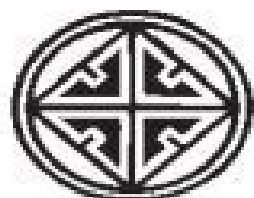


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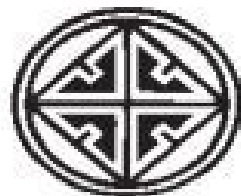


PATRICIA BRIGGS



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

CRY WOLF



PATRICIA BRIGGS



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*Amanda, fashionista, musician, and hairstyle artist.
This one's for you.*

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PROLOGUE

Northwestern Montana,
Cabinet Wilderness: October

NO one knew better than Walter Rice that the only safe place was away from other people. Safe for them, that is. The only problem was that he still *needed* them, needed the sound of human voices and laughter. To his shame, he sometimes hovered on the edge of one of the campgrounds just to listen to the voices and pretend they were talking to him.

Which was a very small part of the reason that he was lying belly-down in the kinnikinnick and old tamarack needles in the shadow of a stand of trees, watching the young man who was writing with a pencil in a metal-bound notebook after taking a sample of the bear scat and storing the resultant partially filled plastic bag in his backpack.

Walter had no fear the boy would see him: Uncle Sam had ensured that Walter could hide and track and decades of living alone in some of the most forbidding wilderness in the States had made him into a fair imitation of those miraculously invisible Indians who had populated the favorite books and movies of his childhood. If he didn't want to be seen, he wasn't—besides, the boy had all the woodcraft of a suburban housewife. They shouldn't have sent him into grizzly country on his own—feeding grad students to the bears wasn't a good idea, might give them ideas.

Not that the bears were out today. Like Walter, they knew how to read the signs: sometime in the next four or five hours there was a big storm coming. He could feel it in his bones, and the stranger didn't have a big enough pack to be prepared for it. It was early for a winter storm, but this country was like that. He'd seen it snow in August.

That storm was the other reason he was following the boy. The storm and what to do about it—it wasn't often anymore that he was so torn by indecision.

He could let the kid go. The storm would come and steal away his life, but that was the way of the mountain, of the wilderness. It was a clean death. If only the grad student weren't so young. A lifetime ago he'd seen so many boys die—you'd think he'd have gotten used to it. Instead, one more seemed like one too many.

He could warn the boy. But everything in him rebelled at the thought. It had been too long since he'd spoken face-to-face with anyone . . . even the thought made his breath freeze up.

It was too dangerous. Might cause another flashback—he hadn't had one in a while—but they crept up unexpectedly. It would be too bad if he tried to warn the boy and ended up killing him instead.

No. He couldn't risk the little peace he had by warning the stranger—but he couldn't just let him die, either.

Frustrated, he'd been following for a few hours as the boy blundered, oblivious, farther and farther from the nearest road and safety. The bedroll on his backpack made it clear he was planning on staying the night—which ought to mean he thought he knew what he was doing in the woods. Unfortunately, it had become clearer and clearer it was a false confidence. It was like watching June Cleaver roughing it. Sad. Just sad.

Like watching the newbies coming into 'Nam all starched and ready to be men, when everyone knew that all they were was cannon fodder.

Damn boy was stirring up all sorts of things Walter liked to keep away. But the irritation wasn't strong enough to make a difference to Walter's conscience. Six miles, as near as he figured it, he'd trailed the boy, unable to make up his mind: his preoccupation kept him from sensing the danger until the boy student stopped dead in the middle of the trail.

The thick brush between them only allowed him to see the top of the boy's backpack, and whatever stopped the boy was shorter. The good part was that it wasn't a moose. You could reason with a black bear—even a grizzly if it wasn't hungry (which in his experience was seldom the case), but a moose was . . .

Walter drew his big knife, though he wasn't sure he'd try to help the boy. Even a black bear was a quicker death than the storm would be—if bloodier. And he knew the bear around here, which was more than he could say about the boy. He moved slowly through the brush, making no noise though fallen aspen leaves littered the ground. When he didn't want to make noise, he didn't make noise.

A low growl caused a shiver of fear to slice through him, sending his adrenaline into the ozone layer. It wasn't a sound he'd ever heard here, and he knew every predator that lived in his territory.

Four feet farther and he had nothing impairing his view.

There in the middle of the path stood a dog—or something doglike, anyway. At first he thought it was a German shepherd because of the coloring, but there was something wrong with the joints of its front end that made it look more like a bear than a dog. And it was bigger than any damned dog or wolf he'd ever seen. It had cold eyes, killer's eyes, and impossibly long teeth.

Walter might not know what to call it, but he knew what it was. In that beast's face lurked every nightmare image that haunted his life. It was the thing he fought through two tours of 'Nam and every night since: death. This was a battle for a blooded warrior, battered and tainted as he was, not an innocent.

He broke cover with a wild whoop designed to attract attention and sprinted, ignoring the protest of knees grown too old for battle. It had been a long time since his last fight, but he had never forgotten the feeling of the blood pounding through his veins.

"Run, kid," he said as he blazed past the boy with a fierce grin, prepared to engage the enemy.

The animal might run. It had taken its time sizing up the boy, and sometimes, when a predator's meal charges it, the predator will leave. But somehow he didn't think that this beast was such an animal—there was an eerie intelligence in its blindingly gold eyes.

Whatever had kept it from attacking the boy immediately, it had no qualms about Walter. It launched itself at him as if he were unarmed. Maybe it wasn't as smart as he thought—or it had been deceived by his grizzled exterior and hadn't realized what an old veteran armed with a knife as long as his arm could do. Maybe it was aroused by the boy's flight—he'd taken Walter's advice at face value and was running like a track star—and just viewed Walter as an obstacle to its desire for fresh, tender meat.

But Walter wasn't a helpless boy. He'd gotten the knife from some enemy general he'd killed, murdered in the dark as he'd been taught. The knife was covered with magic charms etched into the blade, strange symbols that had long ago turned black instead of the bright silver they'd been. Despite the exotic fancy stuff, it was a good knife and it bit deep in the animal's shoulder.

The beast was faster than he, faster and stronger. But he'd gotten that first strike and crippled it, and that made all the difference.

He didn't win, but he triumphed. He kept the beast busy and hurt it badly. It wouldn't be able to go after the kid tonight—and if that boy was smart, he'd be halfway to his car by now.

At last the monster left, dragging a front leg and bleeding from a dozen wounds—though there was no question as to who was worse wounded. He'd seen a lot of men die, and he knew from the smell of perforated bowel that his time had come.

But the young man was safe. Perhaps that would answer, in some small part, for all the young men who hadn't lived.

He let the muscles of his back relax and felt the dried grass and dirt give way beneath his weight. The ground was cool under his hot, sweaty body, and it comforted him. It seemed right to end his life here while saving a stranger, when another stranger's death had brought him here in the first place.

The wind picked up, and he thought the temperature dropped a few degrees—but that might just have been blood loss and shock. He closed his eyes and waited patiently for death, his old enemy, to claim him at long last. The knife was still in his right hand, just in case the pain was too much. Belly wounds weren't the easiest way to die.

But it wasn't death that came during the heart of the first blizzard of the season.

ONE

Chicago: November

ANNA Latham tried to disappear into the passenger seat.

She hadn't realized how much of her confidence had been tied to having Charles beside her. She'd only known him a day and a half, and he'd changed her world . . . at least while he was still next to her.

Without him, all of her newly regained confidence had disappeared. Its mocking absence only pointed out what a coward she really was. As if she needed reminding.

She glanced over at the man who was driving Charles's rented SUV with casual ease through the light after-morning-rush-hour traffic on the slush-covered expressway as if he were a Chicago native instead of a visitor from the wilds of Montana.

Charles's father, Bran Cornick, looked for all the world like a college student, a computer geek or maybe an art major. Someone sensitive, gentle, and young—but she knew he was none of these things. He was the Marrok, the one all the Alphas answered to—and no one dominated an Alpha werewolf by being sensitive and gentle.

He wasn't young, either. She knew Charles was almost two hundred years old, and that would necessitate his father being older yet.

She looked hard, out of the corners of her eyes, but except for something in the shape of his hands and eyes, she couldn't see Charles in him at all. Charles looked pure Native American, as his mother had been, but still she thought she should have been able to see a little resemblance, something that would tell her that the Marrok was the kind of man his son was.

Her head was willing to believe Bran Cornick would not harm her, that he was different from the other wolves she knew. But her body had been taught to fear the males of her species. The more dominant the werewolves were, the more likely they were to hurt her. And there was no more dominant wolf anywhere than Bran Cornick, no matter how harmless he might seem.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he said without looking at her.

She could smell her own fear—so of course he could smell it, too.

"I know," she managed to say, hating herself for allowing them to turn her into a coward. She hoped that he thought it was fear at the idea of facing the other wolves from her pack after she'd precipitated their Alpha's death. She didn't want him to know she was scared of him, too. Or even mostly.

He smiled a little, but didn't say anything more.

All the parking places behind her four-story apartment building were filled with strange cars. There was a shiny gray truck towing a small, bright orange and white trailer with a giant manatee painted on the side just above lettering that let anyone within a block know that Florida was "The Manatee State."

Bran parked behind the trailer without worrying about blocking the alley. Well, she realized as she got out of the car, she wouldn't have to worry about what her landlord thought anymore. She was going to Montana. Was Montana "The Werewolf State"?

Four wolves in their human forms waited for them at the security door, including Boyd, the new Alpha. His shadowed eyes took in every bit of her. She dropped her gaze to the ground after that first glance and kept Bran between her and them.

She was more afraid of them than the Marrok after all. How strange, because today there was none of the speculation, the avarice in their eyes that usually set off her fears. They looked controlled . . .

and tired. Yesterday, the Alpha had been killed, and that hurt all of them. She'd felt it herself—and ignored it because she thought Charles was dying.

Their pain was her fault. They all knew that.

She reminded herself that Leo needed killing—he had killed so many himself and allowed the deaths of many others. She wouldn't look at any of them again. She'd try not to talk to them, and hope they'd ignore her.

Except—they'd come here to help her move. She'd tried to stop that, but she wasn't up to arguing with the Marrok for long. She dared another quick glance at Boyd, but she couldn't read his face any better this time.

She took her key and went to work on the lock with fear-clumsy fingers. None of the werewolves made any move that indicated they were impatient, but she tried to hurry, feeling their eyes on her back. What were they thinking? Were they remembering what some of them had done to her? She wasn't. She *wasn't*.

Breathe, she chided herself.

One of the men swayed on his feet and made an eager sound.

“George,” said Boyd, and the other wolf quieted.

It was her fear that was pushing the wolf, she knew. She had to get a handle on herself—and the sticky lock wasn't helping. If Charles were here, she could deal with everything, but he was recovering from several bullet wounds. His father had told her that he had a stronger reaction than most to silver.

“I didn't expect you to come,” said Bran—she presumed he wasn't talking to her since he'd manipulated and talked her into leaving Charles alone this morning.

It must have been Boyd he was talking to, because it was Boyd who answered him. “I had the day off.”

Until last night Boyd had been third. But now he was the Alpha of the Western Suburb Chicago Pack. The pack she was leaving. “I thought it might hurry matters a bit,” Boyd continued. “Thomas here has agreed to drive the truck to Montana and back.”

She pulled open the door, but Bran didn't go in immediately so she stopped in the entryway just inside the door, holding it open.

“How stand your pack finances?” Bran asked. “My son tells me that Leo claimed he needed money.”

She heard Boyd's typical humorless smile in his voice. “He wasn't lying. His mate was expensive as all hell to keep. We won't lose the manor, but that's the only good news our accountant has for me. We'll get something from selling Isabella's jewelry, but not as much as Leo paid for it.”

She could look at Bran, and so she watched his eyes assess the wolves Boyd had brought like a general surveying his troops. His gaze settled on Thomas.

Anna looked, too, seeing what the Marrok saw: old jeans with a hole in one knee, tennis shoes that had seen better days. It was very much like what she was wearing, except that her hole was in her left knee, not the right.

“Will the time it takes to drive to Montana and back put your job at risk?” Bran asked.

Thomas kept his eyes on his toes and answered, soft-voiced, “No, sir. I work construction, and this is the slow season. I okayed it with the boss; he says I have two weeks.”

Bran pulled a checkbook out of his pocket and, using one of the other wolves' shoulders to give him a solid surface to write on, made out a check. “This is for your expenses on this trip. We'll figure out your pay rate and have money waiting for you when you get to Montana.”

Relief flashed in Thomas's eyes, but he didn't say anything.

Bran went through the door, passed by Anna, and started up the stairs. As soon as he wasn't watching them, the other wolves lifted their eyes to look at Anna.

She jutted her chin up and met their gazes, forgetting entirely her decision not to do just that until it was too late. Boyd's eyes were unfathomable, and Thomas was still looking at the ground . . . but the other two, George and Joshua, were easy to read. With Bran's back to them, the knowledge of what she'd been in their pack was fully visible in their eyes.

And they had been Leo's wolves by inclination as well as fact. She was nothing, and she had brought about their Alpha's death: they'd have killed her if they dared.

Just try, she told them without using words. She turned her back on them without dropping her eye—as Charles's mate, she supposedly outranked all of them. But they weren't only wolves, and the human part of them would never forget what they had done to her, with Leo's encouragement.

Her stomach raw, and tension tightening the back of her neck, Anna tried to keep an even pace all the way up to her apartment on the fourth floor. Bran waited beside her while she unlocked the door. She stepped aside so he could go in first, showing the others that he, at least, had her respect.

He stopped in the doorway and looked around her studio apartment with a frown. She knew what he saw: a card table with two battered folding chairs, her futon, and not much else.

"I told you I could get it packed this morning," Anna told him. She knew it wasn't much, but she resented his silent judgment. "Then they could have come just to carry out the boxes."

"It won't take an hour to pack this and carry it down," said Bran. "Boyd, how many of your wolves are living like this?"

Summoned, Boyd slid past Anna and into the room and frowned. He'd never been to her apartment. He glanced at Anna and walked to her refrigerator and opened it, exposing the empty space inside. "I didn't know it was this bad." He glanced back. "Thomas?"

Invited in, Thomas, too, stepped through the door.

He gave his new Alpha an apologetic smile. "I'm not quite this bad, but my wife is working, too. The dues are pretty dear." He was almost as far down the pack structure as Anna, and, married, had never been invited to "play" with her. But he hadn't objected, either. She supposed that it was more than could be expected of a submissive wolf, but that didn't keep her from holding it against him.

"Probably five or six then," Boyd said with a sigh. "I'll see what can be done."

Bran opened his wallet and handed the Alpha a card. "Call Charles next week and set up a conference between him and your accountant. If necessary, we can arrange for a loan. It's not safe to have hungry, desperate werewolves on the streets."

Boyd nodded.

The Marrok's business apparently concluded, the other two wolves surged past Anna, George deliberately bumping against her. She pulled back from him and instinctively wrapped her arms protectively around herself. He gave her a sneer he hid quickly from the others.

"*Illegitimus nil carborundum*," she murmured. It was stupid. She knew it even before George's fist struck out.

She ducked and dodged. Instead of a fist in her stomach, she took it in the shoulder and rolled with it. The small entryway didn't give her much room to get away from a second blow.

There wasn't one.

Boyd had George pinned on the ground with a knee in the middle of his back. George wasn't fighting him, just talking fast. "She's not supposed to do that. Leo said no Latin. You remember."

Because once Anna realized that no one else in the pack except Isabella, who she had thought was a friend, understood Latin, she'd used it for secret defiance. It had taken a while for Leo to figure it out.

“Leo is dead,” said Boyd very quietly, his mouth near George’s ear. “New rules. If you are smart enough to live, you won’t hit Charles’s mate in front of his father.”

“Don’t let the bastards grind you down?” said Bran from her doorway. He was looking at her like a child who had been unexpectedly clever. “That’s horrible Latin, and your pronunciation needs some work.”

“It’s my father’s fault,” she told him, rubbing her shoulder. The bruise would be gone by tomorrow but for now it hurt. “He had a couple of years of Latin in college and used it to amuse himself. Everyone in my family picked it up. His favorite saying was, ‘*Interdum feror cupidine partium magnarum europe vincendarum.*’ ”

“ ‘Sometimes I have the urge to conquer large parts of Europe?’ ” Boyd said, sounding a little incredulous. Isabella hadn’t, apparently, been the only one who understood her defiance.

She nodded. “Usually he only said it when my brother or I were being particularly horrible.”

“And it was his *favorite* saying?” Bran said, examining her as if she were a bug . . . but a bug he was growing pleased with.

She said, “My brother was a brat.”

He smiled slowly and she recognized the smile as one of Charles’s.

“What do you want me to do with this one?” asked Boyd, tilting his head toward George.

Bran’s smile fled, and he looked at Anna. “Do you want me to kill him?”

Silence descended as everyone waited for her answer. For the first time she realized that the fear that she’d been smelling wasn’t hers alone. The Marrok scared them all.

“No,” she lied. She just wanted to get her apartment packed and get done with this, so she never had to see George and those like him again. “No.” This time she meant it.

Bran tilted his head, and she saw his eyes shift, just a little, gleaming gold in the dimness of the outer hall. “Let him up.”

She waited until everyone was in her apartment to leave the anonymity of the landing. Bran was stripping her futon down to the bare mattress when she entered her apartment. It was sort of like watching the president mowing the White House lawn or taking out the trash.

Boyd approached her and handed her the check she’d left on the fridge door, her last paycheck. “You’ll want this with you.”

She took it and stuffed it in her pants. “Thanks.”

“We all owe you,” he told her. “None of us could contact the Marrok when things started getting bad. Leo forbade it. I can’t tell you how many hours I spent staring at the phone trying to break his hold.”

She was startled into meeting his eyes.

“It took me a while to figure out what you were.” He gave her a bitter smile. “I wasn’t paying attention. I tried really hard not to pay attention or think. It made things easier.”

“Omegas are rare,” said Bran.

Boyd didn’t look away from her. “I almost missed what Leo was doing, why he chose you for such treatment when he had always been the ‘kill ’em quickly’ kind. I’ve known him a long time, and he’s never condoned abuse like that before. I could see that it sickened him—only Justin really enjoyed it.”

Anna controlled her flinch and reminded herself that Justin had died last night, too.

“When I realized why Leo couldn’t rely on you following his orders, that you weren’t just a very submissive wolf, that you were an Omega . . . it was almost too late.” He sighed. “If I’d given you the Marrok’s number two years ago, it wouldn’t have taken you so long to call him. So I owe you both my thanks and my humblest apologies.” And he dropped his eyes, tilting his head to show her his throat.

“Will you . . .” She swallowed to moisten her suddenly dry throat. “Will you make sure it doesn’t happen again? Not to anyone? I’m not the only one who was hurt.” She didn’t look at Thomas. Justin had taken great delight in tormenting Thomas.

Boyd bowed his head solemnly. “I promise.”

She gave him a short nod, which seemed to satisfy him. He took an empty box out of Joshua’s hands and strode to the kitchen. They’d brought boxes and tape and wrapping material, more than enough to pack everything she owned.

She didn’t have any luggage, so she took one of the boxes and put together the basics to take with her. She was very careful to keep her eyes to herself. Too much had changed, and she didn’t know how else to deal with it.

She was in the bathroom when someone’s cell phone rang. Werewolf hearing meant she got both sides of the telephone conversation.

“Boyd?” It was one of the new wolves, Rashid the doctor, she thought. He sounded panicked.

“You’ve got me. What’s wrong?”

“*That wolf in the holding room, he’s—*”

Boyd and his cell phone were in the kitchen, and she still heard the crash through the speaker.

“*That’s him,*” Rashid whispered desperately. “*That’s him. He’s trying to get out—and he’s tearing the whole safe room apart. I don’t think it’ll hold him.*”

Charles.

He’d been groggy when she left, but had seemed happy enough to leave her in his father’s hands while he slept off the effects of having a few silver bullets dug out of him last night. Apparently things had changed.

Anna grabbed her box and met Bran in the doorway of the bathroom.

He gave her a searching glance, but didn’t seem upset. “It seems that we are needed elsewhere,” he said, sounding calm and relaxed. “I don’t think he’ll hurt anyone—but silver has a stronger and more unpredictable effect on him than on some wolves. Do you have what you need?”

“Yes.”

Bran looked around, then his eyes fell on Boyd. “Tell your wolf we’ll be there as soon as possible. Trust you to make certain that everything is packed and the apartment is clean when you leave.”

Boyd bowed his head submissively.

Bran took her box and tucked it under one arm and then held his other out in an old-fashioned gesture. She put her fingers lightly on the crook of his arm, and he escorted her all the way back to the SUV that way, slowing her down when she would have run.

He drove back to the Naperville mansion that the Western Suburb pack kept for its own without breaking any traffic laws, but he didn’t waste any time, either.

“Most wolves wouldn’t be able to break out of a holding room,” he said mildly. “There’s silver in the bars, and there are a lot of bars, but Charles is his mother’s son, too. She’d never have allowed herself to be held by anything as mundane as a few bars and a reinforced door.”

Somehow, it didn’t surprise Anna that Bran would know how the pack’s safe room was built.

“Charles’s mother was a witch?” Anna had never met a witch, but she’d heard stories. And since becoming a werewolf, she’d learned to believe in magic.

He shook his head. “Nothing so well defined. I’m not even sure she worked magic—strictly speaking. The Salish didn’t see the world that way: magic and not magic. Natural and unnatural. Whatever she was, though, her son is, too.”

“What will happen if he breaks out?”

“It would be good if we get there before that happens,” was all he said.

They left the expressway, and he slowed to the posted speed limit. The only sign of his impatience was the rhythmic beat of his fingers on the steering wheel. When he pulled up in front of the mansion she jumped out of the SUV and ran to the front door. He didn't appear to hurry, but somehow he was there before her and opened the door.

She ran down the hall and took the cellar stairs three at a time, Bran at her shoulder. The lack of noise was not reassuring.

Usually the only way to tell the safe room from the basement guest rooms was the steel door and frame. But great plaster chunks had been torn off the wall on either side, revealing the silver-and-steel bars that had been embedded in the wall. The wallpaper from inside the room hung down in strips like a curtain, keeping Anna from seeing inside.

There were three of the pack in human form standing in front of the door, and she could feel their fear. They knew what they had in that room—at least one of them had watched as he killed Leo, even though Charles had been shot twice with silver bullets.

“Charles,” said Bran in a chiding tone.

The wolf roared in response, a hoarse howling sound that hurt Anna's ears and contained nothing but blind rage.

“The screws were coming out of the hinges, sir. On their own,” said one of the wolves nervously, and Anna realized the thing he was holding in his hands was a screwdriver.

“Yes,” Bran said calmly. “I imagine they were. My son doesn't react at all well to silver and even less well to captivity. You might have been safer letting him out—or not. My apologies for leaving you here alone to face him. I thought he was in better shape. It seems I underestimated Anna's influence.”

He turned and held out his hand to Anna, who had stopped at the base of the stairs. She wasn't bothered nearly as much by the raging wolf as she was by the men who stood in the basement. The walls of the hallway were too narrow, and she didn't like having so many of them close to her.

“Come here, Anna,” said Bran. Though his voice was soft, it was a command.

She brushed past the other wolves, looking at feet rather than faces. When Bran took her elbow, Charles growled savagely—though how he had seen it through the hanging wallpaper was beyond Anna.

Bran smiled and removed his hand. “Fine. But you're scaring her.”

Instantly, the growls softened.

“Talk to him a little,” Bran told her. “I'll take the others upstairs for a bit. When you're comfortable, go ahead and open the door—but it might be a good idea to wait until he quits growling.”

And they left her alone. She must have been crazy because she immediately felt safer than she had all day. The relief of being without fear was almost heady. The wallpaper fluttered as Charles paced behind the barrier, and she caught a glimpse of his red fur.

“What happened to you?” she asked him. “You were fine when we left this morning.”

In wolf form, he couldn't reply, but he did stop growling.

“I'm sorry,” she ventured. “But they're packing up my apartment, and I had to be there. And I needed to get clothes to wear until the trailer makes it to Montana.”

He hit the door. Not hard enough to do damage, but in clear demand.

She hesitated, but he'd quit growling. With a mental shrug she threw the bolt and opened the door. He was bigger than she remembered—or maybe it was just that he looked that way when his fangs were so prominently displayed. Blood oozed out of the hole in his left hind leg and trickled down to

his paw. The two holes in his ribs were trickling a little faster.

Behind him, the room, which had been pretty nicely furnished when she left, was in shambles. He pulled large chunks of plaster off all four of the walls as well as the ceiling. Shreds of the mattress carpeted the room, intermingled with pieces of the chest of drawers.

She whistled at the damage. "Holy cow."

He limped up to her and sniffed her carefully all over. A stair creaked, and he whirled with a growl, putting himself between her and the intruder.

Bran sat on the top stair. "I'm not going to hurt her," he commented. Then he looked at Anna. "I don't know how much he's actually understanding right now. But I think he'll do better in his own home. I called our pilot, and he's ready to fly out."

"I thought we'd have a couple of days yet." She felt her stomach clinch. Chicago was her *home*. "I have to call Scorci's and tell Mick I'm leaving, so he can find another waitress. And I haven't had a chance to talk to my neighbor and tell her what's going on." Kara would worry.

"I have to get back to Montana today," Bran said. "Tomorrow morning we're holding a funeral for a friend of mine who just died. I was going to leave you here to follow me later, but I don't think it's a good idea now." Bran nodded at Charles. "He's obviously not healing as well as I thought. I need to get him home and have him checked out. I have a cell phone. Can you call your neighbor and your Mick and explain things to them?"

She looked down at the wolf who'd put himself between her and his father to keep her from harm. It wasn't the first time he'd done something like that.

Besides, what was her alternative? Stay in the Chicago pack? Boyd might be a vast improvement over Leo, but . . . she had no desire to stay with them.

She put her hand on Charles's back and feathered her hand through his fur. She didn't have to reach down to do it, either—Charles was a big werewolf. He altered his stance until he pressed against her, though he never took his eyes off of Bran.

"Okay," she said. "Give me your phone."

Bran smiled and held it out. Charles didn't move from between them, forcing Anna to stretch out and grab it while Charles stared coldly at his father. His attitude made her laugh—which made it much easier to convince Kara that Anna was going to Montana because she wanted to.

TWO

AFTER the disaster this morning, Anna had dreaded the flight to Montana. She'd never been on a plane before in her life, and she'd have thought that it would be terrifying, especially in the little, six-passenger, twin-engine Lear Bran led them to.

Bran sat in the copilot's seat, which left all six of the passenger seats empty. Charles pushed her past the first set of forward-facing seats with a nudge of his nose and stared at the pair of backward seats until she sat down. When he settled in the space on the floor and put his head on her feet, she set her box on the seat next to her, buckled up, and waited for takeoff.

She didn't expect to have fun, especially when Charles so emphatically was not. He rode stiff and grumpy at her feet, growling softly when the plane bounced a little.

But riding in the small plane was like being on the world's tallest amusement-park ride. A gentle one, like the Ferris wheel, but with an edge of danger that just made it all the more fun. She didn't really think they'd plummet out of the sky any more than she believed that a carnival Ferris wheel might break free and go rolling down the arcade. And no Ferris wheel in the world had a view like this.

Not even swooping in to land on an itty-bitty strip that looked smaller than a Wal-Mart parking lot spoiled her mood. She buckled in and braced herself with a hand on her box so it wouldn't fall on Charles as the plane dropped, and her stomach tried to stay where it had been. She found herself grinning as they hit the tarmac and bumped twice before the wheels stayed on the ground.

The pilot taxied into a hangar big enough to hold two planes that size, but the other half of the building was empty. Anna gathered her box and followed Charles out of the plane. He was limping badly—staying still for so long clearly hadn't done him any good. He was still keeping himself between her and his father.

Once on the ground, she started shivering. Her jacket was a little thin for Chicago, but here it was barely adequate. The hangar wasn't heated, and it was cold enough to see her breath.

She hadn't realized how close Charles was, and when she turned to look at the plane, her knee hit his bandaged side. He didn't show any sign it bothered him, but it had to have hurt. It was his own fault, though. If he hadn't been crowding her, she wouldn't have bumped him.

"Ease up," she told him, exasperated. "Your father is hardly going to attack me."

"I don't think he's worried about my *hurting* you," Bran said, amused. "Let's get you somewhere away from all the other males so he can relax a little."

The pilot, who'd followed them out and had been engaged in some sort of maintenance, grinned at that. "Never thought I'd see that old Indian so worked up."

Charles gave him a look, and the pilot dropped his eyes, but not the grin. "Hey, don't glare at me—and here I got you home, safe and sound. Nearly as well as you could have done it, eh, Charles?"

"Thank you, Hank." Bran turned to Anna. "Hank has to button down the plane, so we'll go warm up the truck." He put his hand under her elbow as they stepped out of the protection of the hangar into ten inches of snow. Charles growled; Bran growled back in exasperation. "Enough. *Enough*. I have no designs on your lady, and the ground is rough."

Charles stopped making noise, but he walked so close to Anna that she found herself bumping into Bran because she didn't want to hurt Charles. Bran steadied her and frowned at the werewolf beside her but didn't say anything more.

Other than the hangar, airstrip, and two ruts in the deep snow where someone had recently driven a car, there was virtually no sign of civilization. The mountains were impressive, taller, darker, and rougher than the soft Midwest hills she knew. She could smell woodsmoke though, so they couldn't be as isolated as it looked.

"I thought it would be quieter here." She hadn't meant to say anything, but the noise startled her.

"The wind in the trees," Bran said. "And there are some birds that stay year-round. Sometimes when the wind is still and the cold is upon us, the quiet is so deep you can feel it in your bones." It sounded creepy to her, but she could tell from his voice that he loved it.

Bran walked them around behind the hangar, where a snow-covered gray crew-cab truck waited for them. He reached into the truck bed, pulled out a broom, and banged it good and hard on the ground to dislodge snow.

"Go ahead and get in," he said. "Why don't you start the truck so it can warm up. The keys are in the ignition." He brushed snow off the passenger door and held it open for her.

She put her box on the floor of the cab, and climbed in. The box made sliding across the leather seat to the driver's seat a little awkward. Charles hopped in after her and snagged the door with a paw so it shut. His fur was wet, but after her initial flinch, she found that he generated a lot of body heat. The truck purred to life, blowing cold air all over the cab. As soon as she was sure it would keep running, she slid to the middle seat.

When the truck was mostly cleared of snow, Bran tossed the broom back into the truck bed and hopped into the driver's seat. "Hank shouldn't be much longer." He took in her shivering form and frowned at her. "We'll get you a warmer coat and some boots appropriate to the winter here. Chicago isn't exactly tropical—you should have better winter gear than that."

While he was talking, Charles stepped over her, forcing her to move to the outside passenger seat. He settled between them, but in order to fit, half of him draped over her lap.

"Had to pay the electric, gas, water, and rent," she said lightly. "Oof, Charles, you weigh a ton. We waitresses don't earn enough for luxuries."

The back door opened, and Hank climbed in and put on his seat belt before blowing on his hands. "That old wind has quite a bite to it."

"Time to get home," Bran agreed, putting the truck into drive and starting out, though if he followed a road, it was buried under the snow. "I'll drop off Charles and his mate first."

"Mate?" She had her face forward, but it was impossible to miss the surprise in Hank's voice. "No wonder the old man is so worked up. Man alive, Charles, that was some fast work. And she's pretty, too."

And she didn't appreciate being spoken of as if she weren't there, either. Even if she was too intimidated to say so.

Charles turned his head toward Hank and lifted a lip to show some very sharp teeth.

The pilot laughed. "All right, all right. But nice work, man."

It was only then that her nose told her something she hadn't realized on the plane: Hank wasn't a werewolf. And he clearly knew that Charles was.

"I thought we weren't supposed to tell anyone," she said.

"Tell them what?" Bran asked.

She glanced back at Hank. "Tell them what we are."

"Oh, this is Aspen Creek," Hank answered her. "Every-one knows about werewolves. If you haven't married one, you were fathered by one—or one of your parents was. This is the Marrok's territory, and we're one big, happy family." Was there sarcasm in his voice? She didn't know him well enough to

tell for certain.

The air blowing in her face had warmed up, finally. Between that and Charles, she was starting to feel less like an ice cube.

“I thought that werewolves have no family, only pack,” she ventured.

Bran glanced at her before looking back to the road. “You and Charles need to have a long talk. How long have you been a werewolf?”

“Three years.”

He frowned. “Do you have a family?”

“My father and brother. I haven’t seen them since . . .” She shrugged. “Leo told me I had to break all ties to them— or else he’d assume they were a risk to the pack.” *And kill them.*

Bran frowned. “Outside of Aspen Creek, wolves can’t tell anyone except their spouses what they are—we allow that for their spouses’ safety. But you don’t need to isolate yourself from your family.” Almost to himself, he said, “I suppose Leo was afraid your family might interfere with what he was trying to do to you.”

She could call her family? She almost asked Bran about it, but decided to wait and talk to Charles instead.



LIKE the plane ride, Charles’s house was different than she’d expected. Somehow, since it was in the backwoods of Montana, she’d thought he’d live in one of those big log houses, or something old, like the pack’s mansion. But the house where Bran dropped them off was not huge or made of logs. Instead, it looked like a simple ranch-style house, painted a rather pleasing combination of gray and green. It was tucked up against the side of a hill and looked out over a series of fenced pastures occupied by a few horses.

She waved a thank-you at Bran as he drove off. Then she carried her box, which was looking a little bedraggled since it had gotten wet on the floor of the truck, up the steps, with Charles skulking at her heel. There was a light covering of snow over the steps, though it was obvious that usually it was kept shoveled off.

She had a bad moment when she realized that she’d forgotten to ask Bran to unlock the door—but the knob turned easily under her hand. She supposed that if everyone in Aspen Creek knew about werewolves, they’d know better than to steal something from one. Still, to her city-bred self, it seemed odd for Charles to leave his house unlocked while he traveled halfway across the country.

She opened the door—and all thoughts of locks fled. The exterior of the house might be mundane, but the interior was anything but.

Like her apartment floor, the living-room floor was hardwood, but his had a parquet pattern of dark and light wood that edged the room in a pattern that struck her as Native American. Thick, soft-looking Persian rugs covered the central part of the living room and dining room. Against the far wall was a huge granite fireplace, both beautiful and well used.

Comfortable-looking couches and chairs were intermixed with handcrafted bird’s-eye maple tables and bookcases. The oil painting of a waterfall surrounded by a pine forest could have hung in a museum and, she calculated, probably cost more than she’d earned in her entire life.

From the doorway she could see straight into the kitchen, where subtly glittering light gray granite countertops contrasted with dark Shaker-style oak cabinets that were just irregular enough to be handmade, like the furniture in the living room. Stainless-steel appliances trimmed in black should

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