Tami shifted in the saddle as the horse beneath her stomped a hoof, and leaned a forearm on the saddle horn to ease the ache in her back. She gazed down the hill at the weathered ranch house below. It looked deserted. But was it? Guess wrong and she was right back where she’d started. And she’d rather freeze to death out here than put herself back at the mercy of abusive men.

She needed rest and relief from the November wind. She had been looking for some sort of shelter for the past couple hours. When she first spotted this ranch house half hidden by bare trees and shielded by a hill, fear had warred with hope in her heart. Was this house safety for her or danger? The house stood with its once-white paint chipped away by weather to show the wood beneath. A couple of windows appeared to be broken, but the structure itself looked sound. The barn twenty yards behind the house hadn’t stood the test of time as well. One end of it had fallen down, showing a rusted pickup truck under its fallen boards. The truck, like the barn, might have been painted red once. How many cold wet winters had it taken to strip the paint from everything here? This place had to be abandoned.

Tami waited, watching house and barn for any sign of life for nearly a half hour before mentally girding her loins, touching a heel to her horse’s flank, and starting down the hill.

This might be a mistake. Maybe the house wasn’t deserted. Maybe there were a

bunch of men lying in wait for her to ride into a trap, and then they would tie her to a bed and treat her just like those guys in Greasy Butte had. Her body tremors escaped her control, and her horse, sensing her apprehension, shied. She stopped him in the slight protection of a skeletal bush and focused on controlling herself. But the awful memories she’d been pushing back for days clawed at her lungs again. Tom Leach, her so-called husband number one, had finally given up trying to cajole her into sex and forced her.

And then Steve, husband number two, and then Dwight, and… After that first time with Tom, Tami decided not to fight them. If she appeared to accept what they did to her, then maybe they would untie her. Escape was a lot more likely if she was able to move around than while she was tied to a bed. *Stop thinking about it!*

Tami draped her horse’s reins over the crook of her elbow, blew on her cupped hands, and stuffed them under her armpits to warm them. That was the past. Her present was on a horse in the empty countryside on her own, keeping at least one step ahead of her so-called “husbands.” But it was hard not to remember what had been done to her and to wonder if what they’d said was true. No, it was impossible. No way were those assholes telling the truth. She was not in the year 2064. It was 2014. November 10, 2014, 4:49 p.m. to be exact. Her watch said so, and it was a top-of-theline piece that not only told the time, but the temperature, compass direction, and date as well. Why would she believe a bunch of rapists who had a house without electricity or running water? They were fundamentalist, brainwashing weirdos living in a guarded compound who thought they owned her. Except for the trips she made to the outhouse under the escort of at least one of them, they had kept her tied to the bed until she had fooled them into thinking she accepted her new role as their wife.

God, that had made her feel helpless. Tami didn’t do helpless. She taught people how to survive in the wilderness. She taught them how to trap and cook their own food, how to find their way back to civilization, how to keep warm in the mountains in January. She taught them how *not to be helpless*! It was one of the reasons the co-pilot had chosen her to leave the crashed plane and find help for the other survivors. Being captured, tied to the bed, and forced to sleep with a bunch of anti-government extremists who claimed to be her husbands was her very own nightmare come to life. As soon as she was safe she would have them arrested. And she would damned well enjoy seeing *them* helpless.

*No*, Tami told herself fiercely, shifting her weight in the saddle to ease the pressure on her sore crotch. *Don’t think about that. Get home. Get help. Get safe. Focus on the plan. Don’t give in to fear.*

“How’s that for a motto?” she muttered to her horse. He flicked a tired ear back toward her; plainly he had no comment.

Grimly, she continued on to the house. She would not quit, not until she was safe and those men were punished. The horse blew his breath out in a huff that sounded almost like encouragement.

“Yeah, boy,” she murmured to the gelding. “You’re my friend, aren’t you? If it weren’t for you I’d be dead now, huh? Well, I guess you’re not the reason I survived the plane crash, but you’re the reason I was able to get away from those guys.”

How crazy was it that she was talking to her horse? Not crazy at all. Tami often held conversations with him. Sometimes she thought he answered.

“Yeah, you’re right. It wasn’t coincidence you were left saddled in front of the house when everyone was gone.”

She thought she had Tim, the last, youngest, and possibly kindest of her husbands to thank for this horse and her escape. He was the only one who hadn’t actually raped her. He’d kissed her a few times on the night he’d come to her room, and he’d slept in the bed with her, but aside from those kisses, he didn’t do anything bad. In fact, he told her in a whisper which horse was his and where it could be found the following day. He was the one left behind to guard her that day, too, and he dozed off after many exaggerated yawns before lunch. Sure enough, a saddled horse waited in the corral. It was the last bit of luck to come her way. Or maybe not luck. The saddle bags had been filled with dried meat and fruit, and some bread, and a canteen had been hung over the saddle horn.

“I boarded a plane, and it crashed,” she told her horse now. “Talk about bad luck, huh?”

She waited for some sympathetic remark from her horse, but he was busy snatching mouthfuls of the dried grass as he tiredly plodded toward the ranch house. Tami sighed at her own idiocy. Maybe she really was losing it. But she kept talking to him anyway, trying to work up her courage.

“When the plane crashed I expected help to come soon, even though the plane’s radio didn’t work and no one’s phones could get a signal. You’d think someone would have been tracking all the flights. They had to have noticed we weren’t flying anymore. Not,” she confided, “that I’m an expert on the air traffic control business. But the co-pilot said help would be coming soon. She’d know, right? But no one came and people were hurt, so she asked for volunteers to walk to find help. So, sure, I volunteered to go. The co-pilot paired up me up with a college basketball player named Jessica Butenas. Poor

Jessi.” Her voice faltered for a second before strengthening again. “We walked north.” And look where it had gotten them: captured by men who had raped them. Poor Jessi had committed suicide. That had hardened Tami’s resolve to get away. She had taken this horse and made her escape five days ago. After spending the first three days hiding from the men who had held her prisoner she had ridden west for two days straight. Exhaustion dragged a lead blanket over her, so every movement was an effort. Her horse wasn’t much better off. Her plan to find some regular people--that is, people who were not criminals--had failed. She’d never seen so many abandoned houses and collapsed barns in her life. Why the heck the entire population of this region of Nebraska had left their houses and ranches she couldn’t imagine, but it wasn’t because terrorists nuked New York. Those crazy extremists had told her all kinds of nutty stories to try to brainwash her. After passing a dozen deserted houses she was willing to admit it was sort of spooky. But there was a good explanation for it, she was sure. One that didn’t involve World War III and the Ten Plagues.

“Good thing the weather’s been mild for November,” she remarked idly to the horse. “But the sun’s going down and it’s getting cold.”

Tami grabbed her blanket from behind the saddle and wrapped it over her shoulders after reining her horse to a stop in front of the house. “Well, here we are. Sure doesn’t look like anyone’s home, does it, boy? I hope to God no one’s home.”

Even the simple act of dismounting, something she’d done a million times in her life, nearly sent her to her knees. She’d pushed herself hard for the first couple days of her escape with no thought of rationing her strength because she’d expected to find help right away. That had been a serious miscalculation. Her crotch had already been sore and bruised, and hours in the saddle hadn’t given her any time to heal. She needed rest and food to be able to mend the damage.

She stood beside the horse, ready to flee at the slightest sign of men. She waited, tense enough to shatter, for any sign she wasn’t the only person here. She found none and her shoulders, pulled high with tension, lowered slightly as she forced herself to relax. “Food, Freedom,” she whispered, hardly knowing what she was saying.

“You can eat this grass, but I need people food.”

Yeah, food was a priority. She had been careful to ration the food in the saddlebag after the first day, but there wasn’t much left now. After she checked out the place, she would set up a snare and hope for a rabbit. This tumbled-down ranch house had part of a barn for her horse, and easy access to a creek. The creek would attract some small animals she could snare for supper.

After a quick pat for her exhausted horse, she left him ground hitched in the yard and approached the house cautiously. The wooden steps and veranda were in fragile condition, but that was not the whole of her concern. What if someone was here, just hiding until they could grab her? She doubted it, but even her exhaustion couldn’t shake off her paranoia.

A fast walk through the house showed it hadn’t been disturbed in years. Nor did it offer much. It was utterly deserted, full of dust and rotted overstuffed furniture that had obviously been home to rodents sometime in the past, but the undisturbed dust on the floor made it plain it was a long time since anyone had been here. The floors and roof were solid. That was all she needed. She could at least get a chance to heal up a bit without the house collapsing on her. She went back out to her horse and led him to the barn to get him settled for the night.

No matter how weary or hurt she was, Tami always took care of her horse before herself. That was the first thing she taught in survivalist training: take care of your transportation first. A vehicle with worn-out belts or tires was guaranteed to die at the most inopportune time. Human feet had to be kept dry and clean. The health of a horse could mean the difference between life and death for its rider. This horse was her ticket to freedom, so that was the name she’d given him.

“What a fine boy you are, Freedom,” she crooned as she loosened the saddle girth and lifted the saddle off his back. “So strong and faithful, so pretty.” Actually, he was homely with his black roman nose and nondescript dun coloring that matched the dull tan of the dried grass, but his large eyes still held some fire in spite of his weariness, and that made him beautiful to her. “We’ve had a long, hard ride, haven’t we? But you’re a hero, Freedom. You saved my life.”

He might not understand her words, but her tone hopefully encouraged him.

“Here, baby, let me get you tidied up, and then you can have a nice drink. The water in the tank looks clean. No dead birds or anything like that to spoil the water. I guess they’ve had some rain here lately. Thank goodness we haven’t gotten caught in it. It’s cold enough without us being wet, right? There, now. You can get at the water tank from here.”

She curried him as best she could and hobbled him so he could get to the driedout grass growing inside the barn, but not run away. At least, not without taking baby steps. She wished there was something better for him to eat. Some oats or something. But it looked like they’d both be riding lean. After giving Freedom a final nose scratch, she dragged herself and the almost-empty saddlebag of supplies into the house.

The broken windows she’d noted earlier were the source of the dirt and dust swirled on the floors. Her hiking boots left damning tracks in the dirt drifts as she walked through the living room. Anyone could see she’d been here. She thought the assholes had given up looking for her, but if what they had told her was true, any man who saw her could try to capture her. Her husbands said that in spite of her advanced years and unattractively short hair she was a prize any man would be happy to take, women being, as they put it, “so scarce and all.” Advanced years? She was thirty-four, for crying out loud. They had been playing head games with her. They said plagues after the nuclear attacks fifty years ago had wiped out nearly all the women in the world so any woman of breeding age was a prize. They’d said all kinds of crazy things to try to make her dependant on them. The morons thought when planes crashed, they leaped fifty years into the future? Their brainwashing techniques hadn’t worked on her. She was crazy enough to talk to her horse and expect answers, but not crazy enough to believe anything those men told her.

Standing in this deserted house with her arms wrapped around herself wasn’t getting anything done. She should get the rope out of the saddlebag over her shoulder to make a snare. She should be checking out the rest of the house. She should be doing *something*. Instead, she stood quietly in the empty living room to give herself a minute of rest. Dust danced in the slanted light of the setting sun. It was cold in the house, but not freezing. Her watch said it was forty-nine degrees Fahrenheit and eight degrees Celsius. Thank God the weather had been unseasonably warm. A person could freeze to death sleeping in the open with only a couple blankets, even in midNovember--or least fall prey to hypothermia. The temperature hadn’t dropped below freezing, even at night, and the daytime highs were near sixty. She prayed the good weather would hold until she found safety. Which had to be soon. Right? Please. Let it be soon.

Tami stepped carefully through the narrow butler’s pantry toward the kitchen, avoiding the wide strips of wallpaper dripping in curling, crumbling sheets from the top of the wall to the floor. The layout of this house was pretty close to that of her uncles’ 1920s ranch house. She guessed it had been built around the same time. The tall floorto-ceiling cabinets were empty except for mouse droppings. No canned goods, no jars of peanut butter, nothing. She would have to finish off the last of the bread she had taken from her captors and hope for a rabbit to eat. As she turned to leave the kitchen to set up her snare, something on the colorless, papered wall caught her eye. Stapled to the wall was a faded, age-yellowed calendar. For the year 2017.

For the first time since the plane crashed, Tami cried.

Chapter Two

It was the little things that kept a man alive. Tracker accepted the chair his potential customer offered and sat, ensuring the hilt of his long knife was easily reached from a habit so old he didn’t even think about it. He always expected trouble when he was away from the Clan, which was most of the time. He wasn’t expecting any special trouble from the mayor or members of the city council of Greasy Butte, but keeping his weapons easily accessible was just plain good sense. He’d never been to this house before, but within ten seconds of entering he had already mapped out three ways to leave in a hurry.

The mayor was a wide-shouldered man in a brown suit coat, about forty, brown hair receding from a tall forehead, with brown eyes slightly bloodshot, and a small pink mouth held tight. His three councilmen were seated side by side on a long sofa. Greasy Butte was not much more than a trading post with a transient population of thirty and a reputation for overcharging. The mayor and council were barely half a step up from thugs, but they dressed like affluent business men. Even so, Tracker knew each member of the council wore a pistol and at least one knife under his coat.

Morning light streamed into the living room through tall windows, right into

Tracker’s face. He shifted in the chair to protect his eyes. All three councilmen were watching him like vultures. He had been sent for because Mayor Leach needed a tracker. Tracker didn’t have a job. But if folks needed his help to find precious things and if it was convenient, he’d do it. If folks wanted to pay him, he’d take their money or trade goods. Money was easier to carry. Chickens and cows didn’t travel well, and he didn’t like things to slow him down when he traveled. Besides, the ladies over at Gabe’s Place only accepted cash money if he wanted to buy some time with one of them. Mayor Leach must have lost something almighty important. The message said Leach was willing to pay gold coin for this job. So how come Leach was piddling around instead of coming right to the point? The low coffee table had a flowery china coffee set on it, and it wasn’t just for decoration. Tracker could smell the rich scent of fresh ground coffee. Real coffee, not the cheaper mixture of low-quality coffee beans cut with roasted barley and chicory most people used.

“Coffee?” asked Mayor Leach, his hand hovering over the fancy china coffee pot that was probably more than a hundred years old. Matching cups and other pretty doodads were on the coffee table, too. *What was this?* Tracker wondered with cool derision. *A tea party?*

But Tracker let none of that show on his face as he dipped his chin a scant inch.

“Sugar?”

Derision shifted to surprise, but Tracker hid that, too, behind the same bland face. Sugar was expensive. So was real coffee. So how come the mayor was wasting it on a saddle bum with a knack for tracking? It didn’t make sense, and things that didn’t make sense made Tracker suspicious. He shook his head, and accepted the black coffee in its delicate little cup. It was a pretty thing, probably an heirloom from the Times Before. A cup and saucer wasn’t what he was used to, so he held them real careful. It bothered him that both his hands were occupied, leaving him vulnerable. He drank fast, one eye on the three council members.

The mayor smiled proudly at the coffee cups he handed around to all of them in the living room. “My wife is awfully proud of those cups,” he remarked.

Tracker hadn’t known the man had a wife. In fact, he thought the closest woman was Black Jack Baker’s wife, and she was twenty miles west of here. The cups were thin and delicate, so breakable that a full set rarely survived to reach this age intact. Could be the lady inherited them from her mother or some such, and she treasured them as a piece of her family history. For her sake he’d take extra care to not break the teeny little things. He finished the coffee in about four swallows and set the cup and saucer down, freeing his hands to lay them light and easy on his thighs. Then he fixed his eyes on the mayor.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I asked you to come by,” the mayor began.

Tracker was apparently expected to answer. “Sure,” he said.

“Well, it’s a…” Leach shifted in his chair. “It’s a delicate situation, you understand.” All the councilmen nodded in perfect unison. “It’s about my wife, Tami.

She’s gone. Well, kidnapped, I should say.”

Tracker didn’t move, but something grabbed hold of his gut. “Who took her?”

The mayor spread his soft hands. “I have no idea. I was at the store all day and when I returned in the evening my wife was gone.”

“When?”

“Almost a week ago. I sent my guards out to look for her, but they found nothing.” The mayor’s eyes got a little redder. “Please, Mister … uh, Tracker, help me find my wife. I miss her so.”

Tracker’s face didn’t show any emotion, but he felt a flicker of envy. A wife was a rare and precious thing. The woman stealers must have been bold devils to come right up to the house and carry a woman off. The house was a half mile or so from Greasy Butte itself, so maybe the thieves felt safe stealing a woman from her home, but he’d never heard of any thieves so daring. Why hadn’t Leach kept a couple of his guards at his house? Any man lucky enough to have a wife ought to take better care with her safety. Poor lady deserved a more protective husband than Leach. He’d do everything he could to bring her safely back to her home. Maybe Leach had learned a lesson in this.

The mayor pulled a small gold coin from his pants pocket. “I’ll pay one of these up front, and five more when you bring her back.”

One of those coins was more cash money than Tracker had ever had at one time in his life. Six of them would make him a rich man. With that kind of money he could buy him a turn with one of Gabe’s Girls once a month for the rest of his life. Maybe even a wife of his own… Naw, he couldn’t stay to one place, and he couldn’t drag a wife with him all over the plains. He nodded once, and slipped the coin into his waist pouch with a deft flip of his wrist. “I need something that belonged to her. Something with no one else’s scent on it.”

“Wait here,” the mayor said, and left the room, leaving Tracker with three hardfaced, suit-coated men who stared at him. In his buckskins and two blond braids that reached his waist, Tracker knew he looked like an uncivilized savage in this ritzy house. Like he cared. He considered the councilmen coolly.

“Did you know Mrs. Leach?” he asked. “Can you describe her for me?”

They shrugged. The black-haired one with the bushy beard said, “Kinda middle height for a woman, maybe, and bony. Not so young, either. Light brown hair cut too damn short, a nose too big, and a flat chest.”

“Shut up, Dwight. She might not be pretty, but she’s a good lady,” the youngest one said. Bruises ringed his eyes, marked his jaw. Must have been in a fist fight. Tracker used his senses to test his mood. Sad? Guilty? Maybe ashamed. “I wish I could have done something for her,” the kid muttered.

Dwight glared, then turned his eyes back to Tracker. “You just find her and bring her back here. We’ll take better care with her from now on.”

The third one smelled impatient and … cunning? Tracker inhaled lightly and found he didn’t like the sour scent of him at all. “One thing the boss might not want to tell you is that T-- his wife is touched. She don’t always make a lot of sense. But he wants her back, and he’s paying you a shitload of money to find her. A woman with small tits and a flat ass is better than none.”

The mayor was in the doorway, his face hard, eyes furious. “Steve, shut up! Talk that way about my wife again and you’re off the payroll, understand?”

“Sure, boss. Sorry.”

He didn’t smell sorry. Tracker kept his opinion to himself, but he wanted to make Steve sorry for talking about a woman that way. Leach should fire him for those words. The mayor handed Tracker a fist-sized wad of gray fabric. Tracker stood and took it. The texture was strange; it stretched when he held it up--an unevenly torn piece of fabric about the size of a dinner plate, with a curving hem at one side and an odd design smaller than a man’s fist painted in gold. He lifted it to his nose and took a small sniff. It took all his control not to growl like his wolf-born cousins. It was the most divine scent he had ever gotten a whiff of. And it belonged to another man’s wife. Damn.

“Bring my wife home, Tracker.” It might have been a command, but it sounded like a plea. Tracker could taste utter sincerity in him. “I want my Tami back.” He nodded once. “I’ll find her.”

Chapter Three

Tracker wasn’t his real name. His mother and father had named him Daniel He Continues To Leaf Stensrud in hopes that, like a tree, he would put forth new branches and leaves to grow their family. His cousins sometimes called him “He Continues To Leave,” because he only visited the Clan for short periods before leaving to roam over the plains. His adult name, bestowed upon him after he completed his vision quest, was He Tracks the Wind. His mother was Lakota and his father, who had died when Tracker was a toddler, had been Norwegian American. His father’s blood explained his blond hair and blue eyes, and being born a member of the Clan explained his tracking ability.

The Wolf Clan was famous all over the northern plains. They were respected by most, feared by many, and hated by a few. They were warriors as their ancestors had been and they protected what was theirs fiercely. Fifteen years ago, some townie men had tried to steal their women. Most of the women were killed in the fighting. Only Tracker’s sister, Stands Tall Woman, had survived, and the Clan took terrible vengeance on the thieves. Not one had lived. That was one of the reasons the Clan was feared and hated, but it wasn’t the only reason. Many of Tracker’s cousins in the Clan could change their shapes from man to wolf. Some of the townies called them devil spawned werewolves, but they weren’t werewolves, and they weren’t evil. Some boys of the Wolf Clan were born with a wolf spirit inside them. At puberty, or soon after, the wolf would take over the boy and force a shape change. Tracker had been told it was like a brutal game of tug of war between two beings and whichever had the stronger will won. It took months for the boy to learn to control the wolf, but once he did he was considered a wolf warrior. Not all boys had a wolf but they were proud members of the Clan.

Tracker was one who didn’t have a wolf. He had sometimes felt an alien presence within himself, but if it was a wolf, the wolf wasn’t strong enough to come out. A few of the strengths that came from the wolf were his, like the ability to heal quicker than most and to not feel the cold the way humans did. His sense of smell was even sharper than his wolf-born cousins’ and he could sense emotions. His uncle Muddy Wolf thought it was connected to his sense of smell, that maybe he was actually scenting their emotions. Some of his cousins, like Wolf’s Shadow and Taye, could identify some emotions by scent, but Tracker’s ability far outstripped theirs. His stepfather, the Clan wakan or holy man, said it was spirit magic. It wasn’t the same as reading minds, but he could usually tell when someone was nervous, or scared, or happy, even if they didn’t show it on their faces. It was one of the reasons he stayed away from groups of people. It wasn’t right to invade other people’s privacy like that. Besides, it made him feel crowded. He hated that. But he’d use his ability when he needed to, like when a woman had been stolen and he had promised to find her and bring her safely home.

Mayor Leach had smelled angry and desperate. Natural, for a man who was worried about his stolen wife. The youngest of the councilmen had smelled of guilty shame. Because he should have been able to find the lady? Tracker wasn’t sure. Something didn’t quite fit. Steve and Dwight had smelled of deception. Maybe it was just their nature, or maybe they had sold Mrs. Leach to the thieves? Tracker just didn’t know. But he would find the lady and bring her back to her husband. He had given his word, and Tracker had never once broken his word.

The lady’s scent led him from the house to a horse corral. After that it was mingled with the horses, and then faded completely. Tracker couldn’t scent a strange man with her, but there were so many aromas that even his nose was confused. Unless he got lucky and found her scent on the trail his best bet was to start asking people if anyone had seen her.

He started at the nearest town that had a drinking establishment. Woman stealers were either part of a community, in which case the community would protect them, or strangers, in which case they would have caused talk. Lacey was a sizeable town, holding near three hundred residents. As a stranger, even one whose reputation preceded him, he garnered more than his fair share of stares. Maybe folks were surprised by the way he inhaled deeply every now and then. He saw them taking in his Clan-style clothes and the blond braids that slapped the high back of his saddle and felt folks settle when they realized who he was: The Tracker, the loner who had an uncanny gift for finding lost or stolen things. It was known he didn’t bother women and the men he’d killed had deserved it, so folks mostly let him be. He let his horse stand in front of the bar and went inside to buy a beer. He sipped slowly and let the townsmen look him over some more. It was warm for the second week of November, but he wore his buckskin shirt and leggings with his breechclout and moccasins. He didn’t feel the cold like a pure human would and he’d rather not wear so many heavy layers, but clothes made folks more at ease. Talking was something he did only when he had to, and in order to get information on the woman stealers he would have to talk. So Tracker sipped his beer and made conversation with the bartender. He found out no strangers had been through for a couple weeks and that they hadn’t heard about Leach’s wife being stolen. Sure, they’d heard he’d recently found a wife, but none of them had seen her. Poor lady, they said. And Tracker could feel their sincere pity for the woman.

In the next town it was the same, and the next, and the next. Every few hours he pulled the gray fabric from the waist cord of his breech cloth and inhaled. The scent was still clean and sweet, and even sweeter now that his scent had mingled with it. With that aroma in his nostrils he couldn’t even imagine paying gold to spend time with any of Gabe’s girls. Leach was one lucky son of a bitch.

Tracker was only two hours from Kearney when he heard in a saloon his cousin Taye had found a mate. That was good news. Surprising, and digging little claws of envy into his gut, but good. Talk said his cousin’s mate had come from the Times Before. Tracker knew almost nothing about the Times Before, except what the Grandmother had taught all of them, and that there had been lots of women then, as many as men. What a crazy idea. Almost as crazy as the story his cousin’s mate had been dropped by a giant bird from the sky. He was close, so he decided to continue his search in that direction. Taye lived just outside the biggest town in central Nebraska so he had access to lots of rumors. Besides, he was family and Clan, and if he knew anything of Mrs. Leach or women stealers he would share.

When Tracker arrived at Taye’s den it looked the same as it had the last time he’d been through here. There was a tall chain-link fence patrolled by wolves, a grassy area for training, and the long one-story den itself sprawled inside the fence. After he’d been allowed through the gate and given his horse to his teenaged cousin Jelly, the first thing Tracker heard was a guitar being played and a woman’s voice singing. A woman! He stepped inside the den and went into the common room. The Pack were all wearing clothes, too, which was strange. Since Aunt Naomi had died Taye let his wolves dress as they pleased. And most wolves pleased to wear nothing. The music stopped with a jangle of notes, and the woman who had been playing stared at him. There were two other women on either side of her and one of those women had a townie man standing protectively beside her. Taye came forward at once to give him a bear hug and pound him on the back.

“Dan! Where’d you come from?”

Tracker tilted his head to the northwest. “I was close by. Thought I’d stop in and say howdy.”

“Good. I want you to meet my mate.” Taye urged him to the woman sitting in a large leather chair with a guitar across her lap. “Carla, this is my cousin, Dan Stensrud.

Dan, my Lupa, Carla.”

“Ma’am,” he murmured, a little heat creeping up his neck when she smiled at him. Taye’s mate was the Lupa, the Alpha female of the Pack. Like Taye, she seemed almost too nice to rule a wolf pack, but there was steel under the creamy sweetness of her scent.

The woman tucked her long brown hair behind her ear. “Nice to meet you.” A blonde woman was on her right, wearing a plain dress of blue cotton that didn’t quite manage to hide her boniness. The townie man Tracker didn’t know was standing half in front of her, bristling at him. He nodded to the man, and ignored the woman until Taye introduced Eddie Madison and his wife, Lisa. Lisa’s beautiful face almost made up for her skinniness. Taye began to introduce the other woman, barely more than a girl in age, with wavy blonde hair cropped an even length just below her jaw. She was wearing too-tight denim pants and a stretchy shirt of pale pink. Stretchy… Tracker instinctively reached to caress the fabric he’d tucked into the waist cord of his breechcloth.

“Where did you get that?” the younger woman demanded suspiciously, cutting through Taye’s introduction.

“Rose!” Carla chided. “Don’t be rude. This is Rose Turner. She’s, um, Sky’s mate.”

The younger woman’s fair cheeks flushed red, and Tracker could smell her anger. “Sky,” she uttered with loathing.

Tracker politely pretended to not notice this sign of discord in his young cousin’s mating. He would allow himself to be amused by it later when he was alone. “This belongs to a woman I’ve been hired to find.”

Rose turned to Carla and the other woman. “It has to be someone from the plane. See? It’s part of a T-shirt. They don’t have T-shirts here, not like this.”

Carla looked at the fabric he held out briefly before returning it to its place against his skin. “I think you’re right, Rose,” she said. Have a seat, Mr. Stensrud. Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

“No, thank you, ma’am.” Tracker took a seat in one of the wooden chairs and nodded to the dozen wolves in the room. They were all his cousins or members of the Clan, like Taye. He remembered all of them as babies, but they were growing up now. At thirty-four, Tracker was older than any of them.

Taye sat on the arm of Carla’s chair and put his arm around her waist. Tracker could smell their happiness and contentment. Taye nodded at the gray fabric tucked back into the waist of Tracker’s breechcloth. “What happened to the woman?” Tracker shrugged. “She was stolen. Her husband wants me to find her.” “Stolen? Join the club.” Rose smelled angry again.

“Husband?” said Carla, smelling curious.

Lisa Madison smelled like tears when she said, “Oh, no.”

Taye looked at him inquiringly, so Tracker labored on. He’d talked more this one week than he had in the last year. “I got word Tom Leach up in Greasy Butte wanted to see me. Turns out his wife was stolen while he was out. He gave me this--” He touched the gray fabric. “--to help me find her. I’ve been to every bar between here and Greasy Butte, but no one’s seen or heard anything about woman stealers. You hear anything?”

Taye thought about it for a minute. “I haven’t heard anything either.” He touched his mate’s shoulder. “You think she’s from the plane, sweetheart?”

“Where else would that man in Greasy Butte get a piece of a T-shirt?” Carla looked at Tracker. “Can I see it?”

He handed it over reluctantly. He didn’t want another woman’s scent on it.

Carla turned it over and spread it out for the two other women to see. Rose pointed out the small design on the fabric. “Hey, Carla, isn’t that the University of Denver logo? Wasn’t one of the people who walked for help wearing a T-shirt under a flannel shirt? She was tall, I think. Muscular.”

Carla agreed. “Yeah. I remember her. She was a park ranger or something. She was from Denver.”

Mrs. Madison nodded her angelic blonde head. “She was wearing khakis, and the flannel shirt was an ugly plaid, sort of green, gray, and dull gold. Her hair was brown and the short hairstyle did nothing for her. But she had beautiful skin. Her name was

Terry … or Tina?”

“Tami,” said Tracker quietly. He had to remind himself she was another man’s wife, and he had been hired to bring her back to her husband. “Her name is Tami Leach.”

“Yeah, I remember the name Tami,” said Carla.

Rose was stroking the cloth. “She’s not happy,” she said abruptly. “She’s going toward the mountains.” She closed her mouth tight and held the cloth out. Tracker took it and tucked it away again.

“Rose is a seer,” Taye commented.

Tracker looked at the youngster with surprised respect. The only Seer he knew was his stepfather. “Where is she now? How many men have her?”

Rose shrugged unhappily. “I don’t … uh, feel men. She’s scared and I think she’s hurt. She’s … crying.” The pale blue eyes clenched shut. “That way. West of here. Maybe a hundred miles?” Her eyes opened. “I’m not too good with distances. It’s not like this is an exact science.”

Tracker said something he rarely did. “Thanks. I owe you.” He stood. “Better be on my way to find that woman.”

“It’s almost suppertime,” Carla said. “And it will be dark in an hour. Won’t you stay?”

“No, ma’am, thank you. That lady needs help.”

Taye walked him out to the yard. “Sounds like this one’s gotten to you.”

Taye was nearly ten years younger than he was, but he had always been one of the cousins he got along with best. “Yup. Don’t much care to hear she’s hurt and crying. What’s all the talk about a plane? Heard your mate was from the Times Before.”

“That’s right. Same as Lisa Madison and Rose. They were in an airplane flying in the sky when it fell. Crashed about forty miles northwest of here.”

“The Seer. Rose. She really Sky’s mate?”

“His wolf chose her. It’s gonna take some persuading on his part, though.” Taye’s dimple flared. “Rose doesn’t like him, and Carla won’t hear of him doing more than longdistance courting until Rose is at least eighteen.”

Tracker winced. Could a wolf be made to wait that long without going mad?

“Tough on the kid.”

“Sky or Rose? Sky’s taken work with that guy who wants to get the rails operational. Quill and a couple boys went with him.” Taye put a hand on his shoulder. “When you find the lady, if she doesn’t want to go back to Leach, you can bring her here. The Grandmother and some other mates are spending the winter with us. We’d welcome another woman. I can’t read emotions like you can, but I could tell Carla doesn’t believe this woman is happily married to Leach.”

Temptation clawed at Tracker’s heart, but he pushed it back and mounted his horse. “I’m not a wife stealer. Her husband misses her.”

Taye’s face was serious when he looked up. “What if he misses being able to hurt her?”

Cold settled in Tracker’s bones. “Then he dies.”