

## chapter one

Going on a date with a bodyguard hanging over your shoulder sucks.

Okay, technically, it wasn't really a date. At least, that's what I kept telling myself. Ethan was just a friend. A totally hot, sexy friend who made my hormones do a happy dance, but still just a friend. And if I knew what was good for me, I'd keep it that way.

After a couple of nasty betrayals that had hurt me more than I cared to admit, Ethan had risked his life to save mine, and I'd agreed to wipe our slate clean. The problem was, it isn't that easy to rebuild broken trust, especially when I still had so many reasons not to fully trust him.

For three weeks after he saved my life, I tried to keep my distance, but it didn't seem to discourage him. He called, e-mailed, and IM'ed me about a billion times asking me to go out with him, and I finally gave in. He'd wanted dinner and a movie. That seemed way too date-like to me, so I bargained him down to just the movie.

As I sat in the darkened theater beside him, I realized my bargaining skills could use some work. Dinner would have been safer than the movie. I tried to be subtle as I checked over my shoulder to see how closely Finn, my bodyguard, was watching me.

To my relief, I saw that he'd done me the courtesy of sitting three rows back—far enough away to give me the illusion of privacy, but close enough that he could come to my rescue if I needed it.

I wasn't surprised to see I had Finn's full attention, despite the distraction of the movie. He was a Knight of Faerie, and he took his job very, very seriously. Which was a good thing, because both the Queens of Faerie wanted me dead.

I turned to face front again. Ethan held out the bag of popcorn, and I took a handful, getting salt and melted butter all over my fingers.

"Napkin?" I asked, holding out my other hand.

"Sorry," he said, but the corner of his mouth was lifted in his trademark grin. "Forgot to get napkins."

I gave him my best dirty look, not buying the innocent expression he was giving me. Maybe he'd get a kick out of watching me lick my fingers, but I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction. I'd have gone to the lobby to get my own napkins, only I'd have to crawl over three people to get to the aisle. Besides, the movie had already started. Not that I was paying any attention to it. With a grunt of resignation, I grabbed another handful of popcorn and sank a little lower into my seat.

Somehow, Ethan's arm had found its way around my shoulders. I tried to shrug it off—though a part of me would rather have leaned into him.

“This isn’t a date, remember?” I hissed at him, trying to sound annoyed instead of breathless. I’d been very clear about that when we’d talked on the phone, and Ethan had agreed to my terms. Of course, just because he’d agreed to them didn’t mean he planned to abide by them.

Even in the dark of the theater, Ethan’s smile was devastating. “I remember. But you never said I couldn’t flirt with you.”

“Shh!” said someone from the row behind us before I had a chance to retort.

I fumed a bit as Ethan’s arm settled more comfortably around my shoulders. It would be a lot easier to resist him if he weren’t so . . . irresistible. He was hot even for a Fae, with long blond hair and gorgeous teal blue eyes. The slight bump on his nose that suggested it had once been broken kept him from looking too perfect—and made him even more sexy.

I reminded myself that there was only so much he could get away with, with Finn back there watching us like a hawk. A bodyguard with a heaping side dish of chaperone. Ethan was incredibly cocky, but he’d always shown a healthy respect for the Knight.

I munched on the popcorn and tried to pay attention to the movie. Ethan didn’t help the situation when he started idly stroking my shoulder with his fingers. I felt like I should tell him to quit it, but I liked the way his caress gave me little goose bumps. He leaned closer to me, and I smelled a hint of spicy aftershave blending with the popcorn and butter. Before I knew it, my head was resting against his shoulder.

If I was trying to get across the “not a date” message, I was doing a crappy job of it.

I’d lost my appetite for popcorn entirely, and didn’t protest

when Ethan set the bag down on the floor. I couldn't quite get myself to wipe my greasy fingers on my jeans, but licking them seemed too . . . tacky. Besides, I'd already decided not to give Ethan the satisfaction.

Ethan solved my dilemma by reaching over, taking my hand, and guiding it to his mouth. I was clueless enough that I had no idea what he was about to do until his mouth closed over my index finger. I made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a squeak.

My brain told my hand to jerk away from Ethan's mouth. My hand didn't listen.

Ethan sucked gently on my finger, his soft, hot tongue licking up the butter and salt. My mouth had gone dry, and I had trouble getting any air into my lungs. I'd have thought having a guy I wasn't even dating put my finger in his mouth would feel gross. Shows how little I knew.

Ethan finished with my index finger and moved on to my third finger. I felt like I was about to spontaneously combust. My face felt flushed, almost feverish, and my heart beat from somewhere around my throat. My conviction that this shouldn't feel good was rapidly disappearing.

The nasty, suspicious part of my brain that said I could never trust Ethan again after he'd tried a roofie-like spell on me once before went on high alert, searching for signs that my reaction was caused by magic rather than my own desires. But though my skin prickled with sensation, it was a toe-curling prickle of pleasure, not the electric-shock prickle of magic.

Ethan let go of my hand, and I found myself turning my head toward him, hoping he would kiss me. His lips were shiny

from the butter, and I knew I would practically drown in the taste of them. Lips parted, he leaned in to me.

But before his lips could touch mine, a piece of popcorn bounced off the tip of his nose. We both turned to look behind us.

I hadn't noticed Finn buying popcorn—somehow, that seemed like an odd thing for a Fae Knight to do—but he was holding up another kernel in warning and giving us a stern look. I guess he hadn't been able to see what Ethan was doing before the almost-kiss, or we'd probably be buried in popcorn by now.

My cheeks heated in a blush, but Ethan just laughed softly and leaned back in his seat. I don't suppose the popcorn missiles could have stopped him from kissing me if he really wanted to, but they did kind of spoil the mood.

*Just as well*, I reminded myself. I'd let Ethan overrule my common sense before, and I'd been burned for it. He claimed he was genuinely into me, but I still had trouble believing it. A guy like him had no trouble attracting girls way prettier—and more willing to put out—than me. It didn't make sense for him to want to date *me* of all people. Unless he had ulterior motives.

Once upon a time, I'd thought of myself as a relatively ordinary girl, though my alcoholic mom had made it impossible for me to be as ordinary as I would have liked. I'd gotten fed up with her drinking and run away from home, coming to Avalon—the only place where Faerie and the mortal world intersect—to meet my Fae father. That was when I'd discovered I was a Faeriewalker—a rare individual who could travel freely between Faerie and the mortal world, with the added “perk” of being able to bring magic into the mortal world and technology into Faerie. The last Faeriewalker before me had died like

seventy-five years ago, and I'd found myself the helpless rope in a game of political tug of war. With Ethan and his father on one end of that rope.

So it was a good thing Finn was acting as chaperone as well as bodyguard. The *last* thing I needed was to fall for Ethan, no matter how tempting he was. Not when I couldn't be sure what he really wanted from me.

I spent the rest of the movie fending off Ethan's subtle advances. His eyes sparkled with humor as I glared at him, and I realized it had become a game to him. What could he get away with? What could he do that Finn wouldn't see? I might have been offended by his refusal to take no for an answer, if I weren't so aware of the mixed signals I was sending him. Yeah, I fended him off—but he couldn't help but notice that it always seemed to take me a while to get around to it.

"You're being a jerk," I told him at one point as I grabbed his wrist and moved his hand off my thigh. My *upper* thigh. My voice was a little too breathy to be convincing, and I'd let his hand move way higher than I'd intended to.

His arm—which remained steadfastly around my shoulders—gave me a squeeze. "I'm being a perfect gentleman," he whispered in my ear. "I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to."

Yeah, well, that was sort of the problem. I wanted things I had absolutely no right to want. Or at least that weren't sensible for me to want. And everything I let him get away with gave him that much more reason to take another shot at it every time I shut him down.

By the end of the movie, I was so turned on it was a minor miracle I hadn't started tearing my clothes off in public. If Finn

hadn't been back there, I'd have had to rely on my own willpower, and who knows what stupid things I'd have done. I had a feeling I was in way over my head with Ethan, but I didn't know what to do about it.

We walked out of the theater hand-in-hand. I'm sure Ethan would have walked me home if he could, but I was currently living in a secret underground safe house in the heart of the mountain on which the city of Avalon is built. You could count on one hand the number of people who knew where it was, and Ethan wasn't on the list.

He raised my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles as we stood under the protection of the marquee. A gentle rain was falling, the cobblestone streets shining from the reflected glow of the street lamps.

Ethan let go of my hand, and I immediately missed the warmth of his touch as he helped me into my raincoat. He looked over my head, presumably at Finn, who was hovering behind me.

"Will you flatten me if I kiss her good night?"

"Probably," Finn said drily. He wasn't much of a talker.

I could have called Finn off just then. He wasn't my dad, and "chaperone" wasn't really in his job description. I don't think he much liked Ethan, but I was pretty sure he liked *me*, and a kiss good night was relatively innocent. But I'd let Ethan get away with more than I should already, and it was time to put my foot down.

"This isn't a date," I told him for the millionth time. "You don't get to kiss me good night even if Finn wouldn't flatten you."

Ethan flashed me a rueful, if somewhat skeptical, smile. "Right," he said. "I keep forgetting. Not a date. Got it." He reached out and pulled up the hood of my coat. His finger "accidentally"

stroked the side of my face as he pulled away. I couldn't suppress my shiver of pleasure.

"Maybe we can fix that next time," he suggested. "Wanna be my date for Kimber's party?"

Ethan's sister, Kimber, was my best friend. Her birthday party was on Friday night, and I was looking forward to it more than I could say.

"Nice try, Romeo," I said, though I doubted I sounded as sophisticated as I was trying to. "Kimber gets to be the center of attention at her party, not you."

Ethan rolled his eyes. "Obviously, you've never been to a Leigh family party before. But I get the point. Just save me a dance, okay?" He gave me another grin. "Friends are allowed to dance with each other, aren't they?"

Internally, I groaned. I had a feeling dancing with him would entail another battle of wills—angel me vs. devil me.

"Sure," I said. "As long as you keep your hands to yourself."

He raised one eyebrow, and I remembered how badly I'd enforced that rule tonight. I think I blushed again, but I met his challenging gaze as boldly as I could.

Mischief twinkling in his eyes, he winked at me, tweaked my nose like I was a little kid, then headed out into the rain, not seeming to care that he had neither a coat nor an umbrella. I watched, unable to turn away, until he'd rounded the corner at the end of the block.

## chapter two

Ethan spelled trouble for me, but if he were the only trouble I had to deal with now that I lived in Avalon, I'm sure I could have dealt with him a lot more smoothly.

I'd come here under the mistaken impression that life with my father would be closer to normal than life with my mother. What a joke! I'd been in Avalon only a handful of weeks, and already I was looking back at the days when I'd been my mother's keeper with something almost like longing. I'd really thought it sucked at the time.

I'd been a total loner at school, not because it was my natural inclination, but because my mom made us move every year or two to keep my father from finding us, and because I couldn't risk letting my classmates/potential friends find out my mom was a drunk. I'd learned that the hard way at one of my least favorite schools, where I'd been ridiculed relentlessly.

I'd also had to act as the adult in our family, because my mom was often too drunk to bother with little things like paying bills or buying groceries. And let's not even talk about how

closely I had to watch to make sure she didn't get behind the wheel when she was plastered!

Never in a million years would I have imagined myself looking back on that life with nostalgia. But then, there wasn't a single aspect of my life in Avalon that met the hopes and expectations I'd had when I decided to come.

Instead of living in a nice, normal house in the beautiful city of Avalon, I lived in what was basically a glorified cave, located deep within the mountain. My safe house had all the modern conveniences, such as electricity, running water, and an Internet connection. It was nicely decorated, and if you could get over the total lack of windows, you might even say it was comfortable. But it still felt like a prison to me, complete with a guardroom that was situated between my suite and the front entrance.

I think my dad would have preferred it if I stayed in my safe house twenty-four/seven, but—thank God—he seemed to understand that I would go nuts if he didn't let me out on a regular basis. I never got to go out alone—I always had to have either my dad or Finn at my side—but at least I wasn't a full-time prisoner. I still spent half my time feeling completely stir-crazy, though. I understood Dad's caution, and I didn't want to risk getting myself killed, but I hated living in such isolation. Sometimes it was hard not to hate my father for it, no matter how well I understood.

Mixed feelings or not, when my dad showed up unexpectedly one Sunday at noon to take me and my mom out for brunch, I was so happy at the prospect of going out I could have hugged him. I restrained the impulse, though. He carried himself with the typical icy reserve of the older Fae, which meant a pat on

the shoulder was a gushing display of affection in his book. He might not have known what to do with a hug.

My mom was another story. The moment she saw me, she threw her arms around me and hugged me as if she hadn't seen me in years. It had actually only been three days since the last time she'd visited me, but my mom was as much my dad's prisoner as I was, seeing as how he'd bribed or manipulated the courts of Avalon into declaring her legally incompetent. It had been one hell of a dirty trick, but there was a definite upside. As long as my mom was under my dad's thumb, he wouldn't allow her access to alcohol. This was the longest she'd been sober for as long as I could remember, and I found it hard to be mad at my dad for what he'd done.

He took us to one of Avalon's best restaurants, having secured us a table on the balcony. For once, it was a clear, beautiful day in Avalon, and the view from our table was spectacular. At least it would have been if I were willing to look at it. Because I'm a Faeriewalker, when I look out across the borders of Avalon, I see a disorienting, nausea-inducing double image—called the Glimmerglass—of both the English countryside and the forests of Faerie. I therefore kept my gaze strictly within the borders, which was pretty enough as it was.

The picturesque streets and houses of Avalon stretched out below me. The main road that spiraled from the base of the mountain all the way to its peak was a very modern asphalt, but almost all the side streets were cobblestone. The street lamps were made to resemble old-fashioned gas lights, and many of the buildings had existed in more or less their current form for centuries, giving the city an ancient feel despite the occasional chain store.

The mountain was densely populated, the residents of Avalon having crammed as many buildings as possible into the limited space, and yet it still managed to be lush and green. Everyone here seemed to have window boxes overflowing with flowers, and ivy took advantage of every unpaved spot to take root and crawl up the façade of the nearest building. Practically every inch of the city was a postcard waiting to happen.

Because of my unimpeded view, I was able to see clear down to the moat that surrounded Avalon, crossed by the bridge that led to the Western Gate. From up high, the moat looked as picturesque as anything else, despite its muddy brown color. However, a few weeks ago, my Aunt Grace had thrown me into that moat, and I'd discovered it was inhabited by Water Witches—nasty, malevolent monsters. I'd never be able to look at the moat again without remembering the feeling of being grabbed and dragged under. I don't think Aunt Grace was actually trying to kill me when she threw me in. She'd hatched some kind of crazy scheme to use my powers to assassinate Titania, the Queen of the Seelie Court, and when her plans were foiled, she threw me in the water as a diversion while she fled into Faerie.

My dad had great taste in restaurants. The food was fantastic. The conversation . . . not so much. I knew my parents had loved each other once, but that was a long time ago. Although Dad understood why my mom had kept me secret from him, he couldn't seem to forgive her for it. And Mom couldn't forgive Dad for any number of things, not least of which was her enforced sobriety. At this point, they couldn't agree that the sky was blue, much less agree on anything important, like the current topic of debate.

Mom wanted me to go to school like a normal girl in the fall.

Dad decreed that school was too great a security risk, and that I should be homeschooled. Neither one of them seemed to care what I thought—they didn't even bother to ask—but I knew that, in the end, my dad's word would be law. He was my legal guardian, after all. Not that Mom had any intention of conceding the point.

I tuned them both out, trying to enjoy the meal, the weather, and the view. I kept finding my eyes drawn to the moat, and to the bridge that spanned it, despite the unpleasant memories it dredged up. I kept forcing myself to look away, but my gaze always seemed to return.

I was once again staring at the moat when I caught sight of someone running away from the gatehouse at a frantic sprint. It was a Fae man, dressed in a green tunic and tights like an extra in a Robin Hood movie. Even from this distance, I could see the terror on the guy's face, and the blood that streaked his forehead. The sight made me gasp, and others around me must have followed my gaze, because a low murmur started up among the diners on the balcony.

The Fae was about a third of the way across the bridge, still running headlong, knocking slower pedestrians out of his way, when I finally saw just *why* he was running. A tall door in the gatehouse flew open, and a nightmare figure burst through.

He was dressed entirely in black, his face hidden under a grotesque black mask with a leering, fanged mouth and wickedly sharp antlers. His whole body was covered in shiny black armor peppered with vicious spikes. He rode an enormous black horse, also covered with plates of armor. Maybe it was some kind of optical illusion, but I could have sworn I saw the occasional glow of flames bursting from the horse's nostrils.

All around me, chairs were scraping back as people leapt to their feet, and the murmur had risen to a loud buzz of alarm. The horseman drew a gleaming sword from a scabbard draped over his back, and the buzz got even louder.

“Oh no,” I thought I heard my father say, although it was hard to hear him over the steadily rising voices of the other diners.

Behind the man in black, several more riders emerged from the door—which I belatedly realized must be the entrance to Faerie—each dressed in a slightly toned-down version of their leader’s attire. They fanned out into a V and galloped across the bridge behind him. There were several cars on the bridge, but the Fae riders didn’t seem to care, their horses dodging around them at supernatural speed, or just leaping over them as if they were toys, as brakes squealed and horns blared.

“The Wild Hunt!” someone shouted.

“The Erlking . . .” someone else said, voice cold with dread.

I was on my feet, clinging to the balcony rail without remembering having stood up. I was aware of my dad calling to me, but I was too riveted by what I was seeing to answer.

The leader of the horsemen was steadily gaining on the fleeing Fae. Everywhere, people leapt out of his way, and there was no sign that the border patrol was making even a token attempt to stop him or the rest of the riders. The man in black pulled even with the Fae. He rose up high in his stirrups, easily keeping his balance despite his horse’s breakneck speed. Someone screamed as the sword flashed in the sun and began to swing down at the Fae man.

I didn’t see what happened next, because my mom came at me from behind and slapped her hand over my eyes. But the screams

and gasps around me gave me a pretty good idea without having to see with my own two eyes.

Mom turned me around so my back was to the railing. Dad threw a handful of cash on our table, then grabbed both my mom's and my arms and began dragging us away.

"We have to go," he said urgently, and I can't tell you how terrifying it was to see the fear in his eyes. As far as I could tell, my dad wasn't afraid of anything, and if he *was*, he was a master at not letting it show. What did it mean that I could see the fear in him now?

People from inside the dining room were pushing their way out onto the balcony to see what was going on. My dad shoved his way through the gathering crowd, using magic of some sort to knock people out of our path. I might have objected to the rough handling, but remembering that black rider with his sword raised made me want to run and hide.

My dad made about a million phone calls as he frog-marched me back to the safe house. Mom walked at my side, her arm around my shoulders. Her face was deathly pale, and her eyes a little too wide.

"What's going on?" I asked her as my dad continued with his calls. "Who were those guys?" I really hoped they'd turned around and galloped back into Faerie after they'd . . . I tried not to think about what had happened.

My mom shook her head. "That was the Wild Hunt," she said in a breathless whisper, as if saying the words aloud would somehow make them appear out of thin air.

I waited for her to explain, but she didn't. Maybe I was supposed to know off the top of my head what the Wild Hunt was, but there was a lot I didn't know about Faerie. Mom was born and raised in Avalon, and sometimes she forgot that Avalon wasn't like other places.

"What's the Wild Hunt?" I asked.

We'd entered the tunnel system to begin the trek back to my safe house, and I guess Dad must have lost his signal, because he finally put his cell phone away.

"They are the nightmare of Faerie," he said in a tense, clipped tone. "A pack of horsemen who live only to hunt Fae and mortals alike. Their leader—the Erlking—is the only man the Queens of Faerie are said to fear."

"That would be the guy with the sword?" I asked in a small voice.

Dad dipped his chin in a curt nod. "Yes. All the Huntsmen are dangerous, but none more so than he."

I frowned, belatedly hearing the nuances of what my dad had said. "Wait a minute. You said the Queens of Faerie fear him, plural. But he's Unseelie, right?" All of Faerie is divided into two Courts, each with its own Queen. The Seelie Court had the reputation of being the good guys (though since Aunt Grace was Seelie, it's obvious the reputation doesn't always hold true). The Unseelie Court is the Court of monsters and bad guys, but that was a generalization, too. Ethan and Kimber were Unseelie, and they were pretty decent most of the time. The Erlking seemed to fit the Unseelie stereotype to a tee. "If he's Unseelie, surely the Unseelie Queen isn't scared of him."

"He is neither Seelie nor Unseelie," my father said. "He is out-

side the Courts altogether, a power unto himself. He considers himself a king, although he has no actual kingdom.”

“And he’s allowed to just ride into Avalon whenever he feels like it and kill people in broad daylight?” I’d seen evidence before that the border between Avalon and Faerie was dangerously porous, but I had at least hoped that it was better defended than *that*.

“No. He is not allowed to hunt in Avalon. It’s just that if someone he’s hunting in Faerie comes over the border, he’s allowed to pursue.”

We were moving so fast I was beginning to be a little short of breath, so I decided to hold my questions for the moment. When we passed out of the populated section of the tunnels and into the lightless path that led to my home, Dad cast some kind of spell that created a ball of light, which hovered over our heads and showed us the way. My neck kept prickling, and I kept looking behind me. Not that I really expected to see the Erlking bearing down on me on his fearsome black horse, but I was completely freaked out. I’d never have admitted it, but I was glad my mom had covered my eyes. I’d already seen enough things here in Avalon that would haunt my sleep. I didn’t need one more.

When we finally got to the safe house, Dad asked my mom if she would make us all some tea while he and I waited in the guardroom for Finn to arrive. It came out sounding more like an order than a request, but my mom didn’t object.

The guardroom wasn’t as cozy as the living room in my suite, but there was a reasonably comfortable sitting area. I plopped down heavily on the couch, but my dad was too agitated to sit.

“Okay,” I said. “What’s the scoop on the Erlking? Why did

we have to head for the hills as soon as you saw him? You said he wasn't allowed to hunt in Avalon."

"It's complicated."

I snorted. "Like anything in this place is simple. Come on, Dad. Tell me what's going on. Don't I have a right to know?"

He let out a frustrated sigh, which seemed to release some of his tension. He stared at the floor as he spoke, and his jaw was tight with strain.

"Once upon a time, the Erlking and his Wild Hunt were the scourge of Faerie. This was a long, long time ago. They would hunt the members of both Courts, slaughtering them at will. Those they didn't kill were forced to join the Hunt, slaves to the Erlking's will. Sometimes, the Hunt would ride out into Avalon and wreak havoc among the mortals living here. Mortals who were forced into the Wild Hunt invariably died, their bodies pushed to the breaking point as they tried to keep up the relentless pace of the Hunt."

My mom entered the guardroom, carrying a tray with the tea. I was more of a coffee girl myself, but the people of Avalon apparently couldn't live without their tea. I was learning to tolerate it in the interest of being polite. Mom put the tray on the coffee table, then poured out three cups as my dad continued.

"Eventually, the Queens of Faerie were able to make a deal with the Erlking, a deal they sealed with magic. The Erlking agreed that he would no longer hunt members of either Court without permission of that Court's Queen. Ever since, he and his Wild Hunt have been the Faerie Queens' assassins and executioners. Still a nightmare, but a *leashed* nightmare."

I frowned as I thought that over. "What did the Erlking get out of this agreement?"

Dad stirred his tea with studied intensity. “He gained the privilege of hunting the Courts’ outcasts.”

My frown deepened. “But he was hunting them already, right?”

My dad didn’t answer.

“I think there was another part of the deal,” my mom said, surprising me. “The Erlking lives for the hunt. It’s part of his elemental nature, and yet he allowed the Queens to put limits on him. He *must* have gotten some advantage out of it. But it seems that the Fae who are old enough to remember are under a geis not to speak of it.”

“What’s a geis?”

“It’s a restriction that’s enforced by magic. The spell was cast by both Queens and binds all the members of their courts. The Fae who are old enough to remember literally *can’t* talk about it.”

Dad continued stirring his tea, round and round and round. I looked back and forth between him and Mom.

“Are you old enough to remember?” I asked my dad.

He nodded, but said nothing.

“And you’re not allowed to talk about it?”

He turned his head and looked at me, but he still didn’t speak. He didn’t even nod or shake his head.

“It must be a very powerful geis,” my mom said. “They can’t even tap dance around the truth. They just flat out can’t talk about it. They can’t even admit that a geis exists, even though everyone knows it must.”

“And no one has any idea what they’re hiding?”

Mom shook her head. “There are lots and lots of theories, but I don’t think any one is more likely than another to be true.”

I digested all that for a while, frustrated that I couldn’t get

the whole story. Obviously, I'd seen more than enough evidence that the Erlking was one scary dude. But I still didn't get why Dad had reacted as if the guy was a direct threat to me.

"If the Erlking can't hunt in Avalon," I asked my dad, "then what are you so worried about?"

Dad finally took a sip of his well-stirred tea. "He can't *hunt* in Avalon. That doesn't mean he can't kill. Or worse. There is a geis on him that prevents him from attacking anyone within the borders of the city—with the exception of people he chases here from Faerie. The geis does not prevent him from defending himself, however, and he's free to do whatever he wishes to anyone foolish enough to attack him or his Huntsmen."

"Still not getting it," I said. "Who'd be stupid enough to attack him when they know that allows him to kill them?" Certainly not *me*, which should mean he was no threat to me whatsoever. "Besides, won't he just go back to Faerie now that his, er, hunt is over?" Once again, I had to fight off the image of that black rider on his black horse raising his sword to kill a helpless, unarmed man.

"The Erlking has a unique ability to provoke people into acting against their own best interests. And no, I very much doubt he'll go back to Faerie. Every time he's pursued someone into Avalon, he's stayed for at least a few weeks. He even maintains a household here."

I shook my head. There were a lot of things about Avalon I liked—if somewhat reluctantly—but the weird-ass details of its treaty with Faerie weren't among them.

"Why even let him into the city in the first place?" I asked. "You won't let Spriggans and other Unseelie monsters cross the border, and he seems way scarier than any of them."

Dad's smile turned wry. "Indeed he is. Which is why the city had to make a deal with him. It was either agree to terms by which he could be allowed to come to Avalon, or go to war against him. Most of the Fae are immortal in that they won't ever die of natural causes. But as far as anyone can tell, the Erlking is *literally* immortal. Back in the days when there was open warfare between him and the Courts, a Seelie Knight actually managed to behead him in battle. The Erlking picked up his head, put it back on his neck, and killed the Knight. It behooves the people of Avalon not to make an enemy of a man who cannot be killed."

I saw the sense in it, but I couldn't say I liked it. It seemed to me that there had to be a better solution. Never mind that I couldn't imagine what it was. I guessed that considering how powerful the Erlking was, we were lucky he'd allowed any limitations to be imposed on him at all.

What the hell had the Faerie Queens given him to persuade him to stop hunting their people? Whatever it was, it had to be huge. And I very much doubted it was anything good.

Dad put his teacup down and turned to face me on the sofa. He didn't have the most expressive face in the world, but I got an immediate "uh-oh" feeling even before he opened his mouth. My hand tightened on my own teacup, and I held my breath.

"It's not impossible that one or both of the Queens may have sent the Erlking here to assassinate you," my father told me, and the bottom of my stomach dropped out.

Okay, I already knew the Queens wanted me dead. I mean, Titania, the Seelie Queen, whose Court I was technically affiliated with—I refused to say I *belonged* to it—would have been satisfied if I'd left Avalon never to return. But because Mab, the Unseelie Queen, would hunt me to the end of my days whether

I stayed or left, my dad had decreed I was better off staying. They worried that my powers as a Faeriewalker—like, say, my ability to carry a working gun into Faerie—made me a danger to their thrones. Considering my aunt Grace had wanted to use me to assassinate Titania and usurp her throne, the Queens weren't just being paranoid.

But even knowing the Queens wanted me dead, it was still a shock to hear that they might have sent that terrifying immortal creature—and his pack of Huntsmen—after me. I was just a kid, for God's sake! It was like using a cannon to kill a fly.

Unfortunately, Dad wasn't finished. "I know this will be an . . . inconvenience, but I think it's best for all concerned if you remain in your safe house for the duration of the Erlking's stay."

"No!" The word was out before I had a chance to think or in any way tone down my reaction. I shot to my feet and put some distance between my dad and myself.

"Seamus," my mom said tentatively, "maybe we should . . ." Her voice trailed off at the cold look he gave her. It was beginning to seem like what backbone she had was fueled by alcohol. Right at that moment, I wished I had the stubborn drunk back.

I shook my head and folded my arms across my chest. "No way are you keeping me trapped down here for however long the Erlking decides to hang around!" I managed to keep myself from shouting, but just barely.

"It's for your own safety," he said, trying the same cold stare on me that he'd just used on my mom.

My will has always been stronger than hers, and it would take more than a look to make me back down. "No way!" I repeated. "You said yourself that he can't attack people unless

they attack him first. If you think I'm going to attack that guy, you're nuts. He can't hurt me, and you can't lock me up in this dungeon like a prisoner."

Anger sparked in his eyes, but his voice stayed level. "I can, and I will." He rose to his feet, towering over me. "When you've had some time to calm down, you'll see that it's for the best."

"Like hell I will!" Usually, I did a better job than this at keeping my temper under control around him. Partly because he was always so calm himself, and partly because he had way too much power over me for me to risk antagonizing him. But this was too much.

"You said yourself you won't have any legal power over me when I turn eighteen," I said. "And you want me to stay in Avalon for the rest of my life. If you keep me prisoner down here, I swear I'll be out of Avalon the second I come of age."

I'm not much of a weeper, but I wasn't above a little manipulation. Instead of blinking away the tears that burned my eyes, as I usually would, I let a few spill down my cheeks. Dad had done everything in his considerable power to make my safe house into a homey, comfortable place. But the fact remained, it was a freakin' dungeon, and no amount of pretty decorations could fully hide the fact.

I certainly didn't want to get myself killed. I'm not a total moron. So I didn't complain—much, at least—about having to live down here. And I didn't complain—much—about always having a bodyguard nearby. But I honestly didn't think I could stand it if Dad forced me to stay here until the Erlking decided it was time to go home, and I didn't think the Erlking was a significant threat to me.

My dad isn't exactly the easiest person to negotiate with. He's

had centuries—at least—of practice, and he has so much confidence in himself and in his decisions that once he takes a stand, he has no intention of budging. Ever.

He stared at me for a long time, and I could almost see the thoughts flitting back and forth through his head. Maybe he was wondering if there was a perfect argument he could use to change my mind. Or maybe he was wondering if I really meant what I said.

Finally, he let out a loud sigh, and his shoulders slumped. “All right,” he said, sounding like the words were being dragged out of him under torture. “I won’t insist you stay in the safe house constantly. But I *will* insist you not leave here without at least two powerful guardians, and that you always check with me first before you do.”

I was just beginning to relax, thinking I’d won the battle, when my dad dropped a bombshell.

“However, I think under the circumstances, you will have to skip your friend’s birthday party. It would be too great a security risk.”

I clamped my teeth down on the protest that wanted to erupt from my mouth. I knew Dad had never been thrilled with the idea of me going to Kimber’s party. Not only was Kimber a member of the Unseelie Court, while my dad was Seelie, she was also the daughter of Alistair Leigh, my dad’s chief political rival. Avalon is ruled by a Council consisting of six humans and six Fae. The thirteenth member of the Council—the Consul—breaks ties and is therefore in many ways the most powerful person in Avalon. The Consulship changes hands from Fae to human every ten years, and both my father and Kimber’s father hoped to win the position. My dad thought my attending her party

might have political implications, and he'd made it clear he'd rather I skip it. I had made it equally clear that I wouldn't miss it for the world. Now, it looked like the stupid Wild Hunt was giving Dad just the excuse he needed to keep me from going.

He was waiting for my protest. I could see it in his eyes, in the stiff way he held himself. Instinct told me that he'd budged as much as he was going to, that it was in fact practically a miracle that he'd budged at all.

With Dad, I knew I had to pick my battles, and I tried to pick only those I had a hope of winning.

"Maybe the Hunt will be gone by Friday night," I said, trying to sound hopeful, though these days I never expected my life to be that easy. Notice how I failed to explicitly agree to his terms . . .

Dad relaxed, and I guessed he hadn't caught my verbal side step. "We can hope so," he said, in a tone that said there was no hope in hell.

I barely heard him, because I was already beginning to plot how I would get to Kimber's party even without my dad's permission.

