

Iron Kissed

Patricia Briggs

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'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 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; that 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 heartbreak, and currently my roommate. Just my roommate – though he'd 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 wayward 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 I 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.

'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 ways 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 cold iron. There are maybe one or two here with the ability to sniff people out, but they are so powerless that they cannot be trusted.'

'What do you mean?'

He gave me a grim look. 'Our ways are not yours. If one has no power to protect himself, he cannot afford to offend anyone. If the murderer is powerful or well connected, none of the fae who could scent him would be willing to accuse him.'

He smiled, a sour little quirk of his lips. 'We may not be able to lie . . . but truth and honesty are rather different.'

I'd been raised by werewolves who could, mostly, smell a lie at a hundred yards. I knew all about the difference between truth and honesty.

Something about what he said . . . 'Uhm. I'm not powerful. What happens if I say something to offend?'

He smiled. 'You will be here as my guest. It might not keep you safe if you see too much – as our laws are clear on how to deal with mortals who stray Underhill and see more than they ought. That you were invited by the Council, knowing what you are – and that you are not quite human – should provide some immunity. But anyone who is offended when you speak the truth must, by our guesting laws, come after me rather than you. And *I* can protect myself.'

I believed it. Zee calls himself a gremlin, which is probably more accurate than not – except that the word *gremlin* is a lot newer than Zee. He is one of the few kinds of fae with an affinity for iron, which gives him all sorts of advantages over the other fae. Iron is fatal to most of them.

There wasn't any sign that marked the well-maintained county road where we turned off the highway. The road wove through small, wooded hills that reminded me more of

Montana than the barren, cheat-grass and sagebrush covered land around the Tri-Cities.

We turned a corner, drove through a patch of thick-growing poplar, and emerged with twin walls of cinnamon-colored concrete block rising on either side of us, sixteen feet tall with concertina wire along the top to make guests feel even more welcome.

'It looks like a prison,' I said. The combination of narrow road and tall walls made me claustrophobic.

'Yes,' agreed Zee a bit grimly. 'I forgot to ask, do you have your driver's license with you?'

'Yes.'

'Good. I want you to remember, Mercy, there are a lot of creatures in the reservation who are not fond of humans – and you are close enough to human that they will bear you no goodwill. If you step too far out-of-bounds, they will have you dead first and leave me to seek justice later.'

'I'll mind my tongue,' I told him.

He snorted with uncomplimentary amusement. 'I'll believe that when I see it. I wish Uncle Mike were here, too. They wouldn't dare bother you then.'

'I thought this was Uncle Mike's idea.'

'It is, but he is working and cannot leave his tavern tonight.'

We must have traveled half a mile when the road finally made an abrupt right turn to reveal a guardhouse and gate. Zee stopped his truck and rolled down the window.

The guard wore a military uniform with a large BFA patch on his arm. I wasn't familiar enough with the BFA (Bureau of Fae Affairs) to know what branch of the military was associated with them – if any. The guard had that 'Rent-a-Cop' feel, as if he felt a little out of place in the uniform even as he relished the power it gave him. The badge on his chest read O'DONNELL.

He leaned forward and I got a whiff of garlic and sweat, though he didn't smell unwashed. My nose is just more sensitive than most people's.

'ID,' he said.

Despite his Irish name, he looked more Italian or French than Irish. His features were bold and his hair was receding.

Zee opened his wallet and handed over his driver's license. The guard made a big deal of scrutinizing the picture and looking at Zee. Then he nodded and grunted, 'Hers, too.'

I had already grabbed my wallet out of my purse. I handed Zee my license to pass over to the guard.

'No designation,' O'Donnell said, flicking the corner of my license with his thumb.

'She's not fae, sir,' said Zee in a deferential tone I'd never heard from him before.

'Really? What business does she have here?'

'She's my guest,' Zee said, speaking quickly as if he knew I was about to tell the moron it was none of his business.

And he was a moron, he and whoever was in charge of security here. Picture IDs for fae? The only thing all fae have in common is glamour, the ability to change their appearance. The illusion is so good that it affects not only human senses, but physical reality. That's why a 500-pound, ten-foot-tall ogre can wear a size-six dress and drive a Miata. It's not shapeshifting, I am told. But as far as I'm concerned, it's as close as makes no never mind.

I don't know what kind of ID I would have had them use, but a picture ID was worthless. Of course, the fae tried really hard to pretend that they could only take one human form without ever saying exactly that. Maybe they'd convinced some bureaucrat to believe it.

'Will you please get out of the truck, ma'am,' the moron said, stepping out of the guardhouse and crossing in front of the truck until he was on my side of the vehicle.

Zee nodded. I got out of the car.

The guard walked all the way around me, and I had to restrain my growl. I don't like people I don't know walking behind me. He wasn't quite as dumb as he first appeared because he figured it out and walked around me again.

'Brass doesn't like civilian visitors, especially after dark,' he said to Zee, who had gotten out to stand next to me.

'I am allowed, sir,' Zee replied, still in that deferential tone.

The guard snorted and flipped through a few pages on his clipboard, though I don't think he actually was reading anything. 'Siebold Adelbertsmier.' He pronounced it wrong, making Zee's name sound like Seabold instead of Zeebolt. 'Michael McNellis, and Olwen Jones.' Michael McNellis could be Uncle Mike – or not. I didn't know any fae named Olwen, but I could count the fae I knew by any name on one hand with fingers left over. Mostly the fae kept to themselves.

'That's right,' Zee said with false patience that sounded genuine; I only knew it was false because Zee had no patience with fools – or anyone else for that matter. 'I am Siebold.' He said it the same way O'Donnell had.

The petty tyrant kept my license and walked back to his little office. I stayed where I was, so I couldn't see exactly what he did, though I could hear the sound of computer keys being tapped. He came back after a couple of minutes and returned my license to me.

'Stay out of trouble, Mercedes Thompson. Fairyland is no place for good little girls.'

Obviously O'Donnell had been sick the day they'd had sensitivity training. I wasn't usually a hard-core stickler, but something about the way he said 'little girl' made it an insult. Mindful of Zee's wary gaze, I took my license and

slipped it into my pocket and tried to keep what I was thinking to myself.

I don't think my expression was bland enough, because he shoved his face into mine. 'Did you hear me, girl?'

I could smell the honey ham and mustard he'd had on his dinner sandwich. The garlic he'd probably eaten last night. Maybe he'd had a pizza or lasagna.

'I heard you,' I said in as neutral a tone as I could manage, which wasn't, admittedly, very good.

He fingered the gun on his hip. He looked at Zee. 'She can stay two hours. If she's not back out by then, we'll come looking for her.'

Zee bowed his head like combatants do in karate movies, without letting his eyes leave the guard's face. He waited until the guard walked back to his office before he got back in the car, and I followed his lead.

The metal gate slid open with a reluctance that mirrored O'Donnell's attitude. The steel it was built of was the first sign of competence I'd seen. Unless there was rebar in the walls, the concrete might keep people like me out, but it would never keep fae in. The concertina wire was too shiny to be anything but aluminum, and aluminum doesn't bother the fae in the slightest. Of course, ostensibly, the reservation was set up to restrict where the fae lived and to protect them, so it shouldn't matter that they could come and go as they pleased, guarded gate or not.

Zee drove through the gates and into Fairyland.

I don't know what I expected of the reservation; military housing of some sort, maybe, or English cottages. Instead, there were row after row of neat, well-kept ranch houses with attached one-car garages laid out in identical-sized yards with identical fences, chain link around the front yard, six-foot cedar around the backyard.

The only difference from one house to the next was in

color of paint and foliage in the yards. I knew the reservation had been here since the eighties, but it looked as though it might have been built a year ago.

There were cars scattered here and there, mostly SUVs and trucks, but I didn't see any people at all. The only sign of life, aside from Zee and me, was a big black dog that watched us with intelligent eyes from the front yard of a pale yellow house.

The dog pushed the Stepford effect up to übercreepy.

I turned to comment about it to Zee when I realized that my nose was telling me some odd things.

'Where's the water?' I asked.

'What water?' He raised an eyebrow.

'I smell swamp: water and rot and growing things.'

He gave me a look I couldn't decipher. 'That's what I told Uncle Mike. Our glamour works best for sight and touch, very good for taste and hearing, but not as well for scent. Most people can't smell well enough for scent to be a problem. You smelled that I was fae the first time you met me.'

Actually he was wrong. I've never met two people who smell exactly alike – I'd thought that earthy scent that he and his son Tad shared was just part of their own individual essences. It wasn't until a long time later that I learned to distinguish between fae and human. Unless you live within an hour's drive of one of the four fae reservations in the U.S., the chances of running into one just weren't that high. Until I'd moved to the Tri-Cities and started working for Zee, I'd never knowingly met a fae.

'So where is the swamp?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'I hope that you will be able to see through whatever means our murderer has used to disguise himself. But for your own sake, *Liebling*, I would hope that you would leave the reservation its secrets if you can.'

He turned down a street that looked just like the first

four we'd passed – except that there was a young girl of about eight or nine playing with a yo-yo in one of the yards. She watched the spinning, swinging toy with solemn attention that didn't change when Zee parked the car in front of her house. When Zee opened the gate, she caught the yo-yo in one hand and looked at us with adult eyes.

'No one has entered,' she said.

Zee nodded. 'This is the latest murder scene,' he told me. 'We found it this morning. There are six others. The rest have had a lot of people in and out, but except for this one' – he indicated the girl with a tip of his head – 'who is a Council member, and Uncle Mike, there have been no other trespassers since his death.'

I looked at the child who was one of the Council and she gave me a smile and popped her bubblegum.

I decided it was safest to ignore her. 'You want me to see if I can smell someone who was in all the houses?'

'If you can.'

'There's not exactly a database where scents are stored like fingerprints. Even if I scented him out, I'll have no idea who it is – unless it's you, Uncle Mike, or your Council member here.' I nodded my head toward Yo-yo Girl.

Zee smiled without humor. 'If you can find one scent that is in every house, I will personally escort you around the reservation or the entire state of Washington until you find the murdering son of a bitch.'

That's when I knew this was personal. Zee didn't swear much and never in English. *Bitch*, in particular, was a word he'd never used in my presence.

'It will be better if I do this alone then,' I told him. 'So the scents you're carrying don't contaminate what is already there. Do you mind if I use the truck to change?'

'*Nein, nein,*' he said. 'Go change.'

I returned to the truck and felt the girl's gaze on the back

of my neck all the way. She looked too innocent and helpless to be anything but a serious nasty.

I got into the truck, on the passenger side to get as much room as possible, and stripped out of all my clothes. For werewolves, the change is very painful, especially if they wait too long to change at a full moon and the moon pulls the change from them.

Shifting doesn't hurt me at all – actually it feels good, like a thorough stretch after a workout. I get hungry, though, and if I hop from one form to the other too often, it makes me tired.

I closed my eyes and slid from human into my coyote form. I scratched the last tingle out of one ear with my hind paw, then hopped out the window I'd left open.

My senses as a human are sharp. When I switch forms, they get a little better, but it's more than that. Being in coyote form focuses the information that my ears and nose are telling me better than I can do as a human.

I started casting about on the sidewalk just inside the gate, trying to get a feel for the smells of the house. By the time I made it to the porch, I knew the scent of the male (he certainly wasn't a man, though I couldn't quite pinpoint what he was) who had made this his home. I could also pick out the scents of the people who visited most often, people like the girl, who had returned to her spinning, snapping yo-yo – though she watched me rather than her toy.

Except for her very first statement, she and Zee hadn't exchanged a word that I had heard. It might have meant they didn't like each other, but their body language wasn't stiff or antagonistic. Perhaps they just didn't have anything to say.

Zee opened the door when I stopped in front of it, and a wave of death billowed out.

I couldn't help but take a step back. Even a fae, it seemed, was not immune to the indignities of death. There was no need for the caution that made me creep over the threshold into the entryway, but some things, especially in coyote form, are instinctive.