

# ALPHA AND OMEGA



# *Alpha and Omega*

Alpha/Omega [1]

Patricia Briggs

Subterranean (2009)

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Tags: Fantasy, Epic, General, Fiction, Werewolves, Occult Fiction, Crime, Love stories, Urban Life

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## **From Publishers Weekly**

This terrific little story, originally published in a 2007 anthology, is the first in Patricia Briggs's Alpha and Omega series. Changed against her will three years earlier, frightened, beaten-down Anna Latham doesn't know she is an omega werewolf, revered for the ability to soothe alpha inclinations at opportune moments. Powerful alpha Charles Cornick, son of the North American werewolf leader, heads to Chicago after the patriarch receives a phone call from Anna, informing him of an unsanctioned murder of a young werewolf. Anna's pack leader feared her abilities, approved her degradation and kept her ignorant of pack lore, which allows readers to learn alongside Anna as Charles teaches her what she needs to know. Spare writing and strong descriptions will entice readers to continue following Anna and Charles in two forthcoming novels. (*Dec.*)

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## **Product Description**

Anna, four years a werewolf, raped, beaten, half-starved and handed from one male to another, places a call from Chicago to the wilds of Montana. She reaches the Marrok, North America's werewolf ruler, telling him she's

seen a boy, one reported missing and possibly injured. He was in a cage her pack's Alpha keeps for confining new werewolves.

The Marrok says that his enforcer is flying from Montana to O'Hare. Anna meets the plane, and, Charles, enforcer, as well as the Marrok's oldest son, insists on staying with her. He has seen she is not the Submissive she thinks she is. Charles is a supreme Alpha, and she is his antithesis, a rare Omega; her very presence lowers tension, calms and soothes. Despite centuries as a Solitary, Charles would wed young Anna. His brother wolf, he says, has already taken her as his mate.

There are, as investigation and confrontation reveal, reasons both for the capture of the boy and for what has been done to Anna. It's a surprisingly tender story.

**Praise for Patricia Briggs's #1 *New York Times*  
bestselling Mercy Thompson novels**

***IRON KISSED***

“The third book in an increasingly excellent series, *Iron Kissed* has all the elements I’ve come to expect in a Patricia Briggs novel: sharp, perceptive characterization; nonstop action; and a levelheaded attention to detail and location. I love these books.”

—Charlaine Harris, *New York Times* bestselling author of *From Dead to Worse*

***BLOOD BOUND***

“Once again, Briggs has written a full-bore action adventure with heart...Be prepared to read [it] in one sitting, because once you get going, there is no good place to stop until tomorrow.”

—*SFRevu*

“Plenty of action and intriguing characters keep this fun. In the increasingly crowded field of kick-ass supernatural heroines, Mercy stands out as one of the best.”

—*Locus*

“Briggs’s world, in which witches, vampires, werewolves, and shapeshifters live beside ordinary people, is plausibly constructed; the characters are excellent; and the plot keeps the pages flapping.”

—*Booklist*

“Briggs has created a believable alternative world populated with strong, dynamite characters, deadly adversaries, and cunningly laid plots that leave the reader looking for more.”

—*Monsters and Critics*

“Patricia Briggs has the unique gift of being able to make the reader believe, for the space of three hundred some pages, [in] her truths—that vampires, fae, werewolves, and magic makers live in tentative harmony with humankind. Her world is just like ours, only a bit more dangerous and a bit more sexy.”

—*Dear Author*

“A compelling and fascinating supernatural tale that fans of Laurell K. Hamilton and Charlaine Harris will thoroughly enjoy. Patricia Briggs is a powerful storyteller who convinces readers [that] her earth inhabited by supernatural creatures actually exists.”

—*The Best Reviews*

“Fans of Kim Harrison and Laurell K. Hamilton will enjoy this tightly plotted and fast-paced tale set in a world of vampires, werewolves, fae, and one shapeshifter named Mercy.”

—*Romantic Times Book Reviews*

## ***MOON CALLED***

“An excellent read with plenty of twists and turns. Her strong and complex characters kept me entertained from its deceptively innocent beginning to its can’t-put-it-down end. Thoroughly satisfying, it left me wanting more.”

—Kim Harrison, *New York Times* bestselling author of *For a Few Demons More*

“Patricia Briggs always enchants her readers. With *Moon Called*, she weaves her magic on every page to take us into a new and dazzling world of werewolves, shapeshifters, witches, and vampires. Expect to be spellbound.”

—Lynn Viehl, *USA Today* bestselling author of the Darkyn series

“A suspenseful read that will have you on the edge of your seat as you burn through the pages. Ms. Briggs weaves paranormal and mystery together so deftly you can’t put the book down. The cast of characters is wonderfully entertaining, and Mercy’s emotional struggles will pull on your heartstrings. For lovers of the paranormal, this is a must-read.”

—*Romance Junkies*

“A strong story with multidimensional characters...Mercy is, at heart, someone we can relate to.”

—*SFRevu*

“Inventive and fast paced...Mercy’s first-person narrative voice is a treat throughout. And best of all, the fantasy elements retain their dark mystery and sense of wonder...entertaining from start to end.”

—*Fantasy & Science Fiction*

“I’ve never been disappointed by one of [Patricia Briggs’s] books, and this one is no exception. Mercy’s world is an alternate universe much like Laurell K. Hamilton’s Anita Blake books...or the Buffyverse or more recently the Kim Harrison books...*Moon Called* ends on a high note and leaves you wanting more—like a good book should.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“Fans of Kim Harrison’s *Dead Witch Walking* are sure to enjoy this fast-paced, creature feature-packed suspense story. Mercy’s no-nonsense approach and quick wit coupled with a strong story line and interesting subplots make for a thoroughly entertaining read.”

—*Monsters and Critics*

“Mercy’s a compelling protagonist...The story hums along like a well-tuned engine, keeping the reader engaged through the tumultuous climax.”

—*Romantic Times Book Reviews*

“A really good story...exciting, interesting, and not always predictable...a fun read for a lazy afternoon.”

—*Italics*

“Authors the likes of Tanya Huff, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Charlaine Harris have successfully peopled our modern world with vampires, lycanthropes, and other supernatural beings who, to some extent, coexist politely among us mere mortals, living within complex hierarchies, bureaucracies, and clan protocols. Add Patricia Briggs to the list...*Moon Called* is an exciting new entry in the field of dark urban fantasy...I will be watching for Mercy Thompson’s next adventure with great anticipation.”

—Rambles.net



*Ace Books by Patricia Briggs*

**MASQUES  
STEAL THE DRAGON  
WHEN DEMONS WALK**

**THE HOB'S BARGAIN**

**DRAGON BONES  
DRAGON BLOOD**

**RAVEN'S SHADOW  
RAVEN'S STRIKE**

**MOON CALLED  
BLOOD BOUND  
IRON KISSED**

**CRY WOLF**

*Alpha and Omega*

**PATRICIA BRIGGS**



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## **ALPHA AND OMEGA**

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## CHAPTER 1

THE wind was chill and the cold froze the ends of her toes. One of these days she was going to break down and buy boots—if only she didn't need to eat.

Anna laughed and buried her nose in her jacket, trudging the last half mile to her home. It was true that being a werewolf gave her greater strength and endurance, even in human form. But the twelve-hour shift she'd just finished at Scorci's was enough to make even *her* bones ache. You'd think that people would have better things to do on Thanksgiving than go eat at an Italian restaurant.

Tim, the restaurant owner (who was Irish, not Italian for all that he made the best gnocchi in Chicago) let her take extra shifts—though he

wouldn't let her work more than fifty hours a week. The biggest bonus was the free meal she got each shift. Even so, she was afraid she was going to have to find a second job to cover her expenses: life as a werewolf, she had found, was as expensive financially as it was personally.

She used her keys to get into the entryway. There was nothing in her mailbox, so she got Kara's mail and newspaper and climbed the stairs to Kara's third-floor apartment. When she opened the door, Kara's Siamese cat, Mouser, took one look at her, spat in disgust, and disappeared behind the couch.

For six months she'd been feeding the cat whenever her neighbor was gone—which was often since Kara worked at a travel agency arranging tours. Mouser still hated her. From his hiding place he swore at her, as only a Siamese could do.

With a sigh, Anna tossed the mail and newspaper on the small table in the dining room and opened a can of cat food, setting it down near the water dish. She sat down at the table and closed her eyes. She was ready to go to her own apartment, one floor up, but she had to wait for the cat to eat. If she just left him there, she'd come back in the morning to a can of untouched food. Hate her he might, but Mouser wouldn't eat unless there was someone with him—even if it was a werewolf he didn't trust.

Usually she turned on the TV and watched whatever happened to be on, but tonight she was too tired to make the effort, so she unfolded the newspaper to see what had happened since the last time she'd picked one up a couple of months ago.

She skimmed through the headline articles on the front page without interest. Still complaining, Mouser emerged and stalked resentfully into the kitchen.

She turned the page so Mouser would know that she was really reading it—and drew in a sharp breath at the picture of a young man. It was a head shot, obviously a school picture, and next to it was a similar shot of a girl of the same age. The headline read: "Blood Found at Crime Scene Belongs to Missing Naperville Teen."

Feeling a little frantic, she read the article's review of the crime for those, like her, who had missed the initial reports.

Two months ago, Alan MacKenzie Frazier had disappeared from a high school dance the same night his date's body had been found on the school grounds. Cause of death was difficult to determine as the dead

girl's body had been mauled by animals—there had been a pack of strays troubling the neighborhood for the past few months. Authorities had been uncertain whether the missing boy was a suspect or not. Finding his blood led them to suspect he was another victim.

Anna touched Alan Frazier's smiling face with trembling fingers. She knew. She knew.

She jumped up from the table, ignoring Mouser's unhappy yowl, and ran cold water from the kitchen sink over her wrists, trying to keep nausea at bay. *That poor boy.*

It took another hour for Mouser to finish his food. By that time Anna had the article memorized—and had come to a decision. Truthfully, she'd known as soon as she read the paper, but it had taken her the full hour to work up the courage to act upon it: if she'd learned anything in her three years as a werewolf, it was that you didn't want to do anything that might attract one of the dominant wolves' attention. Calling the Marrok, who ruled all the wolves in North America, would certainly attract his attention.

She didn't have a phone in her apartment, so she borrowed Kara's. She waited for her hands and her breathing to steady, but when that didn't seem to be happening, she dialed the number on the battered piece of paper anyway.

Three rings—and she realized that one o'clock in Chicago would be considerably different in Montana, where the area code indicated she was dialing. Was it a two-hour difference or three? Earlier or later? She hastily hung up the phone.

What was she going to tell him, anyway? That she'd seen the boy, obviously the victim of a werewolf attack, weeks after his disappearance, in a cage in her Alpha's house? That she thought the Alpha had ordered the attack? All Leo had to do was tell the Marrok that he'd come upon the kid later—that he hadn't sanctioned it. Maybe that was how it happened. Maybe she was projecting from her own experience.

She didn't even know if the Marrok would object to the attack. Maybe werewolves were allowed to attack whomever they pleased. That's what had happened to her.

She turned away from the phone and saw the boy's face looking out at her from the open newspaper. She looked at him a moment more and then dialed the number again—surely the Marrok would at least



object to the publicity it had attracted. This time her call was answered on the first ring.

“This is Bran.”

He didn’t sound threatening.

“My name is Anna,” she said, wishing her voice wouldn’t quiver. There was a time, she thought a little bitterly, when she hadn’t been afraid of her own shadow. Who’d have thought that turning into a werewolf would turn her into a coward? But now she knew the monsters were real.

Angry with herself she might have been, but she couldn’t force another word out of her throat. If Leo knew she called the Marrok, she might as well shoot herself with that silver bullet she’d bought a few months ago and save him some trouble.

“You are calling from Chicago, Anna?” It startled her for a moment, but then she realized he must have caller ID on his phone. He didn’t sound angry that she’d disturbed him—and that wasn’t like any dominant she’d ever met. Maybe he was a secretary or something. That made better sense. The Marrok’s personal number wouldn’t be something that would be passed around.

The hope that she wasn’t actually talking to the Marrok helped steady her. Even Leo was afraid of the Marrok. She didn’t bother to answer his question—he already knew the answer. “I called to talk to the Marrok, but maybe you could help me.”

There was a pause, then Bran said, a little regretfully, “I am the Marrok, child.”

Panic set in again, but before she could excuse herself and hang up, he said soothingly, “It’s all right, Anna. You’ve done nothing wrong. Tell me why you called.”

She sucked in a deep breath, conscious that this was her last chance to ignore what she’d seen and protect herself.

Instead she explained about the newspaper article—and that she’d seen the missing boy in Leo’s house, in one of the cages he kept for new wolves.

“I see,” murmured the wolf at the other end of the phone line.

“I couldn’t prove that anything was wrong until I saw the newspaper,” she told him.

“Does Leo know you saw the boy?”

“Yes.” There were two Alphas in the Chicago area. Briefly she wondered how he’d known which one she was talking about.

“How did he react?”

Anna swallowed hard, trying to forget what had happened afterward. Once Leo’s mate had intervened, the Alpha had mostly quit passing her around to the other wolves at his whim, but that night Leo had felt that Justin deserved a reward. She didn’t have to tell the Marrok that, surely?

He saved her the humiliation by clarifying his question. “Was he angry that you had seen the boy?”

“No. He was...happy with the man who’d brought him in.” There had still been blood on Justin’s face and he stank with the excitement of the hunt.

Leo had been happy when Justin had first brought Anna to him, too. It had been Justin who had been angry—he hadn’t realized she’d be a submissive wolf. Submissive meant that Anna’s place was at the very bottom of the pack. Justin had quickly decided he made a mistake when he Changed her. She thought he had, too.

“I see.”

For some reason she had the strange feeling that he did.

“Where are you now, Anna?”

“At a friend’s house.”

“Another werewolf?”

“No.” Then realizing he might think she’d told someone about what she was—something that was strictly forbidden—she hurried to explain. “I don’t have a phone at my place. My neighbor is gone and I’m taking care of her cat. I used her phone.”

“I see,” he said. “I want you to stay away from Leo and your pack for right now—it might not be safe for you if someone figures out you called me.”

That was an understatement. “All right.”

“As it happens,” the Marrok said, “I have recently been made aware of problems in Chicago.”

The realization that she had risked everything unnecessarily made his next few words pass by her unheard.

“—I would normally have contacted the nearest pack. However, if Leo is murdering people, I don’t see how the other Chicago

Alpha wouldn't be aware of it. Since Jaimie hasn't contacted me, I have to assume that both Alphas are involved to one degree or another."

"It's not Leo who's making the werewolves," she told him. "It's Justin, his second."

"The Alpha is responsible for the actions of his pack," replied the Marrok coolly. "I've sent out an...investigator. As it happens he is flying into Chicago tonight. I'd like you to meet him."

Which was how Anna ended up naked between a couple of parked cars in the middle of the night at O'Hare International Airport. She didn't have a car or money for a taxi, but, as the crow flies, the airport was only about five miles from her apartment. It was after midnight and her wolf form was black as pitch and smallish as far as werewolves were concerned. The chances of someone seeing her and thinking she was anything but a stray dog were slight.

It had gotten colder, and she shivered as she pulled on the T-shirt she'd brought. There hadn't been room in her small pack for her coat once she'd stuffed it with shoes, jeans, and a top—all of which were more necessary.

She hadn't ever actually been to O'Hare before, and it took her a while to find the right terminal. By the time she got there, *he* was already waiting for her.

Only after she'd hung up the phone had she realized that the Marrok had given her no description of his investigator. She'd fretted all the way to the airport about it, but she needn't have. There was no mistaking him. Even in the busy terminal, people stopped to look at him, before furtively looking away.

Native Americans, while fairly rare in Chicago, weren't so unheard of as to cause all the attention he was gathering. None of the humans walking past him would probably have been able to explain exactly why they had to look—but Anna knew. It was something common to very dominant wolves. Leo had it, too—but not to this extent.

He was tall, taller even than Leo, and he wore his black, black hair in a thick braid that swung below his bead-and-leather belt. His jeans were dark and new-looking, a contrast to his battered cowboy boots. He turned his head a little and the lights caught a gleam from the gold studs he wore in his ears. Somehow he didn't look like the kind of man who would pierce his ears.

The features under the youth-taut, teak-colored skin were broad and flat and carried an expression that was oppressive in its very blankness. His black eyes traveled slowly over the bustling crowd, looking for something. They stopped on her for a moment, and the impact made her catch her breath. Then his gaze drifted on.

CHARLES hated flying. He especially hated flying when someone else was piloting. He'd flown himself to Salt Lake, but landing his small jet in Chicago could have alerted his quarry—and he preferred to take Leo by surprise. Besides, after they'd closed Meigs Field, he'd quit flying himself into Chicago. There was too much traffic at O'Hare and Midway.

He hated big cities. There were so many smells that they clogged his nose, so much noise that he caught bits of a hundred different conversations without trying—but could miss entirely the sound of someone sneaking up behind him. Someone had bumped by him on the walkway as he left the plane, and he had to work to keep from bumping back, harder. Flying into O'Hare in the middle of the night had at least avoided the largest crowds, but there were still too many people around for his comfort.

He hated cell phones, too. When he'd turned his on after the plane had landed, a message from his father was waiting. Now instead of going to the car rental desk and then to his hotel, he was going to have to locate some woman and stay with her so that Leo or his other wolves didn't kill her. All he had was a first name—Bran hadn't seen fit to give him a description of her.

He stopped outside the security gates and let his gaze drift where it would, hoping instincts would find the woman. He could smell another werewolf, but the ventilation in the airport defeated his ability to pinpoint the scent. His gaze caught first on a young girl with an Irish-pale complexion, whiskey-colored curly hair, and the defeated look of someone who was beaten on a regular basis. She looked tired, cold, and far too thin. It made him angry to see it, and he was already too angry to be safe, so he forced his gaze away.

There was a woman dressed in a business suit that echoed the warm chocolate of her skin. She didn't look quite like an Anna, but she carried herself in such a way that he could see her defying her Alpha to call

the Marrok. She was obviously looking for someone. He almost started forward, but then her face changed as she found the person she was looking for—and it was not him.

He started a second sweep of the airport when a small, hesitant voice from just to his left said, “Sir, have you just come from Montana?”

It was the whiskey-haired girl. She must have approached him while he’d been looking elsewhere—something she wouldn’t have been able to do if he weren’t standing in the middle of a freaking airport.

At least he didn’t have to look for his father’s contact anymore. With her this close, not even the artificial air currents could hide that she was a werewolf. But it wasn’t his nose alone that told him that she was something far rarer.

At first he thought she was submissive. Most werewolves were more or less dominant. Gentler-natured people weren’t usually cussed enough to survive the brutal transformation from human to werewolf. Which meant that submissive werewolves were few and far between.

Then he realized that the sudden change in his anger and the irrational desire to protect her from the crowds streaming past were indications of something else. She wasn’t a submissive either, though many might mistake her for that: She was an Omega.

Right then he knew that whatever else he did in Chicago, he was going to kill whoever had given her that bruised look.

UP close he was even more impressive; she could feel his energy licking lightly over her like a snake tasting its prey. Anna kept her gaze fully on the floor, waiting for his answer.

“I am Charles Cornick,” he said. “The Marrok’s son. You must be Anna.”

She nodded.

“Did you drive here or catch a cab?”

“I don’t have a car,” she said.

He growled something she didn’t quite catch. “Can you drive?”

She nodded.

“Good.”

SHE drove well, if a little overcautiously—which trait he didn't mind at all, though it didn't stop him from bracing one hand against the dash of the rental. She hadn't said anything when he told her to drive them to her apartment, though he hadn't missed the dismay she felt.

He could have told her that his father had instructed him to keep her alive if he could—and to do that he had to stick close. He didn't want to scare her any more than she already was. He could have told her that he had no intention of bedding her, but he tried not to lie. Not even to himself. So he stayed silent.

As she drove them down the expressway in the rented SUV, his wolf-brother had gone from the killing rage caused by the crowded airplane to a relaxed contentment Charles had never felt before. The two other Omega wolves he'd met in his long lifetime had done something similar to him, but not to this extent.

*This must be what it was like to be fully human.*

The anger and the hunter's wariness that his wolf always held was only a faint memory, leaving behind only the determination to take this one to mate—Charles had never felt anything like that either.

She was pretty enough, though he'd like to feed her up and soften the stiff wariness in her shoulders. The wolf wanted to bed her and claim her as his own. Being of a more cautious nature than his wolf, he would wait until he knew her a little better before deciding to court her.

"My apartment isn't much," she said in an obvious effort to break the silence. The small rasp in her voice told him that her throat was dry.

She was frightened of him. Being his father's chosen executioner, he was used to being feared, though he'd never enjoyed it.

He leaned against the door to give her a little more space and looked out at the city lights so she'd feel safe stealing a few glances at him if she wanted to. He'd been quiet, hoping she would get used to him, but he thought now that might have been a mistake.

"Don't worry," he told her. "I am not fussy. Whatever your apartment is like, it is doubtless more civilized than the Indian lodge I grew up in."

"An Indian lodge?"

"I'm a little older than I look," he said, smiling a little. "Two hundred years ago, an Indian lodge was pretty fancy housing in Montana."

Like most old wolves he didn't like talking about the past, but he found he'd do worse than that to set her at ease.

"I'd forgotten you might be older than you look," she said apologetically. She'd seen the smile, he thought, because the level of her fear dropped appreciably. "There aren't any older wolves in the pack here."

"A few," he disagreed with her as he noted that she said "*the* pack" not "*my* pack." Leo was seventy or eighty, and his wife was a lot older than that—old enough that they should have appreciated the gift of an Omega instead of allowing her to be reduced to this abased child who cringed whenever he looked at her too long. "It can be difficult to tell how old a wolf is. Most of us don't talk about it. It's hard enough adjusting without chatting incessantly about the old days."

She didn't reply, and he looked for something else they could talk about. Conversation wasn't his forte; he left that to his father and his brother, who both had clever tongues.

"What tribe are you from?" she asked before he found a topic. "I don't know a lot about the Montana tribes."

"My mother was Salish," he said. "Of the Flathead tribe."

She snuck a quick look at his perfectly normal forehead. Ah, he thought, relieved, there was a good story he could tell her. "Do you know how the Flatheads got their name?"

She shook her head. Her face was so solemn he was tempted to make something up to tease her. But she didn't know him well enough for that, so he told her the truth.

"Many of the Indian tribes in the Columbia Basin, mostly other Salish peoples, used to flatten the foreheads of their infants—the Flatheads were among the few tribes that did not."

"So why are they the ones called Flatheads?" she asked.

"Because the other tribes weren't trying to alter their foreheads, but to give themselves a peak at the top of their heads. Since the Flatheads did not, the other tribes called us 'flat heads.' It wasn't a compliment."

The scent of her fear faded further as she followed his story.

"We were the ugly, barbarian cousins, you see." He laughed. "Ironically, the white trappers misunderstood the name. We were infamous for a long time for a practice we didn't follow. So the white men, like our cousins, thought we were barbarians."

“You said your mother was Salish,” she said. “Is the Marrok Native American?”

He shook his head. “Father is a Welshman. He came over and hunted furs in the days of the fur trappers and stayed because he fell in love with the scent of pine and snow.” His father put it just that way. Charles found himself smiling again, a real smile this time and felt her relax further—and his face didn’t hurt at all. He’d have to call his brother, Samuel, and tell him that he’d finally learned that his face wouldn’t crack if he smiled. All it had taken to teach him was an Omega werewolf.

She turned into an alley and pulled into a small parking lot behind one of the ubiquitous four-story brick apartment buildings that filled the older suburbs of this part of town.

“Which city are we in?” he asked.

“Oak Park,” she said. “Home of Frank Lloyd Wright, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Scorci’s.”

“Scorci’s?”

She nodded her head and hopped out of the car. “The best Italian restaurant in Chicago and my current place of employment.”

*Ah. That’s why she smelled of garlic.*

“So your opinion is unbiased?” He slid out of the car with a feeling of relief. His brother made fun of his dislike of cars since even a bad accident was unlikely to kill him. But Charles wasn’t worried about dying—it was just that cars went too fast. He couldn’t get a feel for the land they passed through. And if he felt like dozing a bit as he traveled, they couldn’t follow the trail on their own. He preferred horses.

After he got his suitcase out of the back, Anna locked the car with the key fob. The car honked once, making him jump, and he gave it an irritated look. When he turned back, Anna was staring hard at the ground.

The anger that being in her presence had dissipated surged back full force at the strength of her fear. Someone had really done a number on her.

“Sorry,” she whispered. If she’d been in wolf form she’d have been cowering with her tail tucked beneath her.

“For what?” he asked, unable to banish the rage that sent his voice down an octave. “Because I’m jumpy around cars? Not your fault.”

He was going to have to be careful this time, he realized as he tried to pull the wolf back under control. Usually when his father sent him



out to deal with trouble, he could do it coldly. But with a damaged Omega wolf around, one that he found himself responding to on several different levels, he was going to have to hold tight to his temper.

“Anna,” he said, fully in control again. “I am my father’s hit man. It is my job as his second. But that doesn’t mean that I take pleasure in it. I am not going to hurt you, my word on it.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, clearly not believing him.

He reminded himself that a man’s word didn’t count for much in this modern day. It helped his control that he scented as much anger on her as fear—she hadn’t been completely broken.

He decided that further attempts to reassure her were likely to do the opposite. She would have to learn to accept that he was a man of his word. In the meantime he would give her something to think about.

“Besides,” he told her gently, “my wolf is more interested in courting you than in asserting his dominance.”

He walked past her before he smiled at the way her fear and anger had disappeared, replaced by shock...and something that might have been the beginning of interest.

She had keys to the outer door of the building and led the way through the entry and up the stairs without looking at him at all. By the second flight her scent had dulled of every emotion besides weariness.

She was visibly dragging as she climbed the stairs to the top floor. Her hand shook as she tried to get her key into the deadbolt of one of the two doors at the top. She needed to eat more. Werewolves shouldn’t let themselves get so thin—it could be dangerous to those around them.

HE was an executioner, he said, sent by his father to settle problems among the werewolves. He must be even more dangerous than Leo to have survived doing that job. She could feel how dominant he was, and she knew what dominants were like. She had to stay alert, ready for any aggressive moves he might make—ready to handle the pain and the panic so she didn’t run and make him worse.

So why was it that the longer he was around, the safer he made her feel?

He followed her up all four flights of stairs without a word, and she refused to apologize again for her apartment. He’d invited himself, after

all. It was his own fault that he'd end up sleeping on a twin-size futon instead of a nice hotel bed. She didn't know what to feed him—hopefully he'd eaten while he traveled. Tomorrow she'd run out and get something; she had the check from Scorci's on her fridge awaiting deposit in the bank.

There had once been a pair of two-bedroom apartments on her floor, but in the seventies someone had reapportioned the fourth floor into a three-bedroom and her studio.

Her home looked shabby and empty, with no more furniture than her futon, a card table, and a pair of folding chairs. Only the polished oak floor gave it any appeal.

She glanced at him as he walked through the doorway behind her, but his face revealed very little he didn't want it to. She couldn't see what he thought, though she imagined his eyes lingered a little on the futon that worked fine for her, but was going to be much too small for him.

"The bathroom's through that door," she told him unnecessarily, as the door stood open and the bathtub was clearly visible.

He nodded, watching her with eyes that were opaque in the dim illumination of her overhead light. "Do you have to work tomorrow?" he asked.

"No. Not until Saturday."

"Good. We can talk in the morning, then." He took his small suitcase with him into the bathroom.

She tried not to listen to the unfamiliar sounds of someone else getting ready for bed as she rummaged in her closet for the old blanket she kept in it, wishing again for a nice cheap carpet instead of the gleaming hardwood floor that was pretty to look at, but cold on bare feet and sure to be hard on her backside when she tried to sleep.

The door opened while she was kneeling on the floor, folding the blanket into a makeshift mattress as far as she could from where he would be sleeping. "You can take the bed," she began as she turned around and found herself at eye level with a large reddish-brown werewolf.

He wagged his tail and smiled at her obvious surprise before brushing past her and curling up on the blanket. He wiggled a bit and then put his head down on his forepaws and closed his eyes, to all appearances dropping off immediately to sleep. She knew better, but he didn't stir as she went into the bathroom herself or when she came out dressed in her warmest pair of sweats.

She wouldn't have been able to sleep with a man in her apartment, but somehow, the wolf was less threatening. *This* wolf was less threatening. She bolted the door, turned out the light, and crawled into bed feeling safer than she had since the night she'd found out that there were monsters in the world.

THE footsteps on the stairs the next morning didn't bother her at first. The family who lived across from her was in and out at all times of the day or night. She pulled the pillow over her head to block the noise out, but then Anna realized the brisk, no-nonsense tread belonged to Kara—and that she had a werewolf in her apartment. She sat bolt upright and looked at Charles.

The wolf was more beautiful in the daylight than he had been at night, his fur really red, she saw, set off by black on his legs and paws. He raised his head when she sat up and got to his feet when she did.

She put a finger to her lips as Kara knocked sharply on the door.

"Anna, you in there, girl? Did you know that someone is parked in your spot again? Do you want me to call the tow truck or do you have a man in there for once?"

Kara wouldn't just go away.

"I'm here, just a minute." She looked around frantically, but there was nowhere to hide a werewolf. He wouldn't fit in the closet, and if she closed the bathroom door, Kara would want to know why—just as she'd demand to know why Anna suddenly had a dog the size of an Irish wolfhound and not nearly as friendly looking in her living room.

She gave Charles one last frantic look and then hurried over to the door as he trotted off to the bathroom. She heard it click shut behind him as she unbolted the door.

"I'm back," said Kara breezily as she came in, setting a pair of bags down on the table. Her dark-as-night skin looked richer than usual for her week of tropical sun. "I stopped on the way home and bought some breakfast for us. You don't eat enough to keep a mouse alive."

Her gaze caught on the closed bathroom door. "You do have someone here." She smiled, but her eyes were wary. Kara had made no secret of the fact that she didn't like Justin, who Anna had explained away, truthfully enough, as an old boyfriend.

“Mmm.” Anna was miserably aware that Kara wouldn’t leave until she saw who was in the bathroom. For some reason Kara had taken Anna under her wing the very first day she’d moved in, shortly after she’d been Changed.

Just then, Charles opened the bathroom door and stepped just through the doorway. “Do you have a rubber band, Anna?”

He was fully dressed and human, but Anna knew that was impossible. It had been less than five minutes since he’d gone into the bathroom, and a werewolf took a lot longer than that to change back to human form.

She cast a frantic glance at Kara—but her neighbor was too busy staring at the man in the bathroom doorway to take note of Anna’s shock.

Kara’s rapt gaze made Anna take a second look as well; she had to admit that Charles, his blue-black hair hanging free to his waist in a thick sheet that made him look strangely naked despite his perfectly respectable flannel shirt and jeans, was worth staring at. He gave Kara a small smile before turning his attention back to Anna.

“I seem to have misplaced my hair band. Do you have another one?”

She gave him a jerky nod and brushed past him into the bathroom. How had he changed so fast? She could hardly ask him how he’d done it with Kara in the room, however.

He smelled good. Even after three years it was disconcerting to notice such things about people. Usually she tried to ignore what her nose told her—but she had to force herself not to stop and take a deep lungful of his rich scent.

“And just who are you?” Anna heard Kara ask suspiciously.

“Charles Cornick.” She couldn’t tell by the sound of his voice whether he was bothered by Kara’s unfriendliness or not. “You are?”

“This is Kara, my downstairs neighbor,” Anna told him, handing him a hair band as she slipped by him and back into the main room. “Sorry, I should have introduced you. Kara, meet Charles Cornick who is visiting from Montana. Charles, meet Kara Mosley, my downstairs neighbor. Now shake and be nice.”

She’d meant the admonition for Kara, who could be acerbic if she took a dislike to someone—but Charles raised an eyebrow at her before

he turned back to Kara and offered a long-fingered hand.

“From Montana?” asked Kara as she took his hand and shook it firmly once.

He nodded and began French-braiding his hair with quick, practiced motions. “My father sent me out here because he’d heard there was a man giving Anna a bad time.”

And with that one statement, Anna knew, he won Kara over completely.

“Justin? You’re gonna take care of that rat bastard?” She gave Charles an appraising look. “Now you’re in good shape, don’t get me wrong—but Justin is a bad piece of business. I lived in Cabrini Green until my mama got smart and married her a good man. Those projects, though, they grew a certain sort of predator—the kind that loves violence for its own sake. That Justin, he has dead eyes—sent me back twenty years the first time I saw him. He’s hurt people before and liked it. You’re not going to frighten him off with just a warning.”

The corner of Charles’s lip turned up and his eyes warmed, changing his appearance entirely. “Thank you for the heads-up,” he told her.

Kara gave him a regal nod. “If I know Anna, there’s not an ounce of food to be found in the whole apartment. You need to feed that girl up. There’s bagels and cream cheese in those bags on the table—and no, I don’t mean to stay. I’ve got a week’s worth of work waiting on me, but I couldn’t go without knowing that Anna would eat something.”

“I’ll see that she does,” Charles told her, the small smile still on his face.

Kara reached way up and patted his cheek in a motherly gesture. “Thank you.” She gave Anna a quick hug and pulled an envelope out of her pocket and set it on the table next to the bagels. “You take this for watching the cat so I don’t have to take him to the kennels with all those dogs he hates and pay them four times this amount. I find it in my cookie jar again, and I’ll take him to the kennels just for spite because it will make you feel guilty.”

Then she was gone.

Anna waited until the sound of her footsteps reached the next landing, then said, “How did you change so fast?”

“Do you want garlic or blueberry?” Charles asked, opening the bag.

When she didn't answer his question, he put both hands on the table and sighed. "You mean you haven't heard the story of the Marrok and his Indian maiden?" She couldn't read his voice and his face was tilted away from her so she couldn't read that either.

"No," she said.

He gave a short laugh, though she didn't think there was any humor behind it. "My mother was beautiful, and it saved her life. She'd been out gathering herbs and surprised a moose. It ran over her and she was dying from it when my father, attracted by the noise, came upon her. He saved my mother's life by turning her into a werewolf."

He took out the bagels and set them on the table with napkins. He sat down and waved her to the other seat. "Start eating and I'll tell you the rest of the story."

He'd given her the blueberry one. She sat opposite him and took a bite.

He gave a satisfied nod and then continued. "It was one of those love at first sight things on both their parts, apparently. Must have been looks, because neither one of them could speak the other's language at first. All was well until she became pregnant. My mother's father was a person of magic and he helped her when she told him that she needed to stay human until I was born. So every month, when my father and brother hunted under the moon she stayed human. And every moon she grew weaker and weaker. My father argued with her and with her father, worried that she was killing herself."

"Why did she do that?" Anna asked.

Charles frowned at her. "How long have you been a werewolf?"

"Three years last August."

"Werewolf women can't have children," he said. "The change is too hard on the fetus. They miscarry in the third or fourth month."

Anna stared at him. No one had ever told her that.

"Are you all right?"

She didn't know how to answer him. She hadn't exactly been planning on having children—especially as weird as her life had been for the last few years. She just hadn't planned on *not* having children either.

"This should have been explained to you before you chose to Change," he said.

It was her turn to laugh. “No one explained anything. No, it’s all right. Please tell me the rest of your story.”

He watched her for a long moment, then gave her an oddly solemn nod. “Despite my father’s protests, she held out until my birth. Weakened by the magic of fighting the moon’s call, she did not survive it. I was born a werewolf, not Changed as all the rest are. It gives me a few extra abilities—like being able to change fast.”

“That would be nice,” she said with feeling.

“It still hurts,” he added.

She played with a piece of bagel. “Are you going to look for the missing boy?”

His mouth tightened. “No. We know where Alan Frazier is.”

Something in his voice told her. “He’s dead?”

He nodded. “There are some good people looking into his death, they’ll find out who is responsible. He was Changed without his consent, the girl who was with him was killed. Then he was sold to be used as a laboratory guinea pig. The person responsible will pay for their crimes.”

She started to ask him something more, but the door to her apartment flew open and hit the wall behind it, leaving Justin standing in the open doorway.

She’d been so intent on Charles, she hadn’t heard Justin coming up the stairs. She’d forgotten to lock her door after Kara left. Not that it would have done her much good. Justin had a key to her apartment.

She couldn’t help her flinch as he strode through the door as if he owned the place. “Payday,” he said. “You owe me a check.” He looked at Charles. “Time for you to go. The lady and I have some business.”

Anna couldn’t believe that even Justin would take that tone with Charles. She looked at him to gauge his reaction and saw why Justin had put his foot in it.

Charles was fussing with his plate, his eyes on his hands. All his awesome force of personality was bottled up and stuffed somewhere it didn’t show.

“I don’t think I’d better go,” he murmured, still looking down. “She might need my help.”

Justin’s lip curled. “Where’d you pick this one up, bitch? Wait until I let Leo know you’ve found a stray and haven’t told him about it.” He

crossed the room and took a handful of her hair. He used it to force her to her feet and up against the wall, shoving her with a hip in a gesture that was both sexual and violent. He leaned his face into hers. “Just you wait. Maybe he’ll decide to let me punish you again. I’d like that.”

She remembered the last time he’d been allowed to punish her and couldn’t suppress her reaction. He enjoyed her panic and was pressed close enough that she could feel it.

“I don’t think that she’s the one who is going to be punished,” Charles said, his voice still soft. But something in Anna loosened. He wouldn’t let Justin hurt her.

She couldn’t have said why she knew that—she’d certainly found out that just because a wolf wouldn’t hurt her didn’t mean he wouldn’t stop anyone else from hurting her.

“I didn’t tell you to talk,” Justin snarled, his head snapping away from her so he could glare at the other man. “I’ll deal with you when I’m finished.”

The legs of Charles’s chair made a rough sound on the floor as he stood. Anna could hear him dust off his hands lightly.

“I think you are finished here,” he said in a completely different voice. “Let her go.”

She felt the power of those words go through her bones and warm her stomach, which had been chill with fear. Justin liked to hurt her even more than he desired her unwilling body. She’d fought him until she realized that pleased him even more. She’d learned quickly that there was no way for her to win a struggle between them. He was stronger and faster, and the only time she’d broken away from him, the rest of the pack had held her for him.

At Charles’s words, though, Justin released her so quickly that she staggered, though that didn’t slow her down as she ran as far away from him as she could get, which was the kitchen. She picked up the marble rolling pin that had been her grandmother’s and held it warily.

Justin had his back to her, but Charles saw her weapon and, briefly, his eyes smiled at her before he turned his attention to Justin.

“Who the hell are you?” Justin spat, but Anna heard beyond the anger to fear.

“I could return the question,” said Charles. “I have a list of all the werewolves in the Chicago packs and your name is not on it. But that is



only part of my business here. Go home and tell Leo that Charles Cornick is here to talk with him. I will meet him at his house at seven this evening. He may bring his first six and his mate, but the rest of his pack will stay away.”

To Anna’s shock, Justin snarled once, but, with no more protest than that, he left.

## CHAPTER 2

THE wolf who scared Anna so badly hadn't wanted to leave, but he wasn't dominant enough to do anything about it as long as Charles was watching. Which was why Charles waited a few seconds and then quietly followed him down the stairs.

The next flight down, he found Justin standing in front of a door prepared to knock on it. He was pretty sure it was Kara's door. Somehow it didn't surprise him that Justin would look for another way to punish Anna for his forced retreat. Charles scuffed his boot on the stairs and watched the other wolf stiffen and drop his arm.

"Kara's not home," Charles told him. "And hurting her would not be advisable."

Charles wondered if he should just kill him now...but he had a reputation that his father couldn't afford for him to lose. He only killed those who broke the Marrok's rules, and he only did it after their guilt was established.

Anna had told his father that Justin was the wolf who changed Alan MacKenzie Frazier against his will, but since there were so many things wrong in this pack there might have been mitigating circumstances. Anna had been a werewolf for three years and no one had told her that she could not have children. If Anna knew so little, then it was more than possible that this wolf didn't know the rules either.

Whether the wolf was ignorant of his crimes or not, Charles still wanted to kill him. When Justin turned around to face him, Charles let his beast peer out of his eyes and watched the other wolf blanch and start back down the stairs.

"You should find Leo and give him the message," Charles said. This time he let Justin know that he was following him, let him feel, a little, the way it was to be prey for a larger predator.

He was tough, this Justin. He kept turning around to confront Charles—only to meet his eyes and be forced away again. The chase aroused his wolf; and Charles, still angry at the way Justin had manhandled Anna, let the wolf out just a little more than he should have. It was a fight to stop at the outside door and let Justin go free. The wolf had been given a hunt and it was much, much too short.

Brother wolf hadn't liked seeing Anna frightened either. He'd staked his claim and it had taken all of Charles's control not to just kill Justin in Anna's apartment. Only the strong suspicion that she'd go back to being afraid of him had allowed him to stay seated until he was sure he could control himself.

Climbing four flights of stairs should have given him enough time to silence the wolf. It might have, except that Anna was waiting for him, rolling pin in hand, on the landing below her apartment.

He paused halfway up the stairs, and she turned around without a word. He stalked her back to her apartment and into the kitchen area, where she set the rolling pin on its stand—right next to a small pot that held a handful of knives.

"Why the rolling pin and not a knife?" he asked, his voice raspy with the need for action.

She looked at him for the first time since she'd seen his face on the stairs. "A knife wouldn't even slow him down, but bones take time to heal."

He liked that. Who'd have thought he'd get turned on by a woman with a rolling pin? "All right," he said. "All right."

He turned abruptly and left her standing in front of the counter because if he'd stayed there he would have taken her, seduced her. The apartment wasn't large enough either to pace or to get much distance between them. Her scent, blended with fear and arousal, was dangerous. He needed a distraction.

He pulled one of the chairs around and sat on it, leaning back until it was propped on two legs. He folded his arms behind his head and assumed a deliberately relaxed posture, half-closed his eyes, and said, "I want you to tell me about your Change." He hadn't missed the clues, he thought, watching her flinch a little. There was something wrong with how she'd been Changed. He focused on that.

"Why?" she asked, challenging him—still caught up in the adrenaline rush of Justin's visit, he imagined. She caught herself and turned away, cringing as if she expected him to explode.

He closed his eyes entirely. Another moment and he was going to put all the gentlemanly behavior his father had taught him aside and take her, willing or not. Oh, that would teach her not to be afraid of him, he thought.

"I need to know how Leo's pack is run," he told her patiently, though at the moment he could have cared less. "I'd rather do that through your impressions first, and then I'll ask you questions. It'll give me a better insight into what he's doing and why."

ANNA gave him a wary look, but he hadn't moved. She could still smell the anger in the air, but it might just have been a remnant from when Justin had been there. Charles was aroused, too—and she found herself responding to it though she knew it was a common result of victorious confrontations among males. He was ignoring it, so she could, too.

She took a deep breath, and his scent filled her lungs.

Clearing her throat, she tried to find the beginning of her story. "I was working in a music store in the Loop when I first met Justin. He told

me he was a guitarist like me, and he started coming in a couple of times a week, buying strings, music...small-ticket stuff. He'd flirt and tease." She gave an exasperated huff for her foolishness. "I thought he was a nice guy. So when he asked me out for lunch, I said sure."

She looked at Charles, but he looked as though he might have fallen asleep. The muscles in his shoulders were relaxed and his breathing was slow and easy.

"We dated a couple of times. He took me to this little restaurant near a park, one of the forest preserves. When we were finished he took me for a walk in the woods. 'To look at the moon,' he told me." Even now, with the night long over, she could hear the tension in her voice. "He asked me to wait a minute, said he'd be right back."

He'd been excited, she remembered, almost frantic with suppressed emotion. He'd patted his pockets, then said he'd left something in his car. She'd been worried that he had gone to get a wedding ring. She'd practiced gentle ways of saying no while she waited. They had very little in common and no chemistry at all. Though he seemed nice enough, she'd been getting the feeling that there was something a little off about him, too, and her instincts told her that she needed to break it off.

"It took longer than a minute, and I was just about to go back to the car myself when I heard something in the bushes." The skin on her face tingled with fear, just as it had that night.

"You didn't know he was a werewolf?" Charles's voice reminded her that she was safe in her apartment.

"No. I thought that werewolves were just stories."

"Tell me about after the attack."

She didn't need to tell him about how Justin had stalked her for an hour, herding her back from the edge of the preserve every time she came close to getting out. He only wanted to know about Leo's pack. Anna hid her sigh of relief.

"I woke up in Leo's house. He was excited at first. His pack only has one other woman. Then they discovered what I am."

"And what are you, Anna?" His voice was like smoke, she thought, soft and weightless.

"Submissive," she said. "The lowest of the low." And then because his eyes were still closed she added, "Useless."

"Is that what they told you?" he asked thoughtfully.

“It’s the truth.” She ought to be more upset about it—the wolves who didn’t despise her treated her with pity. But she didn’t want to be dominant and have to fight and hurt people.

He didn’t say anything so she continued her story, trying to give him all the details she could remember. He asked some questions:

“Who helped you gain control of the wolf?” (No one, she’d done that on her own—another black mark against her that proved she wasn’t dominant, they’d told her.)

“Who gave you the Marrok’s phone number?” (Leo’s third, Boyd Hamilton.)

“When and why?” (Just before Leo’s mate stepped in and stopped him from passing Anna around to whatever male he wanted to reward. Anna tried to avoid the higher-ranking wolves—she had no idea why he’d given her that number and no desire to ask.)

“How many new members have come into the pack since you?” (Three, all male—but two of them couldn’t control themselves and had had to be killed.)

“How many members of the pack?” (Twenty-six.)

When she finally wound down to a stop she was almost surprised to find herself sitting on the floor across the room from Charles with her back against the wall. Slowly Charles let his chair drop back to the floor and pinched the bridge of his nose. He sighed heavily and then looked at her directly for the first time since she’d begun speaking.

She sucked in her breath at the bright gold of his eyes. He was very near a change forced by some strong emotion—and despite seeing his eyes, she couldn’t read it in his body or his scent—he’d managed to mask it from her.

“There are rules. First is that no person may be Changed against their will. Second is that no person may be Changed until they have been counseled and passed a simple test to demonstrate that they understand what that Change means.”

She didn’t know what to say, but she finally remembered to drop her eyes away from his intense stare.

“From what you’ve said, Leo is adding new wolves and missing others—he didn’t report that to the Marrok. Last year he came to our annual meeting with his mate and his fourth—that Boyd Hamilton—and told us that his second and third were tied up.”

Anna frowned at him. "Boyd's been his third for as long as I have been in the pack and Justin is his second."

"You said that there is only one female in the pack besides you?"

"Yes."

"There should have been four."

"No one has mentioned any others," she told him.

He looked over at the check on her fridge.

"They take your paycheck. How much do they give you back?" His voice was bass-deep with the heat of the change behind it.

"Sixty percent."

"Ah." He closed his eyes again and breathed deeply. She could smell the musk of his anger now, though his shoulders still looked relaxed.

When he didn't say anything more, she said quietly, "Is there anything I can do to help? Do you want me to leave or talk or turn on music?" She didn't have a TV, but she still had her old stereo.

His eyes stayed closed but he smiled, just a twitch of his lips. "My control is usually better than this."

She waited, but it seemed to get worse rather than better.

His eyes snapped open and his cold yellow gaze pinned her against the wall where she sat as he uncoiled and prowled across the room.

Her pulse jumped unsteadily and she bowed her head, curling up to be smaller. She felt rather than saw him crouch in front of her. His hands when they cupped her face were so hot she flinched—and regretted it when he growled.

He dropped to his knees, nuzzling against her neck, then rested his body, now taut as iron, against hers, trapping her between him and the wall. He put his hands on the wall, one to each side of her, and then quit moving. His breath was hot on her neck.

She sat as still as she could, terrified of doing anything that might break his control. But there was something about him that kept her from being truly scared, something that insisted he wouldn't hurt her. That he never would hurt her.

Which was stupid. All the dominants hurt those beneath them. She'd had that beaten into her more than once. Just because she could heal quickly didn't make getting hurt pleasant. But no matter how much she told herself she ought to be frightened of him, a dominant among dominants, a

strange man she'd never seen before last night (or, more accurately, very early this morning), she couldn't.

Though he smelled of anger, he also smelled like spring rain, wolf, and man. She closed her eyes and quit fighting, letting the sweet-sharpness of his scent wash away the fear and anger aroused by telling this man about the worst thing that ever happened to her.

As soon as she relaxed he did as well. His rigid muscles loosened and his imprisoning arms slid down the wall to rest lightly on her shoulders.

After a while, he pulled away slowly, but stayed crouched so his head was only slightly higher than hers. He put a gentle thumb under her chin and raised her head until she gazed into his dark eyes. She had the sudden feeling that if she could look into those eyes for the rest of her life, she would be happy. It scared her a lot more than his anger had.

"Are you doing something to me to make me feel like this?" She asked the question before she had time to censor herself.

He didn't ask her how he made her feel. Instead, he tilted his head, a wolflike gesture, but kept eye contact, though there was no challenge in his scent. Instead, she had the impression he was almost as bewildered as she was. "I don't think so. Certainly not on purpose."

He cupped her face in both of his hands. They were large hands, and calloused, and they trembled just a little. He bent down until his chin rested on the top of her head. "I've never felt this way before either."

HE could have stayed there forever, despite the discomfort of kneeling on the hardwood floor. He'd never felt anything like this—certainly not with a woman he'd known less than twenty-four hours. He didn't know how to deal with it, didn't want to deal with it, and—most unlike himself—was willing to put off dealing with it indefinitely as long as he could spend the time with her body against his.

Of course there was something he'd rather do, but if he wasn't mistaken there was someone else coming up the stairs. Four flights of stairs were, evidently, not enough to keep intruders away. He closed his eyes and let his wolf-brother sort through the scents and identify their newest visitor.

There was a knock at the door.



Anna jerked back out of his hold, sucking in her breath. Part of him was pleased that he'd managed to distract her so much that she hadn't noticed anything until then. Part of him worried at her vulnerability.

Reluctantly, he stood up and put a little distance between them. "Come in, Isabelle."

The door opened and Leo's mate stuck her head in. She took a good look at Anna and grinned mischievously. "Interrupting something interesting?"

He'd always liked Isabelle, though he'd tried hard not to show it. As his father's executioner, he'd long ago learned not to get close to anyone he might someday have to kill—which made his circle of friends very small: his father and his brother for the most part.

Anna stood up and returned Isabelle's smile with a shy one of her own, though he could tell she was still shaken. To his surprise, though, she said, "Yes. There was something very interesting going on. Come in anyway."

Once the invitation had been issued, Isabelle blew in like the March wind, as she usually did, simultaneously shutting the door and holding out a hand to Charles. "Charles, it is so good to see you."

He took her hand and bowed over it, kissing it lightly. It smelled of cinnamon and cloves. He'd forgotten that about her, that she used perfume with an eye toward the sharpness of werewolf senses. Just strong enough to mask herself and so give her some protection from the sharp noses of her fellow wolves. Unless she was extremely agitated, no one could tell how she felt from her scent.

"You look beautiful," he said, as he knew she expected. It was true enough.

"I should be looking a nervous wreck," she said, running the hand Charles had kissed through her airy, feathery cut hair that, combined with her fine features, made her look like a fairy princess. She was shorter than Anna and finer-boned, but Charles had never made the mistake of thinking of her as fragile. "Justin came boiling in with some nonsense about a meeting tonight. He was all but incoherent—why did you enrage the boy like that?—and I told Leo I'd drop by to see what you were doing."

This was why he didn't make friends.

"Leo received my message?" Charles asked.

She nodded. “And looked quite frightened, which is not a good look for him, as I told him.” She leaned forward and put a too-familiar hand on his arm. “What has brought you to our territory, Charles?”

He stepped back. He didn’t much like to touch or be touched—though he seemed to have largely forgotten that while he was around Anna.

His Anna.

Forcefully he brought his attention back to business. “I have come to meet with Leo tonight.”

Isabelle’s usually cheerful face hardened, and he waited for her to blow up at him. Isabelle was as famous for her temper as she was for her charisma. She was one of the few people to blow up in the Marrok’s face and get away with it—Charles’s father liked Isabelle, too.

But she didn’t say anything more to him. Instead she turned her head to glance at Anna, whom, he suddenly realized, she’d been pointedly ignoring up to that point. When she returned her gaze to Charles, she began speaking, but not to him.

“What tales have you been carrying, Anna, my dear? Complaining about your place in the pack? Choose a mate, if you don’t like it. I’ve told you that before. Justin would take you, I’m sure.” There was no venom in her voice. Maybe if Charles hadn’t already met Justin, he’d have missed the way Anna’s face paled. Maybe he wouldn’t have heard the threat.

Anna didn’t say anything.

Isabelle continued to stare at Charles, though she was careful to keep from meeting his eyes. He thought she was studying his reactions, but he knew that his face gave nothing away—he’d been prepared for the way his brother wolf surged up in anger to defend Anna this time.

“Are you sleeping with him?” Isabelle asked. “He’s a good lover, isn’t he?”

Though Isabelle was mated, she had a wandering eye and Leo let her indulge herself as she pleased, a situation almost unique among werewolves. That didn’t mean *she* wasn’t jealous; Leo couldn’t so much as look at another woman. Charles always felt it was an odd relationship, but it had worked for them for a long time. When she’d made a play for him a few years ago, he’d allowed himself to be caught, knowing that there was nothing serious about her offer. He hadn’t been surprised when she’d tried

to get him to talk his father into letting Leo expand his territory. She had taken his refusal in good humor, though.

The sex had meant nothing to either of them—but it meant something to Anna. He'd have had to be human to miss the hurt and mistrust in her eyes at Isabelle's thrust.

"Play nicely, Isabelle," he told her, abruptly impatient. He put a little force in his voice as he said, "Go home and tell Leo I'll talk to him tonight."

Her eyes lit with rage and she drew herself up.

"I am not my father," he said softly. "You don't want to try the shrew act with me."

Fear cooled her temper—and his, too, for that matter. Her perfume might have hid her scent, but it didn't hide her eyes or her clenched hands. He didn't enjoy frightening people—not usually.

"Go home, Isabelle. You'll have to swallow your curiosity until then."

He shut the door gently behind her and stared at it for a moment, reluctant to face Anna—though he had no idea why he should feel so guilty for doing something long before he'd ever met her.

"Are you going to kill her?"

He looked at Anna then, unable to tell what she thought about it. "I don't know."

Anna bit her lip. "She has been kind to me."

Kind? As far as he could tell kindness had been pretty far from anything that had happened to Anna since her Change. But the worry in her face had him swallowing his sharp reply.

"There is something odd going on in Leo's pack," was all he said. "I'll find out exactly what it is tonight."

"How?"

"I'll ask them," he told her. "They know better than to think they can lie to me—and refusal to answer my questions, or refusal to meet with me is admitting guilt."

She looked puzzled. "Why couldn't they lie to you?"

He tapped a finger on her nose. "Smelling a lie is pretty easy, unless you are dealing with someone who cannot tell truth from lie, but there are other ways to detect them."

Her stomach growled.

“Enough of this,” he said, deciding it was time to feed her up a little. A bagel was not enough. “Get your coat.”

He didn’t want to take the car into the Loop, where it would be difficult to find parking, because his temper was too uncertain around her. He couldn’t talk her into a taxi, which was a new experience for him—not many people refused to listen when he told them what to do. But then, she was an Omega, and not constrained by an instinctive need to obey a more dominant wolf. With an inward sigh, he followed her down a few blocks to the nearest L station.

He’d never been on Chicago’s elevated train before, and, if it weren’t for a certain stubborn woman, he wouldn’t have ridden one this time. Though he admitted, if only to himself, that he rather enjoyed it when a rowdy group of thugs disguised as teenagers decided to give him a bad time.

“Hey, Injun Joe,” said a baggy-clothed boy. “You a stranger in town? That’s a foxy lady you have there. If she likes her meat brown, there’s plenty here to go ’round.” He tapped himself on his chest.

There were real gangs in Chicago, raised in the eat-or-be-eaten world of the inner city. But these boys were imitators, probably out of school for the holidays and bored. So they decided to entertain themselves by scaring the adults who couldn’t differentiate between amateurs and the real deal. Not that a pack of boys couldn’t be dangerous under the wrong circumstances...

An old woman sitting next to them shrank back, and the smell of her fear washed away his tolerance.

Charles got to his feet, smiled, and watched their smugness evaporate at his confidence. “She’s foxy, all right,” he said. “But she belongs to me.”

“Hey, man,” said the boy just behind the one who had spoken. “No hard feelings, man.”

He let his smile widen and watched them shuffle backward. “It’s a nice day. I think that you should go sit in those empty seats up there where you see your way more clearly.”

They scuttled to the front of the car and, after they had all taken a seat, Charles sat back down next to Anna.

THERE was such satisfaction in his face when he sat down that Anna had to suppress a grin for fear that one of the boys would look back and think she was laughing at one of them.

“That was a prime example of testosterone poisoning,” she observed dryly. “Are you going to go after Girl Scouts next?”

Charles’s eyes glinted with amusement. “Now they know that they need to pick their prey more cautiously.”

Anna seldom traveled to the Loop anymore—everything she needed she could find closer to home. He evidently knew it better than she did, despite being a visitor. He chose the stop they got off on and took her directly to a little Greek place tucked in the shadow of the L train tracks, where they greeted him by name and took him to a private room with only one table.

He let her give her order and then doubled it, adding a few dishes on the side.

While they were waiting for their food, he took a small, worn-looking, leather-bound three-ring notebook from his jacket pocket. He popped the rings and took out a couple of sheets of lined paper and handed them to her with a pen.

“I’d like you to write down the names of the members of your pack. It would help if you list them from the most dominant and go to the least.”

She tried. She didn’t know everyone’s last name and, since everyone outranked her, she hadn’t paid strict attention to rank.

She handed the paper and pen back to him with a frown. “I’m forgetting people, and other than the top four or five wolves, I could be mistaken on rank.”

He set her pages down on the table and then took out a couple of sheets with writing already on them and compared the two lists, marking them up. Anna took her chair and scooted it around the table until she sat next to him and could see what he was doing.

He took his list and set it before her. “These are the people who should be in your pack. I’ve checked the names of the ones who don’t appear on your list.”

She scanned down it, then grabbed the pen back and marked out one of his checks. “He’s still here. I just forgot about him. And this one, too.”

He took the list back. “All the women are gone. Most of the rest who are missing are older wolves. Not *old*. But there’s not a wolf left who is older than Leo. There are a few younger wolves missing as well.” He tapped a finger on a couple of names. “These were young. Paul Lebshak, here, would have been only four years a werewolf. George not much older.”

“Do you know all the werewolves?”

He smiled. “I know the Alphas. We have yearly meetings with all of them. I know most of the seconds and thirds. One of the things we do at the meetings is update the pack memberships. The Alphas are supposed to keep the Marrok informed when people die, or when new wolves are Changed. If my father had known so many wolves were gone, he would have investigated. Though Leo’s lost a third of the pack membership, he’s done a fair job of replacing them.”

He gave back the list she’d written—a number of names, including hers, were also checked. “These are all new. From what you’ve told me, I’d guess that they are all forced Changes. The survival rate of random attack victims is very poor. Your Leo has killed a lot of people over the past few years in order to keep the number of his pack where it is. Enough that it should have attracted the attention of the authorities. How many of these people were made wolves after you?”

“None of them. The only new wolf I’ve seen was that poor boy.” She tapped the paper with her pen. “If they didn’t leave bodies and spread out the hunt, they could have easily hidden the disappearance of a hundred people in the greater Chicago area over a few years.”

He leaned back and closed his eyes, then he shook his head. “I don’t remember dates too well anymore. I haven’t met most of the missing wolves, and I don’t remember the last time I saw Leo’s old second except that it was within the last ten years. So whatever happened was after that.”

“Whatever happened to what?”

“To Leo, I’d guess. Something happened that made him kill all the women in his pack except Isabelle and most of his older wolves—the wolves who would have objected when he started attacking innocent people, or quit teaching new wolves the rules and rights that belong to them. I can see why he’d have to kill *them*—but why the women? And why didn’t the other Chicago Alpha say anything to my father when it happened?”

“He might not have known. Leo and Jaimie stay away from each other, and our pack is not allowed to go into Jaimie’s territory at all. The Loop is neutral territory, but we can’t go north of here unless we get special permission.”

“Oh? Interesting. Have you heard anything about why they aren’t getting along?”

She shrugged. There had been a lot of talk. “Someone told me that Jaimie wouldn’t sleep with Isabelle. Someone else said that they had an affair and he broke it off, and she was insulted. Or that he wouldn’t break it off and Leo had to step in. Another story is that Jaimie and Leo never got along. I don’t know.”

She looked at the checks that marked the newer wolves in her pack and suddenly laughed.

“What?”

“It’s just stupid.” She shook her head.

“Tell me.”

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Fine. You were looking for something that all the newer wolves had in common. I was just thinking that if someone wanted to list the most handsome men in the pack, they would all make the cut.”

Both of them were surprised by the flash of territorial jealousy that he didn’t bother to hide from her.

It was probably a good time for the waiter to come in with the first course of food.

Anna started to move her chair back to where it had been, but the waiter sat his tray down and took it from her, seating her properly before he got back to setting out the dishes.

“And how have you been, sir?” he said to Charles. “Still haven’t given up and moved to civilization?”

“Civilization is vastly overrated,” Charles returned as he put the sheets of paper into his notebook and shut the cover. “As long as I can come up once or twice a year and eat here, I am content.”

The waiter shook his head with mock sadness. “Mountains are beautiful, but not as beautiful as our skyline. One of these days I’ll take you out for a night on the town and you’ll never leave again.”

“Phillip!” A bird-thin woman stepped into the room. “While you are here chatting with Mr. Cornick, our other guests are going hungry.”

The waiter grinned and winked at Anna. He dropped a kiss on the woman's cheek and slipped through the door.

The woman suppressed a smile and shook her head. "That one. Always talking. He needs a good wife to keep him in line. I am too old." She threw up her hands and then followed the waiter.

The next twenty minutes brought a series of waiters and waitresses who all looked as though they were related. They carried food on trays and never said anything about it being odd that two people should eat so much food.

Charles filled his plate, looked at hers, and said, "You should have told me you didn't like lamb."

She looked at her plate. "I do."

He frowned at her, took the serving spoon, and added to the amount on her plate. "You should be eating more. A lot more. The change requires a lot of energy. You have to eat more as a werewolf to maintain your weight."

After that, by mutual consent Anna and Charles confined their conversations to generalities. They talked about Chicago and city living. She took a little of a rice dish and he looked at her until she took a second spoonful. He told her a little about Montana. She found he was very well spoken and the easiest way to stop a conversation cold was to ask him about anything personal. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk about himself, she thought, it was that he didn't find himself very interesting.

The door swung open one last time, and a girl of about fourteen came in with dessert.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" Charles asked her.

She sighed. "Vacation. Everyone else gets time off. But me? I get to work in the restaurant. It sucks."

"I see," he said. "Perhaps you should call child welfare and tell them you're being abused?"

She grinned at him. "Wouldn't that get Papa riled up. I'm tempted to do it just to see his face. If I told him it was your suggestion do ya suppose he'd get mad at you instead of me?" She wrinkled her nose. "Probably not."

"Tell your mother that the food was perfect."

She braced the empty tray on her hip and backed out the door. "I'll tell her, but she already told me to tell you that it wasn't. The lamb was



a little stringy, but that's all she could get."

"I gather you come here often," Anna said, unenthusiastically picking at a huge piece of baklava. Not that she had anything against baklava—as long as she hadn't eaten a week's worth of food first.

"Too often," he said. *He* was having no trouble eating more, she noticed. "We have some business interests here, so I have to come three or four times a year. The owner of the restaurant is a wolf, one of Jaimie's. I sometimes find it convenient to discuss business here."

"I thought you were your father's hit man," she said with interest. "You have to hunt down people in Chicago three or four times a year?"

He laughed out loud. The sound was rusty, as if he didn't do it very often—though he ought to, it looked good on him. Good enough that she ate the forkful of baklava she'd been playing with and then had to figure out how to swallow it when her stomach was telling her that it didn't need any more food sent its way.

"No, I have other duties as well. I take care of my father's pack's business interests. I am very good at both of my jobs," he said without any hint of modesty.

"I bet you are." He was a person who would be very good at whatever he decided to do. "I'd let you invest my savings. I think I have twenty-two dollars and ninety-seven cents right now."

He frowned at her, all amusement gone.

"It was a joke," she explained.

But he ignored her. "Most Alphas have their members give ten percent of their earnings for the good of the pack, especially when the pack is new. This money is used to ensure there is a safe house, for instance. Once a pack is firmly established, though, the need for money lessens. My father's pack has been established for a long time—there is no need for a tithe because we own the land we live on and there are investments enough for the future. Leo has been here for thirty years: time enough to be well established. I've never heard of a pack demanding forty percent from its members—which leads me to believe that Leo's pack is in financial trouble. He sold that young man you called my father about, and several others like him, to someone who was using them to develop a way to make drugs work on us as well as they work on humans. He had to kill a number of humans in order to get a single survivor werewolf."

She thought about the implications. "Who wanted the drugs?"

"I'll know that when Leo tells me who he sold the boy to."

"So why didn't he sell me?" She wasn't worth much to the pack.

He leaned back in his chair. "If an Alpha sold one of his pack, he'd have a rebellion on his hands. Besides, Leo went to a lot of trouble to get you. There haven't been any pack members killed or gone missing since you became a member."

It wasn't a question, but she answered him anyway. "No."

"I think maybe you are the key to Leo's mystery."

She couldn't help a snort of derision. "Me? Leo needed a new doormat?"

He leaned suddenly forward, knocking his chair over as he swept her off of her own and stood her on her feet. She'd thought she was used to the speed and strength of the wolves, but he stole her breath.

As she stood still and shocked, he prowled around her until he came back around the front and kissed her, a long, dark, deep kiss that left her breathless for another reason entirely.

"Leo found you and decided that he needed you," he told her. "He sent Justin after you, because any of his other wolves would know what you were. Even before your Change, they'd have known. So he sent a half-crazy wolf because any other would have been unable to attack you."

Hurt, she flinched away from him. He made her sound special, but she knew he was lying. He sounded like he was telling the truth, but she was no prize. She was nothing. For three years she had been nothing. He had made her feel special today, but she knew better.

His hands, when they came down on her shoulders, were hard and impossible to resist. "Let me tell you something about Omega wolves, Anna. *Look* at me."

She blinked back tears, and, unable to resist his command, raised her eyes to glare at him.

"Almost unique," he said and gave her a little shake. "I work with numbers and percentages all the time, Anna. I might not be able to figure the odds exactly, but I'll tell you that the chances that Justin picked you out to Change by sheer chance are almost infinitesimal. No werewolf, acting on instincts alone, would attack an Omega. And Justin strikes me as a wolf who acts on very little else."

“Why not? Why wouldn’t he have attacked me? And what is an Omega?”

It was evidently the right question because Charles stilled, his former agitation gone. “You are an Omega, Anna. I bet that when you walk into a room, people come to you. I bet complete strangers tell you things they wouldn’t tell their own mothers.”

Incredulous, she stared at him. “You saw Justin this morning. Did he look calm to you?”

“I saw Justin,” he agreed slowly. “And I think that in any other pack he would have been killed shortly after he was made because his control is not good enough. I don’t know why he was not. But I think you allow him to control his wolf—and he hates you for it.

“You should not be ranked last in your pack.” His hands slid down her shoulders until he held her hands. Oddly that felt more intimate than his kiss had. “An Omega wolf is like the Indian medicine men, outside of the normal pack rankings. They had to teach you to lower your eyes, didn’t they? To submissive wolves, such things are instinctive. You, they had to beat down.

“You bring peace to all those around you, Anna,” he said intently, his eyes on hers. “A werewolf, especially a dominant wolf, is always on the edge of violence. After being shut in an aircraft with too many people for hours, I came into the airport craving bloodshed like a junkie craves his next fix. But when you came up to me, the anger, the hunger left.”

He squeezed her hands. “You are a gift, Anna. An Omega wolf in the pack means that more wolves survive the Change from human to wolf because they can find control easier with you there. It means that we lose fewer males to stupid dominance fights because an Omega brings a calmness to all those around him. Or her.”

There was a hole in his argument. “But what about earlier, when you almost changed because you were so angry?”

Something happened to his face, an emotion she didn’t know him well enough to read, except to know that it was strong.

When he spoke it was with visible effort, as if his throat had tightened. “Most werewolves find someone they love, get married, and spend a long time with their spouse before the wolf accepts her as his

mate.” He dropped her gaze and turned away, walking across the room and giving her his back.

Without the warmth of his body, she felt cold and alone. Scared.

“Sometimes it doesn’t happen that way,” he told the wall. “Let it rest there, for now, Anna. You have been through enough without this.”

“I am so tired of being ignorant,” she spat, suddenly hugely angry. “You’ve changed all the rules on me—so you can *damned* well tell me what the new rules are.” As abruptly as the anger had come, it was gone, leaving her shaky and on the verge of tears.

He turned and his eyes had gone gold, reflecting the dim light of the room until they glowed. “Fine. You should have let it be, but you want truth.” His voice rumbled like thunder, though it wasn’t very loud. “My brother wolf has taken you for his mate. If you were *nothing* to me, I would have never allowed such abuse as you have suffered since your Change. But you are mine, and the thought of you hurt, of being able to do nothing about it, is an anger that even an Omega wolf cannot easily soothe.”

*Well*, she thought, stunned. She’d known he was interested in her, but she’d assumed it had been a casual thing. Leo was the only mated wolf she knew. She didn’t know any of the rules. What did it mean that he said his wolf had decided she was his mate? Did she have a choice in the matter? Did the way he aroused her without trying, the way he made her feel—as if she’d known him forever and wanted to wake up next to him for the rest of her life, though she’d known him only hours, really—was that his fault?

“If you had let me,” he said, “I’d have courted you gently and won your heart.” He closed his eyes. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

She should have been frightened. Instead, suddenly, she felt very, very calm, like the eye in a hurricane of emotion.

“I don’t like sex,” she told him, because it seemed like something he ought to know under the circumstances.

He choked and opened his eyes, their bright color giving way to human dark as she watched.

“I wasn’t enthusiastic before the Change,” she told him plainly. “And after being passed around like a whore for a year, until Isabelle put a stop to it, I like it even less.”

His mouth tightened, but he didn't say anything, so she continued. "And I won't be forced. Never again." She pulled up the sleeves of her shirt to show him the long scars on the underside of her arm, wrist to elbow. She'd made them with a silver knife, and if Isabelle hadn't found her, she'd have killed herself. "This is why Isabelle made Leo stop making me sleep with whatever male pleased him enough. She found me and kept me alive. After that I bought a gun and silver bullets."

He growled softly, but not at her, she was pretty sure.

"I'm not threatening to kill myself. But you need to know this about me because—if you want to be my mate—I won't be like Leo. I won't let you sleep around with anyone else. I won't be forced either. I've had enough. If that makes me a dog in the manger, so be it. But if I am yours, then you *damned* well are going to be mine."

"A dog in the manger?" He let out a gusty breath of air that might have been a half-laugh. He closed his eyes again and said in a reasonable tone, "If Leo survives tonight, I shall be very surprised. If I survive you, I'll be equally surprised." He looked at her. "And very little surprises me anymore."

He strode across the floor, picking up his chair and setting it where it belonged as he passed it. He stopped just in front of her and touched her raised chin gently, then laughed. Still smiling he tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. "I promise you will enjoy sex with me," he murmured.

Somehow she managed to keep her spine straight. She wasn't ready to fall into a puddle at his feet quite yet. "Isabelle said you were a good lover."

He laughed again. "You have no need for jealousy. Sex with Isabelle meant no more to me than a good belly scratch and rather less to her, I think. Nothing worth repeating for either of us." There was a whisper of sound outside the room and he took her hand. "Time for us to go."

He paid polite compliments to the meal as he handed over a credit card to a young-looking man who called him "sir" and smelled of werewolf. The owner of the restaurant, Anna supposed.

"So where would you like to go next?" she asked as she stepped out onto the busy sidewalk.

He pulled his jacket on the rest of the way and dodged a woman in high heels who carried a leather briefcase. "Somewhere with

fewer people.”

“We could go to the zoo,” she suggested. “This time of year it’s pretty deserted, even with the kids out of school for Thanksgiving.”

He turned his head and started to speak when something in a window caught his attention. He grabbed her and threw her on the ground, falling on top of her. There was a loud bang, like a backfiring car, and he jerked once, then lay still on top of her.

## CHAPTER 3

IT had been a long time since he'd been shot, but the sizzling burn of the silver bullet was still familiar. He hadn't been quite fast enough—and the crowd of people made sure that he couldn't go after the car that had taken off as soon as the gun had fired. He hadn't even gotten a good look at the shooter, just an impression.

“Charles?” Beneath him, Anna's eyes were black with shock and she patted his shoulders. “Was someone shooting at us? Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said, though he couldn't really assess the damage until he moved, which he didn't want to much.

“Stay where you are until I can get a look,” said a firm voice. “I’m an EMT.”

The command in the EMT’s voice forced Charles to move—he didn’t take orders from anyone except his father. He pushed himself off of Anna and got to his feet, then leaned down and grabbed her hand to pull her up from the frozen sidewalk.

“Damn it, man, you’re bleeding. Don’t be stupid,” snapped the stranger. “Sit down.”

Being shot had enraged the wolf in him, and Charles turned to snarl at the EMT, a competent-looking middle-aged man with sandy hair and a graying red moustache.

Then Anna squeezed his hand, which she still held, and said, “Thank you,” to the EMT and then to Charles “Let him take a look”—and he was able to hold back the snarl.

He did growl low in his throat, though, when the stranger looked at his wound: never show weakness to a possible enemy. He felt too exposed on the sidewalk, too many people were looking at him—they had acquired quite an audience.

“Ignore him,” Anna told the EMT. “He gets grumpy when he’s hurt.”

George, the werewolf who owned the restaurant, brought out a chair for him to sit on. Someone had called the police; two cars came with flashing lights and sirens that hurt his ears, followed by an ambulance.

The bullet had cut through skin and a fine layer of muscle across the back of his shoulders without doing a lot of damage, he was told. Did he have any enemies? It was Anna who told them that he’d just flown in from Montana, that it must have been just a drive-by shooting, though this wasn’t the usual neighborhood for that kind of crime.

If the cop had had a werewolf’s nose, he would never have let her lie pass. He was a seasoned cop, however, and her answer made him a little uneasy. But when Charles showed him his Montana driver’s license, he relaxed.

Anna’s presence allowed Charles to submit to cleaning and bandaging and questioning, but nothing would make him get into an ambulance and be dragged to a hospital, even though silver-bullet wounds healed human-slow. Even now he could feel the hot ache of the silver as it seeped into his muscles.



While he sat beneath the hands of strangers and fought not to lose control, he couldn't get the image of the shooter out of his head. He'd looked in the window and saw the reflection of the gun, then the face of the person who held it, wrapped in a winter scarf and wearing dark glasses. Not enough to identify the gunman, just a glimpse—but he would swear that the man had not been looking at him when his gloved finger pulled the trigger. He'd been looking at Anna.

Which didn't make much sense. Why would someone be trying to kill Anna?

They didn't go to the zoo.

While he used the restaurant bathroom to clean up, George procured a jacket to cover the bandages so Charles wouldn't have to advertise his weakness to everyone who saw him. This time Anna didn't object when he asked her to call a taxi.

His phone rang on the way back to Anna's apartment, but he silenced it without looking at it. It might have been his father, Bran, who had an uncanny knack for knowing when he'd been hurt. But he had no desire to talk with the Marrok while the taxi driver could hear every word. More probably it was Jaimie. George would have called his Alpha as soon as Charles was shot. In either case, they would wait until he was someplace more private.

He made Anna wait in the taxi when they got to her apartment building until he had a chance to take a good look around. No one had followed them from the Loop, but the most likely assailants were Leo's people—and they all knew where Anna lived. He hadn't recognized the shooter, but then he didn't know every werewolf in Chicago.

Anna was patient with him. She didn't argue about waiting but the cabdriver looked at him as though he were crazy.

Her patience helped his control—which was shakier than it had been in a long time. He wondered how he'd be behaving if his Anna hadn't been an Omega whose soothing effect was almost good enough to override the protective rage roused by the attempt on her life. The painful burn of his shoulders, worsening as silver-caused wounds always did for a while, didn't help his temperament, nor did the knowledge that his ability to fight was impaired.

Someone was trying to kill Anna. It didn't make sense, but somewhere during the trip back to Oak Park, he'd accepted that it was so.

Satisfied there was no immediate threat in or around the apartment building, he held out his hand to Anna to help her out of the taxi and then paid the fare, all the while letting his eyes roam, looking for anything out of place. But there was nothing.

Just inside the front door of the lobby, a man who was getting his mail smiled and greeted Anna. They exchanged a sentence or two, but after a good look at Charles's face, she started up the stairs.

Charles had not been able to parse a word she'd said, which was a very bad sign. Grimly he followed her up the stairs, shoulders throbbing with the beat of his heart. He flexed his fingers as she unlocked her door. His joints ached with the need to change, but he held off—only just. If he was this bad in human form, the wolf would be in control if he shifted.

He sat on the futon and watched her open her fridge and then her freezer. Finally she dug in the depths of a cabinet and came out with a large can. She opened it and dumped the unappealing contents into a pot, which she set on the stove.

Then she knelt on the floor in front of him. She touched his face and said, very clearly, "Change," and a number of other things that brushed by his ears like a flight of butter-flies.

He closed his eyes against her.

There was some urgent reason he shouldn't change, but he'd forgotten it while he'd been watching her.

"You have five hours before the meeting," she said slowly, her voice making more sense once his eyes were shut. "If you can change to the wolf and back, it will help you heal."

"I have no control," he told her. That was it. That was the reason. "The wound's not that bad—it's the silver. My changing will be too dangerous for you. I can't."

There was a pause and then she said, "If I am your mate, your wolf won't harm me no matter how much control you lack, right?" She sounded more hopeful than certain, and he couldn't think clearly enough to know if she was correct.

DOMINANTS were touchy about taking suggestions from lesser wolves, so she left Charles to make up his own mind while she stirred the beef stew to

keep it from burning. Not that burning would make it taste any worse. She'd bought it on sale about six months ago, and had never been hungry enough to eat it. But it had protein, which he needed after being wounded, and it was the only meat in the house.

The wound had looked painful, but not unmanageable to her, and none of the EMTs had seemed overly concerned.

She took the metal ball out of the pocket of her jeans and felt it burn her skin. While the EMTs had been working on his back, Charles had caught her eye and then looked at the small, bloody slug on the sidewalk.

At his silent direction, she'd pocketed it. Now she set it on her counter. Silver was bad. It meant that it really hadn't been a random shooting. She hadn't seen who fired the shot, but she could only assume that it had been one of her pack mates, probably Justin.

Silver injuries wouldn't heal in minutes or hours, and Charles would have to go wounded to Leo's house.

Claws clicked on the hardwood floor and the fox-colored wolf who was Charles walked over and collapsed on the floor, near enough to rest his head on one of her feet. There were bits and pieces of torn cloth caught here and there on his body. A glance at the futon told her he hadn't bothered to strip out of his clothes, and the bandages hadn't survived the change. The cut across his shoulder blades was deep and oozing blood.

He seemed more weary than wild and ravenous, though, so she assumed his fears about how much control he'd have had not been borne out. An out-of-control werewolf, in her experience, would be growling and pacing, not lying quietly at her feet. She put the stew in a bowl and set it in front of him.

He took a bite and then paused after the first mouthful.

"I know," she told him apologetically, "it's not haute cuisine. I could go downstairs and see if Kara has any steaks or roasts I could borrow."

He went back to eating, but she knew from healing her own wounds that he'd be better off with more meat. Kara wouldn't be home, but Anna had a key, and she knew Kara wouldn't mind if she borrowed a roast as long as she replaced it.

Charles seemed to be engrossed in his meal so she started for the door. Before she was halfway there, he'd abandoned the food and

stalked at her heels. It hurt him to move—she wasn't quite sure how she knew that, since he neither limped nor slowed visibly.

“You need to stay here,” she told him. “I'll be right back.”

But when she tried to open the door, he stepped in front of it.

“Charles,” she said and then she saw his eyes and swallowed hard. There was nothing of Charles left in the wolf's yellow gaze.

Leaving the apartment wasn't an option.

She walked back to the kitchen and stopped by the food bowl she'd left him. He stayed at the door for a moment before following her. When he had finished eating she sat down on the futon. He jumped up beside her, put his head in her lap, and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh.

He opened one eye and then closed it again. She ran her fingers through his pelt, carefully avoiding the wound.

Were they mated? She thought not. Wouldn't something like that have a more formal ceremony? She hadn't actually told him that she accepted him—no more than he had really asked her.

Still...she closed her eyes and let his scent flow through her and her hand closed possessively in a handful of fur. When she opened her eyes, she found herself staring into his clear gold ones.

His phone rang from somewhere underneath her. She reached down to the floor and snagged the remnant of his pants and pulled the phone out and checked the number. She turned it so he could see the display.

“It says *father*,” she told him. But evidently the wolf was still in control, because he didn't even look at the phone. “I guess you can call him back when you're back to yourself.” She hoped that would be soon. Even with silver poisoning, he ought to be better in a few hours, she hoped.

The phone quit ringing for a moment. Then started again. It rang three times. Stopped. Then rang three more times. Stopped. When it rang again she answered it reluctantly.

“Hello?”

“Is he all right?”

She remembered the werewolf who had brought out a chair for Charles to sit on while the EMTs worked on him. He must have called the Marrok.

“I think so. The wound wasn't so bad, pretty much a deep cut across his shoulder blades, but the bullet was silver and he seems to be

having a bad reaction to it.”

There was a little pause. “Can I speak to him?”

“He’s in wolf form,” she told him, “but he is listening to you now.” One of his ears was cocked toward the phone.

“Do you need help with Charles? His reaction to silver can be a little extreme.”

“No. He’s not causing any problems.”

“Silver leaves Charles’s wolf uncontrolled,” crooned the Marrok softly. “But he’s giving you no problems? Why would that be?”

She’d never met the Marrok, but she wasn’t dumb. That croon was dangerous. Did he think she had something to do with Charles being shot and was now holding him prisoner somewhere? She tried to answer his question, despite the possible embarrassment.

“Um. Charles thinks that his wolf has chosen me as a mate.”

“In less than one full day?” It did sound dumb when he said it that way.

“Yes.” She couldn’t keep the uncertainty out of her voice, though, and it bothered Charles. He rolled to his feet and growled softly.

“Charles also said I was an Omega wolf,” she told his father. “That might have something to do with it as well.”

Silence lengthened and she began to think that the cell phone might have dropped the connection. Then the Marrok laughed softly. “Oh, his brother is going to tease him unmercifully about this. Why don’t you tell me everything that has happened. Start with picking Charles up at the airport please.”

HER knuckles were white on the steering wheel, but Charles was in no mood to ease Anna’s fears.

He’d tried to leave her behind. He had no desire to have Anna in the middle of the fight that was probable tonight. He didn’t want her hurt—and he didn’t want her to see him in the role that had been chosen for him so long ago.

“I know where Leo lives,” she told him. “If you don’t take me with you, I’ll just hire a taxi and follow you. You are not going in there alone. You still smell of your wounds—and they’ll take that as a sign of weakness.”

The truth of her words had almost made him cruel. It had been on the tip of his tongue to ask her what she thought she, an Omega female, could do to help him in a fight—but his brother wolf had frozen his tongue. She had been wounded enough, and the wolf wouldn't allow any more. It was the only time he could ever remember that the wolf put the restraints on his human half rather than the reverse. The words would have been wrong, too. He remembered her holding that marble rolling pin. She might not be aggressive, but she had a limit to how far she could be pushed.

He found himself meekly agreeing to her company, though as they got closer to Leo's house in Naperville, his repentance hadn't been up to making him happy with her presence.

"Leo's house is on fifteen acres," she told him. "Big enough for the pack to hunt on, but we still have to be pretty quiet."

Her voice was tight. He thought she was trying to make conversation with him to keep her anxiety in check. Angry as he was, he couldn't help but come to her aid.

"It's hard to hunt in the big cities," he agreed. Then, to check her reaction because they'd never had a chance to really finish their discussion about what she was to him, he said, "I'll take you for a real hunt in Montana. You'll never want to live near a big city again. We usually hunt deer or elk, but the moose populations are up high enough that we hunt them sometimes, too. Moose are a real challenge."

"I think I'd rather stick to rabbits, if it's all the same to you," she said. "Mostly I just trail behind the hunt." She gave him a little smile. "I think I watched *Bambi* one too many times."

He laughed. Yes, he was going to keep her. She was giving up without a fight. A challenge, perhaps—he thought about her telling him that she wasn't much interested in sex—but not a fight. "Hunting is part of what we are. We aren't cats to prolong the kill, and the animals we hunt need thinning to keep their herds strong and healthy. But if it bothers you, you can follow behind the hunt in Montana, too. You'll still enjoy the run."

She drove up to a keypad on a post in front of a graying cedar gate and pushed in four numbers. After a pause the chain on the top of the gate began to move and the gate slid back along the wall.

He'd been here twice before. The first time had been more than a century ago and the house had been little more than a cabin. There had been fifty acres then and the Alpha had been a little Irish Catholic named

Willie O'Shaughnessy who had fit in surprisingly well with his mostly German and Lutheran neighbors. The second time had been in the early twentieth century for Willie's funeral. Willie had been old, nearly as old as the Marrok. There was a madness that came sometimes to those who live too long. When the first signs of it had manifested in him, Willie had quit eating—a display of the willpower that had made him an Alpha. Charles remembered his father's grief at Willie's passing. They—Charles and his brother, Samuel—had been worried for months afterward that their father would decide to follow Willie.

Willie's house and lands had passed on to the next Alpha, a German werewolf who was married to O'Shaughnessy's daughter. Charles couldn't remember what had happened to that one or even his name. There had been several Alphas here after him, though, before Leo took over.

Willie and a handful of fine German stonemasons had built the house with a craftsmanship that would have been prohibitively expensive to replace now. Several of the windows were thickened on the bottom with age. He remembered when those windows had been new.

Charles hated being reminded how old he was.

Anna turned off the engine and started opening her door, but he stopped her.

"Wait a moment." A hint of unease was brushing across the senses bequeathed to him by his gifted mother, and he'd learned to pay attention. He looked at Anna and scowled—she was too vulnerable. If something happened to him, they'd tear her to bits.

"I need you to change," he told her. Something inside him relaxed: that was it. "If something happens to me, I want you to run like hell, get somewhere safe, then call my father and tell him to get you out of here."

She hesitated.

It was not his nature to explain himself. As a dominant wolf in his father's pack, he seldom had to. For her, though, he would make an effort.

"There is something important about you being in wolf form when we go in there." He shrugged. "I've learned to trust my instincts."

"All right."

She took a while. He had time to open his notebook and look at her list. He'd told Justin that Leo could have Isabelle and his first five.

According to Anna's list, other than Isabelle, of those six only Boyd was on the list of names his father had given him. If Justin was Leo's second, then there wasn't a wolf other than Leo who was a threat to him.

The ache of his wound gave lie to that thought, so he corrected it. There were none of them who would give him a run for his money in a straightforward fight.

Anna finished her change and sat panting heavily on the driver's side seat. She was beautiful, he thought. Coal black with a dash of white over her nose. She was on the small side for a werewolf, but still much larger than a German shepherd. Her eyes were a pale, pale blue, which was strange because her human eyes were brown.

"Are you ready?" he asked her.

She whined as she got to her feet, her claws making small holes in the leather seat. She shook herself once, as if she'd been wet, then bobbed her head once.

He didn't see anyone watching them from the windows, but there was a small security camera cleverly tucked into a bit of the gingerbread woodwork on the porch. He got out of the SUV, making sure that he didn't show any sign of the pain he was in.

He'd checked in the bathroom of Anna's house and he didn't think the wound would slow him appreciably now that the worst of the silver poisoning had passed. He'd considered acting more hurt than he was—and he might have if he'd been sure that it was Leo who was responsible for all the dead. Acting wounded might lead Leo to attack him—and Charles had no intention of killing Leo until he knew just exactly what had been going on.

He held the SUV door open until Anna hopped out, then closed it and walked with her to the house. He didn't bother knocking on the door; this wasn't a friendly visit.

Inside, the house had changed a lot. Dark paneling had been bleached light and electric lights replaced the old gas chandeliers. Anna walked beside him, but he didn't need her guidance to find the formal parlor because that was the only room with people in it.

Everything else in the house might have changed, but they had left Willie's pride and joy: the huge hand-carved granite fireplace still dominated the parlor. Isabelle, who liked to be the center of attention, was perched on the polished cherry mantel. Leo was positioned squarely in front



of her. Justin stood on his left, Boyd on his right. The other three men Charles had allowed him were seated in dainty, Victorian-era chairs. All of them except for Leo himself were dressed in dark, pin-striped suits. Leo wore nothing but a pair of black slacks, revealing that he was tanned and fit.

The effect of their united threat was somewhat mitigated by the pinkish-purple of the upholstery and walls—and by Isabelle, who was dressed in jeans and a half shirt of the same color.

Charles took two steps into the room and stopped. Anna pressed against his legs, not hard enough to unbalance him, just enough to remind him that she was there.

No one spoke, because it was for him to break the silence first. He took a deep breath into his lungs and held it, waiting for what his senses could tell him. He had gotten more from his mother than his skin and features, more than the ability to change faster than the other werewolves. She had given him the ability to *see*. Not with his eyes, but with his whole spirit.

And there was something sick in Leo's pack; he could feel the wrongness of it.

He looked into Leo's clear, sky-blue eyes and saw nothing that he hadn't seen before. No hint of madness. Not him, then, but someone in his pack.

He looked at the three wolves he had not met—and he saw what Anna had meant about their looks. Leo was not unhandsome in his own Danish Viking sort of way, but he was a warrior and he looked like a warrior. Boyd had a long blade of a nose and the military cut of his hair made his ears appear to stick out even farther than they really did.

All the wolves Charles didn't know looked like the sort of men who modeled tuxedos at a rental shop. Thin and edgy, with no real flesh to mar the lines of a jacket. Despite differences in coloring, there was a certain sameness about them. Isabelle pulled her bare feet onto the mantel with the rest of her and heaved a big sigh.

He ignored her impatience because she wasn't important just now—Leo was.

Charles met the Alpha's eyes and said, "The Marrok has sent me here to ask you why you sold your child into bondage."

Clearly, it wasn't the question Leo had expected. Isabelle had thought it was Anna, and Charles hadn't disabused her of the notion. They

would deal with Anna, too, but his father's question was a better starting place because it was unexpected.

"I have no children," said Leo.

Charles shook his head. "All your wolves are your children, Leo, you know that. They are yours to love and feed, to guard and protect, to guide and to teach. You sold a young man named Alan Mackenzie Frazier. To whom and why?"

"He wasn't pack." Leo spread his arms, palms outward. "It is expensive to keep so many wolves happy here in the city. I needed the money. I am happy to give you the name of the buyer, though I believe he was only acting as a middleman."

True. All true. But Leo was being very careful how he worded his reply.

"My father would like the name and the method you used to contact him."

Leo nodded at one of the handsome men, who passed Charles with his eyes on the ground, though he spared an instant to glare at Anna. She flattened her ears at him and growled.

He had been a poor influence on her, Charles thought unrepentantly.

"Is there anything more I can help you with?" Leo asked politely.

They had, all of Leo's wolves, used Isabelle's trick with perfume, but Charles had a keen nose and Leo was...sad.

"You haven't updated your pack membership for five or six years," Charles said, wondering at Leo's reaction. He'd been met with defiance, anger, fear, but never with sadness.

"I thought you might catch that. Did you and Anna compare lists? Yes, I had something of a coup attempt I had to put down a little harshly."

Truth, but, again, not all of it. Leo had a lawyer's understanding of how to be careful with the truth and use it to lie by leading a false trail.

"Is that why you killed all the women of your pack? Did they all rebel against you?"

"There weren't so many women, there never are."

Again. There was something he wasn't catching. Leo hadn't been the wolf who had attacked young Frazier—it had been Justin.

Leo's wolf was back. He handed Charles a note with a name and phone number written in purple ink.

Charles tucked the note in his pocket and then nodded. "You are right. There are not enough females—so those we have ought to be protected, not killed. Did you kill them yourself?"

"All the women? No."

"Which of them did you kill?"

Leo didn't answer, and Charles felt his wolf perk up as the hunt commenced.

"You didn't kill any of the women," Charles said. He looked at the model-perfect men and at Justin who was beautiful in an unfinished sort of way.

Leo was protecting someone. Charles looked up at Isabelle, who loved beautiful men. Isabelle, who was older than old Willie O'Shaughnessy had been when he'd begun to go crazy.

He wondered how long Leo had known she was mad.

He looked back at the Alpha. "You should have asked the Marrok for help."

LEO shook his head. "You know what he would have done. He'd have killed her."

Charles would dearly have loved to see what Isabelle was doing, but he couldn't afford to take his eyes off Leo: a cornered wolf was a dangerous wolf.

"And how many have died instead? How many of your pack are lost? The women she killed for jealousy, and their mates you had to kill to protect her? The wolves who rebelled at what the two of you were doing? How many?"

Leo raised his chin. "None for three years."

Rage rose its ugly head. "Yes," Charles agreed, very softly. "Not since you had your little bully boy attack a defenseless woman and Change her without her consent. A woman who you then proceeded to brutalize."

“If I’d protected her, Isabelle would have hated her,” Leo explained. “I forced Isabelle to protect her instead. It worked, Charles. Isabelle has been stable for three years.”

Until she’d come to Anna’s today and realized that Charles was interested in Anna. Isabelle had never liked anyone paying attention to other females when she was around.

He risked a glance and saw that though she hadn’t moved from the mantel, Isabelle’s legs were back to dangling down so she could hop down quickly if she wanted to. Her eyes had changed and watched with pale impatience for the violence she knew was to come. She licked her lips and rocked her weight from side to side in her eagerness.

Charles felt sick at the waste of it all. He turned his attention back to the Alpha. “No deaths because you have an Omega to keep her calm. And because there are no females to compete with except for Anna, who doesn’t want any of your wolves, not after they raped her on your orders.”

“It kept Anna alive,” Leo insisted. “Kept them both alive.” He ducked his head, an appeal for protection. “Tell your father that she is stable. Tell him I’ll see she doesn’t harm anyone else.”

“She tried to kill Anna, today,” Charles said gently. “And if she hadn’t...She is insane, Leo.”

He watched the last trace of hope leave Leo’s face. The Alpha knew Charles wouldn’t let Isabelle live—she was too dangerous, too unpredictable. Leo knew that he was dead, too. He had worked too hard to save his mate.

Leo didn’t give any warning before he attacked—but Charles had been ready for him. Leo wasn’t the kind of wolf to submit easily to death. There would be no bared throats in this fight.

But they both knew who would win.

ANNA had been stunned to stillness by what Leo had revealed, but that ended when Leo attacked. She couldn’t help the little yip she let out, anymore than she could help her instinctive lunge forward to protect Charles.

A strong pair of workman’s hands gripped her by the ruff of her neck and pulled her back despite the scrabbling of her claws on the

hardwood floor.

“Here, now,” Boyd’s rumble hit her ears. “Steady on. This isn’t your fight.”

His voice, one she was used to obeying, calmed her so she could think. It also helped that Charles avoided Leo’s first strike with a minimal movement of his shoulders.

The other wolves had come to their feet and part of her registered Justin’s insistent chanting, “Kill him, kill him.” She wasn’t sure which wolf he wanted to die. He hated Leo for controlling him and for being Isabelle’s mate. Maybe he didn’t care which one died.

Leo struck three times in rapid succession, missing each time. He’d committed to the last blow, and when it didn’t land he had to take an awkward step forward.

Charles took advantage of the stumble and stepped into Leo, and in a graceful movement she couldn’t quite follow did something to Leo’s shoulder that had the Alpha roaring in rage and pain.

The next few things happened so fast, Anna was never certain in what order they occurred.

There was a rapid double bark of a gun. Boyd’s hands loosened their grip on her fur as he swore, and Isabelle gave a frenetic, excited laugh.

It took Anna only a glance to see what had happened. Isabelle was holding a gun, watching the fight, waiting for another clear shot at Charles.

Anna broke free of Boyd’s loosened grip and sprinted across the room.

From the mantel, Isabelle looked Anna squarely in her eyes and said sharply, “Stop, Anna.”

She was so sure of Anna’s obedience, she didn’t even wait to make certain Anna listened before turning her attention back to the battling men.

Anna felt the force of Isabelle’s command as it rolled by her like a breeze that ruffled her hair. It didn’t slow her down at all.

She gathered her hind quarters underneath her and launched. Her teeth closed on Isabelle’s arm, and she felt the bone crack with a noise that satisfied the wolf’s anger. The force of her leap was such that she pulled Isabelle off the six-foot-high mantel and slammed her into the

fireplace as they both tumbled down—Anna’s jaws still locked around the arm that had held the gun.

She crouched there, waiting for Isabelle to do something, but the other woman just lay there. Someone came up behind them, and Anna growled a warning.

“Easy,” Boyd said, his calm voice touching her as Isabelle’s order had not.

His hand rested on her back and she increased her growl, but he didn’t pay any attention to her: he was looking at Isabelle.

“Dead,” he grunted. “Serves her right for forgetting you aren’t just another submissive wolf who has to listen to her. Let go, Anna. You caved her head in on the fireplace. She’s gone.” But when Anna reluctantly let go, Boyd made sure Isabelle was dead by twisting her head until her neck made a sick-sounding pop. He picked the gun up off the floor.

Staring at Isabelle’s broken body, Anna began to shake. She lifted a foot, but she didn’t know whether she was going to take a step closer or a step away. A chair hit her in the side and reminded her that there was a fight going on—and Isabelle had shot at Charles twice.

If he was hurt, he showed no sign of it. He was moving as easily as he had in the beginning, and Leo was staggering, one arm limp at his side. Charles swept behind him and hit him in the back of the neck with the edge of his hand and Leo collapsed like a kite when the wind dies.

A soft, moaning howl rose from Boyd, who was still standing beside her, echoed by the other wolves as they mourned their Alpha’s passing.

Ignoring them, Charles knelt beside Leo and, with the same motion Boyd had used on Isabelle, he made sure the broken neck was permanent.

He stayed there, on one knee and one foot, like a man proposing. He bowed his head and reached out again, this time to caress the dead man’s face.

Justin’s move was so fast, Anna didn’t have a chance to sing a warning. She hadn’t even noticed when he’d changed to his wolf form. He hit Charles like a battering ram and Charles went down beneath him.

But if Anna was frozen, Boyd was not. He shot Justin in the eye a split second before Justin’s body hit Charles.

That fast it was over.

Boyd hauled Justin's limp body off Charles and dumped him to one side. Anna didn't remember moving but suddenly she was astraddle Charles and growling at Boyd.

He backed up slowly, his hands raised and empty. The gun was tucked into the belt of his slacks.

As soon as Boyd ceased to feel like a threat, Anna turned her attention to Charles. He was lying facedown on the floor, covered with blood—her nose told her that some of it was Boyd's, but some of it was his, too.

Despite the way he'd been fighting Leo, Isabelle had hit him at least once, she could see the bloody hole in his back. In wolf form she couldn't help him and it would take her too long to change.

She looked over her shoulder at Boyd.

He shrugged. "I can't help him unless I get closer than this."

She stared at him, challenging him with her eyes in a way she would never have done before today. It didn't seem to bother him. He just waited for her to make up her mind. The wolf didn't want to trust anyone with her mate—but she knew she didn't have a choice.

She hopped all the way over Charles's body, giving Boyd access. But she couldn't help her snarl when he rolled him over to check him for wounds. He found a second bullet hole in Charles's left calf.

Boyd shed his suit jacket and ripped off his dress shirt, scattering buttons all over the floor. He tore the silk shirt into strips and then, as he was bandaging Charles's with rapid experience, he began giving orders. "Holden, call in the rest of the pack—and start with Rashid. Tell him we need him to bring whatever he needs to treat a silver bullet wound—both bullets are out. When you've finished, call the Marrok and tell him what has happened. You can find his number in Isabelle's address book in the kitchen drawer under the phone."

Anna whined. Both of Isabelle's shots had hit.

"He's not going to die," Boyd told her, tying off the last bandage. He glanced around the room and swore. "This place looks like the last scene in *Hamlet*. Gardner, you and Simon start getting this mess cleaned up. Let's get Charles someplace quieter. He's not going to be a happy camper when he wakes, and all this blood isn't going to help." He picked Charles up. When he carried him out of the room, Anna was at his heels.

BACK in human form, Anna lay on the bed beside Charles. Rashid, who was a real doctor as well as a werewolf, had come and gone, replacing Boyd's makeshift bandage with something more sterile-looking. He told Anna that Charles was unconscious due to blood loss.

Boyd had come in afterward and advised her to leave Charles before he woke up. The room was reinforced to withstand an enraged wolf—Anna was not.

He hadn't argued when she refused. He'd just bolted the door behind him when he left. She waited until he was gone and then changed. There was clothing in the old-fashioned wardrobe, lots of things that were one size fits all. She found a T-shirt and a pair of jeans that didn't fit too badly.

Charles didn't notice when she got on the bed with him. She put her head next to his on the pillow and listened to him breathe.

HE didn't wake quietly. One moment he was limp and the next he'd exploded to his feet. She'd never watched him shift and, although she knew his change was miraculously swift, she hadn't known it was beautiful. It started with his feet, then like a blanket of red fur the change rolled up his body, leaving behind it a malevolent, very angry werewolf dripping blood and bandages.

Bright yellow eyes glanced around the room, taking in the closed door, the bars on the windows, and then her.

She lay very still, letting him absorb his surroundings and see there was no threat. When he looked at her a second time, she sat up and went to work on his bandages.

He growled at her, and she tapped his nose gently. "You've lost enough blood today. The bandages don't advertise your weakness any more than bleeding all over would. At least this way, you aren't going to ruin the carpet."

When she finished, she threaded her fingers through the ruff of fur around his neck and bent her head to his.

"I thought I had lost you."



He stood for her embrace for a minute before wriggling free. He got off the bed and stalked to the door.

"It's bolted," she told him, hopping off the bed and padding after him.

He gave her a patient look.

There was a click and the door was opened by a slender, unremarkable-looking man who appeared to be in his early twenties. He crouched on his heels and stared Charles in the face before glancing up at her.

The force of personality in his eyes hit her like a blow to the stomach, so she wasn't entirely surprised when she recognized his voice.

"Shot three times in one day," the Marrok murmured. "I think Chicago has been harder on you than usual, my son. I'd best take you home, don't you think?"

She didn't know what to say so she didn't say anything. She put her hand on Charles's back and swallowed.

Charles looked at his father.

"Have you asked her?"

Charles growled low in his chest.

The Marrok laughed and stood up. "Nevertheless, I will ask. You are Anna?" It wasn't quite a question.

Her throat was too dry to say anything, so she nodded.

"My son would like you to accompany us to Montana. I assure you that if anything is not to your liking, I'll see to it that you can relocate to wherever suits you better."

Charles growled and Bran raised an eyebrow as he looked at him. "I am the Marrok, Charles. If the child wants to go elsewhere, she can."

Anna leaned against Charles's hip. "I think I'd like to see Montana," she said.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Patricia Briggs** lives in Washington state with her husband, children, and a small herd of horses. Visit her website at [www.patriciabriggs.com](http://www.patriciabriggs.com).

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