

## Chapter 15

Kiera snuggled into the warmth of Hunter's body as they walked the four blocks from the comedy club back to their apartment building. His arm around her shoulders felt wonderful, and the scent of his leather coat blended beautifully with his cologne.

Although the evening had been truly romantic, with a scrumptious candle-lit dinner and enough sexual innuendo to leave her blood singing in anticipation, she'd sensed a certain underlying sadness in Hunter tonight. His laughter at the comedy club had sounded hollow to her ears, and even now, when she was basking in the glory of being close to him, she felt the pall.

She held her peace until they were safely back in his apartment. He took her coat and draped it over a chair. While he slipped off his own coat, she turned to him, arms akimbo.

"All right. Tell me what's wrong," she demanded.

He halted momentarily, then laid his coat on top of hers and turned to face her. "Nothing beyond the usual." He smiled, but it was a very sad smile. "Don't let me put a damper on the

evening with my mood." His smile transformed from sad to lascivious. "Actually, you might be able to *improve* my mood."

She'd been aching all evening to have him inside her, so she decided to figure out why he was especially gloomy today at some later time. She flashed him a mock-innocent glance and batted her eyelashes. "I can't imagine what you might be talking about."

He came to stand only inches from her, close enough that she could feel the warmth of his body even though they weren't touching. She had to strain her neck to meet his eyes, but it was worth it to see the light that shone in them. Oh, it was going to be hot tonight, all right!

Kiera rose to her tiptoes so she could brush her lips against his. He started to lean forward to take her lips more firmly, but she put a hand on his chest to hold him off. It seemed to take a mountain of self-control for him not to plow on through her resistance. She licked her lips invitingly, still holding him off.

"If I'm to cheer you up, you have to let me do this my way," she told him.

He raised his eyebrows. "Your way? What's wrong with *my* way?" He narrowed his eyes as if in anger, but the expression in them was pure mischief. "You've never complained about it before."

She laughed. Perhaps she should have tried taking charge before. She rather liked seeing Hunter out of his element. "Now, now, no pouting. Be a good boy and humor me."

He sighed heavily and put on a look of stoic acceptance. "Oh, all right! If you insist."

She looked him over from head to toe, a grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. She circled him, continuing her slow examination, then put both hands on his chest and worked the top button of his shirt loose. Hunter closed his eyes in pleasure

as she lightly stroked the skin her fingers had exposed. Her fingertips felt the ever-increasing speed of his pulse. She freed two more buttons, then planted a series of soft kisses on his chest as her hands continued their work.

Kiera savored the taste of him as her kisses turned more ardent and she heightened the torment with little flicks of her tongue. When the last button was open, she untucked the shirt from his pants with a swift, sure motion. Hunter shrugged his shoulders until the shirt fell free. She allowed herself to admire his lean but muscular frame for a moment before slipping her arms around him and continuing her oral exploration.

Hunter, clearly not used to being a passive lover, raised his hands with the obvious intention of cupping her breasts, but she grabbed his wrists to still them.

“Remember, I’m in charge here,” she said, her lips only millimeters from his skin.

“I’m not allowed to touch you?”

She laughed and ran the tip of her tongue over his nipple. “All in good time.”

He lowered his hands back to his sides with obvious reluctance. “I’m at your mercy. Do with me as you will.”

She complied by teasing first one nipple then the other into a hard little bud as she pressed her body against him, moving her hips so she could feel the hard length of his erection. Her fingernails raked down his back, then plunged under the waistband of his pants.

“Ah, woman, you’re killing me!” he complained breathlessly as her hands stroked his ass. But he obediently kept his own hands at his sides. Her patience with the foreplay was wavering, so she withdrew her hands and unbuckled his

belt. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” he said.

She glanced up at his face briefly as she slid his zipper down. Despite his grumbling, his face practically glowed with pleasure, and he was watching her hands with heavy-lidded eyes. She pulled the pants and shorts down, biting her lower lip in anticipation when his erection sprang free.

Hunter’s pants and shorts were gathered at his ankles. He tried to free his feet, but he was still wearing his shoes and socks. Kiera stilled his efforts with firm hands.

“Here, let me,” she said, then knelt and slipped his shoes and socks off, tossing them aside. The pants and shorts soon followed. When she straightened, Kiera found herself on eye level with his penis. She reached up to run her fingers gently over the smooth shaft, smiling in pleasure to hear the moan that escaped Hunter’s lips. “I suppose while I’m in the neighborhood . . .” she murmured, then mimicked the course of her fingers with her tongue.

Hunter’s moan turned into a near wail, and his breaths came in short gasps. Feeling bolder and more uninhibited than she could ever remember feeling, Kiera slipped her hand between his legs to cup his balls while she opened her mouth and took him in. He buried his hands in her hair as she sucked greedily, running her tongue against his shaft, drunk with her power to arouse him. She took him deeper, then moved her tongue in an unmistakable rhythm that started his hips thrusting.

“Kiera, stop,” he croaked, his hands urging her head away from him.

Her own desire raged so fiercely that it took a concerted effort to release him. She looked up at him, wondering if

somehow she had offended him with her forwardness. The look in his eyes instantly quelled that worry.

“I want to be making love to you when I come,” he told her. He drew her to her feet and kissed her, hard and deep.

For a moment, Kiera forgot that she was in charge and lost herself in Hunter’s breathtaking kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body tight to his, putting just enough space between her thighs to fit his erection. But she’d been having too much fun teasing and pleasuring him, so when her head cleared from that first waft of fog, she once more pulled away.

“Kiera,” he said in warning tones, his predatory nature fully revealed in his posture and expression.

She grinned, entirely unintimidated. “Behave yourself, Hunter Teague. Remember, tonight I’m running the show.” She ran a finger along his shaft once more, watched the flame dance in his eyes. “I promise not to disappoint.”

He took a shuddering breath. “I’m cooperating to the best of my ability, but if you don’t hurry this along I’m going to ravage you against the wall.”

Deciding that he was indeed near the point of losing all control, Kiera relented and started toward his bedroom, shedding clothes as she went, Hunter hot on her heels. By the time she passed through the bedroom door, she was naked, her clothes strewn in a line behind her.

When they neared his bed, Hunter reached for her, then caught himself just as she was about to give him another gentle reminder. He lowered his hands back to his sides.

“Lie down,” she commanded, jerking her chin toward the bed. He raised a single eyebrow, but hesitated only briefly

before he obeyed. He lay on his side, propped on his elbow, and watched as she opened the drawer in his nightstand. She stuck out her lower lip as she picked up the single box of condoms that remained. “Looks like we’ve decimated your supply,” she said as she opened the box and shook out the final two foil-wrapped packages. “We’ll have to make these count.”

“Believe me, I plan to get my money’s worth out of them. Now get over here!”

She laughed and opened one of the packets, putting the condom on the pillow where it would be in easy reach when needed. Then she climbed onto the bed and pushed on Hunter’s shoulder until he lay flat on his back. She straddled him, covering his chest with kisses once more. When his groans grew desperate, she lifted her head to meet his eyes and decided she had tortured him enough. She put the condom on him, the touch of her hands making his back arch with pleasure.

Kiera slowly, deliciously lowered herself onto him. Waves of heat radiated from their joined bodies, leaving her breathless. Hunter reached for her breasts, and she was too suffused with pleasure to argue with him. She leaned into his hands, rocking her hips gently, wanting to draw out the pleasure as long as possible.

Hunter tolerated her deliberate pace for a few delicious minutes; then, Kiera gave a startled gasp as he pitched below her. Before she knew quite what was happening, she found herself on her back, Hunter thrusting hard and deep on top of her. She wrapped arms and legs around him drawing his head down to hers so their tongues could dance.

The bed creaked and groaned in protest as the power of

Hunter's thrusts shoved them both up to the headboard. A groan escaped Kiera with each breath and she dug her fingernails into his shoulders, her hips rising to meet his. She had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming when the climax seized her. Hunter followed close behind, letting out a roar that was probably heard throughout the ninth floor.

Kiera closed her eyes and tried to slow her gasping breaths, her body limp and sated. Arms and legs slid away from Hunter's body and she lay still as she listened to the pounding of the blood in her ears. She wanted nothing more than to lie like this forever, Hunter's body hot and heavy above her. But he needed to withdraw and get rid of the condom. She opened her eyes to remind him of the necessity.

Words died in her throat when she saw his face. No hint of color remained in his cheeks, and misery filled his eyes. Her heart clutched to see his distress and she reached up to touch his cheek gently.

"What's the matter, Hunter?" she asked.

He closed his eyes, but that did nothing to hide the misery etched into the lines of his face. He sat up and withdrew from her.

"Hunter?" she prompted. But then she saw the reason for the change in him and she felt as though her heart had stopped.

The condom had ruptured.

Seconds dragged by as Kiera tried to absorb what had just happened to her, as she realized what she had first taken for misery on his face was actually guilt. Her heart slammed painfully against her chest, and though she knew tears would come later, the fury was so great that for the moment her eyes remained dry.

"You bastard!" she shouted. "You heartless, soulless bastard!" She jerked herself away from him, disentangling her legs with some difficulty. A sob rose from her chest and her eyes burned, though the tears remained lodged within her. She lurched off the bed. "How could I have been so stupid?"

Hunter grabbed her arms. She tried to jab backward with her elbows, but she couldn't get enough momentum to do more than annoy him.

"Kiera, wait," he said, his voice maddeningly calm.

"Let go of me!" She tried to tear her arms from his grip, but he was far too strong. What kind of idiot let herself fall into bed with a man who'd admitted lying to her, trying to seduce her under false pretenses? And what kind of deluded wishful thinking had led her to think he would suffer the tortures of the Unseelie Court to spare her? "I should have let Seamus kill you!"

"Maybe so."

She felt sick to her stomach, and his fingers dug harshly into her flesh. "You're hurting me!" she cried, but his grip didn't slacken.

"I'm sorry. But I need you to hear this even though I know you won't believe me. Kiera, I didn't do it on purpose. I swear to you."

But his words fell on deaf ears. She remembered how he'd interrupted the blow job he'd obviously been enjoying. And she remembered how he'd been unwilling to lie still beneath her. If she'd needed any further evidence that she had been the worst kind of fool, these facts were it.

"I've heard it," she snarled. "Now let me go! And you sure as hell better find a deep hole to hide in, because when my

mother finds out what you've done, your life won't be worth shit."

Hunter released her arms. She stumbled forward, and it was only by the greatest willpower that she refrained from running naked out into the hall to escape him. She snatched up her clothes, buttoning her shirt unevenly, sticking her bra and panties into a pocket. Shoving her feet into her shoes, she rushed toward the front door as if pursued.

She was dimly aware that Hunter had followed her out to the living room, but she didn't look back as she yanked the door open.

"I love you."

Hunter's voice followed her, but the words didn't even slow her down as she slammed the door behind her and punched the button on the elevator with tears now pouring freely down her cheeks.

Hunter removed the remains of the ruined condom, flinging it violently away from him as his knees gave out. He landed heavily on his butt, sitting naked and stunned in the middle of his living room.

He remembered Bane handling the bag of condoms, remembered the goblin suggesting he use ones that had been spelled to break when Kiera was fertile. Bane had brought him the spelled condoms the next day, but Hunter had thrown them away, just to be sure he didn't accidentally use one. He might have thought that tonight's condom really did break because he'd been too vigorous, but every instinct told him that wasn't the case.

No, Bane had somehow tampered with the ones he'd taken

from Hunter. That was why the damned goblin had played keep-away with them, why he'd acted like he didn't think Hunter needed them. It had all been a ruse, which suggested that either Bane or his mother or both knew he wouldn't have the heart to betray Kiera of his own accord.

Damn them both, and damn the Unseelie Court, and damn him right along with them! How could he not have seen the danger? And why couldn't he have gracefully disappeared this afternoon after speaking with Cathy? He had wanted to say goodbye to Kiera, to make love to her one more time. And for that selfish desire, he had ruined everything.

The condoms had been spelled to break if Kiera was fertile. Which meant she was now pregnant. But she wouldn't let him near her to try to protect her and the baby—he was certain of that too. Not to mention that he probably didn't have the means to protect either of them effectively. It wasn't as though he'd been capable of protecting even himself.

Was it hopeless? Was there no way he could save Kiera and their child from the evil of the Unseelie Court?

Despair weighed heavily on his shoulders, and he hadn't the strength to rise from the floor. He'd never felt so helpless before, not even as a seven-year-old child watching his father's execution. At least then, he'd been secure in the knowledge that there was nothing he could do. Now his soul screamed that there *had* to be something he could do.

And it occurred to him that there *was*. His chances of success were slim at best. And he condemned himself to the slow and painful death he'd dreaded for so long, whether he succeeded or failed. But if there was a chance in a thousand that he could undo the damage he'd inflicted on Kiera, then he

would take it.

The resolve strengthened him. He would have to take some precautions before he left, would have to give Kiera the greatest possible chance to hold off the forces of the Unseelie Court if he failed. She would have to accept the imprisonment in her mother's house that he had refused for himself. He thought for the sake of the child she would do it. However, he had to explain what had happened or she would never go to her mother's house.

She was far too wounded and angry to let him in her apartment or answer her phone or even read a letter that he passed her. He needed a messenger. He briefly considered calling Cathy, but her maternal fury was more than he was willing to face. She and Seamus might hunt him down and kill him before he escaped to Faerie, for they were no more likely to believe his innocence than Kiera.

Then he remembered the flighty Jackson Davis, who had started all the present madness by giving Kiera that first condom. His heart aching, but his resolve firm, Hunter dragged himself up from the floor.

Kiera's eyes were swollen with crying. She bent over her bathroom sink and splashed a handful of cold water on her face. The water's cold bite helped drag her from the heartsick stupor she'd been in ever since she'd left Hunter's apartment.

Hunter's betrayal hurt in every pore. How could she have allowed herself to trust him after she knew the truth about him? What an utter fool she had been! She probably *deserved* the pain she was in, just for being so stupid.

Into that fog of pain intruded a memory—Hunter's soft,

despairing voice whispering *I love you* as she fled.

She didn't believe it, of course. He wouldn't have betrayed her like that if he loved her. And it was impossible to believe that the breaking of the condom had been an accident, not under the circumstances. Still, there was some small, desperate part of her that wanted to believe it had been, wanted to believe that under his Unseelie facade lay a good man with a good heart.

The doorbell rang. Kiera stepped out of the bathroom and stared at her front door. It had to be Hunter, coming to try to explain his way out of everything now that she'd had some time to calm down. She wasn't about to give him the opportunity.

The doorbell rang again, and was shortly followed by Jackson's voice. "Kiera, I know you're in there," he said. "Let me in."

She shook her head in confusion, frowning at her watch. It was almost midnight. What the hell was Jackson doing here at this hour? A hint of alarm made her start toward the door, though as she crossed the short distance she thought to herself that surely he would have called first if something were wrong.

Hunter's betrayal had awakened every self-protective instinct in Kiera's body, and she checked through the peephole to make sure that it was really Jackson who demanded entry. And to make sure he was alone.

She swung the door cautiously open just as Jackson was reaching for the doorbell again. He let his hand drop back to his side when he saw her.

"What are you doing here, Jackson?" she asked in a tear-ravaged voice.

“May I come in?”

She would have said no, would have told him now wasn't a good time, if she weren't so sure he knew that already. Her shoulders slumping in defeat, she stepped out of the doorway to let him in. He stepped inside, then pushed the door closed and suddenly enveloped her in a hug.

Tears stinging once again in her eyes, she clung to him, absurdly grateful for his warm and comforting presence. For a long moment she remained in his embrace, trying not to think at all. Then he gently released her and guided her toward her bedroom. She was too numb and dispirited to ask him again what he was doing here.

Once in her bedroom, Jackson bade her sit and she obeyed without thought, leaning her back against the wall and clutching a pillow tightly to her chest. Jackson disappeared into her closet and returned carrying a small suitcase, which he opened and laid on the bed beside her.

Everything still felt strangely unreal, but Kiera found her voice. “What are you doing?”

“I'm helping you pack a bag. You need to spend some time at your mother's.”

She shook her head, the break from reality now worse. “What are you talking about? And what are you doing here?”

He pushed the suitcase aside and sat on the bed beside her, his eyes full of concern. “Hunter called me.” She winced at the sound of that name. “He told me what happened and asked me to get you to your mother's house ASAP.”

She rubbed her face, amazed that after what had happened Hunter would have the gall to try this. “Absolutely not!” she declared. “Hunter does *not* get to order me around, not after

what he did.”

“Well, here's the thing, Kiera: he says you're pregnant.”

The word was like a lightning bolt. Her hands clenched into sweaty fists and her heart leapt into her throat as she fixed Jackson with a disbelieving stare. “What?”

He looked sheepish and distinctly uncomfortable. “I'm not sure how much of this I'm buying, if any, but I'm trying to keep an open mind, since I've told *you* to do that any number of times. Hunter says there was a spell on the condom, and it broke because you were fertile.” His cheeks turned slightly pink, and Kiera thought that at any other time she would have teased him for his embarrassment. “He says you have to get to your mother's house and put yourself under her protection before anyone but him knows, or you're likely to be abducted by goblins.”

She groaned and closed her eyes. God, it was even worse than she'd thought. And after his pathetic attempts to persuade her of his innocence, here he was coming right out and admitting his guilt by telling her about the spell on the condom. The bastard! She tried to summon some righteous anger, for maybe anger would give her the strength she needed to face this horrible night. But the anger wouldn't come, the despair so strong no other emotion could take root.

“Let's pack you an overnight bag,” Jackson said, standing up once more. “Whatever's really going on, you're obviously in pain, and I think you're best off going to your mother's house.”

She nodded mutely and sat on her bed staring into space like an idiot as Jackson packed a bag for her.

Kiera hadn't said a word during the brief cab ride from her apartment to her mother's house. Jackson hadn't complained. He merely sat there and held her hand tightly, offering his silent support, for which she was so grateful she couldn't express it in words. He should have just dropped her off and then taken the taxi back to his own apartment, but he paid the driver and accompanied her to her mother's door, still holding her hand.

"I can take it from here, Jackson," she tried, surprised to find she still had a voice.

"I'm not leaving until I've seen you safely delivered into your mother's hands," he said, reaching out to ring the doorbell.

It took a while for her mother to come to the door. The house had been completely dark when the cab had pulled up, which meant her mother had been asleep already. Kiera's cheeks heated slightly. What if she *hadn't* been asleep? What if she were with Alonso? This could turn into an even worse nightmare!

When her mother opened the door, she was wearing a white terrycloth robe, and her skin was almost a perfect match for its color.

"Kiera, honey, what's wrong?" she cried.

A big, nasty lump had formed in Kiera's throat and she couldn't force out any words. Jackson nudged her shoulder, and she flung herself into her mother's arms.

"What is it?" her mother asked, sounding even more desperate.

"Hunter claims to have gotten her pregnant," Jackson answered.

Kiera's mother gripped her shoulders and pushed her away to look into her face. Kiera fought the tide of tears, knowing she wouldn't be able to speak a coherent sentence until somehow she regained control of herself. The look of stricken compassion in her mother's eyes nearly set her off again.

Still struggling with the tears, Kiera hardly noticed being guided into her mother's living room, or sitting on the sofa with Jackson beside her, or Phantom leaping up on the sofa on her other side and putting his head in her lap.

Taking slow, deep breaths, she absently scratched behind the dog's ears as her mother disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a cup of tea. Kiera took a sip, yearning for some warmth to thaw the ice that had formed in her chest and belly. Phantom sighed dramatically now that she was no longer scratching his ears, and that sound wrenched a part of her mind back into reality. She blinked and looked down at him, remembering that the head in her lap wasn't really a dog's.

"So," Jackson said, "that's the, uh, phooka, right?"

Kiera's mother gave her a reproving look and another piece of her self seemed to snap back into place. "Jackson knows everything," she said, then looked at Phantom once more. "Will you cut the loveable pooch act?"

He sat up on the couch and gave her a doggie grin, though when she noted the expression in his eyes she wondered how she could ever have mistaken him for a real dog. Kiera put her tea down and met Phantom's intelligent eyes.

"Any chance you can prove to Jackson that I haven't gone entirely insane?"

Phantom raised one eyebrow—something she couldn't ever remember seeing a dog do before—then turned a

questioning gaze to her mother, who shrugged.

“I can’t think of any reason why you shouldn’t,” she said, then turned her own questioning glance on Jackson. “You’re not going to faint dead away or anything, are you?”

“I might,” he said cheerfully, though he was looking a little wild-eyed. “But you can always revive me.”

His eyes suddenly widened even more, and Kiera turned to see Seamus sitting beside her. The phooka’s gaze was kindly compassionate as he looked at her.

“Tell us what has happened,” he urged.

By the time Kiera had spit out the whole story—her cheeks burning, for it was distinctly uncomfortable to talk about her sex life with her mother and two men—the look in the phooka’s eyes was anything but kindly.

“He will die for this,” he said in a voice so cold it sent chills down her spine.

Jackson cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s attention to himself. “Uh, I think maybe he’s not guilty.”

Seamus bared his teeth and glared, but Kiera put a hand on his shoulder to restrain him. “Let him talk!” she insisted.

Jackson rubbed his hands up and down his pants legs. “Here’s the thing: he called me and asked me to get Kiera safely here, where she’s, uh, protected by wardings or something.”

“Far too little, far too late,” Seamus snarled.

“But that’s not all.” Jackson reached into his jacket and pulled out a pair of envelopes, one of which was unmarked, and one of which had Kiera’s name written across the front. “He gave me these, and he said I should open this one,” here he held up the unmarked envelope, “when Kiera was under the

safety of your roof.”

Kiera’s mother reached out and snatched the envelope neatly from Jackson’s hand, sliding her finger under the flap and tearing it open in two quick flicks. She pulled the letter out and read it, her eyes darting quickly across the page. Kiera held her breath and reached for Jackson’s hand, needing the anchor to reality. To her surprise, Seamus took her other hand, his grip firm and sure.

After an eternity, her mother refolded the letter and let her hands fall into her lap.

“What is it?” Kiera cried, unable to keep silent any longer.

“I think Jackson’s right and he’s not guilty,” her mother said, and Kiera gasped. “He’s going back to Faerie tonight. Probably he’s gone already.” She gave Kiera a heartbreaking look. “He’s going to try to assassinate the Queen.”

Kiera tried to shoot to her feet, but as both Seamus and Jackson had hold of her hands she didn’t go anywhere. “What? Why?”

“Remember what I told you about the Unseelie Queen?”

Kiera groaned. “This is no time for a quiz, Mom. Just tell me.”

“She’s an elemental being clothed in flesh. It was that flesh that gave birth to Hunter. If he destroys her body, even when the Court generates a new one, he will no longer be the Queen’s son. And the child you carry will have no blood link to the Queen.” She held up the letter once more. “He says that if he destroys that blood link, the Queen will no longer want the child.”

“But . . . but that’s crazy!” Kiera sputtered. “Surely it can’t be that easy to kill her! And even if he succeeds . . .” Her

voice died, for she couldn't bring herself to utter the words.

"Even he succeeds, he'll be doing so in the depths of the Unselie Court, and there will be no escape for him," Seamus finished for her.

"We have to stop him!" She tried once more to rise, but Seamus and Jackson both tightened their grips on her hands. "Let me go!" she shouted.

"Kiera, sit down," her mother said in a voice of quiet command, and the fight went out of her. "Even if you could have done something to stop him, it's too late now. He's arranged to give himself a head start we can't overcome."

Kiera hadn't thought she could possibly feel worse than she had earlier. How wrong she had been! "Oh, what have I done? I was so awful to him!"

Jackson put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "You had good cause to doubt him," he soothed. "No one could possibly blame you for it."

"I can blame me!" she retorted. She should have known Hunter better than that, should have trusted the instincts that told her he had changed. Should have realized that if he were truly the villain she'd convinced herself he was, he would have had no reason to tell her he loved her as she'd been walking out the door. Now he was going to die to save her and their child, not even putting up a fight to save his own life.

Jackson put the other letter into her hand, his voice barely making it through her consciousness. "Maybe you should read this now," he said.

She took the letter and saw how the ink smeared from the tears that dripped onto it. "I don't know if I can bear to read it," she whispered.

"He's not angry with you, Kiera," Jackson insisted. "He understands why you didn't trust him. I'm confident that isn't an angry letter you're holding."

She didn't answer. It wasn't an *angry* letter she feared. Anger she would welcome, for it was her due. But she knew that wasn't what she'd find in this letter, knew Hunter would shame her with his calm and steady acceptance of her behavior. She had thought herself betrayed; but it was she who betrayed him by not trusting him, by not at least giving him a chance to explain. Her hand clenched around the letter, crumpling the paper in the middle.

"I need to be alone when I read this."

Three sets of eyes bored into her. She took a deep breath and sat up straighter, her eyes dry for the first time in hours. Hunter was knowingly subjecting himself to far more pain than she could imagine. Surely she could stand to subject herself to the pain of reading his final words to her.

Her mother nodded and stood. "All right. Let's get you settled in your room. I'll bring you another cup of tea, and then Seamus and I will strengthen the wards around all the doors and windows. If Hunter fails, we're in for quite a siege."

In a daze, Kiera allowed her mother to guide her up the stairs to her bedroom, Jackson following behind with her suitcase in hand. She sat on her bed and waited until her mother brought her the promised cup of tea and retreated. Then, she opened the envelope.