

Chapter 4

“All right, out with it,” Jackson said, and Kiera froze with a morsel of sweet and sour chicken halfway to her mouth.

They were sitting at their usual table in their favorite Chinese restaurant. Kiera had called him not long after this afternoon’s meeting with Hunter, feeling the need for his warm, familiar comfort. She’d thought she was doing a good job of acting normal, but now Jackson was giving her one of those knowing looks.

“Out with what?” she asked.

He jabbed a chopstick in her direction. “Don’t think you can put one over on me, young lady,” he scolded. “Your face is like an open book to me. So give.”

She sighed and lowered her fork to her plate. Maybe she’d asked Jackson to dinner because she actually wanted to talk. “You know that sexy client I was telling you about?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Quit grinning at me like that.”

“Don’t get sidetracked. What about the sexy client?”

Kiera fidgeted, wondering why this whole thing made her so

uncomfortable. It wasn’t like she was a teenager! She’d dated her fair share of men, should be able to handle this kind of attention. But none of those men had been anything like Hunter.

“He’s coming on to me,” she admitted. “Not in any real blatant way or anything, but he’s given me enough smoldering glances to give me third degree burns.”

Jackson looked distinctly amused. “And the problem with this is . . .”

She frowned, wondering yet again exactly what her problem was. True, she thought it was ethically questionable to date a client, but it wasn’t like she was his therapist or anything. There was no objective reason she could name for why she found the thought of dating him so unnerving. Not that he’d actually asked her for a date or anything.

“I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something . . . wrong with him.”

Jackson raised an elegant brow. “Wrong in what way?”

She grunted in frustration. “That’s just it: I don’t know.” She pushed her plate away, realizing she couldn’t eat anymore. “For one thing, he just flat out does not look like a massage therapist.”

Jackson laughed. “And what exactly does a massage therapist look like?”

She shook her head, refusing to be goaded by his amusement. “It’s not that there’s any particular look massage therapists have; it’s just that he has a particular look that screams he’s *not* a massage therapist.”

“Uh-huh,” Jackson said, looking at her like she’d gone nuts.

She couldn’t blame him. She wasn’t explaining this well at all. Which was no surprise, as she couldn’t seem to straighten the thoughts out in her own head. “The man wears nothing but designer clothes,” she tried again. “He wears a full-length black leather coat.”

“Ah, so massage therapists have no fashion sense!” Jackson said. “*Now* I understand what you’re trying to tell me.”

“A little less mockery and a little more friendly understanding would be appreciated.”

His eyes still twinkled with amusement. “When you say something I understand, I’ll give you the friendly understanding.”

“All right, let me put it to you this way: how many drop-dead gorgeous, filthy rich, straight men do you know who do massage for a living?”

He no longer looked quite so amused, and Kiera was glad to see he was actually putting some thought into the situation. “All right,” he said slowly. “I’ll concede that what you’ve described doesn’t match the stereotype. But what is it that you suspect?”

She shook her head. “Damn it, I don’t know! All I know is that all my instincts tell me something is off about the guy.”

“And one of the things that’s off is that you don’t think he’s really a massage therapist.”

“I know it sounds like some kind of ridiculous, paranoid conspiracy theory. And I’m sure this is all just my imagination running wild. But I can’t shake the feeling, so when he starts pouring on the charm it just makes me that much more nervous. I mean, come on, Jackson: I’m not the kind of woman a man like that chases.”

Jackson blinked in surprise as he poured them each a fresh cup of green tea. “Why ever not?”

“Don’t be silly,” she scoffed. “I’m a long way from anyone’s ideal of beauty. And no, I’m not fishing for compliments or an ego boost.”

He cocked his head as he looked at her, his brows drawn together in earnest concentration. “I don’t think men are quite as

shallow as you seem to think. You know, if I give an honest assessment of my own appearance, I’d say my nose is too big, my eyes are too far apart, my hair’s too thin. I’ve still managed to attract the attention of some absolute knockouts. There’s more to this love and dating stuff than meets the eye, and you don’t have to be Miss America for a guy to be attracted to you.”

She nodded half-heartedly. She couldn’t deny the truth of his statements, but that didn’t make her unease go away.

“Eureka!” Jackson cried suddenly, loud enough to make her jump and to make several other patrons in the restaurant look in their direction.

“Uh-oh. I don’t like the evil glitter in your eyes.”

His grin broadened. “I’ve thought of a way to settle the question of whether he really is who he says he is.”

“Oh?” She was intrigued in spite of herself.

“Do you have one of his business cards?”

She frowned, trying to figure out where he was heading and failing miserably. “Not on me, but I have a couple in my apartment.”

“You know, I’ve been having this terrible trouble with my back lately.”

“Uh-oh,” she repeated.

“So kind of you to refer me to a massage therapist!”

“What are friends for?”

He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “I’ll try to get an appointment with him, and I’ll really camp it up.” He’d been sitting in a casual slouch, but now he straightened to sit primly on the edge of his chair. The lines of his face seemed to rearrange themselves before her eyes as he molded his expression into something vaguely pouty looking.

Usually, when Jackson wasn't dressed for effect, a stranger would be hard-pressed to realize he was gay. It wasn't that he tried to hide it or anything, but he didn't particularly flaunt it either. Strange how with only a change in posture and facial expression, he'd managed to make it unmistakable.

"If Mr. Macho Stud can give *me* a massage," he said, his voice suddenly pitched higher and his hands punctuating his speech, "then you'd have to admit he's the genuine article. No straight man would let me get naked within a hundred yards of him if he's not an honest-to-God massage therapist."

She laughed out loud at the mischievous twinkle in his eye. She tried to imagine Hunter putting his hands on Jackson's naked back, and she had to agree that if anything could flush him out, that would be it.

"Thanks for humoring me, Jackson," she said.

He picked up his cup of tea, his pinky pointing daintily outward. "You don't have to thank me, darling," he lilted. "I plan on enjoying myself."

Hunter prowled his apartment, nerves jumping and singing as he obsessed about his meeting with Bane. How long would his mother give him to complete his quest? Three days to win a kiss didn't sound too unreasonable, but how soon afterwards would she expect Kiera to fall into his bed? And what would she do to him if he failed?

He shuddered. He'd come to the mortal world brimming with confidence, sure that Kiera would have no chance against his charms. He had not been prepared for her resistance. Nor, he had to admit, had he been prepared to like her. He'd bedded mortal women before, and never had even the prettiest of them

managed to touch him in any but the most superficial way. He'd assumed he was incapable of feeling more than lust for a woman. Before Kiera, his full palette of emotions had seemed to comprise lust and hatred and little else.

Cursing his mortal father for falling into the Faerie Queen's arms and siring him, Hunter opened a bottle of Chivas. He'd stocked his bar with expensive liquor, planning to use the alcohol to aid his seduction schemes, but now he needed it himself. Feeling decadent and dissolute, he held the bottle to his lips and downed a big swallow.

He wished he hadn't let himself think of his father, because as usual his mind spiraled out of control and conjured memories best buried. Memories of a warm smile, of kind words and real affection. Memories of feeling safe, of knowing someone stood between him and the terrifying hordes of the Unseelie Court. Bittersweet memories that always led him down the same road, to the memory of the execution.

His father had somehow managed to shake off the seduction spells the Queen of Air and Darkness had woven around him. He had snatched his seven-year-old son and fled the Queen's palace, making for the nearest faerie circle in hopes of escaping into the mortal world. The endeavor had been doomed from the start.

The Queen's executions were never quick, never clean. She ruled her Court with terror, and her mortal consort paid a terrible price for his betrayal. And Hunter had been forced to bear witness to the entire ordeal.

His father was bound, naked, to the whipping posts that loomed ever in the palace courtyard, a reminder of the price of displeasing the Queen. Each day for a full week, the Queen ordered her consort flogged. Bane, wielding the whip, had

stripped every inch of skin from the poor mortal's back, while Hunter stood in his mother's arms, her hand holding his head so that he could not look away. Each night, she used her magic to heal the wounds so that her victim would live to suffer more.

After the seventh flogging, she'd declared it was finally time for Hunter's father to die. It still wasn't quick. Bane used a knife, inflicting wound after wound, none serious enough to kill.

In the end, his father had finally escaped the torture by bleeding to death. Afterward, Hunter had his first taste of the whip himself, as a reminder that he, too, was subject to the Queen's discipline.

Hunter tilted the bottle to his mouth and practically choked himself with a huge gulp. Unlike his father, Hunter was immortal, and if the Queen ever decided to execute him, his body could endure much more terrible tortures.

Ruthlessly, he pulled himself back together. It didn't matter how much he liked Kiera, and it didn't matter how bad it made him feel to lie to her. He would do what he had to do because the alternative was too terrible to contemplate.

The doorbell rang, and every nerve in Hunter's body came alive. This would undoubtedly be Bane, bringing the device that would stop the elevator. Hunter's heart pounded. He took deep, slow breaths, trying to calm himself. Bane rang again, and Hunter went to the door, aware that his movements had taken on a predatory glide. The knife slipped out of its sheath in his sleeve. The dire need to avenge his father was a palpable force, urging him to fling the door open and drive his knife into the goblin's throat.

Luckily, some hint of rationality remained, despite the alcohol, and Hunter resheathed the knife before he opened the

door. He wasn't able to school his expression, however, and Bane, with his unerring recognition of pain, grinned.

Hunter swallowed hard. "I'm warning you, Bane," he said in a low growl, "goad me now, and I'll kill you. The knowledge that I'll suffer for it won't give you any satisfaction if you're dead."

The goblin's grin widened. "Thinking about dear old Dad, eh?"

Hunter's whole body was shaking with the effort to control himself. "I'm not kidding!"

Bane moved with surprising quickness, planting a hand in the center of Hunter's chest and giving him a mighty shove. Unprepared, Hunter couldn't keep his balance. He fell hard and scrambled to his feet in time to see Bane slip into the apartment and close the door behind him.

Somehow, the knife seemed to have slipped out of its sheath again, and Hunter brandished it. Bane just shook his head.

"Now is not the time, Boyo," the goblin said. "Someday, you'n me'll have it out. But not yet."

Hunter was sweating as he battled himself. He'd never felt anything like the hot rage that coursed through his blood right now. Always before, his anger had been a slow, controlled burn.

Bane came slowly closer, holding his hands out to his sides, palms open. "You probably shouldn't drink when you know you're going to be around me," he said, his voice maddeningly calm. "Not good for your self-control. Now put the knife away."

Hunter curled his lip away from his teeth, wishing briefly he had goblin fangs to add to the menace of the expression. The knife was the only thing keeping Bane from retaliating, and Hunter sure as hell wasn't giving up his only advantage.

"Remember yesterday?" Bane asked. "You said I wasn't an

idiot. Well, you're right, I'm not. You're drunk and out of control. I'm not going to goad you or hurt you when there's a good chance you'll kill me for it. So put the knife away—you really don't need it."

The damned goblin sounded . . . *reasonable*. Hunter drew in a deep breath, trying to dispel some of the coiled tension. His nerves were still vibrating with the need for action, but he forced himself to withdraw the knife.

"Good boy," Bane said, but he said it lightly enough not to trigger Hunter's rage. He reached into his bedraggled, filthy coat and pulled out something about the size of a ballpoint pen. "Just press the trigger here," he said, pointing to a button on the pen-like device, "and the elevator will come to a stop. Make sure you're between floors when you trigger it, or they'll be able to pry the doors open."

Hunter took the device from Bane's hand and tucked it into his shirt pocket. He wasn't about to thank the goblin, but at least he was beginning to feel more like himself. He thought he might even be able to withstand an insult without going over the edge.

"Happy hunting, Prince," Bane said, nodding briefly before heading for the door.

"Bane." The goblin turned toward him and raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think we'll ever be able to have it out without the Queen making the winner wish he'd lost?"

The look Bane gave him was strangely thoughtful, and he didn't answer immediately. Then he shrugged, as if coming to some internal agreement. "I'm a goblin, Boyo. My life follows a script, one I didn't write. But I've had an advance glimpse or two—enough to know that you'll kill me one day."

Hunter was so surprised he practically jumped. He hadn't

expected a real answer, certainly hadn't expected *this* answer.

"I don't know what will happen to you when you do," Bane continued. "It's my own future I see, not yours." The nasty light returned to his eyes. "Believe me, I plan on making you regret it even if the Queen doesn't. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a report to make, and I'm running late."

Hunter stood frozen in place for a long time after Bane had gone.

Cradling the bag of groceries against her chest, Kiera gave the doorman her usual smile and thanks as she headed toward the elevators. She noticed the sexy bay-leaf-and-sandalwood scent she'd come to associate with Hunter even before she turned the corner and saw him.

He was standing with arms folded across his chest, watching the lights that indicated the progress of the elevators. One foot was slightly in front of the other, his weight settling into one hip, and the light hit his upturned face in a way that highlighted his clean, masculine lines. If Kiera hadn't known better, she would have sworn he was posing for her.

At the rustle of her grocery bag, he dragged his attention away from the lights and focused on her. The regard of those blue eyes chilled and warmed her simultaneously. Then he smiled, and the chill disappeared.

"Why hello there!" he said. "Here, let me carry that for you."

Before she had a chance to protest, he had taken the grocery bag out of her arms.

"You don't have to do that," she said, reaching for the bag.

Hunter turned his body so she couldn't reach the bag. "Come on, accept a little chivalry. I promise to give it back."

She shook her head, but she didn't want to make a scene. "All right, all right."

The elevator finally arrived. Hunter held the heavy grocery bag easily in one arm and trapped the elevator door open. "Ladies first."

She stifled a sigh, her insides cringing at the thought of sharing so small a space with him. *Here we go again*, she thought, exasperated with herself. She stepped into the tiny elevator, Hunter right behind her. When the doors slid closed, the elevator suddenly seemed even smaller, as though Hunter took up more than his fair share of the available air and space. She pressed the button for the tenth floor, then pressed nine as well at Hunter's request.

The elevator groaned piteously, then started to ascend. Hunter was watching the progress of the glowing numbers over the door. Kiera tried to do so as well, but her eyes kept straying. The small space was filled with the scent of his cologne and the even more masculine scent of his leather coat. His lips wore a Mona Lisa smile. He still held the grocery bag in one arm, his other hand resting inside his coat pocket. Kiera's pulse quickened for no reason she could name.

Hunter turned his face away from the numbers, meeting her eyes. His smile became even more enigmatic. He looked like he was about to say something, but suddenly the elevator made another of its dramatic moaning sounds. The moan turned to a whine, then a metallic bang. The elevator lurched to a stop, and the lights went out.

Kiera gasped, grabbing the railing against the elevator's back wall. The car had gone completely black, and her skin crawled with superstitious terror. Her nerves told her the darkness hid

something feral and dangerous, and she found herself pressed tightly into the corner, her eyes fighting to penetrate the darkness.

The grocery bag rustled. "Kiera?" Hunter's voice asked. "Are you all right?"

Her heart was now pounding in earnest, and a nervous sweat bathed her. She'd never been particularly afraid of the dark before, nor had she been claustrophobic. The small part of her mind that was still rational wondered why she was reacting so badly to the dark, confined space. The rest of her mind just gibbered.

Hunter's leather coat creaked as he moved closer, and she fought the image of a predator homing in on her.

"Kiera?" he asked again, his voice the gentle murmur one would use with a frightened animal.

She couldn't gather enough moisture in her mouth to respond to him. Then, his hand touched her arm and a startled shriek escaped her. She tried to jerk her arm away, but his strong fingers closed around her and held tight.

"Take it easy," he soothed. "There's nothing to worry about. I'm sure they'll get us out of here in no time."

The scent of him made her dizzy, filling her senses. She drew in a shuddering breath, trying desperately to calm herself. She could feel the heat of his body, standing too close to her. His hand slid up her arm to her shoulder, and she swayed. God, she was going to pass out!

"Sit," Hunter commanded, pushing down on her shoulder.

Her knees were too weak to hold her up anyway, so she slid her back along the wall of the elevator until her butt hit the floor. She bowed her head and concentrated on breathing. Hunter's hand slid from her shoulder to her neck, powerful fingers

kneading the tight muscles there. The scent of leather and spice enveloped her, and she realized he was sitting on the floor of the elevator with her.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he crooned, his voice almost hypnotic.

Her mind screamed at her that there *was*. And yet her body seemed to have a will of its own. She leaned closer to him, until she felt the heat of him all along her left side. He pressed her closer into the corner, trapping her with his body. His fingers continued to dig into the muscles of her neck and shoulders, loosening the knots with consummate skill.

“Funny, but I never would have pegged you as claustrophobic,” he said. “You seem like you wouldn’t be afraid of anything.”

Somehow, she found her voice again. “I’m not claustrophobic. I’ve never had anything like this happen before.”

“Is it the dark, then?”

Damn him, he sounded amused! She realized with startling certainty that her strange reaction had nothing to do with the close space or the dark: it had to do with *him*. But she could hardly tell him that. She swallowed hard, the panic less now though her heart still pounded.

“I don’t know,” she lied. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me.”

“Here, why don’t we move away from the wall so I can use both hands.”

She realized she was pressing into the hand that massaged her neck. Her cheeks flamed, and she was glad for the darkness that hid it. She shook her head. “It’s all right.”

He sighed in apparent exasperation. “Kiera, you’re so tight

you feel like a rubber band about to snap. Let me try to help. There’s no telling how long we’ll be trapped in here. And remember, I do this for a living.”

Arguing would take more energy than she had, so she allowed him to maneuver her into a more advantageous position, her feet against the wall and her back angled toward the center of the elevator. In the darkness behind her, she heard him stirring, his coat making that distinctive leather rustling sound as he removed it. Then, his hands descended on her shoulders, and she concentrated on how good they felt as they worked on the tight muscles.

After less than a minute, his hands stilled, and Kiera had to stifle a cry of protest.

“This would be a lot more effective if you took your coat off,” he said.

His voice was practically in her ear, and she shivered in the heat. Her hands plucked at the buttons of her coat, independent of her desires. When the last button popped free, Hunter dragged the coat from her shoulders. Underneath, she was wearing a simple white button-down shirt. When his hands descended on her once more, the pleasure was ten times more intense.

Kiera closed her eyes against the darkness, leaning into Hunter’s glorious hands, breathing his scent. Her head felt cloudy and strange, almost as though she were drunk, or hypnotized. He slid one hand up the center of her back until it rested on the bare skin at the nape of her neck. She shivered again, goose bumps rising all over her body. Those strong, agile fingers pressed more lightly now, the pressure something between a massage and a caress.

Kiera swallowed hard, trying in vain to shake off the haze

that had settled over her mind. Her pulse was speeding, her breaths coming shallow. Hunter's fingers dipped lower, slipping under the collar of her blouse. She had to bite her lip to suppress a moan. Her breasts were aching, the nipples turning hard. The movement of his fingers took on a steady rhythm that brought to her mind the rhythm of the bed. The ache sank lower, gathering between her legs. She squeezed her thighs tightly together, trying to deny the wildly inappropriate arousal.

She was aware of Hunter moving closer behind her, felt the heat radiating from his body. Then she felt the warmth of his breath against her cheek. He kept stroking her neck, the rhythm now unmistakably sexual. He touched his lips lightly to her shoulder, his lips burning her skin through the cotton. A little gasp escaped her despite all her efforts to contain it. His hand finally withdrew from under her collar, moving down her back again, joined by his other hand.

When his hands moved to her shoulder blades, instinct told her they would continue moving until they cupped her breasts. Her nipples puckered tighter at the thought and the ache between her legs worsened. His hands began their slow assault, slipping around under her arms. She wanted his touch so badly she felt near to screaming for it.

Kiera's eyes popped open in the darkness. This was not like her at all! She did not let men she barely knew grope her in elevators! The desire raging unabated in her core, she managed to clamp her arms down and trap his hands at her sides.

"Don't," she croaked, though she wasn't even sure her voice was audible.

Hunter froze, his hands pinned to her sides though she knew he could easily break her hold. He fairly radiated with masculine

strength. Hell, he could do anything to her he wanted and she would have little say about it.

He let out a frustrated sigh and withdrew his hands, resting them lightly on her shoulders. "Sorry," he whispered. "I'm afraid I got a little carried away."

The clouds were fading from her mind, her brain kicking back into gear. A shiver shook her entire body as she realized how out of control she had been. She was still wet, her nipples still hard, but she couldn't imagine how she'd ended up in such a mindless haze. What was happening to her?

To her amazement, Kiera felt tears building in her eyes. She tried to fight them off, but she had no more success against the tears than she'd had against the lust. Her shoulders began to shake and she felt Hunter's sudden tension in his hands.

"Are you crying?" he asked in a voice that sounded absolutely appalled.

She wanted to deny it, but her throat was too tight and clogged, and she sniffled loudly instead. Hunter's arms swept around her in an embrace that held none of the smouldering sexuality of his previous touches.

"Oh, Kiera, please don't cry," he begged. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

The anguish in his voice reminded her that she was overreacting. Badly! After all, he had stopped the moment she'd asked him to. It certainly wasn't his fault that she lusted after him in ways she didn't understand. And it wasn't as if she were some blushing virgin. Really, what would have been the harm if he had felt her up? How ridiculous that she was in tears!

"Don't be sorry," she said. Her voice was hoarse, but she was reigning in the tears. "I don't know what's gotten into me

these days. You didn't do anything wrong."

He sighed again. "Yes I did."

Hunter didn't elaborate on that mysterious comment, and moments later the lights came back on. He helped her to her feet and held her coat for her. She could barely look at him, she was so humiliated by her overreaction. The elevator groaned back to life, starting its slow ascent once more.

Hunter cupped her chin in one hand and raised her head. His brows were drawn together in concern, and there was something haunted-looking in his deep blue eyes as he used his other hand to brush the remaining tears off her cheeks. His jaw set firmly and he looked grim.

"I'll never do that again," he promised her. "I'm very sorry." She tried to speak, to tell him he had no reason to be sorry, but his fingers moved from her cheek to her lips to silence her. "It was unconscionable of me to take advantage of you under the circumstances."

Kiera gently freed herself from his grip. "You didn't do anything, Hunter. Don't worry: I won't be traumatized for life by what you *almost* did." She tried a jaunty grin as the elevator came to a stop on the ninth floor. She didn't think it was very convincing.

Hunter gathered his coat from the floor, draping it over his arm. He paused for a moment in the doorway, staring at her with an intensity that made her nervous. The elevator tried to close on him, whining when the door hit him in the back and was forced to retreat. With a faint shake of his head, he stepped into the hall.

Kiera told herself not to read too much into the strange blend of relief and regret that flooded her when the doors closed behind him.

Hunter sat heavily on the plush couch in his living room, staring at the intricate pattern of the Persian rug at his feet. His heart felt like a lump of lead in his chest. In his mind's eye, he kept seeing the shimmer of tears in Kiera's eyes. His hands remembered the feel of her under them, remembered the terrible shudder that had seized her when she'd somehow shrugged off the glamour.

He had had her, her mind so fogged by desire that she would happily have let him screw her right there on the floor of the elevator. His manhood instantly swelled and hardened at the thought. He squashed the arousal easily by remembering again her distress. Never mind how she had managed to escape the glamour! When she'd come out of it, she'd been wounded by its effects.

All he had needed, all he had wanted out of that encounter had been a single kiss to appease his mother. Even after she had shaken the glamour, he suspected he could have taken that kiss. She'd been in enough distress that a gentle, conciliatory kiss would have slipped in past her guard.

But when he'd seen the damage he'd done to her psyche by trying to coerce her with glamour, he'd found himself unable to take advantage of the opportunity. Damn it, he liked her! He didn't want to hurt her.

Hunter rubbed his hands nervously on his pants legs. The deadline for winning his first kiss was tomorrow. Even if he managed to arrange an encounter for them tomorrow, her defenses would be back up. Would, in fact, be stronger than ever before. By refraining this afternoon, he had doomed himself.

He tried not to let his mind go there, but it was impossible

not to speculate on just how the Queen would punish him for his failure. Bane had said that he would administer the punishment, which suggested that whatever it was, Hunter would not be dragged back to Faerie for it. The Queen needed him whole to do the duties she had assigned him, and if he was not in Faerie then she couldn't use her healing magic on him. So, whatever was in store was something that would not maim or mark him.

Hunter told himself that there was only so much pain Bane could inflict without maiming or marking him. He told himself that he could bear it. He told himself he had endured worse.

He was lying, and he knew it.

Chapter 5

Kiera felt uncommonly stupid trying to explain to Jackson the bizarre reaction she'd had to being trapped in the elevator with Hunter. She was sitting cross-legged on his sinfully plush couch, sipping from a bottle of one of his home-brewed beers. He lounged on the sofa beside her, his elbow propped on the back of the sofa as his head rested on his hand. He seemed to be taking her seriously, for there was no hint of a smile on his lips or in his eyes.

"I presume this is the first time you'd ever been trapped in an elevator?" he asked.

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with anything?"

He shrugged. "Maybe nothing. I'm just saying that just because you're not claustrophobic doesn't mean you wouldn't get freaked out by being trapped in an elevator, even if you'd been alone. Or with me."

Kiera took another sip of beer, trying to convince herself that Jackson was right. It didn't work. "I can't shake the feeling that

it was more than that. Jackson, I didn't feel freaked out by the dark or the enclosed space—I felt freaked out by knowing *he* was in there with me."

"So, you think he's an axe murderer or something?"

"Don't make fun! I don't know what I think. I only know that this is all very strange."

He gave her a gentle smile. "I wasn't making fun. I'm just trying to figure out exactly what kind of vibes this guy is putting out."

She couldn't help rolling her eyes. "You sound like my mom, talking about auras and crap. The guy isn't putting out 'vibes.' I'm just acting like a basket-case." She was even more annoyed with herself than she let on. She had firmly forbidden herself from talking about this with anyone, fearing that talking about it would make it seem more real. Now here she was spilling her guts.

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "I respect your instincts more than you do. If he's creeping you out this bad, I bet there's a reason for it. You've just got to figure out what that reason is."

"If I have such good instincts, why have I dated so many losers?"

"Wishful thinking trumps instinct."

She winced. "Ouch."

"Hey, I tell it like it is. And as I'm sure you've noticed, I don't do much better." He gave her knee an encouraging squeeze. As if taking a cue from his master, Nuriev, one of Jackson's five cats, butted his head against Kiera's shin.

Kiera's nose itched with an impending sneeze, but she stifled it by sheer willpower. She'd taken an antihistamine before

coming over, so she figured the sneeze was just power of suggestion. To prove the point to herself, she reached down and scratched behind Nuriev's ears. The throbbing purr brought a smile to her lips.

"Have you told your mom about the mysterious Mr. Teague?" Jackson asked.

She blinked. "My mom? Why would I tell *her*?"

The grin was back. "Well, she's kind of an expert on things weird, isn't she?"

She gave him a narrow-eyed glare. "Very funny. You're a real comedian."

"I wasn't kidding. Look, I know you think she's a goof, but she does know a lot about the supernatural."

Her glare deepened. "I never said there was anything supernatural about this! What a ridiculous idea."

He raised an eyebrow. "You said yourself you can't explain your reaction to him. I've never known you to be intimidated or unnerved by a man before. Something about him has set you off, and if you can't find a logical reason, is it so ridiculous to consider other more unlikely reasons?"

"Yes, it is." Jackson had never seemed to find her mother as outrageous as she did, but she never imagined he'd take it this far or she wouldn't have said a word. She shuddered to think what her mother might say.

"Maybe you should try keeping your mind ajar, even if you can't quite manage open."

"Thank you very much for the advice, Jackson, but I am *not* talking to my mother about this. Knowing her, she'd decide this means Hunter is my Mr. Right and start making wedding plans."

Jackson gave her a speculative look. "If I actually call him

to make that massage appointment like we talked about, and he turns me down, would you allow at least the possibility that your instincts might be right?"

"I suppose," she agreed grudgingly.

"And if your instincts might be right, do you think you could bite the bullet and ask your mom what she thinks might be going on?"

Kiera gave him her most stubborn look. "I still don't see what my mom has to do with this."

"Hey, it's probably going to turn out there's nothing fishy about him at all. I'll probably call for an appointment, get a massage, and be out eighty bucks. The least you can do is humor me if he acts suspicious."

"I have a bad feeling about this," she muttered.

Jackson parodied her stubborn expression. "That's the deal, take it or leave it."

Telling herself that Jackson was undoubtedly right and nothing strange would happen, she finally agreed.

Hunter had spent a very long and sleepless night, trying not to think about what was to come and failing miserably. He was up and pacing his apartment well before dawn, his nerves strung so tight he couldn't manage to choke down any breakfast. When in the late morning his doorbell finally rang, it was almost a relief.

For a brief moment, Hunter considered not answering the door. But hiding behind the closed door of his apartment would smack of cowardice, and he wasn't going to give Bane the satisfaction of seeing him scared.

When Hunter opened the door, he discovered that Bane was

not alone today—he'd brought two other goblins. Neither one looked delighted with his assignment. Hunter treated them to a chilling glare, and they looked even less happy.

Bane flashed a toothy grin. "Top of the morning to you, Prince," he said as he shouldered Hunter aside and entered the apartment, his henchmen following reluctantly.

Hunter closed the door and turned to face the goblins. Bane dropped the glamour completely, standing before him in all his goblin ugliness, his body short and squat and powerful, his skin a dead-looking shade of gray, his eyes bulging and glowing with malice.

Bane pulled his lips away from his teeth, displaying his mouthful of fangs. "Well?" he asked with a sneer. "Any progress to report?"

Hunter crossed his arms and stood straight and tall, looking down at the goblin from his superior height. "No." He could have tried lying, but the Queen had undoubtedly provided the goblin with a spell to detect lies.

"Such a shame," the goblin said, his eyes even more eager. "Her Majesty will be most disappointed in you."

Hunter unsheathed his knife with a flick of his wrist. Bane's henchmen flinched, but Bane just looked amused. He chuckled and pulled a roll of duct tape from his oversized coat. "Hold out your hands with your wrists together."

Hunter's lips curled into a very goblin-like smile as he brandished the knife. "Make me."

Bane rolled his bulging eyes. "You really want to make things worse?"

Hunter shrugged as though it didn't matter to him one way or another. "I'm curious to see how you plan to restrain me

without maiming me."

"Easy. Three against one. You can count, can't you Boyo?"

If he'd had his sword, the odds would be heavily in Hunter's favor. But the little silver knife was only marginally useful against the three heavy, powerful goblins. Still, Hunter was in no mood to go down without a fight. Bane read his intentions and shook his head, tucking the roll of tape back into his coat pocket. His henchmen looked at Hunter nervously, and he scented fear in the air.

"One more chance, Prince," Bane said. "Resist now, and I'm sure the Queen will make you pay for it later."

Maybe so, but at least Hunter would still have his pride. "Come and get me," he taunted, letting the adrenaline of battle overcome his own fear. He crouched at the ready, eager to spill some goblin blood.

Bane took a step toward him, but his henchmen held back. "Who are you more afraid of?" Bane snarled at them. "Him? Or the Queen?"

The answer was obvious as all three goblins rushed Hunter at once. He slashed at the closest one, but Bane barreled into his legs at the same time, and Hunter managed no more than a shallow cut before he found himself buried under three stinking goblin bodies. They were heavy enough that he couldn't pitch them off. A knee pressed brutally into his groin, sapping his strength. By the time he'd recovered his breath, his knife was out of reach, and his wrists were bound by duct tape.

Bane sat on him and bound his ankles while one of the other goblins stood on a chair and screwed a large hook into the ceiling. Bane tied a length of rope over Hunter's already-bound wrists, then tossed the other end of the rope to the goblin on the

chair. Hunter found himself being dragged to his feet, his arms stretched over his head by the rope, which was tied to the hook in the ceiling. He concentrated on calming the adrenaline surge that had sustained him through the brief struggle. He needed to breathe easy, rein himself in, turn his mind inward to gain some detachment from whatever was about to happen.

His fragile composure was tested when Bane pulled off another length of tape, reaching toward Hunter's face with the obvious intention of taping his mouth shut.

"You don't need that and you know it!" Hunter snapped. He had learned early in life that crying out during a punishment was the surest way to make it even worse. He had taught himself to endure in silence, and he had taught himself well.

The goblin just laughed. "Don't want to upset the neighbors now, do we?" He moved in again, and slapped the length of tape over Hunter's mouth.

"Let's see what kind of fun we can have without marking or damaging you," Bane said, and his henchmen backed off to watch the master at work. Their fear had evaporated now that Hunter was helpless. Their eyes glowed with bloodlust, and one of them was literally drooling.

Bane put his hands on Hunter's abdomen, thick, strong fingers poking and prodding. Hunter wondered what the hell he was doing.

Bane gave a little grunt of satisfaction and his hands stilled. He moved his left hand up fractionally, then made a fist of his right and punched Hunter right below where his hand rested.

The pain was stunning, dragging Hunter's consciousness out of the cocoon he'd been building around it. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, every instinct in his body screaming at him

to double over and protect himself. That instinct caused him to fight against the restraint despite his sure knowledge that he could not free himself. The goblins laughed.

"Liked that, did you?" Bane asked. "Let's make it a matched set, shall we?" He felt along Hunter's abdomen some more until he found the same spot on the other side.

Knowing what to expect this time, Hunter tried to brace himself, but it was no good. By the time the waves of pain receded to a manageable level, his body was drenched in sweat. Bane continued his slow, methodical exploration of Hunter's body, fingers probing for the most sensitive and vulnerable spots so he could deliver brutal jabs. He made a full circle of Hunter's midsection, each blow as excruciating as the last, until Hunter had trouble forcing his knees to support him.

"You're sweating like a pig, Prince," Bane said when he had worked his way around to the front again. "Am I being too rough with you?" His eyes gleamed with pleasure, and his smile made Hunter's stomach churn. "I'll be more gentle on this lap."

Again Bane probed for those sensitive spots, only this time each of them ached from his previous abuse. When he found them, instead of hitting them again, he merely used pressure from his strong fingers to reawaken the pain that had started to subside. It was worse than the punches, for he kept up the pressure for what felt like an eternity. Hunter's heart was slamming against his ribs and he couldn't breathe through the pain. His knees gave out, and his entire weight hung from his suspended hands. He tried to get his feet back under him, but his strength had failed completely.

When Bane had completed his second circuit, he had one of his henchmen cut the rope. Hunter collapsed to the floor, wishing

he would lose consciousness. He remained stubbornly awake as Bane dismissed his henchmen and came to kneel by Hunter's side. He ripped the tape off Hunter's mouth in one quick movement, and Hunter started greedily sucking in more air.

For a while, Hunter just lay there and breathed, eyes closed as he searched deep inside himself for strength. He was aware of Bane still kneeling beside him, but for the moment he put the goblin out of his mind to concentrate on holding himself together. Slowly, his heartbeat returned to something approaching normal and the sweat stopped pouring from his body. He opened his eyes.

The glamour was back, and Bane now looked like a filthy, disheveled street bum. But the smile was still entirely goblin-like as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial. "The Queen sent this along for you," he said. "It will dull the pain. Even with it, you'll be sore some for the next couple of days. But not so sore you can't perform your duties." Another nasty grin as he put the vial down on the floor, then retrieved Hunter's knife and put it beside the vial. "Of course, trying to get yourself free of the duct tape is going to hurt like hell."

"I really can't wait for the day I get to kill you."

Bane shrugged. "Hey, just doing my job here, Boyo."

If Hunter's mouth hadn't been bone dry, he would have spat. "And enjoying it thoroughly."

"Like I keep telling you: I'm a goblin. It's what goblins do. Nothing personal." The evil smile faded and Bane shook his head. "I don't know if you're a total moron, or if you're just tainted by mortal blood. All your life you've lived in the Unseelie Court and you still don't understand this shit."

Bane rose and stepped over Hunter's body toward the door.

He poked a toe into one of the sore spots before he left.

Hunter blacked out two or three times before he managed to saw the duct tape off his wrists. When he succeeded, he lay on his back on the floor, panting with the effort. Finally, he found the energy to haul himself back into a sitting position and free his legs. He grasped the little vial of potion his mother had sent him and staggered to the kitchen. He poured a glass of milk, then leaned on the counter and stared at the vial.

He had no doubt that the vial contained exactly what Bane had promised, nor did he doubt that the potion would ease his pain. Right now, he was barely capable of walking, much less making love to a woman, and she needed him whole. What gave him pause was the inevitable speculation as to what was in that potion. He was sure he didn't want to know.

Hunter unscrewed the cap and breathed through his mouth; if he smelled the damned stuff, he might not be able to force himself to drink it. He held the vial in one hand and the glass of milk in the other. Then, he tossed the contents of the vial down the back of his throat, hoping in vain not to taste it. The foul stuff burned and filled his mouth with the taste of rot and sulphur. Fighting his gag reflex, he chugged down the milk, which, while it didn't do much to mask the taste, at least eased the burning.

The taste of the potion lingered on his tongue and in the back of his throat. Hunter feared his stomach would reject it if he couldn't kill that taste, so he grabbed a bottle of whisky and drank down a healthy dose as he headed to the bedroom. He kept the whisky close at hand when he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, noticing that the potion seemed already to have dampened the pain.

Hunter wasn't exactly drunk, but he was rather . . . mellow . . . when the phone rang. He sat up gingerly and was pleased to note that while his abdomen ached, it didn't feel any worse than minor bruises. He reached for the phone, thinking that it had to be Kiera, for no one else knew his number.

"Hello?"

"Hi!" a man's voice said with great enthusiasm. "Is this Hunter Teague?"

Hunter frowned. He didn't recognize the voice. "Yeah," he said after a brief, puzzled pause.

"Oh good! I was hoping I'd be able to catch you."

Hunter's frown deepened. Whoever this guy was, he had a naturally deep voice that he was clearly pitching to a higher octave, and his words had an exaggerated lilt to them.

"My name's Jackson Davis," the guy said. "I'm a friend of Kiera's. You know, Kiera Malone?"

"Ah. Yes, I know Kiera. What can I do for you Mr. Davis?" But internally, he groaned, for there seemed an obvious reason for Davis to call.

"Well, I was having dinner with our mutual friend the other day, and I was telling her about all these problems I've been having with my back, and she told me she was working for a massage therapist, and I told her I thought it was an act of fate, so I was wondering if I could make an appointment."

Hunter rolled his eyes. Davis sounded overly excited about this little coincidence, and it was a wonder he hadn't passed out from breathlessness. "I'm afraid I'm not open for business yet, Mr. Davis," he said, sure he was crushing the poor guy's hopes into the ground. "But I can refer you to some excellent therapists in the area if you'd like."

"What a terrible shame!" Davis said, sounding as though life as he knew it was ending.

It occurred to Hunter that Davis would relay this conversation to Kiera, and it might be inconvenient to have her thinking he wasn't open for business yet. He had every intention of getting her onto his table, the sooner the better. But he was damned if he was going to lay hands on anyone else, much less this blatantly gay flake. "So sorry to disappoint you," he said, hoping he didn't sound as insincere as he was.

"Oh, that's quite all right. I understand. When will you be opening?"

Hunter rubbed his eyes. He didn't need this, not now. "I'm not sure of the exact date," he hedged. "I've got some supplies on back order, and I'd like to at least have my website up. If you'll give me your email address, I'll be sure to let you know when I have a firm date."

That seemed to satisfy the pest at last, so Hunter pretended to write the address down.

Kiera stood outside her mother's house, thinking that the only sensible thing to do was turn around and high-tail it out of here. But she had promised Jackson she'd consult her mom if Hunter turned him down, and she always kept her promises. Irritated at herself for the hesitation, she reached out and gave the gargoyle-shaped door knocker a couple of firm raps.

Long before she heard her mother's footsteps approaching, she heard the distinctive clicking sound of dog toenails in the entryway. The fact that Phantom never barked when she knocked had always unnerved her—he barked at everyone else. He was by far the strangest dog she'd ever met. Hell, he didn't even make

her sneeze like every other animal on the planet did!

Moments later, the tapping of her mother's high heels drowned out the doggie footsteps, and the door swung open.

"Kiera, honey, what a surprise!" her mother exclaimed with great cheer.

Kiera noticed at once that her mother's cheeks were flushed. Then, she noticed the dark red circle at the base of her neck that looked suspiciously like a hickey. She tore her eyes away, hoping her mother hadn't noticed her noticing.

The door swung open wider. "Well, come on in, honey. It's cold out there."

Kiera was now even less sure that she wanted to be here, but it was too late to back down, so she smiled and stepped through the doorway. Phantom stood a respectful distance away and stared at her, his tail sketching a single wag, which was his idea of an enthusiastic greeting. He was a monster of a dog, an Irish wolfhound that stood as tall as Kiera's waist. She hated the way he stared at her, for his solemn eyes always had a reproachful, disapproving look to them. And he stared a lot.

"Glad to see you too, Phantom," she muttered.

Her mother laughed as she breezed by. "He's just wary, Kiera. He knows your visits often lead to fireworks." She scratched behind his ears, and he turned his attention away from Kiera to look at her mother with an expression of whole-hearted adoration.

"It must be tough to be worshiped like that," Kiera said, feeling strangely jealous and drawing another of Phantom's disapproving looks. She crossed her arms and glared at him. There were times she could have sworn the damn dog understood her.

"Go lie down, Phantom," her mother said. "You make Kiera nervous."

Kiera could have sworn the dog rolled his eyes before he trotted off to do as his goddess commanded. Kiera was trying to figure out how she was going to broach her ridiculous subject with her mom when she finally realized they weren't alone.

The man stood uncertainly at the base of the stairs, leading up to the den—and to her mother's bedroom. He looked to be in his mid-fifties, his dark hair touched with gray. He wasn't handsome in any traditional sense of the word—he was too short, his belly a bit too pronounced, his nose definitely too large—but there was something strangely sensual about him. Perhaps it was those lips, full and curved, or perhaps it was his heavy-lidded eyes.

"Kiera," her mother said, "I'd like you to meet Alonso. Alonso, this is my daughter, Kiera."

Alonso moved away from the stairs, smiling and holding out his hand for Kiera to shake. The smile lit up his face, adding warmth to the sensuality, and Kiera could definitely see how he'd attracted her mother's attention.

"Nice meeting you," she lied, hoping her smile didn't look forced. The last thing she wanted right now to make this visit even more complicated by having to meet her mother's "Mr. Right," but she tried the best she could to stifle her annoyance. She'd make friendly with Alonso, and come back some other time to talk to her mom in private about her own situation. And next time she'd call first!

Phantom reappeared from wherever he'd disappeared to. Alonso cast the wolfhound a nervous glance before returning his attention to Kiera. "Your mother's told me a lot about you,"

Alonso said, looking vaguely amused.

Kiera almost groaned. "I can only imagine." Phantom padded closer, eyes fixed on Alonso, a none-too-friendly expression on his face.

"Well," her mother said, too brightly, "I'm glad you two finally got a chance to meet." She turned and glared at Phantom, who stopped in his tracks. If he'd been human, he would have started whistling in casual innocence. "It was so nice of you to stop by," she said to Alonso.

Kiera recognized the dismissal and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to escape the conversation she'd come here to have. "Really, mother, you don't have to toss Alonso out because of me. I should have called before I came over. We can get together some other time, when it's more convenient."

"No, no," Alonso said. "I had to go anyway. I've got a restaurant to run."

Kiera averted her eyes when he gave her mother a gentlemanly kiss. A very faint growl emanated from Phantom's lips, and Kiera noticed the brute was bristling and glaring. Her mother walked Alonso to the door before Phantom got any more hostile, and Kiera was aware of them whispering to one another before he kissed her again and slipped out. The thunk of the closing door made Kiera feel trapped. Her palms were sweaty, and though she knew her agitation was ridiculous, she couldn't seem to still it.

"Come sit down," her mother urged, leading her to the sofa in the living room.

Kiera sat obediently, Phantom following her in and curling up on his dog bed. She felt like he was studiously not looking at her. She shook her head at herself; bad enough she was feeling so

paranoid about Hunter, now she was suspicious of a damn dog!

"I take it Phantom isn't as fond of Alonso as you are?" Kiera asked.

"He's being a typical jealous male." Phantom gave one sharp, loud bark. Kiera's mom cut him a quick glance, then looked away. "But never mind that. Tell me what's wrong. I've never seen your aura look so troubled before."

Kiera was sure her mother had picked up her mood from her facial expression, not from any mythical aura. But the fact that she'd picked up on it meant that Kiera couldn't weasel out of talking about it, not unless she wanted to suffer an interrogation that she was sure would eventually break her down. She let out a deep sigh and stared at the floor.

"Let me start by saying that I think this is all ridiculous. But I promised Jackson I would talk to you about it, so I'm biting the bullet." Or at least trying to. Her fight-or-flight instinct was screaming at her to get the hell out of here.

"It's so touching how you depend on my advice."

Kiera looked up sharply at the wry words, fearing for a moment she'd hurt her mom's feelings. But her mom looked more amused than hurt. "Sorry, Mom, but I'm not going to pretend I believe in all this supernatural mumbo-jumbo when I don't. Besides, I'd never be able to fool you."

She laughed. "Too true! Now, tell me what kind of supernatural mumbo-jumbo you don't believe in today."

Kiera squirmed on the couch. "Well, there's this guy . . ."

Once she got started, Kiera found it surprisingly easy to spill the whole story. Her mom was the perfect audience, not interrupting, not prodding when Kiera faltered. Somewhere along the way, she stopped feeling so silly and the words tumbled out

faster, a confused jumble of thoughts and emotions.

When she finished, she finally nerved herself up to look at her mother's face. The troubled look she discerned sent a shiver up her spine. "What is it?" she asked.

Phantom, sensing that his goddess was in distress, trotted over and rested his chin on her leg, looking up at her with soulful eyes. She scratched behind his ears and smiled at him.

"Come on, Mom," Kiera urged. "Tell me what you're thinking that's got you looking so worried."

Her mother started chewing on her lip, a nervous habit Kiera had thought she'd kicked long ago. "You're going to scoff at me."

Kiera shrugged and managed a weak smile. "When has that ever stopped you?"

That won her an answering smile from her mother and a doleful look from Phantom. "All right, but don't say I didn't warn you." The smile quickly faded. "What happened in the elevator, the way you felt so inexplicably attracted to him . . ."

"Yes?"

Now her mother's face had set into grim lines. "It sounds like glamour."

"Glamour?" Kiera couldn't help wrinkling her nose, even though she'd asked for this. "You mean glamour, as in fairy-mind-control magic, right?"

"Exactly. What you described feeling . . . it's just like what I felt when your father seduced me." She looked away. "I was a married woman, and while it wasn't exactly a good marriage, I'm not the kind of woman who fools around on her husband."

"You said you were drunk," Kiera reminded her gently.

Her mom nodded. "A little tipsy, yes. But I believe in

fidelity, believe in it far too much to fall into bed with some stranger just because I'd had a few drinks."

Kiera couldn't help feeling skeptical. If her mom's marriage hadn't been going well, it certainly seemed possible that the combination of alcohol and a handsome man could suppress her inhibitions and make her do something she would later regret.

Her mother smiled. "I can practically read your thoughts. I really wasn't that drunk, not drunk enough to throw my marriage in the toilet when I still harbored hopes that it could work out. But the moment your father sat on the barstool beside me, my hormones started wreaking havoc with me. I had never before and have never since felt anything like that." She shook her head. "He was absolutely beautiful. The kind of man who would have caught my eye across a crowded room." She put her hand to her throat and grinned. "Even conjuring his image now makes my pulse race."

Kiera couldn't help it; Hunter's handsome face suddenly loomed in her mind's eye, and her own pulse leapt.

Her mother's face scrunched up in intense thought. "But there's a difference between the kind of attraction you feel for a handsome stranger and the kind you feel for someone you literally want to have sex with." She sighed and looked exasperated. "Damn, this is hard to put into words. But then, maybe I don't have to. Think about the way this Hunter Teague makes you feel. Have you ever felt anything like that for someone you know so little?"

She had to admit her mom was right. That was why she was here, after all. Still . . . "I'll admit it's weird, but I have a hard time convincing myself it's supernatural weird."

Her mom leaned forward and put a hand on her arm. The

gesture startled Kiera, for her mom had never been real touchy-feely. “Can you stand it if your mother asks you an embarrassing question?”

Kiera practically cringed. “Depends on the question.”

“Remember, I’m trying to help, and to help I need to understand as best I can what’s happening. Okay?”

Kiera didn’t like the sound of this at all, but morbid curiosity prompted her to nod cautiously.

“If you think about him right now, when he can’t possibly be using glamour against you, do you want to sleep with him?”

Kiera blushed like a teenager. She wasn’t what you’d call a prude, but discussing sex with her mother was not high on her list of favorite things.

“You don’t have to answer out loud if you don’t want to,” her mother hastened to assure her. “I just want you to think about it.”

Kiera shoved her prudery aside—she’d come too far into this conversation to chicken out now. So, she once again conjured Hunter’s face, adding his tantalizing scent to the mix. Her pulse kicked up and her cheeks heated. “He’s unbelievably sexy. I don’t think it’s impossible that it could happen, if only I could shake whatever it is that bothers me.”

Her mom nodded. “But don’t you see? When he’s not near you, you say it’s not impossible. When you were in that elevator with him, you felt like it was imminent. There’s something unnatural about that.”

“It’s just his charisma.”

“If you thought that, you wouldn’t be so troubled about it. Believe me, honey, I know exactly what you’re feeling. Finvarra had me in such a daze I felt almost like I had no free will of my

own. What he did to me was damn close to rape, because he made me helpless to resist. If your attraction to Hunter were natural, it wouldn’t be making you feel helpless.”

“Maybe I’ve just been alone too long.”

Her mom grunted in disgust. “You are one of the most stubborn people I’ve ever met in my life. I can see I’m not going to convince you.”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” she said, feeling terrible because she had asked for just this kind of answer and she was rejecting it.

Her mom grinned. “Honey, I’ve known you for thirty-one years. Believe me, I’m used to it.” She gently nudged Phantom’s chin away from her leg and stood up. “What I need to do is help you gather more evidence, until eventually you have enough to convince even you. Wait here.”

As if enforcing her mother’s command, Phantom moved to sit directly in front of Kiera, fixing her with his usual stare.

“Quit that!” she snapped at him, then wondered at herself for acting like he could understand her. Of course, even if he’d understood her, he undoubtedly would have ignored her. She didn’t know what the dumb creature had against her. She tried to stand up, thinking to turn her back on him to at least give her the illusion he wasn’t staring like that. But Phantom moved in closer and put his front paws on her lap before she was able to move.

Kiera gasped. With his paws on her thighs, he was able to stare into her eyes from an equal height, and the look in his eyes was almost as unnerving as Hunter. There was too much intelligence there, too much depth. Then, her mother came back into the room. Phantom got down and retreated to his mistress’s side, leaving Kiera thoroughly shaken. Flakiness must run in the family, she decided, and she was really letting her imagination

get away from her.

“You have the world’s weirdest dog,” she grumbled, and her mother laughed.

“Quite a character, isn’t he?” she agreed, resuming her seat on the sofa.

Not exactly the way Kiera would have put it, but she let it go, instead frowning at the horseshoe her mother held in her lap. “What’s with the horseshoe?”

“Any number of supernatural creatures have an aversion to iron, and the fey are no exception. The tradition of hanging a horseshoe on the front door actually originated as a way to keep the fey, among other things, out.” She held out the horseshoe, and Kiera took it. “See if you can get Hunter to touch that. If he’s fey, he won’t do it.” A crooked grin stole over her lips. “It might be very entertaining to see what excuses he uses to avoid it.”

Kiera noticed Phantom was no longer staring at her but had his eyes fixed on the horseshoe instead. Feeling silly once more, and yet unable to resist the impulse, she leaned forward and stretched the horseshoe out in Phantom’s direction. The wolfhound shied away, hackles bristling. She leaned back into the couch and met her mother’s eyes. Her mom made no comment, and Kiera tried to tell herself there was no significance whatsoever to Phantom’s dislike of the horseshoe.

“I’ll give it a try,” she said, not at all sure she would. She let her mother see her to the door, Phantom hanging back instead of staying on his mistress’s heels as usual.

Her mother was in the process of closing the door when a thought suddenly struck Kiera and she stuck her hand out. “Wait!”

“Yes?”

She hefted the horseshoe. “You keep claiming my father is the king of the fairies. If that’s so, why can I touch the horseshoe?”

“He’s the King of the Seelie Court, not the king of the fairies. And though you’re at least half fey, you’re mortal, so the iron can’t hurt you.”

“Somehow I knew you’d have an explanation.”

“See if your skepticism can survive when Hunter refuses to touch the horseshoe!”

Kiera made a noncommittal sound and hurried away.