

## Chapter 12

Cathy stopped the elevator on the ninth floor, and Seamus gave her a killing look. He reached for the Close Door button, but she stepped in front of the door.

“Go on, Seamus,” she said. “You need to gather your information as soon as possible.”

He shook his head. “You are *not* going to his apartment without me.”

Giving him her most condescending smile, she reached out and patted him on the top of the head. “You’re a wonderful watchdog. But I have a few words I need to impart on Mr. Teague, and you have work to do.”

He batted her hand away and scowled. The elevator dinged in protest at her holding the door open so long. “Kiera may think this Teague is repentant, but I don’t trust him for a moment. He’s Unseelie and no pretty words are going to

change that. I’m not letting you talk to him alone.”

It wasn’t as though Cathy trusted Hunter, either. However, he didn’t strike her as being stupid, and if he still had plans for Kiera, it would be incredibly stupid for him to harm Cathy right now. “How about trusting *me*, then? I’m confident I won’t be in any danger.” She grinned, unable to resist jerking his chain. “Besides, his temper seems less volatile than yours.”

Seamus lifted his eyes heavenward in entreaty. “What did I do to deserve this?”

Cathy took a step into the hall and the elevator door started to close with what she would have sworn was a sigh of relief. Seamus stared at her with worry in his eyes until the doors cut off his view. She licked her lips, watching the elevator even after the doors had closed. It was hard to deny that Seamus had looked worried. But the fey didn’t worry—you had to care to worry, and she’d never known any of the fey to have a genuine care for anyone but themselves.

No, if Seamus was worried at all, he was worried he might fail in his duties to his king.

That cleared up, she strode to Hunter’s door and knocked. He answered promptly, opening the door and leaning against the doorframe, giving her an inscrutable look.

“I’ve had more visitors in the last twenty-four hours than I’d had in the last two weeks,” he said, his voice betraying an edge that didn’t show in his expression. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“May I come in?”

Hunter leaned forward slightly, looking up and down the hall. “Where’s your dog?”

“The phooka has other things to do. Now are you going to let me in or not?”

He shrugged and opened the door wider. “Please, come

in.”

She accepted the grudging invitation and stepped inside. She suffered a momentary fear that she was making a mistake, for there was a certain air of menace about Hunter, but it was too late for second thoughts.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked.

“No, thank you.”

“Do *I* need one?”

His lips were twisted into a wry smile, though his eyes looked wary. Cathy looked him up and down, seeing him as a man for the first time, rather than merely a threat to her daughter. Certainly nice to look at, she had to admit. Unusually rugged-looking for the fey, who tended toward delicate features and thin frames. He wasn’t particularly stout, but still his shoulders and chest were broader than the average fey, and he had none of that deceptively fragile look about him. Cathy ignored his question and asked one of her own.

“Is that glamour,” she asked, waving her hand to indicate his appearance, “or is this what you really look like?”

“What you see is what you get. Remember, my father was a mortal man.”

Cathy nodded, having forgotten that interesting fact. “I take it he is no longer living?”

Hunter’s expression didn’t ostensibly change, but she thought she saw a shadow pass over him nonetheless. “The Queen had him executed when I was seven. I was forced to watch.”

She shivered, and some of her hostility faded. What a terrible thing for a child to witness! What would it do to that child’s psyche? Surely that the child would be irreparably

damaged.

“Why are you here?” Hunter asked, his voice now sharp with pain.

“My daughter visited with you earlier today.”

His back stiffened. “That was her own choice. And no, I didn’t harm her in any way.”

Cathy shook her head. “I didn’t say you did. No need to be so defensive.”

Hunter turned away from her and limped over to a chair, sitting down heavily. “No? I would think after last night’s little scene I have every reason in the world to be defensive. You consider me the enemy.” He sighed. “Not that I blame you. I presume you are here to forbid me to see your daughter on pain of further dog bites.”

She didn’t answer immediately, instead studying his face and his posture. That he was trying to mask his emotions was clear; however, his eyes were far too expressive. He seemed strangely young and vulnerable, and Cathy once again felt that annoying twinge of sympathy. She reminded herself that he could be a hundred years old for all she knew. After all, the fey didn’t age. “How old are you?” she blurted.

Hunter’s eyes narrowed. “What does my age have to do with anything? Or is that your way of finding yet another objection to my existence?”

“You should consider hearing me out before becoming so hostile,” she said, and was surprised by the way his shoulders slumped at her words.

“I wasn’t being hostile. I was being defensive.”

She smiled despite herself. Then she focused on why she was here, and the smile disappeared. She moved over to sit on

the arm of the sofa, facing him. “You told my daughter that you will be killed for failing your mission.”

He winced and looked away. “I wouldn’t have told her that, except I’d promised to tell the truth, and she kept pressing.” He raised his eyes once more. “Look, I don’t know what you want of me, but I can tell you right now if it involves lying to Kiera, I won’t do it. I’m not proud of having lied to her before, and now that the axe has fallen I have no intention of repeating my mistakes.”

“All very noble,” she said, with only a hint of acid in her voice. “However, now that you’ve told her you’re going to die, she’s decided to go on a crusade to save you.”

Hunter’s face went from pale to bloodless. He looked at her with wide, horrified eyes. “No!” He sprang to his feet, raking a hand through his hair. “One of my mother’s cohorts dropped by while Kiera was here, and she helped me keep up the illusion. I never thought . . .”

“The reason Seamus isn’t with me is that he’s gone to Faerie in search of a solution. At my daughter’s insistence, naturally.”

Hunter shook his head. “Don’t let her get involved!” He looked at her imploringly. “This is hard enough already without her risking her life on a fool’s errand. There’s nothing she can do for me. Tell her that!”

Cathy was liking him better and better. She managed an ironic smile. “You may have noticed that my daughter is rather willful.”

“Lock her in her room, then! She can’t possibly know what she’s up against.”

Cathy was quiet a long time. This was precisely why she’d

come to Hunter’s apartment. If he’d embraced Kiera’s attempt to save him despite the danger she’d put herself in by trying, then Cathy could have washed her hands of him with little remorse. Oh, she would still feel sorry for him, would still hate to think of him suffering the way that he was sure to suffer. But he would have proved himself a typical, selfish, unfeeling fey, and she would have felt justified doing whatever was necessary to protect her daughter. Even locking her up in her room, if that’s what it took.

Hunter’s concern for Kiera’s well-being made things more complicated.

Cathy smiled at him faintly. “I might just do that, in the end. But first I’ll wait and hear what Seamus finds out.”

Hunter stared up at the ceiling, where Kiera’s footsteps made the floorboards creak. “I refuse to let her get hurt because of me. I’ve done her enough harm already.”

“We’re united in a common cause, then,” Cathy said. “Unless Seamus comes back from Faerie with a nearly risk-free way to save you, we’ll do whatever it takes to keep Kiera from doing anything rash. Right?”

He nodded briskly. “Right.” He rose and limped over to her, his face looking grave and noble. “I know after what I’ve done it’s probably hard to believe it, but I . . . care about her. A lot. Before this damned mess, I didn’t think it was possible for me to feel that way about anyone. I’m almost glad to have learned I was wrong.”

Cathy’s heart went out to him, and she hoped that against all odds, Seamus would return from Faerie with a miracle.

Kiera should have known Jackson would stop by to ask

how the date had gone, but she'd had rather a lot on her mind. When she let him in and saw his Cheshire cat grin, she wished she'd put some time into making up a story. She'd never been much good at lying, especially this ad-lib stuff, but she wasn't sure even Jackson's open mind could handle the truth.

He glided into her apartment, eyes gleaming with mischief. "Tell me everything!" he demanded. "Every juicy detail. And what's with the horseshoe on the door?"

Kiera almost groaned. She was too tired and too overwhelmed to handle this! She should have just played not home. Why hadn't she thought of that *before* she'd answered the door?

Jackson's mischievous grin turned into a frown. "What's the matter? You've got dark circles under your eyes. If you were sleep-deprived because you spent the whole night having wild passionate sex, you'd probably look a lot happier."

She rubbed at her face. "You're too perceptive for my own good," she grumbled.

He laughed. "You know I still expect you to tell me everything. But maybe if it didn't go so well, we should do it over a drink. You do have some alcohol around here, don't you?"

She leaned wearily against a wall. "Any chance we can have this conversation some other time?"

He looked shocked. "Heavens no! You know me better than that." He put his hand on her shoulder blade and firmly guided her into the living room. He pointed at the couch. "Sit."

Too tired to argue, she dropped into the couch and tucked her feet underneath herself while Jackson disappeared into her kitchen to help himself to her liquor stash. He returned quickly

with two glasses. Kiera sniffed her glass and determined it was a rum and Coke. A strong one. She took a polite sip, though she wasn't much in the mood for alcohol.

"Okay, spill it," Jackson said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Why would you want me to spill it?" She held up the glass and tried a feeble laugh. But dumb jokes weren't going to put Jackson off. She sighed. "You're going to think I've gone insane if I tell you everything that happened."

He cocked his head. "Oh? Now you've really piqued my curiosity."

Kiera put her drink aside and leaned back into the cushions of the couch. She didn't much want to share the lunacy with Jackson, but he would badger her until she told him the truth and she couldn't even begin to think of a clever lie. In nervous fits and starts, she spilled the story, from Hunter's refusal to have sex with her, to the strange and terrible revelations, to her recent decision to try to save Hunter's life.

When she finished her recitation, she didn't lift her head from the sofa cushions, not wanting to see the look on Jackson's face. He didn't say anything for a long time, and she feared that silence portended condemnation.

"Well," he finally said, "that was a little stranger than I was expecting."

She lifted her head and looked at him. His features were a little pinched, his eyes worried-looking, but he wasn't looking at her as though she'd grown a third arm or anything. She tried a smile. "No kidding? It was a little stranger than *I'd* been expecting too."

He made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a snort. “I’ll bet.”

“So, how nuts do you think I am?”

He shrugged. “I have to admit this is a little much to swallow. I could dismiss most of it as other people lying to you, but the bit about your mom’s dog turning into a man is a kind of hard to explain away. Unless you’d been drinking heavily when you saw it?” He gave her a hopeful look.

“Sorry, but no. Jackson, I saw it with my own eyes, with a relatively clear head. If you can come up with some logical explanation to make it all go away, I’d really appreciate it. I don’t particularly like thinking that Hunter might die, and I don’t like thinking that I’m going to get attacked by goblins or something if I try to help him.”

“No, I don’t imagine that’s a particularly fun prospect.”

She groaned loudly. “God, this is such a mess! What happened to the nice, normal, sane life I used to have?”

He wrinkled his nose. “The nice, normal, dull, lonely, unhappy life you mean?”

She glared at him. “I was *not* lonely, and I was *not* unhappy! Geez, you and my mom are a matched set.”

He grinned. “Fraid not—she’s not my type, you know.”

“Ha ha, I’m laughing so hard I can barely contain myself.”

“I can see that. Deny it all you want, but you’ve been the next best thing to a hermit ever since Jon dumped you, and I don’t care what you say, that is not a happy way to live.”

She swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat. Jon had dumped her almost two years ago. Of all the losers she’d dated, he was the king, and she’d repeatedly chanted the mantra “I’m better off without him.” But she supposed it was rather sorry

that she hadn’t dated anyone since. And she had started her own business working from home less than three months after they’d broken up. So, maybe what Jackson was saying wasn’t so far off the mark after all, though she wasn’t about to admit it.

“I was overjoyed to see you taking interest in a man again,” Jackson continued. “Of course, I’d like to kick his ass for hurting you.”

She smiled at the image that came to mind. Jackson attacking Hunter would be kind of like a chihuahua attacking a rottweiler. “I appreciate the sentiment, but it’s really not necessary. I’m convinced his own conscience is giving him punishment enough.” Not to mention the ultimate punishment he would receive for failing. Her smile faded. “I think he’s actually a pretty decent human being under it all.”

Jackson raised an elegant eyebrow. “I thought he wasn’t a human being of any kind, decent or otherwise.”

“You know what I mean.”

He slapped his forehead loudly. “Shit!”

Kiera stared at him. “What?”

He leaned forward and poked a finger at her. “You’ve still got it for him.”

She drew back. “I do not!” she cried, feeling her face turn red. “How stupid do you think I am? He might be a decent guy, but all the charm and seduction crap was just an act, remember? I always knew deep down inside that a man like him wouldn’t be interested in someone like me, and I was right. Now that the clouds are out of my eyes, I can accept that and move on.”

Jackson actually laughed at her. “Oh, you’ve got it all

right, babe. You should see the way your eyes are flashing.”

She was trying to decide which pithy comment would most thoroughly put Jackson in his place when the doorbell rang and disrupted her thoughts. She sighed dramatically. “It’s like Grand Central Station in here today,” she complained, standing up.

Jackson stood also and put a hand on her arm, stopping her from going to the door. His brows were drawn together in concern. “Let me answer the door.”

She blinked in surprise. “I’m sure it’s just my mother, coming back to try to talk sense into me again.”

“Maybe so, but it can’t hurt to let me check it for you. Wait here.”

He started toward the door, but she took a step right with him until he grabbed her arm again. “I said wait here!”

“What’s with the macho he-man crap?”

He planted his fists on his hips as the doorbell rang a second time. “My sexual preferences don’t stop me from having protective instincts, you know. I’m no bruiser, but I’m still bigger and stronger than you are. So stay here, and when I let your mother in you can laugh at me.”

She forced herself not to argue, hanging back as Jackson stepped up to the door and looked into the peephole. He frowned, then turned to her with a speculative look that told her it was definitely *not* her mother. Before she could ask a question, Jackson opened the door, a big, cheesy smile on his face.

“You must be Hunter,” Jackson said, sticking out his hand.

Kiera groaned and hurried to his side in time to see Hunter looking at him with an expression that she could have sworn

betrayed rampant jealousy. Only Hunter couldn’t be jealous, of course, because you had to actually care about someone to be jealous.

Hunter declined to shake the offered hand—surprise, surprise—and stood stiffly in the doorway. “Forgive me,” he said, ignoring Jackson and directing his words to Kiera. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

He took a step back from the doorway, but Jackson laughed and grabbed his arm. The narrow-eyed stare Hunter gave him chilled Kiera’s marrow.

“It’s not what you think,” Jackson said, oblivious to the threat in the other man’s eyes. “I’m just a friend. Now come in and stop scowling.”

The scowl deepened, but Hunter stepped into the apartment nevertheless. Kiera forced a bright smile. “Hunter, this is my friend Jackson. Jackson, Hunter.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Jackson said, looking disgustingly cheerful, and not a little smug.

Hunter did not look similarly pleased as he raked Jackson with a hostile glance. Then, something changed in his expression. “How’s your back?” he asked, and Kiera realized the change had come because he’d recognized Jackson’s name.

Jackson grinned. “Never better.”

Hunter nodded, lips pressed firmly together. “It was a setup.”

“Yup,” Jackson agreed, still cheerful. “Our mutual friend has pretty canny instincts. She didn’t believe the massage therapist act for a moment.”

Hunter raised an eyebrow at Kiera and she grinned sheepishly.

“Well, I guess I’ve overstayed my welcome,” Jackson said, breaking the tension.

“You might say that,” Kiera muttered.

Jackson reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Kiera frowned, wondering what on earth he was up to. He reached into the wallet and gave her a positively evil grin.

“Just in case,” he said, whipping something out of the wallet and throwing it to her.

Instinctively, she caught it. Jackson slipped out the door. Kiera’s cheeks flamed as she opened her hand and saw the foil-wrapped package that lay in her palm. She quickly closed her hand again. Outside, she heard Jackson laughing at his little jest. She wished the floor would open up and swallow her. She didn’t dare look at Hunter.

She heard his footsteps approaching but kept her gaze locked on the floor, heat radiating from her cheeks. Hunter took her clenched fist in his hand and gently pried her fingers open, taking the condom and slipping it into his pants pocket.

“How much does he know?” Hunter asked.

“Pretty much everything,” Kiera mumbled. She couldn’t read anything from his voice and she was still too embarrassed to risk looking at his face. Unfortunately, looking down as she was, she couldn’t help noticing the bulge that adorned the front of Hunter’s pants. Her cheeks flamed even hotter. He cupped her face in both hands and raised her head until their eyes met.

Her heart fluttered when she saw the hungry look in his eyes. But he *couldn’t* be looking at her like that, not now, not when his mission had already failed. He started to bend down, his lips parting for a kiss. Despite everything, she yearned for the feel of his lips on hers, and she tilted her head backward to

give him better access.

Hunter jerked to a stop before he’d closed even half the distance between them. He closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “It’s just damned hard to control myself with you around.” His hands slipped away from her face and he took a step backward.

She shook her head. “You can’t mean that.”

He frowned at her. “Of course I can. I promised to tell you the truth, remember?” He glanced down at the still-prominent bulge in his pants. “Do you think I’m faking this?”

The words sent a tremor of desire through her, and her common sense decided to go on another vacation. As though drawn there magnetically, her hand reached out to stroke the length of his erection. He let out a breathy groan, growing even harder at her touch.

It had been so long since she’d had a man inside her. Two years. And Jon had been a lousy lover, much too interested in his own pleasure to bother much about hers. She already knew Hunter wasn’t like that, for he’d sent her to the stars last night while remaining firmly on earth himself. He moved closer to her, his breath coming in audible gasps.

“I know after everything that’s happened you have no reason to trust me,” he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the condom again. “But you can be sure I haven’t tampered with this. And I would dearly love to finish what we started last night, if you’re willing.”

Willing? Her whole body felt near to bursting into flames with the heat of her desire. There would still be a risk, of course. Condoms had been known to break, and if Hunter was

still determined to carry out his mission, then he could probably manage to break it on purpose. But she was in a relatively safe part of her cycle. And surely he wouldn't depend on making her pregnant in one try, so even if he was still plotting against her, he would have to play it safe this time.

The overwhelming desire overrode any lingering doubts, and she smiled up at him as she took his hand. "My bedroom's this way," she said, tugging him along after her.

Before she'd taken two steps, he'd swept her up into his arms. "I know where it is," he said, then sealed her mouth off with a kiss.

### Chapter 13

Kiera had never had a man carry her to bed before last night, but that seemed to be Hunter's strategy of choice. It felt rather nice, she decided as she clung to his neck and felt her heartbeat speed to match his. He moved swiftly, pushing her bedroom door shut with his foot and laying her down on her bed. As soon as her head hit the pillow, his mouth was upon her, giving hungry, ardent kisses that made her head spin. She wanted to savor the taste of his tongue, but his kisses soon moved downward as his fingers deftly unbuttoned her blouse. She buried her hands in his hair, amazed by the amount of heat he generated in her.

Hunter bared her breasts in record time, his hands eagerly caressing her as she pressed herself against him. When he took one taut peak into his mouth, she moaned loudly, digging her hands into his scalp.

His mouth was relentless, licking and suckling until she thought she'd go mad with it. She writhed beneath him,

wanting more even as she moaned in pleasure. As if sensing her need, he suddenly released her nipple and moved back up to capture her mouth with a kiss while one skillful, wicked hand worked her jeans open. She tilted her hips upward, and he impatiently swept both jeans and panties out of the way. The stroke of his fingers through her curls almost sent her over the edge.

Hunter deepened his kiss, his tongue sliding slowly in and out of her mouth in an unmistakable rhythm. Blood pounded in her ears, and the anticipation became almost unbearable. His fingers began moving in time to his tongue, stroking the sensitive bud that ached for them. The unbearable anticipation felt so good Kiera almost hated to let it end, but the insistent strokes of his fingers and his tongue brought her steadily closer to the edge until she finally teetered over. She arched into him, crying out as best she could with his tongue in her mouth, her hands gripping him with desperate strength. The pleasure came in waves of heat, which the stroke of his fingers nursed for every drop of delight.

When the spasms finally stopped, Kiera shuddered and went limp. Hunter broke the kiss and let her take greedy gasps of air. A velvet laugh escaped his lips, and his eyes glowed as he watched her, drinking in her pleasure.

"I take it that was adequate?" he asked, his lips curled into a smug smile.

Kiera put a hand to her chest, feeling the insistent pounding of her over-excited heart. "It was all right," she said grudgingly as she grinned up at him.

He sat up and loomed over her as he unbuttoned his shirt. "Well, I'll have to find a way to elicit a more enthusiastic

response,” he said as he shrugged his shoulders out of his shirt and unbuttoned his fly.

“Any more enthusiasm might kill me,” she protested, lying limply on the bed as anticipation mounted once more. Then Hunter slid his pants off, and all thoughts of teasing and quips fled her mind.

She had never in the past been much impressed with male nudity. She enjoyed a well-toned body as much as the next girl, but it seemed to her that the male sexual equipment was rather utilitarian in form and was generally best kept out of sight until needed.

All it took to change her mind was Hunter.

Instead of trying to avoid looking at it—which was what she’d always done in the past—Kiera found herself staring at his erection. She reached out to stroke it, fingers sliding softly from base to tip and back again as Hunter’s breath hissed in and out. That smooth, silky texture was infinitely appealing, and she kept stroking.

“If you don’t want to risk having me inside you,” he said between gasping breaths, “just keep doing that and I’ll be quite satisfied.”

She gave a cursory consideration to the idea, but shook it off almost instantly. “I wouldn’t be,” she told him, then closed her hand around him and gave a very gentle but insistent tug toward her.

Hunter laughed tightly. “I do love a woman who knows what she wants.” He reached for the condom and tore the packet open. He fumbled a bit as he unrolled it, frowning in concentration.

When he was properly armored, Hunter rolled over on top

of her, kissing her deeply as he parted her legs with his body. She opened for him with no hesitation, amazed to discover that she didn’t feel even slightly nervous or uncomfortable, as she usually did when she slept with a man for the first time.

Hunter broke the kiss for a moment, keeping his lips only millimeters from hers. “Are you sure?” he whispered.

Kiera raised her head and brushed her lips against his. “Yes.”

As soon as the word left her mouth, he was inside her, and she sucked in a startled breath because it felt so unbelievably good. Hunter misinterpreted that gasp and lay perfectly still on top of her, his eyes widening with dismay as he peered into her face.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, and Kiera had to fight a laugh at the alarm in his voice.

“God, no!” she said, smiling up at him as she squeezed his hips with her thighs. “You feel . . . incredible.”

Relief flooded his face, and he gave her a gentle, tender kiss as he thrust into her in a maddeningly slow rhythm. She wrapped her legs around him, wanting to savor each delicious stroke, amazed at the pleasure and need he was able to induce in her. He raised his head and looked into her eyes, seeming to drink in her pleasure as his thrusts inevitably picked up speed. Her back and neck arched, but she stubbornly kept her eyes open, watching Hunter watching her, his obvious joy in pleasuring her making the pleasure all the more powerful. She ran her hands down his body until they were cupped around his buttocks and she could feel the sleek muscles there bunching and releasing.

Kiera was practically purring with pleasure, loving the feel

of him inside her, loving the way he filled her, most of all loving the way he looked at her as he moved. His eyes spoke quite clearly that he was making love to her, that she wasn't just a convenient receptacle for his need. Always in the past—especially with Jon—she'd felt as if once the actual sex began, the emotion ceased. But not this time.

“You're amazing,” she whispered, and his eyes glowed with pleasure.

“Not as amazing as *you* are,” he whispered back, a hint of a grin on his lips. “I want to feel you come with me inside you.”

The words triggered a moment of unease. As good as this felt, she wasn't heading for orgasm, and she wondered if she should start working on a fake one. But she'd always been too self-conscious to fake it very effectively, and she didn't particularly want that lie between them when they were being so honest with one another.

“I'm not one of those lucky women who can have multiple orgasms,” she confessed, internally bracing herself for a rebuff.

Hunter's eyes darkened and his nostrils flared, and once more she was reminded of a dangerous predator, though this time the image didn't scare her. His grin became fierce. “Lady, you're not leaving this bed until you come for me.”

He gave her no time to argue, clouding her thoughts once more with a spectacular kiss. When he came up for air, she told herself she was going to have to fake it after all, no matter how uncomfortable it made her. Then, Hunter shifted position, skillfully unwrapping her legs from his hips and turning her over onto her side. He slid one arm under her neck and pulled her up against him in a spoon position, still buried inside her.

“Let's see if we can't change your luck,” he whispered in her ear as his other hand slid down her belly and between her legs. His fingers searched her curls until they found the perfect spot, and he began stroking her there in time to his thrusts.

The sensation was like nothing Kiera had ever known before. She instantly forgot all thoughts of faking it as his touch lit a fire in her center. She groaned and clutched a pillow, wishing she could clutch Hunter instead. His lips brushed the side of her neck and his thrusts picked up speed once more. She released the pillow to brace herself against his power, savoring every sensation as she spiraled ever closer to release.

When that release came, the sound that emanated from her throat was practically a wail. The power of it seized her like a rag-doll, shaking her helplessly, and she could hardly breathe through the pleasure. Hunter roared in fierce satisfaction, the urgency of his thrusts almost sending her off the side of the bed because she was too mindless in her own pleasure to brace herself properly.

Her body bathed in sweat, her muscles quivering and weak, Kiera lay on her side and gasped for breath as her heart pounded. Hunter's arms relaxed around her and she heard his heavy breathing, felt the hurried drum-beats of his heart. He rested only a few moments before he withdrew. Kiera mustered enough energy to turn over and look at him, meaning to protest his hasty withdrawal. Then she remembered all the logical reasons why she shouldn't be sleeping with him in the first place and was grateful to see him taking the proper precautions with the condom.

Kiera closed her eyes and rested her forearm across her

brow, trying to slow her breathing to a more healthy level before she passed out. She felt Hunter stirring beside her, but opening her eyes seemed to require too much effort.

“Was I too rough with you?” he asked softly.

She laughed. No way in hell he thought he’d been too rough! He was fishing for compliments. He deserved them.

She finally found the energy to open her eyes and smile at him. “You were fantastic,” she told him, reaching out to stroke his cheek. “I’ve never had it so good.” She shivered with remembered pleasure.

His eyes twinkled with mischief. “I bet you say that to all the guys. You’re far too nice to risk bruising a man’s ego.”

Her smile faded some, for he’d hit uncomfortably close to the mark.

“What did I say?” Hunter asked, looking alarmed.

She shook her head. “It wasn’t what you said. At least, not really.” She pressed herself against him, wrapping an arm around him and squeezing tightly. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I’d never had it so good.” She slid her hand onto his chest, stroking his sweat-dampened skin with her index finger. “It’s true that I’ve told other men that it was good when it wasn’t particularly. I just . . . I didn’t realize it could be better.”

He turned onto his side and gathered her into his arms. “I’m so glad I managed to do *something* right,” he murmured.

Kiera snuggled deeper into his arms, savoring the feel of his warmth against her. He’d done something right, all right. And he’d done it so right she wondered if she’d ever be satisfied with another man again. She suppressed a sigh. She would have to be satisfied, somehow. Even if she and her mother and Seamus managed to work a miracle and save

Hunter’s life, this relationship of theirs would be temporary. Much as she’d enjoyed what they’d just done, she was keenly aware that she didn’t fully trust Hunter. If she’d trusted him fully, she wouldn’t have had that niggling worry that he might purposely break the condom. And she wouldn’t feel that disquieting feeling that she had just dodged a bullet.

“You’ve tensed up,” Hunter said, pushing her gently away so he could look into her face.

She swallowed hard. “It’s been a confusing couple of days. I’m a bit of a basket-case right now.”

“Hmm.” He reached out to stroke her cheek with the back of his hand. “You won’t hurt my feelings if you admit you don’t trust me,” he said, and she couldn’t help wincing to realize how obvious she was. “If I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t trust me either.” He raised her chin, urging her to look into his eyes. “I promise you that I won’t let you come to harm, by my hand or anyone else’s. But I don’t expect you to trust me when I haven’t earned it, and I won’t act like a wounded puppy if you take precautions to protect yourself. Okay?”

She nodded, afraid she might start to cry if she spoke.

Hunter’s face turned grim. “Now, while you’re being so agreeable, let’s talk about why I came up here. Believe it or not, I had a purpose other than getting you into bed.”

She sighed, wishing she could have basked in the afterglow just a little longer. “That doesn’t sound very promising.”

“Your mother stopped by to see me.”

Kiera covered her face with her hands and groaned. “I’m going to kill her.”

“She’s just looking out for you.” He sat up beside her and pulled her hands away from her face. Sadness filled his eyes. “You’re very lucky to have a mother who looks out for you.”

Thinking about what *his* mother was like made her feel like a whiny brat for complaining about her own mother. “I know I am,” she said. “But it isn’t all sweetness and light. I love my mom dearly, but she’s a pain in the ass, especially when she starts treating me like I’m twelve.” She shook her head, trying to calm her temper, which seemed determined to sweep her away despite her internal reprimands. “I don’t even want to think about what she might have said to you!”

He snorted. “Of course you don’t! That’s because you know I’m going to agree with her.” He took her hand and squeezed tightly. “I can’t possibly put into words how much I appreciate the thought, but Kiera don’t you dare stick your neck out for me.”

She scowled at him. “If you think I’m just going to sit back and do nothing while they kill you, then you don’t know me at all.”

“And if you think I’m going to let you go to battle against the Unseelie Court, then *you* don’t know *me* at all. It’s my battle to fight.”

Kiera sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest because it didn’t feel right to argue with him while he was staring at her breasts. “You can’t take on the whole Court by yourself, Hunter. You have to let me help.”

“But you can’t. Two people against the Unseelie Court is no better than one. And don’t forget, I’m Unseelie myself.”

She frowned and looked at him more closely. “I thought the Unseelie Court was just goblins and monsters. You’re not

either one. In fact, if I didn’t know better, I would swear you’re just a regular human being.”

He shrugged. “I was sired by a human man and borne by a humanoid woman, so you’re right, I don’t look like a member of the Unseelie Court. But I’m Unseelie all the same.”

“But why?”

He blinked as though the question were unheard of. “Because my mother is the Queen of Air and Darkness!”

“So? That’s your mother. What makes *you* Unseelie, when you aren’t a member of any of the Unseelie races? Isn’t there something inherent in being a goblin that makes them Unseelie? Something that you *don’t* have?”

He shifted uncomfortably, his eyes looking troubled. “I’ve spent all my life in the Unseelie Court, Kiera. It’s the only life I know. Maybe it isn’t inherent in me, but I’ve been raised to it.”

She shook her head, warming to the subject as pieces began to fit together in her mind. “If you were a goblin—a true Unseelie creature—would you have spared me?”

His jaws clamped stubbornly. “I’m *not* a goblin, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh come on, Hunter. I may not have believed my mother’s stories growing up, but I did listen to them. Goblins and bogles and redcaps . . . they’re all evil creatures. All. There’s no such thing as a goblin with a heart of gold. I don’t think they’re capable of being good. *That’s* what makes them Unseelie, Hunter, not the fact that they grew up in the Unseelie Court. But you’re different.”

There was a strange expression on his face, one that mingled hope and horror and doubt. “It doesn’t matter!” he

declared, but Kiera suspected she had given him some food for serious thought. “Whether I’m Unseelie or not, I’m still my mother’s son, and she will still want to punish me for my failure. If you get in the way, she could kill you too, and I couldn’t bear that. Please, Kiera. Be safe.”

She had no choice but to back down, at least for the moment. All his defenses were up, every protective instinct urging him to fight her. And there was nothing she could do for him right now anyway, not until Seamus returned from Faerie. The best she could do was make sure none of his cohorts found out his cover was blown. She supposed she’d already gone a long way toward doing that.

She forced herself to relax and smile at him, despite her fears for his safety. “All right, you win. For the moment, I won’t do anything that might get me in trouble.” *Except sleep with you.* “And if I have any creative or dangerous ideas, I’ll run them by you before I try them. Okay?”

His expression as he examined her face was distinctly suspicious. “I swear I should just gang up with your mother and lock you in your bedroom until this is all over.”

“I’d find a way to escape. Now, enough of this conversation.” She put a hand on his chest and pushed him back down onto the bed. “I have other plans for you.”

Hunter gave her one of his lopsided grins. “Remember, your friend only gave you one condom.”

She had indeed entirely forgotten that and she shook her head at herself. “I’ll scold him for his lack of foresight later.” She sighed dramatically. “I suppose that means an encore is out of the question.”

“There’s a drug store right around the corner. I wouldn’t

want to leave you unsatisfied.”

“Unsatisfied is not the word I’d use to describe myself right now.”

Hunter slipped out of the bed and began pulling on his clothing. “How about ‘greedy?’ Is that a better word?”

Kiera grabbed a pillow and swatted his butt with it. He howled in mock pain and clutched his luscious cheeks as though mortally wounded. She laughed, amazed at the emotional roller coaster she’d been riding over the past twenty-four hours.

When Hunter pulled on his pants, she caught a glimpse of the bandage on his leg and felt a twinge of guilt. “You should stay here and let me go to the drugstore,” she said, starting to get up.

He put her back in bed with a scolding look. “I can walk a half a block without collapsing, thank you very much. Especially when I know the reward that awaits me when I return.” He finished buttoning his shirt and leaned over to kiss her forehead. “I’ll be back soon.”

Kiera turned over on her side, watching Hunter’s back until he disappeared from sight, her body already beginning to react to the promise of his return.

Hunter’s thoughts rushed willy-nilly across his mind, flitting from one impossible subject to another. He tried to keep pushing his thoughts back to the incredible gift Kiera had given him—and planned to give him again when he returned. That he didn’t deserve it went without saying. But he wanted it with such a deep-seated intensity that he couldn’t imagine turning her down.

Enticing as the thought of losing himself in her body was, the glow of pleasant anticipation was interrupted frequently with a single, innocent question that had rocked the very foundation of his world. *What makes you Unseelie?* It was something he had never thought to question before, something that he had taken for a given. But, though he had balked at the thought when Kiera mentioned it, he began to wonder if there was any chance she was right.

He couldn't deny that the full-blooded creatures of the Unseelie Court were unfailingly evil. He'd never heard of one that had a conscience of any sort. And hadn't he always felt that gap between himself and the rest of the Court, hadn't he always noted that he didn't enjoy cruelty the way they did?

A spark of hope lit somewhere in his chest. The Unseelie creatures were born evil, and he honestly believed they were incapable of being otherwise. But he obviously was capable of being a good man, even if he hadn't always exercised that option. Perhaps he was not as tainted as he'd thought.

His mind was so occupied by these thoughts that he walked to the drugstore and bought the condoms in something of a daze, hardly noticing his surroundings. His hopes of redemption were tempered by the knowledge that whether he was genuinely Unseelie or not mattered little to his ultimate fate.

Still puzzling over the implications, Hunter walked back toward the apartment with his head down and his shoulders hunched against the persistent cold. He was distracted enough that he didn't immediately notice that someone had fallen into step beside him. Then the familiar, dreaded odor reached his nostrils and snapped him out of his reverie.

"Penny for your thoughts, Prince?" Bane said, throwing an arm around his shoulders and neatly plucking the paper bag out of his hands.

Hunter's eyes watered from the miasma that rose from Bane's body and he shrugged the arm off violently. Bane clearly enjoyed his revulsion. Hunter hoped the brief contact hadn't imbued his leather coat with the stench of goblin.

"Whatcha got in the bag?" Bane asked, not waiting for an answer. "Oh-ho!" he crowed, pulling out the three boxes of condoms. "Progress at last, I take it"

Several passers-by cast a curious glance in their direction. Hunter tried to grab the condoms out of the goblin's hand, but he jerked them out of reach like a schoolyard bully.

"Will you stop making such a goddamned spectacle!" Hunter growled.

Bane laughed, but put the condoms back in the bag. "Extra large, eh? Mighty proud of yourself, aren't you Boyo?"

"You know, she's up there waiting for me and you're delaying my mission."

Bane tucked the bag of condoms into a coat pocket. "You don't need these for your mission."

Hunter pulled back the reins on his temper and was glad he was able to do so with relative ease. "This is the twenty-first century. She's not going to let me bed her without protection. I'll poke some holes in them. There, are you satisfied?"

Hunter didn't like the sly intelligence of Bane's glance. "There's a slim chance she might notice the holes. It would be more effective to spell them. I'm sure the Queen could manage a very clever spell that would cause them to tear at a convenient moment—like, for instance, when she's fertile."

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Hunter agreed, and he was pretty sure he did a good job of keeping his revulsion out of his face and voice. “But she’s in bed waiting for me right now, and I need that bag. I’ll try my way for the moment, and you can bring me some spelled ones later. Now hurry up and hand them over. If you delay me any longer, I’m going to have a hard time explaining why I’ve been gone so long, and we risk making her suspicious.”

Bane shrugged and pulled the bag out of his pocket once more. “All right, Boyo. Go do your worst. But don’t bother poking holes. If she notices, you’ve blown it completely. I’ll bring you some special ones tomorrow. Go ahead and f—”

Hunter’s hand darted out and seized the collar of Bane’s coat, twisting the fabric there and choking off the words. “Don’t say it,” he said calmly as he retrieved the bag of condoms with his other hand.

The goblin’s eyes burned into his with chilling malevolence. “You’re not starting to get sentimental about this, are you Prince?”

Hunter quickly determined that lying was pointless, for Bane had already made up his mind that it was so. “It doesn’t matter if I am.” He let some of his anguish show. “I have no choice in the matter, and I won’t let sentiment get in the way.”

Bane reached for the hand that clutched his collar, prying at the fingers. Hunter realized he could end up with broken fingers if he didn’t let go, so he released Bane and took a step back.

“Are we through here,” he asked, “or are you going to delay me even more?”

“We’re through once you tell me what happened to your

leg.”

Hunter turned his back and started hurrying toward the apartment building. “Dog bit me,” he said over his shoulder, and was mightily relieved when Bane didn’t call him back and force him to explain in more detail.