No problem. Even if I did have a problem with it, I’m not Alpha enough to challenge you. Who are your Betas?”

“Just Hawk for now. We’re not big enough to need more. Are you going to be staying?”

“I’ll be here for a while at least. Depends on Sherry. If she wants to live here, I can try to do that, part of the year at least.” He was willing to do almost anything for Sherry, but he had responsibilities to the Clan, too. “I’m being trained to follow Kills Bears as wicasa wakan for the Clan. I don’t want to give that up. Now that the Clan is building a bunch of houses, maybe Sherry would like to live there.”

Would Sherry ever accept him? His wolf turned in tight, agitated circles inside him. Stag threw Des a tortured glance and thumped a frustrated fist on the top of the bureau. “Des, I just don’t know. I’ve been patient, waiting for my mate to open up to me. I’ve been gentle. Anything she needed or wanted I’ve given her. I even left for a time when she demanded I give her time to work things out. I’ve been hanging back, waiting for her to decide something. How much longer do I have to wait?”

Des straightened up. “Maybe not too long. She’s been talking to Jodi and Dixie, the women who were counselors in the Times Before. She’s gonna sit with you at supper tonight. Maybe it will be soon. You want some advice?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t waste your chance tonight. Ask her questions. Get her to talk to you. Women sure do like to talk.” Des flipped his hair aside to scratch the back of his neck. “One thing I’ve learned since coming to live with a whole bunch of women is that they will talk themselves to death about any little thing and they get pissed if you don’t let ’em. Best thing you can do is ask her a question, and then just shut up and listen.”

“Uh-huh. What kind of question?”

“Hell, anything. Ask her what her favorite color is.”

Stag folded his arms and raised an eyebrow. “How long would that take to answer? It seems to me like one word would do it.”

“Nah.” Des shook his head. “Women can go on for an hour about it. If she likes pink, she’ll tell you what shade of pink, and how many pink shirts and dresses she used to have, and then she’ll tell you which shade of pink she *doesn’t* like.” Des shook his head again, with fond wonder. “Women. They can hold a two hour conversation about a color. Funny thing is, they smell so good and their voices sound so nice while they’re talkin’ that you won’t even care.”

# Chapter Two

Sherry leaned lightly on her cane and took a deep breath outside the dining room. Everybody called it “the big room”. It was the communal area that would be the Plane Women’s Restaurant sometime in the spring. On some evenings, the room was open to the visitors who came to flirt with the women in an effort to woo them into marriage. Few men dared to flirt with her. Stag’s barely leashed jealousy kept other men away. Sherry was grateful and resentful at the same time. Some of the men could be overbearing, and Sherry hated that, but a choice would have been nice too.

Sherry let the breath out carefully. Stag was back. It was time to put on her big girl panties. Since the plane crash she had lost her hard-won self-confidence and acted more like the timid child she’d been in her Korean grandparents’ house. That was going to stop now. She would talk to Stag tonight. Show him who she really was. A grimace curled her lips. Maybe that would scare him off.

She shifted her cane to wipe her sweaty palms on her pants, and walked into the dining room. A quick glance around the dozen tables showed about fifteen women, a few of the wolves who lived there, but no Stag. A feeling uncomfortably like disappointment went through her. Marissa, sitting beside her husband Red Wing at one of the smaller tables, waved.

“Come sit with us, Sherry,” she called.

Marissa had married one of the werewolves last month at Taye’s den a few miles north of town. That was the same time that Stag had tried to cajole her into marrying him. She’d refused, but he had made quiet, one-sided wedding vows to her anyway. That bossy werewolf didn’t know how to take “no” for an answer. Sherry sat across from Marissa at the six-seat table, leaning her cane against the next empty chair and said hello to her werewolf husband. Red Wing was Native American, but with his tumbled curls of golden brown and hazel green eyes he didn’t look it.

“Stag’s back,” Marissa announced.

“Yes, I know,” Sherry said quickly, trying to sound happy about it. Or at least not unhappy. She tapped her cane lightly against the chair next to her. “I’m saving this seat for him.”

Red Wing gave her an approving smile. Sherry gave him a half-smile back, and glanced around. Most of the tables had people at them. There were Dixie and Jodi, who were counseling her. In the Times Before they had worked together as counselors at a rape and abuse crisis center. Renee was no doubt running the show in the kitchen. Connie, whom they all called “Lupa” now that she was married to Des, was already at the table closest to the kitchen. Sherry had mixed feelings about Connie. Last month she had told Sherry not to be so mean to Stag. As if she didn’t have a right to be upset at the way Stag hounded her to be his mate! But Connie had also fought to give the survivors the best life she could, even accepting Des’ mate claim to save them from forced marriages to strangers.

Mate. Lupa. Alpha. Werewolves. Good lord. The men were offended by that label. They preferred to be called wolf warriors or just wolves. Sherry gave a tiny shake of her head. She would have to break herself of the habit of calling them “werewolves”. Before she’d decided to try to get to know Stag she hadn’t cared if they were offended. Now she had to care. Her stomach flip-flopped as she remembered Stag’s nearly naked body when he had bent to pick up her yarn this afternoon. She would never admit it, but she had missed him. For months he had been a faithful protective shadow who did little things to make her life easier. There had been times when she’d been tempted to let down her guard and allow him to court her. That was an old-fashioned word, but it was what everyone used here. The perfection of his muscular body did bad things to her libido. His bossiness did bad things to her temper.

“I sure miss electricity,” Marissa was saying glumly. She cast a glance of loathing at the faint smoke rising from the oil lamp on the table. “Life was so much easier with real lights. And cars. And computers.” She sighed. “It’s only been fifty years! You’d think someone would know how to get stuff working.”

Sherry agreed with Marissa’s gripe. Okay, without gas cars wouldn’t work, but wasn’t there oil in Texas? Or what about ethanol? She didn’t know how that sort of thing worked, but someone had to. It was a real shame that none of the crash survivors were electricians or computer geeks or anything really useful.

She opened her mouth to say something about it, but she closed it without a word. The tenderness the wolves showed their women always surprised her. Red Wing smoothed the backs of his fingers down Marissa’s plump cheek in a gesture so sweet Sherry had to look away. Watching such tenderness made her feel like a voyeur.

“So many died during the Terrible Times,” Red Wing said. “Not many were left who knew how to work the gadgets from the Times Before, much less make them or fix them. That’s what the Grandmother says, anyway, and she would know, since she lived through it. And everyone was so busy trying to stay alive that non-essentials took a back seat to things like food and safety.”

The Times Before was any time before 2014. Sherry shifted in her hard wooden chair. It was weird to think that to people like Red Wing, her whole life was a science fiction story. Nuclear bombs, asteroids and plagues had changed the world completely right after her plane had taken off in 2014.

Red Wing grabbed Marissa’s hands, fear sending a visible shudder down his naked back. “You probably would have died if you hadn’t been on that plane.” He kissed his mate’s hands fervently. “The Grandmother says that only one in ten lived through the Terrible Times and hardly any of those were women.” He kissed Marissa’s hands again. “If you hadn’t been on that plane …”

Sherry shifted her eyes away from the horror on Red Wing’s face. A tiny pinprick of envy poked at her. No man had ever looked at her like that, not even LeRoi. She shouldn’t think ill of the dead. Her husband had been a real bastard at times, but he had been trying to turn things around. They’d been on their way to renew their marriage vows on their fourth anniversary when the plane crashed in rural Nebraska, killing or injuring nearly all the passengers. Instead of spending October 29, 2014 in a nice hotel in Vegas making love with LeRoi, she had spent it in a primitive teepee in the year 2064, mostly unconscious from the injuries she’d sustained in the crash. She’d had vivid hallucinations of big wolves that killed her by tearing her into glistening red hunks of meat. No wonder she’d thought the werewolves were unnatural. Part of her still did.

Sherry cast a quick glance across the table. Oh, good, Marissa and Red Wing were back to behaving like adults instead of horny teenagers. They were newlyweds, and acted like it. They spent a lot time holed up in their apartment, sometimes missing meals. When they did join the other residents of the Plane Women’s House they hung all over each other. Looking at Red Wing, she could see why Marissa had a hard time keeping her hands to herself. He was almost as handsome and well built as Stag.

Stag stepped up to the empty chair beside her. Sherry took a deep breath and was surprised that a genuine smile bloomed on her face at the sight of him. Was she happy to see him? The smile faltered into uncertainty as she grabbed her cane to move it out of his way. “Hi, I was saving this chair for you.”

He was so handsome, especially with his muscular upper body completely bare. Wolves seemed to have a deep aversion to wearing clothes. He wore a dark blue wool breechcloth, leather leggings and moccasins, but no shirt. She had to admit she liked the view. His chest and abs were more perfect than any she’d seen on a living man in the flesh, and he smelled faintly of some wonderful cologne. Just the sight and smell of him sparked heat flaring between her thighs. She followed Dixie’s advice and told the shame that tried to fill her to go away. Being attracted to a handsome man did not mean she was a slut. It was a natural physical reaction. She watched him settle into the chair, and suppressed a sigh. She’d been reacting naturally to Stag for quite a while now, even while she shrank from his werewolf side.

As Stag said hello to Red Wing and Marissa, she could feel his attention on her. A cat whose tail was in the tight grip of a five year old boy couldn’t feel more trapped. He always made her feel that way. But that wasn’t fair. Last month she’d told him she wanted him to leave her alone for a while to get her head together. He hadn’t liked it, but he hadn’t argued. She’d told him she needed some time but she promised she would talk to him in a few weeks. He’d done what she asked and left. That was nearly a month ago. He’d given her the time she’d asked for. Now it was time for her to do her part and honestly try to get to know him. Big girl panties time.

“How was your trip, Stag?” she asked. Her attempt to sound breezy and friendly came out strained.

He looked at her with blue eyes fringed with a thick curtain of lashes. Really, the man had beautiful eyes. The color was so unexpected in his dark Native American face that she was surprised every time she looked at them. Actually, all of him was beautiful, from his muscular chest to his tight belly to his long legs.

“It was good. I went to visit the Clan.”

She waited for him to go on, but he didn’t. Sherry looked around, wondering when the food would be served. She wanted something to focus on besides the wolf at her side. It was hard, but she made herself keep the conversation going.

“Oh, good,” she said lamely. “How is everyone? Uh, your mom and dad …?”

She trailed off because she realized she knew nothing of his family. All the wolves called each other cousin and they all seemed to be related somehow, but she didn’t know his parents or whether he had brothers or sisters.

Stag flinched ever so slightly. “My mother was killed by men who tried to steal her about fifteen years ago, along with almost all the women in the Clan. My father died soon after.”

Ouch. “I’m sorry.”

He may have felt her discomfort because he smiled faintly as he shook his head. “Thank you. It was a long time ago. What about your parents? I suppose they’re gone now, but were they alive when you got on the plane?”

The subject of her parents was a painful one she avoided at all costs. She sure didn’t want to discuss them now. “My mom died when I was six,” she said curtly. “My dad and his wife would be almost one hundred years old now, so they’re probably dead too. Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“I had two older brothers. They’re dead too.”

Oh, God. Sherry had never been so glad to see platters of food coming out of the kitchen. The next few minutes were busy with scooping food onto their plates and filling their cups. Sherry felt the silence weighted by Stag’s eyes stretch so thin she decided she had to keep up some sort of conversation so it wouldn’t snap.

“This roast beef sure looks good. Stag, do you like beef or do you like venison better?”

“I like meat,” he replied, stabbing a thick bundle of the paper-thin slices with his knife.

He must need a lot of protein to maintain his awesome physique. She ignored her body’s interest in that awesome physique and focused on her food. If he wanted conversation he would have to start it himself this time. She was done.

Sherry had eaten her two slices of beef and was playing with her slightly too-mushy carrots before Stag spoke.

“Is that all you’re going to eat?” He sounded disapproving. “No wonder you’re so skinny. Here, have some more potatoes.”

Sherry gritted her teeth. “I’m not that big. I don’t need more food.”

Red Wing sounded a little kinder. “We have plenty of food. You don’t need to skimp.”

“I’m not skimping.” She tried to be polite instead of venting her frustration. “I’ve eaten enough. I’m not hungry anymore.”

“The meat is good,” Stag said temptingly, as if she were a recalcitrant toddler refusing more strained peas.

“No, thank you,” she said between clenched teeth.

Stag subsided, but his face showed his displeasure. What was it with the men in this place? They were constantly trying to make the women eat more. Sherry had always been slender, possibly a genetic gift from her mother. She barely remembered her mother, but she had one precious photograph of her parents and in it her beefy African American father had towered over her petite Korean mother. Sherry had some of her father in her, but she was built like her mother.

“What’s your favorite color?” Stag shot at her.

Sherry blinked. “What? Um, yellow, I guess. Why?”

“I was told that colors are important to women. What shade of yellow?”

Sherry glanced at Marissa, who as an interior decorator was an expert on color. “Bright, clear yellows. Not gold or mustard.”

“Lemon? Canary? Sunshine?” offered Marissa.

“Yeah,” Sherry agreed.

“How many yellow shirts and dresses did you have in the Times Before?” Stag asked.

Sherry exchanged a mystified glance with Marissa. “I don’t know. I had an angora sweater that was buttery yellow. But yellow isn’t the best color for my skin tone.”

The memory of the life she’d had before the plane crash depressed her. “What’s your favorite color, Stag?”

“Don’t have one.”

Okay, that was a conversational dead end. She couldn’t ask him what bands he liked or what movie he’d seen most recently, or which television shows he watched. She couldn’t ask him about his job or what car he drove, or get his number. Did they have anything in common? Well, they both seemed to like apple crisp. That was tonight’s dessert. Stag took an enormous helping and drowned it in cream. Sherry took a small scoop and passed on the cream, even when Stag tried to give her some.

Sherry had decided weeks ago that she was going to honestly try to get to know Stag and see if she could love him. But it was hard to fall in love with a man who spoke little except to tell her what she should do. And she was damned sick of men trying to run her life. She ate her apple crisp in a silence that bordered on sullen.

After supper they helped to clear the tables, fold them up and stack them in a corner. Tonight was one of the nights the townsmen were allowed to come to the Plane Women’s House to court the women who had survived the plane crash. No matter how old or even ugly a woman was, she had her pick of men. The town of Kearney, Nebraska had fifteen hundred residents, and the surrounding communities, farms and ranches added another five hundred. Of those two thousand, only two hundred were women, and the majority of those were already married. The Plane Women would have been mobbed by men, but the mayor of Kearney had arranged for a fence to be erected around the apartment building and had assigned guards to be sure none of them were stolen. Since the wolves had come to live here, they had taken over security. Only twenty-five men were allowed in at a time on visitation nights. Sherry had heard that the townsmen sometimes decided amongst themselves who would come on which nights by fistfights.

Sherry had endured dozens of visitation nights, and though she was young and pretty, only a few men had ever dared to speak to her. The reason for that was the half-naked barbarian moving her chair closer to the warmth of a stove. Sherry was the chosen mate of a wolf warrior, and who would flirt with her while he hovered over her like a growling dog guarding a bone? This last month, while he’d been away, a few men tried to be friendly, but the other wolves had chased them off. *Thank you very much, Des*, she thought bitterly.

“I’m going to get my knitting,” she told Stag now. “Be right back.”

“Sit down,” Marissa said. “Rest your legs. I’m going to go upstairs for my crochet. I’ll grab your bag for you.”

“Thanks.” Sherry sank into the chair Stag had placed for her in front of one of the stoves. Five other chairs were arranged in a semi-circle in front of it, but for now it was only she and Stag there, with Red Wing lounging at the room’s entrance, waiting for Marissa to come back. Stag sat and pulled his chair so close his warm, bare arm pressed against her.

“Why do you like yellow?” he asked. “Why bright yellow, and not gold?”

His dogged tone made her want to roll her eyes. But at least it was a topic she could discuss. “I like clear, bright yellow because it reminds me of sunshine. It makes me feel more cheerful even if the weather is gloomy.”

He nodded at that, looking up as Marissa handed a canvas bag to her. She pulled out her attempt at a scarf. Knitting was new to her, but she was getting the hang of it. She pursed her mouth as she saw how wide her scarf was in some areas and narrow in others. She didn’t know how it happened, but some rows had magically grown to thirty-three stitches instead of thirty stitches, and then shrunk to twenty-seven stitches. Carla, who was teaching her to knit, said that it didn’t really matter, as long as it kept her neck warm. She should tell people it was a design element.

The wool yarn was surprisingly soft, and the color was beautiful, that bright, cheerful yellow she loved. They sat in silence, she making careful stitches and Stag staring at her longingly, while Marissa and Red Wing put their heads together to whisper to each other in the two chairs on the opposite end of the semi-circle. That left two chairs between she and Stag and Red Wing and Marissa. Sherry doubted anyone else would sit there, since Marissa and Red Wing were practically making out. Marissa was happy with her wolf husband. Renee and Hawk in Flight were older, more sedate, but Renee acted very content with him. In public they sat side by side, chastely holding hands. It was kind of cute to see them behave like that, as if they were kids instead of thirty-somethings. Connie and Des seemed sometimes to circle each other as if they were still working out who was running the show, but there was never any anger or violence in their words or actions. Des wasn’t shy about petting her in public. He frequently touched her arm or ran a hand through her blond bob as if he couldn’t keep himself from connecting with his mate every chance he got. In fact, all the wolves seemed to need to touch their mates constantly. Sherry envied that. Sort of. Sometimes she wished she had someone to pet her. She slanted a glance at Stag under her lashes, wondering what it would be like to hold his hand or have him run his fingers through her hair.

His blue eyes fixed on her face with a hunger that almost frightened her. No, it was her own response that frightened her. Her nipples tightened with embarrassing need beneath her blessedly baggy sweater. With a single word she could have this wolf in bed. And part of her wanted that. What would he be like as a lover? In the beginning of their marriage, LeRoi had been careful and tender with her. She’d sometimes wished he would move faster, thrust harder. He hadn’t received her hints well, turning rough and angry. She hadn’t liked rough and angry. It made her feel trapped, afraid of the violence that simmered in him. Her fear that he would hurt her had come horribly true. What she wanted was a man who could be wild and forceful without ever losing control or forgetting about her pleasure.

Was Stag that man? He was an overbearing wolf. But he hadn’t ever hurt her. Yet. Was it wrong for her to want to sleep with him? He was part animal. The other women who had married wolves weren’t turned off by that. But if she went to bed with Stag, she would truly belong to him. Marissa had explained that Stag had claimed her, but until she made love with him, they weren’t mated. She could still refuse him.

She had tried to refuse him several times already, but Stag just wouldn’t accept it. Carla, Taye Wolfe’s mate, who had also been on the plane, told her about Taye’s parents. It had taken three years for his mother to accept his father’s mate claim. His father had stolen his mother and resolutely courted her for those three years before she accepted him. Poor woman.

Sherry made a careful stitch and slid it to the other needle, shooting a quick glance at Stag. What did werewolf courtship consist of? Kisses? Heavy petting? Day-yam, he was tempting. His hair was thick and straight in a ponytail that went halfway down his back. It gleamed like raw silk in the light of the fire in the stove. She wanted to stroke it, but that would probably give him the wrong signal. She shot another quick glance at him. He was still watching her.

*Why wasn’t he talking*? she wondered peevishly. He should be telling her about himself. He should be asking her questions. How could they get to know one another if they didn’t talk?