# Chapter 1

*The Den outside Kearney, Nebraska*

*September, 2072*

Rose Turner wiped her sweaty hands on her pants and raised one hand to knock on the nursery door. Her fist paused in the air while she debated. Maybe she should talk to him later. Taye might not be in this room. He could be in the room he shared with Carla, his mate, next door. She blew out a breath, looking up and down the long, narrow corridor of the den to be sure no one could see her standing out here.

Why was she so nervous? The Alpha of the Pack might be feared by everybody for hundreds of miles, but she wasn’t afraid of him. Most people outside the Pack trembled when he growled. She knew for a fact he had killed men to protect and avenge women under his protection. But she had no reason to be nervous. No one in his Pack had ever treated her badly. In fact, they all teased, protected, and pampered her like she was their kid sister. She drew in her breath and let it out in a controlled sigh. What she wanted to ask would probably tick him off. Wavering, she dropped her hand and turned from the door.

No! She had put this off long enough. Chin high, she swung back and rapped.

“Come in, Rose,” Taye called.

With his wolf’s excellent sense of smell, he probably knew exactly when she arrived in front of his door and how long she had argued with herself before knocking. Rose swallowed and opened the door.

Taye Wolfe, the fierce Alpha wolf who inspired fear everywhere he went, held his two week old son against his chest and patted his small back with a gentle, rhythmic hand. The boy obligingly burped and then spit up a good portion of his breakfast all over his father’s bare shoulder. Using a square of thick cotton, Taye deftly wiped the mess from his shoulder, and turned his baby son into the cradle of his elbow to dab the little face clean. Rose was sure the fond, half-awed expression on Taye’s face was one no one outside the Pack had ever seen. Or would ever see.

He looked up. “What can I do for you?”

Yearning strengthened Rose’s resolve as she stared at Little Feather. The baby’s silky tuft of hair was brown like his mother’s, not the Native American black of his father, but his eyes were as dark as Taye’s. He was tiny and precious, and Rose ached to have one of her own. She looked around the room that held two small beds, one for Taye’s elder son Colby and the other for his daughter Patia, and saw a three-legged stool pushed under the child-sized desk. She pulled it closer to where Taye sat in the rocking chair and perched on it like a long-legged frog.

“Is Carla sleeping?” she asked, noticing the door connecting the children’s room to Alpha couple’s room was closed. “I didn’t see her at breakfast.”

“Yeah, the baby kept her up most of the night. She just finished feeding him and now she’s resting.” Love warmed the Alpha’s deep tone. “I’ll look after the kids for a couple of hours. So, what can I do for you?”

“I’m twenty-four years old now,” she began, and stalled.

Little Feather kicked his feet into his father’s side with infant vigor which made Taye chuckle. “We should have named you Little Mule,” he told his son proudly. His smile still lingered when he glanced back at Rose. “I know how old you are. We had the party just last week.”

Yeah, the party had been well attended by the Pack, and many of the members of the Lakota Wolf Clan had traveled to the den to celebrate with her. The Clan was nomadic like their Native American ancestors had been, and the Pack was an offshoot from the Clan that had settled outside Kearney, Nebraska. Their name wasn’t mere symbolism. Rose remembered the dizzy shock zipping through her the first time she saw a member of a Wolf Clan change from man to wolf. Now it was so common she barely noticed. Just as she barely noticed the Pack habitually wore as little clothing as possible. Taye had only a ratty pair of denim shorts on now, which was probably more than he liked to wear. He and the other men pointed out how much it cut down on laundry. It was an unconvincing excuse for going nearly naked, considering the Pack had given her several new outfits for her birthday.

Her fingers tightened on a fold in the cotton of her pants, one of her birthday gifts designed by Lisa Madison. “I know. What I mean is ... I want ... ” She swallowed, trying to find the right words. “When Ellie was twenty years old, she was a mother. She and Quill have four kids now, including Connor and Tommy. Lisa and Eddie have four. You and Carla have three. Tracker and Tammy have three. Shadow and Glory have five! Sand and Amanda, and Stag and Sherry, and Des and Connie, Marissa and Red Wing, and Renee and Hawk, they *all* have kids. Everyone has kids!”

Taye nodded at the door connecting this room to the one Carla was sleeping in, a warning to her to keep her voice down. “Yeah,” he said softly. “The Packs are growing.”

“I want kids too,” she said baldly.

Taye waited politely for her to go on as he rubbed his son’s head in soothing circles.

Rose steeled herself. “I want kids, but to have kids I need to have a husband.”

“You have a mate,” Taye said. His hand kept moving gently over the baby’s head, but his gaze was sharper now. “Blue Sky At Midday.”

Sky. Taye’s cousin had claimed her as his mate when he was seventeen. She had only just turned sixteen, so Carla had forbidden him to court her until she was eighteen. As the Pack’s Lupa, even budding Alphas like Sky obeyed her. “Taye, it’s been eight years since I’ve seen Sky.”

“Nah, it hasn’t been that long.”

“Fine. Seven years, ten months, and two weeks.”

Taye arched one of his eyebrows in an expression of doubt.

“Yes, almost eight years,” she insisted. “I got on the plane on October 29, 2014. The plane crashed on the same date in 2064. I’m not likely to forget that date, you know.”

She couldn’t forget any part of that day. She remembered being excited when she boarded the plane that was to take her to San Francisco to attend her dad’s wedding to his boyfriend Jonas. Her mom drove her to the Minneapolis airport, reminded her to mind her manners, and hugged her goodbye. That was the last time she saw her mom. Only an hour into the flight, the plane crashed. The memory of the plane falling in the sky wasn’t as vivid eight years later, but the feeling of shock and terror would never entirely go away. Stranded in the middle of nowhere with dozens of people who were hurt or dead was horrifying. How relieved she’d been when a hunting party of the Clan found the survivors and took them back to their camp!

She smiled now as she recalled the confusion that blended with her relief. Their rescuers were all dressed like actors in a Native American film, and none of them had had a cell phone or seemed to understand about laptops or tablets.

Nor would she forget the sick feeling in her stomach when she was convinced she and the other crash survivors had actually jumped forward to a time fifty years after the plane’s take off. Everyone she loved was dead. Her mother, her father, her uncles and aunts, her cousins, her classmates, and her friends were all gone. Even if they had survived the nuclear war and the plagues the terrorists created, she couldn’t possibly find them. The loss of life had been so immense there had been no one to keep up with technology. Without the internet or cell phones or even a reliable postal service, there had been no way to track anyone down. Even if any of them still lived, they’d be fifty years older while she was still young. In the space of one horrible day, her entire world had disappeared. Of course she remembered that date.

She focused her gaze on Taye. “And it was only a few days later that Sky claimed me for his mate.”

That brought more memories flashing through her. Her fingers clenched on the fold of cotton at her knee until her knuckles ached. The crash survivors had been found and brought to the camp of the Lakota Wolf Clan. One of the Lakota men had made Rose feel slimy. He stared at her and followed her around until she couldn’t bear it and ran into the healing tent where she knew others would keep her safe, and there she had first set eyes on Sky. Even now, all these years later, she could picture his long black braids falling over a bare chest with amazingly developed musculature for a boy of seventeen. She remembered the vividness of his eyes, so blue in his dark Native American face that even in the dimness of the tent they glowed. She remembered more, in a jumble of confusion and horror, like the way he stared at her, so protectively that she wanted to hide behind him and so domineering that she wanted to punch him.

“You sent him away,” Taye remarked.

She remembered to keep her voice down. “No, I didn’t. He left on his own.”

“Because you rejected him.”

She felt color rise to her cheeks, the curse of being a blonde with fair skin. “He practically attacked me!”

From a vantage point of several lonely years, she wondered if she could have handled it better. Her emotions in the weeks after the crash were nothing short of a train wreck. Who wouldn’t be upset to find herself thrown into a world where women were commodities made valuable by their rareness? She had gone from a life where her old-fashioned mom wouldn’t let her date until she was sixteen, to acquiring a bossy, jealous, would-be husband in the blink of an eye. She’d tried refusing Sky, and she’d avoided him as much as possible, but one day he’d leaped on her, shoved her against the wall and kissed her savagely.

“He scared me.”

Taye nodded. “I know. I had a talk with him. He was upset because you flirted with that man from Kearney.”

Outrage nearly sent her to her feet, but she clenched her hands on the edge of the stool’s seat instead. “I did not flirt. Sky overreacted. As usual.”

“Well, he was young.” Taye shrugged, careful not to jostle the baby in the crook of his arm. “He’s probably better now.”

Rose took a deep breath. “Taye, he was supposed to come back in a year or two. It’s been eigh—seven years and ten months, and he’s never left Omaha. I write him letters every month. He sends maybe two or three letters a year.” She took another breath and blurted, “I’m done waiting for him.”

Taye’s long mouth set in an expression of disapproval, but whether it was at her, or at Sky for staying away so long she wasn’t sure. “Rose, I’ve talked to Quill and Paint, and they’ve told me he has good reasons to stay in Omaha for a while longer.”

She shook her head slowly. “Not good enough. I wrote him a letter in July telling him he had until my birthday to come back, but he didn’t come, and he didn’t even send a letter.”

Taye frowned a little at that.

She steeled herself. “Taye, I repudiate Sky’s claim.” There. Her heart thundered in her ears, but it was out. “If this was the Times Before, being unmarried at twenty-four would be normal. I’d probably be working on my doctorate. But I can’t do that here.” She blinked tears back and gestured at the sleeping baby. “Back then I didn’t expect to start my family until I was thirty or so, but here I’m the only woman my age who doesn’t have kids. I’ve never even—” She choked words back. Taye knew she’d never had sex; he and the Pack made sure she was never alone. “I want to hold a baby of my own. I want a family. Sky isn’t here. I don’t think he ever will be. I want to find a husband now.”

Taye’s brows dove down over his nose. “Did you have anyone in mind?”

She felt a blush set fire to her cheeks again. “Well, uh, Jasper Packard is nice, and he has a good business breaking and training horses.”

Taye’s voice was very soft, but not because of the baby sleeping in his arm. It was the tone that made ice slide down the backs of men confronted by an enraged Alpha. “Has he done anything to—”

“Of course not!”

Little Feather jerked in his father’s arm, letting out a thin wail. He settled again with a fretful whimper under his father’s gentle hand.

“Sorry,” Rose said, lowering her voice. “Sorry. No, Jasper has barely spoken to me. Probably because the Pack won’t let him within ten feet of me. Do you know anything bad about Jasper?”

The Alpha didn’t look very happy about it, but he shook his head. “He’s a good man, from what I can tell. Raises some of the best horses around, and treats them well too.”

Rose let out a relieved breath. “All I ask is that you tell the Pack to back off. Let me have a little time with Jasper so we can get to know each other. Maybe we’ll hit it off. Maybe we won’t. I can’t tell if I don’t get to know him, right?”

“What if Packard doesn’t want you?”

Rose gave him the incredulous look that remark deserved. There were so few women nowadays that men fought for them. Any single man would jump at the chance to court a woman. “If we don’t hit it off, there’s Doug Grey or Johnny Sommers.”

Taye shifted the baby to his other arm, looking dissatisfied. “Grey is too old for you.”

“He’s thirty-five, only a few years older than you. He comes from a big family, so I’d have plenty of people to help me with housework. And his cousin is Ellie, so he already has ties to the Pack.” She lifted a gaze that she forced any hint of pleading from. “Will you tell the Pack to back off?”

Still looking sour, Taye nodded. “All right. You can talk to men in public places. But you can’t be alone with them.”

“No, I won’t.” Rose nodded back, long ago having accepted the dangerous position of women in this crazy future world and the lengths the Pack would go to in order to keep their women safe. She couldn’t imagine anyone stupid enough to try to steal her. Everyone in a hundred miles knew she was under the protection of a pack of wolf shifters. Still, women were stolen from time to time, and she didn’t want Taye or any of his men to have to kill someone just because he was an idiot.

“Thank you, Taye.”

He pointed a finger at her. “But I’m writing one more time to Sky. If we don’t hear from him by Halloween you can be formally courted.”

“But I can at least talk to men now? Get to know them?”

A low, unhappy growl rumbled in his throat. “All right.”

She jumped off the stool to hug him, careful of the baby. “Thank you, Taye!”

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Sky Wolfe sat down to breakfast alone in the dining room of the whorehouse he managed and co-owned. He enjoyed these quiet moments before the rest of the house roused. Katelyn Jones, the new maid, came in with the coffeepot and a folded square of grimy paper in her hand.

“A letter for you,” she said in her soft mumble, setting it down on the table. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Sky made it a point to be courteous to all his employees, and something about Miss Jones, with her club foot, perpetually anxious face, and speech difficulties, brought out the pity he never let anyone see. Just two months ago he had arranged for her to leave her former place of employment where she had been beaten and abused, and she still hadn’t learned to believe she was safe here.

While she lifted his cup to pour coffee, he slathered butter over a slice of toast and bit into it before opening the letter to read. The shock of his wolf screaming inside him almost distracted him from the content of the letter, but not quite. He slammed the paper onto the table and choked on the toast.

“Fuck!”

He regretted the outburst the moment he saw the terror that flared in Katelyn’s pale green eyes. The coffee pot hit the table with a thud, sloshing a bit of the hot beverage over the tablecloth. She cringed away from the hand he raised in apology and rushed out of the dining at a limping run. He swore again. He hadn’t lost his temper in years. During those years, the wolf within him had withdrawn into sullen silence. Only this kind of news could drag the stubborn beast back to life after all this time. With his teeth clenched together, Sky took up the letter again.

*“Cousin, your mate is not willing to wait for you anymore. I have given my permission for her to see other men so she can find a husband to give her children. If you want to keep your mate, come at once. Taye”*

Damn it! He crumpled the note in his fist and hurled it at the wall. The limp, lifeless thud of the paper didn’t satisfy him so he did it again with his coffee cup.

“Sky?” Ms. Mary, his business partner, hesitantly poked her head around the door. “What on earth is going on? Katelyn nearly ran me over in the hall. She looked like she was being chased by all the devils of hell.”

“No,” he muttered, glaring at the spray of coffee over the pale wallpaper and the shattered bits of his cup littering the rug by the wall. “Just me. I’ve had bad news.”

“Oh, no.” She came into the room, wrapped in a frilly pink robe better suited to a woman a third her age. “What is it?”

He let her put a motherly arm around him. She had acted like a mother ever since that day nearly eight years ago, when he and Quill had rescued her from a gang of men intent on doing her harm. Neither he nor Quill had understood exactly what was going on. They’d only seen a lady alone on a city street being pushed around by a bunch of men, and had acted according to the standards they’d been raised with. When a man of the Lakota Wolf Clan saw a woman in trouble, they stepped in to keep her safe. She had thanked them by bringing them home with her and giving them jobs. It had been the beginning of a new life for him.

“Do you remember that first day, when you brought me and Quill here?” he asked.

If she thought the topic was odd, she didn’t say so. “Oh, sure. You boys did me a big favor that day. You didn’t know what you put yourselves in the middle of.”

“We didn’t then,” he agreed, moving over to seat her in the mistress of the house’s place at the foot of the table. She sat and let him pour her a cup of coffee. Instead of moving to his usual spot at the head of the table, he sat close to her and sighed. “We were such hicks.”

The woman he and Quill saved that day wasn’t just anyone. She was Ms. Mary, owner of one of Omaha’s whorehouses, and she’d been set on by hirelings of other whorehouse owners to teach her a lesson.

“You hired us to be security when no one else would hire us for anything at all,” he said softly. “We might have starved if you hadn’t been so generous.”

“Generous! I couldn’t even afford to pay you wages, and you refused to allow me to pay you in services. Any of the girls would have been happy to give the two of you as many freebies as you liked, but you never accepted their offers.” She looked at him with shrewd, brown eyes. Someone who didn’t know her well would be misled by her innocent face and silly clothes. With her thin silver hair rising like dandelion fluff around her plump face, she looked like a perpetually surprised and confused elderly angel. Sky knew better.

Ms. Mary took a sip of coffee. “You said you had a girl waiting for you at home. Is this about her?”

Somehow, she always knew what was wrong with him. Townspeople discounted the possibility of magic, but he was Lakota, and his people knew the world was full of more than what could only be seen or touched. “Yes.” He clenched a hand on the arm of his chair. “I have to leave.”

“Now?” Dismay rang in her voice. “But the meeting with the City Council is this afternoon.”

“I know.” He dragged a hand over his jaw. “Joe will have to represent us.”

“Joseph Sullivan is a good man, and a fine lawyer, but he doesn’t command the respect you do in the City. They won’t listen to him.”

“I know,” he said again. “But the train leaves this morning. There isn’t another one to Kearney for a week. I can’t wait that long.”

She leaned over the table to lay a hand spotted with age on his shoulder. “Sky, we’ve worked to change this law for *years*. Without your voice during the hearings, it very well might go against us. Can’t you put this other thing off for just a week?”

How long would it take Rose to find another husband? When had Taye written his letter? The wolf inside him, who was hardly more than a stranger to him these days, howled. Sky tried to cover it with a cough, but by the startled look on Ms. Mary’s face he hadn’t succeeded.

“No, I can’t put this off. I must go or I might find my wife married to another man.” He pushed his chair back and went to the crumpled letter on the floor and picked it up. “Have someone find Joe and send him up to my room.”

“All right,” she called after him and then muttered in a low tone that only his wolf-born hearing allowed him to catch, “I told you she wouldn’t wait forever.”

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One week after her talk with Taye, Rose walked up the wooden steps to Martin’s Trading Store, followed by her escort. Today was her first trip into Kearney since Taye’s agreement that she could talk with men. Not that she never spoke with men, of course, but those conversations revolved around the weather, their wives and children, or other safe topics that wouldn’t rile an over-protective wolf. This would be her first chance to really talk with a guy. And her private inner radar told her Jasper was near. From the time she was in seventh grade she just sometimes knew where things or people were. No one at home ever believed her, but the Pack accepted her weird ability without question.

She paused on the top step so White Horse could enter the store first. She waited for him to come back and nod that it was safe for her to enter. Three of the wolves in man form scattered inside the store to take up watch posts, and White Horse stationed himself near the door. With Stone flanking her on her right and Paint on her left, she walked into the store.

She loved coming to this store. She couldn’t catch scents the way the wolves could, but she could tell someone had made up a new batch of potpourri and the wood floor had recently been polished with lemon. Eight years ago she might have thought a general store quaint. Well, no, she wouldn’t have used a word like quaint. She probably would have said it was boring. But now, with no mall to hang out at and no mega discount stores, the Martins’ place was her favorite place to shop. They had a little bit of everything, and Hannah Martin was half of Lisa & Hannah, the duo who created designer clothes that were in high demand from Denver to Omaha.

Hannah smiled at her from the counter. “Good morning, Rose. Be with you in a minute.”

“No rush. We have a shopping list from the den for you to fill, but I’ll just pick out some yarn for my winter knitting until you’re free.”

A six year old boy barreled out from behind the counter. “Rose,” he shrieked, and flung himself on her. “Guess what? I start school tomorrow! My first time! Jack gets to go too, but he’s already gone for four years, so he doesn’t care. But I do! It’ll be fun, won’t it?”

“I bet it will, Petey,” she agreed, smiling down into his excited face. What would it be like to have a little boy of her own? Her smile grew when she remembered she would soon have a chance to find out. “I’ll be back in town next week. You can tell me all about it then. I can’t wait to hear how you like school.”

His small white teeth showed in a big grin. “I heard there’s gonna be two girls in my class.”

Rose made her expression appropriately impressed. “Two? Imagine that.”

Petey agreed with vigorous nods. “Dad says I have to be especially nice to them or the wolves will eat me up.” He sent a nervous sidelong glance at Paint, who was rather fierce looking with his scarred face and eye patch. She saw Paint’s mouth twitch with a suppressed smile. “Will they really eat me?” the boy whispered.

She leaned down to whisper back. “No. Just be nice and they won’t hurt you.”

He thought it over for a moment. “Okay. Come on. I’ll show you where the yarn is!”

She knew perfectly well where the yarn could be found. The store was one big room crowded with everything from nails to toiletries to bolts of fabric. She stroked a hand through Petey’s hair. “Okay, you show me.”

She followed him past the aromatic sacks of coffee beans, around a display of cups and plates, and past a few other customers. She knew most of them, but one, standing beside Paul Cruz from Odessa, was a stranger. She gave Paul a polite nod but didn’t pause to speak to him because she saw the very man she’d hoped to find in town a little ways past him. Jasper Packard, tall and lean in a work shirt and jeans, with his sandy hair long enough to brush his shirt collar, stood at a barrel, counting out nails.

Rose zeroed in on him with a flutter in her stomach. She walked up to him with a smile she couldn’t control. She hoped she didn’t look like a clown as she struggled to make her smile small and friendly. “Good morning, Jasper.”

He smiled back and his hand lifted as if to touch her, but a glance at Stone made him drop his hand. Too bad. Stone’s face wore its usual cold expression, but he wasn’t growling or showing his teeth, which would have been his reaction a week ago. “Good morning, Miss Rose,” Jasper said, his tone cautiously friendly.

Rose had to use a little force to get past Stone, but she managed it. She didn’t quite have the nerve to lay a hand on Jasper’s arm, but she kept her gaze and her smile fixed on his face. He wasn’t the most handsome man in Kearney, or the richest, but she liked him a lot. He had passed Taye’s exacting standards for what sort of man was allowed to court her. Jasper would make a great husband and father.

“So, any new foals?” she asked, at the exact moment he said, “Nice to have cooler weather.”

They both blushed and stammered for a minute. Jasper mimicked drawing a zipper closed over his mouth and gestured for her to speak.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I love summer, but by September I’m always glad for the cool nights and less heat. Too bad it’s followed by winter, though.”

His smile was sympathetic. “My brother feels exactly like you do. He likes the warmth of June, July and August, but after that he’s done with summer and ready for fall. Um, how is Flora working out for you?”

They were almost flirting! At least, she thought this was flirting. Maybe? Well, perhaps talking about her horse wasn’t quite flirting. “Wonderful. I rode her to town today.” Duh. Rose almost slapped herself. He knew she always rode Flora to town while her guards walked. “She’s in the stable behind the Plane Women’s House. I know your dad bred her, but you trained her, didn’t you?” She fixed what she hoped was an admiring expression on her face. “Taye says you are one of the best horse trainers in the region.”

His lean suntanned cheeks darkened a little. “That means something, coming from him.”

She moved a step closer, closer than she had ever been to a man outside the Clan or Pack, and shot a warning glare at Stone before smiling again at Jasper. “I wonder if you’d like to join m—us for lunch at the Plane Women’s Eatery today around one o’clock?”

His flush darkened, then drained away as he sent an alarmed glance at Stone and Paint. “I—I—Are you sure?” he blurted.

Paint grunted. Stone folded his arms and glowered, but neither said anything. “Yes,” she said firmly. “I’d really like that.”

His grin emerged triumphant. “I would like that, too. One o’clock.”

Relief eased her shoulders. “Yes, one o’clock. We can eat, and then maybe watch the train come in?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “That sounds good.” He scooped up the nails he’d been counting. “I’ll see you then.”

Rose watched him walk to the counter with a jaunty step and hardly suppressed a skip herself. She had a date! For the second time in her life, she had a date. Her first date was had been when she was in tenth grade, with Greg ... Gary? She wasn’t sure about the name. Her life in the Times Before was distant from the here and now. They went to see a movie, but she couldn’t remember which one, and in the car when they were idling at a stop light he stuck his tongue down her throat. Rose shuddered at that memory. Even Sky’s attack had been less gross than that kiss.

This date would be different. For one thing, she and Jasper would be chaperoned by her escort, and by Des and his Plane Women’s House Pack. In the unlikely event of Jasper trying to stick his tongue down her throat, blood would be shed, and he would probably be short a tongue. As for entertainment, watching the weekly train arrive at the station was the height of excitement around here. Half the town would show up to watch the few passengers disembark and the freight be unloaded. They wouldn’t be alone, so Taye couldn’t complain.

Petey broke into her thoughts by poking her in the side. “Look!” he said, pointing to a rainbow of yarn hanging on hooks on the far wall. “We gots lots of yarn. Whatcha gonna make?”

As Rose moved toward the yarn she heard an unfamiliar voice murmur, “That’s her, isn’t it? The one they call the Princess of the Wolves? Nice ass.”

A low growl seeped from Stone’s throat. Eight years with a pack of wolves gave her the training needed to prevent bloodshed. She wheeled and grabbed his arm just as he lunged at the stranger. Her weight was negligible compared to a wolf’s strength, but it stopped Stone dead. The fingers that were mere inches from the stranger’s throat curled into fists. The stranger stood frozen, eyes horrified circles in his suddenly white face.

“Just ignore it,” she hissed. “Help me pick out yarn for new socks.”

Two years ago, Stone would have joined in yarn shopping with boyish enthusiasm. Now he cast one last icy glare at the stranger before folding his arms and standing like a guard dog at her side while she surveyed the wall of yarn. She tried to distract him by asking his opinion of the red compared to the blue yarn. He grunted at her choices, continuing to keep most of his attention on the stranger. From the peek Rose snuck at Paul and his companion, she could see the stranger’s face hadn’t regained its color. Moron. What kind of idiot whispered things about her when she was surrounded by her Pack escort? Did he not know they could hear a pin drop in the next room? And did he not realize that his comment on her anatomy bothered her less than his comment about her being the Princess of the Pack?

“I love how they wet themselves whenever we scare them,” Stone said with a sneer.

Irritation made her toss a skein of vivid blue yarn away.

“That one would match Sky’s eyes,” Paint remarked. “Are you going to make him a pair of socks for Christmas again?”

“No.” She had knit her supposed mate socks for Christmas for the past several years, but no more. She had waited for him for eight years, but she wasn’t waiting any longer. Jasper’s eyes were mossy green. She scanned the wall of yarn for something in that color.

Nathan Martin, Hannah’s husband and the owner of the store, approached with a respectful smile. “Good morning, Miss Turner. Do you have the shopping list for the den?”

She nodded at Paint, who handed it over. It took Nathan and his elder son Jack about twenty minutes to collect the items on the list, and she spent the time planning a sweater and a pair of socks to knit for the man she was sure she would marry. She made her yarn selections and brought them to the front counter, still smiling.

The men of her escort had the extra strength that the wolves within gave them. Standing Bear hefted two one hundred pound sacks of sugar to his shoulders with no sign of stress and three of the other men were similarly loaded. Only Stone and Paint were unburdened, alert for any trouble. Rose occupied the safe place in the middle of the group as they walked to the Plane Women’s House. Rose smirked to herself. Jasper didn’t know it yet, but he was about to become prey for a woman who learned to hunt from wolves.

# Chapter 2

Des Wolfe, the Alpha of the small Plane Women’s House Pack, met Rose and her escort at the door of the Eatery, his face even more grim than usual. His dark eyes fixed on Paint. “That Packard boy is here. He says he’s eating lunch with Rose.”

His tone indicated his willingness to pitch Jasper out a window. When Rose first saw the Plane Women’s House eight years ago, it was a rundown apartment building with very few windows intact. Now, eight years later, it was restored to something close to its former Art Deco glory, with windows gleaming in the red brick. Rose doubted Connie, Des’ mate, would appreciate a broken window.

Paint adjusted his eye patch and shrugged. “Taye says it’s okay.”

Des made a noise common to the wolves when communicating wordless disgust, and stepped aside for them to enter.

“Yeah,” Paint grumbled in agreement. “It okay if we keep these supplies here until we head back to the Den later this afternoon?”

When Des nodded and said the stall net to Rose’s horse was open, Paint sent a couple of the men around to the back to put the things they’d bought in storage until they left for the den. Then he and the rest of the escort walked Rose into the foyer. Jasminka Keric O’Connor, acting today as hostess for the Eatery, stepped forward to welcome them, but Des waved her back.

Even though this was a safe place guarded by two dozen men of Des’ Pack, her escort clustered around Rose as she entered the lobby. There were two men sitting in the seats Connie had arranged for those who were waiting for a table to open. She didn’t recognize them, so they must be travelers passing through the area. They stared at her as she and her personal army moved past them into the dining room. She heard one of them say something about a princess. She refrained from snarling at them.

Jasper saw her—with six scowling men around her she was hard to miss—and rose from the small table beside one of the side windows. A sunbeam fell on his hair, turning the tips from sand to gold. Seeing him waiting for her gave Rose a thrill. She’d gone only a few steps toward him when she was cut off by a wide bony chest in a crisp white shirt. Raven. Sky’s sixteen-year-old brother. Dang it. She tilted her head to look up at him.

“Hello, Raven.”

She kept moving forward, and he allowed it, but walked backward in front of her, frowning. His eyes were nearly the same blue as Sky’s under the dark, gracefully curving brows that were a family trait. The adorable fugitive dimple beside his mouth wasn’t in evidence right now, but with his full, soft mouth and high cheekbones, he looked almost exactly as Sky had the last time she saw him. “You’re going to sit and eat with a man? Do you think Sky would like that, sister?”

“It’s none of his business, Raven. I repudiated him.”

Raven drew in a breath and let out a low, pained howl before turning and rushing back toward the kitchen. An emotion she didn’t want to identify poked at Rose’s throat. She swallowed and put her shoulders back. Raven would just have to deal with it. She refused to watch him disappear into the kitchen. Instead she smiled at Jasper.

With a show of gallantry, he held the back of a chair to seat her at the table. She had eaten here hundreds of times, but most often she’d been in the back room, where the residents ate their meals. Where, she added to herself, the Pack knew she would be safely out of sight of outsiders. As she settled herself in the chair she glanced around to see where her escort had gone. They hadn’t gone far, only to line up against the wall on either side of Jasper’s table. Their crossed arms and scowling faces expressed their disapproval in loud silence. Rose inwardly sighed. *Oh, joy*.

Jasper noticed them too. After he sat back down he smiled at her, an endearing, lopsided grin that made her automatically smile back. “Being watched by wolf men is enough to put a man off his feed,” he whispered.

He probably didn’t know they could hear him no matter how low his voice was. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He lifted the hand-printed menu, a single sheet of homemade paper. “They only want to be sure you’re safe. Let’s see. Do you want a grilled ham and cheese sandwich or a hamburger? There’s tomato soup with the grilled cheese or fried potatoes with the burger.”

The menu didn’t have many options. As she was the manager of the only restaurant for miles, Connie said people should be happy with what they got. And generally, they were. Not only was the food excellent, but it was served by women. In a world where men outnumbered women two hundred to one, having a woman take the order and bring the food was a thrill for the customers. Of course, those women were watched over by men who turned into wolves, so the diners had to settle for just talking to the waitresses. Over the years a few customers had misunderstood what sort of service the waitresses provided, but that kind of mistake only happened once in a while. Whenever a customer tried to be too friendly with one of the women, Des would point out the old bloodstains on the wood floor and explain how they got there. Rose was sure he was disappointed when the customer took the hint and behaved himself.

“Oh, I think a hamburger sounds good,” she said.

Marissa Paulson Wolfe, married to one of Des’ pack, came to take their order. She kept her face professionally impersonal, but she tilted her head at Rose, and one eyebrow flew up. The comical expression disappeared after only a moment, but Rose’s blush lasted longer.

“You know everyone here, don’t you?” Jasper commented, after Marissa left. “Even the busboy.”

“Yes.” It was true. Every woman in the House was a survivor of the plane crash, and Taye’s pack and Des’ pack were like the right and left arms of the same body. She spent a lot of time here at the Plane Women’s House. These women were the only people who really knew what life had been like fifty years ago.

“And everyone knows you. Or at least about you. The Pack Princess.” Something must have shown on her face, because he quickly said, “What did I say?”

“Nothing. I just don’t like that name. I don’t know how it got started.” She fastened her attention on her napkin, lining up the folded edges just so. “I suppose, since for a long time I was the only young female in the Pack or the Clan, people started calling me that.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, nodding earnestly. “And because you’re followed by a bunch of them every time you step foot out of their compound, too. And the way they bristle if anyone looks at you too long. That’s where the nickname came from.”

Her cheeks were probably the color of the tomato soup Marissa carried past to another table. “Yeah, that probably doesn’t help. Now complete strangers call me that, and they don’t know a thing about me. Maybe it was meant as a joke, but it makes me sound like a spoiled brat.”

“Are you?” he asked.

She blinked at the bold question, half-offended until she saw his teasing smile. “Well, I’ll admit to being spoiled. Hard not to be, with a hundred men trying hard to give me whatever I want, but I absolutely deny the brat part.”

Their food came, deftly and gracefully served by Marissa, who told them cheerily to have a nice lunch and let her know if they needed anything else. Rose noticed how the other diners watched Marissa move. The other woman had the plump, voluptuous figure men in this time preferred. Back in her old life, Rose might have been thought a bit overweight, but here she was considered too thin.

“I don’t know why,” she remarked, drenching a thick cut French fry in ketchup, “but everything tastes better here. Even a plain old hamburger is extra good.”

Jasper nodded. “No one has better food than the Eatery. I hear the Saturday Suppers are to die for.”

Renee, the Eatery’s cook, had once been the executive chef in one of Denver’s finest restaurants, so even the simplest food was superb. The weekday suppers were more formal than the bare table lunches, but on Saturdays Renee served unique, elegant meals that drew people from all over. The tables then boasted fine tablecloths with floral arrangements and silverware that gleamed in the candlelight. To dine at the Plane Women’s Eatery on a Saturday night was the highlight of the year for many. Renee trained several of the crash survivors to be sous chefs, pastry chefs, prep cooks, and goodness knew what else, and several restaurants in Omaha and Denver had tried to lure her away. Renee would never leave Kearney without her mate, Hawk in Flight, and he would never leave the Pack, so the Eatery retained its fine chef.

“I wonder.” Jasper cleared his throat, a flush staining his suntanned cheeks. “I wonder if you might like to join me for supper this Saturday?”

A low growl came from one of the men along the wall. Rose ignored it. “Yes, I would.”

Stone’s cold voice rose just loud enough for them to hear him. “You won’t be able to get a reservation for this Saturday. Make a reservation now and maybe you can get in around Christmas.”

“I’m sure Kathy will squeeze us in,” Rose said as pleasantly as possible through clenched teeth.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. When Jasper finished eating, he wiped his fingers with his napkin, and then looked at her with a shadow of uncertainty on his face. “Maybe I shouldn’t ask,” he said, seeming to choose his words with care. “But I can’t help but wonder why you’re here with me.” His voice went to the merest whisper of sound. “And why they—” He tipped his head at the men leaning against the wall. “—are allowing it.”

She hesitated, raising the last slice of fried potato to her mouth to give herself another moment to find words. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

She really did like that lopsided smile of his. It was wryly self-deprecating, and put a shallow crease in his lean cheek that was very attractive. “I mean everybody knows you are spoken for by one of the wolves. A man would have to be suicidal to court a woman who belongs to a wolf, and I’m not real anxious to die yet.”

Rose chose her own words with equal care. “It’s true that Sky claimed me for his mate many years ago, but he left to go to Omaha.” She didn’t mention how she had rebelled against him at the time, or her later vague regrets that Sky hadn’t returned to the Den so they could get to know one another better. If he had returned five or six years ago they might be mated. They would have children. “I waited eight years for him, but he hasn’t come back, so I’ve decided to move on.”

“Move on,” he echoed. “Like, look for a different husband?”

She hoped he couldn’t hear the almost sub-vocal growls from the men at the wall. She made herself look directly at him. “Yes.”

Color rose in his face, but he smiled that lopsided smile again. “And you’re looking at me?”

Good grief, now she was blushing too. Who knew this courting business would be so awkward? “Well.” She coughed to clear her throat. “I thought it might be nice to get to know you better.”

He ducked his head for a minute, before he looked up beaming. “I’m glad. Ready to go to the train station?”

Relief made her smile. “Sure. Let’s stop up front and make a reservation for Saturday.”

At the hostess booth, Jas gave her a frown of disapproval when Rose made her request. “Dees Saturday? Veet heem?” she asked, her Bosnian accent more pronounced than usual. “I don’t teenk Taye or Des veel like dat.”

Paint heaved a heavy sigh. “It’s okay, Mrs. O’Connor.”

Jas looked Jasper over. “Vell, okay, den. Ve bring out da leetle table for you. I mark you down for Saturday at seex o’clock.”

“Thanks, Jas. See you Saturday.”

As they left the restaurant, the open stares of the other customers irritated her. Couldn’t she have any privacy? Now everyone would know she was seeing Jasper. She quickly smoothed her irritation away. Stone and the others were already on edge. If they scented her annoyance, they might do something violent to a hapless diner. She hurried to distract them. The sight of her fingertips resting on Jasper’s elbow ought to do the trick. It did, so she gave in to their pointed stares and dropped her hand as soon as they were on the street walking toward the train station.

“Tell me about what stock you’re working with,” she encouraged Jasper. “I think you mentioned some fillies?”

Enthusiasm fired his eyes. “Lina and Lola. Twin sisters out of Beauty Queen by Black Devil. Those two are born to be racehorses. Fast as the wind in January, and as strong.”

At the end of the forty-five minute stroll to the train station, Rose knew every little thing about the two fillies Jasper was training, and her eyes threatened to glaze. He told her at length how many hands tall each parent was, the width of their withers and the length of their necks. She could recite their lineage back five generations, and knew exactly how they were related to her own mare. Carla would have loved this conversation. Rose understood barely half of it, and wondered if Jasper was really the right man for her. Did she want to spend the rest of her life talking about horses?

Some of her escort, walking in protective formation around her, seemed to know her thoughts. She caught the barest hint of a smirk on Stone’s stern face and shot him a quick glare. He let a yawn swallow the smirk.

“Look,” Jasper said in a pleased voice. “The three o’clock train is exactly on time. There it is, only a mile off.”

The platform outside the station was already crowded with spectators. There were a few benches lined up against the front of the station, and a few more on the edge of the platform, for passengers and those meeting them to sit while they waited. All were occupied until Stone stalked to the nearest one and growled, “Out!” The two men sitting there hurried to obey. Stone jerked a thumb at Rose. She sighed and sat, glancing around at the people lounging about.

“Oh, hey!” She waved at a couple across the platform. “It’s Eddie and Lisa Madison, and they have little Emily with them.”

The Madisons, a handsome blond couple in their thirties, walked over to Rose’s bench. Lisa held their ten-week-old daughter in a fabric sling over her chest, and Eddie herded two boys in front of him. The brown haired boy was Eddie’s seven-year-old brother, Marty, who was born just after the last Woman Killer Plague epidemic in Kearney. The blond boy was Eddie’s six-year-old son, Ray. Uncle and nephew were only thirteen months apart in age.

“Hi, Rose!” Ray said happily.

Rose smiled back. “Hi, Ray-Ray. How are you today? Hi, Marty. What are you doing here?”

“We came to help Dad load up the fabric Mom ordered,” said Ray excitedly.

The other boy chimed in. “It’ll be too heavy for Lisa to carry. We brought the wagon. I get to help pull it.” Marty puffed out his narrow chest to show how strong he was. “She can’t pull it ‘cause she’s got that baby to carry.”

Lisa said, “That baby is your niece Emily.”

Marty looked as disgusted as a little boy could about a girl baby. “All she does is cry, sleep and shi—” He cut himself off with a guilty look at his much older brother. “Poop, I mean.”

Eddie arched a brow at Marty and turned to greet the men from the den. Lisa lifted the baby out of her sling and offered her to Rose to hold. She stood up to take Emily. The little body was warm, and smelled like powder and lavender lotion. Emily was a beautiful baby, the little face relaxed in sleep, framed by a frilly bonnet to keep the sun off. Rose cradled her close, the familiar longing for a child of her own so strong it nearly brought tears to her eyes. She blinked them back to smile at Lisa. Lisa was staring at Jasper with her brows lifted.

Jasper shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Hello, Mrs. Madison.”

Rose recalled that Jasper had had a big crush on Lisa years ago. Ray tugged on the hem of her shirt. “Emmy doesn’t have any hair,” he confided in what he must have thought was a whisper.

Rose hid a grin by looking down at the baby’s sleeping face, her lack of hair hidden by the bonnet. “Ray, when I first met you, you were as bald as an egg.”

Ray’s hand flew to his thick yellow mop. “I was not!”

Eddie dropped a hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’m afraid you were. And so were your brothers.” After giving the narrow shoulder an affectionate squeeze, he reached his hand to Jasper to shake. “How’s it going?” he asked with a tiny tip of his head toward Rose.

She didn’t miss it, and neither did Paint and Stone.

Jasper’s grin was big. “Pretty well, I think.”

Stone’s eyes narrowed dangerously. Rose quickly held out the baby for him to see. “Isn’t she darling?”

One thing none of the wolves could resist was a baby, especially a girl baby. They were in public, so his face and stance didn’t change, but Rose knew him well enough to see that he had inwardly melted. “Pretty baby,” he said, his voice softer and gentler than his usual grunt.

Rose returned Emily to her mother. Eddie slipped an arm around his wife and leaned down to kiss the baby’s forehead. “She’s so beautiful,” he murmured in a tone the precise equivalent of the one Taye used when speaking of his children. “And so are you, Lisa-love.”

The kiss he gave his wife was sweet and tender, not carnal, but Rose felt like a voyeur. Witnessing that sort of loving exchange always made her chest hurt. She wanted a man to hold her like Eddie held Lisa now. She wanted him to say he loved her. She took a deep breath to loosen the tightness in her chest and cast a glance at Jasper. Would he be the one to hold her and love her?

Jasper moved a few steps closer to Eddie, and they turned toward the other men to chat. Rose tried to listen to what they were saying, but the screech and hiss of the arriving train drowned their voices.

“Well,” Rose said to Lisa, raising her voice to be heard over the train. “Did you ever imagine, nine or ten years ago, that the most exciting thing to do would be watching a train come into town?”

Lisa laughed. “No. I’ve been to all kinds of social events, from the Grammys to the Cannes Film Festival. I’ve danced at a Presidential Inaugural Ball. I’ve met European royalty. I never thought that my most exciting social outing of the week would be to see crates and barrels unloaded from a train.” Her voice sobered. “Are you ... Well, I’m not sure ‘dating’ is the right word to use. But are you?”

Rose hesitated, and then nodded. “It’s way past time for me to be married. I want a family of my own. I live in an old motel with dozens of other people around me all the time. They love me, but it’s not the same. Sometimes I feel so alone. Is it possible to be lonely when I’m never alone?”

“Yes.” Lisa set Emily into the sling that held her against her chest and gave Rose a quick hug. “Just be careful, okay? No need to rush into marriage. Take all the time you need to be sure the man you choose is the right one.” She gurgled with sudden laughter. “You’ll have plenty to choose from. By now everyone is gossiping about you and Jasper. Once the men in the area know that you’re husband shopping, they’ll be haunting the den.”

“Oh, crap.” Rose had a vision of men swarming outside the stone wall around the den, and the wolves’ probable reaction. “Oh, crappity crap.”

Lisa swayed from side to side to soothe the baby, who was awake and showing signs of displeasure. “I guess I shouldn’t laugh, but honestly, this is going to be a very entertaining winter.”

“Entertaining? That’s not the word I would use,” Rose replied glumly.

Eddie came to collect his wife. “They’re unloading the freight cars, Lisa-love. We should go claim your order. Bye, Rose. See you, Packard.”

Rose said good bye and turned her attention to the train. She saw the mail bag carried into the station and wondered if there would be a letter for her from Omaha. There were usually not many passengers to disembark at Kearney, and today was no different. Three men came off the train. Rose recognized one of them as a farmer from Odessa, a few miles south of Kearney.

“Look, there’s Gary Black,” she pointed out.

Jasper, standing again beside her, nodded. “I heard he had to go to Omaha. There’s Samuel Overby, too. Don’t know the third man.”

Neither did Rose, but he was the first one she’d noticed. He was tall and slender, with short dark hair, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit of silvery gray fabric that showed off a lean physique with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. The trousers were crisply pressed even after hours on the train. She’d never seen a suit like that in Kearney before. His hair was cut neatly at the nape, but an inch or so longer on top, artfully styled to look casually tumbled. If there were anything like a men’s fashion magazine these days, this man would be on the cover.

Rose despised him on sight even while she admired the lines of his body. Living with several dozen handsome men who wore as little clothing as Carla would let them get away with, Rose was very familiar with the male body. Under the expensive suit, this man’s body was probably exactly the type she liked best: lean, powerful, and graceful. Was his face as attractive? His head was turned away, looking at something to the side, so she could see only his profile. His nose was perhaps a tad large, but his jaw was well defined, running parallel to high cheekbones. A narrow tie was a black exclamation point over a shirt of vibrant blue. When he turned toward them, she saw the color of his eyes exactly matched the shirt. His face had nicely shaped eyebrows and a full, soft mouth ...

She jerked in a sharp gasp. “Oh, no,” she moaned.

Jasper forgot himself and dared to grab her arm to steady her. “Rose, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Grabbing him back would probably get him killed. She was sure that buzzing in her ears would go away any second. It would. It had to. The man in the slick suit came their way, and she swayed, willing herself to be calm.

“Hello, Rose,” the man said to her with a cold smile. The hint of a dimple beside his mouth didn’t soften his expression. His head turned a fraction to stare at Jasper, and he continued in the same lazy, deadly tone, “I don’t know you.” The smile hardened to brittle ice. “If you want to live, you’ll *take your hand off my mate*.”