



Night Broken (Mercy Thompson Book 8)

By Patricia Briggs

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When her mate’s ex-wife storms back into their lives, Mercy knows something isn’t right. Christy has the furthest thing from good intentions—she wants Adam back, and she’s willing to do whatever it takes to get him, including turning the pack against Mercy.

Mercy isn’t about to step down without a fight, but there’s a more dangerous threat circling. As the bodies start piling up, she must put her personal troubles aside to face a creature with the power to tear her whole world apart.

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Editorial Review

Review

“There is no doubt that Mercy Thompson is one of urban fantasy’s favorite heroines.”—Fresh Fiction

“A tightly woven story...*Night Broken* moves at a blistering pace, moving from action-packed scene to action-packed scene with Briggs’s traditional strong writing and knack for dialogue.”—SF Site

More Praise for the Mercy Thompson Novels

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

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

“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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The phone rang while I was elbow-deep in sudsy dishwater.

“I’ll get it,” said my stepdaughter, Jesse, hastily dumping two glasses and a fork in my sink.

A werewolf pack that eats together stays together, I thought, scrubbing stubborn egg off a plate. Sunday breakfasts weren’t attended by the whole pack—some of them had families just like regular people or jobs they worked on the Sabbath. The breakfasts weren’t mandatory because that would have ruined the intent. Darryl, Adam’s second, who usually prepared the meals, was a hellaciously good cook, and his food attracted anyone who could manage to come.

The dishwasher was running, stuffed full and then some. I would have let the rest of the dishes wait until it was done, but Auriele, Darryl’s mate, wouldn’t hear of it.

I didn’t argue with her because I was one of the three people in the pack who outranked her, so she’d have to back down. That felt like cheating, and I never cheat.

Unless it is against my enemies, whispered a soundless voice in my head that might have been mine but felt like Coyote’s.

The second reason for my compliance was more self-serving. Auriele and I were getting along, which made her the only one of the three female werewolves in the pack who was friendly with me at the moment.

Auriele hadn’t been happy having me as the Alpha’s mate, either—I was a coyote shapeshifter among wolves. She didn’t think it was a good thing for pack morale. She also thought, correctly, that I brought trouble for the pack with me. She liked me despite herself. I was used to the company of men, but it was nice to have a woman besides Jesse, my teenage stepdaughter, who would talk to me.

So, to please Auriele, I washed dishes that the dishwasher could have taken care of, ignoring the burn of hot soapy water in the wounds of my trade—barked knuckles are a mechanic’s constant companion. Auriele dried the dishes, and Jesse had volunteered to tidy up the kitchen in general. Three women bonding over household chores—my mother would be pleased if she could see us. That thought hardened my resolve that next week, some of the men would do cleanup. It would be good for them to expand their skill set.

“There’s this kid in my second-period class.” Auriele ignored the ringing phone as she hefted a stack of plates up to the cupboard with a grunt of effort. It wasn’t the weight of the dishes that was the problem—Auriele was a werewolf; she could have lifted a four-hundred-pound anvil onto the shelf. It was that she was short and had to stand on tiptoe to do it. Jesse had to dodge around her to get to the phone.

“All the teachers love Clark,” Auriele continued. “All the girls and most of the guys, too. And every word out of his mouth is a lie. ‘Enrique cheated off my paper,’ he told me when I asked him why they both had all the same mistakes. Enrique, he just gets this resigned look on his face; I expect that Clark has done this to him before.”

“Hauptman residence,” said Jesse cheerfully. “Can I help you?”

“Is Adam there?”

“So I told him—” Auriele stopped talking abruptly, her sensitive ears caught by the familiar voice on the line.

“I need Adam.” My husband’s ex-wife’s voice was thick with tears. Christy Hauptman sounded desperate and half-hysterical.

“Mom?” Jesse’s voice was shaky. “Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Get Adam.”

“Mom?” Jesse gave me a frantic look.

“Adam,” I called. “Christy’s on the phone for you.”

He was in the living room talking to Darryl and a few of the pack who had lingered after breakfast, so I didn’t have to raise my voice much. It wasn’t the first time Christy had called needing something.

Dealing with Christy was usually enough to give me a stomachache. Not because of anything she could do to me or Adam. But Jesse, who loved her mother but was currently fighting to keep liking her, suffered every time that woman called. There was nothing I could do to stop it.

“He’s coming, Mom,” Jesse said.

“Please,” Christy said. “Tell him to hurry.”

Desperate, hysterical tears—those weren’t unusual. But she sounded scared, too. And that wasn’t anything I’d heard before.

Adam walked into the room, and from his grim face, I could tell he’d heard at least part of what Christy had said. He took the handset from Jesse but hugged her with the other arm. Jesse’s eyes grew watery under his comforting hold. She gave me a frantic look before bolting away, out the door, and up the stairs, presumably to her room, where she could collect herself.

“What do you need?” Adam said, most of his attention still on his daughter.

“Can I come home?”

Aurieie glanced at me, but I was already wearing my blank face. She wouldn’t be able to tell what I was thinking from my expression.

“This isn’t your home,” Adam said. “Not anymore.”

“Adam,” Christy said. “Oh, Adam.” She sobbed, a small, hopeless sound. “I’m in trouble, I need to come home. I’ve been so stupid. He won’t leave me alone. He hurt me, he killed a friend of mine, and he follows me everywhere I go. Can I come home, please?”

That wasn’t anything I’d expected. Aurieie quit trying to pretend she wasn’t listening to every word and jerked her face toward the phone.

“Call the police,” Adam said. “That’s what they are there for.”

“He’ll kill me,” she whispered. “Adam, he’ll kill me. I don’t have anywhere else to run. Please.”

Werewolves can tell when people are lying. So can some of the other supernatural critters running around—like me, for instance. Over the phone is a lot trickier because a lot of the telltale signs involve heartbeat and smell—neither of which is possible to detect over a phone line. But I could hear the truth in her voice.

Adam looked at me.

“Tell her to come,” I said. What else could I say? If something happened to her when we could help . . . I wasn’t sure if I could live with that. I knew that Adam couldn’t.

Aurieie continued to watch me. She frowned, finally turned away, and started to dry the dishes again.

“Adam, please?” Christy pleaded.

Adam narrowed his eyes at me and didn’t say anything.

“Adam,” Mary Jo said from the doorway. Mary Jo is a firefighter, tough and smart. “She is owed by the pack for the years that she was yours. Let her come home, and the pack will protect her.”

He gave Mary Jo a look, and she dropped her eyes.

“It’s okay,” I said to Adam, and tried to make it not a lie. “Really.”

I bake when I’m stressed. If I had to make enough chocolate chip cookies to feed Richland while she was here, it would be okay because Adam needed me to be okay with it.

If she tried anything, she would be sorry. Adam was mine. She had thrown him away, thrown Jesse away—and I had snatched them up. Finders keepers.

Maybe she didn’t want them back. Maybe she just needed to be safe. My gut wasn’t convinced, but jealousy isn’t a logical emotion, and I had no reason to be jealous of Christy.

“All right,” Adam said. “All right. You can come.” Then, his voice gentle, he asked, “Do you need money for plane tickets?”

I went back to the dishes and tried not to hear the rest of the conversation. Tried not to hear the concern in Adam’s voice, the softness—and the satisfaction he got from taking care of her. Good Alpha werewolves take care of those around them; it’s part of what makes them Alpha.

I might have been able to ignore it better if all the wolves still in the house hadn’t drifted into the kitchen. They listened to Adam’s finalization of the details that would bring Christy here and snuck occasional, furtive glances my way when they thought I wouldn’t notice.

Aurieie took the last cup from my hand. I unplugged the sink and shook the water from my hands before drying them off on my jeans. My hands aren’t my best feature. The hot water had left my skin pruned, and my knuckles were red and swollen. Even after washing dishes, there was still some black grease embedded in my skin and under my nails. Christy’s hands were always beautiful, with French-manicured nails.

Adam hung up the phone and called the travel agent he used to coordinate his not-infrequent business travel: both business business and werewolf business.

“She can stay with Honey and me,” said Mary Jo to me, her voice neutral.

Mary Jo and Honey were the other two female werewolves in the pack. Mary Jo had moved in with Honey when Honey’s mate had been killed a few months ago. Neither of them liked me very much.

Until Mary Jo made the offer of hospitality, I’d been half planning to put Christy up with one of the other

pack members because I hadn't thought it through. I knew that putting Christy in with Mary Jo and Honey would be a mistake.

Adam and I were working hard to increase the pack cohesion, which meant that I was trying very hard not to further alienate either Mary Jo or Honey. I was doing pretty well at keeping our interactions to polite neutrality. If Christy moved in with them, she would use their dislike of me and fan it into a hurricane-force division that would rain down on the pack in a flood of drama.

Once I recognized the power of Christy as a divisive force, I realized that it wasn't just a problem for my relationship with the pack, but also for Adam's. Putting Adam's ex-wife in the same house with Honey and Mary Jo would be stupid because it would force Mary Jo to take Christy's side on any tension between Christy and Adam or Christy and the pack. The same thing would be true of anyone Christy stayed with.

Christy was going to have to stay here with Adam and me.

"Christy needs to be here, where she'll feel safe," said Auriele before I could reply to Mary Jo.

"Uhm," I said, because I was still reeling under the weight of just how much it was going to suck having her not just here in the Tri-Cities, but here in my home.

"You don't want her here?" asked Auriele, and for the first time, I realized that Auriele, like Mary Jo, had liked Christy better than she did me. "She's scared and alone. Don't be petty, Mercy."

"Would you want Darryl's ex staying at your house?" asked Jesse hotly. I hadn't realized she'd come back downstairs. Her chin was raised as she flung her support my way. I didn't want her to do that. Christy was her mom—Jesse shouldn't be trying to choose between us.

"If she needed help, I would," Auriele snapped. It was easy for her to be certain because Darryl, as far as I knew, didn't have an ex-wife. "If you don't want Christy here, Mercy, she is welcome at my house."

Auriele's offer was followed up by several others, accompanied by hostile stares aimed at me. Christy had been well liked by most of the pack. She was just the sort of sweet, helpless homemaker that appealed to a bunch of werewolves with too much testosterone.

"Christy will stay here," I said.

But since Mary Jo and Auriele were arguing hotly about where Christy would be happiest, and the men were paying attention to them, no one had heard me.

"I said"—I stepped between the two women, drawing on Adam's power to give weight to my words—"Christy will stay here with Adam and me." Both women dropped their eyes and backed away, but the hostility in Auriele's face told me that only the Alpha's authority in my voice had forced her to stop arguing. Mary Jo looked satisfied—I was pretty sure it meant that she thought Christy's staying here might give Christy a chance to resume her position as Adam's wife.

Though Adam was still on the phone, my pull on his authority had made him look around to see what was happening in the kitchen, but he didn't slow his rapid instructions.

"Having her here isn't a good idea. She'd do okay at Honey and Mary Jo's." Jesse sounded almost frantic.

"Christy stays here," I repeated, though this time I didn't borrow Adam's magic to make my point.

“Mercy, I love my mother.” Jesse’s mouth twisted unhappily. “But she’s selfish, and she resents that you took her place here. She’ll cause trouble.”

“Jesse Hauptman,” snapped Auriele. “That’s your mother you are talking about. You show her some respect.”

“Auriele,” I growled. This morning needed a dominance fight between the two of us like it needed a nuclear bomb. But I couldn’t let her dictate to Jesse. “Back off.”

Teeth showing in a hostile smile, Auriele turned her hot gaze on me, yellow stirring in the cappuccino depths of her eyes.

“Leave Jesse alone,” I told her. “You’re overstepping your authority. Jesse is not pack.”

Auriele’s lips whitened, but she backed down. I was right, and she knew it.

“Your mom will feel safer here,” I told Jesse without looking away from Auriele. “And Auriele’s also right when she says we can protect Christy better here.”

Jesse gave me a despairing look. “She doesn’t want Dad, but that doesn’t mean she wants anyone else to have him. She’ll try to get between the two of you—like water torture. Drip. Drip. Drip. You should hear what she says about you.”

No. No, I shouldn’t. Neither should Jesse, but there was nothing I could do about that.

“It’s all right,” I told her. “We’re all grown-ups. We can behave for a little while.” How long could it take for a werewolf to hunt down a stalker and scare him off? A stalker, by definition, should be easy to find, right?

“Good Samaritan Mercy,” Mary Jo muttered. “Shouldn’t we all be grateful for her charity?” She glanced around and realized she was the center of attention and flushed. “What? It’s true.”

Still on the phone, Adam looked at Mary Jo and held her—and everyone else in the room—silent with his gaze. He finished his business with the travel agent, then hung up the phone.

“That’s enough,” he said very softly, and Mary Jo flinched. He is quiet when he is really mad—right before people start dying. “This is not up for debate. It is time for everyone to go. Christy is not pack, was never pack. She was never my mate, only my wife. That means she is not pack business, and not your business.”

“Christy is my friend,” said Auriele hotly. “She needs help. That makes it my business.”

“Does it?” Adam asked her, clearly out of patience. “If it is your business, why did Christy call me, not you?”

She opened her mouth, and Darryl put a hand on her shoulder and led her out of the room. “Best leave well enough alone,” I heard him say before they left the house.

The wolves—including Mary Jo—slid out of the room without waiting for Adam to say anything more. We stood in the kitchen, Adam, Jesse, and I, waiting until the sounds of cars starting and driving away left us in silence. All the uniting benefit of this Sunday breakfast was gone like the last of the waffles.

“Jesse,” I said. “Your mother is welcome here.”

“You know what she’s like,” Jesse said passionately. “She’ll spoil everything. She can get people, can get Dad, to do things they had no intention of doing.”

“Not your problem,” I told her, while Adam’s face tightened because he agreed with Jesse.

“She can get me to do things, too.” Jesse’s face was desperate. “I don’t want you hurt.”

Adam’s hand came down on my shoulder.

“You are responsible for your own actions,” I told her. Told both of them. “Not hers. She’s not a werewolf, not Alpha. She can’t make you do anything unless you let her.”

I glanced up at the clock, though I knew what time it was. “Now, if you’ll both excuse me, I need to change clothes and head to church, or I’m going to be late.” I strode out of the kitchen, then gathered myself together and turned at the doorway. “Something tells me that I’ve got a lot of praying for patience and charity in my future.” I flashed them a grin I didn’t much feel, then left.

Church didn’t help a lot. I was still unsettled by the events of the morning when my back hit the mat on the floor of the garage. The impact forced the air from my lungs in an inelegant sound and drove my worries away. I snarled at my attacker—who snarled back with interest.

The snarl didn’t make Adam’s too-handsome features less handsome, but it would probably have scared anyone else. Me? I think I have some kind of subliminal death wish because Adam’s anger makes me go weak in the knees, and not in a terrified sort of way.

“What are you trying to do? Kill mosquitoes?” Adam was too mad to be aware of my reaction to his anger. “I’m a werewolf. I’m trying to kill you—and you smack me open-handed on my butt?”

Even with me on the ground, he stayed in sanchin dachi, a neutral-ready position that allowed him easy rotation for either strike or block. It also made him look pigeon-toed. Not a good look, even for Adam, but his thin t-shirt, wet with sweat, did its best to improve the picture.

“It’s a cute butt,” I said.

He rolled his eyes, released the stance, and took a step nearer to me.

“As for my hand on your cute butt,” I continued, letting my shoulders relax against the mat, “I was cleverly trying to distract you.”

He frowned at me. “Distract me from what? Your awesome, sneaky attack that left you lying on the floor?”

I twisted, catching him in front of the ankle with one foot as I put my whole weight behind the shin I slammed into the back of his knee. He started to lose his balance, and I rolled up with an elbow strike that hit the big muscle that ran up the back of his upper leg with charley-horse-causing force. As he went all the way down to hands and knees, I swung the wrench I’d snagged on my original fall and touched him on the back of the head with it.

“Exactly,” I said, pleased that I’d been able to lie well enough with my body language that I’d taken him unawares. He’d been fighting a lot longer than I, and he was bigger and stronger. I was very seldom able to best him while we were sparring.

Adam rolled over, rubbing his thigh to relieve the cramp I'd given him. He saw the wrench and narrowed his eyes at me—and then grinned and relaxed on the wrestling mat that covered half the garage floor. “I’ve always had the hots for the mean and sneaky women.”

I wrinkled my nose at him. “Sneaky I knew, but I didn’t know you liked mean. Okay, then. No more chocolate chip cookies for you. I’ll feed them to the rest of the pack instead.”

He sat up without using his hands, not showing off, but because he was just that strong. He wasn’t vain enough to realize how it made the muscles in his belly stand out under the meager cover of his shirt, and I wasn’t going to tell him.

Not that I had to. His mouth kicked up at the corners, and his chocolate eyes darkened a little as his nostrils flared, taking in the change that desire had made in my scent. He stripped off the shirt and wiped his face on it before tossing it to the side.

“I only like a little bit mean,” Adam confided in a low-husky voice that made my heartbeat pick up. “Withholding cookies is world-class mean.”

We’d been sparring every day since I’d had a fight with a nasty vampire named Frost. Adam decided that since I was going to keep getting into trouble, the only thing he could do was try to ensure I could get myself out of it, too. I was still doing karate with my sensei three times a week, and I could feel the difference all the extra practice was making in my fighting ability. Sparring with Adam meant that I could pay attention to fighting without worrying about hurting someone (werewolves are tough). It meant that I could ignore the need to hide what I was behind human-slow movement. Today, it also meant that I could forget that phone call this morning for a little while.

I leaned forward, putting my forehead against his sweat-slicked shoulder. He smelled good: the mint and musk of werewolf, clean sweat, and the blend of scents that was Adam. “No. If I were world-class mean, I’d have told Christy to go find someone else to save her.”

His arm came around me. “I don’t love her. I never loved her the way I love you. She needed someone to take care of her, and I like taking care of people. That’s all we had.”

He thought he meant it, but I knew better. I’d seen them together when times had been good. I’d seen the damage that her leaving had done to a man who took care of the people who belonged to him and didn’t let go of them easily. But I wasn’t going to argue with him.

“I’m not worried about her coming between us,” I told him truthfully. “I’m worried about her hurting you and Jesse. Hurting the pack. But that’s better than letting her face whatever it is on her own.”

He bent down and put his cheek against the top of my head. “You lied,” he said. “You aren’t mean at all.”

“Shh. It’s a secret.”

He lay back on the mat and pulled me down with him. “I think you need to bribe me to keep your secret,” he told me thoughtfully.

“I have a feeling I’m going to be baking a lot of cookies in the near future,” I said ruefully. “I could go back on what I said and let you eat one or two.”

He hummed, then shook his head slowly, rolling me a little, so I was on top of him instead of beside him. “That would defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it? People wouldn’t think you were mean if you fed me cookies.”

Jesse was out with friends, and none of the werewolves had ventured back after Adam sent them away.

I sat up, feeling the rise of his breath underneath me, feeling the hard muscles of his abdomen. I wiggled back a little, and he sucked in his breath.

“I don’t know if I have anything else to bribe you with,” I said seriously.

He growled at me, a real growl. Then he said, “See? World-class mean.”

Making love with Adam was sometimes slow, the intensity building until I swore if I felt one thing more, I would burst into sparks and never feel anything again. At those times, I’d come back to myself limp and a little lost, in the best of all ways. Love means leaving yourself vulnerable, knowing that there is someone to catch you when you fall. But when I was already feeling vulnerable, I couldn’t have let go like that.

Adam chose to keep it lighter this time, as if he knew how breakable I felt. He was passionate and playful, and I gave as good as I got. I wasn’t the only one worried about what Christy’s presence would do to us; I wasn’t the only one who needed reassurance.

I cried out when his teeth nipped my shoulder, as the hint of pain traveled electrically down my spine, sending me into a climax that left me wrecked in body and whole in spirit. He waited until I was finished before starting again. I watched his face, watching him hold on to his control—and I put paid to that. I nibbled the side of his neck, then wrapped my legs around him, digging into his lower back a little with my heels. He lost himself in me, and it was enough for me to climax again.

And when we lay naked on the mats, the smell of sex and sweat in the air, his hand wrapped tightly around mine: I felt the problem of Christy shrink down to a manageable level.

As long as Adam loved me, I was sure I could deal with the worst Christy could throw at us. I pushed aside the nagging thought that the euphoria of Adam’s lovemaking sometimes left me with delusions of invulnerability.

Late that night, long after we’d gone to bed, someone knocked on the front door.

Adam’s arm was heavy across the back of my thigh. Somehow, I’d rolled until I was curled up mostly sideways in the bed. Medea, the cat, lay behind my head, answering my question about why I was in such an odd position. She had a way of shoving me off my pillow while we slept, so she could have the high ground.

Someone knocked again, a polite knock-knock.

I groaned and pushed Medea off my pillow, so I could pull it over my head. Adam stayed relaxed and loose as I wiggled. So did the cat. She didn’t protest, didn’t get up and stalk off. Just kept sleeping where I’d put her.

Knock. Knock.

I stiffened, half lifted myself off the bed, and looked at Adam. Looked at the cat. I shook Adam’s shoulder to no effect: something was keeping him asleep. Since it had taken the cat, too, I assumed it was magic.

I am immune to some magic, and maybe that’s why it wasn’t affecting me, but that persistent knock—

Knock. Knock.

—that was the one, made me think that perhaps my exclusion had been deliberate. Someone wanted to talk to me alone. Or do something to me when I didn't have Adam to back me up.

I rolled off the bed and grabbed my Sig Sauer out of the drawer in the nightstand, dropped the magazine with silver bullets, and replaced it with copper-jacketed hollow points. No werewolf I knew had the magic to keep an Alpha of Adam's caliber sleeping this deeply. That meant fae or witchcraft, and both of them could be killed by a regular bullet. I was pretty sure. Witches I was certain of—as long as it wasn't Elizaveta—but the fae were tricky.

The hollow points would do more damage than silver bullets to any of them, anyway. Silver was too hard to be good ammunition. And armed was better than unarmed when facing an unknown enemy.

I looked in on Jesse on my way to the front door. She was sleeping on her back, her arms wrapped over her head, snoring lightly. Safe enough, for now.

Knock. Knock.

The gun gave me the courage to ghost down the stairs. It was heavy. Like the daily fighting sessions with Adam, carrying the gun had become part of my routine. I wasn't human, not quite, but I was very nearly as helpless. It hadn't mattered much until I took Adam as my mate. In some ways, being part of the pack had made me a lot safer—but it had also made me the weakest link in the pack. The gun helped equalize the difference between me and the werewolves.

It was dark outside, and the narrow glass panel next to the door was opaque anyway. I had no way to tell who was there.

Knock.

"Who are you?" I asked, raising my voice without yelling.

The knocking ceased.

"We do not give our names lightly," said a man's pleasant voice. That he didn't raise his voice told me that he knew enough about me to understand that I could hear better than a regular human. His answer told me what he was, if not who.

The fae were careful with their names, changing the ones they used regularly and concealing the older ones, so that they could not be used against them. Fae magic works best when it knows who it is working upon. However, giving an enemy your name could also be a show of strength—See how little I am worried about you? I will give you my name, and even with that, you cannot hurt me.

Thanks to my friend and former employer Zee—iron-kissed, self-proclaimed gremlin, and mechanic extraordinaire—I knew a lot of the fae around the Tri-Cities, but the one at my doorstep was no one whose voice I recognized. Fae were good with glamour: they could change their faces, their voices, even their sizes and shapes. But all the fae were supposed to be on their reservations after having all but declared war upon the US.

"I don't open my door to people whose names I do not know," I told the stranger outside my door.

"Recently, I have been Alistair Beauclair," he told me.

Beauclaire. I sucked in my breath. I knew who he was, and so did anyone who watched the viral YouTube video someone had filmed. Beauclaire was the fae who killed the man who had kidnapped his daughter with the intention of murdering her as he had so many other half-blood fae (as well as a few werewolves). Beauclaire was the man who had declared the fae independent from the US and all human dominion. He was a Gray Lord, one of the powerful few who ruled all the fae.

But he was more, much more than that, because he'd given up another of his names on that day.

"Gwyn ap Lugh," I said.

I'd looked up Lugh after an encounter with an oakman fae who had tossed Lugh's name about. The results of my research were confusing to say the least. The only thing for certain was that in a history of legendary fae, Lugh stood out like a lantern on a dark night. "Ap Lugh" meant son of Lugh, so at least I wasn't dealing with Lugh himself.

The fae on the other side of the door paused before saying, slowly, "I have gone by that name as well."

"You are a Gray Lord." I tried to keep my voice steady. As Beauclaire, this one had lived a long time in human guise, and he'd been, from all the interviews of his friends, ex-wife, and coworkers, well liked. No sense offending him if I didn't have to, and keeping him on the porch might just do that.

"Yes," he said.

"Would you give your word that you intend me no harm?" Not offending him was important, but so was not being stupid. Though I was pretty sure if he wanted in, a door wasn't going to keep him out.

"I will not hurt you this night," he said readily, and so unfaelike in his straightforward answer it made me even more suspicious.

"Are you the only one out there?" I asked warily, after examining any possible harm he might be able to do without breaking his word. "And would you promise not to harm anyone in this house tonight?"

"I am the only one here, and for this night, I will ensure no harm comes to those who are within your home."

I engaged the safety on the gun, backed into the kitchen, and put it under a stack of dish towels waiting to be put away. Then I went into the front room and opened the door.

The cold night air, still around freezing this early in the spring, made the long t-shirt I wore, a black Hauptman Security shirt washed to gray, inadequate for keeping me warm. I don't sleep naked: being the wife of the Alpha means unexpected visits in the middle of the night.

I am not shy or particularly body conscious, but Adam is not okay with other men seeing me naked. It makes him shorter-tempered than usual. Adam's t-shirts were exactly the right size to be comfortable, and having me wear his shirts helped him keep his cool around other males.

Beauclaire didn't look below my chin. Politeness or indifference, either one was okay by me.

He smelled like a lake, full of life and greenness with a hint of summer sun even though he stood under the light of the stars and moon with the bare-branched trees that held only a hint of bud. Reddish brown hair, lightly graying at the temples, gave him a normalcy that the still-sleeping werewolf in my bed told me was a lie.

Beauclaire was medium tall but built on graceful lines that didn't quite hide the whipcord muscle beneath. Warren, Adam's third, was built along the same lines.

He didn't look like a sun god, a storm god, or a trickster, as Lugh was variously reputed to be. Beauclaire had been a lawyer before his dramatic YouTube moment, and that was what he looked like now.

Of course, fae could look like whatever they wanted to.

When I stepped back and gestured him into the living room, he moved like a man who knew how to fight—balanced and alert. I believed that more than I believed the lawyer appearance.

He walked into the living room, but he didn't stop there since the main floor of the house has a circular flow. He continued through the dining room and around the corner into the kitchen, where he pulled up a chair with his back to the wall and sat down.

I was fairly sure that his choice was important—the fae place a great deal of emphasis on symbolism. Maybe he picked the kitchen because guests came to the house and sat in the living room. Family and friends sat in the kitchen. If so, maybe he was trying to present himself as a friend—or point out that I didn't have the power to keep him out of the center of my own home. It was too subtle to be certain, so I ignored it altogether. Trying too hard to figure out the meaning in what the fae say or do would send anyone to Straightjacket Land.

"Ms. Hauptman," he said after I sat down opposite him, "It is my understanding that you have one of my father's artifacts. I have come for the walking stick."

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