

iron kissed

P A T R I C I A B R I G G S



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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

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

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

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

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

—Romantic Time

Praise for
MOON CALLED

“An excellent read with plenty of twists and turns. Her strong and complex characters kept me

entertained from its deceptively innocent beginning to its can't-put-it-down end. Thoroughly satisfying, it left me wanting more.”

—Kim Harrison, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Fistful of Charr*

“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.”

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

—*Romance Junkie*

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

—*SFReview*

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

—*Fantasy & Science Fiction*

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

—*Fresh Fiction*

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

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

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

—*Italian*

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

Ace Books by Patricia Briggs

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WHEN DEMONS WALK

THE HOB'S BARGAIN

DRAGON BONES
DRAGON BLOOD

RAVEN'S SHADOW
RAVEN'S STRIKE

MOON CALLED
BLOOD BOUND
IRON KISSED

iron kissed

PATRICIA BRIGGS



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*For Collin:
Collector of all that is Sharp and Pointy
Dragon Slayer*

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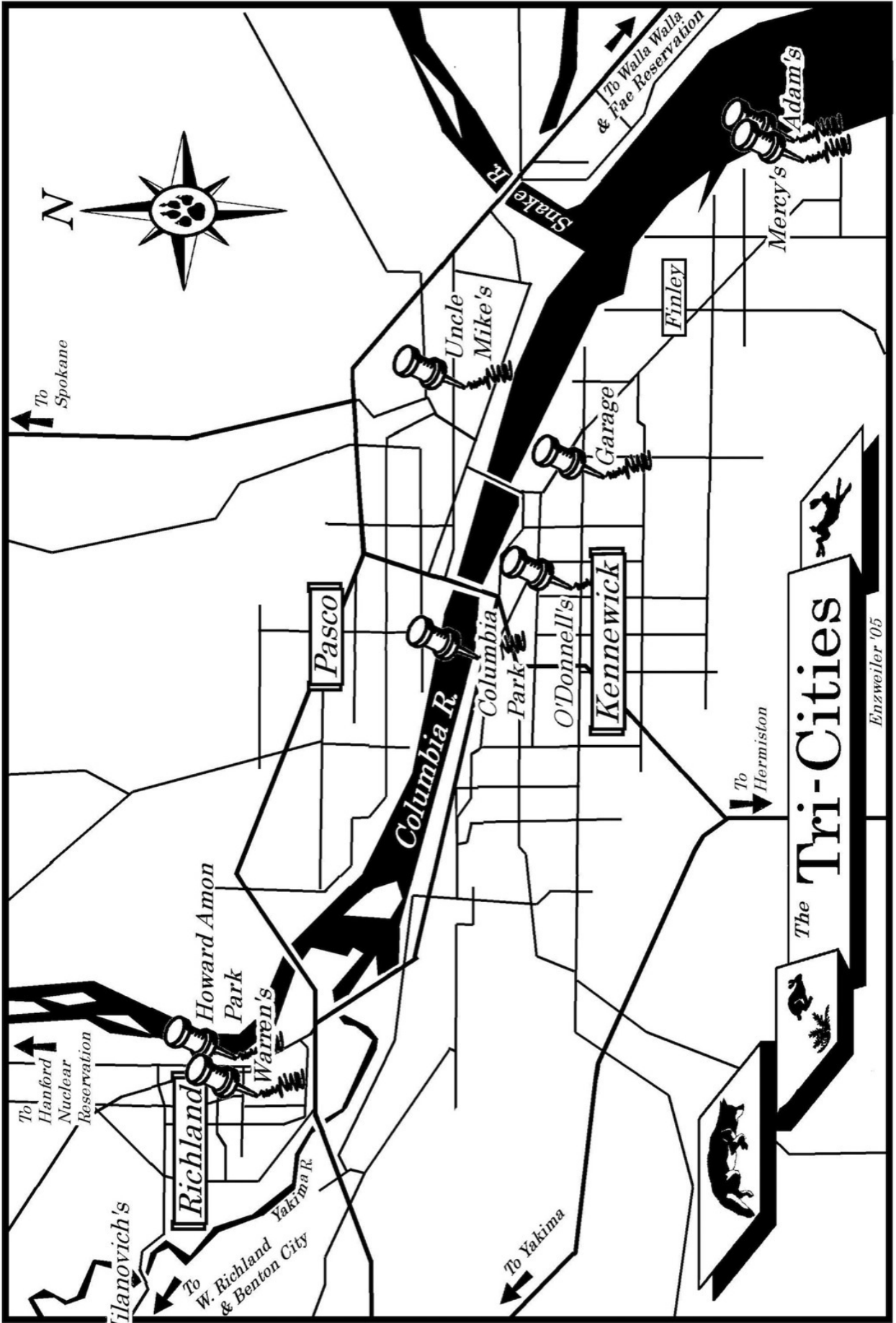
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Despite the valiant efforts (and struggles) of these many talented people, I expect that there are still mistakes herein, and I accept full responsibility for them.



Enzweiler '05

chapter 1

“A cowboy, a lawyer, and a mechanic watched *Queen of the Damned*,” I murmured.

Warren—who had once, a long time ago, been a cowboy—snickered and wiggled his bare feet. “It could be the beginning of either a bad joke or a horror story.”

“No,” said Kyle, the lawyer, whose head was propped up on my thigh. “If you want a horror story, you have to start out with a werewolf, his gorgeous lover, and a walker...”

Warren, the werewolf, laughed and shook his head. “Too confusing. Not many people still remember what a walker is.”

Mostly they just confused us with skinwalkers. Since walkers and skinwalkers are both Native American shapeshifters, I can sort of understand it. Especially since I’m pretty sure the walker label came from some dumb white person who couldn’t tell the difference.

But I’m not a skinwalker. First of all, I’m from the wrong tribe. My father had been Blackfoot, from a northern Montana tribe, and skinwalkers come from the Southwestern tribes, mostly Hopi or Navajo.

Second, skinwalkers have to wear the skin of the animal they change into, usually a coyote or wolf, but they cannot change their eyes. They are evil mages who bring disease and death wherever they go.

When I change into a coyote, I don’t need a skin or—I glanced down at Warren, once a cowboy and now a werewolf—the moon. When I am a coyote, I look just like every other coyote. Pretty much harmless, really, as far down the power scale of the magical critters that lived in the state of Washington as it was possible to get. Which is one of the things that used to help keep me safe. I just wasn’t worth bothering about. That had been changing over the past year. Not that I’d grown any more powerful, but I’d started doing things that drew attention. When the vampires figured out that I’d killed not one, but two of their own...

As if called by my thoughts, a vampire walked across the screen of the TV, a TV so big it wouldn’t have fit in my trailer’s living room. He was shirtless and his pants clung inches below his sexy hipbones.

I resented the shiver of fear that surged through my body instead of lust. Funny how killing them had only made the vampires more frightening. I dreamed of vampires crawling out of holes in the floor and whispering to me from shadows. I dreamed of the feel of a stake sliding through flesh and fangs digging into my arm.

If it had been Warren with his head on my lap instead of Kyle, he would have noticed my reaction. But Warren was stretched out on the floor and firmly focused on the screen.

“You know,” I snuggled deeper into the obscenely comfortable leather couch in the upstairs TV room of Kyle’s huge house and tried to sound casual, “I wondered why Kyle picked this movie. Somehow I didn’t think there would be quite so many bare manly chests in a movie called *Queen of the Damned*.”

Warren snickered, ate a handful of popcorn from the bowl on his flat stomach, then said with more than a hint of a Texas drawl in his rough voice, “You expected more naked women and fewer

more than a hint of a Texas drawl in his rough voice, “You expected more naked women and fewer half-clothed men, did you, Mercy? You oughtta know Kyle better than that.” He laughed quietly again and pointed at the screen. “Hey, I didn’t think vampires were immune to gravity. Have you ever seen one dangle from the ceiling?”

I shook my head and watched as the vampire dropped on top of his two groupie victims. “I wouldn’t put it past them, though. I haven’t seen them eat people yet either. Ick.”

“Shut up. I like this movie.” Kyle, the lawyer, defended his choice. “Lots of pretty boys writhing in sheets and running around with low-cut pants and no shirts. I thought you might enjoy it, too, Mercy.”

I looked down at him—every lovely, solar-flexed inch of him—and thought that he was more interesting than any of the pretty men on the screen, more real.

In appearance he was almost a stereotype of a gay man, from the hair gel in his weekly cut dark brown hair to the tastefully expensive clothes he wore. If people weren’t careful, they missed the sharp intelligence that hid beneath the pretty exterior. Which was, because it was Kyle, the point of the facade.

“This really isn’t bad enough for bad movie night,” Kyle continued, not worried about interrupting the movie: none of us were watching it for its scintillating dialogue. “I’d have gotten *Blade III*, but oddly enough, it was already checked out.”

“Any movie with Wesley Snipes is worth watching, even if you have to turn off the sound.” I twisted and bent so I could snatch a handful of popcorn from Warren’s bowl. He was too thin still; the scars and a limp were reminders that only a month ago he’d been so badly hurt I’d thought he would die. Werewolves are tough, bless ’em, or we’d have lost him to a demon-bearing vampire. That one had been the first vampire I’d killed—with the full knowledge and permission of the local vampire mistress. That she hadn’t actually intended me to kill him didn’t negate that I’d done it with her blessing. She couldn’t do anything to me for his death—and she didn’t know I was responsible for the other.

“As long as he’s not dressed in drag,” drawled Warren.

Kyle snorted agreement. “Wesley Snipes may be a beautiful man, but he makes a butt-ugly woman.”

“Hey,” I objected, pulling my mind back to the conversation. “*To Wong Foo* was a good movie. We’d watched it last week at my house.

A faint buzzing noise drifted up the stairs and Kyle rolled off the couch and onto his feet in a graceful, dancelike move that was wasted on Warren. He was still focused on the movie, though his grin probably wasn’t the reaction the moviemakers had intended for their bloodfest scene. My feelings were much more in line with the desired result. It was all too easy to imagine myself as the victim.

“Brownies are done, my sweets,” said Kyle. “Anyone want something more to drink?”

“No, thank you.” It was just make-believe, I thought, watching the vampire feed.

“Warren?”

His name finally drew Warren’s gaze off the TV screen. “Water would be nice.”

Warren wasn’t as pretty as Kyle, but he had the rugged-man look down pat. He watched Kyle walk down the stairs with hungry eyes.

I smiled to myself. It was good to see Warren happy at last. But the eyes he turned to me as soon as Kyle was out of sight were serious. He used the remote to raise the volume, then sat up and faced me, knowing Kyle wouldn’t hear us over the movie.

“You need to choose,” he told me intently. “Adam or Samuel or neither. But you can’t keep them dangling.”

Adam was the Alpha of the local werewolf pack, my neighbor, and sometimes my date. Samuel was my first love, my first breakfast, and currently my roommate. Just my roommate, though he’d

was my first love, my first heartbreak, and currently my roommate. Just my roommate—though he would like to be more.

I didn't trust either of them. Samuel's easygoing exterior masked a patient and ruthless predator. And Adam...well, Adam just flat scared me. And I was very much afraid that I loved them both.

"I know."

Warren dropped his eyes from mine, a sure sign he was uncomfortable. "I didn't brush my teeth with gunpowder this morning so I could go shooting my mouth off, Mercy, but this is serious. I know it's been difficult, but you can't have two dominant werewolves after the same woman without bloodshed. I don't know any other wolves who could have allowed you as much leeway as they have, but one of them is going to break soon."

My cell phone began playing "The Baby Elephant Walk." I dug it out of my hip pocket and looked at the caller ID.

"I believe you," I told Warren. "I just don't know what to do about any of it." There was more wrong with Samuel than undying love of me, but that was between him and me and none of Warren's business. And Adam...for the first time I wondered if it wouldn't just be easier if I pulled up stakes and moved.

The phone continued to sing.

"It's Zee," I said. "I have to take this."

Zee was my former boss and mentor. He'd taught me how to rebuild an engine from the ground up—and he'd given me the means to kill the vampires responsible for Warren's limp and the nightmares that were leaving fine lines around his eyes. I figured that gave Zee the right to interrupt *Friday Night at the Movies*.

"Just think about it."

I gave him a faint smile and flipped open my phone. "Hey, Zee."

There was a pause on the other end. "Mercedes," he said, and not even his thick German accent could disguise the hesitant tone of his voice. Something was wrong.

"What do you need?" I asked, sitting up straighter and putting my feet on the floor. "Warren's here," I added so Zee would know we had an audience. Werewolves make having a private conversation difficult.

"Would you drive out to the reservation with me?"

He could have been speaking of the Umatilla Reservation, which was a short drive from the Tri-Cities. But it was Zee, so he was talking about the Ronald Wilson Reagan Fae Reservation just this side of Walla Walla, better known around here as Fairyland.

"Now?" I asked.

Besides...I glanced at the vampire on the big-screen TV. They hadn't gotten it quite right, hadn't captured the real *evil*—but it was too close for comfort anyway. Somehow I couldn't work up too much sorrow at missing the rest of the movie—or more conversation about my love life either.

"No," Zee grouched irritably. "Next week. *Jetzt*. Of course, *now*. Where are you? I will pick you up."

"Do you know where Kyle's house is?" I asked.

"Kyle?"

"Warren's boyfriend." Zee knew Warren; I hadn't realized he hadn't met Kyle. "We're out in West Richland."

"Give me the address. I will find it."

Zee's truck purred down the highway even though it was older than I was. Too bad the upholstery wasn't in as good a shape as the engine—I shifted my rump over a few inches to keep a wavyward

spring from digging in too deeply.

The dash lights illuminated the craggy face that Zee presented to the world. His fine white hair was mussed a little, as if he'd been rubbing his hands over it.

Warren hadn't said more about Adam or Samuel after I'd hung up because Kyle, thank goodness had arrived with brownies. It wasn't that I was bothered by Warren's interference—I'd done enough interfering in his love life that I figured he had a right. I just didn't want to think about it anymore.

Zee and I rode mostly in silence from West Richland, all the way past Richland and on through Pasco. I knew better than to try to get something out of the old gremlin until he was ready to talk, so let him alone until he decided to speak—at least after the first ten or fifteen questions he hadn't answered.

"Have you been to the reservation before?" he asked abruptly as we crossed the river just outside Pasco on the highway to Walla Walla.

"No." The fae reservation in Nevada welcomed visitors. They had built a casino and small theme park to attract tourists. The Walla Walla reservation, however, actively discouraged anyone who wasn't fae from entering. I wasn't quite certain if it was the Feds or the fae themselves responsible for the unfriendly reputation.

Zee tapped unhappily on his steering wheel with hands that belonged to a man who'd spent his lifetime repairing cars, tough and scarred with oil so ingrained not even pumice soap would remove it.

They were the right hands for the human that Zee had pretended to be. When the Gray Lords, the powerful and ruthless beings who ruled the fae in secret, forced him to admit what he was to the public a few years ago, a decade or more after the first fae had come out, Zee hadn't bothered to change his outward appearance at all.

I'd known him for a little over ten years, and the sour old man face was the only one I'd ever seen. He had another; I knew that. Most fae lived among humans under their glamour, even if they admitted what they were. People are just not ready to deal with the fae's true appearance. Sure, some of them looked human enough, but they also don't age. The thinning hair and the wrinkled, age-spotted skin were sure signs that Zee wasn't wearing his true face. His sour expression, though, was no disguise.

"Don't eat or drink anything," he said abruptly.

"I've read all the fairy tales," I reminded him. "No food, no drink. No favors. No thanking anyone."

He grunted. "Fairy tales. Damned children's stories."

"I've read Katherine Briggs, too," I offered. "And the original Grimm's." Mostly looking for some mention of a fae who could have been Zee. He wouldn't talk about it, though I think he'd been Someone. So finding out who he'd been had become something of a hobby of mine.

"Better. Better, but not much." He tapped his fingers on the wheel. "Briggs was an archivist. Her books are only as correct as her sources and mostly they are dangerously incomplete. The stories of the Brothers Grimm are more concerned with entertainment than reality. Both of them are *nur Schatten*...only shadows of reality." He looked at me, a quick searching glance. "Uncle Mike suggested you might be useful here. I thought it was a better repayment than might otherwise come your way."

To kill the sorcerer vampire, who was gradually being taken over by the demon that made him a sorcerer, Zee'd risked the wrath of the Gray Lords to loan me a couple of the treasures of the fae. I'd killed that vampire all right, and then I'd killed the one who'd made him. As in the stories, if you use a fairy gift once more than you have permission for, there are consequences.

If I'd known this was going to be repayment for favors rendered, I'd have been more apprehensive from the start; the last time I'd had to repay a favor hadn't ended well.

apprehensive from the start: the last time I'd had to repay a favor hadn't ended well.

"I'll be all right," I told him despite the cold knot of dread in my stomach.

He gave me a sour look. "I had not thought about what it might mean to bring you into the reservation after dark."

"People do go to the reservation," I said, though I wasn't really sure of it.

"Not people like you, and no visitors after dark." He shook his head. "A human comes in and sees what he should, especially by daylight, when their eyes are easier to fool. But you... The Gray Lords have forbidden hunting humans, but we have our share of predators and it is hard to deny nature. Especially when the Gray Lords who make our rules are not here—there is only I. And if you see what you should not, there are those who will say they are only protecting what they have to..."

It was only when he switched into German that I realized that he had been talking to himself for the last half of it. Thanks to Zee, my German was better than two requisite years of college classes had left it, but not good enough to follow him when he got going.

It was after eight at night, but the sun still cast her warm gaze on the trees in the foothills beside us. The larger trees were green still, but some of the smaller bushes were giving hints of the glorious colors of fall.

Near the Tri-Cities, the only trees were in town, where people kept them watered through the brutal summers or along one of the rivers. But as we drove toward Walla Walla, where the Blue Mountains helped wring a little more moisture out of the air, the countryside got slowly greener.

"The worst of it is," Zee said, finally switching to English, "I don't think you'll be able to tell us anything we don't already know."

"About what?"

He gave me a sheepish look, which sat oddly on his face. "*Ja*, I am mixing this up. Let me start again." He drew in a breath and let it out with a sigh. "Within the reservation, we do our own law enforcement—we have that right. We do it quietly because the human world is not ready for the way we have to enforce the law. It is not so easy to imprison one of us, eh?"

"The werewolves have the same problem," I told him.

"*Ja*, I bet." He nodded, a quick jerk of a nod. "So. There have been deaths in the reservation lately. We think it is the same person in each case."

"You're on the reservation police force?" I asked.

He shook his head. "We don't have such a thing. Not as such. But Uncle Mike is on the Council. He thought that your accurate nose might be useful and sent me to get you."

Uncle Mike ran a bar in Pasco that served fae and some of the other magical people who lived in town. That he was powerful, I'd always known—how else could he keep a lid on so many fae? I hadn't realized he was on the Council. Maybe if I'd known there was a council to be on, I might have suspected it.

"Can't one of you do as much as I can?" I held up a hand to keep him from answering right away. "It's not that I mind. I can imagine a lot worse ways to pay off my debt. But why me? Didn't Jack's giant smell the blood of an Englishman for Pete's sake? What about magic? Couldn't one of you find the killer with magic?"

I don't know much about magic, but I would think that a reservation of fae would have someone whose magic would be more useful than my nose.

"Maybe the Gray Lords could make magic do their bidding to show them the guilty party," Zee said. "But we do not want to call their attention—it is too chancy. Outside of the Gray Lords..." He shrugged. "The murderer is proving surprisingly elusive. As far as scent goes, most of us aren't gifted in that way—it was a talent largely given only to the beast-minded. Once they determined it would be safer for all of us to blend in with humans rather than live apart, the Gray Lords killed most of the beasts among us that had survived the coming of Christ and gold fever. There are maybe one or two

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