

Chapter 6

Hunter woke in the morning with a headache that made him wish he were dead. He groaned and tried to will himself back to sleep, but it felt like someone had jabbed an icicle in his eye. His stomach churned, and he was poised to race for the bathroom. When the wave of nausea passed, he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position.

There were some sore spots on his mid-section still, but they were nothing compared to the pain that speared through his skull. It seemed that alcohol did not go well with the healing potion his mother had sent. Wincing, he dragged himself to the bathroom where he turned the shower to the hottest setting he could stand.

The steamy air seemed to dull the pain, and when he emerged, Hunter felt much better. He suffered a brief chill when he went to the kitchen for his breakfast and saw the hook that still protruded from the ceiling. He quickly removed it and tossed it in the trash. Once he'd made himself a pot of strong coffee, he retreated to the living room to rethink his strategy.

Yesterday's torment, though terrible, had been nothing

compared to what he would suffer if he failed in his mission. Yes, he liked Kiera. And no, he didn't want to hurt her. But the threat that hovered over him was more than any man could ignore, and despite the attacks of conscience, he was going to have to find a way to get her into his bed.

He had learned a lot from the interlude in the elevator. For whatever reason, even when Kiera succumbed to the glamour, it had an ill effect on her. As his mission required he sleep with her often enough to get her pregnant, it wouldn't do to have her feeling lots of morning-after regrets. So, perhaps his best strategy was to dispense with the glamour altogether and let his natural charm win her. He did have some, after all.

Maybe when the deed was done, when Kiera had borne her child and the Queen had taken it away, he would try to make reparations as best he could. After all, by then his mother ought to have her attention thoroughly distracted by the child she hoped to raise to rule over both the Seelie and Unseelie Courts, and he ought to be able to slip away without being noticed. Kiera would probably never forgive him—nor would he ever forgive himself—but he would do whatever he could to help.

Not that any of that mattered until he actually got her to bed. After all, so far he'd failed even to win a kiss!

It was time to step up the pressure. He owed her an apology after making a pass at her in the elevator. Perhaps he could offer a very special apology that would turn into a far more subtle, and far more effective, pass.

Trying to feel pleased that he had come up with a clever seduction tool, Hunter poured himself another cup of coffee and settled in to wait until it was a decent hour to make a phone call.

Kiera was staring at the horseshoe her mother had given her when the phone rang. Shaking her head at herself for even considering her mother's crazy notions, she answered. When Hunter's voice greeted her, her heart fluttered.

"Oh. Hi," she said, feeling like a nervous teenager. What did you say to a client who'd almost felt you up in an elevator? Especially when you didn't know if you were more relieved or disappointed that you'd stopped him?

"I feel like the world's worst heel," he told her.

Somehow, that hadn't been what she'd been expecting from him, and she became even more tongue-tied. She tried to force some words of forgiveness from her dry mouth, but he continued before she could manage it.

"I can only claim temporary insanity. I'm really not the type to take advantage of someone like that, and I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"Don't worry about it," she said when she could find her voice. "It really wasn't a big deal." Pathetic lie, perhaps, but maybe if she said it enough times she'd convince herself.

"It was to me. I'm ashamed of myself, and I'd really like the chance to make it up to you."

"Really, Hunter, that isn't necessary. Let's just forget about it, okay? I should have your website done in three more days."

Her attempt to sidetrack him with talk of business failed miserably. "I'd like to offer you a free massage."

Kiera's heart seemed to skip a beat as her mind filled with images of lying naked on a table with his hands on her. The thought sent a shiver from the top of her head all the way down to her toes.

"I would, of course, promise to behave in a thoroughly professional manner. There would be no repeat of the elevator scene."

"That's a very nice offer," she began, "but—"

"You're probably reluctant to be alone with me after the way I acted, but Kiera this is my business. I've had some very beautiful women as clients, and I haven't once made a pass at any of them. Aside from any professional ethics, I could very well ruin my business by acting in an inappropriate manner with a client. You'd be quite safe with me."

Kiera frowned; she couldn't imagine feeling safe with Hunter. Even his name declared him a predator. But the idea of having his hands on her, of letting those strong, lithe fingers press into the tight muscles of her back, filled her with heat.

She shook her head and the frown turned into an ironic grin. Maybe *Hunter* wouldn't be safe with her! "I don't know," she said. "I have a feeling it might be tempting fate."

"Come on," he wheedled. "It's been weeks since I've given a massage. I'm out of practice."

She laughed. "If that's the case, maybe I should wait until you're at your best once more. You don't want to make a bad impression, do you?"

"I've never had a woman play hard-to-get over a massage before. Come on, what could it possibly hurt?"

She was beginning to weaken. She'd only ever had a massage twice, both times because a friend had given her a gift certificate. She'd really enjoyed it, but not enough to pay eighty dollars of her own money to get another. And she'd already had a brief sample of Hunter's wares when he'd rubbed her shoulders in the elevator.

A sudden thought brought her up short just as she was about to accept his offer. "I just referred a friend of mine to you and you told him you weren't open for business."

"I wasn't, at the time. My massage table only arrived yesterday."

He'd answered smoothly, but Kiera's irritating instincts told her he was lying. She told her instincts to go to hell, but they didn't listen. "I'm sure Jackson will be thrilled to hear that you're open now."

Was it her imagination, or did he hesitate a beat before answering? "You're trying to deflect my attention from the subject at hand. I will worry about Mr. Davis's ailing back later. Right now, my concern is you. Let me make amends, please."

What was the point of resisting? Damn it, even though he made her nervous, she had to admit she wanted the massage. Not for sexual reasons, of course. It was just such a decadent pleasure, and Hunter promised to be good at it. And how could she turn down a free massage by a hot guy?

"All right, all right. You win. I lose."

He laughed. "I hope you will not feel like you lost when I'm finished with you."

"If I do, I'll ask for my money back," she teased.

"And I will, of course, refund every penny," he promised in a mock-serious voice. "Now, when would you like to come?"

She shrugged. "I hadn't given it any thought."

"How about three o'clock?"

Apparently, he *had* given it some thought. No doubt he'd entered this debate certain he was going to win. The idea irked

her. "How about four instead," she said, not because she had any objection to three but because she wanted the illusion of being in control.

"Four it is. Wear loose, comfortable clothing that you don't mind getting massage oil on."

"Will do," she agreed, even as heat filled her once more. Her skin felt a phantom touch of oiled hands, and she wondered if she'd just made a terrible mistake.

All was prepared, but that didn't stop Hunter from taking yet another turn around the room, checking and rechecking. Yes, he had a relaxing CD in the stereo; yes, he had matches with which to light the scented candles; yes, he remembered the pattern of strokes he planned to use. No, he no longer had his knife up his sleeve.

Damn, he thought as he came to a stop in his pacing. He was *nervous*. He couldn't remember feeling this way ever before. And all because he was going to have Kiera under his hands when he had no intention of making a move on her. He took a deep, steadying breath. It wouldn't do to act nervous when she arrived. Which, if he had the read on her habits, she would do late. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost four.

Hunter slipped out of the massage room, prowling the apartment restlessly. He stopped in his bedroom in front of the full-length mirror that faced the bed. His nervousness still showed in his eyes, and he spent an anxious moment staring at himself in an effort to school his expression.

The doorbell rang.

"Will you *relax!*" he snarled at his reflection when he saw

what the sound of that bell had done to his face. The doorbell rang a second time before he reached the door.

Hunter swung the door open, a practiced smile on his face. When he saw Kiera standing there, the smile almost died. She looked as nervous as he felt, her smile failing to reach her eyes, and he felt instantly guilty that he was putting her through this ordeal.

Getting a massage is not an ordeal, he reminded himself as he firmed up his smile. “Come in, come in,” he said, stepping back and opening the door wider. He saw her swallow hard before she stepped into the room. He glanced at his watch. “You’re right on time. I wasn’t expecting you for at least another ten minutes.”

She gave him a dirty look, but the jest seemed to have banished some of her nerves. “Well, they usually tell you to arrive at least ten minutes early to fill out all the paperwork.”

“That explains it, then.” He reached out and put his hand lightly on her arm. “Come, let me show you to my office.”

She tensed ever so slightly at his touch. “What about the paperwork?”

His research had failed to turn up the fact that there was any paperwork involved, but he figured he could bluff his way through this easily enough. He grinned. “I’m not officially open for business yet, remember? And this is a freebie. So, no paperwork required.”

She allowed him to guide her back to the massage room, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the frown that creased her brow. He’d never met anyone quite so suspicious before. Still, she was here, and he was confident he could allay those suspicions, at least temporarily.

He thought her suspicions went down a notch when she stepped into the massage room, which he knew looked highly professional. Money had been no object, so he had ordered only the best equipment, and he had looked at plenty of pictures from the most elegant and expensive spas from around the world.

The lights were low, giving the room a tranquil atmosphere without making it feel dim or gloomy. A tall indoor fountain bubbled gently against one wall, and his cart of lotions and oils stood amidst lush potted ferns.

Hunter gave her a moment to look around while he lit the scented candles that flanked the doorway in simple wall sconces. The scent of sulphur and smoke momentarily marred the atmosphere, and he reminded himself to use a lighter instead of matches if he ever did this again.

Kiera was rubbing her hands absently against the legs of her wide-leg knit pants, and he wondered if her palms were sweating. *His* certainly were. Feigning assurance, he stepped up to the massage table and folded back the sheets.

“I’ll leave you for a couple of moments,” he said, then paused to clear his throat when he heard how husky his voice came out. “I’ll start you off face down.” He forced a bit of a grin. “If your back is anywhere near as tight today as it was before, it’ll need lots of extra attention. You can, uh, leave your underwear on or take it off, whichever makes you more comfortable.”

She fixed him with a stare that did funny things to his insides, but he met her eyes as innocently as possible. That was the standard spiel. Nothing sexual about it. But the idea of her lying entirely naked beneath that sheet . . . Better not to think

about it. He'd purposely worn a pair of blue jeans entirely inappropriate for massage because the heavy denim would help hide the arousal he'd been certain he would feel. However, denim could only do so much.

He cleared his throat once more. "I'll knock before I come in," he finished, then slipped out of the room quickly before he embarrassed himself any further.

He needed to pull himself together and fast! The plan here had been to make her feel less threatened by him while at the same time getting her to associate him with things sensual. To do that, he'd have to keep at least a bit of professional distance. It wouldn't do to have a hard-on the entire time he was in the room with her. He closed his eyes and focused on the punishment he'd suffered at Bane's hands. That had been nothing but a wrist slap compared to what awaited him should he fail the larger mission.

The reminder wilted him immediately and he opened his eyes. Not the most pleasant way to rein in his lust, but it was effective.

Marginally more prepared, he knocked softly on the door to the massage room. After a brief hesitation, Kiera gave him permission to enter.

She'd managed to pull the sheet all the way up to her neck—a difficult feat when lying on her stomach. Her head was turned toward the doorway in what must have been an uncomfortable position, but she was obviously too uneasy to bury her face in the headrest yet. He gave her his most reassuring smile, coming to stand beside the table.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, then. Go ahead and put your face in the headrest."

The sheet rose and fell with her deep breath, but she turned her head and wriggled until she was comfortable. Hunter took a deep breath himself as he folded back the sheet to reveal the smooth, creamy expanse of her back. His manhood twitched and he drew in another breath, drawing the sheet farther down to reveal the first swell of her hips. He stopped when he caught a glimpse of the elastic waistband of her panties. What a surprise, she had kept them on. And they reached practically to her waist. He wondered if she'd specifically gone out to buy granny panties today, for he couldn't imagine that was what she usually wore.

He tucked the sheet into the waistband of her panties and drew them a little lower down her hips. He saw the muscles in her back clench, but he chose not to acknowledge her tension. Lowering them was perfectly acceptable, for they would get in the way when he worked on her lower back. There was nothing sexual in it whatsoever.

Hunter couldn't help the little smile that curved his lips. He wondered how many times he would repeat that little refrain before this hour was up.

He flipped on the stereo, and the soft, vague strains of new age violins joined the burble of the fountain. He squirted massage oil onto his hands and rubbed them together to warm it.

When his hands first touched her back, both of them tensed. The feel of her against his palms sent an arrow of desire from his hands through his arms to his groin. By the time he'd finished the first broad stroke, he was fully erect and Kiera was even more tense than she'd been when she walked

in.

Ignoring as best he could the throbbing in his groin, Hunter closed his eyes and concentrated on what he'd learned about massage, concentrated on keeping the pressure from his hands firm and even, concentrated on keeping the strokes slow and unhurried.

Somewhere along the way, Kiera's muscles began to respond, the tension draining out of them drop by drop until she was completely pliant beneath his hands. He risked opening his eyes and was pleased to discover his lust had calmed from a rolling boil to a gentle—and not unpleasant—simmer. He changed from the broad strokes that covered her entire back into a more focused stroke that concentrated on the tightness of her shoulders. It didn't take long for him to find isolated spots that felt strangely harder than the rest of her muscles and he worked each until it softened and relaxed. He didn't need to ask if the pressure was too much; she had gone so limp he was certain he wasn't hurting her.

When he could no longer find those hard little bumps in her shoulders, he worked his way down her arms, strokes taking him all the way to the base of her fingers. He noticed how smooth and soft her skin was, realized it wasn't just because of the massage oil.

Hunter pulled the sheet back up and tucked it under her shoulders, going to work next on her legs. She was so relaxed he wondered if she might have fallen asleep. He had a harder time keeping himself under control while his hands worked her thighs, constantly aware of the desire to keep his hands moving upward. By the time he was done, his jeans had become

unbearably tight and he knew he couldn't risk letting her see him. He improvised and worked on her feet a little longer until his arousal wasn't so excruciating.

When he held the sheet up and asked her to turn over, it seemed as though she could barely move. Her eyes were closed, her lips slack. Any suspicions she might have had were gone, and she lay before him in a state of total trust. He worked her neck and face and wished he deserved that trust.

With a regretful sigh, he allowed his hands to slide off her skin. "Take your time getting up," he whispered. "Come on out when you're ready."

He slipped out the door, filled with a strange yearning that had nothing to do with the desires of the flesh.

Kiera felt like a lump of putty. When Hunter had first put his hands on her, she'd practically jumped off the table she'd been so tense. Now, it seemed it would take more will than she had, simply to sit up. With a groan, she propped herself up on her elbows. She breathed deep, taking in the vanilla scent of the candles, and, under that, Hunter's spicy scent. A smile crept over her lips.

Eventually, she managed to get to her feet and get dressed, though every movement was slow and languid. She'd felt relaxed after her previous massages; after this one, she felt boneless and sated. Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door.

Hunter was waiting for her in the living room. At first, he didn't seem to hear her enter, so she stood silent for a moment, observing him. He sat on a very masculine brown velour couch, his booted feet propped on the glossy walnut coffee

table. His hands—those wonderful, warm, strong hands—were folded across his abdomen, and his head rested against the back of the couch, his hair fanned out around him in a dark halo. His eyes were open, staring fixedly at the ceiling. When she followed his gaze, she noticed a small hole in the ceiling, but there was nothing about it that seemed to warrant such attention.

Either she made a noise, or Hunter finally sensed he was not alone, for he raised his head and swung his feet off the coffee table. For the first moment she caught his eyes, she saw something haunted—and hunted—in them, but he hid the expression before she could be certain it wasn't just a figment of her imagination.

“Wow,” he said, smiling warmly at her. “You look much more relaxed than you were when you got here. I swear your shoulders are sitting about six inches lower.”

She returned his smile. “Okay, even I have to admit you did good. I feel like an overcooked noodle.”

“Well come sit down a moment.” He indicated a tall glass sweating on a coaster. “You need to drink lots of water to flush out the toxins. Might as well start now.”

She hesitated, worrying that if she stayed she would shatter the tenuous peace that seemed to have taken hold. But somehow, it seemed too much effort to remain worried about his intentions when she felt so good, so she fell heavily onto the couch beside him. She took a couple long swallows of water, noticing as she did so that her nerves weren't jangling the way they usually did when Hunter was close. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. He looked much more relaxed himself. Maybe even more . . . human.

Kiera shook off that thought, remembering reluctantly her mother's crazy ideas and the horseshoe. All so ridiculous, really. Hunter was just a man. Full of contradictions and complexity, perhaps, but a man nonetheless.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he asked, startling her.

She took another sip of water, considering the wisdom of answering him with any kind of honesty. She turned toward him on the couch, propping her head on her hand. “I'm just trying to figure you out.”

He grinned and raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And what conclusions have you reached?”

“That's just the thing: I'm failing miserably. You don't have multiple personality disorder or anything, do you?”

A short bark of laughter escaped him. “Not that I know of.” He moved a little closer to her, turning his body so that he was facing her. “Tell me what you're trying to figure out. Maybe I can help.”

She was momentarily tempted to laugh, but he looked like he was serious, so she put some thought into it. “Well, I have to admit you just gave me a wonderful massage. But I'm still having trouble reconciling with the idea that you do it for a living.”

“Why? Still based on the stereotype?”

She shrugged. “I think it's more than that.” She bit her lip and wondered whether she dared say any more. She was already being pretty damn rude, considering he'd just given her a free sample of his services. But his face looked open and friendly, and she was so curious about him she couldn't resist. “For one thing, I don't think massage therapists usually make the kind of money it would take to dress the way you do—or to

furnish an apartment quite so elegantly.”

He nodded in acknowledgment, his face grave. “That’s true. You have caught me out in my secret.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “The drugs are where the real money comes from.”

He looked so serious that for a fraction of a second, she thought he might actually mean it. Then she saw the glint in his eye and she gave him a mock glare. “Very funny,” she said, reaching behind her and grabbing the throw pillow propped in the corner of the couch.

Hunter was about to respond when she whipped the pillow around and tried to bop him in the head with it. He moved with incredible speed, one arm blocking the blow while his other hand darted out to fasten on her wrist. It all happened so fast she could barely comprehend it. Their gazes locked as he held her wrist in a firm grip and plucked the pillow from her fingers with his other hand.

Kiera was shocked at herself, amazed she’d had the gall to try to hit this man she barely knew with a pillow, that she’d gone from being so rigid and guarded with him to acting like he was a close friend. She was even more shocked by his swift reaction. When he’d seen the blow coming, he’d reacted like he was trying to prevent a death-blow, his eyes hardening and all signs of humor fading. Even so, when he’d caught her wrist, his fingers had been firm but gentle, belying the ferocity of his expression.

Heat crawled up Kiera’s cheeks as they stared at one another, her wrist still trapped in his fingers. She didn’t know how she could possibly apologize for the over-familiarity, but she had to try. “I don’t know what came over me,” she said,

shaking her head and trying to extricate her wrist from his grip.

He didn’t let go, although he lowered their hands to the couch. He no longer looked so fierce, his lips now quirked into something approaching a smile, but there was still a strange intensity to his gaze. “You don’t have to apologize. It was a bad joke.” His thumb moved in a slow circle against the skin on the underside of her wrist. She wasn’t even sure he knew he was doing it. “I had it coming.”

She blinked and swallowed, her breath coming shorter as her pulse kicked up. She knew he must be able to feel the quickening of her pulse where his thumb caressed her wrist, but she couldn’t force herself to pull her hand away. Words failed her, and she sat there mute and confused. Suddenly, she wanted very much to kiss him, but the feeling was very different from the fuzzy-headed compulsion she’d experienced in the elevator.

Hunter laughed softly and let go of her wrist. She almost reached for him, hating to have lost that point of contact between them. She stopped herself in time.

“I think perhaps you’d better finish your glass of water and head on home,” he said with a rueful smile. “If you don’t, I’m going to end up making another pass, and then I’ll have to give you another free massage. I’ll bankrupt myself at this rate!”

Kiera let out a slow breath. Right this moment, she wasn’t entirely sure she would rebuff him if he did make a pass. She felt none of the creepy, unsettling sensations that she usually associated with him. Perhaps it had all been in her head, and he was exactly as he seemed. Her pulse showed no sign of slowing, and she imagined he would be an excellent kisser.

But this was simply ridiculous. Men who looked like him did not pursue women who looked like her. He was simply reacting to their proximity, his male instincts prodding him in a sort of reflexive reaction entirely beyond his control. If she gave in to her own impulses, she would feel like the worst kind of fool afterward, and it would make their professional relationship impossible.

So she sucked in a deep breath, ordering her pulse to return to normal, and she smiled at him. “Well, I certainly wouldn’t want you in bankruptcy court because of me!” She put some distance between them as she picked up the glass and gulped the remainder of the water. She plunked it triumphantly on the coaster and practically leapt to her feet. Shit, her cheeks were hot, which meant she was probably blushing.

Hunter got to his feet almost as fast, his face now a mask of concern. “Damn! I just blew it again, didn’t I?” He shook his head. “Sorry, Kiera. I didn’t mean to—”

She held up a hand to stop him. “Don’t worry about it.” She forced a smile. “You didn’t blow it. Really you didn’t,” she added when he looked skeptical. If she didn’t watch it, she was going to tweak more of those manly instincts by running away. “Thank you so much for the massage. It was really wonderful. I’ll recommend you to all my friends. Once you’re actually open for business, that is.”

“Well, if you decide I owe you another freebie after my unwise comment, let me know. I’d be happy to oblige.”

Yikes! As good as the massage had been, she didn’t think she dared risk another. The relaxation had clearly addled her brain, and if she didn’t watch it she could end up flinging herself at him. It had been too long since she’d had a

boyfriend—she was really losing her cool.

“I think I’ll let you off the hook just this once,” she said. “But you’d better be on your best behavior when you come to see the website in a couple days, got it?”

“I will be a model of propriety,” he promised as he guided her to the door.

There was another awkward moment when they stood together in the doorway. Kiera found herself staring at his lips, speculating once more on what they would feel like on hers.

Somehow, showing more willpower than she liked to contemplate, she managed to make it home without finding out.

Chapter 7

When the fog cleared from her head, Kiera realized the massage had left her even more perplexed by Hunter. That she had wanted him was undeniable; that the desire had felt so different from her earlier experiences with him just made it more strange. Trying to keep her mind . . . ajar . . . as Jackson had suggested, she had to admit that if there really were such a thing as fairy glamour, it would explain a lot: Hunter had used glamour to stir her hunger in the elevator, and it had been her own natural desire she'd felt in his apartment.

Her mind still recoiled from the idea, but she sternly reminded herself that entertaining the possibility did no harm, and so she set up an ambush.

She invited Hunter over to her apartment to see the finished design for his website. Maybe she was sending a dangerous signal by inviting him over instead of meeting him at the coffee shop and taking advantage of its wireless Internet connection, but she couldn't imagine any excuse to have the

horseshoe with her there.

Kiera's study was positively cramped with her large computer desk and bookshelves, but she could just manage to drag a second chair in. She scattered a handful of bric-a-brac on the chair, then nestled the horseshoe amongst the clutter. Her whole apartment was an homage to clutter, so she didn't think the chair would stand out as unusual.

True, the horseshoe looked pretty out of place. But, if Hunter was just a normal man—as, of course, he *had* to be—he would think nothing of it. And if he was some kind of supernatural being . . . Well, but he wasn't, so it wasn't worth thinking about what would happen if he was.

Her imagination now firmly under control, Kiera waited anxiously for Hunter to arrive. She had changed clothes three times before she'd settled on a deep green button-down shirt-dress with a knotted leather belt. The fit and the color flattered her nicely without looking like something she'd wear for a date. And though she didn't wear cologne or lipstick often, it wasn't unheard of. No, she definitely wasn't trying to make any kind of impression on Hunter.

The doorbell rang and she suffered a moment of panic. God, what had she been thinking, dressing up and wearing lipstick? He'd take one look at her and assume this was some kind of come-on! But it was too late now. Cursing herself under her breath, she hurried to get the door.

Hunter looked more handsome every time she saw him. Today, he was wearing a charcoal gray sweater that looked like it might be cashmere. She shook his hand in greeting and had to resist an urge to run her hand over his arm to feel the sweater. Actually, it wasn't his arm she most wanted to touch

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“Great sweater,” she said, then wanted to slap herself for the ridiculous comment; it made her sound as nervous as she was. And there was no reason to be nervous. She was merely meeting with a client, showing him her work. If he was happy with her work, this might be the last time they saw each other except for the occasional run-in in the lobby or elevator.

Hunter’s eyes smiled down at her as though he guessed the direction of her thoughts. “Thanks.” His eyes dipped lower, taking her in from head to toe then back again. His nostrils flared ever so slightly, like a hound scenting the wind. “Great dress,” he said, but his expression said clearly that he was more interested in what was *under* the dress.

Kiera cleared her throat quietly, hoping her cheeks weren’t as rosy as she suspected. “Come in,” she said, gesturing him into the apartment. Her voice sounded too bright to her own ears. She wasn’t fooling anyone! “My office is back here.” All right, that sounded a little better. She led him toward the office, painfully aware of how close behind her he walked.

“Your shoulders are back up around your ears,” Hunter said. He stopped her in the doorway by putting his hands on said shoulders and giving them a glorious squeeze. She sucked in a loud breath and he chuckled. “With shoulders this tense, you should be getting regular massages. It’s not good for you to carry so much tension around.”

She had the distinct impression he knew that he himself was causing the tension, but she wasn’t rude enough to point it out to him. For a few delicious seconds, she let him rub her shoulders, wishing she could strip off the dress and get his hands on her bare skin. Then she forcibly reminded herself

why he was here.

“If you keep doing that, I’m going to turn into a puddle of mush,” she murmured.

“Would that be a bad thing?”

“Puddles of mush generally aren’t much good at showing off websites.”

“Websites?” he said in feigned confusion.

She laughed and reached up to pat one of his hands. “Back off, Romeo,” she said without rancor. “You have a business to run, remember?”

He sighed dramatically, then gave her shoulders a final squeeze before letting his hands slide away.

The small, crowded study seemed even smaller with both of them in it, and Kiera wished she’d staged this scene in the living room. Hunter’s scent filled the air, making her knees all weak and quivery. She hurried to her chair and sat down, turning to the second chair and putting on a chagrined face. “Sorry about the mess,” she said, waving a hand at the pile of junk on the chair. “Just put that stuff on the floor and have a seat.”

She had laid out the trap carefully, covering the seat with small objects such as pens and paperclips and Post-it notes. There was nothing he could use to shield himself from the iron horseshoe, and he would have to touch it directly to clear off the seat. She glanced up and saw him frowning at the chair.

“I get the paperclips and pens,” he said, turning his frown into a puzzled smile, “but explain the horseshoe.”

She hoped she was hiding her embarrassment better than she thought she was. This was worse than silly! “My mother’s very superstitious,” she explained. “She gave me the horseshoe

to put up on my front door, but I haven't gotten around to it. Just chuck it on the floor."

Ignoring the chair, Hunter came to stand in front of her. He leaned over and grabbed the back of her chair, turning her around to face the computer. He kept his hands on the back of the chair, crowding into her space. "I think I'll have a better view from right here, don't you?" he asked, his breath fanning her hair.

Kiera wanted to scream. On the one hand, he'd just neatly avoided touching the horseshoe, which should have been suspicious. On the other hand, moving in to stand so close was such a Hunter-like thing to do that it was hard to put any significance into his seeming reluctance.

Admitting temporary defeat, she put her mind to showing him the website. He made appreciative comments here and there, and even once or twice suggested a slight change. But every nerve in her body told her that only a small fraction of his attention was on the computer screen. Certainly only a small fraction of hers was. Every time he breathed, she felt the air tickle her neck or her ear. Every time *she* breathed, she noticed the scent of bay leaves and sandalwood. His voice sent chills through her, and his body seemed to radiate heat.

When she'd finished her tour of the site, Kiera felt like she'd just run a marathon, her heart was beating so hard. Her lips tingled with the yearning to be kissed, and her nipples had long ago gone hard. If she wasn't careful, this time it would be *she* who made a pass at *him*. She had to put some distance between them somehow, before this went too far.

"Would you help me hang that horseshoe to make my mother happy?" she asked, the words coming out too fast and

way too blatant. Somewhere along the line, she'd lost the art of subtlety.

"To hell with the horseshoe," he murmured in her ear, then turned the chair around once more so that she was facing him. He grasped her upper arms and pulled her to her feet. The amazing thing was, she let him.

Kiera's heart slammed in her chest and her eyes widened as she read his intent, but she didn't even try to escape as he lowered his head and captured her lips.

The moment his lips touched hers, a deep-throated moan escaped her and she forgot all thoughts of resistance. He kissed lightly at first, a gentle exploration that made her ever hungrier. She put her arms around him, hands burrowing into the feather-soft cashmere as she tilted her head backward to give him full access. When the tip of his tongue licked delicately over the seam between her lips, she opened for him, pressing herself tightly into his arms, hands stroking his back as she imagined what that gloriously soft cashmere would feel like against her bare breasts.

Hunter deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue past her teeth and exploring her mouth. Each caress of his tongue heightened her desire, and she moved her hips the better to feel the hard ridge in his pants. He moaned into her mouth and guided her until her back was against the wall, and he used his body to pin her there when her knees felt too weak to hold her up. His hands seized her breasts, kneading urgently at first, then circling the hardened nubs with his thumbs.

Kiera clung to him for dear life, the flood of sensation overpowering. His mouth began to travel downward, hot lips trailing burning kisses across her jaw line as he unbuttoned her

dress down to her waist. By . . . coincidence . . . she'd worn an especially sexy black lace bra, and Hunter's hands soon showed their ardent appreciation. She laid her head back against the wall, her eyes closed, her breaths shallow, her heart racing, as his kisses continued down her throat, the scrape of his teeth suggesting he was marking her. She didn't care.

She should be reciprocating somehow, should be caressing him, giving him at least a fraction of the pleasure he was giving her. Instead, she stood selfishly still, hands buried in his sweater, as he popped the catch on her bra and tasted her. The rasp of his tongue against her nipple sent a delighted shiver through her.

Hunter raised his head from her breast to give her another amazing kiss. She dug her fingers into his hair as she felt the soft sweep of cashmere against her bare flesh. She pressed her breasts into him, teasing her own nipples against the softness of the sweater. He worked more buttons loose on her dress, then started tugging on the knot in her belt.

The phone rang.

Hunter might as well not have heard it for all the attention he spared it. He was struggling a bit with the tight knot, but Kiera was confident he'd manage. The phone rang again, and she urged herself to ignore it just as Hunter was doing.

On the third ring, Kiera came back to herself enough to wonder just what the hell she was doing. If she didn't pull back on the reins soon, Hunter was going to screw her against the wall in a minute. Her body flushed with desire at the image that formed in her mind.

The phone's fourth ring was cut off by her answering machine. Hunter won out over the knot in her belt, and the

strip of leather dropped to the floor. He smoothed his hands over the skin of her belly under her dress, curving them around the swell of her hips until they cupped her bottom.

"Kiera, honey, it's me," her mother's voice said over the answering machine, which, unfortunately, was situated in the study so she could hear it loud and clear.

The sound of her mother's voice was like a splash of cold water. She had to stop this. *Now*.

If she could.

She reluctantly drew her hands out of Hunter's hair and placed them against his chest.

"I just wanted to see if you'd made any progress on that matter we were discussing the other day," her mother continued, blissfully unaware of just what her daughter was doing at the moment.

Kiera pushed against Hunter's chest, firming up her knees so she no longer stood so limply in his arms.

"Give me a call when you get this message, sweetheart."

Hunter seemed uninclined to yield to the pressure against his chest, his tongue still probing the depths of her mouth, his hands doing wicked things to her derriere. She pushed more forcefully and tried to turn her head to the side.

"I know you think I'm being my usual nutty self, but I'll feel much better when I know you've tried our little experiment."

Kiera was just beginning to feel a frisson of alarm, wondering if she was going to be able to get Hunter to stop, when he finally broke the kiss and moved his hands around until they rested on her hips.

"If I'm not home when you call, just leave a message.

Thanks for humoring a wacky old lady.”

The answering machine beeped again, then went silent. Kiera swallowed hard and rested her forehead against Hunter’s chest. Her entire body still felt the heat of desire. He was standing so close to her, she could feel his heat, and the scent of him nearly made her giddy. With her forehead pressed against his chest, she could feel the pounding of his heart. His hands still rested on her hips inside her dress as he awaited an invitation to resume.

Gathering her courage, she raised her head from his chest and looked up into his eyes, staring into pupils dark and dilated with desire. Almost, she gave in to the hunger she saw there, the hunger that sang through her blood just as intensely.

Kiera shivered, amazed at how overpowering this whole encounter had been. Hunter’s lips curved in the barest beginning of a smile. She matched it with an ironic smile of her own.

“You know,” she said, “usually I don’t kiss on the first date.” She frowned as though deep in thought. “I certainly think this has gone far enough, since we haven’t even *had* a first date yet.”

He laughed, and the sound was rich and mellow. He smoothed his hands up her sides, then cupped her bare breasts again. Her breath caught in her throat while her conscious mind scrambled to rally the troops.

“How would you like to come to dinner Friday night?” he asked, giving her breasts a light squeeze. “My place.”

She hesitated before answering. Her blood pounded in her ears, and the long-denied hunger screamed at her to accept, but instinct told her she needed to think this one through. The

kissing on the first date line had been crap, but she really didn’t sleep with anyone on the first date. Nor even the second. But she had no doubt that if she were alone in Hunter’s apartment, he would go for the jugular. And she had lots of doubt that she’d be able to resist.

“Come now,” he teased, “the decision isn’t that difficult, is it?”

She looked down at his hands still cupping her breasts. “It is when you’re doing that,” she said, a trifle breathlessly.

He moved his hands away with evident reluctance, then even went so far as to pull her dress closed to give her some semblance of modesty. “There, is that better?”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “If I agree to come to dinner, are you going to take that as an agreement to sleep with you?”

He smiled down at her. “Is that how you would mean it?”

She wished he would back off, wished he would stop crowding her with his undeniable sex appeal. “No, that’s not how I would mean it,” she replied with admirable certainty, although inside she wasn’t really all that certain.

“Then I won’t take it that way.” To her surprise, he took a step backward, giving her room to breathe, though his eyes still bored into hers. “I’m an aggressive man, Kiera. But, as I think I’ve demonstrated, I do take no for an answer.” He brushed the back of a single finger across her cheek. “You will be safe with me.”

Somehow, Kiera rather doubted that. But her body overruled her mind and its doubts, and she found herself agreeing to arrive at his apartment at seven o’clock on Friday evening.

She hoped like hell she wasn't going to regret this later.

Hunter was drowning in a sea of guilt. For the short time he'd been in Kiera's apartment with her melting in his arms, he'd forgotten everything but the desire she kindled in him. With single-minded intensity, he'd allowed his world to shrink until nothing mattered but the taste of her lips and the feel of her body under his hands. Nothing he'd done up there had been part of his mother's scheme. And it had felt so right! Even now that he had withdrawn, his nerve endings still tingled with the remembered pleasure.

When he'd made the date for Friday night, he'd barely thought about his mission. *You will be safe with me.* How could he possibly have spoken those words to her? What kind of cold-blooded, cruel-hearted bastard would say that to a woman he planned to seduce and impregnate? Right now, he felt like the lowest pond scum on earth, no thrill of victory whatsoever.

Hunter's mood was not improved when he pushed open the door to his apartment and scented goblin on the air. He groaned, wondering if he had the will to control himself right now. He felt so edgy there was considerable risk he'd go for Bane's throat if the goblin provoked him. He stalked into the living room where he found Bane reclining on the sofa, an uncorked bottle of vintage red wine clutched in his hand.

"I bought that for Kiera, not you," Hunter said, indicating the bottle of wine.

Bane grinned and downed another large mouthful straight from the bottle. "I'll be sure to leave her some."

Hunter grimaced. "Take the bottle with you when you

leave." He wouldn't touch anything the goblin's lips had touched before him, and he certainly wouldn't subject Kiera to such either. After this visit, he might even have to buy a new couch, for he wasn't at all sure he could get the stench of goblin out of this one now that Bane had fouled it with his presence.

Bane set the wine bottle down and leaned forward. "How are you feeling, Boyo? All better?" The light of cruelty shone from his eyes.

Bane stared at him for a long time before answering. Hunter supposed the goblin was assessing him, trying to figure out how much he could taunt without getting himself killed. He apparently came to the correct conclusion, and his voice when he spoke was all business. "Just the usual. The Queen would like a progress report."

Hunter crossed his arms over his chest. "I've made some progress." He hoped his stance and the belligerence of his expression conveyed adequately his determination not to elaborate.

Bane waited a couple of beats as if expecting more. When he didn't get it, he grinned again. "Come on, Prince, out with it. Give me all the juicy details. What base did you get to? Or have you already crossed home plate?"

"You can tell my mother I made progress. If she wants any more specific details, she can stop by and we'll have a chat."

The goblin's eyes hardened and he rose from the sofa. "Don't be a fool. You don't dare defy her. I know plenty more methods of hurting you without doing much damage, and I'd love to try some of them out."

Hunter didn't waver. "I've had enough of your

interference—and of hers. I will accomplish my mission and you don't need to know every tawdry detail.”

Bane looked comically surprised by Hunter's sudden show of backbone. “Did you learn *nothing* from your last punishment?”

“Remind my dear mother that she needs me right now. If she pushes too hard, her plans will go all to ruin.”

The goblin gave him a long, narrow-eyed stare, then shook his head as he hopped over the coffee table and headed for the door. Hunter moved with him, prepared to lock and bolt the door behind him.

Bane stopped in the doorway and squinted up at Hunter. “I'll give the Queen your message. And you're probably right in your assumption that she won't retaliate just now. As you said, she needs you. But have you considered what may happen to you after you succeed? How many debts will you have to pay then, eh Boyo? Worth thinking about.”

Bane slipped out without waiting for a reply. Hunter closed the door behind him, then leaned his back against the door and wondered what the hell had come over him. Bane was entirely right, and Hunter was setting himself up for terrible retribution. Once Kiera was pregnant and he was no longer of any use, he would have to make a run for it. He'd never dared try to escape before, remembering how terribly his father had suffered for that mistake, and knowing his mother would pursue him with single-minded purpose. But perhaps when she had the prospect of a grandchild she could groom to rule over all of Faerie, she would lose interest in him. A faint hope, at best, but if he hadn't already earned himself an execution after his defiance, he had certainly earned a

punishment he had no wish to face.

Hunter noticed that Bane had left the bottle of wine on the coffee table. He threw the bottle away, holding it gingerly with the tips of his fingers, then called a carpet cleaning service to steam clean the sofa. He retreated to his bedroom to escape the lingering stink in the air.

Lying on his bed, his head pillowed by his hands as he stared at the ceiling and listened to Kiera's footsteps above him, he wondered whether there had been any significance to the horseshoe she'd had on her chair. Certainly it was an odd thing to have sitting around in one's office. And she had twice suggested he touch it. Was it possible she had begun to suspect? She'd told him her mother gave her the horseshoe, and obviously her mother had experience with the denizens of Faerie. Had Kiera spoken to her mother about him? And did her mother now harbor suspicions?

It didn't matter, he decided, sitting up. Kiera was hardly going to bring a horseshoe with her when she came to dinner, and he thought he'd deflected her attempts earlier with enough grace that even if she did suspect something, she would not feel as though she'd gained any proof.

Pushing his worries aside the best he could, Hunter set about planning a dinner date that would shatter Kiera's defenses and tempt her into his bed.

Kiera badly needed a confidante, and she sure as hell didn't want it to be her mom. She knew what would happen if she called her mom: she'd mention Hunter's evasive maneuvers vis-a-vis the horseshoe, and her mom would be firmly convinced he was some kind of fairy with dastardly

purposes.

She giggled to herself, suddenly and unexpectedly. There was an outside chance—slim, and still pretty ridiculous in her mind—that Hunter was fey; however, “fairy” was not a word she could easily associate with him.

Eventually, she convinced herself that it would be safe to confide in Jackson. He would probably buy into her mother’s suspicions, but he wouldn’t be quite so . . . insufferable about it.

Jackson came by late Friday afternoon, to help her prepare for her date, and his warm, familiar face was a welcome sight indeed. He swept into her apartment in a cloud of Drakkar Noir and manic energy, and before she got a word in he insisted she show him what she was planning to wear.

Kiera frowned. “You know, I have no earthly idea,” she admitted. She’d been thinking so hard about what might happen once she arrived at Hunter’s apartment, she had barely given a thought to her preparations.

Jackson patted her on the shoulder blade. “Well, let’s work on that together, shall we?” He started for her bedroom before she’d agreed.

Kiera hurried along behind him. “But Jackson, I have to get my mind in order before I can deal with the details!”

“We can talk and examine your wardrobe at the same time.” He opened the door to her walk-in closet and flipped the light on, tapping his chin with one finger as he considered the possibilities.

“I’m just going to his apartment, Jackson. It’s not like we’re going to some fancy restaurant where I have to dress up or anything.”

He tore his attention away from her clothes to give her a knowing look. “And the clothes you wear for this intimate little dinner in his apartment will go a long way toward signaling your intentions. What do you want your clothes to say, eh? ‘Keep your hands to yourself?’ ‘Take me, I’m yours?’” He indicated her current outfit of jeans and a boxy solid blue sweater with a sweep of his hand. “For instance, that outfit says ‘This isn’t a date, it’s merely a friendly get-together.’” He perused her closet and pulled out a burgundy silk dress with a plunging neckline—a dress she’d bought because it was gorgeous and on sale, but one she’d never found an occasion to wear. “This little number says ‘fuck me.’” Her cheeks instantly colored. “Big difference, you see.”

“I thought you were here to help!” she snapped.

He put the dress back on the rack and gave her a look of perfect innocence. “I am, darling. You said you were confused about how you felt for him. Well, by the time we figure out what you’re wearing to this dinner, I think it will all be a lot clearer.”

She groaned and rubbed her face, reminding herself that she had indeed asked for this. She’d told Jackson that things had gotten pretty hot and heavy when Hunter had come over to view the website. She suspected he’d read more into her words than she’d meant to communicate. She backed away from the closet to sit on the edge of her bed, her palms perspiring as she tried to make sense of everything. It wasn’t as though she’d never gone on a date before. It wasn’t even as though she’d never gone on a date where she was contemplating whether to sleep with the guy or not. But damn, she couldn’t ever remember feeling this nervous about it before.

Jackson abandoned the closet and sat on the bed facing her. “Maybe you need a little perspective,” he said softly. “This is not a life or death decision you’re making. And you don’t need to decide right now. All I’m suggesting is that you straighten out in your mind what the possibilities are.”

She sighed heavily. “You’re right, I know. But everything’s swirling around in my head and I can’t tell up from down.” She turned to him, her oldest friend, who’d seen her through happiness and heartbreak. “Do you ever remember seeing me in such a muddle?”

“No,” he admitted. “You usually make up your mind way too early and then ignore any suggestion that you just might be wrong.”

She winced. “Geez, Jackson. You’ve really been getting in some zingers lately.”

“Sorry, but it’s true. If you meet a guy and your first impression is that he’s the kind of man you might like, you suddenly put these blinders on and dismiss every sign that he’s an asshole until you’ve gotten your heart thoroughly stepped on. And if you get the impression that someone isn’t your type, there’s not a damn thing he can do to change your mind no matter how perfect he is for you. The fact that you haven’t made up your mind about Hunter is a good thing, in my opinion. You haven’t known him long enough to make up your mind one way or another.”

She made a gesture that was halfway between a shrug and a nod. “So where does that leave me for tonight?”

“Okay, forgetting certainties for a moment: is there a chance you might sleep with him tonight?”

She frowned, but the answer was inescapable when she’d

almost let him take her against the wall. “Yes.” She swallowed hard, her hands sweating even more, and she cursed herself for the foolish reaction.

“Then you should dress for success, so to speak.”

“I’m not wearing the red dress, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“Not at all. That would signal certainty, and you aren’t certain. What you want to do is let him know that you’re open to the possibility.”

Jackson headed for the closet again, searching her entire wardrobe. Eventually, he emerged with a clingy black mini-skirt and a deep green silk charmeuse blouse.

“Put these on and then let me see,” he commanded.

Kiera raised an eyebrow at him. “Do I get any say in this?”

He grinned. “No.”

Jackson ducked out of the room to let her change. She had only one set of sexy underwear—the one with the black lace bra Hunter had already seen—but if there was a chance she might end up undressing in front of him, she didn’t want to be caught wearing bra and panties that didn’t match. She briefly considered skipping the bra altogether, but that was not her style at all. She decided Hunter was way too male to notice she was wearing the same bra—or care even if he *did* notice—so she went with the set.

The mini-skirt fit tightly to her curves—more tightly than she liked, actually—but the blouse was an oversized tunic-style button-down that hung just over her butt and made her look decent. Of course, the outfit showed a lot of leg. She chewed her lip anxiously.

“How long does it take you to change, woman?”

Jackson’s voice startled her out of her contemplation of her reflection. “Come on in,” she beckoned, and he soon obliged.

If he weren’t gay, she would have described the look he gave her as lascivious. His eyes glinted with satisfaction, and his smile was practically wolfish. He whistled softly. “You ought to let me dress you more often.”

She sniffed and turned back to her reflection. She had to admit the combination was flattering, though perhaps more alluring than she had had in mind. “I don’t know . . .”

“Well I do. You look stunning.” He made a face. “Well,” he amended, “your body looks stunning.”

“Hey!” she cried in offended tones.

“That clown-wig hair will never do.”

“I’m about three seconds from kicking your ass.”

He was entirely unintimidated. “Someday you’ll have to take my advice and get it cut. But for now . . . Do you have any mousse or gel?”

Her chin jutted out stubbornly. She’d heard more carrot jokes as a kid than she could bear to remember, and she’d come home from school crying so many times it had become almost habit. In an attempt to be helpful, her mom had taken her to the hairdresser and had her hair cut short. Far from being helpful, it had caused the kids to call her Little Orphan Annie. When she’d become an adult, she’d vowed she would never again let anyone make her feel embarrassed about her hair. “I like my hair just the way it is,” she lied.

“Do you have any mousse or gel?” he repeated.

“This is me,” she said, grabbing a lock of hair and shaking

it for emphasis. “If he doesn’t like it, then tough.”

Jackson put on a look of long-suffering patience. “Do you have any mousse or gel?”

She glared at him, but knew in a battle of stubbornness, he would eventually win. Without speaking to him, she stalked into the bathroom and dug in the cabinet under the sink until she unearthed an ancient tube of gel, from which she had used maybe two squirts. She tossed it at Jackson, who caught it nimbly.

He wrinkled his nose and blew on the tube, raising a cloud of dust. Other than some muted clucking sounds, however, he refrained from comment. Next, he badgered her about hair ornaments and she finally revealed a cache of barrettes she hadn’t used in ages. These days when she wanted to restrain her hair, she settled for scrunchies.

Jackson picked out a large barrette with an antique bronze finish and several green glass beads, then dragged her to the bathroom. Reminding him that he was not a hairdresser seemed to do no good, and he bullied her into wetting her hair. Then, he squeezed tons of gel into his hands and applied it liberally to her head. He then forced her to go digging again to find the diffuser for her blow dryer. When her hair was dry, he brushed a few locks away from her face, securing them with the barrette just below the crown of her head.

He declared himself finished and finally allowed Kiera to look at herself in the mirror. She gasped.

What he had done had seemed so simple—just applied a little gel, gently blow-dried, and pulled some locks into a barrette—but the effect was just short of miraculous. The wild frizz of curls was tamed into neat spirals tumbling down her

neck and shoulders, and having the locks closest to her face caught up in the barrette revealed sleek lines she hadn't realized she had.

Jackson put his hands on her shoulders, his face appearing beside hers in the mirror. "It doesn't take a hairdresser, Kiera. All it takes is a willingness to be pretty."

She stared at him in the mirror for a long moment, trying to understand what he meant. Then she shook it off and forced a laugh. "All right, Pygmalion: you've done an admirable job." She turned around to face him, the false smile fading. "Any advice for me on what I should do tonight?"

He leaned against the wall and gave her a gentle smile. "I'm afraid that's something you've got to figure out on your own. The best advice I can give is to listen to your heart."

She managed a rueful grin. "You're just full of these little pearls of wisdom tonight, aren't you?"

"Hey, the wisdom of the ages is timeless."

"And the cliches are endless."

"But my generosity is boundless."

"Stop it, or you'll be toothless."

He laughed and glanced at his watch. "It's twenty to seven. Put on the finishing touches and then go knock him dead."

Wishing she felt more sure of herself and what she wanted from this date, she walked Jackson to the door and gave him a big, grateful hug. Then, she returned to her bedroom to pick out jewelry and a pair of shoes.