



Moon Called (Mercy Thompson, Book 1)

By Patricia Briggs

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THE FIRST MERCY THOMPSON NOVEL!

***Moon Called* is the novel that introduced Patricia Briggs's Mercy Thompson to the world and launched a #1 bestselling phenomenon...**

Mercy Thompson is a shapeshifter, and while she was raised by werewolves, she can never be one of them, especially after the pack ran her off for having a forbidden love affair. So she's turned her talent for fixing cars into a business and now runs a one-woman mechanic shop in the Tri-Cities area of Washington State.

But Mercy's two worlds are colliding. A half-starved teenage boy arrives at her shop looking for work, only to reveal that he's a newly changed werewolf—on the run and desperately trying to control his animal instincts. Mercy asks her neighbor Adam Hauptman, the Alpha of the local werewolf pack, for assistance.

But Mercy's act of kindness has unexpected consequences that leave her no choice but to seek help from those she once considered family—the werewolves who abandoned her...

“In the increasingly crowded field of kick-ass supernatural heroines, Mercy stands out as one of the best.”—*Locus*

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Editorial Review

Review

“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.”—Kim Harrison, *New York Times* bestselling author

“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, *New York Times* bestselling author

“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*

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

“I’ve never been disappointed by one of [Patricia Briggs’s] books and this one is no exception...*Moon Called* ends on a high note and leaves you wanting more.”—Fresh Fiction

More Praise for the Mercy Thompson Novels

“I love these books.”—Charlaine Harris, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“The best new urban fantasy series I’ve read in years.”—Kelley Armstrong, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Action-packed and with more than a few satisfying emotional payoffs...Patricia Briggs at the top of her game.”—The Speculative Herald

“The characters are all realistic and vibrant.”—*The Independent*

“These are fantastic adventures, and Mercy reigns.”—SFRevu

“The world building is incredibly lush and subsuming...a fantastic urban fantasy adventure.”—Fresh Fiction

“Outstanding.”—Charles de Lint, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*

About the Author

Patricia Briggs is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Mercy Thompson urban fantasy series and the Alpha and Omega novels.

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acknowledgments

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chapter 1

I didn't realize he was a werewolf at first. My nose isn't at its best when surrounded by axle grease and burnt oil—and it's not like there are a lot of stray werewolves running around. So when someone made a polite noise near my feet to get my attention I thought he was a customer.

I was burrowed under the engine compartment of a Jetta, settling a rebuilt transmission into its new home. One of the drawbacks in running a one-woman garage was that I had to stop and start every time the phone rang or a customer stopped by. It made me grumpy—which isn't a good way to deal with customers. My faithful office boy and tool rustler had gone off to college, and I hadn't replaced him yet—it's hard to find someone who will do all the jobs I don't want to.

"Be with you in a sec," I said, trying not to sound snappish. I do my best not to scare off my customers if I can help it.

Transmission jacks be damned, the only way to get a transmission into an old Jetta is with muscle. Sometimes being a female is useful in my line of work—my hands are smaller so I can get them places a man can't. However, even weightlifting and karate can't make me as strong as a strong man. Usually leverage can compensate, but sometimes there's no substitute for muscle, and I had just barely enough to get the job done.

Grunting with effort, I held the transmission where it belonged with my knees and one hand. With the other I slipped the first bolt in and tightened it. I wasn't finished, but the transmission would stay where it was while I dealt with my customer.

I took a deep breath and smiled once brightly for practice before I rolled out from under the car. I snagged a rag to wipe the oil off my hands, and said, "Can I help you?" before I got a good enough look at the boy to see he wasn't a customer—though he certainly looked as though *someone* ought to help him.

The knees of his jeans were ripped out and stained with old blood and dirt. Over a dirty tee, he wore a too-small flannel shirt—inadequate clothing for November in eastern Washington.

He looked gaunt, as though he'd been a while without food. My nose told me, even over the smell of gasoline, oil, and antifreeze permeating the garage, that it had been an equally long time since he'd seen a shower. And, under the dirt, sweat, and old fear, was the distinctive scent of werewolf.

"I was wondering if you had some work I could do?" he asked hesitantly. "Not a real job, ma'am. Just a few hours' work."

I could smell his anxiety before it was drowned out by a rush of adrenaline when I didn't immediately refuse. His words sped up until they crashed into one another. "A job would be okay, too, but I don't have a social security card, so it would have to be cash under the table."

Most of the people who come around looking for cash work are illegals trying to tide themselves over between harvest and planting season. This boy was white-bread American—except the part about being a werewolf—with chestnut hair and brown eyes. He was tall enough to be eighteen, I supposed, but my instincts, which are pretty good, pinned his age closer to fifteen. His shoulders were wide but bony, and his hands were a little large, as if he still had some growing to do before he grew into the man he would be.

“I’m strong,” he said. “I don’t know a lot about fixing cars, but I used to help my uncle keep his Bug running.”

I believed he was strong: werewolves are. As soon as I had picked up the distinctive musk-and-mint scent, I’d had a nervous urge to drive him out of my territory. However, not being a werewolf, I control my instincts—I’m not controlled by them. Then, too, the boy, shivering slightly in the damp November weather, roused other, stronger instincts.

It is my own private policy not to break the law. I drive the speed limit, keep my cars insured, pay a little more tax to the feds than I have to. I’ve given away a twenty or two to people who’d asked, but never hired someone who couldn’t appear on my payroll. There was also the problem of his being a werewolf, and a new one at that, if I was any judge. The young ones have less control of their wolves than others.

He hadn’t commented on how odd it was to see a woman mechanic. Sure, he’d probably been watching me for a while, long enough to get used to the idea—but, still, he hadn’t said anything, and that won him points. But not enough points for what I was about to do.

He rubbed his hands together and blew on them to warm up his fingers, which were red with chill.

“All right,” I said, slowly. It was not the wisest answer, but, watching his slow shivers, it was the only one I could give. “We’ll see how it works.”

“There’s a laundry room and a shower back through that door.” I pointed to the door at the back of the shop. “My last assistant left some of his old work coveralls. You’ll find them hanging on the hooks in the laundry room. If you want to shower and put those on, you can run the clothes you’re wearing through the washer. There’s a fridge in the laundry room with a ham sandwich and some pop. Eat, then come back out when you’re ready.”

I put a little force behind the “eat”: I wasn’t going to work with a hungry werewolf, not even almost two weeks from full moon. Some people will tell you werewolves can only shapechange under a full moon, but people also say there’s no such things as ghosts. He heard the command and stiffened, raising his eyes to meet mine.

After a moment he mumbled a thank-you and walked through the door, shutting it gently behind him. I let out the breath I’d been holding. I knew better than to give orders to a werewolf—it’s that whole dominance reflex thing.

Werewolves’ instincts are inconvenient—that’s why they don’t tend to live long. Those same instincts are the reason their wild brothers lost to civilization while the coyotes were thriving, even in urban areas like Los Angeles.

The coyotes are *my* brothers. Oh, I’m not a werecoyote—if there even is such a thing. I am a walker.

The term is derived from “skinwalker,” a witch of the Southwest Indian tribes who uses a skin to turn into a coyote or some other animal and goes around causing disease and death. The white settlers incorrectly used

the term for all the native shapechangers and the name stuck. We are hardly in a position to object—even if we came out in public like the lesser of the fae did, there aren't enough of us to be worth a fuss.

I didn't think the boy had known what I was, or he'd never have been able to turn his back on me, another predator, and go through the door to shower and change. Wolves may have a very good sense of smell, but the garage was full of odd odors, and I doubted he'd ever smelled someone like me in his life.

"You just hire a replacement for Tad?"

I turned and watched Tony come in from outside through the open bay doors, where he'd evidently been lurking and watching the byplay between the boy and me. Tony was good at that—it was his job.

His black hair was slicked back and tied into a short ponytail and he was clean-shaven. His right ear, I noticed, was pierced four times and held three small hoops and a diamond stud. He'd added two since last time I'd seen him. In a hooded sweatshirt unzipped to display a thin tee that showed the results of all the hours he spent in a gym, he looked like a recruitment poster for one of the local Hispanic gangs.

"We're negotiating," I said. "Just temporary so far. Are you working?"

"Nope. They gave me the day off for good behavior." He was still focused on my new employee, though, because he said, "I've seen him around the past few days. He seems okay—runaway maybe." Okay meant no drugs or violence, the last was reassuring.

When I started working at the garage about nine years ago, Tony had been running a little pawnshop around the corner. Since it had the nearest soft drink machine, I saw him fairly often. After a while the pawnshop passed on to different hands. I didn't think much of it until I smelled him standing on a street corner with a sign that said WILL WORK FOR FOOD.

I say smelled him, because the hollow-eyed kid holding the sign didn't look much like the low-key, cheerful, middle-aged man who had run the pawnshop. Startled, I'd greeted him by the name I'd known him by. The kid just looked at me like I was crazy, but the next morning Tony was waiting at my shop. That's when he told me what he did for a living—I hadn't even known a place the size of the Tri-Cities would have undercover cops.

He'd started dropping by the shop every once in a while, after that. At first he'd come in a new guise each time. The Tri-Cities aren't that big, and my garage is on the edge of an area that's about as close as Kennewick comes to having a high-crime district. So it was possible he just came by when he was assigned to the area, but I soon decided the real reason was he was bothered I'd recognized him. I could hardly tell him I'd just smelled him, could I?

His mother was Italian and his father Venezuelan, and the genetic mix had given him features and skin tone that allowed him to pass as anything from Mexican to African-American. He could still pass for eighteen when he needed to, though he must be several years older than me—thirty-three or so. He spoke Spanish fluently and could use a half dozen different accents to flavor his English.

All of those attributes had led him to undercover work, but what really made him good was his body language. He could stride with the hip-swallowing walk common to handsome young Hispanic males, or shuffle around with the nervous energy of a drug addict.

After a while, he accepted I could see through disguises that fooled his boss and, he claimed, his own mother, but by then we were friends. He continued to drop in for a cup of coffee or hot chocolate and a

friendly chat when he was around.

“You look very young and macho,” I said. “Are the earrings a new look for KPD? Pasco police have two earrings, so Kennewick cops must have four?”

He grinned at me, and it made him look both older and more innocent. “I’ve been working in Seattle for the past few months,” he said. “I’ve got a new tattoo, too. Fortunately for me it is somewhere my mother will never see it.”

Tony claimed to live in terror of his mother. I’d never met her myself, but he smelled of happiness not fear when he talked of her, so I knew she couldn’t be the harridan he described.

“What brings you to darken my door?” I asked.

“I came to see if you’d look at a car for a friend of mine,” he said.

“Vee-Dub?”

“Buick.”

My eyebrows climbed in surprise. “I’ll take a look, but I’m not set up for American cars—I don’t have the computers. He should take it somewhere they know Buicks.”

“*She’s* taken it to three different mechanics—replaced the oxygen sensor, spark plugs, and who knows what else. It’s still not right. The last guy told her she needed a new engine, which he could do for twice what the car’s worth. She doesn’t have much money, but she needs the car.”

“I won’t charge her for looking, and if I can’t fix it, I’ll tell her so.” I had a sudden thought, brought on by the edge of anger I heard in his voice when he talked about her problems. “Is this *your* lady?”

“She’s not my lady,” he protested unconvincingly.

For the past three years he’d had his eye on one of the police dispatchers, a widow with a slew of kids. He’d never done anything about it because he loved his job—and his job, he’d said wistfully, was not conducive to dating, marriage, and kids.

“Tell her to bring it by. If she can leave it for a day or two, I’ll see if Zee will come by and take a look at it.” Zee, my former boss, had retired when he sold me the place, but he’d come out once in a while to “keep his hand in.” He knew more about cars and what made them run than a team of Detroit engineers.

“Thanks, Mercy. You’re aces.” He checked his watch. “I’ve got to go.”

I waved him off, then went back to the transmission. The car cooperated, as they seldom do, so it didn’t take me long. By the time my new help emerged clean and garbed in an old pair of Tad’s coveralls, I was starting to put the rest of the car back together. Even the coveralls wouldn’t be warm enough outside, but in the shop, with my big space heater going, he should be all right.

He was quick and efficient—he’d obviously spent a few hours under the hood of a car. He didn’t stand around watching, but handed me parts before I asked, playing the part of a tool monkey as though it was an accustomed role. Either he was naturally reticent or had learned how to keep his mouth shut because we worked together for a couple of hours mostly in silence. We finished the first car and started on another one before I decided to coax him into talking to me.

“I’m Mercedes,” I said, loosening an alternator bolt. “What do you want me to call you?”

His eyes lit for a minute. “Mercedes the Volkswagen mechanic?” His face closed down quickly, and he mumbled, “Sorry. Bet you’ve heard that a lot.”

I grinned at him and handed him the bolt I’d taken out and started on the next. “Yep. But I work on Mercedes, too—anything German-made. Porsche, Audi, BMW, and even the odd Opel or two. Mostly old stuff, out of dealer warranty, though I have the computers for most of the newer ones when they come in.”

I turned my head away from him so I could get a better look at the stubborn second bolt. “You can call me Mercedes or Mercy, whichever you like. What do you want me to call you?”

I don’t like forcing people into a corner where they have to lie to you. If he was a runaway, he probably wouldn’t give me a real name, but I needed something better to call him than “boy” or “hey, you” if I was going to work with him.

“Call me Mac,” he said after a pause.

The pause was a dead giveaway that it wasn’t the name he usually went by. It would do for now.

“Well then, Mac,” I said. “Would you give the Jetta’s owner a call and tell him his car is ready?” I nodded toward the first car we had finished. “There’s an invoice on the printer. His number is on the invoice along with the final cost of the transmission swap. When I get this belt replaced I’ll take you to lunch—part of the wages.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding a little lost. He started for the door to the showers but I stopped him. The laundry and shower were in the back of the shop, but the office was on the side of the garage, next to a parking lot customers used.

“The office is straight through the gray door,” I told him. “There’s a cloth next to the phone you can use to hold the receiver so it doesn’t get covered with grease.”

I drove home that night and fretted about Mac. I’d paid him for his work in cash and told him he was welcome back. He’d given me a faint smile, tucked the money in a back pocket, and left. I had let him go, knowing that he had nowhere to stay the night because I had no other good options.

I’d have asked him home, but that would have been dangerous for both of us. As little as he seemed to use his nose, eventually he’d figure out what I was—and werewolves, even in human form, do have the strength they’re credited with in the old movies. I’m in good shape, and I have a purple belt from the dojo just over the railroad track from my garage, but I’m no match for a werewolf. The boy was too young to have the kind of control he’d need to keep from killing someone his beast would see as a competing predator in his territory.

And then there was my neighbor.

I live in Finley, a rural area about ten minutes from my garage, which is in the older industrial area of Kennewick. My home is a single-wide trailer almost as old as I am that sits in the middle of a couple of fenced acres. There are a lot of small-acreage properties in Finley with trailers or manufactured homes, but along the river there are also mansions like the one my neighbor lives in.

I turned into my drive with a crunch of gravel and stopped the old diesel Rabbit in front of my home. I noticed the cat carrier sitting on my porch as soon as I got out of the car.

Medea gave me a plaintive yowl, but I picked up the note taped to the top of the carrier and read it before I let her out.

MS. THOMPSON, it said in heavy block letters, *PLEASE KEEP YOUR FELINE OFF MY PROPERTY. IF I SEE IT AGAIN, I WILL EAT IT.*

The note was unsigned.

I undid the latch and lifted the cat up and rubbed my face in her rabbitlike fur.

“Did the mean old werewolf stick the poor kitty in the box and leave her?” I asked.

She smelled like my neighbor, which told me that Adam had spent some time with her on his lap before he’d brought her over here. Most cats don’t like werewolves—or walkers like me either. Medea likes everyone, poor old cat, even my grumpy neighbor. Which is why she often ended up in the cat carrier on my porch.

Adam Hauptman, who shared my back fence line, was the Alpha of the local werewolf pack. That there was a werewolf pack in the Tri-Cities was something of an anomaly because packs usually settle in bigger places where they can hide better, or, rarely, in smaller places they can take over. But werewolves have a tendency to do well in the military and secret government agencies whose names are all acronyms, and the nuclear power plant complex close by the Hanford site had a lot of alphabet agencies involved in it, one way or another.

Why the Alpha werewolf had chosen to buy land right next to me, I suspect, had as much to do with the werewolf’s urge to dominate those they see as lesser beings as it did with the superb riverfront view.

He didn’t like having my old single-wide bringing down the value of his sprawling adobe edifice—though, as I sometimes pointed out to him, my trailer was already here when he bought his property and built on it. He also took every opportunity to remind me I was only here on his sufferance: a walker being no real match for a werewolf.

In response to these complaints, I bowed my head, spoke respectfully to his face—usually—and pulled the dilapidated old Rabbit I kept for parts out into my back field where it was clearly visible from Adam’s bedroom window.

I was almost certain he wouldn’t eat my cat, but I’d leave her inside for the next week or so to give the impression I was cowed by his threat. The trick with werewolves is never to confront them straight on.

Medea mewed, purred, and wagged her stub tail when I set her down and filled her food dish. She’d come to me as a stray, and I’d thought for a while that some abusive person had chopped her tail off, but my vet said she was a Manx and born that way. I gave her one last stroke, then went to my fridge to scrounge something for dinner.

“I’d have brought Mac home if I thought Adam would leave him be,” I told her, “but werewolves don’t take to strangers very well. There’s all sorts of protocols they insist upon when a new wolf comes into someone else’s territory, and something tells me that Mac hasn’t petitioned the pack. A werewolf won’t freeze to death sleeping outside, however bad the weather. He’ll be all right for a little while.”

“Still,” I said, as I got out some leftover spaghetti to nuke, “if Mac’s in trouble, Adam might help him.” It

would be better to introduce the subject gently when I knew what the boy's story was.

I ate standing up and rinsed out the dish before curling up on the couch and turning on the TV. Medea yowled and jumped on my lap before the first commercial.

Mac didn't come in the next day. It was a Saturday, and he might not know I worked most every Saturday if there were cars to fix. Maybe he'd moved on.

I hoped Adam or one of his wolves hadn't found him before I'd had a chance to break the news of his presence more gently. The rules that allowed werewolves to live undetected among humankind for centuries tended to have fatal consequences for those who broke them.

I worked until noon, then called to tell the nice young couple that their car was a lost cause. Replacing the engine in it would cost them more than the car was worth. Bad news calls were my least favorite job. When Tad, my old assistant, had been around, I'd made him do them. I hung up almost as depressed as the hapless owners of the shiny, decked-out, well-loved car now destined for a boneyard.

I scrubbed up and got as much of the gunk out from under my nails as was going to come and started in on the never-ending paperwork that had also fallen to Tad. I was glad he'd gotten the scholarship that allowed him to head to the Ivy League college of his choice, but I really missed him. After ten minutes, I decided there was nothing that couldn't be put off until Monday. Hopefully by then I'd have an urgent repair, and I'd be able to put off the paperwork until Tuesday.

I changed into clean jeans and a T-shirt, grabbed my jacket, and headed to O'Leary's for lunch. After lunch I did some desultory grocery shopping and bought a small turkey to share with Medea.

My mother called on the cell as I was getting into the car and tried to guilt me into driving up to Portland for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I weaseled my way out of both invitations—I'd had enough of family gatherings in the two years I'd lived with her to last a lifetime.

It's not that they are bad, just the opposite. Curt, my stepfather, is a soft-spoken, no-nonsense sort of person—just the man to balance my mother. I later found out he hadn't known about me until I showed up on his doorstep when I was sixteen. Even so, he opened his house to me without question and treated me as if I were his own.

My mother, Margi, is vivacious and cheerfully flaky. It's not difficult at all envisioning her getting involved with a rodeo rider (like my father) any more than it would be difficult imagining her running off to join the circus. That she is president of her local PTA is far more surprising.

I like my mother and stepfather. I even like all of my half siblings, who had greeted my sudden appearance in their lives with enthusiasm. They all live together in one of those close-knit families that television likes to pretend is normal. I'm very happy to know people like that exist—I just don't belong there.

I visit twice a year so they don't invade my home, and I make certain that it isn't a holiday. Most of my visits are very short. I love them, but I love them better at a distance.

By the time I hung up, I felt guilty and blue. I drove home, put the turkey in the fridge to thaw, and fed the cat. When cleaning the fridge didn't help my mood, though I'm not sure why I expected it to, I got back in the car and drove out to the Hanford Reach.

I don't go out to the Reach often. There are closer places to run, or, if I feel like driving, the Blue Mountains aren't too far away. But sometimes my soul craves the arid, desolate space of the preserve—especially after I get through talking with my mother.

I parked the car and walked for a while until I was reasonably certain there was no one around. Then I took off my clothes and put them in the small daypack and shifted.

Werewolves can take as much as fifteen minutes to shift shape—and shifting is painful for them, which is something to keep in mind. Werewolves aren't the most friendly animals anyway, but if they've just shifted, it's a good policy to leave them alone for a while.

Walkers' shifting—at least my shifting, because I don't know any other walkers—is quick and painless. One moment I'm a person and the next a coyote: pure magic. I just step from one form into the next.

I rubbed my nose against my foreleg to take away the last tingle of the change. It always takes a moment to adjust to moving on four feet instead of two. I know, because I looked it up, that coyotes have different eyesight than humans, but mine is pretty much the same in either form. My hearing picks up a little and so does my sense of smell, though even in human form I've got better senses than most.

I picked up the backpack, now stuffed with my clothes, and left it under a bunch of scrub. Then I shed the ephemera of my human existence and ran into the desert.

By the time I had chased three rabbits and teased a couple in a boat with a close-up glimpse of my lovely, furred self on the shore of the river, I felt much better. I don't have to change with the moon, but if I go too long on two feet I get restless and moody.

Happily tired, in human shape, and newly clothed, I got into my car and said my usual prayer as I turned the key. This time the diesel engine caught and purred. I never know from day to day if the Rabbit will run. I drive it because it is cheap, not because it is a good car. There's a lot of truth in the adage that all cars named after animals are lemons.

On Sunday I went to church. My church is so small that it shares its pastor with three other churches. It is one of those nondenominational churches so busy not condemning anyone that it has little power to attract a steady congregation. There are relatively few regulars, and we leave each other mostly alone. Being in a unique position to understand what the world would be like without God and his churches to keep the worst of the evil at bay, I am a faithful attendee.

It's not because of the werewolves. Werewolves can be dangerous if you get in their way; but they'll leave you alone if you are careful. They are no more evil than a grizzly bear or great white shark.

There are other things, though, things that hide in the dark, that are much, much worse—and vampires are only the tip of the iceberg. They are very good at hiding their natures from the human population, but I'm not human. I know them when I meet them, and they know me, too; so I go to church every week.

That Sunday, our pastor was sick and the man who replaced him chose to give a sermon based upon the scripture in Exodus 22: "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live." He extended the meaning to encompass the fae, and from him rose a miasma of fear and rage I could sense from my seat. It was people like him who kept the rest of the preternatural community in hiding almost two decades after the lesser fae were forced into the public view.

About thirty years ago, the Gray Lords, the powerful mages who rule the fae, began to be concerned about advances in science—particularly forensic science. They foresaw that the Time of Hiding was coming to an end. They decided to do damage control, and see to it that the human's realization of the world's magic was as gentle as possible. They awaited the proper opportunity.

When Harlan Kincaid, the elderly billionaire real estate magnate, was found dead near his roses with a pair of garden shears in his neck, suspicion fell upon his gardener Kieran McBride, a quiet-spoken, pleasant-faced man who had worked for Kincaid, a prize-winning gardener himself, for a number of years.

I saw bits of the trial, as most Americans did. The sensational murder of one of the country's wealthiest men, who happened to be married to a beloved, young actress, ensured the highest ratings for the networks.

For several weeks the murder occupied the news channels. The world got to see Carin Kincaid, with tears flowing down her California-tanned cheeks, as she described her reaction to finding her dead husband lying next to his favorite rosebush—which had been hacked to pieces. Her testimony was Oscar-quality, but she was upstaged by what happened next.

Kieran McBride was defended by an expensive team of lawyers who had, amid much publicity, agreed to work pro bono. They called Kieran McBride to the stand and skillfully baited the prosecuting attorney into asking McBride to hold the garden shears in his hand.

He tried. But after only an instant his hands began to smoke before dropping them. At his attorney's request he showed the blistered palms to the jury. He couldn't have been the murderer, the lawyer told the judge, jury, and the rest of the world, because Kieran McBride was fae, a garden sprite, and he couldn't hold cold iron, not even through thick leather gloves.

In a dramatic moment, McBride dropped his glamour, the spell that kept him appearing human. He wasn't beautiful, just the opposite, but anyone who has seen a Shar-pei puppy knows there is great charisma in a certain sort of ugliness. One of the reasons McBride had been chosen by the Gray Lords was because garden sprites are gentle folk and easy to look at. His sorrowful, overly large brown eyes made the covers of magazines for weeks opposite less-than-flattering pictures of Kincaid's wife, who was later convicted of her husband's death.

And so the lesser fae, the weak and attractive, revealed themselves at the command of the Gray Lords. The great and terrible, the powerful or powerfully ugly, stayed hidden, awaiting the reaction of the world to the more palatable among them. Here, said the Gray Lord's spin doctors who had been McBride's lawyers, here are a hidden people: the gentle brownie who taught kindergarten because she loved children; the young man, a selkie, who risked his life to save the victims of a boating accident.

At first it looked as though the Gray Lords' strategy would pay off for all of us preternaturals, fae or not. There were New York and L.A. restaurants where the rich and famous could be waited on by wood sprites or muryans. Hollywood moguls remade *Peter Pan* using a boy who could actually fly and a real pixie for Tinkerbell—the resulting film made box office records.

But even at the beginning there was trouble. A well-known televangelist seized upon fear of the fae to increase his grip over his flock and their bank accounts. Conservative legislators began making noise about a registration policy. The government agencies began quietly making lists of fae they thought they could use—or who might be used against them, because throughout Europe and parts of Asia, the lesser fae were forced out of hiding by the Gray Lords.

When the Gray Lords told Zee, my old boss, that he had to come out five or six years ago, Zee sold the

garage to me and retired for a few months first. He'd seen what happened to some of the fae who tried to continue their lives as if nothing had happened.

It was all right for a fae to be an entertainer or a tourist attraction, but the brownie kindergarten teacher was quietly pensioned off. No one wanted a fae for a teacher, a mechanic, or a neighbor.

Fae who lived in upscale suburbs had windows broken and rude graffiti painted on their homes. Those who lived in less law-abiding places were mugged and beaten. They couldn't defend themselves for fear of the Gray Lords. Whatever the humans did to them, the Gray Lords would do worse.

The wave of violence prompted the creation of four large reservations for fae. Zee told me that there were fae in the government who saw the reservations as damage control and used fair means and foul to convince the rest of Congress.

If a fae agreed to live on a reservation, he was given a small house and a monthly stipend. Their children (like Zee's son Tad) were given scholarships to good universities where they might become useful members of society . . . if they could find jobs.

The reservations sparked a lot of controversy on both sides. Personally, I thought the Gray Lords and the government might have paid more attention to the innumerable problems of the Native American reservations—but Zee was convinced the reservations were only a first step in the Gray Lords' plans. I knew just enough about them to admit he might be right—but I worried anyway. Whatever ills it created, the reservation system had lessened the growing problems between the human and fae, at least in the US.

People like the visiting pastor, though, were proof that prejudice and hatred were alive and well. Someone behind me muttered that he hoped Pastor Julio recovered before next week, and a round of mumbled agreement cheered me a little.

I've heard of people who've seen angels or felt their presence. I don't know if it is God or one of his angels I sense, but there is a welcoming presence in most churches. As the pastor continued with his fear-driven speech, I could feel that spirit's growing sadness.

The pastor shook my hand as I left the building.

I am not fae, broad though that term is. My magic comes from North America not Europe, and I have no glamour (or need of it) to allow me to blend with the human population. Even so, this man would have hated me had he known what I was.

I smiled at him, thanked him for the service, and wished him well. Love thy enemies, it says in the scriptures. My foster mother always added, "At the very least, you will be polite to them."

chapter 2

Mac the werewolf was sitting on the step by the office door when I drove up Monday morning.

I kept my face impassive and showed none of the surprisingly fierce satisfaction I felt, just handed him a heavy sack of fast-food breakfast sandwiches so I could get my key out and open the door. I'd been raised around wild animals; I knew how to tame them. A hearty welcome would send him off faster than harsh words if I judged him aright, but food was always a good lure.

“Eat,” I told him as I set out for the bathroom to change into work clothes. “Save me one—the rest are for you.”

All but one were gone when I came back.

“Thank you,” he told me, watching my feet.

“You’ll work it off. Come on, help me get the garage doors up.” I led the way through the office and into the garage. “There’s nothing pending today so we can work on my project Bug.”

The Beetle was unprepossessing at the moment, but when I was finished it would be painted, polished, and purring like a kitten. Then I’d sell it for twice what I had put into it and find another car to resurrect. I made almost half my income refurbishing old VW classics.

We’d worked a few hours in companionable silence when he asked to use the phone to make a long-distance call.

“Long as it’s not to China,” I said, coaxing a bolt held in place by thirty-odd years of rust.

I didn’t sneak over to the office door to listen in. I don’t make a practice of eavesdropping on private conversations. I don’t have to. I have very good hearing.

“Hello,” he said. “It’s me.”

My hearing was not so good, however, that I could hear the person he was talking to.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” he said quickly. “Look I can’t talk long.” Pause. “It’s better you don’t know.” Pause. “I know. I saw a news report. I don’t remember anything after we left the dance. I don’t know what killed her or why it didn’t kill me.”

Ah, no, I thought.

“No. Look, it’s better just now if you don’t know where I am.” Pause. “I told you, I don’t know what happened. Just that I didn’t kill her.” Pause. “I don’t know. I just want you to tell Mom and Dad I’m okay. I love them—and I’m looking for the ones who killed her. I have to go now.” Pause. “I love you, too, Joe.”

There were a dozen stories that could account for the half of his conversation that I heard. Two dozen.

But the most prevalent of the cautionary tales werewolves tell each other is what happens the first time a werewolf changes if he doesn’t know what he is.

In my head, I translated Mac’s half of the conversation into a picture of a boy leaving a high school dance to make out with his girlfriend under the full moon, not knowing what he was. New werewolves, unless they have the guidance of a strong dominant, have little control of their wolf form the first few times they change.

If Mac were a new werewolf, it would explain why he didn’t notice that I was different from the humans around. You have to be taught how to use your senses.

Here in the US, most werewolves are brought over by friends or family. There is a support structure to educate the new wolf, to keep him and everyone around him safe—but there are still the occasional attacks by rogue werewolves. One of the duties of a pack is to kill those rogues and find their victims.

Despite the stories, any person bitten by a werewolf doesn't turn into another werewolf. It takes an attack so vicious that the victim lies near death to allow the magic of the wolf to slip past the body's immune system. Such attacks make the newspapers with headlines like "Man Attacked by Rabid Dogs." Usually the victim dies of the wounds or of the Change. If he survives, then he recovers quickly, miraculously—until the next full moon, when he learns that he didn't really survive at all. Not as he had been. Usually a pack will find him before his first change and ease his way into a new way of life. The packs watch the news and read the newspapers to prevent a new wolf from being alone—and to protect their secrets.

Maybe no one had found Mac. Maybe he'd killed his date and when he'd returned to human shape he'd refused to believe what he'd done. What he was. I'd been operating under the impression that he had left his pack, but if he was a new wolf, an untaught wolf, he was even more dangerous.

I broke the rusted-out bolt because I wasn't paying attention. When Mac returned from his phone call, I was working on removing the remnant with an easy out, the world's most misnamed tool—there is nothing easy about it.

I hadn't planned on saying anything to him, but the words came out anyway. "I might know some people who could help you."

"No one can help me," he replied tiredly. Then he smiled, which would have been more convincing if his eyes hadn't been so sad. "I'm all right."

I set down the easy out and looked at him.

"Yes, I think you will be," I said, hoping I wasn't making a mistake by not pushing. I'd have to let Adam know about him before the next full moon. "Just remember, I've been known to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

His mouth quirked up. "Lewis Carroll."

"And they say the youth today aren't being educated," I said. "If you trust me, you might find that my friends can help you more than you believed possible." The phone rang, and I turned back to my work. "Go answer the phone, please, Mac," I told him.

That late in the year it was dark out when we finished at six. He stood and watched me as I locked up, obviously thinking about something. I deliberately fumbled with the lock to give him more time, but he didn't take advantage of it.

"See you tomorrow," he said, instead.

"All right." Then, impulsively, I asked, "Do you have a place to sleep tonight?"

"Sure," he said with a smile, and started off as if he had somewhere to be.

I could have bitten off my tongue because I pushed him into a lie. Once he started lying to me, it would be harder to get him to trust me with the truth. I don't know why it works that way, but it does—at least in my experience.

I kicked myself all the way home, but by the time I had fed Medea and made myself some dinner, I'd figured out a way around it. I'd take him a blanket tomorrow and unlock Stefan's VW bus, which was patiently awaiting brake parts from Oregon. I didn't think Stefan would mind Mac camping out for a night or two.

I called Stefan to make sure, because it's unwise to surprise vampires.

"Sure," he said, without even asking who I wanted to let sleep in his van. "That's all right with me, sweetheart. How long until my bus is roadworthy again?"

For a vampire, Stefan was all right.

"Parts are supposed to be in day after tomorrow," I told him. "I'll call you when they get here. If you want to help, we can get it done in a couple long evenings. Otherwise, it'll take me a day."

"Right," he said, which was apparently good-bye because the next thing I heard was a dial tone.

"Well," I told the cat, "I guess I'm headed out to buy a blanket." It had to be a new blanket; mine would all smell like coyote—and a werewolf who hardly knew me wouldn't be comfortable surrounded by my scent.

I spent several minutes looking for my purse before I realized that I'd left it locked in the safe at work. Happily, my garage was on the way to the store.

Because it was dark, I parked my car on the street behind the garage where there was a streetlight to discourage any enterprising vandals. I walked through the parking lot and passed Stefan's bus, parked next to the office door, and gave it an affectionate pat.

Stefan's bus was painted to match the Mystery Machine, which said a lot about the vampire it belonged to. Stefan told me that he'd briefly considered painting it black a few years ago when he started watching Buffy, but, in the end, he'd decided the vampire slayer was no match for Scooby Doo.

I opened the office door, but didn't bother turning on the lights because I see pretty well in the dark. My purse was where I remembered leaving it. I took it out and relocked the safe. Out of habit, I double-checked the heat to make sure it was set low. Everything had been turned off and put away. All was as it should have been, and I felt the usual sense of satisfaction knowing it was mine—well, mine and the bank's.

I was smiling when I left the office and turned to lock the door behind me. I wasn't moving quietly on purpose, but having been raised by a pack of werewolves makes you learn to be quieter than most.

"Go away." Mac's voice came from the other side of Stefan's bus. He spoke in a low, growling tone I hadn't heard from him before.

I thought he was talking to me and spun toward the sound, but all I saw was Stefan's bus.

Then someone else answered Mac. "Not without you."

The bus had darkened windows. I could see through them well enough to see the side door was open, framing the vague shadowy forms of Mac and one of his visitors. The second one I couldn't see. The wind was right, blowing gently past them to me, and I smelled *two* other people besides Mac: another werewolf and a human. I didn't recognize either one.

Although I know most of Adam's wolves by scent, it wouldn't be odd if he had gotten a new wolf without my hearing about it. But it was the human that told me something was up: I'd never known Adam to send a human out with one of his wolves on business.

Stranger yet was that no one showed any sign they knew I was around. I was quiet, but even so, both werewolves should have heard me. But neither Mac nor the other wolf appeared to notice.

“No,” said Mac, while I hesitated. “No more cages. No more drugs. They weren’t helping.”

Cages? I thought. *Someone had been keeping Mac in a cage?* There was no need for that, not with Adam around. Though some Alphas had to depend upon bars to control new wolves, Adam wasn’t one of them. Nor did Mac’s comments about drugs make sense: there are no drugs that work on werewolves.

“They were, kid. You just need to give them a chance. I promise you we can undo your curse.”

Undo his curse? There was no drug in the world that would undo the Change, and darn few werewolves who considered their state a curse after the first few months. Eventually most of them felt that becoming short-tempered and occasionally furry was a small price to pay for extraordinary strength, speed, and senses—not to mention the fringe benefit of a body immune to disease and old age.

Even if the werewolf belonged to Adam, I doubted he knew that one of his pack was telling wild stories. At least I *hoped* he didn’t know.

Mac seemed to know these two, though, and I was beginning to feel that his story was more complicated than I had thought.

“You talk like you have a choice,” the third man was saying. “But the only choice you have is how you get there.”

These weren’t Adam’s men, I decided. The mention of curses, cages, and drugs made them the enemy. If Mac didn’t want to go with them, I wouldn’t let them take him.

I took a quick glance around, but the streets were empty. After six the warehouse district is pretty dead. I stripped out of my clothes as quietly as I could and shifted into coyote form.

As a human I didn’t stand a chance against a werewolf. The coyote was still not a match—but I was fast, much faster than a real coyote and just a hair quicker than a werewolf.

I jumped onto the railing and vaulted from there to the top of Stefan’s bus for the advantage of the higher position, though I was giving up surprise. No matter how quietly I moved, a werewolf would hear the click of my nails on the metal roof.

I readied myself for launch, but paused. From atop the bus I could see Mac and the two men. None of them seemed to be aware of me. Mac had his back to me, but all the others would have had to do was look up. They didn’t. Something wasn’t right.

Behind the two strangers was a big black SUV, the kind of car you’d expect bad guys to drive.

“I don’t believe there is any way to undo what you did to me,” Mac was saying. “You can’t give me back my life or give Meg back hers. All you can do is leave me alone.”

The human’s hair was in a crew cut, but it was the big black gun I could see peeking out of his shoulder holster that first made me think military. Both of the strangers stood like military men—Adam had the posture, too. Their shoulders were just a little stiff, their backs a little too straight. Maybe they did belong to Adam. The thought made me hesitate. If I hurt one of Adam’s wolves, there would be hell to pay.

“The moon’s coming,” said the longer-haired man, the werewolf. “Can’t you feel it?”

“How’re you planning on surviving the winter, kid?” It was Short-hair again. His voice was kindly. Fatherly.

Patronizing even. “It gets cold ’round December, even in this desert.”

I stifled a growl as I tried to determine the best way to help Mac.

“I’m working here,” Mac said, with a gesture at the garage. “If it gets colder, I think she’ll let me sleep in the garage until I find somewhere to live if I ask her.”

“Ask her?” Short-hair looked sympathetic. “She kept you here for us. She’s one of us, kid. How else do you think we found you?”

Mac smelled of shock first, then defeat. Emotions have a smell, but only in my coyote form is my nose good enough to distinguish more than the strongest feelings. My lips curled back over my teeth—I don’t like liars, especially when they are lying about me.

The werewolf’s voice was dreamy. “When the moon comes, you can’t stop the change.” He swayed back and forth. “Then you can run and drink the fear of your prey before they die beneath your fangs.”

Moonstruck, I thought, shocked out of my anger. If this wolf was so new that he was moonstruck, he certainly wasn’t Adam’s, and whoever had sent him out was an idiot.

“I’m not coming,” said Mac, taking a step away from them. He took another step back—putting his back against the bus. He stiffened, drew in a deep breath, and looked around. “Mercy?”

But neither of the men paid attention when Mac caught my scent. The werewolf was still held in his moon dreams, and the human was drawing his gun.

“We tried to do this the easy way,” he said, and I could smell his pleasure. He might have tried the easy way first, but he liked the hard way better. His gun was the kind you find in military catalogues for wanna-be mercenaries, where what it looks like is at least as important as how well it performs. “Get in the car, kid. I’m packing silver bullets. If I shoot you, you’ll be dead.” He sounded like a thug from a fifties gangster movie; I wondered if it was deliberate.

“If I get in the car, I’ll be dead anyway, won’t I?” Mac said slowly. “Did you kill the other two who were in the cages by me? Is that why they disappeared?”

None of them had noticed that the werewolf was starting to change, not even the werewolf himself. I could see his eyes gleaming brightly in the darkness and smell the musk of wolf and magic. He growled.

“Quiet,” snapped the human, then he looked. He paused, swallowed, and turned his gun, ever so slightly, toward his erstwhile partner.

As a human, the werewolf probably weighed in at about two hundred pounds. Werewolves, fully changed, weigh upward of two hundred and fifty pounds. No, I don’t know where the extra weight comes from. It’s magic, not science. I’m a little large for the average coyote—but that meant that the werewolf was still five times my weight.

I’d been trying to figure out a way to turn my speed to advantage, but when the werewolf, his elongating jaws stretching around sharp, white fangs, focused on Mac and growled again, I knew I’d just run out of time.

I threw myself off the top of the car and onto the werewolf, who was still slowed by his ongoing change. I snapped at him to get his attention and caught his throat, still barren of the thick ruff designed to protect him

from such an attack.

I felt my eyeteeth snag flesh, and blood spurted, pushed by his heart and the increased blood pressure that accompanies the change. It wasn't a mortal wound—werewolves heal too fast—but it should slow him down, giving me a head start while he bound the wound.

Only he didn't stop.

He was hot on my heels as I dashed past Stefan's bus, across the alley that allowed access to my garage bays, and leapt over the chain-link fence surrounding the Sav U More Self-Storage facility. If he'd been in full wolf form, he'd have cleared the fence easier than I did, but he was hampered by his awkward shape and had to stop and tear through the fence instead.

Spurred by hunting-rage, he was faster than I was, even on two legs. He shouldn't have been. I've outrun my share of werewolves, and I knew I was faster than they were; but no one had told him that. He was catching up to me. I jumped back over the fence because it had slowed him down the first time.

If there had been homes nearby, the impatient, frustrated whines the werewolf made as it was forced to stop and rip the chain-link fence again would have had the police on their way, but the nearest residences were blocks away. The thought reminded me that I needed to worry about innocent bystanders as well as Mac and myself.

I reversed my direction, running down the road back toward the garage, intent on leading the werewolf away from town rather than into it. But before I reached the garage, my pursuer tripped and fell to the street.

I thought at first that the change had taken him completely, but no werewolf rose on all fours to continue the chase. I slowed, then stopped where I was and listened, but all I could hear was my heart pounding with fear.

He was almost finished with the change, his face entirely wolf though his fur had not yet begun to cover him. His hands, lying limply on the blacktop, were distorted, too thin, with an inhuman distance between his fingers and his thumb. His nails were thickened and had begun to come to a point at the tips. But he wasn't moving.

Shaking with the need to run, I forced myself to approach him. I waited for him to jump up and grab me the way they always do in the late-night movies, but he just lay there, smelling of blood and adrenaline.

A trail of liquid stretched out behind him as if he were a car that had blown a radiator hose and slung antifreeze all over the road—but the liquid that glistened under the streetlamp was blood.

Only then did it occur to me that I did not hear the thrum of his heart or the whisper of his breath.

I heard a car start up and took my eyes off the werewolf in time to see the black SUV squeal out of the parking lot and turn toward me. The big car wobbled as the driver fought his speed and his turn. His headlights blinded me momentarily—but I'd already seen my escape route and took it blind.

He slowed a minute, as if he considered stopping by the body on the street, but then the V-8 roared, and the SUV picked up speed.

He narrowly avoided hitting the lamppost I'd dodged behind. I couldn't tell if Mac was in the car or not. I watched the SUV's taillights until it turned onto the highway and blended in with the traffic there.

I walked to the werewolf just to be certain—but he was well and truly dead.

I'd never killed anyone before. He shouldn't have been dead. Werewolves are hard to kill. If he had bothered to stanch the wound, or if he hadn't chased me, the wound would have healed before he could bleed out.

The taste of his blood in my mouth made me ill, and I vomited beside the body until the taste of bile overwhelmed anything else. Then I left him lying in the middle of the road and ran back to the garage. I needed to check on Mac before I took on the task of dealing with the dead werewolf.

To my relief, Mac was leaning on Stefan's van when I loped into the parking lot. He held a gun loosely in his hand, the barrel bent.

"Mercy?" he asked me, when I approached, as if he expected me to talk.

I ducked my head once, then darted around the front of the garage where I'd left my clothes. He followed me. But when I shifted back, and he saw that I was naked, he turned his back to let me dress.

I pulled on my clothing quickly—it was cold out. "I'm decent," I told him, and he faced me again.

"You have blood on your chin," he said, in a small voice.

I wiped it off with the bottom of my T-shirt. I wasn't going shopping tonight, so it didn't matter if I got blood on my clothes. *Don't throw up again*, I told myself sternly. *Pretend it was a rabbit*. It hadn't tasted like rabbit.

"What are you?" he asked. "Are you one of theirs? Where is . . . is the wolf?"

"He's dead. We need to talk," I told him, then paused as I collected my scattered thoughts. "But first we need to get the dead werewolf out of the street. And before that, I guess we should call Adam."

I led him back to the office—this time turning on the light. Not that either of us needed it for anything other than comfort.

He put his hand on top of mine when I reached for the phone. "Who is Adam, and why are you calling him?" he asked.

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