

Chapter 2

Hunter glanced impatiently at his watch as he sipped his cooling cup of coffee and watched the ebb and flow of customers through the doorway. His appointment was supposed to be at two o'clock, and Kiera was now fifteen minutes late. Unprofessional, to say the least! She lived only a block away from the coffee shop, and his covert observation had shown she rarely left her apartment for more than the occasional shopping trip or meal. No excuse whatsoever for being late when meeting a potential client!

The bell on the coffee shop door tinkled, and Kiera stepped in from the cold, her cheeks bright red from the wind's bite. She was wearing the same ugly coat, the same hat, and the same scarf that she'd worn every time he'd laid eyes on her. He had thought perhaps she would dress more appropriately when meeting a client. He himself had chosen an expensive Armani jacket, paired with a silk shirt and Italian loafers. His black leather coat was draped across one of the four chairs at his table, though today he had skipped the hat.

Kiera scanned the tables. He had not described himself to her, and he'd told her he'd recognize her when she entered the

shop from her picture on her business card. He let her examine each of the tables, hoping she was sweating and thinking her client had failed to wait for her. But when her eyes found his table, she stopped her search. Her brows drew together in just a hint of a frown, and he wondered if she remembered seeing him in the square the other day. Then she banished the frown and strode to his table.

"Hunter Teague?" she inquired, so sure she was right she was already pulling out a chair to sit down.

Hunter's reply was half a beat late because he was so startled by her certainty. "How did you know?" he asked, hoping he sounded only mildly curious instead of annoyed.

She piled her motley array of winter wear onto the other empty chair, then shrugged. "Instinct, I guess. You look like your voice sounded."

Hunter was struck momentarily speechless, not knowing what to make of that comment. He tried to hide his discomfiture by taking another sip of coffee. It had gone cold and bitter, and he couldn't help the grimace of distaste. She had now spoken two sentences, and already she had managed to put him off balance! Pushing the coffee cup away, he cocked his head at her. "Is that a compliment or an insult, I wonder?"

She looked surprised. "Neither. Just an observation." The surprise vanished under a sweet smile as she stuck her hand out over the table. "Kiera Malone, at your service."

Hunter suppressed a growl of frustration, for somehow Kiera seemed to have taken charge when he had assumed *he* would hold the reins. His intention had been to stand when she entered the room. Then, when she shook his hand, he would give her a gallant kiss on the knuckles. It would unsettle and confuse her, but with a potential client she would accept the anachronistic gesture with grace. And he would have gained instant control of

the interview.

Now, however, it was too late to stand up, and he would feel silly kissing her knuckles when sitting down. Annoyed that his choreography had been ruined so easily, he managed a winning smile as he clasped her hand warmly.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Malone. As you so rightly guessed, I am indeed Hunter Teague. Would you like a cup of coffee before we begin?”

Kiera brushed red curls out of her face and shook her head. “No, thanks. I’ve had so much coffee already I might float away. But if you want a warm-up, go ahead.” She reached into her pocket and withdrew a couple of dollar bills, holding them out to him. “I’m buying, since I kept you waiting.”

Hunter stared at the bills as though they were something filthy. “That won’t be necessary,” he said, his lip curling in disdain even as he tried to school his expression.

Kiera laughed and dropped the bills onto the table. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those old-fashioned guys who think women should never pay for anything! I’ll write this off as a business expense, so it’s really no hardship.”

“I did not suggest it was a hardship. I would merely find it . . . impolite.” He pushed back his chair, still refusing the money. “I shall return momentarily,” he said, grabbing his cup and retreating.

There were several people in line at the counter, so Hunter had a couple of minutes to pull himself together. He couldn’t remember ever meeting anyone who had him so thoroughly flummoxed so quickly. He was ashamed of himself! Surely he could ad-lib better than this, even if she had spoiled his well laid out plans. He frowned as he reached the head of the line and

ordered another coffee. Maybe he was merely reacting to the pressure of having to seduce someone on command. His past conquests had all been women of his own choosing.

Returning to the table, Hunter found Kiera had pulled out a yellow, spiral-bound note pad and a mechanical pencil. She was idly doodling in the margins when he set his cup of coffee onto the table and sat down.

Kiera stopped doodling and flashed him one of those brilliant smiles. He noted she looked almost pretty when she smiled. He also noted that he was smiling back without having meant to.

“So, Mr. Teague,” she said, “tell me a little about your business and about what you imagine your website will look like.”

“Please, call me Hunter.”

“All right,” she agreed easily.

“As I believe I mentioned on the phone, I am a massage therapist.” He watched her face closely for her reaction, and was rewarded with a spark of interest.

“You did mention it.” Her smile changed into something more like a grin. “You don’t look like any massage therapist I’ve ever seen!”

Aha, now he was getting somewhere. He took a sip of his coffee and raised his eyebrows. “Oh? What should a massage therapist look like?”

She was still grinning. “In my experience, they’re always these tiny little new-age women who look like they couldn’t even lift a bag of dog food, and yet their hands are so strong they could crush bricks in them.”

He put down the coffee cup and pushed it aside, leaning forward ever so slightly, letting his Faerie glamour surround him

and reach for her. “Well,” he murmured, “I may not be a petite new age woman, but I do have strong hands.”

He expected her eyes to get that smoky, glazed look women usually got when they felt the touch of his glamour, but Kiera remained distressingly clear-eyed. Of course, being half-fey herself, she was undoubtedly more resistant to glamour than the average mortal.

“What led you to such an unusual profession?” she asked.

Hunter tried not to be disgruntled by her failure to fall instantly under his spell. Luckily, he had invented an entire past for himself and had his lie ready to hand. “An old girlfriend of mine was in training to be a massage therapist. She practiced on me. I wanted to be able to return the favor.”

The way she was looking at him was worrisome. He could tell at once that she doubted his story, though he didn’t know why that should be. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable explanation. He wondered if he had made a tactical error in choosing massage as his profession. Perhaps it was too female-dominated an industry, and he was raising her suspicions by his unusual choice. But the possibilities were too tempting. If she resisted all his other charms, surely she would not be able to resist him when he talked her into sampling his services. Imagining her lying naked on the massage table stirred something deep in his belly. When he took the fantasy a step further, imagining his hands on the bare, smooth skin of her back, heat flooded him.

Hunter reached for his cup of coffee once more, startled by his reaction. Kiera wasn’t pretty enough to justify the lust she had somehow inspired in him. He wondered if she had a touch of Faerie glamour around her, despite being mortal.

Whatever doubts she might have had about his explanation, she banished them with a shrug. “So, you’ve recently moved here from New York, and you need to establish a new clientele.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you have a business card?”

“Of course.” He pulled a gold business card holder from his pocket, flipping it open and passing a card across the table. He’d decided that the card should be plain and understated—let Kiera put her mind to the task of designing an image for him. The harder she had to think about the allure of massage, the more susceptible she would be when he moved in for the kill.

Kiera took the card and glanced at it briefly. She started to tuck it into her coat pocket, then pulled it out again and looked at it more closely. Her eyebrows shot up. “Why, this is the same building I live in!” she said.

“Is it?” he exclaimed in feigned surprise.

“What a coincidence.”

He smiled. “Yes. And a convenient one at that.”

She smiled in what was probably supposed to be agreement, but he could see at once that the thought of him living in the same building made her uncomfortable. He stored that observation away for future reference.

“All right,” Kiera said brightly, sticking the card in her coat pocket, “that gives me the essential address and phone information. Now tell me a little bit more about how you envision your website looking.”

He tried to look appropriately helpless. “To tell you the truth, I haven’t the faintest idea. When I was in New York, I built my clientele by word of mouth, and I haven’t a clue how to attract new clients through a website.” He smiled hopefully. “I was

rather thinking that was where *you* came in.”

“Yes, of course. I just wanted to know if you had something in mind to begin with. What kind of image would you like to build?”

“Peaceful,” he answered promptly. “Relaxing. Sensual without being sexual.” He almost smiled to see the faint hint of color in her cheeks at his mere suggestion of sex.

Kiera scribbled a few notes, then stuck the end of the pencil in her mouth without seeming to notice she was doing it. “And what vital information do you need displayed?”

He launched into a detailed description of his “business” and his offerings. He’d read up on several forms of massage on the Internet, and had settled on Swedish and deep tissue massage as his specialties, as they seemed to have the broadest appeal. He’d called a number of spas in the area to inquire about the prices, making sure his own were reasonable. He’d even bought a couple of instructional books and videos, so he knew the basics of what he’d be expected to do. He’d had no one to practice on, of course, but he was sure the touch of his hands would be sufficient to hide any deficiency in his training.

By the time he was through, Kiera had covered a whole page with scrawled, illegible notes, and had left many a tooth mark in her pencil. She was chewing on it again as she glanced over the page of notes, and Hunter found his attention riveted to her lips as she toyed with the pencil. Images came to mind of those lips wrapped around something other than a pencil, and his manhood stirred restlessly.

An interesting development, he thought, frowning. He’d assumed he would have to use plenty of imagination to arouse himself sufficiently to do his job, but Kiera seemed to be

inspiring him all on her own. He couldn’t imagine why. Not that she was ugly. In fact, he was probably being uncharitable when he thought of her as homely—she just wasn’t *beautiful*, and he’d never yet felt such an attraction to any but the most lovely mortal specimens.

Kiera extracted the pencil from her mouth and nodded briskly. “I think I’ve got enough here to work with,” she told him, closing the notebook. “When do you need the project done?”

He gave her his most charming smile. “I am more concerned that the project be done right than that it be done fast.”

“All right. I can have some mockups for you in about a week. I’ll come up with three design schemes, then a couple sample pages for each scheme. You tell me which one you want me to pursue, or if you want me to give you more options. Sound fair?”

“Sounds perfect.” He reached into his pocket, pulling out his wallet and counting out four crisp hundred-dollar bills.

Kiera blinked in surprise when he handed the money to her.

“We did agree on four hundred as a down-payment, didn’t we?” he asked.

The surprise vanished under another of her lovely smiles. “Yes, of course. I just wasn’t expecting cash is all.” She took the money and tucked it into a pocket in her jeans. “You being a city boy, I wouldn’t have expected you to carry that kind of cash around in your wallet.”

“I pity any pickpocket or mugger who dares to mess with me.” He allowed a little of the savagery that was his birthright to show in his fierce smile. Kiera saw it and recognized it; he could tell by the almost imperceptible shiver that ran through her. If she

was like most women, that savagery would both frighten and excite her.

Hunter rose smoothly from his chair, slipping into his leather coat and pretending he didn't notice the effect he had had on her. She remained seated, looking uncertain of herself for the first time. He reached out to shake her hand, and she instinctively complied.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, Kiera," he said, putting a hint of a seductive purr in his voice. Her palm was damp as he squeezed her hand, and he couldn't help wondering if she was damp anywhere else.

She smiled, just a bit too brightly, the apples reappearing on her cheeks. "You too."

Thinking that perhaps the reality was even better than the scene he had choreographed in his mind, he bent to press his lips against her knuckles. His mouth felt the tremor that shook her and he had to suppress a gloating smile. She was falling already.

Releasing her hand slowly, he pulled his coat closed and swept out of the coffee shop.

Kiera sat unmoving at the table for a long time after Hunter was gone. The shop smelled heavily of coffee beans, but underneath that she scented bay leaves and sandalwood. Her knuckles still felt hot from the touch of his lips, and her throat was dry as parchment.

She'd never felt anything like this before! She had met Hunter less than an hour ago, and already her hormones were screaming that she had to have him. All right, so he was quite a treat for the eyes, and his deep, cultured voice had a naturally seductive throb in it that would make any woman's knees weak.

But really! She was thirty-one years old! Much too old to go all soft and gooey because a handsome man looked at her. She smiled to herself. All right, a drop-dead gorgeous man who oozed with blatant male sexuality. But she still had no right to feel this horny just from a meeting with a client.

Unbidden to her mind came her mother's voice, talking about the quest for Mr. Right, telling Kiera she would know her soul mate the instant she laid eyes on him. And Kiera remembered seeing Hunter sitting on that park bench almost a week before he'd called to make an appointment. Why, out of all of the thousands of men she'd seen in the crowded streets of Philadelphia, did that one stand out so in her mind?

Kiera laughed and shook her head at herself. Looniness must run in her family, and she was apparently suffering from a delayed onset. There was nothing the least bit mysterious about Hunter or her attraction to him! He was just a gorgeous guy, and she was an unattached woman who'd gone too long between boyfriends.

Not willing to go back to her apartment building—Hunter lived there, after all, and she didn't think she wanted to see him again just yet—she ordered a decaf and curled up on an arm chair in the corner of the intimate little seating area. Her mind seemed not her own right now, for if she didn't concentrate every moment on not thinking about it, she found herself imagining Hunter stripping off his expensive clothes for her pleasure.

Kiera frowned at the image. She hadn't thought about it before, but his clothes really had been expensive. Why, the leather coat alone must have cost a small fortune! And that business card holder had had a gleam to it that suggested it might be real gold. Was massage therapy so lucrative an occupation?

And now that the fog of sexual desire was finally beginning to fade, how could that man possibly be a massage therapist? Sure, looks could be deceiving, as could stereotypes, but it was almost impossible to imagine Hunter . . . She closed her eyes and tried to picture him putting his hands on the sagging flesh of one of the matronly women who resided in their apartment building, and her mind balked. Her mind balked even more at the image of him putting his hands on a *man's* flesh. Something about it just wasn't right.

But that was silly, right? Why would he lie about it? Why would he hire her to design a website for his business if he didn't really have a business? Paranoia, she decided. First she'd caught herself thinking he might be the mythical Mr. Right, now she was thinking he was some kind of imposter.

Sure this temporary insanity was somehow her mother's fault, Kiera pulled out the pad of notes and began idly sketching out some design ideas.

Hunter's nostrils flared the instant he stepped into his apartment. He recognized that stink, like poorly tanned leather. With a flick of his wrist, he unsheathed the knife he kept hidden up his sleeve. Cautiously, he moved farther into the apartment, his nose twitching as he followed the stench of goblin until he found the uninvited guest in the room that would one day be his massage studio. Already, the room sported a massage table, CD player, and a stack of CD's with soothing, tuneless music on them.

Bane didn't hear Hunter's silent footsteps—he was too busy uncapping and sniffing the collection of massage oils and lotions Hunter had purchased. In fact, the goblin had no hint he was not

alone until the silver blade of Hunter's knife was pressed into the flesh of his throat.

Hunter hated to be this close to Bane. On top of the goblin's natural tainted odor, the street bum disguise also stank and was crusted with filth. "I don't remember inviting you in," Hunter growled in the goblin's ear, increasing the pressure on the knife so that the blade just broke the first layer of skin.

Bane didn't move, but Hunter sensed no hint of fear from him, no tensing of his muscles, no quickening of his heartbeat. "Her Majesty would be displeased with you if you killed me," he said calmly.

Hunter's hand itched to draw the knife across the evil creature's throat, but he didn't want to imagine how the Queen would punish him for killing the most vicious of her courtiers. "It might almost be worth it."

"You don't have the balls for it, half-breed."

Hunter reined in his temper with an effort. Bane had goaded him into more foolish acts in his lifetime than he could bear to admit. Just this once, he would refrain from taking the bait.

With a grunt of disgust, Hunter released the goblin and slid the knife back into its sheath. Bane put a little distance between them, then reached up to finger his throat. A thin line of blood beaded where Hunter's knife had bitten. Bane examined the blood on his fingers, lips twisted into a snarl that showed his fangs.

"If you were going to stick me, Prince, you should've done a better job than this!" He licked the blood from his fingers. "Barely enough to annoy me."

"What do you want?"

Bane chuckled. "What do you think I want, Boyo? I want to

snap your bones one by one and hear you scream.”

Hunter met the goblin’s eyes. “Yes, well I wanted to slit your throat, but I refrained.”

Bane’s chuckle turned into an all-out laugh. “The Queen will be highly pleased with both of us for our self-control.” He looked genuinely amused by their mutual desire to kill each other, and Hunter could do nothing but shake his head.

Neither a lifetime in the Unseelie Court, nor the Unseelie blood that ran through him, was enough to make him understand how these creatures could so greatly enjoy killing. It wasn’t that Hunter had never killed before. Most of the unfortunates he’d hunted for the Queen’s pleasure had been highly reluctant to be taken alive. Usually, he’d been able to subdue them, but there were times he’d “accidentally” killed his mother’s intended victim. There’d been a certain sense of satisfaction with those deaths—despite the inevitable consequences. But he’d never actually *enjoyed* the killing, not like these goblins did, not like his mother did.

“Why are you here?” he asked with exaggerated patience.

“A little reminder from Mama,” Bane sneered. “Just because you’re on your own doesn’t mean she isn’t watching you. And she can always get to you if you displease her.”

Hunter had never doubted that for a moment, but he wasn’t particularly surprised she’d felt compelled to send him the message. Nor was he surprised she’d chosen Bane, whom he hated above all others—except his mother herself—as the messenger.

“Well, now that your message is delivered, you can get the hell out of my apartment. I’ll have to fumigate just to get the stench out.”

Bane gave him another of his toothy, vicious smiles. “Sorry for the . . . inconvenience. But, since I’ve already inconvenienced you, perhaps I should stain the carpet with your blood while I’m at it.”

“If you thought you could get away with it, you would have gone for my throat already. Now, are you planning to leave peacefully, or will I have to throw you out?”

“I wouldn’t want you to get your hands dirty, Prince,” Bane said, starting toward the door.

Hunter tried to step aside, knowing that Bane would shoulder him out of the way if he didn’t. But it seemed that only a handful of days in the mortal world had already dulled his instincts, for he didn’t read the intention in Bane’s eyes until too late.

As Bane brushed by, he made a fist and poked a lightning-quick jab at Hunter’s groin. The pain drove Hunter to his knees, and for a moment he could barely breathe as his body clenched in agony.

“That’s for the little nick you gave me. Unfortunately, I can’t hit you any harder or you might have trouble performing your stud duties. But if the Queen ever takes the muzzles off us, I’ll show you what I *really* wanted to do.”

Hunter had to fight too hard for air to manage a comeback.

Chapter 3

“It’s perfect,” Jackson declared, looking over her shoulder at the site she’d designed for him.

Kiera beamed, absurdly pleased to have won his approval. He’d been her best friend ever since her senior year in college, and this project was more like a favor than an actual job. But Jackson had never been shy about his opinions, so she knew he meant what he said.

Jackson put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. “You’re a genius, you know,” he said, and she laughed.

“Do I look like I need an ego boost today?”

He moved around her chair and rested a hip against the desk. He was wearing a heavy wool turtleneck in muted shades of red, and a pair of black leather jeans that molded to his ass like a second skin. Kiera couldn’t help thinking that the jeans were so tight, he should be showing the male version of panty lines; however, the leather was smooth and unmarred. “I don’t know about an ego boost, but you do have one of those looks today.”

Surprised, she pushed her chair back from the desk and frowned at him. He always seemed to see her moods, even when she thought she was hiding them so well even the CIA wouldn’t know she was faking it. “One of what looks?” she asked.

He cocked his head as he regarded her more closely. She tried not to squirm under the scrutiny. “At a guess, I’d say you met a new potential man in your life.”

Kiera grinned and shook her head. The man was amazing. “Not really,” she said, thinking of Hunter and the burning kiss he had planted on her hand. “Just a good-looking client.”

Jackson raised an eyebrow. “Is he married?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t ask clients personal questions like that.”

“Hmpf! You ask *me* personal questions all the time.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. But if it makes you happy, I did notice he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.”

“So, you met a good-looking, unmarried client, and he’s impressed you enough that I picked up the lust vibe from you. Why does he not qualify as a potential man in your life?”

She tried to look nonchalant. “Other than the fact that I don’t date clients, you mean?”

“You work from home where you’re guaranteed never to meet any new men, you hardly ever go out, at least not for anything fun, and now you tell me you don’t date clients.” He frowned and tapped his lips thoughtfully. “It sounds to me as though you’re avoiding men.”

She snorted. “I’m not avoiding *you*,” she pointed out.

“That’s because I’m not a threat,” he countered, quite reasonably. “I might as well be ‘one of the girls.’”

She had to laugh at that. She had never thought of him as

“one of the girls,” despite the occasionally flamboyant clothing, and despite his boyfriends. But, she had to admit, he had never been a potential lover, so his accusation was more accurate than she wished to admit.

“Can you really blame me, Jackson? With my history?”

“Blame you? No. But, if you would occasionally take my advice when I tell you you’re dating an asshole, perhaps you might do better.”

Her cheeks felt suddenly hot and she looked away. “You and my mother always seem to know when *I’m* dating the wrong guy, but neither one of you can avoid the lemons any better than I can.”

“It’s all a question of perspective,” he told her, making a mock-serious face. “Perhaps you should introduce me to this client of yours.”

“Jackson . . .” she warned.

He held his hands out in a gesture of supreme innocence. “Of course, I would never suggest that you disregard your professional ethics and date a client. But as he does seem to have piqued your interest, I can tell you whether it might have worked out. If you were willing to date clients.”

She gave him a narrow-eyed glare, even though she couldn’t help wondering what Jackson would make of the unsettling Hunter Teague. “Keep your match-making nose out of this, Jackson. I’m serious.” Despite all the sexual heat Hunter had aroused in her, he was definitely not her type, she told herself. Too arrogant, too smooth.

Jackson’s smile became devious. “Of course, I’m unattached right now myself. Do you think he might be *my* type?”

She laughed. “No. I don’t think the two of your egos could

fit in the same room at the same time.”

He took the jibe with his usual good-natured humor, laughing as he reached out to rumple her hair. “Hey!” she cried, batting his arm out of the way.

“You can’t mean to tell me you think I could do any further damage to that unruly mess!” he protested.

“Leave my hair out of this,” she grumbled. “I like it just the way it is. And you’re not a hairdresser.” She used her fingers to smooth out the curls as best she could. As a teenager, she’d tried unsuccessfully to tame them. Now, as a mature adult, she was determined to embrace them.

Jackson pushed away from the desk and glanced at the screen once more. “Brilliant,” he told her again. “Absolutely brilliant.” He bent to plant a light kiss on her cheek. “Worth every cent I paid you for it. And more, I might add.”

She’d refused to charge him full price for her services, despite his protestations. He couldn’t have afforded it, and besides it just didn’t seem right to charge a friend full price. “If I ever have a pet, you can sit for it at half price to make up the difference,” she told him.

He sighed heavily. “If you weren’t allergic, I would feel much more comforted. Ah, well. I’ll find a devious way to pay you back, never fear.”

“As long as that devious way has nothing to do with Hunter, that’s fine.” She recognized her tactical error the moment the words left her mouth, but it was too late to stuff them back in.

“Hunter?” Jackson asked with a wicked grin. “His name is Hunter?”

“Let it go, Jackson.”

“But even the name sounds sexy. Kiera, I’ve got to meet this

guy.”

“Go play with your puppies. I’ve got work to do.”

“For Hunter the sexpot?”

“Jackson, you’ve got one of the finest asses known to mankind, and it would be a terrible shame if I took a big bite out of it. Go!”

With another laugh, Jackson finally withdrew, leaving Kiera to contemplate with no small amount of dread just what kind of mischief her best and oldest friend would get into.

Kiera had suggested they meet at the coffee shop again, and though she’d had the distinct impression Hunter wished to make a counter-suggestion, he kept it to himself. She bundled the screen mockups into a manila folder, then started layering on the winter clothes.

She paused to glance at herself in the mirror before stepping out into the hallway. What she saw brought her up short.

She’d never thought of herself as a fashion queen, preferring comfort to style, but she was suddenly struck by how awful this outfit looked. The fluffy green down coat was at least one size too big for her—she’d known that when she’d bought it, but it had been on sale, and it had been warm, and she’d figured it didn’t look *that* bad. The warm knit hat she pulled down over her ears was in a conflicting shade of green, and the way her riot of hair spilled out beneath it reminded her suddenly of one of those Bozo the Clown wigs.

Hunter was a client, not a date. But there was no reason she should look like such a slob when going to meet a client, either.

She pulled off the hat and flung it back into the closet. The quick motion left her hair alive with static electricity. She

shrugged off the coat and hurried to the bedroom. Layers. That was the key to staying warm. So she donned a turtleneck, a wool-blend sweater, and a corduroy blazer. Then she hurried into the bathroom and brushed some water into her hair, temporarily taming the static. Satisfied—and now running significantly late—Kiera hurried out the front door and headed across the square.

This was one of the coldest Novembers in her memory, and the instant she left the comfort of her building, she cursed the vanity that had moved her to change out of the heavy coat. At least the cold made hurrying easy. Hunter didn’t strike her as the type who had much patience with tardiness, and she’d sensed a distinct annoyance when she’d arrived late for their first meeting.

When she burst through the coffee shop door, she felt chilled down to her bones. She stood blinking in the doorway a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the dimness. Then her eyes found Hunter, sitting at a four-person table with his arms crossed over his chest. He had stretched his legs out into the aisle, crossing his heavy black boots at the ankle, and she could tell at once that he was exasperated by the delay. Heat rose to her frosty cheeks.

Kiera crossed the distance in several nervous strides, her stomach feeling strangely fluttery. Ridiculous to feel nervous, of course. He was just a client, one of many. Nothing special about him whatsoever. *Get a grip, Kiera,* she scolded. She smiled brightly and held out her hand as she approached the table.

Hunter uncoiled. That was the best word she could think of to describe the way he sat up in his chair, drawing his legs back under him and uncrossing his arms.

Kiera froze in her tracks, her heart nearly stopping at that brief image of him as a cobra about to strike. There was

something fierce and primal in his eyes, something that chilled her far more than the frigid wind.

Then, he smiled, and the illusion burst. He was once more a drop-dead gorgeous man with expensive taste in clothes. Today, he was wearing a deep blue turtleneck that brought out the color of his eyes. She was pretty sure the turtleneck was silk. He had dressed down some today, the silk turtleneck tucked into jeans instead of designer pants, but the leather coat was draped over the chair again, and even the jeans looked like they'd been tailored just for him. Once again she wondered how a massage therapist could afford to dress like that.

Hunter clasped her hand warmly, and she noted the smoothness of his skin. "Sorry I'm late," she said, slipping into the chair across from him and putting the manila folder on the table.

There was a faint pause, as though Hunter were waiting for her to explain her lateness. She wasn't about to do so.

"No problem," he said, though the slight downward tug at the corners of his mouth suggested the words came with some difficulty. The frown disappeared almost instantly. "You look like you're nearly frozen," he continued. "Let me buy you a nice, hot cup of coffee."

Kiera wondered if he could see her blush, hoped the cold-induced redness of her cheeks hid it. She felt as though he were seeing right through her, guessing why she had skipped the coat and hat. "A hot cup of coffee would be heaven right now."

"Your wish is my command," he replied with a knowing smile.

When Hunter turned his back and got in line, Kiera let out a quiet breath of relief. What was the matter with her? She was

never nervous with men, not even men she hoped to date! She was letting her mother's soul mate fairy tales get to her.

Hunter soon returned with her coffee, dropping a pile of sugar packets and a wooden stir on the table. She wrapped her hands around the cup, letting the warmth seep through the thick ceramic. Without a word, Hunter reached for the manila folder, pulling it over to himself and flipping it open. He slid the pages out of the folder, arraying them across the table for his perusal, giving each a long, hard stare. Kiera had to remind herself to breathe.

"You do nice work," he said without looking at her.

"Thank you." Damn, did her voice just quaver? She gulped some coffee, burning her tongue in the process. "Is there one in particular that strikes you as right?" She'd researched other websites for spas and massage therapists, and then designed three different schemes. One was highly professional, stressing the therapeutic benefits and having an almost medical feel to it. One stressed the relaxing tranquility. And one combined the other two ideas with an overtone of sensuality, using warm colors and slightly fuzzy images.

Somehow, Kiera was not surprised that Hunter seemed most interested in that third scheme. He gave the other two a cursory examination, then put them back in the folder.

"This is just the kind of image I had in mind," he told her, tapping one of the mockups. His finger landed on the picture of a beautiful woman stretched out on a massage table. A sheet covered her legs and came up just over her hips, and there was a contented smile on her face.

Kiera couldn't help noticing he was tapping right on the woman's ass, and somehow, she didn't think it was a

coincidence. She tried not to think about her own body draping across a massage table, waiting for the touch of those strong, dangerous hands. Another sip of coffee seemed in order.

“Of course, that’s just a sample image,” she said. “I snagged it from another website just so I could show you the basic idea.”

“Understood. I presume that you could find a similar image in the public domain. Or must I hire a photographer and model?”

“No, I’m sure I can find something.”

He nodded briskly. “Good.” He tucked the remaining pages into the folder and slid the folder back across the table to her. “I’ve definitely chosen the right woman for the job,” he said, resting his elbows on the table and regarding her with an unsettling intensity.

“I’m glad you think so.” It was a lame reply, but she could barely think with those eyes on her. She felt as though he were stripping off her clothes, one slow layer at a time, unwrapping her like a Christmas gift. Her mind filled with images of bare skin and burning touches.

She blinked to dispel the images, looking instead into her now nearly empty coffee cup. Still she felt his eyes on her, and she squirmed under his scrutiny. Her discomfort slowly turned into annoyance, and finally she looked up and met his eyes again.

“You’re pouring it on a little thick,” she told him, amazed that she was able to force sound out of her throat. Annoyed she might be, but it was hard to deny the way his regard made her shiver deep inside.

Hunter looked startled, blinking and sitting back once more. The surprise banished some of the sexual heat, and for just a moment he looked like a normal—if insanely good-looking—human being. “What do you mean?” he asked, his eyes

all boyish innocence.

His attempt to deny it was even more annoying. No way in hell Hunter was not aware he was coming on to her. The Irish temper that she had inherited from her mother began to stir. She swallowed a number of comments that would be highly inappropriate with a client.

“Look,” she said, “I’m perfectly happy to design this website for you, and I’m perfectly happy to meet for coffee like this to discuss it, but I could do without all the smoldering looks, okay?”

“Smoldering looks?”

She rolled her eyes. His face just wasn’t made for feigned innocence. “Yeah. You know, like this:” She let her lids slide heavily halfway over her eyes and parted her lips in a parody of a come-hither expression.

For a moment, he looked both surprised and offended, and Kiera had a terrible fear that she’d been wrong and had just made the worst kind of fool of herself. Then he laughed and shook his head, but it was a self-deprecating laugh, not a mocking one. Actually, that laughter had a warm, pleasant burr to it that made her wish she could hear it more often.

“Sorry about that,” he said, still grinning. “I’m an incorrigible flirt, I’m afraid. I’ll try to knock it off if it’s bugging you.”

She would not have described what he was doing as flirting. Flirting was light and fun and unthreatening, and she couldn’t apply any of those words to the way Hunter had been looking at her. What the hell was he after, anyway? It’s not like she was a thing of beauty, and he didn’t know her well enough to be interested in her for her personality.

“Thanks,” she said, unable to muster anything better. She

was beginning to wish she'd never taken this client on. There was no doubt in her mind that he would continue his particularly aggressive form of "flirting," despite his promise.

If only she didn't fear she might eventually fall for it!

Hunter sat at the table and fumed as he watched Kiera slip out the door of the coffee shop and practically run across the street to the square. She couldn't get away from him fast enough, apparently.

He'd never had that happen to him before, never had a woman turn him down like that. He had thought for a moment that her defenses were weakening, had thought the glamour and his own personal appeal had become irresistible. How had she managed to shrug it off? And how had she dared confront him like that?

Hunter took a deep breath in an attempt to settle himself down. He had time still. No need to rush these things, and after all, with her fey blood he shouldn't expect her to fall for him as easily as other mortal women. But even as he thought these comforting thoughts, someone slipped into the chair that Kiera had recently vacated.

Hunter looked up to see Bane sitting across from him, an ugly smirk on his ugly face. Hunter was really letting the mortal woman get to him if he actually failed to notice Bane making an entrance! The goblin had a cup of coffee in each hand and pushed one across the table to Hunter.

"Trouble in paradise, Boyo?" Bane mocked, sipping his coffee.

Several patrons in the shop were staring at the table in distaste, for Bane's ragged, filthy coat stank of sweat and alcohol

and urine. His hands were wrapped in raveled knit gloves with the fingers torn off, and his hair was a snarled rat's nest of oil and debris.

Hunter hated the very thought that anyone might see him talking to this degenerate. However, he had little choice in the matter, and he refused to let Bane know he was uncomfortable. So he shrugged and leaned back in his chair, stretching out his long legs. "No trouble," he said. "I'm just learning the lay of the land."

Bane snorted. "You're supposed to be laying the woman, remember?"

"I don't interfere with your business. Keep out of this."

"Can't. The Queen wants her progress reports."

Hunter had to fight to contain the stream of curses that wished to escape. The last thing he needed right now was added pressure to get the job done. And he hated to have Bane witness his failure.

"So," Bane prompted, grinning in pleasure at Hunter's discomfort, "got any progress to report?"

"This is only the second time I've met her. I'm working on it."

The goblin put his cup of coffee aside and leaned his elbows on the table. "You've been here almost ten days, and you've only met her twice?"

Hunter shrugged. "I'm posing as a client for her web design business. I had to give her time to get the first assignment done."

"You're living in her building, in case you forgot. You don't need the client charade."

Hunter narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists under the table. "I know what I'm doing. And when was the last time *you*

seduced a woman?”

The amusement faded from Bane’s face, and he replaced it with a look designed to freeze Hunter’s marrow. The goblin leaned even closer, his foul breath making Hunter’s eyes water. “When I want a woman, Prince, I don’t ask her permission.” The glamour slipped enough that Hunter could make out the flash of fangs behind the disguise.

His whole life, Hunter had had to mask his disgust for the cruelties of the Unseelie Court. Only that long experience kept him from recoiling now. “Well I *do* need this one’s permission,” he said evenly. “I’ll have to bed her multiple times to make sure I get her pregnant.”

Bane touched his tongue to one of his fangs. “We could just snag her and bring her back to Faerie. You could fuck her at your leisure until she’s pregnant, and you wouldn’t need permission.”

Hunter’s stomach churned at the thought, but still he kept his voice calm and level. “She may be mortal, but she is Finvarra’s daughter. There’s a reasonable chance she’s got enough Faerie magic about her that she would not conceive if forced.” He had no idea if that was true, but it didn’t seem impossible. She probably had no idea that any magic clung to her, probably couldn’t control it, but he’d seen flashes here and there.

Hunter waited as Bane digested the thought. His heart thundered in his ears and his palms were sweating. If Bane were to recommend this kidnaping idea to the Queen and if she were to accept it, it would be an unmitigated disaster. Hunter knew that he could never force himself on any woman, much less Kiera, whom he had to admit he rather liked. If he couldn’t do it, both he and Kiera would suffer horribly, maybe even fatally.

Bane nodded. “I suppose that possibility exists,” he

conceded, and Hunter let out a silent sigh of relief. The goblin grinned again. “Besides, you wouldn’t be able to get it up to rape her, so it wouldn’t do us any good.”

Hunter realized that the suggestion had been just another one of Bane’s twisted mind games. He itched to unsheathe the knife up his sleeve and bury it in the creature’s throat.

Bane shook his head. “You’re too easy, Prince. After all these years, shouldn’t you know me well enough not to fall for it *every* time I goad you?”

Hunter forced himself to relax, leaning back into his chair once more. “Probably,” he agreed, pissed off at himself for fueling the goblin’s amusement once more.

“Now, let’s get down to the real business, shall we?”

“What business would that be?”

“The Queen wants to see some sign of progress.”

“I told you, I’m working on it!”

“Well work faster.” Bane drained the remains of his coffee cup, giving a pointed look at the cup he had passed to Hunter.

Hunter pushed the cup back across the table; he would never dream of drinking anything the goblin had fouled with his touch. Bane shrugged and gulped half the cup down.

“She’s set a deadline for you,” Bane said. “You have three days to win your first kiss.”

Hunter told himself not to panic, but that didn’t stop the sudden quickening of his pulse. Kiera was far too guarded with him still. He couldn’t imagine how he could get her to lower her guard enough to let him kiss her in three days. Hell, he didn’t even think he could get her out on a date in that little time. He shook his head.

“Too soon,” he said. “I need time to get her to trust me.” His

conscience stirred uncomfortably. He'd seduced women before, but never with such a nefarious purpose, and he'd never violated anyone's trust like he planned to violate Kiera's. If he succeeded, he was going to feel tainted for the rest of his days.

"The Queen wants that kiss in three days. She is not overly patient, as I'm sure you know." Bane pushed his chair away from the table and rose. "If you fail, she has authorized me to administer discipline." His eyes glowed suddenly with his lust for pain. "Personally, I really hope you fail."

Chuckling to himself, Bane casually wove his way through the tables to the front door.

Three days was not enough, Hunter was sure of it. Not unless he forced it somehow. After the way she brushed him off today, there was no way she would go out on a date with him so soon. It would be another week before she had enough work done on the website to meet with him again. Somehow, he was going to have to engineer a meeting before then, and it couldn't be just a brief elevator ride.

Struck by a sudden burst of inspiration, Hunter leapt from his chair and hurried for the door. He glanced left and right, and was relieved to see Bane ambling down the street not far away. If the goblin had hailed a taxi, Hunter would never have caught him.

"Bane!" he called, jogging down the pavement.

Bane looked both startled and amused, but he waited. Hunter came to a stop upwind. "Do you know anything about elevators?" Hunter asked.

The puzzlement in Bane's face was almost enough to make Hunter laugh despite the seriousness of the situation.

"Elevators?" Bane repeated.

"Yeah. As in, would you be able to rig one to get stuck." Aside from their skills at murder and mayhem, goblins had a natural affinity for things mechanical.

Bane nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, I could do that. And I suppose you would want to be able to trigger the failure at a convenient moment?"

"That's the idea."

Bane grinned. "And you would trust me to actually help you meet the deadline?"

Hunter grimaced. "Hell no. But you're not an idiot, and you don't want to taste the Queen's wrath any more than I do. If you sabotage my efforts, she will know, and you will pay."

Even the glamour and the disguise couldn't hide the effect that reminder had on the goblin. Bane's grin disappeared, and he managed a tight nod. "I'll bring the toy tomorrow. And I guarantee it will work."

For a fleeting moment, Hunter and Bane were in sympathy with one another, each dreading the repercussions of failure. Then Bane turned his back and hurried away.