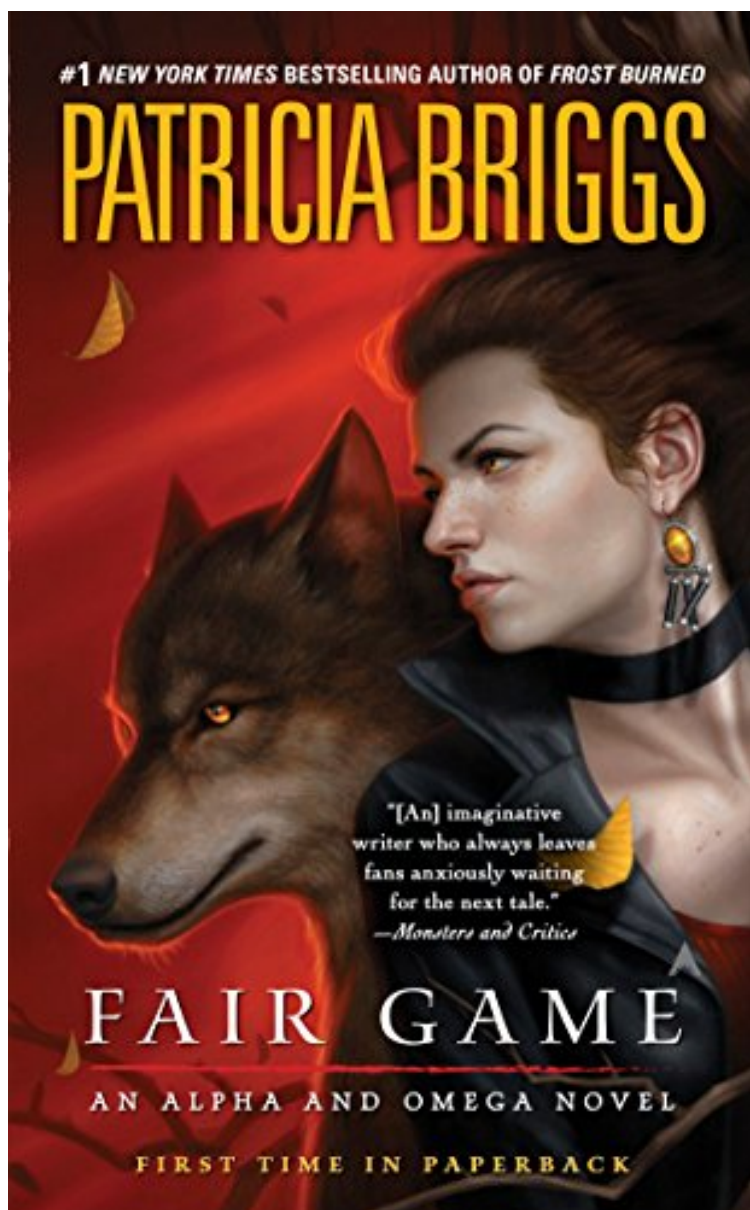


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## Fair Game



Par Patricia Briggs  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur#1 New York Times bestselling author Patricia Briggs' third Alpha and Omega novel brings werewolves out of the darkness and into a society where fear and prejudice could turn the hunters into the prey It is said that opposites attract. And in the case of werewolves Anna Latham and Charles Cornick, they mate. The sonand enforcerof the leader of the North American werewolves, Charles is a dominant Alpha. While Anna, an Omega, has the rare ability to calm others of her kind. When the FBI requests the packs help on a local serial-killer case, Charles and Anna are sent to Boston to join the investigation. It soon becomes clear that someone is targeting the preternatural. And now Anna and Charles have put themselves

right in the killers sights...Extrait Aspen Creek, Montana Go home, Bran Cornick growled at Anna. No one who saw him like this would ever forget what lurked behind the Marroks mildmannered facade. But only people who were stupid or desperate would risk raising his ire to reveal the monster behind the niceguy mask. Anna was desperate. When you tell me you will quit calling on my husband to kill people, Anna told him doggedly. She didnt yell, she didnt shout, but she wasnt going to give up easily. Clearly, shed finally pushed him out to the very narrow edges of his last shred of civilized behavior. He closed his eyes, turned his head away from her, and said, in a very gentle voice, Anna. Go home and cool off. Go home until he cooled off was what he meant. Bran was Annas fatherinlaw, her Alpha, and also the Marrok who ruled all the werewolf packs in his part of the world by the sheer force of his will. Bran His power unleashed with his temper, and the five other wolves not counting Anna who were in the living room of his house dropped to the floor including his mate. Their heads were bowed and tipped slightly to the side to expose their necks. Though he made no outward move, the speed of their surrender testified to Brans anger and his dominance and only Anna, somewhat to her surprise at her own temerity, stayed on her feet. When Anna had first come to Aspen Creek, beaten and abused as shed been, if anyone had yelled at her, shed have hid in a corner and not come out for a week. She met Brans eyes and bared her teeth at him as the wave of his power brushed past her like a spring breeze. Not that she wasnt properly terrified, but not of Bran. Bran, she knew, would not really hurt her if he could help it, no matter what her hindbrain tried to tell her. She was terrified for her mate. You are wrong, Anna told him. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. And you are determined not to see it until he is broken beyond repair. Grow up, little girl, Bran snarled, and now his eyes bright gold leaching out his usual hazel were focused on her instead of the fireplace in the wall. Life isnt a bed of roses and people have to do hard jobs. You knew what Charles was when you married him and when you took him as your mate. He was trying to make this about her, because then he wouldnt have to listen to her. He couldnt be that blind, just too stubborn. So his attempt to alter the argument when there should be no argument at all enraged her. Someone in here is acting like a child, and it isnt me, she growled right back at him. Brans return snarl was wordless. Anna, shut up, Tag whispered urgently, his big body limp on the floor where his orange dreadlocks clashed with the maroon of the Persian rug. He was her friend and she trusted the berserkers judgment on most things. Under other circumstances shed have listened to him, but right now she had Bran so angry he couldnt speak so she could get a few words in past his stubborn, inflexible mind. I know my mate, she told her father by marriage. Better than you do. He will break before he disappoints you or fails to do his duty. You have to stop this because he cant. When Bran spoke, his voice was a toneless whisper. My son will not bend or break. He has done his job for a century before you were even born, and hell be doing it a century from now. His job was to dispense justice, she said. Even if it meant killing people, he could do it. Now he is merely an assassin. His prey cling to his feet repentant and redeemable. They weep and beg for mercy that he cant give. It is breaking him, she said starkly. And Im the only one who sees it. Bran flinched. And for the first time, she realized that Charles wasnt the only one suffering under the new, harsher rules the werewolves had to live by. Desperate times, he said grimly, and Anna hoped that shed broken through. But he shook off the momentary softness and said, Charles is stronger than you give him credit for. You are a stupid little girl who doesnt know as much as she thinks she does. Go home before I do something Ill regret later. Please. It was that brief break that told her this was useless. He did know. He did understand, and he was hoping against hope that Charles could hold out. Her anger fled and left . . . despair. She met her Alphas eyes for a long moment before acknowledging her failure. Anna knew exactly when Charles drove up, newly returned from Minnesota where hed gone to take care of a problem the Minnesota pack leader would not. If shed been deaf to the sound of the truck or the front door, shed have known Charles was home by the magic that tied wolf to mate. That was all the bond told her outright, though his side of their bond was as opaque as he could manage, and that told her a whole lot more about his state of mind than he probably intended. From the way he let nothing leak through to her, she knew it had been another bad trip, one that had left too many people dead, probably people he hadnt wanted to kill. Lately, they had all been bad trips. At first shed been able to help, but when the rules changed, when the werewolves had admitted their existence to the rest of the world, the new public scrutiny meant that second chances for the wolves who broke Brans laws were offered only in extraordinary circumstances. Shed kept going with him on these trips because she refused to let Charles suffer alone. But when Anna started having nightmares about the man whod fallen to his knees in front of her in mute entreaty before his execution, Charles had quit letting her go. She was strongwilled and she liked to think of herself as tough. She could have made him change his mind or followed him anyway. But Anna hadnt fought his edict because she realized she was only making his job harder to bear. He saw himself as a

monster and couldn't believe she didn't also when she witnessed the death he brought. So Charles went out hunting alone as he had for a hundred years or more, just as his father had said. His hunt was always successful and, at the same time, a failure. He was dominant; he had a compulsory need to protect the weak, including, paradoxically, the wolves he was there to kill. When the wolves he executed died, so did a part of Charles. Before Bran had brought them out to the public, the new wolves, those who had been Changed for less than ten years, would have been given several chances if their transgression came from loss of control. Conditions could have been taken into account that would lessen the punishment of others. But the public knew about them now, and they couldn't allow everyone to know just how dangerous werewolves really were. It was up to the pack Alpha to take care of dispensing commonplace justice. Previously, Charles had only had to go out a few times a year to take care of bigger or more unusual problems. But many of the Alphas were unhappy with the new harshness of the laws, and somehow more and more of the enforcement fell to Bran and thus to Charles. He was going out two or three times a month and it was wearing on him. She could feel him standing just inside the house, so she put a little more passion into her music, calling him to her with the sweetvoiced cello that had been his first Christmas gift to her. If she went upstairs, he'd greet her gravely, tell her he had to go talk to his father and leave. He'd come back in a day or so after running as a wolf in the mountains. But Charles never quite came back all the way anymore. It had been a month since he'd last touched her. Six weeks and four days since he'd made love to her, not since they'd come back from the last trip she'd accompanied him on. She'd have said that to Bran if he hadn't made that Grow up, little girl comment. Probably she should have told Bran anyway, but she'd given up making him see reason. She'd decided to try something else. She stayed in the music room Charles had built in the basement while he stood upstairs. Instead of words, she let her cello speak for her. Rich and true, the notes slid from her bow and up the stairway. After a moment she heard the stairs squeak a little under the weight of his feet and let out a breath of relief. Music was something they shared. Her fingers sang to him, coaxing him to her, but he stopped in the doorway. She could feel his eyes on her, but he didn't say anything. Anna knew that when playing on her cello, her face was peaceful and distant, a product of much coaching from an early teacher who told her that biting her lip and grimacing was a dead giveaway to any judge that she was having trouble. Her features weren't regular enough for true beauty, but she wasn't ugly, either, and today she'd used some makeup tricks that softened her freckles and emphasized her eyes. She glanced at him briefly. His Salish heritage gave him lovely dark skin and exotic (to her) features, his father's Welsh blood apparent only in subtle ways: the shape of his mouth, the angle of his chin. It was his job, not his lineage, that froze his features into an unemotional mask and left his eyes cold and hard. His duties had eaten away at him until he was nothing but muscle, bone, and tension. Anna's fingers touched the strings and rocked, softening the cello's song with a vibrato on the longer notes. She'd begun with a bit of Pachelbel's Canon in D, which she generally used as a warmup or when she wasn't sure what she wanted to play. She considered moving to something more challenging, but she was too distracted by Charles. Besides, she wasn't trying to impress him, but to seduce him into letting her help. So, Anna needed a song that she could play while thinking of Charles. If she couldn't get Bran to quit sending her mate out to kill, maybe she could get Charles to let her help with the aftermath. It might buy him a little time until she could find the right baseball bat or rolling pin to beat some clarity into his father's head. She deserted Pachelbel for an improvised bridge that shifted the key from D to G and then let her music flow into the prelude of Bach's Cello Suite No. 1. Not that that music was easy, but it had been her high school concert piece so she could practically play it in her sleep. Her fingers moving, she didn't allow herself to look at him again, no matter how hungry she was for the sight of him. She stared at an oil painting of a sleeping bobcat while Charles stood at the door and watched her. If she could get him to approach her, to quit trying to protect her from his job . . . And then she screwed up. She was an Omega wolf. That meant that not only was she the only person on the continent whose wolf would allow her to face down the Marrok when he was in a rage, but also that she had a magical talent for soothing wolfish tempers regardless of whether or not they wanted to be soothed. It felt wrong to impose her will on others, and she tried not to do it unless the need was dire. Over the past few years, Anna had learned when and how to best use her ability. But her need to see Charles happy slipped over the barrier of her hardwon control as if it wasn't there at all. One moment she was playing to him with her whole self, focused solely on him and the next her wolf reached out and calmed Charles's wolf, sent him to sleep, leaving only his human half behind . . . Charles turned and walked purposefully away from her without a word. He, who ran from nothing and no one, exited their house by the back door. Anna set down her bow and returned her cello to its stand. He wouldn't come back for hours now, maybe not even for a couple of days. Music hadn't worked if the only

thing holding Charles in its spell was his wolf. She left the house, too. The need to do something was so strong it had her moving without a real destination. It was that or cry, and she refused to cry. Maybe she could go to Bran one more time. But when the turnoff for his house appeared, she drove past it. Like as not Charles was headed to Brans to tell his father what hed done for the wolves of the worldand it would be . . . awkward to follow him, as if she were chasing him. Besides, shed already talked to Bran. He knew what was happening to his son; she knew he did. But, like Charles, he weighed the lives of all of their kind against the possibility that Charles would break under the strain of what was necessary, and thought the risk acceptable. So Anna drove through town, arriving at a large greenhouse in the woods on the other side. She pulled over and parked next to a battered Willys Jeep and went in search of help. A lot of wolves called him the Moorwhich he disliked, saying that it was a vampire kind of thing to do, take a part of who a person was and reduce him to it with a capital letter or two. His features and skin showed traces of Arabia by way of North Africa, but Anna agreed that certainly wasnt the sum total of who he was. He was very beautiful, very old, extremely deadlyand right now he was transplanting geraniums. Asil, she began. Hush, he said. Dont disturb my plants with your troubles until they are safe in their new houses. Make yourself useful and deadhead the roses along the wall. She snagged a basket and started picking dead flowers off Asils rosebushes. There would be no talking to him until hed accomplished what he intended, whether that was to calm her down before they talked, get some free labor, or merely keep the silence while he tended his plants. Knowing Asil, it could be all three. She worked for about ten minutes before she got impatient and reached for a rosebud, knowing that he always kept an eye on anyone working with his precious flowers. Remember the story of Beauty and the Beast? remarked Asil gently. Go ahead. Take that little bloom. See what happens. Beauty and the Beast is a French fairy tale and you are a mere Spaniard, Anna told him, but she took her fingers off the bud. Beautys father had stolen a flower at great cost. And in no way are you an enchanted prince. He dusted off his hands and turned to her, smiling a little. Actually I am. For some definitions of prince. Hah, said Anna. Poor Belle would find herself kissing your handsome face and then, poof, there would be the frog. I think you are mixing your fairy tales, Asil told her. But even as a frog I would not disappoint. You came to talk fairy tales, querida? No. She sighed, hopping up to sit on a convenient flat table next to a bunch of small pots that held a single peasized leaf each. Im here to get advice about beasts. Specifically, information about the beast who rules us all. Naturally I sought you out. Bran has to quit sending Charles out to kill. It is destroying him. He sat on the table opposite hers and looked at her with the space of the narrow aisle between them. You do know that Charles lived nearly two hundred years without you to take care of him, yes? He is not a fragile rosebud who needs your tender touch to survive. Hes not a killer, either, Anna snapped. I beg to differ. Asil spread his hands peaceably when she snarled at him. The results speak for themselves. I doubt that there are any other wolves with so many werewolf kills under their belt outside of present company. He indicated himself with a modest air that was a tribute to his acting skills, since he didnt have a modest bone in his body. Anna shook her head at him, her hands curling into fists of frustration. He isnt. Killing hurts him. But he sees it as necessary Which it is, murmured Asil, clearly patronizing her. Fine, she agreed sharply, hearing the growl in her voice but unable to keep it down. Failing so spectacularly with Bran had taught her she needed to keep her own temper in check if she wanted to convince old dominant wolves of anything. I know that it is necessary. Of course it is necessary. Charles wouldnt kill anyone if he didnt see that it was necessary. And Charles is the only one dominant enough to do the job who is also not an Alpha, since that would cause trouble with the Alpha of the territories he must enter. Fine. It doesnt mean that he can continue like this. Necessary does not mean possible. Asil sighed. Women. He sighed again, theatrically. Peace, child. I do understand. You are Omega and Omegas are worse than Alphas about protecting their mates. But your mate is very strong. He grimaced as he said it, as if tasting something bitter. Anna knew that he didnt always get along with Charles, but dominant wolves often had that problem with one another. You just have to have a little faith in him. Anna met his gaze and held it. He doesnt bring me with him anymore when he goes. When he came home this afternoon, I used my magic to send his wolf to sleep, and as soon as the wolf was quiet he left without a word. You expected living with a werewolf to be easy? Asil frowned at her. You cant fix everyone. I told you that. Being Omega doesnt make you Allah. Asils longdead mate had been an Omega. Asil had taught Anna all that she knew about it, which he seemed to believe gave him some sort of in loco parentis status. Or maybe he just patronized everyone. Omega doesnt mean power without end. Charles is a stonecold killerask him yourself. And you knew it when you married him. You should quit worrying about him and start worrying about how you are going to deal with accepting the situation you got yourself into. Anna stared at him. She knew that he and Charles werent

bosom buddies or anything. She hadn't realized that he didn't know Charles at all, that Asil saw only the front he put on for everyone else. Asil had been her last, forlorn hope. Anna levered herself off the table. She turned her back on Asil and strode to the door, feeling the heavy weight of despair. She didn't know how to make him, to make Bran, see how bad things were. Bran was the one who counted. Only he could keep Charles home. She had failed to persuade her father-in-law. She'd been hoping that Asil might help. It was still light out and would be for a few more hours, but the air was already stirring with the weight of the waxing moon. She held the door open and turned back to Asil. You are all wrong about him. You and Bran and everyone else. He is strong, but no one is that strong. He hasn't picked up an instrument, hasn't even sung a note for months. Asil's head came up and he stared at her a moment, proving that he knew something about her husband after all. Perhaps, he said slowly with a frown, rising to his feet. Perhaps you are right. His father and I should speak. Asil let himself into the Marroks house without knocking. Bran had never objected, and another wolf might think he just never noticed. Asil knew that Bran noticed everything and had chosen to allow Asil's subtle defiance for his own reasons. And that was almost enough to make Asil knock on the door and wait for an invitation to enter. Almost. Leah was on the living room couch, watching something on the big TV. She looked up as he passed by and didn't bother smiling, while a woman screamed shrilly from the surroundsound speakers. When Asil had come to Montana, Leah had flirted with his Alpha's mate, who should know better. He'd allowed her the first one, but the second time he'd taught her not to play her games with him. So she sat on the couch, glanced up at him and then away, as if he bored her. But they both knew that he scared her. Asil was slightly ashamed of that, only because he knew his mate, dead but still beloved, would be disappointed in him. Teaching Leah to be afraid of him had been easier and more satisfactory than just letting her know that her flirtations were unwelcome and would not gain her whatever it was that she wished. Had he not expected the Marrok to execute him in short order which was the reason he'd come to the Montana pack he might not have done such a thorough job of it. But he was not unhappy that Leah ignored him as much as possible and less unhappy that the Marrok would not kill him than he had expected to be. Asil found that life still had the power to surprise him, so he was willing to stick around for a little while longer. He followed the sound of quiet voices to the Marroks study, pausing in the hallway to wait when he realized it was Charles, himself, talking to his father. Had it been anyone else, he'd have intruded, expecting the lesser wolf and they were all lesser wolves to give way. Asil frowned, trying to decide if what he had to say would play better with Charles in the room or not. Strategy would be important. A dominant wolf, such as he or Bran, could not be compelled, only persuaded. In the end he decided on a private talk and continued on to the library where he found a copy of *Ivanhoe* and reread the first few chapters. Romantic claptrap, said Bran from the doorway. Doubtless he'd scented Asil as soon as Asil had walked by the study earlier. As well as historically full of holes. Is there something wrong with that? asked Asil. Romance is good for the soul. Heroic deeds, sacrifice, and hope. He paused. The need for two dissimilar people to become one. Scott wasn't trying for historical accuracy. Good thing, grunted Bran, sitting down on the chair opposite the love seat Asil had claimed. Because he didn't manage it. Asil went back to reading his book. It was an interrogation technique he'd seen Bran use a lot and he figured the old wolf would recognize it. Bran snorted in amusement and gave in by beginning the conversation. So what brings you out here this afternoon? I trust it wasn't a sudden desire to read Sir Walter's dashing romance. Asil closed the book and gave his Alpha a look under his lashes. No. But it is about romance, sacrifice, and hope. Bran threw his head back and groaned. You've been talking to Anna. If I'd known what a pain in the ass it would be to have an Omega who doesn't back down in my pack, I'd have beaten her into submission? Asil murmured slyly. Starved and abused her and treated her like dirt so she would never understand what she was? The silence became heavy. Asil gave Bran a malicious smile. I know better than that. You'd have asked her to come here twice as fast. It's good for you to have someone around who doesn't back down. Ah, the frustrating joy of having an Omega around. I remember it well. He smiled more broadly when he realized he'd once thought he'd never smile at the memory of his mate again. Irritating as hell, but good for you. She's good for Charles, too. Bran's face hardened. Anna came to see me, Asil continued, watching Bran carefully. I told her she needed to grow up. She signed on for the hard times as well as the bad. She needs to realize that Charles's job is tough and that sometimes he's going to need time to deal with it. That was not exactly what he'd said, but he'd have bet it was what Bran had told her. His Alpha's blank face told him he was right on target. I told her that there was a larger picture that she wasn't looking at, Asil continued with false earnestness. Charles is the only one who can do his job and that it has never been more necessary than it is now, with the eyes of the world on us. It's not easy covering up the deaths with stories of wild dogs or

scavenger animals eating someones body after they died from something else, not anymore. Police are looking for signs that their killers might be werewolves, and we cant afford that. I told her she needed to grow up and deal with reality. The muscle on Brans jaw tightened because Asil had always had a talent for imitationhe thought hed gotten Brans voice just about perfect on the last few sentences. So she gave up on me, Asil said, back in his own voice. She was leaving while I sat content in the smug knowledge that she was a weak female who was more concerned with her mate than with the good of the whole. Which is only what a woman should be like, after all. It really isnt fair to blame them for it when it inconveniences us. Bran looked at him coolly, so Asil knew hed hit hard with that last remark. Asil smiled ruefully and caressed the book he held. Then she told me that its been months since hes made any music, viejito. When was the last time that one went more than a day without humming something or playing that guitar of his? Brans eyes were shocked. He hadnt known. He rose to his feet and began pacing. It is a necessity, Bran said at last. If I dont send him, then who goes? Are you volunteering? It would be impossible; they both knew it. One kill, or maybe as many as three or four, and his control would be gone. Asil was too old, too fragile, to be sent out hunting werewolves. He would enjoy it entirely too much. He could feel the wild spirit of his wolf leap at the chance of such a hunt, the chance of a real fight and the blood of a strong opponent between his fangs. Bran was still ranting. I cannot send an Alpha into another packs territory without it becoming a challenge that will spawn even more bloodshed. I cannot send you. I cannot send Samuel because my oldest son is even more at risk than you are. I cannot go because Id have to kill every damned Alphaand I have no desire to take every werewolf into my personal pack. If not Charles, then who do I send? Asil bowed his head to Brans anger. Thats why you are the Alpha and I will do anything I can to never be Alpha again. He stood up, head still lowered. He caressed the fabric cover of the book and set it down on the table. I dont think I really need to read this book again. I have always thought Ivanhoe should have married Rebecca, who was smart and strong, instead of choosing Rowena and what he thought was right and proper. Asil left Bran alone with his thoughts then, because if he stayed, Bran would argue with him. This way, Bran would have no one to argue with but himself. And Asil had always credited Bran with the ability to be persuasive. Bran stared at Ivanhoe. Its cover was a dull blue gray, the weave of the cloth a visible sign of its age. He ran his fingers over the indentations that were the title and the line drawing of a knight wearing sixteenthcentury armor. The book had once had a paper cover with an even less appropriate picture on the front. Inside, on the flyleaf, he knew that there was an inscription that he didnt open the book to find. He was pretty sure Asil had been here long enough to go through the whole damned library to find this book. Charles had given it to him, maybe seventy years ago. Merry Christmas, it said. Youve probably read this book a dozen times before. I read it for the first time a couple of months ago and thought that you might take comfort in this tale of the possibility that two dissimilar people might learn to live togethera good story is worth revisiting. It was a good story, even if it was historically inaccurate and romantic. Bran took the book and replaced it gently in the bookshelf before he gave in to his impulse to rip it into small pieces, because then he wouldnt stop until there was nothing left to destroyand no one could manage him if that happened. He needed Charles to be something he was not, and his son would kill himself trying to be what his father needed. How long had he lied to himself that Charles would be fine? How long had he known that Anna was right to object? There were many reasons, good, sound reasons, for Bran not to be the one doing the killing. Hed given Asil one of them. But his real reason, his true reason, was more like Asils, though that one was more honest about it. How long would it be until Bran started to enjoy the pleading, the suffering, before the kill? He didnt remember much about the time he let his wolf take charge, though the world still had record of it and it had happened more than ten centuries ago. But some of the memories he did retain were of his terrified victims and the satisfaction their cries had brought him. Charles would never do that, would never glory in the fear others felt of him. He would never do more than what was needed. A paradox, then. Bran needed Charles to be just what he wasand Charles needed to be the monster his father was to survive it. The phone rang, saving Bran from his thoughts. Hopefully it was a different problem he could sink his teeth into. Something with a solution. I wont do it, Adam Hauptman said when Bran called. Bran paused. It had surprised him no end when Adam, of all his Alphas, had been the one best suited to deal with the feds. Adam had a terrible temper and not as tight a leash on it as was prudent. For that reason, Bran had kept him back, out of the limelight, for all of Adams looks and charisma. But his experience in the military and his contacts as well as an unexpectedly good understanding of politics and political blackmail had turned him gradually into Brans most useful political chessman. It was unlike Adam to refuse. Its not a difficult assignment, Bran murmured into the phone, holding back the wolf who wanted to insist on instant obedience. Just an exchange of

information. We've lost three people in Boston and the FBI thinks it's connected to a larger case and want a werewolf to consult with. The local Alpha isn't qualified and he's too young to be good at diplomacy when his own people are dying. If they want to fly out here, that will be fine, Adam said. But Mercy's legs aren't healed and she can't get around in the wheelchair without help because her hands were burned. Your pack won't help her? Icy rage froze his voice. Mercy might be mated to Adam, but to his wolf she would always belong to Bran. Would always be his little coyote, who was tough and defiant, raised by a good friend because Bran couldn't trust his mate with someone he cared about who was more fragile than his grown sons. Adam gave a huff of laughter that eased Bran's ire. It's not that. She's grumpy and embarrassed at being helpless. I had to leave last week on business. By the time I got back, the vampire had to come take care of her because she'd driven everyone else off. I don't have to listen when she tells me to leave her alone, but everyone else does.

Pleased at the thought of Mercy ordering around a bunch of werewolves, Bran settled back in his chair. Bran? Are you all right? Don't worry, Bran said. I'll get David Christiansen to do it. The FBI will just have to wait a week or so until he gets back from Burma. That's not what I was asking, Adam said. Volatile is not a word I'd normally apply to you but you aren't yourself today. Are you all right? Bran pinched his nose. He should just keep it to himself. But Adam . . . He couldn't talk to Samuel about this; the only thing that would do would be to make his oldest son feel guilty. Adam knew all the players and he was an Alpha; he'd understand without Bran having to explain everything. Adam listened without comment except a snort when he heard how neatly Asil had turned the tables on Bran. You need to keep Asil around, he said. The rest of them are too intimidated to play games with you and you need that now and again to keep you sharp. Yes, said Bran. And the rest? You have to back off on the death sentences, Adam said with certainty. I heard about Minnesota. Three wolves took out a pedophile stalking a third grader with a rope in his hand and a stun gun in his pocket. Bran growled. I wouldn't have objected except they got carried away and then left his half-eaten body to be discovered the next day before they told their Alpha what happened. If they'd just snapped his neck, I could have let it go. He pinched his nose again. As it is, the coroner is speculating all over the papers. If you backed off, Charles wouldn't have to go out and kill so often, because you wouldn't have so many Alphas refusing to take care of discipline. I can't, Bran said tiredly. Have you seen the new commercials Bright Future has sponsored? The endangered species hearings are beginning next month. If they classify us as animals, it won't be just the problem wolves being hunted. We are what we are, Bran.

We're not civilized or tame, and if you force that upon us, it won't be only Charles who loses it. Adam let out a breath and in a less passionate voice he said, In any case, maybe giving Charles a break on other fronts will give him more rest. I've freed him entirely from his business obligations, said Bran. It hasn't worked. There was a pause. What? said Adam carefully. The business? You've turned pack finances over to someone else?

He'd already backed away from most of the daily chores of running the corporation; put it in the hands of five or six different people, only one of whom knows that it's owned by Charles's family. He does that every twenty years or so, to keep people from noticing that he doesn't age. I brought in a finance firm to take over the pack's other holdings, and what they aren't handling, Leah is. So Charles is doing nothing at all except going out and killing? Nothing to distract him, nothing to dilute the impact. I know I just said he might need a break, but that's almost the opposite. Do you really think that's a good idea? He enjoys making money; it's

like an infinitely complicated game of chess for him. He told me once it was even better than hunting because no one dies. He'd told Bran that, too. Maybe he should have listened more carefully. I can't give him the finances back, Bran said. He's not . . . I can't give him the finances back. Not until Charles was

functioning better, because the money the pack controlled was enough to mean power. His reluctance to trust Charles, who had engendered it, made Bran admit, at least to himself, that he'd noticed that Charles was in trouble a while ago. I have an idea, said Adam slowly. About that task you had for me I'm not sending him to deal with the FBI, said Bran, appalled. Even before . . . this, Charles would not be the right person to send.

He's not a people person, agreed Adam, sounding amused. I imagine the last year and more hasn't helped that any. No. Send Anna. Those FBI agents won't know what hit them and with Anna as a cushion, Charles may actually do them some good. Send them in to help as well as consult. One of us can tell the cops a lot about a crime scene that forensics can't. Give Charles something to do where he can be the good guy instead of the executioner. Let him be a hero, thought Bran, his eyes on the Ivanhoe in his bookshelf as he hung up the phone. Asil had been right to point out that there was nothing wrong with a little bit of romance to cushion the harsh realities of life. Adam might have given him the Band-Aid he needed to help his youngest son. He

devoutly hoped so.