# Chapter One

*Monday, December 29, 2064*

In the hall on the second floor of the Plane Women’s House, two angry voices rose in argument.

“You said you would switch laundry duty with me!” Krissy said. “So why aren’t you down in the laundry room, instead of up here?”

“I changed my mind, okay?” Liz snapped. “I’ve got a killer headache, and I want to take a nap.”

“You promised! You can’t just back out whenever you want to, you stupid cow.”

Connie Mondale, standing in the door of the apartment she shared with Kathy and Katie, gritted her teeth and counted to ten. Herding cats would be easy compared to handling a bunch of women. This was the third hissy fit she’d had to break up today, and it wasn’t even lunchtime. At least this one hadn’t descended into an actual cat fight. Yet.

As she entered the hall, both women turned and tried to outshout each other in their efforts to convince her why she was right, and the other wrong. A lesser woman might have gone back into her apartment, slammed the door, and let them fight it out. Connie wasn’t a lesser woman. She was a former Marine Corps pilot who had once flown combat missions over Iraq and Afghanistan, and held the lives of hundreds in her hands. She might be reduced to babysitting a bunch of undisciplined, whiney women, but she was, by God, going to enforce some sort of order around here.

She raised a hand to silence them. “Liz, you agreed to switch shifts with Krissy?”

“Yeah, but that was before Christmas, and I have a headache today!”

Connie kept her expression cool while she stared at the brunette. “Join the club. Tell Dixie I said you could have two aspirin, then get your ass down to the laundry room.”

Connie pretended not to hear Liz’s muttered, “Bitch!” In the Corps such a comment could have resulted in severe disciplinary action. Here, with no established organization of authority to back her, Connie thought it best to ignore such insults. She folded her arms and watched Krissy enter her apartment and Liz stalk sullenly to the staircase at the end of the hall. She waited until Liz had stamped her way down the first few steps before following her. The ankle that had been broken in the plane crash two months ago didn’t like stairs, so Connie went down the steps one at a time, hand braced on the elaborately-carved banister. She could have fetched her cane from her apartment, but she told herself her ankle didn’t hurt that badly.

The staircase ended in the open foyer of the apartment building. Two men stood there, apparently waiting for her. She couldn’t dodge them, not that she would. Whatever meager backing she had for her authority came mostly from them. Faron Paulson was the sheriff of Kearney, Nebraska and Steve Herrick was the Public Works Director, or the equivalent thereof, in this post-apocalyptic world. They were responsible men and wouldn’t search her out to bother her with petty issues.

“What can I do for you?” she asked brusquely.

Steve Herrick smoothed a hand down his long, silvering, blond ponytail and cleared his throat. “Ah,” he began, then paused to shift his weight from foot to foot, his gaze dropping from hers to slide around the foyer. “We’ve gotten the rest of the old wallpaper down in the kitchen, and you should see the tile and woodwork we found under it. Really nice. That’s something you don’t see any more, that kind of Art Deco design.” He gave a little chuckle. “Well, I guess you saw it all the time before you crashed here, huh?”

Connie wasn’t even sure what Art Deco was. The cornerstone of this old apartment building had the name Merryman and the date 1923 chiseled into it, so she guessed it was something from the Roaring Twenties. She hadn’t been born until 1977. Which made her either eighty-seven or thirty-seven, depending on whether you counted the years she missed when her plane jumped fifty years into the future. She liked to think of herself as a very youthful eighty-seven.

But why would Steve and Faron waylay her now to talk about the progress made on the building repairs? That could wait for their weekly meeting on Saturday morning.

Faron cut Steve a stern glance. “That’s not what we wanted to speak to you about. It’s personal. Could we go somewhere private to discuss it?”

Connie was mystified by the wave of red creeping up his neck. “Sure. Let’s just step into my office.”

Neither man seemed to catch the irony in her voice. They followed her into the little room just off the foyer, which might have been where residents of the building collected their mail once. Back in the day, this apartment building must have been meant to house the well-to-do of Kearney. The exterior of the old building was mellow brick, with a fancy bit of stonework above each window and an entry flanked by crouching stone lions. Every time Connie passed them she felt a glimmer of kinship with them. The lions were now broken and worn, but still standing. Although the place was rundown, the interior showed signs of former elegance. Even in this small room were signs of former glory. The brass fronts of the mailboxes were now black with the tarnish of age and the small tiles which made a red, white and black geometric pattern on the floor were broken, but Connie could imagine what it must have looked like. There were no windows in the small room, so they left the door open to give them a little light. Connie took the stool behind the crudely made desk, and they took their usual seats from when they had their weekly security and building maintenance meeting.

The men waited for her to begin. Connie rubbed her cold-reddened hands together before stuffing them under her armpits. “You have no idea,” she remarked, “how much I wish someone would re-invent electricity and central heating.”

“The next stove that becomes available is yours,” Steve promised, but faltered when Faron shot him a glare.

Wood-burning stoves were the height of heating technology fifty years after terrorists had nuked the world back to the Stone Age. She wished she had such advanced technology in her icebox of a bedroom. “No, the next one needs to go to Dixie and Jodi, so the girls being counseled can be comfortable.” She paused to fix Steve with a hard stare. “That’s not what you wanted to talk about.”

Faron leaned forward on his stool. “No. I’d like your permission to marry Donna Morgan.”

“What?” Connie felt cold air kiss her teeth when her mouth dropped open. “Why are you asking *me* that?”

“She doesn’t have her father or brothers here to give me permission,” Faron began.

“You don’t need anyone’s permission!” Connie’s ankle gave a vicious twinge when she began to leap to her feet. She carefully settled her weight back on the stool. “Donna can decide for herself who she wants to marry. And I thought you pretty much had it settled already. I mean, didn’t you take her out to the den for Christmas to meet your mom?”

“It wasn’t official then,” Faron told her. “Now it is. I’d like to marry Donna Morgan.”

“Okay, but you still don’t need my permission.”

Steve shook his head. “We want to do this right. You’re in charge of the women here, so you’re the one to ask.”

This must be what goggling felt like. Yes, Connie was pretty sure she was goggling at them. She blinked to force her eyeballs back into their sockets and flexed her jaw to be sure it was still hinged to the rest of her face. “You *both* want to da— er, marry Donna?”

Steve’s weathered face darkened further with a flush. “No! I want Melinda.”

These two men, one in his mid-fifties and the other in his early forties, were asking her to give them permission to marry women older than she was. It was one of the most surreal experiences she’d had in the past two months, and she’d had a lot of surreal experiences since the plane she’d co-piloted had jumped fifty years into the future, and crashed.

“Really, you don’t need to ask me. It’s up to Donna and Melinda.”

Faron’s round face turned stubborn. “We need your permission. You’re the one who stepped up to be in charge.”

Somebody had to. As first officer of the plane, and only surviving crewmember, she had taken charge after the crash. Afterward, when the women were rescued and brought here, it seemed logical for her to continue. She’d just had no idea what she was getting herself into. Commanding Marines was a hell of a lot easier. They understood the chain of command and the need for discipline, and they didn’t bicker over who should get which sweater from the donation box. She scrubbed a cold hand over her face.

“Okay, fine. If Melinda and Donna are interested in marrying you, you have my permission.”

Faron and Steve’s faces beamed as they enthusiastically thanked her and hurried out of the room to go find the objects of their affections. Connie stayed on her stool, elbows on the desk, forehead in her hands. Okay, now she was officially freaked out. Again. Maybe she should set up a chart in her room where she could keep track of all the crazy things she’d had to deal with since the crash, and add to it as things happened.

She glanced up when Kathy poked her head around the door. “You okay?” the older woman asked.

“Oh, sure. For someone who herds cats and gives grown men permission to marry grown women, I’m dandy.”

Kathy gave a no-nonsense shake of her head. She was close to sixty years old, a full-bodied, sensible sort of woman, whose thick, short, brown hair was showing a half inch of gray at the roots. Connie raised a hand to brush through her own white-blond asymmetrical bob. One side came just to her earlobe and the other side hung a few inches below her jaw. The once-chic style was looking a bit ragged these days; she was well past her usual appointment for a trim. But her hair wasn’t her biggest concern right now.

Kathy made a beckoning gesture at her. “Well, come on over to the kitchen. It’s warm there. And you can see what the walls look like without that nasty wallpaper.”

Warm sounded like paradise. Not on the same level as a Caribbean cruise, maybe, but close. Connie followed Kathy through the foyer to the Big Room, where Faron sat with Donna near one of the stoves, and Steve leaned close to Melinda beside another stove. It wasn’t young love, but they gazed into one another’s eyes like shy teenagers from the ’50s. It was almost embarrassing. Connie quickened her steps to hurry past them into the kitchen at the back of the house.

The kitchen was large and spacious. It still had two of its windows intact, so it had more natural light than most rooms. Why an apartment building had a large open room and a kitchen Connie didn’t know, but it worked well for their purposes. In the spring, the women planned to open a restaurant to support themselves. They couldn’t live off the charity of the mayor of Kearney forever. With so many men living here and no other eateries, the restaurant was just about guaranteed to make a good profit.

Connie scanned the walls. Steve was right, the big square tiles set in a Greek key pattern along the top of the walls brightened the room, and the woodwork below was beautiful. Or it would have been, if it were cleaned up and polished. The men of Kearney who volunteered their time to renovate the place would probably get started on that soon. She noticed someone had hung the oversized calendar one of the women had hand drawn back on the newly bare wall.

Today was Monday, December 29, 2064. In the square that marked today was the work schedule. The rosters for laundry, cleaning, and cooking were plainly listed there. Connie saw Krissy’s name neatly crossed out and Liz’s written below it.

Kathy stopped too. “It’s been exactly two months, hasn’t it?” she asked quietly. “The plane took off on October 29.”

“Yeah.” While she stared blindly at the calendar, Connie’s mind drifted back to that day. Takeoff had been textbook perfect and the first two hours of the flight had been routine. Don Wheeler, the captain, was telling her about the necklace he’d bought for his wife’s birthday when everything went to hell. The vertical wind shear they hit was so strong it disabled the plane. Inexplicably, all engines failed simultaneously. Like all pilots, she and Don had trained for every emergency imaginable and they worked calmly and quickly to retake control of the plane. Nothing had worked. The plane had screamed a metallic protest under the stress of air pressure, and finally had come down to earth in a barely-controlled crash that killed the rest of the crew and too many of the passengers. If only…

Connie shook her head wearily. It never did her any good to review the sequence of events from that morning, so she shoved the memory away. Besides, it just made her headache worse.

Kathy leaned closer to speak in a low voice. “You should stop blaming yourself. You and the captain did everything you could.”

“Not enough.” Connie heard the bleakness in her voice. “Too many died.”

“You’re not being fair to yourself. Some of us did survive.”

Connie’s laugh came out of her throat like cheese scraped over a grater. “Yeah. Thirty-one out of a hundred and fifty-two.”

Kathy squeezed her forearm. “That’s thirty-one who still have lives. Probably more would have died if you hadn’t fought so hard to save us. If we hadn’t gotten help from the Lakota, more would have been lost. God was looking out for us. The Lakota nursed us through, and they brought us here to Kearney.” She raised her voice to cut off any disagreement Connie might want to make, but Connie was silent. “Mayor Madison set this building aside for us so we’d have a place to live. We have big adjustments to make, I know, but we’re alive and safe.”

Connie refrained from asking why God hadn’t looked out for the hundred and twenty-one who hadn’t made it. “We’re safe because we’re surrounded by a fence patrolled by armed guards. Women being so rare,” she added, bitterness biting the back of her throat, “that we’re like gold in a bank vault.”

“Or water in a desert.” Kathy brayed with laughter. “When you’re my age, it’s nice to have younger men fighting over you, wanting to lap you up.”

“Lap?” Connie echoed, confused, her mind picturing a dog at a water dish.

“You know, licking. All over.”

“Ack!” Connie slapped a hand over her eyes. “Stop! Do *not* put that image in my head.”

She lowered her hand, and her gaze settled on the calendar again. She saw something she had entirely missed earlier. “Shit! Tonight is visitation night?”

Kathy looked at the calendar with a nod. “We had to change it because of the holidays.”

“Oh, shit,” Connie said again, with feeling. “My head is already killing me.”

Kathy brayed again. “Maybe you’d enjoy it more if you smiled at one of our visitors. Pick a young, handsome one and let the good times roll.”

Connie raised a hand to her temple to rub at the ache. “I think I’ve made it pretty plain that I don’t plan to marry, so there’s no reason to lead them on.”

A new voice spoke behind her in a quiet bass. “Your head hurts. I’ll mix up some willow bark tea.”

She turned to see Stag, one of the men from the Lakota Wolf Clan who had found the crash survivors and brought them to their camp for treatment. He had been one of the escorts that brought them from the Lakota camp on the prairie to Kearney, and had remained with them so he could court Sherry. His basement room, next to the one Faron was living in, was hardly more than a broom closet, but he didn’t complain about the accommodations.

Before Connie could tell him not to bother with the tea, he was walking across the kitchen to the cabinet where he kept his native medicines, dodging the cooks with lithe grace.

Kathy leaned close to whisper in Connie’s ear. “Isn’t it cute how Stag wants to take care of everyone? I bet he can be scary when he wants to, but he’s just so sweet to us.”

“Yeah. Sweet.”

All the werewolves were ludicrously solicitous about the women’s wellbeing. And didn’t that sound ridiculous? Werewolves were supposed to be scary. Bloodthirsty. Inhuman. But the Wolf Clan insisted they weren’t werewolves. They were merely men with the spirit of a wolf inside them, who sometimes changed into wolves.

Wolves, apparently, were as anxious as any other man in this place to find wives. They called them ‘mates’ not wives, but Connie didn’t see the difference. Stag had chosen Sherry to be his mate, but the petite woman wanted nothing to do with him. Stag persisted in his courtship anyway.

Connie glanced at the native man over by the stove. He wore only jeans, and his thick black hair was in two braids. It gave Connie a clear view of his perfectly muscled back. Kathy noticed the direction of her gaze and nodded approvingly.

“Stag would be a good choice,” she said in a whisper, probably because she knew how good werewolf hearing was. “Someday he’ll give up on Sherry, and you can snag him on the rebound.” She nodded again and walked to the pantry to fetch something one of the cooks needed.

Connie looked back at Stag. He was one of the most handsome men she’d ever seen, but it was hard to feel romantic about a man who had helped you pee into a cup when you couldn’t stand on a broken ankle.

His cousin Des, on the other hand, was even more handsome and he hadn’t helped her with any personal business. He also had an aversion to wearing any more clothes than was absolutely necessary, which left a good bit of his muscular body on display. Connie had no complaints about that. A man with a body like his was well worth looking at. She didn’t want to marry, but she had a healthy appreciation for the view he’d presented every time she’d seen him. Pity he lived a few miles north of Kearney with the Pack, instead of at the Plane Women’s House.

Sometimes Connie lost track of who was who in the werewolf world. There was the Lakota Wolf Clan, the primary group of werewolves who lived in teepees on the prairie like Indians in the Old West, and there was the Pack, who lived in an old motel they referred to as their den. From what Connie could understand, the Pack was just a stationary branch of the nomadic Clan, and Taye was the Alpha of the Pack. His word was absolute law for his followers. Des was one of Taye’s seconds-in-command. They must all be related somehow, because they all called each other cousin, and there was a definite resemblance. She hadn’t seen an ugly one yet, and she had spent quite a bit of time covertly staring at them while she recovered from the crash. Des was absolutely the best of a good-looking bunch.

She rubbed her temples again, feeling a little like a teenaged voyeur. There was nothing wrong with discreetly ogling a good-looking man. Des was more than just handsome, more than just well built. He was also her personal Sir Galahad. He had chased off Dick Dickinson and other pushy would-be suitors with a mere scowl, and on occasion had literally picked them up and removed them. He was quiet and grim, and hadn’t shown any romantic interest in her. Her interest in him was of the fantasy variety, the kind that showed up in erotic dreams, not the real life romance variety. But if he ever did show any interest in courting her, she’d be tempted to see where it would go. He was one of the good guys, and she could imagine falling in love with him. Hell, she was already half in love with him, at least in her dreams.

She accepted the tea Stag brought her. The stuff was nasty, but it probably would help her headache. Common medicines that could have been picked up at any grocery store were hard to find here. Whatever pain relievers the survivors had had in their purses were mostly exhausted now. Thank God the native medicines like the ones Stag brewed were surprisingly effective. She gulped tea down as quickly as its hot temperature allowed and handed the cup back. “Thanks, Stag.”

On her way out of the kitchen she glanced over at the calendar again and forced her shoulders to not slump. Visitation started in seven hours. Damn it.

# Chapter Two

One good thing about visitation night was that the extra bodies warmed the place up. Connie leaned a shoulder against the back wall in the Big Room, her cane balanced in the notch made by the fancy wooden frame of the kitchen door. With her arms folded and brows pulled low in a scowl to ward men off, she tried to think of other positives, but came up empty. She hated visitation nights, when dozens of men invaded the Plane Women’s House with the goal of getting one of the women to agree to marry him. Men in this time and place thought it was a crime for any woman to be single. Well, of course they felt that way. There were two hundred men for every woman. If a man wanted to get laid, he either had to travel to Omaha and spend an exorbitant amount to hire a prostitute, or he had to convince a woman to marry him. With so many men flirting with the same woman, the competition was fierce.

And it was a competition. Connie looked over the crowded room. Women were seated by the stoves, and the men clustered around the women like bees swarming around flowers. Some of the men were aggressive, some were charming, but all of them wanted the same thing: a wife. Faron Paulson and his deputies allowed only fifty male visitors in at a time, three times a week, and they controlled who was admitted. Faron limited the visitors to only the “good” men, those with the income to support a wife. *No lowlifes need apply, no sir,* thought Connie sarcastically. *We can’t expect helpless women to be able to decide for themselves who might be fit for marriage.*

Having a plane load of women magically turn up must have seemed like the best Christmas present in the history of the world to the men of Kearney. Connie inwardly snarled at the idea of being anyone’s present. She hated this set up. Hated being seen as an object instead of a person. Hated that all the women were being slavered over by men who wanted to force them into marriage. Most of all, she hated feeling helpless to change any of it.

Did it matter to the men that not all of the women wanted a husband? Connie’s gaze fell on Nikki, a young mom who had left a husband and two children behind in 2014. Her pretty face, surrounded by a sweep of tawny brown hair, was stony as she listened to three men from Kearney try to flirt with her. She grieved for her husband and children, and wasn’t interested in acquiring replacements. Connie could sympathize with that. Her gaze passed on to Jasminka, whose husband had died in the crash and who didn’t speak much English. She had an uncertain smile on her face, as if she didn’t understand what was going on but wanted to be polite to the half-dozen men surrounding her. Sherry sat straight in the wooden chair by one of the stoves, hands folded primly in her lap and face turned away from Stag, sitting on her left. The Native American man divided his attention between Sherry and the men in the room. Connie had seen his hackles rise more than once when a stranger approached Sherry. Sammie sat opposite Sherry. She was a nineteen-year-old college student who’d planned on a career in law enforcement, not marriage to some stranger.

And why shouldn’t she have a career instead of a husband? Connie ground her teeth, infuriated by the sense of helplessness that wanted to overwhelm her when she wasn’t looking. They didn’t require husbands to provide for them. In the spring they would open the restaurant. Kathy had decades of experience managing restaurants, and Renee, one of the survivors living at the wolf den a few miles away, was a chef who was teaching some of the women to cook.

Renee was living at the den because one of the werewolves had claimed her for his mate. Connie suppressed a shiver. She had tried to defend the chef from an unwanted marriage, but Renee had assured her she liked Hawk and was glad to be with him. Several other survivors lived at the den too, and one of them, Carla, had been claimed by Taye. Connie didn’t believe in love at first sight, but she had seen how Taye looked at Carla, and how Carla looked at him. If it wasn’t love it was a damned good imitation.

Katie, the blonde who shared Connie’s apartment with Kathy, sat at the nearest stove. She laughed loudly and playfully slapped the shoulder of one of her current boyfriends. Connie mentally shook her head. Katie was one of the women who enjoyed all the male attention. She and JaNae loved flirting with the men who tried to outdo each other in their lavish gifts and compliments. Katie’s voice rose above the low murmur of voices.

“I need the little girl’s room,” she told the six men hovering around her, flashing them a flirtatious smile. “I’ll be right back. Don’t any of y’all fight while I’m gone, hear?”

She detached herself from the cluster and gestured for Sammie to join her. The younger woman jumped up and abandoned her admirers without a backward glance. The two women walked toward the kitchen door.

Katie paused to grin at Connie, who raised one brow. “Why do you flirt with them like that?” she asked. “And why are you using that fake southern accent? You’re from Minnesota.”

Katie’s cheeks flushed and she hunched a shoulder, as if embarrassed, then she shrugged and her grin flared bigger. “I’m copying your accent. The men love it!”

Connie managed to not roll her eyes. “Are you ever going to actually pick one and marry him?”

Katie shrugged again. “Someday, I guess I will. But I’m enjoying myself too much to settle down with one yet.” Her hand smoothed down the curve of her waist to her wide hip and down to her thigh. “After more than thirty years of being too fat to attract a man, it’s a rush to have dozens of them fighting over me.” She winked and grabbed Sammie’s arm to tow her through the kitchen door toward the outhouse in the yard.

That was one thing Connie did like about the men here. They didn’t judge a woman solely by her body. They liked big women even better than skinny women, but every woman, no matter her age, looks, or size, found herself the object of blatant admiration. Connie had added considerable padding to her own hips since she’d left the Marines, and many men had tried to catch her attention in spite of her loud avowals to never marry. It had taken her over a month to shake Dick Dickinson off. Thank God he’d finally given up on her. He was the self-proclaimed richest man within hundreds of miles, but he gave her the creeps. He stood too close, spoke too loudly, and tooted his horn so often she couldn’t get a word in edge-wise.

Connie’s gaze sharpened when she noticed Stag’s head lift and his nostrils flare like those of a wild animal scenting the air. His head swiveled in the direction of the backyard and when he rose and strode through the room to the kitchen, Connie followed him. Men saw them coming, and melted out of Stag’s way.

The noise level dropped sharply once they were in the empty kitchen. It was quiet enough that Connie could plainly hear Katie’s voice raised in what sounded like a mix of fear and anger, and Sammie’s voice, quieter but with an edge of hysteria, sobbing. When Stag threw open the back door, Connie was able to distinguish words.

“We don’t want your money!” Katie shouted. “Let her go!”

A man’s voice was impatient. “Quit playing, lady, and tell us your fee.”

“I’m not a whore!”

Connie froze for a split second, but Stag leapt forward, running bare-chested through the snow. She recovered, and ran after him, not bothering to grab a shawl from the pegs beside the door. In the light of a lantern sitting in the snow, she could see Katie, shawl hanging from one shoulder, her forearm in the hand of a man Connie had never seen before. Her other hand gripped Sammie’s. Sammie was struggling hard against a second man. When she saw Stag she jerked harder to free herself, almost pulling the stranger off his feet.

“Stag!” she cried with tearful relief.

Something on Stag’s face made the man pale and let go of Sammie’s arm as though it was on fire. Sammie flung herself toward Stag, who caught her with one arm and passed her to Connie. Katie, having been hastily released, picked up the lantern, settled her shawl back over her shoulders with dignified outrage, and stalked to Connie.

“Take the ladies inside,” Stag said in a flat, even voice. “Get Faron Paulson and bring him to the kitchen.”

Connie opened her mouth to refuse, but he went on before she could speak. “I’ll meet you there in a few minutes, and I’ll haul these two in with me.”

Connie didn’t mind getting out of the cold, but the women here were hers. The paternalistic men of Kearney frequently neglected to include her in anything important, but she’d noticed that Stag and other Lakota always consulted her, so she reluctantly nodded.

“Okay,” she agreed, and gave Sammie’s back a little push to get her moving toward the back door.

“What happened?” she demanded as she stepped into the kitchen.

Katie set the lantern on the table and went to dip some water from the barrel beside the stove to start heating. Sammie was shaking, maybe with cold, maybe with fear. She dragged her shawl back up over her shoulders and clenched it tightly beneath her chin.

“We were on the way to the bathroom when those two guys walked up to us,” the nineteen-year-old said. “I think they were hiding behind the outhouse. Scared me to death! They asked how much I charged.” Her eyes gleamed with tears. “How much I charged?” Her voice rose an octave. “I didn’t know what they were talking about!”

Tears. Connie shot a quick, panicked glance at Katie over by the stove. She never knew what to do when women cried. Yes, she did. Retreat and call up reinforcements. “Okay, hold on to that thought. I need to find Faron.”

Faron was sitting knee to knee with Donna, staring into her eyes with the sappy lovesickness of a teenager with his first crush. Connie got his attention the third time she tapped his shoulder.

“Come back to the kitchen,” she told him. “We have a situation.”

The lovesickness faded as his eyes sharpened. She led him back to the kitchen and saw Stag had brought the two men in. Katie and Sammie were seated at one end of the wood-topped worktable, sipping steaming tea flavored with mint and other locally grown herbs. Relief bloomed in Connie when she saw Sammie had stopped crying, although she held on to her warm tea mug with fierce concentration. The two men were on the opposite side of the table, with Stag standing so close behind them they must have felt his body heat. Their shoulders were hunched forward, and Connie saw them flick quick glances over their shoulders at Stag. She’d be nervous too. She knew Stag was a sweetheart, but right now he looked as sweet as a mother bear ready to maul the fool who tried to steal her cub.

Faron stopped beside Katie. “Is there a problem?”

Katie inhaled the steam that rose from her tea. She shrugged and jerked a chin at Sammie. “On our way out to use the bathroom, these two guys stopped us. They wanted to know how much we charged.”

Faron’s jaw bunched, making his round face more angular. “Charge for what?” he demanded, voice hard.

The two men, one with dirty-blond hair cut very short, one with light brown hair worn longer, exchanged glances. “A fuck,” the blond said in a calmly reasonable tone.

Without meaning to, Connie clenched her fists. “What do you think this is, a whorehouse?”

The men looked at each other again. This time the brunet spoke. “Well, sure. The Plain Women’s House?” He was boyishly handsome when he smiled at Katie. Connie wondered if he were older than twenty. “I sure don’t know why they call this the *Plain* Women’s House. You’re really pretty.” He shared his smile with Sammie, then glanced up at Connie. “You too. Not plain at all.”

Sammie let out a slightly hysterical giggle. “What a pair of morons,” she told Connie.

Connie had to agree. She raised an eyebrow at Faron. His arms were folded over his barrel chest and he was glaring at the men.

“I don’t recognize you boys. Who are you? Where are you from?”

Blondie and his friend looked at each other again. “I’m Troy Hodson. This is my cousin, Bob Ternley. We’re from Bellevue. It’s outside Omaha. We’re visiting out at the Baranski place. Heard about the ladies here and thought we’d drop in. Try our luck.”

Faron looked them up and down with icy disdain. “You didn’t come in the front door.”

“Uh, no.” Bob picked at a loose thread on the cuff of his wool jacket. “We were turned away, so we climbed the fence and staked out the outhouse. We figured one of the girls would come out eventually and we’d see if we could make a deal with her.”

Again Sammie let out a peal of laughter as she lifted her mug. Her cheeks were flushed and she slammed back the tea like it was a shot of whiskey. Katie lifted the cast iron teapot and refilled Sammie’s cup. Connie wondered if there was more than just tea in the pot, and if so, if she could have a shot too.

“So you propositioned me.” Sammie laughed, as if it was the funniest thing she’d heard in days, but Connie heard the suppressed sobs edging her voice. “Sucky—I mean, lucky me!”

Troy leaned forward with a smile. “We have money,” he began.

Stag’s growl was utterly feral, and utterly furious. Troy and Bob jumped and jerked their heads around to stare up at the werewolf looming behind them. Maybe they were finally cluing in on how dangerous Stag was. “Mister,” one whined. “If we did something wrong, we’re real sorry. We didn’t know we did anything wrong.”

“Liar,” Stag snarled. “You knew climbing the fence was wrong.”

The expression of fright on their faces pulled another maniacal giggle from Sammie. “Dude!” she said, slapping the table. “You are so totally lucky it was me you propositioned. Stag would have buried you by now if I’d been Sherry.”

“You’re part of this pack and they frightened you.” Stag’s voice remained hard and flat. “I can still bury them.”

Sammie leaned forward toward the two strangers. “He’s really protective,” she confided in a tone she probably thought was whisper.

When multiple voices rose in anger and fear, Connie pinched the bridge of her nose to try to relieve her headache. Faron cut through the babble with a roared “Be quiet!”

Connie raised her head as everyone shut their mouths and stared at the sheriff.

He stabbed a finger at the two men. “This isn’t Omaha, and this isn’t a whorehouse. How old are you?”

Bob swallowed. “Twenty.”

“I’m nineteen,” Troy said.

Faron’s face was coldly condemning. “Old enough to know better. In Bellevue what would happen to two men found breaking into a compound with women?”

Two Adam’s apples bobbed. “We didn’t mean anything. Really! We’re sorry!”

Faron nodded at Stag. “Take them to Ray Madison.” He looked at the men again. “The mayor will decide what to do with you.”

Stag wasn’t particularly gentle when he pulled them out of their seats and pushed them to the back door. He cast a frown at Faron. “Your guards didn’t see them climb the fence,” he said with disgust.

“You’re right.” Faron sounded just as disgusted, with a big helping of anger added. “I’ll deal with the guards.” He waited until Stag and his prisoners had left before turning to Sammie and Katie. “I’m sorry you had such a terrible experience. Could you leave me and Miss Connie to talk now?”

Sammie blew out a big breath. “Sure. I’m feeling pretty warm now. I mean, better now.”

Katie gave Connie a smile that looked apologetic and helped Sammie stand. The younger woman appeared to be trying to stand straight, but she swayed bonelessly until Katie put an arm around her waist. Connie reached for Sammie’s tea mug and raised it to her nose to sniff the dregs. Then she pinned Katie with a demanding stare.

Katie’s smile turned into a wince. “It’s in the third cabinet in the pantry, top shelf on the left.”

As the two other women left, Connie made a mental note to dig out Katie’s stash and have a slug as soon as Faron finished talking to her. She pulled out a chair and sat, placing the mug back on the table.

Faron sat down too, and his face had a serious expression on it. “This was bound to happen eventually. A house with more than two dozen unmarried women? Most men think exactly what those two kids did, that this must be a whorehouse.”

Connie forced herself to loosen her grip on the mug’s handle. “So? They’re wrong.”

He looked directly at her. “Ray gave you this house and arranged for some men to guard it, but he meant that to be a temporary arrangement. We expected you would be married by now. We were planning to give you until the first of the year before talking to you about this, but those two morons have moved the timetable up a few days. Miss Connie, we have got to get these women married.”

She swallowed hard. “Not all of us want to be married. Not all of us are ready to get married yet.”

“I know some of you lost husbands in the plane crash.” He sounded apologetic, but firm. “But this isn’t the Times Before. You’ve had two months to mourn. It’s time to move on. Ray can’t afford to keep you here forever. We’re giving you the food you eat with no charge, and that’s expensive. So is paying the men who guard you.”

Connie spread one hand flat against the table, studying it until she steadied her breathing. “If you didn’t expect us to stay here, why is Steve Herrick wasting his time doing all the repairs and renovations? Why did you offer me a stove this morning?”

Faron shrugged. “Getting a sound building into good repair is never a waste. You know why this place was abandoned? Because this is the pest house where women were quarantined during the Woman Killer Plague breakouts. More women have died here than anywhere else.”

Connie gave a little shudder. She’d heard of the epidemics that had killed so many women after the nuclear attacks.

“And it’s winter,” Faron went on. “Most of the men volunteering to work on the house don’t have much else to do right now, and it’s a good way for them to see the women. But come spring they’ll be busy. Miss Connie, I’m getting tired of living in the basement here instead of in my house. When Donna and I marry, I’m taking her home to my place.”

A boiling mix of fear, frustration and anger swirled in her stomach. “We’ll be self-sufficient once we get the restaurant up and running,” she began, but Faron cut her off.

“The restaurant was a nice idea, but be realistic. Any man you let in the door is a possible woman thief. You would all be in danger.”

Her cherished dream of independence was running through her clenched fingers like water. “But the guards,” she protested.

Faron shook his head. “In a few months most of ’em will be working in the fields. There won’t be enough men to guard this place twenty-four hours a day, and without guards you’re vulnerable.” His mouth twisted wryly. “Even with guards you’re vulnerable, if tonight is anything to go by.”

“Stag will stay. He can guard us.”

She hated the pity on his face. “Stag is worth any three of my men put together,” he said gently, “but he’s only one man. What happens when he gives up on Sherry and goes back to his family on the plains?”

Connie’s head gave a vicious throb. “What do you expect us to do?” she demanded in a voice only the most stringent effort kept steady. “Pick some guy we barely know and marry him? What if we don’t?”

“Then Ray will raffle you off or hold Bride Fights to see who will win you. That way, instead of spending money to keep you here, he’ll make money.” Some sympathy colored his tone. “Wouldn’t it be better to choose a man yourself? You have until the Mayor’s New Year Gala to decide on one.” He pushed himself to his feet. “That’s three weeks.” He walked to the door and paused. “I’m sorry, but it’s for the best.”

Three weeks. Three damned weeks for newly-widowed women to find husbands. She controlled her urge to smash the mug on the floor. No amount of violence would still the helpless rage churning in her gut. Why the hell was this happening? Women weren’t objects to be handed out to men like door prizes. Marriage should be more than two strangers shoved together like a dog and a bitch in a breeding kennel. There had to be a way around this mess. She needed to find it. She *would* find it, but first she needed a drink or two. Or ten.

Connie’s eyes went to the door of the walk-in pantry on the other side of the kitchen. Third cabinet, top shelf. She crossed to the pantry, carrying the lantern, and dragged the stepstool over to the wall of cabinets. There it was. A two-quart–sized glass bottle of amber brown liquid, still nearly full. Score! She lifted it with a grunt of effort, climbed down the stool and grabbed a towel from the kitchen to wrap the bottle in. No sense advertising. Tucking the bottle under her arm, she strolled casually through the Big Room, calling cheerful good nights to the men and women still clustered around the stoves. Her cheerfulness should have raised suspicion, but no one looked at her strangely. Still trying to appear casual, she went up the stairs to her apartment.

It was freezing in the living area, and even colder in her bedroom. She set the bottle on the tiny bedside table, pulled up the three-legged stool, and poured herself a drink. In the months after her fiancé’s death, she had come to understand the allure of drowning her sorrows. She’d been careful to control her drinking. A drunk combat pilot could easily kill herself and her crew. Right now she had no crew, just a bunch of women who didn’t yet know they would be forced into marriage in less than a month. Getting drunk sounded like the plan for tonight.

The first swallow burned its way down her throat. Connie sucked in a breath and blew it out. Holy cow, this stuff was potent. She poured a second glass and drank it quickly, eyes watering.

She wasn’t crying, she assured herself. It was just the burn of the alcohol that brought moisture to her eyes. She never cried. Well, almost never. When Paul had been shot down by insurgents in Afghanistan, she had cried. But that was four years ago. She poured another glass and drank it down. She had survived three combat tours overseas. She survived crashing here. She had taken charge and given the survivors a leader they could look to for guidance. She considered herself a tough, competent woman. But telling women like Nikki that she had to choose a husband or have one chosen for her might take more strength than she had left.

Connie lowered her aching head to rest her cheek on the table in her icy bedroom, and wept.

# Chapter Three

Des Wolfe came to the gates of the Plane Women’s House just after nine o’clock that night. His feet in their leather moccasins moved lightly over the packed snow. It was cold enough that even a wolf warrior of the Clan needed something to protect his feet, and the wind had torn at his heavy braids every step of the three mile walk from the den, trying to unravel his waist-length black hair. The Lupa, the Alpha female of the Pack, had tried to insist that he wear a heavy winter coat. Even though Carla had mated the Alpha almost two months ago, she didn’t seem to completely understand that wolves didn’t feel the cold the way human did. A coat was unnecessary. After all, it wasn’t even below zero.

He nodded at the man who came to see what he wanted. The guard was so bundled up Des was surprised he could move. “I’m here to see Faron Paulson,” he told the guard.

“It’s late.”

Des lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “I have news from his mother.”

The man opened the gate, and Des passed through it. He found the house quiet and dark, although it wasn’t very late. The darkness wasn’t a problem for Des’ wolf sight. He went down the hall to the basement stairs. A soft golden glow of a lamp shone in a bar at the bottom of Faron Paulson’s door. The next room, belonging to his pack mate, Jumping Stag, was dark. He tapped on Paulson’s door.

When he opened the door, the sheriff’s tired face sharpened with alarm. “Des. What is it?”

Des strolled into the small room. “It’s good news. Your mother is marrying my cousin Red Wing tomorrow. She wants you to come to the den to give her away at the ceremony.”

Faron looked blank. “I thought they were already married.”

“Mated,” Des corrected. “His wolf chose her to be his mate, and she accepted his claim. But now they will be married too. Tami and Tracker are getting married, and she wanted to be married by a priest, so Tracker fetched one from Grand Island. The Lupa and the Chief are getting married too, and so are Renee and Hawk.”

A smile threatened to tug at Des’ lips. There had never been a wedding performed at the den in the twelve years he had lived there, and now there would be four. It would be a joyful event for the Pack. That was enough to make even a lonely wolf smile.

Footsteps so quiet only a wolf would hear them told Des Stag was coming down the stairs. Des turned to the door and spoke over his shoulder. “You’ll come? The wedding will be in the afternoon.”

“Of course I’ll come. My mother is getting married.” Paulson shook his head and spoke, as if to himself. “I never knew her. I thought she died when I was a kid. My grandparents told me my mother was never heard from again after she flew away on a plane. And here she is, alive, looking half my age. A miracle. Of course I’ll come,” he repeated.

Des left Paulson sitting on his bed, shaking his head over the wonder of reconnecting with a mother he’d thought was dead. Stag was in the hall at the door to his room, waiting for Des. With a nod, the other wolf opened the door and waited for Des to follow him in before closing it. They pounded one another on the back in a wolf warrior’s embrace.

“What are you doing here?” Stag asked.

Des allowed a brief smile to express his happiness. “Tomorrow Father John from Grand Island will perform marriage ceremonies at the den. Miss Tami agreed to marry Tracker, but only if a priest performed the ceremony. Since the priest is there anyway, others are being married too. I came to bring a message to Faron Paulson from his mother. And another message, to warn Miss Connie that Dickinson might try to court her again, now that Miss Tami won’t be available anymore.”

His heart rate jumped; just to speak the name of his unclaimed mate was a painful joy. The thought that another man might court her roused the jealous rage of the wolf inside him. Des forced the beast down with the brutal reminder that she didn’t plan to ever marry. She had refused them two months ago, just as she had refused every other man who’d begged for her hand since.

“I’m going to find Miss Connie,” he told Stag. “See you tomorrow at the den?”

“Yes,” said Stag, but he looked preoccupied.

Probably thinking about Sherry. Des didn’t know if he pitied the other man or admired him for not giving up. He climbed the stairs to the foyer, then went in search of the woman his wolf had chosen to be his mate. The main floor was strangely empty, but he could hear women in the kitchen. The motherly woman, Kathy, was there with two others, washing a few dishes and tidying up the counters.

When he cleared his throat at the door, the women put out a scent of fear that quickly faded when they recognized him. “I’m looking for Miss Connie,” he said.

Kathy frowned. “I think she’s gone to bed.”

Another woman snorted. “She’s not asleep. I was just up there, checking on her, and she’s in her room.” She coughed gently. “Not sleeping.”

Des cocked his head at the odd note in her voice. “Will you ask her to come down?”

The woman paused. He recognized her now. Katie. She and Kathy shared Connie’s living quarters. “You know, I think I should take you up to her.”

Kathy jerked in a sharp breath. “It’s late, and I don’t think Connie’s up to visitors tonight.”

His breath stilled. “She’s sick?”

“No.” There was a slight hesitation in Kathy’s face. “Not sick. Something must have happened. I think she’s upset.”

Des leaned forward, but before he could speak, Katie laughed.

“And Des is exactly the right guy to help with that, I bet,” she said blithely. She picked up one of the lanterns on the counter. “Come on, I’ll walk you up.”

He made himself match Katie’s shorter steps as she led him out of the kitchen. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know.” She pursed her lips and reconsidered. “Well, actually, I do. Two guys climbed the fence and caught some of us on our way to the outhouse.”

Rage rumbled deep in his throat. She stopped walking to glance nervously up at him. “Everything’s fine. Stag took care of it,” she said quickly, turning back to the stairs. “I think it’s more than just that, though. She’s acting weird. See if you can get her to talk to you.”

He would love to talk to Connie about anything at all. She was always pleasant when they encountered one another, but she barely noticed him. His heart thundered and he could hardly keep his eyes off her whenever they were together, but she showed more interest in her cane than she did in him.

At the top of the stairs Katie paused and called “Man on the floor!” before moving down the dark hallway. In a quieter voice, she said to Des, “I don’t know what’s wrong, but it can’t be good. Please, try to help her, okay?”

“I’ll help her.”

Something was wrong with the woman his wolf had chosen for his mate. Though she rejected him, and he was determined to not harass her with his demands, his chest tightened with the need to defend her from any trouble. Worry made his breath harsh in his ears. In spite of that, a sound caught his attention, and something perilously close to panic surged through him.

Crying. Almost soundless crying, coming from the apartment Miss Connie shared with Katie and Kathy. Panic was followed swiftly by rage. Without hesitation, he opened the door and flung himself inside, gaze sweeping the room to find whatever had reduced his strong, unclaimed mate to tears. There was nothing in the main living area, so he tore open the door to a bedroom. Connie sat at a small table, her pale blond hair untidy as though she had raked her fingers through it. She jerked her head up from the cradle of her hands to stare at him.

“What the hell?” she began.

“Who hurt you?” he snarled.

She rose from the chair to face him, chin up and mouth firm. “I’m not hurt.”

“Then what made you cry?”

Red bloomed over her pale face. “I’m not crying.”

Tenderness, a feeling utterly alien to his nature before he’d seen this courageous woman, swamped him. “Okay,” he said, attempting to sound calmly reasonable. ”I can pretend there’s no tears on your cheeks if you want. Tell me what *upset* you.”

She folded her arms with a glare that aroused him. Instead of answering his question, she attacked. “What are you doing upstairs? Men aren’t allowed up here.”

Did she have any idea what her strength did to him? Lust. Love. The two wrestled with his control. He wanted to crush her mouth under his, to feel her body molded against him. He wanted to give her comfort and assure her nothing would ever be allowed to make her cry again.

Before he could do something he would regret, Katie poked her head in the door. “Um, I brought him up. My bad. Sorry.” Her gaze went to the bottle on the table. “Should I take that out?”

Connie wrapped a protective hand over the neck of the bottle. “No,” she snapped.

Katie retreated half a step. “Oooh-kay.”

Connie jerked her chin at Des. “You can take that out.”

Des braced his feet and folded his arms over his chest. “*That* isn’t going anywhere until you tell me what’s wrong.”

Connie’s pale blue eyes narrowed. Then she briefly closed her eyes, drew a long breath and let it slowly out. “Look, Des, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. Really. But this isn’t any of your business.”

She was his mate, unclaimed or not, so anything that affected her was his business. His wolf demanded he fix whatever was bothering her. “Miss Connie, something is wrong. Maybe talking to someone will help.”

She scrubbed her hands over her wet cheeks and stared at him for a few long moments. “All right, fine. Katie, would you please give us some space?”

Katie glanced between them before closing the door. He heard her walk across the apartment and then the outer door closed. Connie seated herself on the bed and waved at the stool at the table.

“Make yourself comfy,” she invited. “But this won’t take much time to tell.” She splashed some whiskey in her glass and offered him the bottle. He shook his head, attention fixed solely on her. She shrugged. “To make a long story short, we all have to find husbands in the next three weeks or Mayor Madison will find them for us.”

Icy fingers gripped his heart. “What brought that about?”

She took a long sip and shrugged. “Tonight, two morons from the Omaha area climbed the fence and hit on Katie and Sammie. Thought we were all whores.”

Des maintained his calm, relaxed posture on the stool. He marveled at his own self-control.

“That’s when Faron sprang it on me.” She tipped the rest of the drink down her throat and waved the empty glass at him. “Madison never expected us to actually open a restaurant. He thought we’d all be married off before spring. Like women just can’t manage to exist without a man to take care of them. Ha! As if. Right?”

He waited for her to continue. When she didn’t, he ventured, “As if what?”

Her scowl showed annoyance. “As if. It’s a saying.”

“Okay.”

“So. Madison can’t afford to keep feeding us and arranging guards for the compound, so if we don’t find husbands on our own, we’ll be put up for auction. How is that fair?”

He could see the small signs of inebriation now in her too-careful speech and slightly too-precise movements. The room seemed to evaporate when she looked directly into his eyes. The connection threatened to stop his heart. “It’s not,” he said in a quiet voice.

“Do you think a woman can’t function without a man?” she demanded.

“No.” But he didn’t know how much longer he could function without her. If she were to marry another man his wolf would go into full rebellion. “Women are strong. They have to be or the race would die out.”

“Damn straight!” She banged the glass down and jumped off the bed to pace. He inwardly cringed when he saw that her limp was more pronounced. “Why does a woman have to be married? Think about Sammie. She’s only nineteen, for God’s sake. And Nikki! Why should she have to get married when she’s only just become a widow? It’s only been two months! No way in hell is that enough time to get over the death of one man and fall in love with another. Is it too much to ask to be left alone?”

“No. But the chances are you wouldn’t be left alone.” He could imagine it. A bunch of women in one undefended house would be a magnet for every filthy woman stealer in the state. His wolf screamed at him to do something, to save the woman he’d chosen. “Miss Connie,” he began, but words failed him.

She continued to limp back and forth in the cold room, her breath puffing faint clouds to stream behind her. “I wish to God there was a way for us to stay here and open our restaurant like we planned. I know we could make a success of it. If only we could afford to hire guards! If only this stupid, fucked-up world wasn’t so fucked up, we could do it.”

The bed groaned when she dropped back down on it. Her head sank into her hands and in a smothered voice she moaned, “What am I going to do?”

His big brown hands trembled when he reached for her wrists to tug them down. “I have an idea.” He swallowed when she lifted her face to stare at him with fresh tears gleaming in her eyes. “You might not like it, but it’s a way for you to open your restaurant and for all the women to stay here, single, and safe, for as long as they want.”

Cautious hope bloomed on her face. “How?”

“Marry me.” He kept his eyes on hers, gentle and steady. “With me and Stag and some other men from the Clan and Taye’s Pack living here, the house will be protected. I’ll make sure everyone is safe. None of your women will be forced into marriage.”

Her eyes unfocussed as she thought. “I have to marry you?”

“Yes. That’s the deal. You marry me; I protect you.”

“You *want* to marry me? Shouldn’t you wait for your mate? I mean, your inner wolf is the one to choose your wife, right?”

The doubt and confusion in her voice made him want to laugh. “You are my mate. I knew it when I saw you at the Clan’s camp. Why else would I have asked you to be my mate?”

She pulled her wrists from his grip and shook her head. “When did you ask me that? I don’t remember it.”

Well, wasn’t that a kick in the balls? He asked a woman to be his mate, and she didn’t even remember it. His empty hands threatened to clench. “You’re my mate. I asked you the day I first saw you in the Clan camp.”

She hooked her hair behind her ear. It immediately fell out again, but she ignored it. “I barely remember the first few days I was with the Clan. The pain from my broken ankle was so bad, I was out of it most of the time. I told you no?”

He nodded.

Her shoulders hunched, as if the ghost of the pain in her ankle slid through her. “You never said anything about it again.”

“You said you never wanted to marry.” He made himself relax. “I wouldn’t try to force you.”

“But you helped me with Dick Dickinson so many times I lost count.” Her eyes unfocussed again while she thought. When her gaze returned to him it was sharp and determined. “You have to promise you’ll never let any of the women be forced into marriage. You have to swear you’ll take care of them and keep them safe no matter what.”

“Okay.”

She stood up, her pale blond hair almost glowing in the light of the lamp. “Swear!” she demanded.

He stood too, looking down at his beautiful mate with fiercely triumphant joy singing in his blood. She was going to marry him! “I swear I will protect you and all the women in this house. No one will ever hurt them or force them to get married. They will be my pack and I will keep them safe at any cost. That is my solemn oath.”

Her breath shuddered out of her in a long breath. “Okay. Good enough. That’s good.”

From the way she twisted her hands together and looked everywhere but at him, he guessed she didn’t know what to do or say next. He took her hands. “We’ll be married tomorrow afternoon at the den.”

He could see that jolted her. “Married? So soon?”

“The priest will be here for only a day or two. There will be other weddings at the same time.”

She pulled her hands away. “Don’t take this wrong, but why do we have to get married? Can’t you just stay here for the first few months as a favor? As soon as the restaurant starts making money, we can pay you.”

Give up his chance to have his mate? There wasn’t enough money in the world for that. “No. I’m too selfish. I’ve wanted you from the moment I first saw you in the healing lodge in the Clan camp.” He dared to touch a finger to the pale hair hanging over her ear. “I’ve never felt my wolf so clearly. He chose you before I was even through the door flap. I saw you, so still under the blanket, barely breathing. Your face was as white as death, and your ankle was encased in the leather cast, and I wanted to tear the world apart to ease your pain. You were so beautiful, and it killed me to not be able to help you.”

Her eyes were icy blue, gazing into his. The connection between them reached into his heart and yanked. Did she feel it too? Her eyes widened. “Really”

Her lips were so pink, so close. “Yes,” he whispered, bending his head to touch her mouth with his.

She swiftly turned her head aside and stepped back. The slight hiss of pain when she stumbled shoved the missed kiss out of his mind. “Your ankle hurts. Sit down,” he ordered.

She drew herself up straight. “Sure, I’ll sit down. I’ll do it because my ankle hurts, but not because you’re throwing around orders like a newly-commissioned officer.” She jabbed a finger at his chest before settling on the bed. “We need to work out the chain of command. I can take orders, but I can give them too. If you expect me to be a meek little housewife who waits on you hand and foot, you’re in for a surprise.”

His wolf howled approval of his mate. She was strong and beautiful while she stood her ground and demanded his respect. “You’re my mate, not a meek little housewife. I don’t expect that.”

She studied him from her perch on the edge of the bed. “Good.”

“We’ll have three packs now.” The thrill of knowing the Clan was growing made him smile. “The Clan, Taye’s Pack, and now our Pack. I’m Alpha and you will be my Lupa.” He would need to recruit more wolves to be part of his pack. With so many females, they would require plenty of wolf warriors to protect them. He glanced down at his mate and saw the shadows worry and weariness put in her eyes. “We can work out the details later. You look tired. Lie down.”

Instead, she stood up, narrowed eyes staring straight at him. “That’s another thing. No sex. I don’t have to be head over heels in love, but I have to feel something for you before we have sex. I don’t know you well enough for that.”

He nodded. As long as she belonged to him, he could wait for her to share her body with him. Something Taye had said to him once came back to him now. Some things shouldn’t be rushed. A mate was a precious gift. Forcing her into sex might bring momentary gratification, but it could take years to rebuild trust, and without trust, the relationship would fail. “Agreed.”

She collapsed back onto the bed. “It’s been a hell of a day. I’m going to sack out. Are you headed back to Taye’s?” Her feathery brows, pale against the fading tan of her face, wrinkled. “Who will walk with me to the den?”

“I will. I’ll stay here tonight and escort you to the den tomorrow myself.”

“*Here*, here? Or do you mean downstairs here?”

“I’ll stay here.” He smelled her alarm and spoke quickly to sooth it. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“In the living room.” She made it a statement, not a question.

“No, here. In front of your door.”

She studied him from under frowning brows. “Whatever. I have to make a trip outside.”

He followed her downstairs and across the yard to the outhouse, and stood guard while she did her business. He lifted his head to the star-spangled black sky, resisting his urge to howl his triumph. The women in the house were sleeping. No need to wake them.

Connie Mondale was going to be his mate! Soon, he’d have the right to kiss her. Soon, he’d be able to stroke his hands over her strong, pale body. Soon, he’d claim that body and sink himself deep inside her heat and then nothing would prevent him from howling his victory.

He followed her back to her apartment and waited in the outer room while she changed into nightwear. When she called for him to come in, he settled himself on the floor in front of the door. She sat on the bed, wearing an oversized wool shirt and loose trousers, biting her lip. He could almost smell the battle that waged inside her.

“It’s cold on the floor,” she finally said, sounding exasperated. “Go stay with Stag or Faron.”

“I won’t leave you,” he said simply.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. Fine, you can sleep on the bed.”

“The floor is good. Sleep well, mate.”

“I said, sleep on the bed.” She sounded as though she were grinding her teeth together. “Just don’t get any funny ideas.”

“No funny ideas,” he agreed.

“Blow out the lamp,” she ordered in a disagreeable tone.

Alpha female. It made him want to smile. He suppressed it. Her bed was narrow enough that, lying side by side, their arms touched. She lay rigid next to him, under stacks of quilts, while he lay on top of the quilts. Her obvious fear that he wouldn’t abide by his agreement rankled . He comforted himself with her previous statement that she didn’t know him.

She would. One night she would know all of him. Not tonight, and perhaps not any night in the immediate future, but one night she would give him her body, and that would have to be enough until he won her heart and soul as well.

Inhaling the cold air perfumed by the scent of his mate, he slept.