

Chapter 8

Hunter had never felt anything like this in his life. He was nervous. He was excited. He was filled with guilt.

His first step in preparing the evening's seduction had been to call a caterer—he wasn't much of a cook himself. He'd chosen the menu with meticulous care, everything rich and fragrant. Medallions of tenderloin in an aromatic sauce of wine and butter; scalloped potatoes in heavy cream, redolent of mild onions; green beans almondine. For dessert, he'd gone with a selection of petit-fours that reminded him of little, bite-sized Christmas packages.

It was the second step that caused the guilt and self-loathing to gather around him in an oppressive cloud. If he managed to seduce her tonight, Kiera would undoubtedly insist he use a condom. Accordingly, he had bought a couple boxes and stashed them in the drawer beside his bed. His mission being what it was, however, he had removed each foil-wrapped condom and used a thin needle to poke several holes all the way through before returning them to the box. Each jab of the needle had made his conscience ache all the more, and he

cursed his mother for making him do this.

By some miracle, he'd managed to get his guilt at least partially under control by the time Kiera rang the doorbell promptly at seven o'clock. It still ate away at him, but he knew he'd be able to conceal it, and he hoped Kiera's enticing presence would help keep his head in the gutter where it needed to be. He threw open the door.

And had trouble believing it was Kiera who stood on the doorstep before him.

She'd done something to tame the frizz of her hair, and she'd pulled it away from her face to reveal the elegant line of her cheekbones. Her mini-skirt displayed long, shapely legs, and he wondered why she usually kept them so stubbornly hidden. She smiled at him tentatively, and he realized he was staring at her like an idiot.

Hunter snapped out of it and invited her in. "You look stunning," he told her, and was rewarded by a broadening of her smile.

"Thanks. I hope I didn't overdress for the occasion." She plucked nervously at her silk blouse.

Hunter smiled at her in a way he suspected conveyed his intention to get her out of that blouse as soon as possible. "Not at all," he assured her, leading her to the dining alcove.

He had set the stage with consummate skill. The small round table was draped with a white tablecloth, adorned with delicate china plates and a pair of crystal candlesticks. Hunter pulled back one of the chairs, and Kiera obediently sat. She breathed deeply.

"It smells wonderful in here," she said.

"Well, let me serve the first course, then." He hurried to the kitchen, where he had two salad plates chilling in the refrigerator. When he returned to the table, Kiera was running

her fingers idly over the sterling silverware that framed her plate. She smiled when he laid the salad plate in front of her, but he could see at once that she was speculating.

“The silver belonged to my grandmother,” he said, making it up as he went along. “She left it to me when she died.”

Kiera smiled at him as she picked up the salad fork. “And what about the china? Or is that just something your typical bachelor keeps around the house?”

He sat at the table and grinned at her. “Am I a typical bachelor?”

She rolled her eyes. “Definitely not!”

“So, am I allowed to have china?”

“I never said you weren’t allowed to have china.”

“No, but you implied it was strange for a bachelor to have it.”

“It is! But then, you don’t dress like your typical bachelor, nor do you decorate like one.” Here she encompassed his entire apartment with a sweep of her hand. “I mean, you even cook!”

He laughed. “I hate to shatter your illusions. I’ve got plenty of eccentricities, but cooking isn’t one of them. I worked with a caterer to arrange this meal, I’m afraid.” He rested his elbows on the table and gave her a tragic look. “Have I just ruined everything by confessing the truth?”

The look in her eye softened. “Not at all.”

He forced another smile, even as his stomach churned with the bitterness of his deception. God, how he hated this! And yet, no matter how much he hated it, his blood was stirring in all the right ways. He gazed at the curls that cascaded down Kiera’s neck, at the warm hazel eyes no longer shadowed by her hair, at the enticing vee of her blouse; and desire seized

him by the throat. Had he really declared this woman homely? How could he have been so blind?

The meal passed in surprising quiet. Hunter served each dish with a flourish, pairing each course with the perfect wine. Kiera told him how wonderful everything tasted. Occasionally, they managed a little small talk, but the sexual tension in the air was like a palpable force, killing each conversation before it got rolling. He thought they each did an admirable job of eating, considering they both were so supremely focused on what would happen *after* dinner.

Finally, it was time for dessert, and Hunter produced the plate of petit-fours with a flourish.

“I couldn’t eat another bite!” Kiera protested.

Hunter pulled his chair over so that it was only inches from hers. He saw the pulse leap in her throat as he leaned into her space and looked into her eyes. “Are you sure?” he murmured. She looked wide-eyed and dumbstruck, and he gave her his most seductive smile.

Without looking, he reached for the plate and picked up one of the little pastries. It was square, iced with chocolate and adorned with a single raspberry. He raised the petit-four to his mouth, his eyes never leaving Kiera’s, then slowly bit it in half. Kiera’s lips quivered faintly when he licked a stray dollop of icing from the corner of his mouth. Then, he held the other half of the petit-four to her lips. She hesitated only briefly before desire took over and she opened her mouth. He laid the petit-four directly on her tongue, lingering long enough to feel the faint brush of her lips as she closed her mouth.

Hunter stared at her mouth as she chewed, watched hungrily as her tongue darted out in search of any icing that

remained on her lips. When she'd swallowed, he raised his hand between them, displaying the icing that remained on his thumb and index finger. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and slowly sucked the icing off, all the while watching her face as it flushed with desire. When he put his index finger to her lips, she opened immediately to take it in, her eyes sliding closed as she sucked.

Hunter moaned as he instantly swelled and hardened. Her tongue rasped over his finger long after the last trace of icing had disappeared. He bore it as long as he could, then reluctantly withdrew his finger. Kiera's lips looked unbearably lush, and he longed to taste them.

He picked another petit-four at random and found himself in possession of a breast-shaped delicacy with a chocolate nipple at its apex. He ran his tongue over the chocolate and watched Kiera's lips quiver at the sight. He put the petit-four halfway into his mouth, then leaned forward. Kiera's brief look of puzzlement faded when he touched the petit-four to her lips. She opened her mouth, and he pressed his lips to hers, biting the pastry neatly in half. She let out a soft moan of pleasure as she savored her half.

Hunter did not rest on his laurels, instead reaching out to unbutton her blouse. Her breath hissed in sharply, but she made no protest.

When her blouse was open to the waist, he picked another petit-four from the plate, using his hands to pull it in two. Kiera was looking at him in mingled puzzlement and desire. He flashed her a wolfish grin as he popped one half into his mouth, then held the rest out to her again, one finger conspicuously resting in the creamy filling. When she took the

pastry from his hand, he didn't let her lips close around his finger. Instead he brushed his finger over the top of one breast, leaving a trail of sweet vanilla cream. Her skin shivered under his finger, and he could see her pulse leaping in her throat. His own pulse throbbing, he lowered his head to the top of her breast.

The taste of her skin on his tongue was even more enticing than the cream, and he trailed kisses along the edges of her bra. When he raised his head, he saw that her eyes were closed, head thrown back in pleasure, and a smile curved his own lips. He popped the catch on her bra and thrilled at the audible hitch in her breath. He turned momentarily from the glory of her bare breasts to examine the plate of petit-fours, picking one he knew was filled with raspberry jam.

When he turned back, he saw that Kiera had opened her eyes and was watching him hungrily. He broke the petit-four in half, feeding one half to each of them while staining his fingers with jam. Then he rubbed those fingers over her nipples, urging them to pucker under his caress. She was leaning forward in her chair now, no sign of reluctance or uncertainty in her demeanor. When he set about licking the jam off those hardened peaks, she buried her hands in his hair and pressed herself closer, her breaths coming in sweet, short gasps.

The blood drummed in Hunter's ears as he tasted and suckled and listened to the soft sighs of pleasure. He was unbearably hard, his erection straining uncomfortably against his pants. And he'd only just begun! With a last delicious kiss on each nipple, he pulled away. Kiera reached for him, and he stood and swept her off the chair and into his arms. A startled cry escaped her lips, and she reflexively flung her arms around

his neck. He grinned at her, a feral predator's grin.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't drop you."

She was silent in his arms as he carried her to his bedroom, where before her arrival he'd put the lights on a dimmer switch. The room was dark and romantic, yet not so dark that he couldn't feast his eyes when it pleased him. He set Kiera on the bed, leaning over her to capture her lips in a kiss. He drew her into a sitting position and slipped the blouse and bra off her shoulders, dropping the unnecessary garments on the floor beside the bed. Her breasts beckoned to him once more, and he feasted while she arched beneath him, her hands pulling at his shirt in an effort to get at his skin.

Hungry as Hunter was, he released the delectable nipple he'd been sucking, sitting up so he could get his shirt off. The thought of having Kiera's hands on his bare skin made his fingers shake with desire, and he practically tore the buttons in his haste to get out of the shirt. Kiera laughed devilishly at his too-obvious need. He managed a reproving cluck of his tongue as he finally escaped the shirt.

"I'm going to have to punish you for laughing at me," he warned, and her eyes widened in mock alarm.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked breathlessly.

In answer, he reached for the waistband of the mini-skirt that clung so enticingly to her curves, sliding it down to reveal what lay beneath: a pair of black lace panties that almost sent him over the edge. The primal urge to tear off the remainder of her clothing and bury himself inside her was so strong that he couldn't resist wrapping his hands in the waistband of her pantyhose, meaning to jerk them down.

Kiera sat up halfway, putting her hands over his to stop

him. For a fleeting moment, he took the gesture as a rejection, and the disappointment that flooded him was as overwhelming as the lust. Then, he realized she was merely taking over for him, smoothly sliding the pantyhose—and the panties—down the length of her legs until she lay before him in all her naked splendor.

Hunter swallowed hard, fighting to control himself. If he was going to seduce her so cold-bloodedly, the least he could do was make sure she thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

The reminder of his purpose eased the ache in his groin enough to bring him back under control, and he lay on his side beside her, propping his head on one hand as the other explored. He began with the now-familiar territory of her breasts, teasing each nipple back to hardness, then sliding his fingers slowly down her center. She tensed as he dipped below her navel, but it was a yearning tension, and his hand continued its journey.

When his fingers brushed over the first curls, Kiera's back arched, and she sucked in a loud, harsh breath. Her thighs parted, and Hunter took full advantage, stroking the hot, slick flesh in a slow, steady rhythm designed to arouse without satisfying. He would bring her to fruition, all right, but not yet, not until she was begging for mercy, not until he had tasted every inch of her body. He watched with heavy-lidded eyes as she raised her hips, trying to hurry his fingers along. He refused to be rushed.

That refusal lasted only a few heartbeats. The feel of her so hot and wet lit a greedy flame in his groin, and against his conscious desires, his fingers delved deeper, stroked harder. He wanted to feel her body rocked with the spasms of ecstasy,

wanted to hear her voice cry out in pleasure, couldn't bear to wait any longer to give her the gift he still denied himself.

Kiera's hips rose beneath his hand, and a long, drawn-out moan escaped her as her whole body arched, her hands balled into fists. A smile curved Hunter's lips as he watched her face, read the pleasure there, realized he'd caused it without the slightest touch of glamour. For the first time in his life, he'd made a woman come just being himself, and he realized with a little shock that before he'd met Kiera, he hadn't been sure that was possible.

When she was fully sated, Hunter slid his hand reluctantly away, still gazing down at her sweat-dampened skin, watching the rise and fall of her breasts. She opened her eyes and smiled at him, her hand reaching out to touch his cheek tenderly.

"Wow," she whispered.

He smiled at her pleasure, turning his head to kiss her palm. He'd pleased women before, but never had he himself gotten such pleasure out of the act, never had he felt the glow of satisfaction that heated his chest at the moment. Never had he realized just how wonderful it felt to give, not just receive.

Kiera's hand slid down his face, brushing over the light smattering of hair on his chest, making a beeline for his belt. His manhood ached again, a desperate ache he could only satisfy by burying himself in her warmth and softness. His heart pounded insistently as she made short work of the buckle. He watched her face as she started on the button of his pants, saw the desire that still hovered in her eyes. She slid the zipper down and ran a single finger over his hardness.

The hunger was more powerful now than he could remember it being in all his life. Every instinct in his body

screamed for release, and the way Kiera looked at him made it obvious she wanted him inside her.

But, damn it, she *trusted* him. She wouldn't be here if she didn't, wouldn't look at him with that kind of openness, wouldn't have let him touch her as he had. And he didn't know how to force himself to betray that trust. No matter how desperate the desire. No matter how terrible the cost of restraint. With a groan of pure misery, he reached down and took her wrist, moving her hand away from his now painful erection.

Kiera blinked and looked up at him in confusion. Hunter wasn't sure at first he'd be able to find his voice. Inside his head, his common sense reminded him that no matter how much it hurt, eventually he was going to have to betray her trust, was going to have to slake his desire. The price for failure was just too steep. He was brave and strong, but no one was brave enough or strong enough to defy the Queen of Air and Darkness, not when he knew the price as Hunter did.

"What's wrong?" Kiera asked softly.

He shuddered, trying to cool his desire while searching for a logical explanation for backing off now. Knowing nothing he said was going to sound convincing.

"Hunter?" She sounded worried.

He let out a long, slow breath. "I forgot to buy condoms," he mumbled. It was the only explanation that had any chance of working.

"What?"

He cleared his throat, and his voice came out steadier and stronger. "I was so wrapped up in planning the romantic dinner that I forgot to buy condoms." He glanced at her face from the

corner of his eye. What he saw was not promising.

There was a long silence as Kiera continued to stare at him skeptically and he continued to avert his eyes. He was being unbelievably obvious here, and there was no way in hell she was going to be convinced. But it wasn't as though he could tell her the truth!

Hunter shook his head. "You must think I'm the world's worst idiot."

Another long silence. "I don't know *what* to think," she admitted eventually.

He forced himself to look at her, trying to ignore the beautiful body he so badly wanted to possess. There was a hint of hurt in her eyes, but mostly he saw there concern and confusion. He reached out to stroke her cheek, trying a tentative smile.

"I hope you know that I want you quite badly," he said. "I'm sorry I screwed up."

She did not return his smile. "You strike me as the kind of man who would carry a condom in his wallet."

"Actually, I'm not," he told her truthfully. The women he usually consorted with were not the type to be unprepared, and being immortal he did not fear catching a disease. "Believe me, I had every intention of buying some today, but I got myself in such a muddle trying to plan everything else to be just perfect that it totally slipped my mind."

She cocked her head as she regarded him. That she didn't believe him was clear. He couldn't blame her. But there was nothing else he could say. She huffed out an exasperated breath. "You certainly are an enigma, Hunter Teague." She slid off the bed and gathered her clothes.

"I'm sorry," he said again, miserable.

She shook her head, throwing her clothes on carelessly, her eyes now hard and cold, her lips compressed with anger. The glimmer in her eyes suggested there was hurt under her anger. Hunter wished there was something he could say to soothe it, but anything he said now would probably make things worse, so he merely bit his tongue.

"I'll see myself out," Kiera said.

Wondering how he was ever going to recover from the horrendous mess he'd just got himself into, Hunter watched her leave.

Dressed in a warm, ragged pair of flannel pajamas, Kiera sat on her bed with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her eyes were swimming, but she'd used up the last Kleenex ages ago, so she had to settle for wiping them on her sleeve.

As soon as she'd set foot in her apartment, she'd rushed to get out of the sexy clothes she'd worn for Hunter, darting into the shower to wash away the last sticky traces of chocolate and jam and wash away the lingering scent of him. By the time she'd gotten out of the shower, she'd been crying, and she hadn't been able to stop since.

No way Hunter was telling the truth about the condoms. If he'd really forgotten to buy them, he would have remembered far earlier than he had. And he wouldn't have looked so damned guilty. But for the life of her she couldn't figure out what he was guilty of. Everything had felt so good! Her indecision as to whether she wanted to sleep with him had faded entirely the moment she'd laid eyes on him. The sudden certainty had lightened her heart, and she'd enjoyed his every

lustful glance.

And when he'd started in on the dessert, she'd been beside herself, amazed at how wonderful it felt to be wicked. There'd been no question in her mind when he'd carried her to bed that he meant to make love to her, and there'd been no question in her mind that she would let him.

Why had he stopped? It didn't make any sense. And it didn't make any sense for her to be curled up in a ball of misery crying her pathetic eyes out because she hadn't gotten laid tonight! Angrily, she scrubbed at her wet eyes, giving herself yet another stern lecture. It was his loss, after all! He'd given her an orgasm that made her see stars, and he'd gotten nothing for himself. No reason at all why she should feel hurt and rejected.

She sniffed loudly, then jumped when the phone rang. Her heart leapt into her throat, and hope surged through her that this was Hunter, calling to apologize for and explain his behavior. She lunged for the phone, picking it up before the second ring.

"Hello?" she said, her voice coming out a hoarse, thick croak that betrayed her tears.

"Kiera, honey, what's the matter?" her mother asked.

Kiera cursed whatever maternal instinct had caused her mom to call at a time like this. Then, she found herself pouring her heart out, telling her mother between hiccuping sobs exactly what had happened tonight. Well, not *exactly*. She didn't give details—that would have been far too embarrassing—but she painted an accurate enough picture.

"Has he touched the horseshoe?" her mother asked when Kiera paused for breath.

Kiera stifled another snuffle. "No."

"Did you even try to get him to touch it?"

"Actually, I did. But it was a pretty pathetic attempt, and even a normal red-blooded human being probably wouldn't have done it under the circumstances."

Her mother sighed. "I have a bad feeling about this, honey."

"Mom, he's not a fairy, all right?" It wasn't fair to be snapping at her mother like this, but Kiera was too wounded to control her temper.

"I'm coming over."

"Mother, no!"

"Yes. We need to talk. Too many strange things have been happening lately, and we need to figure out what it all means."

"I don't have the strength for it. Not now." Not ever. "I just want to curl up and go to sleep."

"That's too bad. I'm coming over."

"It's after ten o'clock."

"I know what time it is. I should be there in, oh, twenty minutes."

"Mother—" But her mother hung up the phone before Kiera managed to finish the protest.

Chapter 9

Kiera had reluctantly changed out of her comfy pj's into a comfy set of sweats. She'd splashed water on her face to wash away the tear tracks, but her puffy eyes betrayed her anyway. As she waited for her mother to arrive, she prayed for strength. She felt far too vulnerable to deal with nuttiness right now, and she feared her temper would make her say things she would regret. She really, really didn't want to hear about how Hunter might be some supernatural being. He was just a very human asshole, one of many she'd been taken in by.

The desk clerk called up to let her know she had company. She had a fleeting urge to tell him not to let her mother up, but figured the repercussions down the road would be unbearable. She stood in front of her door, arms crossed over her chest, foot tapping with frustration. Maybe when her mom got a look at her face, she'd finally realize this was not a good time to push.

The doorbell rang.

Even though Kiera was standing within arm's reach of the door, she waited a few beats, trying to calm her furious pulse, before opening the door. The wait didn't help any, and she opened her mouth for a caustic remark as she swung the door open.

The words died in her throat when she saw Phantom standing close by his mistress's legs. The dog stared up at her with his usual baleful expression, and Kiera blinked.

"There are no pets allowed in this building," she told her mother, still looking at Phantom.

"I know."

Kiera shook her head. "How the hell did you get him past the doorman and the desk clerk?" She could understand if Phantom were a toy poodle or something, but you couldn't miss an Irish wolfhound. The dog was almost big enough to be mistaken for a small pony! She finally dragged her eyes away from the wolfhound to meet her mother's grim face.

"Trust me, sweetheart, you don't want to know."

"What the—"

"You're blocking the doorway, dear."

Too perplexed to argue, Kiera stepped out of the way. She noticed that Phantom was not on a leash. How could her mom walk through the streets of the city with her dog off the leash? Didn't she know the poor thing could get hit by a car? Or that she herself could be fined for breaking the law?

"Mom, what is going on?"

All signs of genial goofiness were erased from her mother's face, and Kiera clearly saw the worry in her eyes. "I don't know, honey. That's what I'm here to find out."

"But . . . but . . ."

“This Hunter Teague—he lives in this building, right?”

“Yes, but—”

”I’d like to meet him.”

“What?” The word came out almost a shriek, and Kiera winced at her own tone of voice. “Why?” she asked, more calmly.

“You’re going to have to humor me on this one. If I’m totally off base, then I’ll keep my silly suspicions to myself and you won’t feel quite so sure I need to be institutionalized. If I’m not . . . Well, we’ll deal with that when the time comes.”

Kiera rubbed her eyes. “I am *so* not up to this right now.”

Her mom put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “I know. And I’m sorry. But I don’t think this can wait.”

Kiera blinked, yet again. What she’d meant was she wasn’t up to having the *conversation*. “You mean you want to meet him *now*?” she cried.

“Yes.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

Kiera shook her head. There was no way she was taking her mom to meet Hunter, not after what happened tonight. It would be embarrassing enough to see Hunter later, when her nerves had calmed and when her mother was ten blocks away. “Absolutely, positively not. End of story.”

Her mother stood up extra straight, making the most of her height. Her eyes were frosty and determined, and Kiera realized with a start that the green contacts were gone. She’d never seen her mom look so grave, or so powerful. “Kiera Malone,” her mother said in a voice that would have cowed the most unruly school bully ever to walk the earth, “this is too

important to fight about. You are going to introduce me to this man, and you’re going to do it now. You can yell at me all you want when it’s over, and if I’m imagining things I will apologize until I turn blue in the face. Now, let’s go!”

Her mother took hold of Kiera’s upper arm and started marching her toward the front door. Kiera tried to dig in her heels, but Phantom head-butted her from behind. She turned a glare over her shoulder as he padded along behind them.

“You can’t drag me there by force,” she grated through her clenched teeth. “You don’t know what apartment he lives in.”

“Nine B.”

Kiera gaped.

“I saw one of his business cards. Now, close your door. We might be gone awhile.” She pressed the down arrow, and a complaining elevator started up to meet them.

Kiera considered ducking in her door and locking it behind her, but Phantom was dogging her heels—so to speak—and she knew instinctively that he’d be able to get inside with her before she got the door shut. She had no wish whatsoever to spend the night with the wolfhound in her apartment.

Bowing to the inevitable—much as she dreaded it—Kiera pulled her door closed and got into the elevator.

Usually, even the shortest ride seemed an eternity in this aged beast of an elevator, but this one seemed to pass in a heartbeat. Kiera tried another impassioned plea, but her mother ignored her, striding up to Hunter’s apartment and ringing the bell. Phantom placed himself right at her mother’s side, the two of them blocking Kiera from the doorway.

Moments later, Hunter opened the door.

Strangely, his eyes fixed immediately on Phantom, skimming over Kiera and her mother as though they were hardly important. Even more strangely, Phantom's hackles rose and his lips pulled away from his teeth.

Hunter's face went deathly pale. "Well," he said. "Damn."

Kiera looked from him, to Phantom, to her mother. The grimness was back in her mother's face as she put a hand on the door and pushed it farther open. Hunter didn't resist.

"May we come in?" Kiera's mother asked, in a tone that said it was not a question.

Hunter held his hands to his sides, palms open, and backed slowly into the apartment. Phantom stalked forward, stiff-legged, snarling.

"What is going on?" Kiera asked yet again, following her mother into the room and closing the door behind her. "This is all way too weird for me."

Hunter finally wrested his attention from the snarling wolfhound and met her eyes. "I think you'll want to sit down for this," he said, his voice maddeningly calm.

"You don't get to tell my daughter what to do!" her mother growled, sounding rather like Phantom for a moment.

Hunter gave her a lopsided grin that didn't reach his eyes. "All right. *You* tell her to sit down. Assuming you plan on answering her questions. Or making me do so."

Her mother put a protective arm around her shoulders. "I hate to admit it, but he's probably right."

Kiera swallowed on a suddenly dry mouth. "Are you trying to tell me those mysterious suspicions of yours are right?"

"Yes. Now, let's all go sit down. Hunter first." She fixed him with a steely stare. "And keep your hands in plain sight."

"Naturally." He kept his hands splayed and away from his body as he led them into the living room and sat on the loveseat, while Kiera and her mother took the couch. Phantom, still bristling and snarling, parked himself right in front of Hunter.

Hunter, having now fully regained his usual composure, lifted an eyebrow at Kiera's mother. "Would you be so kind as to call off your dog?"

Phantom's snarl became louder, and he was now drooling in eagerness. Kiera had never seen him act this way with anyone.

"Not just yet," her mother said. "First, tell us who you are."

He jerked his chin toward Phantom. "Why don't you ask him? He seems to recognize me."

"Excuse me," Kiera interrupted, "but am I going insane or having a nightmare or something?" No one paid the slightest attention to her.

"I would like you to tell my daughter who the hell you are!" her mother snapped, looking every bit as dangerous as Phantom.

"She won't believe me, any more than she's believed any of your warnings."

"You know," Kiera interjected, "I'm sitting right here. It's not only not necessary to talk about me in third person, it's downright rude."

Hunter sighed and finally ended his staring contest with her mother, turning to her. "Sorry. This is just a tad awkward,

you know.” He turned back to her mother. “Please ask the . . . dog . . . to back off. It’s hard to think with him slobbering on my shoes.”

Phantom let out an indignant bark and lunged. Kiera’s mother called him off at the last possible moment. Kiera was amazed he actually obeyed when his eyes looked so blood-crazed.

“Good doggie,” Hunter said, and Phantom started toward him once again.

“Stop it!” her mother commanded, and once again Phantom controlled himself. “Keep taunting him like that and he’ll decide to ignore me and tear your throat out. Now start talking. Who are you?”

“My name is Hunter Teague—that wasn’t a lie.” He turned to Kiera once more, and she saw the haunted expression that he usually guarded so carefully. “I’m so sorry, Kiera,” he said, face tight with strain. “For everything.”

“Tell me what ‘everything’ is,” she said, her voice shaking.

The anguish in his face deepened. “My mother is the Queen of Air and Darkness,” he said, and Kiera’s mother gasped. When he saw Kiera’s blank look, he clarified. “She’s the Queen of the Unseelie Court.”

Kiera wanted to dismiss this as nonsense, but the sense of portentousness that hung in the air wouldn’t allow her to. “Those are the bad guys, right? The Unseelie Court? Goblins and bogles and things that go bump in the night.”

He closed his eyes in evident pain. “Yes.”

“What do you want with my daughter?” her mother demanded. “And don’t bother with any more lies.”

He opened his eyes and nodded. “All right. My mother sent me here to seduce her.”

Kiera gasped at the pain that lanced through her heart. Another round of tears beaded in her eyes, though she desperately wished she could keep them from falling. Hunter winced as he looked at her.

“Please don’t cry,” he begged. “I’m so sorry.” He started to rise, but Phantom put him back in his chair with a snarl.

For the first time in her life, Kiera thought she might actually like the dog. Her mother shifted closer to her on the couch and slung an arm around her shoulders, glaring at Hunter.

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t let Phantom tear your crotch out,” she said, her arm tightening around Kiera’s shoulders.

Hunter shook his head, still watching Kiera as she battled the tears. “Kiera, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t bring myself to hurt you like that.”

She snorted and scrubbed at her eyes for the millionth time tonight. “It’s a little late to worry about hurting me, you prick!”

He stood up, incurring another growl from Phantom. He narrowed his eyes at the dog. “Bite me,” he snapped, and quickly crossed the distance to the sofa, where he knelt on the floor in front of her. Phantom lunged and sank his teeth into Hunter’s leg as he knelt. Hunter ignored him, the only sign of pain a tightening of his features.

“I’m sorry,” he said yet again.

This had to be some kind of bizarre dream. Kiera shook her head as if trying to clear the cobwebs. Her mother was

sitting quietly beside her, arm still around her shoulders. Hunter knelt at her feet, practically groveling in his futile attempt to apologize. And Phantom continued to growl, teeth buried in Hunter's calf, as blood welled around the wound.

"Doesn't that hurt?" she found herself asking.

"Yes," he answered, "but I don't care. Not now." He reached for her hand, trapping it in his own before she realized what he was going to do.

A part of her mind said she should be recoiling, shouldn't let this lying imposter touch her, but it seemed too much trouble to resist. He didn't say anything, just clasped her hand in what she supposed he meant as a gesture of comfort. His face grew paler, and his palm was clammy in hers. Kiera frowned. Much though he probably deserved to suffer . . . "Mom, can you make Phantom let go?"

"I don't know that I want to," her mother answered in a glacial voice.

"Please?"

Her mom hesitated a long moment then finally called Phantom off. The dog reluctantly let go, his muzzle now stained with Hunter's blood. Kiera's stomach threatened her with dire retribution should she look at the blood for another moment, so she forced her eyes away. She sat up straighter on the sofa, and her mom took the hint and gave her a little space. Kiera focused on Hunter's face, seeing the pain etched into his features and knowing that very little of it was due to the bite wound. There was still so much she didn't understand.

"Why?" she whispered, unable to force more sound from her throat.

He opened his mouth to answer, then seemed to think

better of it, flicking a glance at her mother. "Does she know who her father is?"

"I've told her. But she doesn't believe me."

Kiera shook her head. "Oh, no. No, no. My father is *not* king of the fairies."

"Finvarra is King of the Daoine Sidhe, not king of the fairies," Hunter said, as if that made everything better.

"And who the hell are the Deena Shee?" she asked, saying the words as if she'd never heard them before.

Hunter looked perplexed. "Surely your mother has taught you *something* about your heritage, even if you didn't believe it."

"I have," her mother confirmed. "Kiera's just being difficult because she doesn't like what she's learning."

"Will you two stop talking about me in third person? It's irritating the crap out of me. And even if my father is the king of some kind of mythological elf warriors, what does that have to do with anything?"

Hunter gave her a stern look. "The Daoine Sidhe are not mythological and they're not elves."

"Okay. A very real band of fey warriors. Is that better?"

"Yes."

"And this matters to me . . . why?"

Hunter glanced at her mother. "Any chance you can convince the dog not to bite me again when I explain?"

"I suspect I'll be *begging* him to bite you by the time you finish!"

"Mother," Kiera said in a warning tone.

Her mother sniffed. "I'm afraid I see an obvious and very nasty reason why the Queen of Air and Darkness would send

her son to seduce Finvarra's daughter."

Hunter bowed his head.

"Finish the confession," her mother insisted. "Tell my daughter just what you were planning to do, and see if she doesn't want me to sic Phantom on you when you're done."

He heaved a massive sigh and raised his head, sad eyes looking into Kiera's. "I won't blame you if you do," he said. "My mother . . ." He swallowed hard, and the pain in his expression redoubled. "My mother wanted a child who would be heir to both the Seelie and the Unseelie thrones."

The blood drained from Kiera's face, and her mouth went dry. "Oh, God," she whispered, her throat knotting up as she realized what he meant. She shook her head, and tears spilled despite her best efforts to contain them.

"Shall I have Phantom rip his throat out?" her mother asked quietly.

The hurt crystalized into fury, at least for the moment. "I think there's another part of his anatomy I'd rather have ripped out!"

Hunter let go of her hand and straightened his shoulders. He flicked his wrist, and suddenly there was a knife in his hand. Kiera gasped and realized that there was no way even Phantom could move fast enough to save her. But instead of attacking her or using her as a hostage, Hunter turned the blade around and handed the hilt to her. She took it from him almost reflexively, and he rose to his feet, favoring his injured leg as he turned to face the bristling wolfhound.

"You want a piece of me, doggie?" he taunted. "It's almost a fair fight now."

Phantom crouched as though ready to lunge.

"All right, stop it!" Kiera cried before hostilities began. Hunter and Phantom continued to rake each other with alpha-male stares, but neither attacked.

Kiera had been able to accept Phantom's usual behavior as weird, but just barely within the realm of believable. But tonight, pieces were not adding up. How had her mother managed to get him into a no pets building? How come he was off the leash? How come he and Hunter had immediately started challenging one another when Hunter opened the door? How come Hunter kept making the snide dog comments? And how come Phantom seemed to take offense at them?

She gave the wolfhound a stare of her own, remembering how it had shied away from the horseshoe at her mother's house. She pointed at him and looked at her mother. "Is that something other than a dog?"

Her mother grinned sheepishly but didn't answer.

"It's a phooka," Hunter said.

Kiera turned her attention back to him. "A phooka?" Her mom had told her enough fairy stories that she'd heard of phookas, but damned if she was going to admit it.

"A shape-shifter. He can do horses too, though dogs are his forte."

"Uh-huh." She couldn't help sounding skeptical, no matter how much evidence she'd already seen that some of her mother's nuttiness wasn't quite so nutty.

"I'm sure he'd be happy to show you his human form, except, of course, that the only reason we're even close to evenly matched is because he's got those nasty teeth right now."

The phooka was apparently as easily baited as a human

male, for suddenly the air shimmered like a heat mirage. Moments later, Kiera blinked to see a man standing where Phantom had been.

He was not a particularly large man, his frame more agile than bulky. His long black hair was receding from his temples and pulled away from his face by a leather thong. Hunter's blood still stained his chin.

"Size isn't everything," the phooka said, looking like he wanted to burn holes in Hunter with his eyes. Kiera noticed that his lips were still pulled away from his teeth in a dog-like snarl.

Hunter gave him a nasty grin. "You'd better hope not."

The phooka clenched his fists and crouched.

"Oh, Seamus, stop it!" Kiera's mother said. "Why are you letting him get to you?"

The phooka—Seamus, apparently—straightened up, still eying Hunter with great hostility. "He's Unseelie," he said, lips curling again.

"He's also the Queen's son. You don't want to start a war, do you?"

With a very canine growl, Seamus backed off and plopped down onto the sofa next to Kiera. She couldn't help staring at him. "So, what's *your* story?" she asked.

"Finvarra wanted someone to keep an eye on you," he answered. "Your mother wouldn't allow him to interfere directly with your life, so I've stayed with her, where I can keep tabs on you." He turned another one of his chilling stares on Hunter. "Which is why I came here tonight."

Kiera now turned to her mother. "So my father knows about me? And you've seen him since I was born?"

She shrugged. "If I'd had any reason to think you'd want to meet him, I would have introduced you. But Finvarra is . . ." She pursed her lips and shook her head.

"The fey are very different from mortals," Hunter said, drawing Kiera's attention back to him. "A very different moral standard. Mortals who tangle with them invariably come to harm, as your mother did."

"As *I* did," she retorted.

He flinched but held her accusing gaze. "I'm only half fey. My father was a mortal man, ensnared by the Queen's magic. I'm not quite so foreign to you as your father would be."

"Half fey, eh?" Kiera's mother said. "In other words, unlike Finvarra, you know what you did was wrong, and you did it anyway."

He nodded, eyes still meeting Kiera's. "Yes, I know what I did was wrong. That's why in the end, I couldn't go through with it. If there was some way I could take back the pain I've caused you, I'd do it in a heartbeat." He looked at her mother. "To tell you the truth, I'm kind of relieved it's over. I know I hurt your daughter's feelings earlier tonight. The only way even to begin setting things straight was to tell her the truth, but she never would have believed me without you." His nose wrinkled. "And the phooka."

"I think we've heard enough," the phooka said. If steel could talk, that was what it would sound like. "I think Finvarra would agree that your Queen's actions justify a war. And, as you are at present unarmed . . ."

The air shimmered again and Kiera started, seeing that the phooka had turned himself back into the snarling wolfhound. He leapt from the sofa, crashing into Hunter's chest and

knocking him to the floor.

“No!” Kiera cried, and without a moment’s thought she was on her feet, ignoring her mother’s frantic warning.

Hunter had grabbed Phantom by the neck, but Phantom was still snarling and snapping his teeth. The wolfhound looked even larger than usual, his body rippling with muscle. Though Hunter strained to hold the dog at bay, the razor-sharp teeth were getting ever closer to his throat. Kiera grabbed a handful of flesh and skin from the back of Phantom’s neck and pulled backward.

“Get off of him!” she shouted.

Phantom suddenly whirled on her, teeth still bared, eyes radiating fury. She stumbled backward, wondering what had come over her, and wondering how badly she was about to pay for her altruism. She heard her mom hurl a sharp command, but before Phantom even had a chance to act on it—if, indeed, he would have obeyed—Hunter grabbed hold of his tail and yanked him away from her, putting himself between them and holding out his arms.

“Your quarrel is with me, you son of a bitch!” Hunter said. “Leave her alone.”

“Seamus, stop it immediately!” Kiera’s mom ordered.

“There is to be no killing! Not in front of my daughter. She’s had enough shocks tonight, don’t you think?”

Hunter gave her the evil eye. “Are you going to mention that he not only shouldn’t kill me, but he shouldn’t attack *her*?” He waved in Kiera’s direction.

Phantom did another of his transformation acts and stood with his arms crossed and fire in his eyes. “I wouldn’t have bitten her, you fool. I was merely warning her off.”

Kiera wondered if now would be a good time to faint. Certainly her head was swimming, and her stomach felt kind of funny. She swayed dizzily and lowered her head.

“All right, enough. Both of you.” Kiera’s mom knelt by her side, and she spoke with great gentleness. “My poor baby,” she said, putting a hand on her back and rubbing vigorously. “You’ve had enough for one night. Let’s get out of here, shall we? You can stay at my place tonight.”

“And what about this Unseelie scum?” Seamus growled.

“He’s no longer our concern,” her mother answered in a flat and deadly voice.

Kiera suppressed a hysterical urge to laugh. If only she thought she could dismiss Hunter so easily! Seamus offered her a hand up, and she accepted without thinking.

“Truly I would not have hurt you,” he said in a low whisper for her ears only.

The shock had settled in firmly, and Kiera couldn’t find the energy to acknowledge the statement one way or another. Feeling lost and disconnected from reality, she allowed them to steer her out of the apartment.