Chapter One

It wasn’t the crowd that made Carla’s palms sweat, or even the fact that this crowd was made up exclusively of men who were staring at her. She had spent most of the last five years standing on stage, singing her songs and playing her guitar for thousands of enthusiastic fans at a time, both men and women. She’d even received half a dozen marriage proposals from men she had never met. None of that had ever made her suffer from nerves before. There were only a few hundred men fixated on her here, but her sweaty hands were shaking worse than they ever had before a show. The difference was none of her adoring fans had a snowball’s chance in hell of marrying her, but one of these half-savage men lining up to fight for her would be her husband in a few hours. God help them.

How could she have gone from being a rising country music star in the year 2014 to a piece of merchandise in 2064? Useless questions raced angrily around her head, bringing her perilously close to tears, so she scowled at her surroundings. She’d be damned if she’d cry in front of this crowd.

The theater she was in now must have been a showpiece in its glory days, and maybe a historical site later. Right now it was a shell. The majority of one wall had been knocked out and replaced by mismatched windows so light could come in. The afternoon sun lit the interior like a spotlight on a once elegant but now aging diva. Half the fancy chandeliers were missing, and the ones remaining were missing most of their crystals. The balconies, like the one she stood in now, lined the only intact wall. Carla could see traces of the gold paint that once embellished the ornately carved wood. The raised stage was below and to the left of her balcony, but the curtain was gone. The slightly sloping floor was bare wood, marked with rough spots where the seats had once been fastened. The stage had a large square marked off to designate where the fights would take place.

Several of the men made a point of standing below her balcony while they stripped off their shirts and shoes to get ready to fight. They preened for her, stretching muscled lean bodies and trying to catch her eye. Some made kissing faces at her. She pointedly ignored them.

Her fingernails, showing only chipped remnants of Cherry Bomb nail lacquer, were ragged while they bit into her palms. If she counted correctly, today was The Day. If her world hadn’t ended four days ago she would be singing the national anthem at game five of the World Series tonight. But that world was gone. No cell phones, no cars, no computers, no planes. At least none that could fly … When she left Minneapolis after a show four days ago and boarded a plane to Denver, the world had been sane. Highways were full of cars driven by people who listened to CDs and played DVDs for their children. There were restaurants and grocery stores and malls in every town they flew over. The plane had been full of businessmen tapping away on their laptops and families with teenagers who were glued to their cell phones or tablets. And then … the world ended. Somehow the plane had gone fifty years into the future. And this future was after the apocalypse.

Carla glanced over at the woman on the balcony beside hers. Lisa Anton was beautiful. Of course she was beautiful: she was a model. She had long blond hair—natural blond!—perfect skin, perfect body, perfect makeup. At least, her makeup had been perfect when she’d got on the plane and taken the seat next to Carla. Carla, already in her seat, had cynically tagged her as a Blonde, not too bright, way too vain, and useless. They’d made superficial conversation during the flight, and what Lisa said hadn’t changed Carla’s mind about her. But when the plane went down and the survivors tried to dig through the wreckage to find others, the blonde model had done more than her share of digging and lifting. Her perfect makeup had been smeared all over her face, her perfect clothes torn and dirty. She’d held a little boy while he died and smiled for him the whole time, not crying until after he was gone. While others were hysterical when their cell phones and laptops didn’t work she stayed calm. When co-pilot Connie Mondale, the only surviving member of the plane crew, asked for volunteers to walk to try to find help, she immediately offered to go. Three pairs of survivors each set out in different directions to find help. Carla had been impressed by the blonde and hadn’t minded being paired up with her as one of the teams going to find help.

Help? Carla glared blindly at the windows opposite her balcony. A fat lot of help they had gotten. They had been glad and relieved to see the farm people after hiking for a day with no signs of life. The two-lane asphalt road they found was badly cracked and overgrown with grass and weeds. They didn’t know where they were, except somewhere between Minneapolis and Denver, without any cell phone reception. There had been nothing to see but grassy plains for miles. The first town they came to after walking for two hours was totally empty except for rusted shells of cars and sagging buildings. They continued to struggle on, confused by the emptiness around them and worried about the people they left behind. They passed a number of empty ruined farmhouses without ever seeing a person. It made no sense why miles of farm and grazing land were empty. Carla grew up on a ranch in eastern Wyoming, and it wasn’t unusual for ranches to be spread far apart, or to see an occasional older house or barn abandoned. But a dozen empty houses? Carla knew there was something weird about that, but she never in a million years would have guessed they had gone fifty years into the future.

The crash had been completely unexpected. Of course, who did expect a plane crash? It was a beautiful day for travel, so when the turbulence hit it caught all the passengers by surprise. Carla swallowed. Alarm closed her throat just as it had when the plane jolted violently and fell. So many had been killed or hurt she’d felt almost guilty to be merely bruised.

But the crash, terrifying as it had been, didn’t explain the eerie emptiness of the houses and towns she and Lisa had frantically searched. It was all surreal, like the set for an end of times movie. She’d constantly looked over her shoulder, half expecting a zombie to attack, but that was ridiculous.

The walled farming community they found the following morning was ridiculous too. Well, weird, anyway. The men guarding the gate had worn plain dark clothes, and held some sort of shotgun or rifle which Carla didn’t recognize. A militant Amish community? Or some strange group like at Waco? If she and Lisa hadn’t been so tired and hungry, and if their feet hadn’t hurt so much from walking in high-heeled boots, they would have passed on. But these were the first people they had seen, and the people from the plane needed help.

They should have passed on. Like her mom said, hind sight was 20/20.

There were plenty of suspicious men, but very few women in the Odessa farming settlement. The farmers wore plain pants and shirts, and their wives wore ankle-length dresses. These farmers did without phones or televisions or computers. They seemed odd but not aggressive in spite of the armed guards at the gate. Their religion was rigid, and all-prevalent. At the midday meal the elder had prayed for “the two worldly strangers from the Times Before whom God sent to us as a gift to save us from the harsh winter.” Carla had to bite her tongue to keep from saying something rude. The women had fussed over their blisters and torn clothes and set up skimpy baths of water heated over the stove, like in *Little House on the Prairie*. The men agreed to take Carla and Lisa to the nearest town so they could get help for the survivors.

Right. Fooled by a bunch of Amish farmers. The farmers had taken them in a horse-drawn wagon into a nearby town that looked like a cross between an Old West town and a military base, to the so-called mayor, Ray Madison. The town was strange, with tall walls made of stone sectioning off some blocks and no signs of technology anywhere. There were no cars, no lights, no fast food places. They passed a building that had once been a popular chain restaurant, but the familiar sign was bleached by age and weather. Some men and boys were on the streets, staring at the two of them like they had two heads each, but they saw no women. Ray had looked them over like they were prime livestock while they had explained about the plane and the survivors needing medical help. Ray hadn’t shown much interest in that. He only gave the farmers some boxes and bundles in trade for the two of them. The farmers had left them with Ray. Lisa had cried. Carla had argued. But Ray had rubbed his hands together gleefully and announced that he would offer them as prizes in a Bride Fight. It seemed that two unknown women in their twenties were hot commodities in this future hell.

So that’s what they were now, prizes the best fighters could take home. And no help yet for the plane crash survivors. Had either of the other volunteer teams found help? Carla met Lisa’s eyes just for a minute and saw the model shaking. Her fair skin showed the signs of tears. Carla hoped her own tanned face was calm. She was so furious she’d like to punch these men. If there hadn’t been four guards standing behind her chair she’d have tried to escape. But where could she go?

Ray, the man who had bought her, stepped into her balcony. He smiled at her, showing a few gaps between yellowed teeth. Dental care must be hard to come by in this place. He indicated the men below. “One of those fine men will be yours in just a little while. You got a preference, little lady?”

His father-of-the-bride attitude rubbed Carla the wrong way. “My preference is to go home,” she said between clenched teeth.

Ray looked pitying. “Can’t,” he said patiently. “We’ve told you over and over that your world doesn’t exist anymore. Hasn’t for fifty years. Same thing happened a few years back. My missus told you about them other women from the Times Before who showed up out west of here. They never got back neither. They got good husbands now, and couple kids too, I heard. But I ain’t never heard nothin’ about them complainin’. So, buck up. You got twelve men fighting for you.” He sounded like he was congratulating her. “No more than what might be expected, a healthy-looking gal like you. You have a bit of meat on your bones. Gives a man something to hold on to.”

Carla’s teeth were in danger of shattering. She wore a size twelve, and a size twelve was *not* fat.

“But,” Ray went on, “even that skinny yellow-haired gal has ten men fighting for her, including my son.”

Ray was proud of his son, and with good reason, Carla had to admit. Eddie was a golden god, as handsome as any model Lisa might have worked with in the past. And he had been nice to her and Lisa when he tried to explain about terrorist nuclear weapons destroying most major US cities fifty years ago, and the asteroid that had hit Texas the following year, and the epidemics that wiped out more women than men, and how hardly anyone alive now even remembered computers or phones. Only a tiny percentage of the population was older than fifty. Eddie had made it plain that this wasn’t a dream, and even if they found help for the plane crash survivors they could never go back to their own time. His mother, Darlene, and his sister, Bree, had told them this wasn’t the year 2014 anymore, and having two more women in town increased their number to an even two hundred. There were over 4,000 men in the area, and about 1,000 of them were of marriageable age but unmarried. Lots of men would like to marry them, but only a couple dozen would be allowed to enter the Bride Fights.

Carla wanted to believe everyone lied to them and it was not 2064. But what else could explain the lack of cars, the lack of modern appliances? Sure, crazy fundamentalist technophobes could all move out to the middle of Nebraska and make their own community without street lights or phones or electricity, but that didn’t explain the obvious age of the tumbled buildings or the fact that her cell phone wouldn’t place a call to her mother or even 911.

“But you got good men fighting for you,” Ray went blithely on. “Like Doug Gray, there. He don’t have much to offer a wife, but he’s got education. They say he might be able to get some of these gadgets from the Times Before to work someday. You’d like that, hey? And he comes from a pretty well-respected family, too. Bill Russell is a blacksmith. Don’t let his size scare you. My wife says he’s a real gentleman. He’s got a good business. His wife would be taken care of real good. Or there’s Taye Wolfe. He’s head of the Pack from north of town, and he’s got ties to the Lakota hereabouts. Nobody would be stupid enough to mess with his wife. Got probably fifty men under him. They’re a bit odd, those wolves, but good people. My daughter says he’s a handsome man. Whatchu think?”

Without meaning to, Carla followed Ray’s pointing finger. Taye Wolfe was tall and dark, and he had just taken off his shirt, showing an impressive expanse of taut brown skin. Native American? He met her gaze and inclined his head to her before turning away to talk to someone. Carla frowned and jerked her eyes back to Ray.

“You don’t have the right to do this,” she snapped at him. “I am not a slave! You can’t sell me off—”

Ray had heard it a dozen times already. “Yes, I can. Common sense says you need to be married. This ain’t the Times Before. You are a grown woman without a husband, a father, or a brother. There’s too many men here and hardly any women. If you don’t get a husband quick the men will fight over you, and not the nice organized fights like these are gonna be. They’ll ambush each other, kill each other. They’ll commit outright murder. Just to get hold of you. You want that?”

Carla opened her mouth to reply, but he didn’t give her a chance.

“And I ain’t selling you! All these boys have paid an entrance fee to be able to participate in the Bride Fight. I’ll take my fair cut, but the rest goes to the town, to fix the streets and what not. I’m letting only the best men enter. The ones that have enough goods to support a wife, and ones who have a respected position in the town. Sure, Doug Gray’s not as well off as the rest of these others, but he’s respected. All of ’em are good fighters. The best fighter deserves to have a wife. That way the best genes will pass on to the next generation.”

Carla said a word she seldom used.

“And,” Ray went on, raising his voice to cover her profanity, “my wife got final pick of who got to enter. She made sure all of the fighters are good men. They’ll treat you right. She thinks any of these men would be good enough for our own daughter. If they’re good enough for Bree, they’re good enough for you.” He gave her a fierce nod. “Now I’m going to go over to the other gal and give her a pep talk too.”

Carla forced her fists open and took deep breaths, not bothering to watch Ray leave. Pep talk. Right.

“Ma’am?”

A low, deep voice made her jump. It was Taye Wolfe, standing just below the balcony. Carla realized that he *was* a handsome man, with thick shiny black hair cut neatly at his nape, but long enough in front to fall into his eyes. His eyes were dark too, with surprisingly long lashes, under elegantly curved black brows. And he was younger than she had thought, maybe only twenty-three or twenty-four. His mouth was full and soft, a contrast to the hard angle of his jaw, and a hint of a dimple showed at the corner of his mouth.

“Ma’am,” he said again. “I heard that you are from the Times Before, and you don’t want to be here. Is that so?”

Maybe it was her love of putting sounds together to create music that made his deep voice so attractive to her. Shivers ran down her back at the sound of it. She leaned over the balcony, holding her long walnut brown hair back so it wouldn’t fall past the railing. “Yes! I need to go back to the plane! People are dying!” She looked around and noticed several of the other fighters scowling at Taye. She lowered her voice. “Can you help me get away?”

“No, ma’am.” His teeth were very white against his brown face when he smiled at her. “I plan to win this fight and take you home with me. But I want you to know that I’ll always take good care of you. I don’t know you yet, but I hope we’ll love each other someday. Until then I can promise you respect and gentleness.” He nodded once and walked away, leaving her gaping after him. He paused and turned back. “And I think I should tell you that I’ve read a bunch of those romance novels from the Times Before, and I know what a woman likes. I promise you’ll be satisfied in our bed.” He smiled again, a wicked white slash in his brown face, and sauntered away. Carla stared after him, appreciating the narrow waist and wide shoulders before remembering why he was here. Curse him. Curse them all!

Carla’s thoughts raced around her head. Like it or not, she was going home with a stranger after this tournament. Did she have anything in her purse that could be used as a weapon? She had a lot to choose from in there. After carrying it for a day and a half she knew how much it weighed. She picked it up from the floor beside her and rummaged through it, cataloging its contents. She was vaguely aware that Ray was down on the stage now, making announcements. She heard her name and the roar of applause from the crowd and looked out at them, glowering. Now, what did she have? Keys for an apartment and car that had no doubt been destroyed in the past fifty years. Wallet with useless money and credit cards. Knitting needle? That could be a weapon, but she was knitting socks on size one double-pointed needles that her brother called toothpicks, so probably not. Nail file? It was blunt and pretty small, from a purse-size travel kit. Darn the airline security regulations. She was wearing a leather belt with her barrel-racing championship buckle. The buckle was large and solid. If she swung it by the belt and hit someone, it could cause a lot of damage. Even kill a person. Her hands stilled. Was she capable of that?

The preliminary fights had already taken place when she decided to start paying attention. By the time she figured out what was going on, there were only eight men left on the stage aside from the referees, four fighting for her and four for Lisa. The contenders for her were on the right. She knew this because Taye Wolfe and Doug Gray were there. Lisa’s men, including Eddie, were on the left. Eddie kissed his fingertips and flicked his hand up, smiling at Lisa in the balcony besides hers.

Carla looked over at Lisa. The blonde tried to smile at Eddie, but she was terrified, and not hiding it well. Eddie would probably make an okay husband. Carla hoped he would win. He would treat Lisa nicely. Only two days ago Lisa had been only a name and a picture in magazine. Now she was like a sister. Carla wanted Lisa to be okay and happy, if possible. She looked down at the stage again, and her gaze met Taye Wolfe’s. His face was tilted down so that when he looked up at her it was from under dark brows. His dimple flashed with his quick smile. Carla folded her arms and frowned briefly before looking away.

She couldn’t help but look, though, when Taye and Doug Gray went into the square and both turned to face her. They nodded formally, almost like a bow, then shook hands, and at a word from one of the referees began to fight. It was a brutal mixture of boxing and wrestling. With four brothers, Carla had seen plenty of fights, but this was vicious. Compared to Taye Wolfe, Doug Gray was lanky, not as muscular. He fought well, though. Taye was hurt, but he won in the end, pinning his opponent in a strangle hold. Doug Gray slapped his hand against the floor to signal his defeat. Taye Wolfe helped him up and they shook hands. Doug Gray nodded to Carla, and Taye Wolfe sent her another wicked smile. Jerk. Did he think she was glad he had won? She looked away and yawned as if bored.

But actually, her stomach was jumping around so much she thought she might throw up. She barely watched the next fights because she wasn’t sure she could keep her face cool. She knew Eddie won his last fight because Lisa gave a half sob and said, “Thank God!” audibly, and then the spectators began applauding and chanting Eddie’s name. That was good. Lisa liked Eddie, and Eddie was obviously smitten with her. Ray’s voice was proud when he announced that the hand of Miss Lisa Anton had been won by Eddie Madison.

The spectators quieted down when the last two fighters stepped into the square. Taye Wolfe was facing a large, heavily muscled black man. Wasn’t he the blacksmith Ray had pointed out to her? Taye was barehanded, but the black man had a knife. Was that allowed? It must be, if the referee didn’t take it away or try to stop the fight. Carla couldn’t quite suppress her nervous shiver. One of these two men would own her. Taye was almost slender compared to the other man. The smooth way he moved seemed like a ballet to Carla. For all that, the fight was brutal. The black man had pinned Taye Wolfe down with his teeth sunk into his chest, trying to stab him with the knife. But Taye managed to free himself and kick his opponent in the head. He had a gouge in his pec from where the black man had bitten him. Blood ran in a dark stream down his chest. Carla turned her face away, teeth clenched. She didn’t look again until she heard Ray shouting that Taye Wolfe had won her. An unearthly howl rose above the roar of the spectators. When she forced herself to look she saw the black man lying still in a pool of blood and Taye with his head flung back and his mouth open in the howl that made her shudder. His teeth closed in a hard grin and his eyes slanted to look up at her with fierce triumph.

Taye Wolfe was her new owner, and he looked as feral as his name.

Chapter Two

The fights had been hard, especially the final bout. Taye knew he was bleeding from the slice across his forearm and the bite over his right pec, but he didn’t care. He screamed his victory, his howl rising above the roar of the crowd. The first thing he saw when he finished was Eddie Madison with his arm tenderly around his prize, and the trusting way she laid her cheek against his shoulder. Taye looked up at the balcony where his own prize stood. Surely now she would have lost that aloof expression of disdain. Now she would know he was worthy of her.

Carla had lost the disdain, but replaced it with disgust. Horror? Fear? That wasn’t right. His wolf’s protective instincts took over. Genetics and adrenaline gave him the strength to leap from the stage to the balcony. Her hair swung when she jerked back from his reaching hands. Her hazel eyes were wide, going from the stage where he had been standing to him now standing in front of her, before fixing on the blood seeping down his chest and then jerking up to his face.

“Don’t touch me!” she hissed.

“Shh,” he soothed gently. “It’s OK.”

“Yeah, right,” she snapped. “You touch me and you’ll be sorry.”

She was trying to hide it, but he could smell her fear. It hurt him. He pulled back a little. “Don’t be afraid. I promise, all I want is for you to be happy. For us to be happy.”

Her sour expression doubted him. “Yeah, right,” she said again.

His mate was beautiful even with a sour expression. Her face was triangular with a broad forehead tapering to a narrow, stubborn chin. Greenish eyes were outlined with long dark lashes, and her mouth was made up of a narrow upper lip and a plump lower lip. Her legs were long, too, and he wanted to wrap them around his waist and put her against the wall … No, better to not think of that yet. The urge to touch her, to feel that full red lower lip against his was overpowering, but he forced himself to keep a little space between them. “Don’t be afraid,” he said again. “I’ll be good to you. I’ll take good care of you and our children.”

The scent of her fear grew stronger. His words weren’t working. She didn’t know him yet. Time would show her that she was safe with him. He signaled to Pete and Jay, his packmates standing below the balcony as guards. Here at a public contest like a Bride Fight he should be guaranteed safety, but the three mile walk home could be an invitation for sore losers to try to steal the prize they had lost. He and his Pack would need to be extra vigilant. ”Let’s go home, mate.”

Carla folded her arms over her chest. “Mate? You mean wife? I’m not your wife.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Since when?” she challenged. “I don’t remember being invited to the ceremony.”

Taye caught hold of his patience. “I won the Bride Fight, remember? Didn’t you hear Ray make the announcement? You’re mine now.”

“That’s it?” Her voice rose sharply. She clutched her leather satchel against her chest like a shield. “That’s the entire ceremony? What about the church? What about the vows?”

Taye stared at her strangely for a moment, trying to remember anything about the marriage customs from the Times Before. “We don’t have a church or a priest here. Don’t need ’em to be married. You want vows? I’ll make vows to you. I promise to take care of you as long as I live. If there’s only enough food for one of us, you’ll get it. I’ll keep you warm when it’s cold. Anyone who tries to hurt you will have to go through me first. How’s that?”

“Those aren’t wedding vows!”

Taye shrugged. His new mate was obviously too upset to be reasonable. Taye shook his head, picked her up with one arm under her knees and the other around her shoulders and jumped out the balcony. The shriek she let out almost popped his eardrums. She let go of the satchel to clutch at him. He landed and reluctantly set her on the floor. For just a second her arms remained clenched around his neck. But she remembered herself too soon and scrambled out of his arms.

“What the h—How did y—ARE YOU CRAZY?” she screeched. She stumbled in her hurry to back away. “Don’t ever do that to me again!”

“All right,” he agreed mildly. A quick slash of his hand killed Pete and Jay’s grins. Jay held out his shirt and shoes. “I’ll get my things on.” A smear of his blood stained her green blouse at the shoulder and breast. It made him perversely happy to see that. All the spectators would know she belonged to him. “Why don’t you say good-bye to your friend before we leave?”

Lisa Anton was standing in the embrace of Eddie’s arms, blue eyes wide, eyelashes dark and spiky with tears. Carla’s brown leather satchel hung from her free hand. Unlike Carla, the blonde seemed content to let her husband hold her. She held the leather satchel out. “Carla, here’s your purse. Are you … Are you okay?”

“Peachy,” Carla snapped. Taye was bent over putting on his shoes, so he couldn’t see her face, but he heard her voice soften. “Sorry. Yeah, I’m okay. You?”

Lisa’s pale hair rippled when she nodded. “Yeah. But Eddie says he doesn’t see much of Taye or his Pack. I’ll miss you.”

Carla’s eyes were gleaming. With tears? “I’ll miss you too.”

Yes, tears. But she was blinking hard, daring them to fall. Taye straightened and nodded once at Eddie Madison. “You have free passage if you want to bring your wife for a visit. Send a message ahead. I’ll clear it for you.”

Eddie smiled. Taye had never in his life been attracted to a man, but even he felt the sensual beauty of that smile. “Thanks. Lisa will like that. After the honeymoon we’ll take you up on that.”

Eddie’s mate flushed a delicate pink, and she smiled at her new husband’s mention of a honeymoon. His own mate jerked her chin up and glared at him. Taye hoped that wasn’t a bad sign for his own honeymoon. He had been looking forward to tonight for years. The sooner they got home, the sooner he could begin gentling his mate.

“We better get moving. We need to get home before dark. Eddie. Ma’am.” He nodded at the blonde politely. “Congratulations.”