

A STROKE
OF MIDNIGHT

Chapter 1

I HATE PRESS CONFERENCES. BUT I ESPECIALLY HATE THEM when I've been ordered to hide large portions of the truth. The order had come from the Queen of Air and Darkness, ruler of the dark court of faerie. The Unseelie are not a power to be crossed, even if I was their very own faerie princess. I was Queen Andais's niece, but the family connection had never bought me much. I smiled at the nearly solid wall of reporters, fighting to keep my thoughts from showing on my face.

The queen had never allowed this much of the human media inside the Unseelie's hollow hill, our sithen. It was our refuge, and you don't let the press into your refuge. But yesterday's assassination attempt had made allowing the press into our home the lesser evil. The theory was that inside the sithen our magic would protect me much better than it had in the airport yesterday, where I'd nearly been shot.

Our court publicist, Madeline Phelps, pointed to the first reporter, and the questions began.

"Princess Meredith, you had blood on your face yesterday, but today the only sign of injury is your arm in a sling. What were your injuries yesterday?"

My left arm was in a green cloth sling that matched my suit jacket near perfectly. I was dressed in Christmas, Yule, red and green. Cheerful, and it was that time of year. My hair was a deeper red than my blouse. My hair is the most Unseelie part of me, sidhe scarlet hair for someone who looks good in black. Not the gold or orangey red of human hair. The jacket brought out the green in two out of the three cir-

cles of color in my iris. The gold circle would flash in the camera light sometimes as if it truly was metallic. The eyes were pure Seelie sidhe, the only part of me that showed that my mother had been of the golden court. Well, at least half.

I didn't recognize the reporter who had asked the question. He was a new face to me, maybe new since yesterday. Since yesterday's assassination attempt had happened in front of the media, on camera, well, we'd had to turn away some of the reporters, because the big room wouldn't hold more. I'd been doing press conferences since I was a child. This was the biggest one I'd had, including the one after my father was assassinated. I'd been taught to use names for reporters when I knew them, but to this one I could only smile and say, "My arm is only sprained. I was very lucky yesterday."

Actually, my arm hadn't been injured in the assassination attempt that got on film. No, my arm had been hurt on the second, or was that the third, attempt on my life yesterday. But those attempts had happened inside the sithen, where I was supposed to be safe. The only reason the queen and my bodyguards thought I was safer here than outside in the human world was that we had arrested or killed the traitors behind the attempts on me, and the attempt on the queen. We'd damned near had a palace coup yesterday, and the media didn't have a hint of it. One of the old names for the fey is the hidden people. We've earned the name.

"Princess Meredith, was it your blood on your face, yesterday?" A woman this time, and I did know her name.

"No," I said.

I smiled for real, as I watched her face fall when she realized she might be getting just a one-word answer. "No, Sheila, it wasn't mine."

She smiled at me, all blond and taller than I would ever be. "May I add to my question, Princess?"

"Now, now," Madeline said, "one question per."

"It's okay, Madeline," I said.

Our publicist turned to look at me, flipping off the switch at her waist so her microphone would not pick up. I took the cue and covered mine with my hand and moved to one side of it.

Madeline leaned in over the table. Her skirt was long enough that she was in no danger of flashing the reporters down below the dais. Her hem length was the absolute latest of the moment, as was the color. Part of her job was paying attention to what was in and what was out. She was our human representative, much more than any ambassador that Washington had ever sent.

“If Sheila gets to add to her question, then they will all do it. That will make everything harder, for you and for me.”

She was right, but . . . “Tell them that this is an exception. Then move on.”

She raised perfectly plucked eyebrows at me, then said, “Okay.” She hit the switch on her mike as she turned and smiled at them. “The princess will let Sheila ask another question, but after that you’ll have to keep it to the original rule. One question per.” She pointed to Sheila and gave a nod.

“Thank you for letting me add on to my question, Princess Meredith.”

“You’re welcome.”

“If it wasn’t your blood yesterday, then whose was it?”

“My guard Frost’s.”

The cameras flashed to life so that I was blinded, but the attention of everyone had moved behind me. My guards were lined up along the wall, spilling down the edges of the dais, to curl on either side of the table and floor. They were dressed in everything from designer suits to full-plate body armor to Goth club wear. The only thing that all the outfits had in common was weaponry. Yesterday we’d tried to be discreet about the weapons. A bulge that ruined the line of the jacket, but nothing overt. Today there were guns under jackets or cloaks, but there were also guns in plain sight, and swords, and knives, and axes, and shields. We’d also more than doubled the number of guards around me.

I glanced back at Frost. The queen had ordered me not to play favorites among the guard. She’d gone so far as to tell me not to give any long lingering glances to one guard over another. I’d thought it was an odd demand, but she was queen, and you argued with her at your peril. But I glanced

back; after all, he'd saved my life. Didn't that earn him a glance? I could always justify it to the queen, my aunt, that the press would think it strange if I hadn't acknowledged him. It was the truth, but I looked because I wanted to look.

His hair was the silver of Christmas-tree tinsel, shiny and metallic. It fell to his ankles like decoration, but I knew that it was soft and alive, and felt oh so warm across my body. He'd put the upper layer of his hair back from his face with a barrette carved from bone. The hair glittered and moved around his charcoal-grey Armani suit that had been tailored over his broad shoulders and the athletic cut of the rest of him. The suit had also been tailored to hide a gun in a shoulder holster and a knife or two. It had not been designed to hide a gun under each arm, or a short sword at his hip, with a leather scabbard strapped tight to his thigh. The hilt of a second sword rode over his shoulder, peeking through all that shining hair. He bristled with knives, and Frost always had other weapons that you couldn't see. No suit was designed to cover that much armament and hold its shape. His jacket couldn't be buttoned at all, and the guns and sword and one knife glinted in the camera's flash.

Cries of "Frost, Frost" filled the room, while Madeline picked a question. The man was another one I didn't know. Nothing like an assassination attempt to attract the media.

"Frost, how badly were you hurt?"

Frost is a little over six feet, and since I was sitting down, and the microphone was adjusted to my height, he had to lean down, way down. With a weapon of any kind he was graceful. But bending low over that mike he was awkward. I had a moment to wonder if he'd ever been on mike before, then his deep voice was answering the question.

"I am not hurt." He stood back up, and I could see the relief on his face. He turned away from the cameras, as if he thought he'd get off that easily. I knew better.

"But wasn't it your blood on the princess?"

His hand was gripping the pommel of his short sword. Touching his weapons unnecessarily was a sign of nerves. He leaned over the mike again, and this time he bumped my

bad shoulder with his body. I doubted the press saw such a small movement, but it was too clumsy for words, for Frost. He braced a hand flat against the table, steadying himself. He turned eyes the grey of a winter sky to me. The look asked silently, “Did I hurt you?”

I mouthed, no.

He let out a sigh and leaned back to the microphone. “Yes, it was my blood.” He actually stood back up, as if that would satisfy them. He should have known better. He had been decorative muscle for the queen at enough of these over the years to know that he was being a little too concise. At least he didn’t try to go back to his spot behind me this time.

A reporter I did know, Simon McCracken, was next. He’d covered the faerie courts for years. “Frost, if you are not hurt, then where did your blood come from and how did it get on the princess?” He knew how to word the question just right, so we couldn’t tap-dance around it. The sidhe don’t lie. We’ll paint the truth red, purple, and green, and convince you that black is white, but we won’t actually lie.

Frost leaned over the mike again, his hand pressed to the table. He’d moved minutely closer to me, close enough that his pants leg touched my skirt. His sword was almost trapped between our bodies. That would be bad if he had to draw the weapon. I looked at his hand, so big and strong on the table, and realized his fingertips were mottled. He was gripping the table the way you grip a podium when you’re nervous.

“I was shot.” He had to clear his throat sharply to continue. I turned my head just enough to see that perfect profile, and realized it was more than nerves. Frost, the queen’s Killing Frost, was afraid. Afraid of public speaking. Oh, my. “I have healed. My blood covered the princess when I shielded her from harm.”

He started to stand back up, but I touched his arm. I covered the mike with my hand, and leaned in against him, so I could whisper against the curve of his ear. I took in a deep breath of the scent of his skin, and said, “Kneel or sit.”

His breath went out so deep that his shoulders moved with

it. But he knelt on one knee beside me. I moved the microphone a little closer to him.

I slid my hand under the back of his jacket, so that I could lay my hand against the curve of his back, just below the side sweep of the big sword sheath. When fey are nervous, any fey, we take comfort from touching one another. Even the mighty sidhe feel better with a little contact, though not all of us will admit it for fear of blurring the line between royalty and commoner. I had too much lesser fey blood in my veins to worry about it. I could feel the sweat that was beginning to trickle down his spine.

Madeline started to come closer to us. I shook my head. She gave me a questioning look but didn't argue. She picked another question from the throng.

"So you took a bullet to protect Princess Meredith?"

I leaned into the mike, putting my face very close to Frost's, touching carefully, so I didn't get makeup on him. The cameras exploded in bursts of white light. Frost jumped, and I knew that was going to be visible to the cameras. Oh, well. We were blinded, vision blurred in bursts of white and blue spots. His muscles tightened, but I wouldn't have known it if I hadn't been touching him.

"Hi, Sarah, and yes, he took a bullet for me," I said.

I think Sarah said "Hi, Princess" back, but I couldn't be sure, since I still couldn't see well enough, and the noise of so many voices was too confusing. I'd learned to use names when I knew them. It made everyone feel more friendly. And you need all the friendly you can get at a press conference.

"Frost, were you afraid?"

He relaxed minutely against me, into the touch of my hand and my face. "Yes," he said.

"Afraid to die," someone yelled out without being called on.

Frost answered the question anyway. "No."

Madeline called on someone, who asked, "Then what were you afraid of?"

"I was afraid Meredith would be harmed." He licked his lips, and tensed again. I realized he'd used my name without my title. A faux pas for a bodyguard, but of course, he was

more than that. Every guard was technically in the running to be prince to my princess. But we were sidhe, and we don't marry until we're pregnant. A nonfertile couple is not allowed to wed, so the guards were doing more than just "guarding" my body.

"Frost, would you give your life for the princess?"

He answered without hesitation. "Of course." His tone said clearly that that had been a silly question.

A reporter in back who had a television camera next to him asked the next question. "Frost, how did you heal a gunshot wound in less than twenty-four hours?"

Frost gave another deep, shoulder-moving sigh. "I am a warrior of the sidhe." The reporters waited for him to add more, but I knew he wouldn't. To Frost, the fact that he was sidhe was all the answer he needed. It had been only a through and through bullet wound from a handgun and no special ammunition. It would take a great deal more than that to stop a warrior of the sidhe.

I hid my smile and started to lean into the mike, to help explain that to the press, when the sweat along his spine suddenly stopped being wet and warm. It was as if a line of cold air swept down his back. Cold enough that I moved my hand away, startled.

I glanced down at his big hand on the table and saw what I'd feared. A white rime of frost was drifting out from his hand. I thanked Goddess that the cloth on the table was white. Only that was saving us from someone noticing. They might notice later when they went back over the camera footage, but that I could not help. I had enough to worry about without thinking that far ahead. In a way this was my fault. I'd accidentally brought Frost into a level of power that he'd never known. It was a blessing of the Goddess, but with new power comes new responsibilities, and new temptations.

I moved my hand from under his jacket to cover his hand with mine, as I spoke into the reporters' puzzled murmur. I was braced for his hand to be as icy as that slide of power down his back, but surprisingly, his hand wasn't nearly that cold.

“The sidhe heal almost any injury,” I said.

The frost was spreading out. The edge of it caught the microphone and began to climb it. The mike crackled with static, and I squeezed Frost’s hand. He saw it then, what his fear was doing. I’d known it wasn’t on purpose. He balled his hand into a fist, but with my hand on top of his, my fingers entwined with his. I did not want anyone to notice the frost before it melted.

I turned my face toward his, and he faced me. There was a snow falling in his iris, like a tiny grey snow globe set in his eyes. I leaned in and kissed him. It surprised him, because he’d heard the queen’s admonition about not showing favoritism, but Andais would forgive me, if she gave me time to explain. She’d have done the same, or more, to distract the press from unwanted magic.

It was a chaste press of lips because Frost was that uncomfortable in front of all these strangers. Plus, I was wearing a red lipstick that would smear like clown makeup if we did a tonsil-cleaning kiss. I saw the explosion of the cameras like an orange press against my closed eyelids.

I drew back from the kiss first. Frost’s eyes were still closed, his lips relaxed, almost open. His eyes blinked open. He looked startled, maybe from the lights, or maybe from the kiss. Though Goddess knows I’d kissed him before, and with a great deal more body English. Did a kiss from me still mean that much to him, when we’d kissed so many times I couldn’t count them all?

The look in his eyes said yes more clearly than any words.

Photographers were kneeling as close to the front of the table as the other guards would let them get. They were taking pictures of his face and mine. The frost had melted while we kissed, leaving only a light wetness around our hands. It barely darkened the white cloth. We’d hidden the magic, but we’d exposed Frost’s face to the world. What do you do when a man lets the whole world see just how much your kiss affects him? Why, kiss him again, of course. Which I did, and this time I didn’t worry about clown makeup, or the queen’s orders. I simply wanted, always, to see that look on his face when we kissed. Always and forever.

Chapter 2

WE HAD RED LIPSTICK SMEARED OVER BOTH OUR FACES, BUT WE were sidhe, and one of the lesser powers we possessed was glamour. A little concentration, and I simply made my lipstick look perfect, though I could feel it smeared around my mouth. I spilled the small magic across Frost's face, so that he looked as he had before, and not like he'd laid his face into a pot of red paint and rubbed back and forth.

It was illegal to use magic on the press. The Supreme Court had declared that it infringed on the First Amendment, freedom of the press and all that. But we were allowed to use small magic on ourselves for cosmetic purposes. After all, there was no difference between that and regular makeup or plastic surgery for celebrities. The court wisely didn't try to open that particular can of movie-star worms.

I could have worn glamour instead of makeup in the first place, but it took concentration, and I'd wanted all my concentration for the questions. Besides, if there was another assassination attempt, the glamour would go, and the queen was just vain enough that she'd ordered me into makeup, just in case. I guess so that if the worst happened, I'd look good dead. Or maybe I was just being cynical. Maybe she simply didn't trust my abilities at glamour. Maybe.

I told Frost that he'd answered enough questions for one day, and it was a feeding frenzy of "Frost, Frost." There were even a few rude enough to shout out questions like "Is she good in bed...? How many times a week do you get to fuck her?" Gotta love the tabloids, especially some of the European ones. They make our American tabloids look downright friendly.

We all ignored such rude questions. Frost took his post behind me against the wall. I could feel the small magic around him. If he walked too far from me, the glamour would break, but this close I could hold it. Not forever, but long enough to get us through this mess.

Madeline chose one of the mainstream newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune*, but his question made me wonder if we'd have been better off answering the tabloids. "I have a two-part question . . . Meredith, if I may?" He was so courteous, I should have known he was leading up to something that wouldn't be pleasant.

Madeline looked at me, and I nodded. He asked, "If the sidhe can heal almost any wound, then why is your arm not healed?"

"I'm not full-blooded sidhe, so I heal slower, more like a human."

"Yes, you're part human and part brownie, as well as sidhe. But isn't it true that some of the noble sidhe of the Unseelie Court are concerned that you are not sidhe enough to rule them? That even if you gain the throne, they will not acknowledge you as queen?"

I smiled into the flash of lights and thought furiously. Someone had talked to him. Someone who should have known better. Some of the sidhe did fear my mortality, my mixed blood, and thought that if I sat on the throne I would destroy them. That my mortal blood would take their immortality. It had been the reason behind at least one, maybe both, of the extra attacks yesterday. We had an entire noble house, and the head of another, imprisoned now, awaiting sentencing. No one had briefed me on what to say if the question arose, because no one had dreamt that any sidhe, or lesser fey, would have dared talk to the press, not even to hint.

I tried for half-truth. "There are some among the nobility that see my human and lesser fey blood as inferior. But there are always racists, Mr. . . ."

"O'Connel," he said.

"Mr. O'Connel," I said.

"Do you believe that it is racism then?"

Madeline tried to stop me, but I answered because I wanted to know how much he knew. "If not racism then what, Mr. O'Connel? They don't want some mongrel half-breed on their throne." Now if he pushed it, he'd look like a racist. Reporters from the *Chicago Tribune* don't want to look like racists.

"That's an ugly accusation," he said.

"Yes," I said, "it is."

Madeline stepped in. "We need to move on. Next question." She pointed to someone else, a little too eagerly, but that was all right. We needed to change topics. Of course, there were other topics that were almost as bad.

"Is it true that a magic spell made the policeman shoot at you, Princess Meredith?" This from a man in the front row who looked vaguely familiar in the way that on-air personalities often do.

The sidhe do not lie. We make a sort of national sport out of almost lying. We can lie. But if we do, then we are foresworn. Once upon a time you were kicked out of faerie for that. The answer to the question was yes, but I didn't want to answer it. So I tried not to. "Let's drop the 'princess,' guys. I've been working as a detective in L.A. for three years. I'm not used to the title anymore."

I wanted to avoid having anyone ask who had done the spell. It had been part of the attempted palace coup. We were so not sharing that a sidhe noble had caused one of the police helping to guard me to try to kill me.

Madeline picked up her cue perfectly, calling on a new reporter with a new question. "This is quite a display of sidhe muscle, Prince—Meredith." The woman smiled when she left off the "princess." I was hoping they would like that. And I didn't need the title to know who I was. "Is the extra muscle because you fear for your safety?"

"Yes," I replied, and Madeline moved us on.

It was a different reporter, but he repeated the dreaded question. "Was it a spell that caused the policeman to shoot at you, Meredith?"

I drew breath, not even sure what I was going to say, when

I felt Doyle move up beside me. He leaned over the microphone like a black statue carved all of one piece—black designer suit, black high-collared dress shirt, shoes, even his tie, of the same unrelieved blackness. “May I take this question, Princess Meredith?” The silver earrings that traced the curve of his ear all the way up to its point flashed in the lights. Contrary to all the faerie wannabes with their cartilage implants, the pointy ears marked him as not pure high court, as something less, something mixed like me. His black hair was ankle-length, and he could have hidden his “deformity,” but he almost never did. His hair was pulled back in its usual braid. The diamond stud in his earlobe glittered next to my face.

Most of his weapons were as monochrome as the rest of him, so it was hard to spot the knives and guns, darkness on darkness. He had been the Queen’s Darkness, her assassin, for more than a thousand years. Now he was mine.

I fought to keep my face as blank as his, and not let the relief show. “Be my guest,” I said.

He leaned down to the microphone in front of me. “The attempt on the princess’s life yesterday is still under investigation. My apologies, but some details are not ready to be discussed publicly.” His deep voice resonated over the mike. I saw some of the female reporters shiver, and it wasn’t fear. I’d never realized he had a good voice for a microphone. I think he, like Frost, had never been on mike before, but unlike Frost, it didn’t bother him. Very little did. He was Darkness, and the dark isn’t afraid of us; we’re afraid of it.

“What can you tell us about the assassination attempt?” another reporter asked.

I wasn’t sure if the question was directed at Doyle or me. I couldn’t see his eyes through his wraparound black-on-black sunglasses, but I swear I felt him look at me. I leaned into the mike. “Not much, I’m afraid. As Doyle says, it’s an ongoing investigation.”

“Do you know who was behind it?”

Doyle leaned into the mike again. “I am sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but if you insist on asking questions that we are

not free to answer for fear of hindering our internal investigation, then this press conference is over.”

On one hand, it was neatly done; on the other hand, he'd said a bad word—internal.

“So it was sidhe magic that bespelled the policeman,” a woman yelled.

Shit, I thought.

Doyle had caused it; he tried to clean it up. “By ‘internal’ I meant that it involves Princess Meredith, the potential heir to Queen Andais’s throne. It does not get much more internal than that. Especially not for those of us who belong to the princess.” He was deliberately trying to distract them into asking about my sex life with my guard. A much safer subject.

Madeline cooperated by picking one of the tabloid reporters for the next question. If anyone would fall for sex over internal politics, it was the tabloids.

They swallowed the bait. “What do you mean, you belong to the princess?”

Doyle leaned in closer to the mike, close enough that his shoulder brushed against mine. It was very subtle and very deliberate. It would probably have been more eye-catching if Frost and I hadn't played kissy-face first, but Doyle knew how to play to the press. You had to start slow and give yourself someplace to go. He'd only started playing to the media in the last few weeks, but as with everything, he learned quickly and did it very well. “We would give our life for her.”

“The Secret Service are sworn to give their life for the president but they don't belong to the president.” The reporter emphasized the word *belong*.

Doyle leaned closer to the mike, forcing him to put one arm against the back of my chair, so I was framed in the curve of his body. The cameras exploded so that I was blind again. I allowed myself to lean in against Doyle, partly for the picture, and partly because I liked it.

“Perhaps I misspoke,” Doyle said, with all my Christmas brightness framed against his blackness.

“Are you having sex with the princess?” a female reporter asked.

“Yes,” he said simply.

They actually almost sighed as a group in eagerness. Another woman said, “Frost, are you sleeping with the princess?”

Doyle stepped back and let Frost come up to the mike again, though I would have preferred keeping him away from it. He was brave and he came and bent over the mike, bent over me. But Frost wouldn't play for the cameras. His face was arrogant, and perfect, and showed nothing, even though his grey eyes were bare to the camera's glare. He always said he thought it was beneath us to play to the media. But I knew now that it wasn't arrogance that made him not play, it was fear. A phobia, if you will, of cameras and reporters and crowds. He leaned over stiffly, and said, “Yes.”

This shouldn't have been news to any of them. Publicly I'd returned to faerie to seek a husband. The sidhe don't breed much, so the royals get to marry only if they get pregnant first. The queen and I had explained this at another press conference, when I first visited home. But she'd kept the guards away from the mikes, and there was something about the guards admitting it, on mike, that excited the media. Almost as if it was dirtier because they were saying it.

“Are the two of you having sex with the princess at the same time?”

“No.” Frost fought not to frown. We were lucky the reporter hadn't asked if they slept together with me. Because that we did. The fey sleep in big puppy piles. It's not always about sex; sometimes it's about safety and comfort.

Frost stepped back to the wall, stiff and unhappy. The reporters were yelling even more sexual questions at him. Madeline helped us out. “I think our Killing Frost is a little shy at the mike, boys and girls. Let's pick on someone else.”

So they did.

They yelled out names and questions to the men. One or two of the guards onstage had never been paraded in front of the media at all. I wasn't certain that Adair or Hawthorne had

ever seen a television or a movie. They were in full-plate mail, though Adair's looked like it was formed of gold and copper, and Hawthorne's was a rich crimson, a color no metal had ever been. Adair's was metal; Hawthorne's just looked like metal, though I couldn't say what it was made of. Something magical. They had both chosen to keep their helmets on. Adair, I believe, because the queen had shorn his hair as a punishment for trying to refuse my bed. Hawthorne's hair still fell in thick black-green waves to his ankles. I had no idea why he kept his helmet on. They must have been roasting in front of this many electric lights, but having decided to wear the helmets, they'd wear them until they fainted. Well, Adair would. I didn't know even that much about Hawthorne. They knew what a camera was because the queen was fond of her Polaroid, but beyond that and indoor plumbing, technology was a stranger to them. I wondered how they felt about being thrown to the lions. Their faces would show nothing. They were the Queen's Ravens; they knew how to hide what they felt.

Thankfully, no one yelled their names, probably because no one knew who they were.

Madeline finally picked a question, and a victim for them. "Brad, you had a question for Rhys."

The reporter stood up a little taller, and most of the others sat down like disappointed flowers. "Rhys, how was it being a real detective in Los Angeles?"

Rhys was on the far end near the edge of the dais. He was the shortest of the purebred sidhe, only five and a half feet tall. His white curls fell to his waist, capped with a cream-colored fedora with a slightly darker band. The trench coat he wore over his suit matched the hat. He looked like a cross between an old-time detective with better fashion sense, a male stripper, and a pirate. The stripper came from the pale blue silk T-shirt that clung to his muscular chest and washboard abs. The pirate came from the fact that he wore a patch over one eye. It wasn't affectation, but to save the press from seeing what was left after a goblin had torn out his eye, laid scars down a boyishly handsome face. The remaining eye

was three rings of blue. He could have used glamour to hide the scars, but when he realized the scars didn't bother me, he'd stopped bothering. He thought the scars gave him character, and they did.

Rhys had always been a huge film noir fan, and the reporter clearly remembered that. I liked her better for it.

He put one hand flat on the table and the other across my shoulders as he moved into the mike, similar to what Doyle had done. But Rhys knew how to play to the camera better because he'd been doing it longer. He took off the fedora and shook his hair out, so it fell around his shoulders in thick white curls.

"I loved being a detective in L.A."

"Was it like in the movies?" someone asked.

"Sometimes, but not very much. I ended up doing more bodyguard work than actual detective work."

The next question was interesting. "There were rumors that some of the stars you and the other guards protected wanted more body than guarding?"

That was a hard one, because a lot of the clients had asked or indicated a willingness for sex. The men had either ignored the invitation or said no. So technically the answer was yes, but if he said yes, then all the semi-famous, or even famous, for whom Rhys had bodyguarded would be in the tabloids tomorrow, and it would be our fault. Our former boss, Jeremy Grey, deserved better than that from us. So did our clients. And the right kind of clients would stay away from Grey Detective Agency, and the wrong kind would come and be disappointed.

I leaned into the microphone, and said suggestively, "I'm afraid that Rhys was too busy bodyguarding me to bodyguard anyone else."

That got me laughter and distracted them all. We were back to sex questions about us, and those we could answer.

"Is Rhys good in bed?"

"Yes," I said.

"Is the princess good in bed?"

"Very."

See, easy questions.

“Rhys, have you ever shared a bed with the princess and one of the other guards?”

“Yes.”

Then the reporters started working together. The first reporter tried to ask who with, but Madeline said he'd had his question. The next reporter she picked asked, “Rhys, who did you share the princess with?”

He could have tap-danced around that one, but he chose truth, because why not?

“Nicca.”

The cameras and attention turned to Nicca like lions spotting a newly wounded gazelle. This particular gazelle was six feet tall with deep brown skin and rich chestnut hair that fell to his ankles, thick and straight, held back only by a thin copper diadem. He was naked from the waist up except for the rich gold silk suspenders that graced his chest and caught the faint yellow pattern in the brown of his suit pants. He had two 9mm guns in the front of his pants, because no one could figure out how to get him in a shoulder holster, or how to strap on his armor, or his swords, without damaging his wings.

They towered above his shoulders and a little above his head. They swept out and down to his calves, so that the edges of them almost brushed the floor. They were huge moth wings, as if a half-dozen different kinds of giant silk moths had had sex one dark night with a faerie. Only two days ago the wings had been a birthmark on the back of his body, but during sex the wings had suddenly burst forth from his skin and become real. The back of his body was now one smooth brown piece.

He moved to join us while the cameras made us go blind again. Rhys stayed with me, as Nicca stood beside us, towering over us both. He looked out at the crowd, his face puzzled. He wasn't accustomed to being front and center for the queen, or me.

“Nicca, do you really sleep with the princess and Rhys?”

He bent over toward the mike, so he was on one side of me

and Rhys was on the other. The wings fanned out above my head. "Yes," he said, then stood back up.

The cameras clicked and reporters shouted questions until Madeline picked someone. "How did you get wings?"

Good question. Unfortunately, we didn't have a good answer. "You want the truth?" I asked. "We're not sure."

"Nicca, what were you doing when the wings appeared?"

When Nicca knelt back over, the wings flexed so that for a moment I was backdropped against one of them. I couldn't see anything but flashes. "Having sex with Meredith."

The reporters did everything but giggle like junior high school kids. The American reporters, and some of the European, had never quite gotten used to the fact that the fey, as a whole, don't see sex as bad. So admitting to sex with someone, unless it makes your lover uncomfortable, isn't bad, or scandalous.

"Was Rhys with you?"

"Yes." Technically, Rhys had been beside the bed, not in it, but Nicca didn't see a reason to quibble.

"Was anyone else in the bed with you and the princess when it happened?"

"Yes." That was Nicca, and very sidhe. You either distracted with a story that had nothing to do with what was asked, or you answered exactly what was asked, and absolutely nothing else. Nicca wasn't good at stories, so he stuck to truth.

"Who?" someone yelled.

Nicca glanced at me, and he shouldn't have. The glance was enough to let the reporters know that he wasn't sure I wanted him to tell the name. Shit. Most sidhe women do not like admitting that they've fucked a lesser fey, but I wasn't ashamed. The reporters would make more of that one glance than there was to make. Damn.

The trouble was that Sage wasn't on the stage. He wasn't sidhe, and his own queen had demanded him at her side. Besides, our queen didn't want him onstage with me. In Andais's own words, "Oral sex, fine, but he doesn't get to fuck you. No demi-fey, no matter how tall, is sitting on my

throne as anyone's king." So Sage got to stay out of sight. Which made this moment even more interesting.

"The other third, or would that be fourth," I said with a smile, "isn't onstage today. He's not certain he wants the media attention."

"Is he going to be one of your lovers, and potential kings?"

"No." Which was the truth.

"Why not?" someone else shouted out. I wouldn't have answered it, but Nicca did. "He's not sidhe."

Oh, hell. That started another frenzy of shouted questions. I leaned into Nicca and asked him to go back to his piece of wall on the dais. Rhys went back to his section on the edge where he could watch the crowd. He was trying not to laugh. I guess it might as well be funny. But Nicca had to stay away from the mike from now on. I wasn't ashamed of what I'd done with Sage, but I wasn't sure how much of it my aunt wanted me to explain to the media. She did seem embarrassed about it.

Madeline finally found a question that she thought I would be able and willing to answer. She was wrong. "Which of them is the best in bed, Meredith?"

I fought not to glance at Madeline. What was she doing taking that question? She knew better. "Look at them all. How could anyone choose just one?"

Laughter, but they didn't let it go. "You seemed to have a preference for Frost earlier, Princess."

It wasn't a question so I didn't answer it. Another reporter asked, "Fair enough, Princess, but if not just one, who are your multiple favorites?"

That was trickier. "Everyone that I've had sex with is special to me in their own way." Truth.

"How many have you had sex with?"

I leaned into the mike. "Gentlemen, if you would just take a step or two forward."

Rhys, Nicca, Doyle, and Frost moved forward. Only three extra men stepped away from the wall. Galen's skin was almost as white as my own, but in the right light there was an undercast of green to that paleness. His curls were green in

any light, except in the dark, where they looked blond. He had cut his own hair just above his shoulders, leaving only one thin braid to remind me that once it fell to his ankles. Of the men of faerie, only the sidhe were allowed to grow their hair long. Galen had cut his hair voluntarily, unlike Adair. Or Amatheon, who stood next to him. Amatheon's rich red hair had been French-braided so that the reporters would have a harder time realizing that his hair only touched his shoulders now. He'd given in to the queen's order sooner than Adair had. The fact that cutting the men's hair had been a punishment, a humiliation that persuaded them to do as the queen bid, said how very odd it was that Galen had done it on his own. He was the youngest of the Queen's Ravens, only seventy-five years older than me. Among the sidhe it was almost like being raised together. I'd thought that open, handsome face was the perfect face since I was fourteen, or maybe younger. It was Galen that I wanted my father to let me be engaged to, but he had chosen another. That engagement had lasted seven years, but there had been no children, and in the end, he had told me I was too human for him. Not sidhe enough. It had made me wonder even more why my father wouldn't let me have Galen in the first place.

He turned lovely green eyes to me and smiled, and I smiled back. He was as armed as any of them with blade and guns, but there was a softness to him that most of the others had lost centuries before either he or I had been born. He'd give his life for me, and would have when I was a child, unlike the rest of them. But as a politician he was something of a disaster, and that could be fatal in the high courts of faerie.

Someone touched my shoulder. I jumped, and found Madeline with her hand over my mike. She leaned in and whispered, "You're staring at him. Let's not repeat the Frost incident, shall we?" She stepped back with a smile ready for the press, hitting the switch at her waist.

I had to keep my face turned away from the crowd because I was blushing. I didn't blush much, and by human standards it wasn't too dark. Sidhe skin just doesn't flush the way human skin tones do. Of course, keeping my face away from

the cameras meant that Galen could see me. Some days it's only a choice of embarrassments, not an escape from them.

Madeline was saying, "Princess Meredith is getting a little tired. We may have to cut this short, guys, sorry."

There was a general outcry, and a renewed flash of cameras, which was bad, because Galen came to me. He knelt in front of me, beside my chair, and was tall enough that, from the shoulders up, he was still clearly visible to them. He touched my chin, so gently, with just the tips of his fingers. It made me look at him. It made me forget that we were both in profile to the cameras. He leaned his face closer to me, making me forget that we were onstage. I leaned in toward him, and his hand cupped the side of my face. That made me forget everything else. I have no explanation for it. We'd shared a bed for months. He was a disaster politically, and showing him this much favor in front of everyone could endanger him, but I wasn't thinking that when we kissed. I wasn't thinking anything, and all I could see was the pleased look on his face, the look in his eyes. He'd loved me since I was seventeen, and that was, in his eyes, as if nothing had changed and no time had passed.

The queen had ordered me not to show favoritism. She was going to be angry with me, with him, with us, but after Frost's little incident, as Madeline called it, what was one more? It was bad, and still I kissed him. Still I wanted to kiss him. Still, for just a moment, the world narrowed down to Galen's face, his hand against my skin, and his mouth on mine.

It was a soft, chaste kiss, I think because he knew if he kissed me too hard, I'd lose my hold on the glamour that kept Frost and me from looking like lipstick casualties. Galen drew back, and his eyes held that soft surprise that they did sometimes, as if he still couldn't believe he was allowed to kiss me, allowed to touch me. I'd caught the same look on my face in the bedroom mirror a time or two.

"Do we all get a kiss?" The voice was deep and held the rough sloughing of the sea. Barinthus moved toward us in a swirl of his hair, the color of oceans. The turquoise of the Mediterranean; the deeper medium blue of the Pacific; a

grey-blue like the ocean before a storm, sliding into a blue that was nearly black, where the water runs deep and thick like the blood of sleeping giants. The colors moved and flowed into one another so that the actual where and what his hair looked like was ever-changing, like the ocean itself. He'd once been a god of the sea. I'd only recently discovered that he had been Manannan Mac Lir, but that was a secret. Now he was Barinthus, a fallen god of the sea. He moved gracefully across the stage, all near seven feet of him. His eyes were blue but with a slit pupil like a cat or a deep-sea animal. He had a second clear membrane that could close over his eye when he was underwater, and would often flicker when he was nervous. It flickered just a touch now.

I wondered if anyone in the crowd of reporters knew how much it cost this very private man to have suggested a kiss, and make himself the target of all these cameras?

Galen had realized he'd misbehaved because he showed me with his eyes that he was sorry. Unfortunately, his face wasn't that hard for anyone to read, including the reporters. The queen had said no favorites. Our behavior was going to force me to try to prove I had none. After what Galen and I had just done, that was going to be difficult.

A lot of the men standing with me would have played for the cameras, and it would have cost them, or me, nothing. Barinthus was not one of them. He'd been my father's friend, and by American standards we hadn't had sex. Not even by Bill Clinton's standards. If I'd been him, I would have stayed against the wall, but he held to a higher standard of truth even than most of the sidhe.

I looked up at Barinthus, and with me sitting and him standing, it took a while to get all the way to his face. "If you like." I kept my voice light and my face pleasant. Barinthus and I had never kissed, and the first kiss should not be on film.

It was Rhys who saved the day. "If Barinthus gets a kiss, then so do I."

Doyle said, "To be fair, we all should."

Barinthus gave a slight smile. "I would bow to the larger need, and take my kiss in private."

“Galen and Frost have already had theirs,” Rhys said, and as Galen went back to his place in line, Rhys pretended to box his ears.

Barinthus did a very graceful bow and tried to slink back to his place. But that wasn't happening. A reporter asked, “Lord Barinthus, have you decided to go from being king-maker to being king?” No sidhe would have called him king-maker to his face, or queenmaker either. But the media, well, he couldn't box their ears.

He knelt beside me, rather than lean into the mike. Kneeling down, his head was about even with mine. “I doubt I will stay with the princess as a permanent member of her guard.”

“Why not?”

“I am needed elsewhere.”

Truth was that before Queen Andais had accepted him into the Unseelie Court after the Seelie Court kicked him out, Barinthus had to promise that he would never accept the throne here, not even if it was offered. He'd been Manannan Mac Lir, and the queen and her nobles all feared his power. So he'd given his most solemn oath that he would never, personally, sit on our throne.

He bowed to the room in general and simply went back against the wall. He made it clear that he was done with questions for the day. Kitto, the half-goblin sidhe, had already moved back to his place. He was only four feet tall, and that made a lot of the media try to portray him as childlike. He was old enough to remember what the world was like before Christianity was a religion. But his appearance made the media uncomfortable. His short black curls, pale skin, and sunglasses made him look ordinary in his jeans and T-shirt. The queen didn't have a designer suit to fit someone so short. There hadn't been time even for the queen's seamstress to make those kind of alterations. He got away with hugging his section of the wall.

“Princess Meredith, how will you choose your husband from among all these gorgeous men?” a reporter was asking.

“The one who gets me pregnant wins the prize,” I said, smiling.

“What if you are in love with someone else? What if you don’t love the one who gets you pregnant?”

I sighed, and didn’t fight the smile slipping away. “I am a princess, and heir to a throne. Love has never been a prerequisite for royal marriages.”

“Isn’t it traditional to sleep with one fiancé at a time, until you either get pregnant or don’t get pregnant?”

“Yes,” I said, and cursed that anyone knew our customs that well.

“Then why the marathon of men?”

“If you had the chance, wouldn’t you?” I asked, and that got them laughing. But it didn’t distract them.

“Would you marry a man you didn’t like just because he was the father of your child?”

“Our laws are clear,” I said. “I will marry the father of my child.”

“No matter who it is?” another reporter asked.

“That is our law.”

“What if your cousin Prince Cel gets one of his female guards pregnant first?”

“Then, according to Queen Andais, he will be king.”

“So it’s a race to get pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“Where is Prince Cel? No one has seen him in nearly three months.”

“I’m not my cousin’s keeper.” In fact, he was in prison for trying to kill me one too many times, and for other crimes that the queen didn’t want even the court to know. He should have been executed for some of them, but she’d bargained for her only child’s life. He was to be locked away for six months, tortured with the very magic he had used against sidhe-ancestored humans. Branwyn’s Tears, one of our most guarded ointments. It was an aphrodisiac that worked even against someone’s will. But more than that, it made your body crave to be touched, to be brought. He was chained and covered in Branwyn’s Tears. There were bets around the court that what little sanity he’d been born with would not survive it. The queen had given in to one of his guards only

yesterday, to let the woman slack Cel's need, save his sanity. And suddenly I had not one, but two, no, three attempts on my life, and one on the queen's. It was more than a coincidence, but the queen loved her son.

Madeline was back in front of me, looking at me. "Are you all right, Princess?"

"Sorry, I'm getting a little tired. Did I miss a question?"

She smiled and nodded. "I'm afraid so."

They repeated it, and I wished I'd missed it again. "Do you know where your cousin the prince is?"

"He's here in the sithen, but I don't know what he's doing this exact moment. Sorry."

I needed off this subject, off this stage. I signaled to Madeline, and she closed it down with a promise of a photo op in a day or two, when the princess was fully healed.

A tiny faerie with butterfly wings fluttered into camera range. This was a demi-fey. Sage, whom I'd "slept with," could make himself human tall, but most of the demi-fey were permanently about the size of Barbie dolls, or smaller. The queen would not be happy about the little faerie fluttering in front of the cameras. When there was press in the sithen, the less-human-looking stayed away from them, and especially away from cameras, or faced the queen's wrath.

The figure was a pale blue-pink with iridescent blue wings. She fluttered through a barrage of flashbulbs, shielding her eyes with a tiny hand. I thought she'd land on me, or maybe Doyle, but she flew the length of the stage to land on Rhys's shoulder.

She hid herself in his long white curls. She whispered something in his ear, using his hair and hat as a shield. Rhys stood up and came to us smiling.

Doyle was standing beside me, but even that close I couldn't hear what Rhys whispered to him.

Doyle gave a small nod, and Rhys left the room ahead of us with the tiny fey still tangled in his hair. I wanted to ask what could be important enough for Rhys to leave early in front of the press.

Someone shouted, "Rhys, why are you leaving?"

Rhys left the room with a wave and a smile.

Doyle helped me stand, then the rest of the guards closed around me like a multicolored wall, but the reporters weren't finished.

"Doyle, Princess, what's happened?"

"What did the little one say?"

The press conference was over; we got to ignore them. It might have been wise to give them an excuse, but Doyle either didn't think we needed to bother or he didn't know what to say. There was a tension in his arm where he touched me that indicated that whatever Rhys had said had shaken him. What does the Darkness fear?

My wall of bright-colored muscle marched me down the steps and out. When we were in the hallway, clear of the media, I still whispered. Modern technology was a wonderful thing, and we didn't need some sensitive microphone picking us up. "What's happened?"

"There are two dead bodies in one of the hallways near the kitchen."

"Fey?" I asked.

"One, yes," he said.

I stumbled in my high heels because I tried to stop, but his arm on mine kept us all moving. "What about the other?"

He nodded. "Yes, exactly."

"Is it one of the reporters? Did one of them go wandering?"

Frost leaned in from the line of men. "It cannot be. We had spells that would make them unable to leave the safe path inside the sithen."

Doyle glanced at him. "Then explain a dead human in our sithen with a camera beside his hand."

Frost opened his mouth, then closed it. "I cannot."

Doyle shook his head. "Nor can I."

"Well, isn't this going to be a disaster," Galen said.

We had a dead reporter in the Unseelie sithen, and a mass of live reporters still on the premises. Disaster didn't even begin to cover it.