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Bone Crossed

Patricia Briggs

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Extract

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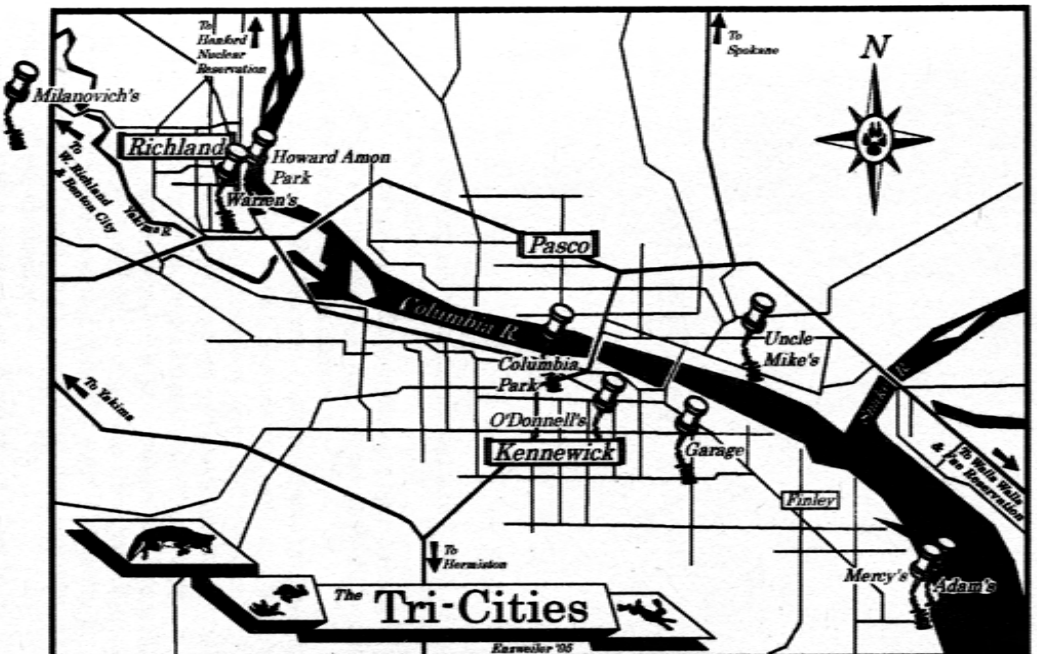
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To Hermiston
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Adam's
The Tri-Cities
Entwistle '96

1

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I wasn't pretty, but my hair was thick and brushed my shoulders. My skin was darker on my arms and face than it was on the rest of my body, but at least, thanks to my Blackfoot father, I'd never be pasty pale.

There were two stitches Samuel had put in the cut on my chin, and the bruise on my shoulder (not extensive damage considering I'd been fighting something that liked to eat children and had knocked out a werewolf). The dark thread looked from some angles like the legs of a shiny black spider. Aside from that slight damage, there was nothing wrong with my body. Karate and mechanicking kept me in good shape.

My soul was a lot more battered than my body, but I couldn't see it in the mirror. Hopefully no one else could either. It was that invisible damage that left me afraid to leave the bathroom and face Adam, who waited in my bedroom. Though I knew with absolute certainty that Adam wouldn't do anything I didn't want him to do—and had wanted him to do for a long time.

I could ask him to leave. To give me more time. I stared at the woman in the mirror, but all she did was stare back.

I'd killed the man who'd raped me. Was I going to let him have this last victory? Let him destroy me as he'd intended?

"Mercy?" Adam didn't have to raise his voice. He knew I could hear him.

"Careful," I told him as I left off mirror-gazing and began

pulling on clean underwear and an old T-shirt. "I have an ancient walking stick, and I know how to use it."

"The walking stick is lying across your bed," he said.

When I came out of the bathroom, Adam was lying across my bed, too.

He wasn't tall, but he didn't need height to add to the impression he made. Wide cheekbones and a full, soft mouth topping a stubborn jaw combined to give him movie-star beauty. When his eyes were open, they were a dark chocolate only a shade lighter than mine. His body was almost as pretty as his face—though I knew he didn't think of himself that way. He kept himself in shape because he was Alpha and his body was a tool he used to keep his pack safe. He'd been a soldier before he was Changed, and the military training was still there in the way he moved and the way he took charge.

"When Samuel gets back from the hospital, he's going to spend the rest of the night at my house," Adam said without opening his eyes. Samuel was my roommate, a doctor, and a lone wolf. Adam's house was behind mine, with about ten acres between them—three were mine and the rest were Adam's. "We have time to talk."

"You look horrible," I said, not quite truthfully. He did look tired, with dark circles under his eyes, but nothing short of mutilation could make him look terrible. "Don't they have beds in D.C.?"

He'd had to go to Washington (the capital—we were in the state) this weekend to clean up a little mess that was sort of my fault. Of course if he hadn't ripped Tim's corpse into bits on camera, and if the resultant DVD hadn't landed on a senator's desk, there wouldn't have been a problem. So it was partially his fault, too.

Mostly it was Tim's fault, and whoever had made a copy of the DVD and mailed it off. I'd taken care of Tim. Bran,

the head-honcho werewolf above all of the other head-honcho werewolves, was apparently taking care of the other person. Last year, I would have expected to hear about a funeral. This year, with the werewolves barely having admitted their existence to the world, Bran would probably be more circumspect. Whatever that would mean.

Adam opened his eyes and looked at me. In the dimness of the room (he'd only turned on the small light on the little table by my bed), his eyes looked black. There was a bleakness in his face that hadn't been there before, and I knew it was because of me. Because he hadn't been able to keep me safe—and people like Adam take that pretty seriously.

Personally, I figured it was up to me to keep me safe. Sometimes it might mean calling in friends, but it was *my* responsibility. Still, he saw it as a failure.

"So have you made up your mind?" he asked.

Would I accept him as my mate, he meant. The question had been up in the air too long, and it was affecting his ability to keep his pack under control. Ironically, what happened with Tim had resolved the issue that had kept me from accepting Adam for months. I figured if I could fight back against the fairy magic potion Tim had fed me, a little Alpha mojo wasn't going to turn me into a docile slave either.

Maybe I should have thanked him before I hit him with the tire iron.

Adam isn't Tim, I told myself. I thought of Adam's rage when he'd broken down the door to my garage, of his despair when he persuaded me to drink out of that damned fae goblet again. In addition to robbing me of my will, the goblet also had the power to heal—and I'd needed a lot of healing by that point. It had worked, but Adam had felt like he was betraying me, believed I'd hate him for it. But he'd done it anyway. I figured it was because he wasn't lying when he

said he loved me. When I'd hidden in shame—I put that down to the fairy brew, because I knew . . . I *knew* I had nothing to be ashamed about—he'd pulled my coyote self out from under his bed, bitten my nose for being foolish, and held me all night long. Then he'd surrounded me with his pack and safety whether I needed it or not.

Tim was dead. And he'd always been a loser. I'd be damned if I was going to be the victim of a loser—or anyone else.

"Mercy?" Adam stayed on his back on my bed, taking the position of vulnerability.

In answer, I pulled the T-shirt over my head and dropped it on the floor.

Adam was off the bed faster than I'd ever seen him move, bringing the comforter with him. He had it wrapped around me before I could blink . . . and then I was pressed tightly against him, my bare breasts resting against his chest. He'd tipped his head to the side so my face was pressed against his jaw and cheek.

"I meant to get the blanket between us," he said tightly. His heart pounded against mine, and his arms were shaking and rock hard. "I didn't mean you had to sleep with me right now—a simple 'yes' would have done."

I knew he was aroused—even a regular person without a coyote nose would have known it. I slid my hands up from his hips to his hard belly and up his ribs and listened to his heart rate pick up even further and a light sweat broke out on his jaw under my slow caress. I could feel the muscles in his cheek move as he clenched his teeth, felt the heat that flushed his skin. I blew in his ear, and he jumped away from me as though I'd stuck him with a cattle prod.

Streaks of amber lit his eyes, and his lips were fuller, redder. I dropped the comforter on top of my shirt.

"Damn it, Mercy." He didn't like to swear in front of women. I always counted it a personal triumph when I could

make him do it. "It hasn't even been a week since you were raped. I'm not sleeping with you until you've talked to someone, a counselor, a psychologist."

"I'm fine," I said, though in fact, once distance had released me from the safety he brought with him, I was aware of a sick churning in my stomach.

Adam turned so he was facing the window, his back to me. "No, you're not. Remember, you can't lie to a wolf, love." He let out a breath of air too forcefully to be a sigh. He rubbed his hair briskly, trying to get rid of excess energy. Obligingly, it stuck up in small curls that he usually kept too short to look anything but neat and well-groomed. "Who am I talking about?" he asked, though I didn't think the question was directed at me. "This is Mercy. Getting you to talk about anything personal is like pulling teeth at the best of times. Getting you to talk to a stranger . . ."

I hadn't thought myself particularly closemouthed. Actually, I'd been accused of having a smart mouth. Samuel had told me more than once that I'd probably live longer if I learned to bite my tongue occasionally.

So I waited, without saying a word, for Adam to decide what he wanted to do.

The room wasn't cold, but I was shivering a little anyway —it must be nerves. If Adam didn't hurry up and do something, though, I was going to be throwing up in the bathroom. I'd spent too much time worshipping the porcelain goddess since Tim had made me overdose on fairy juice to view the thought with any equanimity.

He wasn't watching me, but he didn't need to be. Emotions have a scent. He swung back to look at me with a frown. He took in my state with one comprehensive look.

He swore and strode back to me, wrapping me in his arms. He pulled me tight against him, making low, soothing sounds in the back of his throat. He rocked me gently.

I took a deep breath of Adam-scented air and tried to think. Normally, this wouldn't be difficult for me. But normally I wasn't all but naked in the arms of the hottest man I knew.

I'd misunderstood what he'd wanted.

To double-check, I cleared my throat. "When you said you needed my answer to your claim today—you weren't actually asking for sex?"

His body jerked involuntarily as he laughed, rubbing his jaw against my face. "So, you think I'm the kind of person who'd do something like that? After what happened just last week?"

"I thought that's what it took," I mumbled, feeling my cheeks heat up.

"*How* long did you spend in the Marrok's pack?"

He knew how long. He was just making me feel stupid. "Mating wasn't something everyone talked to me about," I told him defensively. "Just Samuel . . ."

Adam laughed again, one of his hands on my shoulder, the other moving in a light caress on my butt, which should have tickled but didn't. "I just bet *he* was telling you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth right then."

I tightened my grip on him—somehow my hands had landed on his lower back. "Probably not. So all you needed was my agreement?"

He grunted. "It won't help with the pack, not until it's for real. But with Samuel out of the way, I thought you'd be able to decide if you were interested or not. If you weren't interested, I could regroup. If you agreed to be mine, I can wait until Hell freezes over for you."

His words sounded reasonable, but his scent told me something else. It told me that my reasonable tones had soothed his worries, and his mind was now on something other than our discussion.

Fair enough. Being this close to him, feeling his heat against me, feeling his heartbeat race because he wanted me . . . someone told me that knowing someone desires you is the greatest aphrodisiac. It was certainly true for me.

"Of course," he said, still in that curiously calm voice, "waiting is much easier in abstract than reality. I need you to tell me to back off, all right?"

"Mmm," I said. He brought a cleanness with him that washed the feel of Tim off my skin far better than the shower did—but only when he touched me.

"Mercy."

I lowered my hands, sliding them beneath the waistline of his jeans and digging my nails lightly into his skin.

He growled something more, but neither of us was listening. He turned his head and tilted it. I expected serious and got playful as he nipped at my lower lip. The roughness of his teeth sent tingles to my fingertips, zings past my knees and down to my toes. Potent things, Adam's teeth.

I brought my suddenly shaking hands around to worry at the button on his jeans, and Adam jerked his head up and put a staying hand on mine.

Then I heard it, too.

"German car," he said.

I sighed, slumping against him. "Swedish," I corrected him. "Four-year-old Volvo station wagon. Gray."

He looked at me in surprise that quickly turned to comprehension. "You know the car."

I moaned and tried to hide in his shoulder. "Damn, damn. It was the newspapers."

"Who is it, Mercy?"

Gravel shooshed, and headlights flashed on my window as the car turned into the driveway. "My mom," I told him. "Her sense of timing is unreal. I should have realized she would read about . . . about *it.*" I didn't want to name what

had happened to me, what I'd done to Tim, out loud. Not while I was mostly naked with Adam, anyway.

"You didn't call her."

I shook my head. I should have, I knew it. But it had been one of those things I just couldn't face.

He was smiling now. "You get dressed. I'll go stall her until you're ready to come out."

"There is *no way* I'll ever be ready for this," I told him.

He sobered, put his face next to mine, and rested his forehead against me. "Mercy. It will be all right."

Then he left, shutting the door to my bedroom as my doorbell rang the first time. It rang twice more before he opened the outside door, and he wasn't being slow.

I grabbed clothes and desperately tried to remember if we'd done the dishes from dinner. It was my turn. If it had been Samuel's turn, I wouldn't have had to worry. It was stupid. I knew that she couldn't care less about the dishes —but it gave me something to do other than panic.

I'd never even considered calling her. Maybe in ten years I might feel ready.

I pulled on my pants and left my feet bare while I searched frantically for a bra.

"She knows you're here," Adam said on the other side of the door—as if he were leaning against it. "She'll be out in a minute."

"I don't know who you think you are"—my mother's voice was low and dangerous—"but if you don't get out of my way right this instant, it won't matter."

Adam was the Alpha werewolf in charge of the local pack. He was tough. He could be mean when he had to—and he wouldn't stand a chance against my mom.

"Bra, bra, bra," I chanted as I pulled one out of the dirty-clothes basket and hooked it. I pulled the thing around so fast I wouldn't be surprised to discover I'd given myself a

rug burn. "Shirt, shirt." I ransacked my drawers and found and discarded two shirts. "Clean shirt, clean shirt."

"Mercy?" called Adam, sounding a little desperate—how well I knew that feeling.

"Mom, leave him alone!" I said. "I'll be right out."

Frustrated, I stared at my room. I had to have a clean shirt somewhere. I had just been wearing one—but it had disappeared in my search for a bra. Finally, I pulled on a shirt that said *1984*: GOVERNMENT FOR DUMMIES on the back. It was clean, or at least it didn't stink too badly. The oil smudge on the shoulder looked permanent.

I took a deep breath and opened the door. I had to duck around Adam, who was leaning against the door frame.

"Hey, Mom," I said breezily. "I see you've met my—" What? Mate? I didn't think that was something my mother needed to hear. "I see you've met Adam."

"Mercedes Athena Thompson," snapped my mother. "Explain to me why I had to learn about what happened to you from a newspaper?"

I'd been avoiding meeting her gaze, but once she three-named me, I had no choice.

My mother is five-foot-nothing. She's only seventeen years older than me, which means she's not yet fifty and looks thirty. She can still wear the belt buckles she won barrel racing on their original belts. She's usually blonde—I'm pretty sure it's her natural color—but the shade changes from year to year. This year it was strawberry gold. Her eyes are big and blue and innocent-looking, her nose slightly tip-tilted, and her mouth full and round.

With strangers, she sometimes plays a dumb blonde, batting her eyelashes and speaking in a breathy voice that anyone who watched old movies would recognize from *Some Like It Hot* or *Bus Stop*. My mother has never, to my knowledge, changed her own flat tire.

If the sharp anger in her voice hadn't been a cover for the bruised look in her eyes, I could have responded in kind. Instead, I shrugged.

"I don't know, Mom. After it happened . . . I stayed coyote for a couple of days." I had a half-hysterical vision of calling her, and saying, *"By the way, Mom, guess what happened to me today . . ."*

She looked me in the eyes, and I thought she saw more than I wanted her to. "Are you all right?"

I started to say yes, but a lifetime of living with creatures who could smell a lie had left me with a habit of honesty. "Mostly," I said, compromising. "It helps that he's dead." It was humiliating that my chest was getting tight. I'd given myself all the self-pity time I would allow.

Mom could cuddle her children like any of the best of parents, but I should have trusted her more. She knew all about the importance of standing on your own two feet. Her right hand was balled into a white-knuckled fist, but when she spoke, her voice was brisk.

"All right," she said, as if we'd covered everything she was going to ask. I knew better, but I also knew it would be later and private.

She turned her angelic blue eyes on Adam. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my daughter's house at eleven at night?"

"I'm not sixteen," I said in a voice even I could tell was sulky. "I can even have a man stay all night if I want to."

Mom and Adam both ignored me.

Adam had remained in position against my bedroom door frame, his body held a little more casually than usual. I thought he was trying to give my mother the impression that he was at home here: someone who had authority to keep her out of my room. He lifted an eyebrow and showed not even a touch of the panic I'd heard in his voice earlier.

"I'm Adam Hauptman. I live on the other side of her back fence."

She scowled at him. "The Alpha? The divorced man with the teenage daughter?"

He gave her one of his sudden smiles, and I knew my mom had made yet another conquest: she's pretty cute when she scowls, and Adam didn't know many people gutsy enough to scowl at him. I had a sudden revelation. I'd been making a tactical error for the past few years if I'd really wanted him to quit flirting with me. I should have smiled and smirked and batted my eyelashes at him. Obviously, a woman snarling at him was something he enjoyed. He was too busy looking at my mom's scowl to see mine.

"That's right, ma'am." Adam quit leaning against the door and took a couple of steps into the room. "Good to meet you at last, Margi. Mercy speaks of you often."

I didn't know what my mother would have said to that, doubtless something polite. But with a popping sound like eggs cracking on a cement floor, something appeared between Mom and Adam, a foot or so above the carpet. It was a human-sized something, black and crunchy. It dropped to the floor, reeking of char, old blood, and rotten corpses.

I stared at it for too long, my eyes failing to find a pattern that agreed with what my nose told me. Even knowing that only a few things could just appear in my living room without using the door couldn't make me acknowledge what it was. It was the green shirt, torn and stained, with the hindquarters of a familiar Great Dane still visible, that forced me to admit that this black and shrunken thing was Stefan.

I dropped to my knees beside him and reached out before snatching my hand back, afraid to damage him more. He was obviously dead, but since he was a vampire, that wasn't as hopeless a thing as it might have been.

"Stefan?" I said.

I wasn't the only one who jumped when he grabbed my wrist. The skin on his hand was dry and crackled disconcertingly against my skin.

Stefan has been my friend since the first day I moved here to the Tri-Cities. He is charming, funny, and generous—if given to miscalculations on how forgiving I might be about innocent people he killed trying to protect me.

It was still all I could do not to jerk away and rub off the feel of his brittle skin on my arm. Ick. Ick. Ick. And I had the horrible feeling that it was hurting him to hold on to me, that at any moment his skin would crack and fall off.

His eyes opened to slits, his irises crimson instead of brown. His mouth opened and shut twice without making any sound. Then his hand tightened on mine until I couldn't have pulled free if I had wanted to. He sucked in a breath of air so he could talk, but he couldn't do it quite right, and I heard air hissing out of the side of his ribs, where it had no business escaping from.

"She knows." His voice didn't sound like his at all. It was rough and dry. As he pulled my hand slowly toward his face, with the last of the air from that breath, he said intently, *"Run."* And with those words, the person who was my friend disappeared under the fierce hunger in his face.

Looking into his mad eyes, I thought his advice was worth taking—too bad I wasn't going to be able to break free to follow it. He was slow, but he had me, and I wasn't a werewolf or vampire with supernatural strength to help myself out.

I heard the distinctive *clack* of a bullet chambering, and a quick glance showed me my mother with a wicked-looking Glock out and pointed at Stefan. It was pink and black—trust my mom to have a Barbie gun, cute but deadly.

"It's all right," I told her hastily—my mother wouldn't hesitate to fire if she thought he was going to hurt me.

Normally I wouldn't worry about someone shooting at Stefan, vampires not being that vulnerable to guns, but he was in bad shape. "He's on our side." Hard to sound convincing when he was pulling me toward him, but I did my best.

Adam grabbed Stefan's wrist and held it, so instead of Stefan pulling me toward him, the vampire was slowly raising his own head off the floor. As he came closer to my arm, Stefan opened his mouth and scraps of burnt skin fell on my tan carpet. His fangs were white and lethal-looking, and also a lot bigger than I remembered them being.

My breathing picked up, but I didn't jerk back and whine, "Get it off! Get it off!"—full points to me. Instead, I leaned over Stefan and put my head into Adam's shoulder. It put my neck at risk, but the smell of werewolf and Adam helped mask the stench of what had been done to Stefan. If Stefan needed blood to survive, I'd donate to him.

"It's all right, Adam," I said. "Let him go."

"Don't put down the gun," Adam told my mother. "Mercy, if this doesn't work, you call my house and tell Darryl to collect whoever is there and bring them here."

And, in an act of bravery that was completely in character, Adam put his wrist in front of Stefan's face. The vampire didn't appear to notice, still pulling himself up by his grip on my arm. He wasn't breathing, so he couldn't scent Adam, and I didn't think he was focusing any too well either.

I should have tried to stop Adam—I'd fed Stefan before without any ill effects that I knew of, and I was *pretty* sure that Stefan cared whether I lived or died. I wasn't so sure how he felt about Adam. But I was remembering Stefan telling me that there "shouldn't" be any problems because it had only been the once, and I'd met a few of Stefan's band of sheep—the people who served as his breakfast, dinner, and lunch. They were all completely devoted to him. Don't get

me wrong, he's a great guy for a vampire—but I somehow doubted that those people, mostly women, could live together devoted to one man without some sort of vampire mesmerism at work. And I'd sort of had my fill of magical compulsion for the year.

Any protest I made to Adam would be an exercise in futility anyway. He was feeling especially protective of me at that moment—and all I would do was stir up tempers: his, mine, and my mother's.

Adam pressed his wrist against Stefan's mouth, and the vampire paused his incremental closing of the distance between my arm and his fangs. He seemed confused for a moment—then he drew air in through his nose.

Stefan's teeth sank into Adam's wrist, his free hand shot up to grab Adam's arm, and his eyes closed—all so fast it looked like the motion of a cheaply drawn cartoon.

Adam sucked in his breath, but I couldn't tell if it was because it hurt him or because it felt good. When Stefan had fed from me, I'd been in pretty rough shape. I didn't remember much about it.

It was strangely intimate, Stefan holding me as he drank from Adam's wrist, and Adam leaning harder into me as Stefan fed. Intimate with an audience. I turned my head to see that my mother still held her gun in a steady two-handed grip, pointed at Stefan's head. Her face as calm as if she saw burnt bodies appear out of nowhere, then rise from the dead to sink fangs into whoever was closest to them all the time, though I knew that wasn't true. I wasn't sure she'd ever even seen one of the werewolves in wolf form.

"Mom," I said, "the vampire is Stefan, he's a friend of mine."

"I should put the gun away? Are you sure? He doesn't look like a friend."

I looked at Stefan, who was looking better, though I still

wouldn't have recognized him without my nose. "Truthfully, I'm not sure how much good it would do anyway. Bullets, if they are silver, may work on werewolves, but I don't think any bullets do much to vampires."

She tucked the Glock, hot, into the holster inside the waistline of the back of her jeans. "So what *do* you do to vampires?"

Someone knocked on the door. I hadn't heard anyone drive up, but I'd been a little distracted.

"Don't let them in your home in the first place," suggested Adam.

Mom, who'd been on the way to the door, stopped. "Is this likely to be a vampire?"

"Better let me get it," I said. I wiggled my arm, and Stefan released me and took a better grip on Adam. "Are you all right, Adam?"

"He's too weak to feed fast," Adam commented. "I'm good for a while yet. If you'll get my phone out for me and hit the speed dial, I'll call for some more wolves, though. I doubt one feeding will be enough."

With Mom watching, I behaved myself while I dug his phone out of the holder on his belt. Instead of taking the time to sort through his contacts, I just punched in his house number and handed him the ringing phone. Whoever was outside was growing impatient.

I straightened my shirt and took a quick look at myself to make sure there wasn't anything that said, "Hey, I have a vampire in my house."

I was going to have a bruise on my forearm, but it wasn't too noticeable yet. I slipped past Mom and opened the door about six inches.

The woman standing on the porch didn't look familiar. She was about my height and age. Her dark hair had been highlighted with a lighter shade (or her light brown hair

had been striped with a darker color). She wore so much foundation that I could smell it over the perfume that a purely human nose might find light and attractive. Her grooming was immaculate, like a purebred dog ready to be shown—or a very expensive call girl.

Not a person you'd expect to find on the porch of an old mobile home out in the boonies of Eastern Washington at night.

"Mercy?"

If she hadn't spoken, I'd never have recognized her because my nose was full of perfume and she didn't look anything like the girl I'd gone to college with. "Amber?"

Amber had been my college roommate Charla's best friend. She'd been studying to be a veterinarian, but I'd heard she'd dropped out her first year in vet school. I hadn't heard from her since I'd graduated.

When I'd last seen Amber she'd been wearing a Mohawk and had had a ring in her nose (which had been bigger) and a small tattooed hummingbird at the corner of her eye. She and Charla had been best friends in high school. Though it had been Charla who had decided they shouldn't room together, Amber had always blamed me for it. We had been acquaintances rather than friends.

Amber laughed, doubtless at the bewildered look on my face. There was something brittle in the sound, not that I was in any position to be picky. My manner was stiffer than usual, too. I had a vampire feeding from a werewolf behind me; I wondered what *she* was hiding.

"It's been a long time," she said, after a short, awkward silence.

I joined her out on the porch and shut the door behind me, trying not to look like I was keeping her out. "What brings you here?"

She folded her arms over her chest and turned to gaze at

my scraggly-looking field where a rusty VW Rabbit rested on three tires. From where we stood, the graffiti, the missing door, and the cracked windshield weren't visible, but it looked junky anyway. The old wreck was a joke between Adam and me, and I wasn't going to apologize for it.

"I read about you in the paper," she said.

"You live in the Tri-Cities?"

She shook her head. "Spokane. It made CNN, too, didn't you know? The fae, werewolves, death . . . how could they resist?" For a moment there was a flash of humor in her voice, though her face stayed disconcertingly blank.

Lovely. The whole world knew I'd been raped. Yeah, that might have struck me as funny, too—if I'd been Lucrezia Borgia. There were a lot of reasons I'd never bothered to keep in contact with Amber.

She hadn't driven over from Spokane to hunt me down after ten years and tell me she'd read about the attack, either. "So you read about me and decided it might be fun to tell me that the story about how I killed my rapist was all over the country? You drove a hundred and fifty miles for that?"

"Obviously not." She turned back to face me, and the awkward stranger had been replaced by the polished pro who was even more a stranger to me. "Look. Do you remember when we took a day trip to Portland to see that play? We went to the bar afterward, and you told us about the ghost in the ladies' room."

"I was drunk," I told her—which was true enough. "I think I told you I was raised by werewolves, too."

"Yes," she said with sudden intentness. "I thought you were just telling stories, but now we all know that werewolves are real, just like the fae. And you're dating one."

That would have come out in the newspaper story, I thought. Double yippee. There was a time when I tried to stay out of the spotlight because it was safer. It was still

safer, but I hadn't been doing so good at stealthy living the past year.

Unaffected by my inner dialogue, Amber kept talking. "So I thought if you were dating one now, you had probably been telling the truth then. And if you told the truth about the werewolves, then you were probably telling the truth about seeing ghosts, too."

Anyone else would have forgotten about that, but Amber had a mind like a steel trap. She remembered everything. It was after that trip that I quit drinking alcohol. People who know other people's secrets can't afford to do things that impair their ability to control their mouths.

"My house is haunted," she said.

I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I took a step toward Amber and turned a little. I still couldn't see anything out there, but with Amber a little downwind so her perfume didn't ruin my nose, I could smell it: vampire.

"And you want *me* to do something about it?" I asked. "You need to call a priest." Amber was Catholic.

"No one believes me," she said starkly. "My husband thinks I'm crazy." The porch light caught her eyes, just for a minute, and I could see that her pupils were dilated. I wondered if it was just the darkness of the night or if she was on something.

She was making me uneasy, but I was pretty sure it was just the weirdness of seeing Amber, queen of the unconventional, dressed up like a rich man's mistress. There was something soft and helpless about her now that made me think *prey*, while the Amber I'd known would have taken a baseball bat to anyone who annoyed her. She wouldn't have been afraid of a ghost.

Of course, my unease could have been caused by the vampire lurking in the shadows or by the one in my home.

"Look," I said. Stefan and what had been done to him

were more important to me than what had happened to Amber, or anything she might want from me. "I can't get away right now—I have company. Why don't you give me your phone number, and I'll call you as soon as things calm down."

She fumbled her purse open and handed me a card. It was printed on expensive high-cotton paper, but all that was on it was her first name and a phone number.

"Thank you." She sounded relieved, the tension flowing from her shoulders. She gave me a small smile. "I'm sorry that you were attacked—but I'm not surprised you got your own back. You were always rather good at that." Without waiting for me to answer, she walked down the steps and got into her car, a newer Miata convertible with the soft top up. She backed out of the driveway without looking at me again and sped off into the night.

I wished she hadn't been wearing perfume. She'd been upset about something—she'd always been a terrible liar. But the timing was just a little too convenient: Stefan arrives, tells me to run, and Amber arrives with a place for me to run to.

I knew what Stefan had been telling me to run from, and it wasn't him. "She knows," he'd said.

"She" was Marsilia, the Mistress of the Tri-Cities' vampires. She'd sent me out hunting a vampire who'd been on a killing spree that risked her seethe. She'd figured I was her best chance to find him because I can sense ghosts that other people don't see, and vampire lairs tend to attract ghosts.

She hadn't thought I would really be able to kill him. When I did, it made her very unhappy. The vamp I'd killed had been special, more powerful than the others because he'd been demon-ridden. That the demon had made him crazy and he'd been killing humans left and right hadn't bothered her except that it might have exposed the vampires to the

human world. He'd gone out of control when he'd grown more powerful than his maker, but Marsilia believed that she could have fixed that, taken control of him. She used me to find him—she'd been sure he'd kill me.

And she'd have been right if I hadn't had friends.

Since she'd sent me after him, she couldn't seek retribution without risking losing control of her seethe. Vampires take things like that very seriously.

I'd have been safe if it hadn't been for the second vampire.

Andre had been Marsilia's left hand where Stefan was her right. He'd also been responsible for creating the demon-possessing vampire who'd killed more people than I could count on both hands. And Andre and Marsilia had intended to make more. One had been more than enough for me. So I'd killed Andre, knowing that it meant my death.

But Stefan had hidden my crime. Hidden it with the deaths of two innocent people whose only crimes had been that they were Andre's victims. He'd saved me, but the cost had been too high. Their deaths had bought me two months.

Marsilia knew. She'd have never hurt Stefan so badly for anything else.

She'd tortured and starved him and let him free to come to me. I looked down at the red marks Stefan had put on my arm—if he'd killed me, no blame would have fallen on her.

There was a noise, and I looked up. Darryl and Peter were walking past the battered hulk of the Rabbit.

Darryl was tall, athletic, and Adam's second. He got his dark skin from his African father and his eyes from his Chinese mother. His perfect features came from the happy combination of very different genes, but the grace of his stride came from the accident that had turned him into a werewolf. He liked nice clothes, and the crisp cotton shirt he wore probably cost more than I made in a week.

I didn't know how old he was, but I was pretty sure he wasn't much older than he looked. There's something about the older wolves, an air they carry of being not quite of this age of cars, cell phones, and TVs, that Darryl didn't have.

Peter was old enough to have been in the cavalry, but here and now he worked as a plumber. He was good at his job, and he had a half dozen people (human) on his payroll. But he walked to the right and behind Darryl because Darryl was very dominant and Peter was one of the few submissives in Adam's pack.

Darryl stopped at the foot of the porch. He didn't like me much most of the time. I'd finally decided it was snobbery—he was a wolf and I a coyote. He was a Ph.D. working in a high-priced think tank, and I was a mechanic with dirt under my fingernails.

And worst of all, if I was Adam's mate, he had to follow my orders. Sometimes the chauvinism that permeates the rules by which the werewolves operate works backward. No matter how submissive the mate of the Alpha is, her commands are second only to his.

When he didn't say anything, I just opened the door and led Adam's two wolves into my home.