

A LICK OF FROST

a novel

LAURELL K. HAMILTON



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Chapter 1

I WAS SITTING IN AN ELEGANT CONFERENCE ROOM AT the top of one of the gleaming towers that make up part of downtown Los Angeles. The room's far wall was almost entirely of glass, so that the view was nearly agoraphobic. They're predicting that if the big one—the big earthquake that is—hits, this section of L.A. will be eight to fifteen feet deep in glass. Anything on the streets below will be cut to pieces, crushed, or trapped underneath an avalanche of glass. Not a pretty thought, but it was a day for ugly thoughts.

My uncle Taranis, King of Light and Illusion, had pressed charges against three of my royal bodyguards. He had gone to the human authorities with charges that Rhys, Galen, and Abe had raped one of his court's women.

In all the long history of his reign in the Seelie Court he had never gone outside to the humans for justice. Faerie rule; faerie law. Or truthfully, sidhe rule; sidhe law. The sidhe had ruled faerie for longer than anyone could remember. Since some of those memories stretched back thousands of years, maybe the sidhe had always been in charge, but it tasted like a lie. The sidhe do not lie, for to truly lie is to be cast out of faerie, exiled. Since I knew that the three body-

guards in question were innocent, that raised interesting problems with Lady Caitrin's testimony.

But today we were just giving statements, and, depending on how that went, King Taranis was standing by for a group call. Which was why Simon Biggs and Thomas Farmer, both of Biggs, Biggs, Farmer, and Farmer, were sitting beside me.

"Thank you for agreeing to this meeting today, Princess Meredith," one of the suits across the table said. There were seven suits across the wide, gleaming table, with their backs to the lovely view.

Ambassador Stevens, official ambassador to the courts of faerie, was sitting on our side of the table, but he was on the far side of Biggs and Farmer. Stevens said, "A word on faerie etiquette: You don't say thank you to the people of faerie, Mr. Shelby. Princess Meredith, as one of the younger royals, will probably not be offended, but you will be dealing with some nobility who are much older. Not all of them will allow a thank-you to pass without grave insult." Stevens smiled when he said it, his blandly handsome face sincere from his brown eyes to his perfectly cut brown hair. He was supposed to be our voice to the world, but, truthfully, he spent all his time at the Seelie Court sucking up to my uncle. The Unseelie Court where my aunt Andais, Queen of Air and Darkness, ruled, and where I might rule someday, was too scary for Stevens. No, I didn't like him.

Michael Shelby, a U.S. Attorney for L.A., said, "I am sorry, Princess Meredith. I didn't realize."

I smiled, and said, "It's fine. The ambassador is correct, a thank-you won't bother me."

"But it will bother your men?" Shelby asked.

“Some of them, yes,” I said. I looked behind me to Doyle and Frost. They stood behind me like darkness and snow made real, and that wasn’t far from the truth. Doyle had black hair, black skin, a black designer suit; even his tie was black. Only the shirt was a rich royal blue, and that had been a sop to our lawyer. He thought black gave the wrong impression, made him seem threatening. Doyle, whose nickname was Darkness, had said, “I am the captain of the princess’s guard. I am supposed to be threatening.” The lawyers hadn’t known what to say to that, but Doyle had worn the blue shirt. The color almost glowed against the rich, perfect black of his skin, which was so black there were purple and blue highlights to his body in the right light. His black eyes were hidden behind wraparound black-on-black sunglasses.

Frost’s skin was as white as Doyle’s was black. As white as my own. But his hair was uniquely his own, silver, like metal beaten into hair. It gleamed in the tasteful lighting of the conference room. Gleamed like something you could have melted down and made into jewelry. He had tied the top layer of it back with a barrette that was silver, and older than the city of Los Angeles itself. The dove-gray suit was Ferragamo, and the white of his shirt was less white than his own skin. The tie was darker than the suit, but not by much. The soft gray of his eyes was bare to the room as he scanned the far windows. Doyle was doing it, too, behind his glasses. I had bodyguards for a reason, and some who wanted me dead could fly. We didn’t think Taranis was one of the people who wanted me dead, but why had he gone to the police?

Why had he persisted in these false charges? He would never have done all this without an agenda. We just didn't know what that agenda was, so just in case, they watched the windows for things that the human lawyers couldn't even begin to imagine.

Shelby's gaze flicked behind me to the guards. He wasn't the only one who kept fighting not to glance nervously at my men, but it was Assistant District Attorney Pamela Nelson who was having the most trouble keeping her eyes, and her mind, on business. The men across the table gave the guards the glances men give when they see another man whom they are almost certain could take them physically without breaking a sweat.

U.S. Attorney Michael Shelby was tall, athletic, and handsome, with a gleam of white teeth, and the look of someone who had plans to rise above being the U.S. attorney for the Los Angeles area. He was over six feet, and his suit couldn't hide the fact that he worked out pretty seriously. He probably didn't meet many men who made him feel physically weak. His assistant Ernesto Bertram was a slender man who looked too young for his job, and far too serious with his short dark hair and glasses. It wasn't the glasses that made him look too serious; it was the look on his face, as if he'd tasted something sour. The U.S. attorney for the St. Louis area, Albert Veducci, was here, too. He didn't have Shelby's tan. In fact, he was a little overweight, and he looked tired. His assistant was Grover. He'd actually introduced himself only as Grover, so I didn't know if it was his first, last, or only name. He smiled more than the rest of them and was attractive in that friendly, walk-you-home-on-

campus way. He reminded me of guys in college who were either as nice as they seemed or absolute bastards who only wanted sex, for you to help them pass a class, or, for me, to be close to a real live faerie princess. I wouldn't know which kind of "nice guy" Grover was for a while. If things went well, I'd never figure it out, because I'd probably never see him again. If they went badly, we might see a lot of Grover.

Nelson was the assistant district attorney to *the* district attorney for Los Angeles County. Her boss, Miguel Cortez, was short, dark, and handsome. He looked great on camera. I'd seen him on the news often enough here. The trouble was that he, like Shelby, was ambitious. He liked being on the news, and wanted to be on the news more. This accusation of rape against my men had all the earmarks of a case that could make your career or break it. Cortez and Shelby were ambitious; it meant that they would either be very cautious, or very incautious. I wasn't sure which mood would help us the most, yet.

Nelson was taller than her boss, close to six feet in her not-too-high heels. Her hair was a vibrant red that fell in waves around her shoulders. It was that rare shade that is deep, rich, and as close to true red as human hair can get. Her suit was well cut, but conservative and black, her button-up shirt white, her makeup tasteful. Only that flame of hair to ruin the almost mannish exterior she portrayed. It was as if she were hiding her beauty and drawing attention to it at the same time. Because she was beautiful. A sprinkling of freckles underneath the pale makeup didn't detract from the flawless skin; it added. Her eyes were green and blue at once, depending on how

the light caught them. Those undecided eyes couldn't stop looking at Frost and Doyle. She tried to concentrate on the legal pad she was supposed to be making notes on, but her gaze kept rising, and finding them, as if she couldn't help herself.

That made me wonder if there was more going on than just handsome men and a distracted woman.

Shelby cleared his throat sharply.

I jumped and looked at him. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Shelby, were you speaking to me?"

"No, I was not, and I should have been." He looked down the table on his side. "I was brought into this as a more neutral voice, but let me ask my fellow members of the bar if they are having trouble forming questions for the princess."

Several of the lawyers spoke at the same time. Veducci just raised his pencil in the air. Veducci got the nod. "My office has dealt more closely with the princess and her people than the rest of you, which is why I'm carrying certain remedies against glamour."

"What sort of remedies?" Shelby asked.

"I won't tell you what I'm carrying, but cold steel, iron, four-leaf clover, Saint-John's-wort, rowan, and ash—either the wood or the berries—have been known to work. Some say bells will break glamour, but I think high-court sidhe won't be bothered much by bells."

"Are you saying that the princess is using glamour against us?" Shelby asked, his handsome face no longer pleasant.

"I am saying that sometimes when dealing with King Taranis or Queen Andais, their presence overwhelms humans," Veducci responded. "Princess Meredith,

being part human, though beautiful—” He nodded in my direction.

I nodded at the compliment.

“—has never affected anyone so strongly, but a lot has been happening in the Unseelie Court in the last few days. Ambassador Stevens has filled me in, as have other sources. Princess Meredith and some of her guard have moved up the power grid, so to speak.” Veducci still looked tired, but now his eyes showed the mind inside that overweight, overworked camouflage. I realized with a start that there were other dangers besides ambition. Veducci was smart, and hinted that he knew something about what had happened inside the Unseelie Court. Did he know, or was he fishing? Did he think we’d give something away?

“It is illegal to use glamour on us,” Shelby said, angry. He looked at me now, and his look was no longer in the least friendly. I looked back. I gave him the full force of my tricolored eyes: molten gold at the outer edge, then a circle of jade green, and last, emerald to chase around my pupil. He looked away first, dropping his gaze to his own legal pad. His voice was tight with controlled rage. “We could have you arrested, or deported back to faerie for trying to use magic to sway these proceedings, Princess.”

“I’m not doing anything to you, Mr. Shelby, not on purpose.” I looked at Veducci. “Mr. Veducci, you say that simply seeing my aunt and uncle was difficult; am I difficult now?”

“From my colleagues’ reactions, I believe you are.”

“So this is the reaction that King Taranis and Queen Andais have on humans?”

“Similar,” Veducci said.

I had to smile.

“This is not funny, Princess,” Cortez said, his words full of anger, but when I met his brown eyes, they dropped from me.

I looked at Nelson, but it wasn't me distracting her; her problem was behind me.

“Which one are you staring at the most?” I asked. “Frost or Doyle; light or dark?”

She blushed in that pretty way human redheads have. “I'm not . . .”

“Come, Ms. Nelson, confess, which one?”

She swallowed hard enough that I heard it. “Both,” she whispered.

“We will charge you and these two guards with undue magical influence in a legal proceeding, Princess Meredith,” Cortez said.

“I agree,” Shelby said.

“Neither I, nor Frost and Doyle, are doing this on purpose.”

“We are not stupid,” Shelby said. “Glamour is an active magic, not a passive one.”

“Most glamour, yes, but not all,” I said. I looked down the table at Veducci. They'd put him farthest from the center of the table, as if being from St. Louis made him less. Or maybe I was just overly sensitive for my hometown.

“Did you know,” Veducci said, “that when you see the Queen of England, they call it being in the presence? I've never met Queen Elizabeth, and I'm not likely to, so I don't know how it works for her. I've never spoken to a human queen. But the phrase ‘in the presence,’ to be in the presence of the queen,

means more when it's the queen of the Unseelie Court. To be in the presence of the king of the Seelie Court is also a treat."

"What does that mean?" Cortez asked. "A treat?"

"It means, gentleman and ladies, that being king or queen in faerie gives you an unconscious aura of power, of attractiveness. You live in L.A. You see that it works in lesser ways for major stars or politicians. Power seems to breed power. Dealing with the faerie courts has made me believe that even us poor humans do it. To be around the powerful, rich, beautiful, talented, whatever, it isn't just human nature to suck up. I think it's glamour. I think that success of a certain level has a glamour to it, and you attract people to you. They want to be around you. They listen to you more. They do what you say more. Humans have a shadow of real glamour; now think about someone who is the most powerful figure in faerie. Think about the level of power surrounding them."

"Ambassador Stevens," Shelby said, "shouldn't you have been the one who warned us about this effect?"

Stevens smoothed his tie, played with the Rolex watch Taranis had given him as a present. "King Taranis is a powerful figure with centuries of rulership. He does have a certain nobility that is impressive. I have not found Queen Andais as impressive."

"Because you only talk to her from a distance, over the mirrors, with King Taranis by your side," Veducci said.

I was impressed that Veducci knew that, because it was absolutely true.

“You’re the ambassador to faerie,” Shelby said, “not just to the Seelie Court.”

“I am the United States Ambassador to the courts of faerie, yes.”

“But you never step foot into the Unseelie Court?” Shelby asked.

“Uh,” Stevens said, running his fingers over and over the watchband, “I find Queen Andais a little less than cooperative.”

“What does that mean?” Shelby said.

I watched Stevens play with the watch, and a tiny bit of concentration showed that there was magic on it, or in it. I answered for him, “It means he thinks the Unseelie Court is full of perversion and monsters.”

They were all looking at him now. If it had been purposeful glamour on our part, they wouldn’t have. “Is that true, Ambassador?” Shelby asked.

“I would never say such a thing.”

“But he believes it,” I said, softly.

“We’ll all make a note of this, and make sure the proper authorities know of your gross dereliction of your duties,” Shelby said.

“I am loyal to King Taranis and his court. It is not my fault that Queen Andais is a sexual sadist, and quite mad. She and her people are dangerous. I have said so, for years, and no one has listened to me. Now we have these charges, proving what I have been saying.”

“So you told your superiors that you feared the queen’s guard would rape someone?” Veducci asked.

“Well, I, no, not exactly.”

“What did you tell them?” Shelby asked.

“I told them the truth, that I feared for my safety at

the Unseelie Court, and that I would not be comfortable there without an armed escort.” Stevens stood up, very tall, very certain of himself. He pointed at Frost and Doyle. “Look at them, they are frightening. The potential in them to do carnage, why, it just radiates off of them.”

“You keep touching your watch,” I said.

“What?” He blinked at me.

“Your watch. King Taranis gave it to you, didn’t he?” I asked.

“You accepted a Rolex watch from the king?” Cortez made it a question. He sounded outraged, but not at us.

Stevens swallowed, and shook his head. “Of course not. That would be totally inappropriate.”

“I saw him give it to you, Ambassador,” I said.

He ran his fingers over the metal. “That’s simply not true. She’s lying.”

“The sidhe don’t lie, Ambassador, you know that. That’s a human habit.”

Stevens’s fingers were practically rubbing a hole through the watchband. “The Unseelie are capable of every evil. Their very faces show them for what they are.”

It was Nelson who said, “Their faces are beautiful.”

“You are fooled by their magic,” Stevens said. “The king gave me the power to see through their deceptions.” His voice was rising with each word.

“The watch,” I said.

“So this,” Shelby gestured at me, “beauty is illusion?”

“Yes,” Stevens said.

“No,” I said.

“Liar,” he screamed, shoving his chair back so that it rolled on its wheels. He started walking past Biggs and Farmer, toward me.

Doyle and Frost moved like two halves of a whole. They simply stood in front of him, blocking his way. There was no magic to it, except the force of their physicality. Stevens stumbled back from them as if he'd been struck. His face contorted in terror, and he cried out, “No, no!”

Some of the lawyers were standing now. Cortez said, “What are they doing to him?”

Veducci managed to yell above Stevens's screams. “I can't see anything.”

“We are doing nothing to him,” Doyle said, his deep voice cutting under the higher-pitched voices like water undercutting a cliff face.

“The hell you aren't,” Shelby yelled, adding to the noise of Stevens's screams and those of the others.

I tried yelling above the noise, “Turn your jackets inside out!” No one seemed to hear me.

Veducci bellowed, “Shut up!” in a voice that smashed through the noise like a bull through a fence. The room was stunned into silence. Even Stevens stopped screaming and stared at Veducci. Veducci continued in a calmer voice, “Turn your jackets inside out. It's a way to break glamour.” He moved his head toward me, almost a bow. “I forgot that one.”

The others hesitated for a second. Veducci took off his own jacket and turned it inside out, then put it back on. It seemed to galvanize the rest. Most of them began taking off their jackets.

Nelson said, as she folded her jacket so the seams

showed, "I'm wearing a cross. I thought that protected me from glamour."

I answered her. "Crosses and bible verses would only work if we were of the devil. We have no connection to the Christian religion, either for good or ill."

She looked down, as if embarrassed to meet my eyes. "I didn't mean to imply anything."

"Of course not," I said. My voice was empty as I said it. I'd heard the insult too often to take it to heart. "One of the things the early church did was to paint anything they could not control as evil. Faerie was something they could not control. As the Seelie Court became more and more human-friendly, the parts of faerie that could not, or would not, play human, became part of the Unseelie Court. Since the things that humans perceive as frightening are mostly at the Unseelie Court, we got painted as evil over the centuries."

"You *are* evil!" Stevens screamed. His eyes bulged, his pulse was racing, and his face was pale and beaded with sweat.

"Is he sick?" Nelson asked.

"In a way," I said, softly enough that I wasn't sure any of the other humans in the room heard me. Whoever had done the spell on the watch had done too good a job, or a bad one. The spell was forcing Stevens to see nightmares when he looked at us. His mind wasn't coping well with what he was seeing and feeling.

I turned to Veducci. "The ambassador seems ill. Perhaps he should be taken to see a doctor?"

"No," Stevens yelled. "No. Without me here they

will take over your minds!” He grabbed Biggs, who was closer. “Without the king’s gift you will all believe their lies.”

“I think the princess is right, Ambassador Stevens,” Biggs said. “I think you *are* ill.”

Stevens’s hands dug into the inside-out designer jacket that Biggs was now wearing. “Surely you see them for what they are now?”

“They look like all the sidhe to me. Except for the color of Captain Doyle’s skin, and the princess being petite, they look like nobles of the sidhe court.”

Stevens shook the bigger man. “The Darkness has fangs. The Killing Frost has skulls hanging from his neck. And she, she is withered, dying. Her mortal blood contaminates her.”

“Ambassador . . .” Biggs began.

“No, you must see it, as I do!”

“They didn’t change at all when we turned our jackets inside out,” Nelson said. She sounded a little disappointed.

“I told you, we are not doing active glamour on any of you,” I said.

“Lies! I see the horror of you.” Stevens hid his face against Biggs’s broad shoulders, as if he could not bear the sight of us, and perhaps he could not.

“It is easier not to look at them, though,” Shelby said.

Cortez nodded. “I can focus better now, but they look the same.”

“Beautiful,” Bertram said.

Shelby gave him a sharp look, and the assistant apologized, as if that one word was totally out of line.

Stevens had begun to sob into Biggs's designer suit. "You must get him away from us," Doyle said.

"Why?" one of the others asked.

"The spell on the watch makes him see monsters when he looks at us. I fear his mind will break under the strain of it without King Taranis nearby to ease the effects."

"Can't you just undo the spell?" Veducci asked.

"It is not our spell," Doyle said simply.

"Can't you help him?" Nelson asked.

"I think the less contact with us, the better for the ambassador."

Stevens had seemed to be trying to bury his face into Biggs's shoulder. The ambassador's hands twisted in the seams and lining of the coat.

"Being near us is hurting him," Frost said, speaking for the first time since the introductions. His voice did not have the depth of Doyle's, but the width of his chest gave it weight.

"Get some security up here," Biggs said to Farmer. And though Farmer was a very powerful man in his own right, and a full partner, he moved for the door. I guess when your daddy is one of the founders of a firm and you are the leading active partner, you still have clout, even over other partners.

We stood in silence, the humans' awkward body language and facial expressions saying that they were terribly uncomfortable with the display of mad emotion. It was a type of madness, but the three of us sidhe had seen worse. We'd seen madness that had magic to it. The kind of magic that could steal the breath from your body on a laughing whim.

Uniformed security came. I recognized one of the

guards from the entrance desk. They had a doctor with them. I remembered reading several doctors' names on the board beside the elevator. Apparently, Farmer had exceeded his orders, but Biggs seemed very pleased to hand the sobbing man over to the doctor. No wonder Farmer had made partner. He followed orders to the letter, but built on them, made them better.

No one said anything else until they led the ambassador from the room and the door closed quietly behind him. Biggs straightened his tie and tugged at the wrinkled suit jacket. Inside out, or right side out, the suit was ruined until a dry cleaner got hold of it. He started to take the jacket off, then glanced at us and stopped.

I caught his eye, and he looked away, embarrassed. "It's all right, Mr. Biggs, if you're afraid to take your jacket off."

"Ambassador Stevens's mind seems quite broken."

"I would advise the doctor to have a licensed practitioner of the arts look at the watch before you simply remove it."

"Why?"

"He's worn that watch for years. It may have become a part of his psyche, his mind. To simply remove it could do more harm."

Biggs reached for a phone.

"Why didn't you say something before he was led away?" Shelby asked.

"I only now thought of it," I said.

"I thought of it before they left," Doyle said.

"Why didn't you speak up?" Cortez asked.

"It is not my job to protect the ambassador."

“It’s everyone’s job to help another human in such a state,” Shelby said, then he looked surprised, as if he’d just heard what he’d said.

Doyle gave the smallest curl of lips. “But I am not human, and I think the ambassador is weak and without honor. Queen Andais has lodged several complaints with your government about the ambassador. She has been ignored. But even she could not have foreseen such treachery as this.”

“Treachery of our government against yours?” Veducci asked.

“No, King Taranis’s treachery against someone who trusted him. The ambassador saw that watch as a mark of high favor, when in fact it was a trap and a lie.”

“You disapprove,” Nelson said.

“Do you not also disapprove?” Doyle asked.

She started to nod and then looked away, blushing. Apparently, even with her jacket turned, she couldn’t help reacting to him. He was worth reacting to, but I didn’t like that she was having this much trouble. The charges would be hard enough without us making the prosecutors blush.

“What would the king have gained from poisoning the ambassador against your court?” Cortez asked.

“What have the Seelie always gained from blackening the name of the Unseelie?” I asked.

“I’ll bite,” Shelby said. “What *have* they gained?”

“Fear,” I said. “They have made their people fear us.”

“What did that gain them?” Shelby asked.

Frost spoke. “The greatest punishment of all is to be cast out of the Seelie Court, the golden court. But

it is punishment because Taranis and his nobles have convinced themselves that once you join the Unseelie Court you become a monster. Not just in actions, but in body. They tell their people that they will become deformed if they join with the Unseelie.”

“You talk like you know,” Nelson said.

“I was once part of the golden throng, long, long ago,” Frost said.

“What did you do to earn exile?” Shelby asked.

“Lieutenant Frost doesn’t have to answer that,” Biggs said. He had stopped fussing with his suit and was back to being one of the best lawyers on the West Coast.

“Is the answer prejudicial to the charges brought against the other guards?” Shelby asked.

“No,” Biggs said, “but since the lieutenant is not included in the charges filed, the question is outside the scope of this investigation.”

Biggs had lied, smoothly, effortlessly; lied as if it were the truth. He actually didn’t know if Frost’s answer would have been prejudicial, because he had no idea why anyone but the three guards in question had been exiled from the Seelie Court. (Though in Galen’s case, he hadn’t been exiled because he’d been born and raised in the Unseelie Court; you can’t be exiled from what you’ve never been a part of.) Biggs had carefully not allowed any questions that might interfere with a linear defense of his clients.

“This is a very informal proceeding,” Veducci said with a smile. He radiated harmless good-ol’-boy charm. It was a trick, bordering on a lie. He’d researched us. He’d dealt with the courts more than any

of the other lawyers. He was either going to be our greatest ally or our most difficult opponent.

He continued, still smiling and letting us see those tired eyes. “We are all here today to see if the charges that King Taranis filed on behalf of the Lady Caitrin should be followed up with more formal proceedings. Cooperation would give strength to the princess’s guards’ denials.”

“Since all of the guards have diplomatic immunity, we are here out of courtesy,” Biggs said.

“We do appreciate that,” Veducci said.

“Do bear in mind,” Shelby said, “that King Taranis has stated that all of the queen’s guard, and now the princess’s guard, are a danger to everyone around them, most especially women. He stated that this rape did not surprise him. He seemed to think it was the inevitable outcome of allowing the queen’s Raven Guard unlimited access even inside faerie. One of the reasons he brought these charges to the human authorities, an unprecedented action in all the history of the Seelie Court, is that he feared for us. If a sidhe noble of Lady Caitrin’s magical powers could be so easily taken, then what hope did mere humans have against their . . . lusts?”

“Unnatural lusts,” I said.

Shelby shifted his gray eyes to me. “I did not say that.”

“No, you didn’t, but I’m betting my uncle Taranis did.”

Shelby gave a little shrug. “He doesn’t seem to like your men much, that is true.”

“Or me,” I said.

Shelby’s face showed surprise, and I wished I could

have told if it was genuine, or if he were lying with his face. “The king had only good things to say about you, Princess. He seems to feel that you have been”—he seemed to change what he was about to say at the last moment—“led astray by your aunt, the queen, and her guards.”

“Led astray?” I made it a question.

He nodded.

“That’s not what he said, is it?”

“Not in so many words, no.”

“It must have been truly insulting for you to pretty it up like this,” I said.

Shelby actually looked uncomfortable. “Before I saw Ambassador Stevens and his reaction to you, and the possible spell on his watch, I might have simply stated what the king said.” Shelby gave me a very straightforward look. “Let’s say that Stevens has made me wonder at the vehemence of King Taranis’s dislike of all your guard.”

“All my guard?” Again I made it a question with the upward lilt of my voice.

“Yes.”

I looked at Veducci. “He charges all my men with crimes?”

“No, only the three mentioned, but Mr. Shelby is correct. King Taranis stated that your Raven Guard is a danger to all women. He thinks that having been made celibate for so long has driven them insane.” Veducci’s face never changed as he let out one of the biggest secrets of the faerie courts.

I opened my mouth to say, “Taranis wouldn’t have told you that,” but Doyle’s hand on my shoulder stopped me. I looked up at his dark figure. Even

through his black glasses, I knew the look. That look said “Careful.” He was right. Veducci had stated earlier that he had sources at the Unselie Court. Taranis might not have said it at all.

“This is the first we’ve heard that the king is accusing the Raven Guard of being celibate,” Biggs said. He had glanced at Doyle, but now put his attention back on Shelby and Veducci.

“The king felt that the long-enforced celibacy was the reason for the attack.”

Biggs leaned in to me, and whispered, “Is this true? Were they forced to be celibate?”

I whispered against his white collar, “Yes.”

“Why?” he asked.

“My queen willed it so.” That was true, as far as it went, but it kept me from sharing secrets that Queen Andais wouldn’t want shared. Taranis might survive her wrath; I wouldn’t.

Biggs turned back to the opposing side. “We are not conceding that this alleged celibacy took place, but if it did, the men in question are no longer celibate. They are with the princess now, and not the queen. The princess has stated that the three of them are her lovers. There would be no alleged celibacy-induced”—Biggs seemed to search for the right word—“madness.” He made light of it with his voice, his face, and a hand gesture. It was a glimpse of what he’d be like in court. He just might be worth all the money my aunt was paying.

Shelby said, “The king’s statement, the charges filed, are enough to allow the United States government to confine all of the princess’s guard to the lands of faerie.”

“I know the law you’re referring to,” Biggs said. “Many in Jefferson’s government didn’t agree with him allowing the fey to settle here after they were exiled from Europe. They insisted on a law that would allow them to permanently confine to faerie any citizen of faerie deemed too dangerous to be allowed among the human citizenry. It is a very broad law, and has never been invoked.”

“It’s never been needed before,” Cortez said.

Doyle had stayed at my back, his hand resting on my shoulder. Either he knew I needed comforting, or he needed it. I laid my hand on top of his, so we could touch bare skin to bare skin. He was so warm, so solid. Just the touch made me feel more certain that it would be all right. We would be all right.

“It’s not needed now, and you all know it,” Biggs said. He *tsked* at them. “Trying to scare the princess by threatening to send all her guards back to faerie. Shame on you.”

“The princess doesn’t look scared,” Nelson said.

I gave her the full weight of my tricolored eyes, and she couldn’t hold my gaze. “You are threatening to take the men I love away from me,” I said. “Shouldn’t that frighten me?”

“It should,” she said, “but it doesn’t seem to.”

Farmer touched my arm, a clear let-me-talk gesture. I leaned back into the weight of Doyle at my back and let the lawyers talk. “Which brings us to the law in question,” Farmer said. “The royals of any court are exempt from the law Mr. Shelby has mentioned.”

“We are not proposing to exile Princess Meredith to faerie,” Shelby said.

“You know that the threat to put all her guards under some sort of legal confinement to faerie is outrageous,” Farmer said.

Shelby nodded. “Fine, then just the three who are charged with rape. Mr. Cortez and I are both duly appointed officers of the United States attorneys’ office. We are within our duty and rights to simply put the three guards back into the land of faerie until these charges are settled.”

“I repeat, the law, as written, cannot be applied to the royals of any court of faerie,” Farmer said.

“And I repeat that we aren’t threatening to do anything to Princess Meredith,” Shelby said.

“But we aren’t referring to that royal,” Farmer said.

Shelby looked down the line of lawyers on his side. “I’m not sure we’re following your argument.”

“Princess Meredith’s guard are royal, for now.”

“What does that mean, for ‘now’?” Cortez asked.

“It means that when inside the Unseelie Court, they have a throne on the royal dais in which they take turns sitting beside the princess,” Farmer said. “They are her royal consorts.”

“Being her lover doesn’t make them royal,” Cortez said.

“Prince Phillip is technically still Queen Elizabeth’s royal consort,” Farmer said.

“But they’re married,” Cortez said.

“But in faerie, at any court, you aren’t allowed to marry until you are with child,” Farmer said.

“Mr. Farmer,” I said, touching his arm, “since this is informal, perhaps it would go more quickly if I explained.”

Farmer and Biggs whispered back and forth, but finally I got the nod. I was going to be allowed to talk. Oh, goody. I smiled at the other side of the table, leaning a little forward, hands nicely folded on the table. "My guards are my lovers. Which makes them royal consorts until one of them makes me pregnant. Then that one will be king to my queen. Until the choice is made, they are all royalty in the Unseelie Court."

"The three guards who have been charged by the king should be sent back to faerie," Shelby said.

"King Taranis was so afraid that Ambassador Stevens would see that the Unseelie Court was beautiful that he put a spell on the man. A spell that forced him to see us as monstrous. A man who would do such a desperate thing would do many other desperate things."

"What do you mean, Princess?"

"To lie is to be cast out of faerie, but to be king is sometimes to be above the law."

"Are you saying these charges are falsified?" Cortez asked.

"Of course they are false."

"You would say anything to save your lovers," Shelby said.

"I am sidhe, and I am not above the law. I cannot lie."

"Is that true?" Shelby leaned down and asked Veducci.

He nodded. "It's supposed to be true, but either the princess is lying, or Lady Caitrin is lying."

Shelby looked back at me. "You cannot lie."

"I have the ability, but to do so is to run the risk of

being cast out from faerie.” I squeezed Doyle’s hand tightly. “I just got back. I don’t want to lose it all again.”

“Why did you leave faerie the first time, Princess?” Shelby asked.

Biggs answered that. “That question is off-limits, and outside the charges in question.” The queen had probably given him a list of questions I couldn’t answer.

Shelby smiled. “Very well. Is it true that the Raven Guard were forced into centuries of celibacy?”

“May I ask a question before I answer that?”

“You can ask anything you like, Princess, but I may not answer.”

I smiled at him, and he smiled back. Doyle’s hand tightened on my shoulder. He was right—mustn’t flirt, until we knew exactly how it would be perceived. I toned the smile down, and asked my question. “Did King Taranis himself say that the Ravens were forced into centuries of celibacy?”

“I’ve so stated,” Shelby said.

“No, I mean as truth, Mr. Shelby. Please bear in mind that even a princess may be tortured for going against her queen’s orders.”

“You admit that they torture people at the Unseelie Court,” Cortez said.

“They torture people at both courts, Mr. Cortez. Queen Andais just doesn’t hide what she does, because she’s not ashamed of it.”

“Are you stating for the record . . . ?” Cortez said.

“This will be a sealed record,” Biggs said, “unless it goes to court.”

“Yes, yes,” Cortez said, “but are you stating for the

record that King Taranis allows torture to be used as a punishment in the Seelie Court?”

“Answer my question truthfully, and I will answer yours.”

Cortez looked at Shelby. They exchanged a longer-than-normal look, then both of them turned back to me. “Yes,” they said at the same time. The two men looked at each other, and finally Cortez nodded at Shelby, who said, “Yes, King Taranis stated that the fact that the Raven Guard had been forced into centuries of celibacy was the reason they were a danger to women. He further stated that to then have the forced celibacy lifted for only one little girl, referring to you, Princess, was monstrous. For no one woman could satisfy the lusts of centuries.”

“So the celibacy was the motive for the rape,” I said.

“That seems to be the king’s reasoning,” Shelby said. “We haven’t looked for a motive beyond the usual for rape.”

The usual, I thought.

“I’ve answered your question, Princess. Now, are you stating for the record that the Seelie Court tortures its prisoners?”

Frost came to stand beside Doyle. “Meredith, think upon this before you answer.”

I looked behind me, met his worried eyes, the soft gray of winter skies. I held my other hand out to him, and he took it. “Taranis let our cat out of the bag, Frost. It’s only fair we let one of his out.”

Frost frowned at me. “I do not understand this talk of cats, but I fear his anger.”

I had to smile at him even as I agreed with him. "He began this, Frost. I will only finish it."

He squeezed my hand, and Doyle squeezed the other, so that my hands were crisscrossed over my chest, holding them. I held their hands while I said, "Mr. Shelby, Mr. Cortez, you asked me, am I stating for the record that King Taranis's golden court tortures as a punishment? I am so stating."

The record was supposed to be sealed, but if either of these secrets got into the press. . . . This little family feud was going to get very ugly, very fast.

Chapter 2

THE LAWYERS DECIDED THAT DOYLE AND FROST could answer some general questions about what it was like being part of my personal guard to give some background to the atmosphere that Rhys, Galen, and Abe had been living in. I wasn't sure it was going to be helpful, but I wasn't a lawyer, so who was I to argue?

Doyle sat on my right, Frost on my left. My lawyers Farmer and Biggs moved a few seats down to give them room.

Shelby got the first question. "And there are now sixteen of you with access only to Princess Meredith for your, um, needs?"

"If you mean for sex, then yes," Doyle said.

Shelby coughed and nodded. "Yes, I do mean sex."

"Then say what you mean," Doyle said.

"I will do that." Shelby sat up a little straighter. "I imagine it must be difficult to share the princess."

"I'm not certain I understand the question."

"Well, not to be indelicate, but waiting for your turn must be hard after so many years of denial."

"No, it is not hard to wait."

"But of course it is," Shelby said.

“You’re putting words in the witnesses’ mouths,” Biggs said.

“Sorry. What I mean, Captain Doyle, is that, after so many years of needs unmet, it must be difficult to only have sex about every two weeks or so.”

Frost laughed, then caught himself and tried to turn it into a cough. Doyle smiled. It was the first truly broad smile that he’d had since the questions had started. The white flash of his teeth in all that dark, dark face was startling if you weren’t used to it. It was like having a statue suddenly smile at you.

“I fail to see the humor in being forced to wait weeks for sex, Captain Doyle, Lieutenant Frost.”

“I would see no humor in that either,” Doyle said, “but when the number of men grew larger, Princess Meredith changed some of the parameters for us all.”

“I’m not following,” Nelson said, “Parameters?”

Doyle looked at me. “Perhaps you better explain, Princess.”

“When I had only five lovers, it seemed fair to make them wait for their turns, but as you point out, waiting two weeks, or more, after centuries of celibacy seems like another form of torture. So when the number of men went up to double digits, I upped the number of times I make love during a given day.”

You don’t get to see powerful, high-priced lawyers look that embarrassed often, but I got to see it then. They all looked at each other; Nelson actually raised her hand. “I’ll ask, if no one else will.”

The men let her ask. “How many times a day do you make love?”

“It varies, but usually at least three times.”

“Three times a day,” she repeated.

“Yes,” I said, and gave her a blank, pleasant face. She blushed to the roots of her red hair. I was sidhe enough that I didn’t understand this American trait of being totally fascinated with sex and totally uncomfortable with it.

Veducci recovered first, as I had figured he would. “Even at three times a day, Princess Meredith, that leaves an average of five days between lovemaking sessions for the men. Five days is a long time when you’ve been denied for centuries. Couldn’t your three guards have tried to find something to occupy their time in between waiting?”

“A five-day wait implies that I’m only sleeping with one man at a time, Mr. Veducci, and most of the time I’m not.”

Veducci smiled at me. It was a nice smile. It went all the way to his eyes, and folded the bags into smile lines that said here was a man who knew how to enjoy life, or had once. It was like a glimpse into a younger, less tired version.

I smiled back at him, responding to that joy.

“You are totally comfortable with this line of questioning, aren’t you, Princess Meredith?” he asked.

“I am not ashamed of anything I’ve done, Mr. Veducci. The fey, outside of some of the Seelie Court, see no shame in sex, as long as it is consensual.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll ask the next one. How many men at a time do you routinely sleep with?” He shook his head when he asked as if he couldn’t believe he was asking it.

“I don’t think that’s appropriate,” Biggs said.

"I'll answer it," I said.

"Are you sure . . . ?"

"It's sex. There's nothing wrong with sex." I held Biggs's gaze until he looked away. I turned back to Veducci. "Average is probably two at a time. I think the max that I've ever done at once is four." I looked at Doyle and Frost. "Four?" I made it a question.

"I believe so," Doyle said.

Frost nodded. "Yes."

I turned back to the lawyers. "Four, but two is average."

Biggs recovered a little. "So, you see, gentlemen, ladies, a two-day wait between sex, or less. There are married men who have to wait longer than that for their needs to be met."

"Princess Meredith," Cortez said.

"Yes, Mr. Cortez." I looked into his dark brown eyes.

He cleared his throat and said, "Are you telling us the truth? You have sex three times a day with an average of two men at a time, and sometimes up to four. Is this what you want in the record?"

"It is sealed," Farmer said.

"But if this does go to court, then it may not be. Is this really what the princess wants the public to know about her?"

I frowned at him. "It's the truth, Mr. Cortez. Why should the truth bother me?"

"Do you honestly not understand what this information could do to your reputation in the media?"

"I don't understand the question."

He looked at Biggs and Farmer. "I don't say this

often, but is your client aware of what this record, even sealed, can be used for?”

“I did discuss it with her, but . . . Mr. Cortez, the Unseelie Court does not view sex in the same way as most of the world. They certainly don’t view it as mainstream America views it. My colleague and I learned that when we prepped the princess and her guard for these talks. If you are hinting that the princess might be more careful about what she admits to having done with her men, then save your breath. She is absolutely not bothered by anything she has done with any of her men.”

“Not to bring up a painful subject, but the princess didn’t seem very happy in the media when her ex-fiancé, Griffin, sold those Polaroids to the tabloids a few months back,” Cortez said.

I nodded. “That did hurt me,” I said, “but because Griffin broke my trust, not because I was ashamed of what we’d done. I thought we were in love when those pictures were taken. There is no shame in love, Mr. Cortez.”

“You are either very brave, Princess, or very naive. If you can use the word naive to a woman who is having sex with nearly twenty men on a regular basis.”

“I am not naive, Mr. Cortez. I simply don’t think like a human woman.”

Farmer said, “King Taranis’s allegation that the three guards he accused of this crime did so out of unmet sexual needs is a false assumption. It is based on the king’s own lack of understanding of his sister court.”

“Is the Unseelie Court so different from the Seelie

Court when it comes to matters of sex?" Nelson asked.

"May I take this one, Mr. Farmer?" I asked.

"You may."

"The Seelie try to ape human behavior. They're stuck somewhere between the centuries of fifteen hundred to eighteen hundred, but they try to play human more than the Unseelie. Many of those exiled to our court have been exiled because of simply wanting to remain true to their original natures, and not let themselves be civilized in a human manner."

"You sound like you're lecturing," Nelson said.

I smiled. "I did a paper in college on the differences between the two courts. I thought it might help the teacher and the other students understand that the Unseelie Court wasn't the bad guy."

"You were the first of the fey to attend human college in this country," Cortez said. He shifted through some papers in front of him. "But not the last. Some of the so-called lesser fey have actually gotten degrees since then."

"My father, Prince Essus, thought if one of the royals went, then our people might follow. He thought that learning, and understanding the country we lived in, was a necessary part of the fey adapting to modern life here."

"Your father never saw you attend college, though, did he?" Cortez asked.

"No," I said. The one word was clipped.

Doyle and Frost reached for me at the same time. Their hands found each other at the back of my shoulders. Doyle's arm stayed there. Frost's hand

moved to cover one of my hands where I kept them still upon the tabletop. They were reacting to the tension in me, but it let everyone in the room know how concerned they were with me dealing with this topic. They hadn't reacted to talk of my ex-fiancé, Griffin. I think all my men thought they had washed his memory clean from me with their own bodies. I felt the same, so they'd read me right. Doyle was usually a good judge of my moods. Frost, who had his own moods, was learning mine.

"I think this topic is closed," Biggs said.

"I am sorry if I caused the princess distress," Cortez said, but he didn't sound sorry. I wondered why he'd brought up my father's assassination. Cortez, like Shelby and Veducci, struck me as a man who didn't do things without a reason. I wasn't sure about Nelson and the rest. I was counting on Biggs and Farmer being calculating men. But what did Cortez hope to gain from mentioning my father's death?

"I am sorry to cause distress, but I do have a reason for bringing the topic up," Cortez said.

"I don't see what relevance it could possibly have on these proceedings," Biggs said.

"The murderer of Prince Essus was never apprehended," Cortez said. "In fact, no one was even seriously suspected, is that correct?"

"We failed the prince and the princess in every way," Doyle said.

"But you weren't a guard for either of them, were you?"

"Not at that time."

"Lieutenant Frost, you were also part of the queen's Ravens when Prince Essus died. None of the current

bodyguards of the princess were members of Prince Essus's Crane Guards, is that correct?"

"That is not true," Frost said.

Cortez looked at him. "Excuse me?"

Frost looked at Doyle, who gave a small nod. Frost's hand tightened over mine. He didn't like to speak in public; it was a phobia. "We have half a dozen guards with us here in Los Angeles who were once part of Prince Essus's Cranes."

"The king seems very certain that none of the prince's guards are guarding the princess," Cortez said.

"It is a recent change," Frost said. His hand tightened on mine until I used my free hand to play my fingers across the back of his. One, it would comfort him; two, it would keep him from forgetting how strong he was and hurting my hand. I played my fingers on the smooth white skin of his hand, and realized it didn't comfort just him.

Doyle moved closer to me so that he was more obviously hugging me. I leaned into the curve of his arm, letting my body settle into the line of his, while I continued to stroke the back of Frost's hand.

"I still see no reason for this line of questioning," Biggs said.

"I agree," Farmer said. "If you have any more questions that are relevant to the actual charges, we might entertain them."

Cortez looked at me. He gave me every ounce of those dark brown eyes. "The king thinks that the reason your father's murderer was never caught is that the men investigating it were the murderers."

Doyle, Frost, and I went very still. He had our attention now, indeed he did. "Speak plainly, Mr. Cortez," I said.

"King Taranis accuses the Raven Guard of Prince Essus's murder."

"You saw what the king did to the ambassador. I think that level of fear and manipulation speaks for my uncle's state of mind right now."

"We will follow up on Ambassador Stevens's . . . condition," Shelby said, "but doesn't it make sense that the reason no clues were found is that the men looking for the clues were hiding them?"

"Our oath to the queen would forbid us to do harm to her family," Doyle said.

"Your oath is to protect the queen, correct?" Cortez asked.

"We now belong to the princess, but the oath remains the same, yes."

"King Taranis alleges that you killed Prince Essus to keep him from killing Queen Andais and putting himself on the throne of the Unseelie Court."

The three of us stared at Cortez and Shelby. This was laundry so dirty that the queen had tortured people who had merely hinted at such things. I didn't ask if Taranis had actually said it, because I knew no one else at his court would have dared Queen Andais's anger. Anyone less than the king himself, and she would have called them out to a personal duel for such rumors.

Andais had a lot of faults, I knew that, but she had loved her brother. He had loved her, too. It's why he hadn't killed her and taken the throne, even though

he felt that he would have been a better ruler. If he had lived, and my cousin, Prince Cel, had tried to take the throne, my father might have killed Cel to keep him off the throne.

Cel was insane, I think literally, and a sexual sadist who made Andais look mild. My father had feared the Unseelie Court at the hands of Cel. I feared it now. To save my life and the lives of those I loved, and to keep Cel off the throne, were the reasons I was still trying to be queen.

But I wasn't pregnant, and whoever got me pregnant would be king to my queen. I had realized only a day or so ago that I'd have given up everything to be with Frost and Doyle—including being queen—but for one thing: To keep these two men with me might require me to give up my birthright. And I was too much my father's daughter to let Cel have our people. But the regret in me was growing.

"Do you have a reply to the accusation, Princess Meredith?"

"My aunt is not perfect, but she loved her brother. I believe that with all my heart. If she discovered who killed him, her wrath would be the stuff of nightmares. None of her guard would have dared such a thing."

"Are you sure of that, Princess?"

"I think you might want to ask yourself, Mr. Cortez, Mr. Shelby, what King Taranis hopes to gain by this accusation. In fact, you might wonder what he might have gained from my father's death."

"Are you accusing the king of your father's murder?" Shelby asked.

“No, I am simply saying that the Seelie Court has never been a friend of my father’s family. Whereas one of the queen’s guard killing my father would have earned them a death by torture. I think if King Taranis could have plausible deniability of the deed, he would reward his own guard for it.”

“Why would he kill Prince Essus?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you believe he was behind the assassination?” Veducci asked. That fine mind was all there in those eyes.

“I didn’t until now.”

“What do you mean by that, Princess?” he asked.

“I mean I can’t see what the king hopes to gain by the accusation against my guard. It makes no sense, and it makes me wonder what his true motives are here.”

“He seeks to divide you from us,” Frost said.

I looked at him, studying that handsome, arrogant face. I knew now that the cold arrogance was his mask when he was nervous. “Divide me from you how?”

“If he could plant such an ugly doubt in your mind, would you ever trust us again?”

I looked down at the table, at his pale hand on mine, my fingers against his skin. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“If you think about it,” Frost continued, “the rape accusation is also meant to make you doubt us.”

I nodded. “Maybe, but to what purpose?”

“I don’t know.”

“Unless he has taken leave of his senses at last,” Doyle said, “he has a purpose to all of this. But I confess that I do not see what it could gain him. I do not

like that we seem to be deep in a game and I do not know what we are playing.”

Doyle stopped talking, and looked across the table at the lawyers. “Forgive us, please. We forgot where we were for a moment.”

“Do you believe that this is all some sort of inter-court politics?” Veducci asked.

“Yes,” Doyle said.

Veducci looked at Frost. “Lieutenant Frost?”

“I agree with my captain.”

Last he looked at me. “Princess Meredith?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Veducci, whatever else we are doing, it is most certainly intercourt politics.”

“His treatment of Ambassador Stevens makes me begin to wonder if we are being used here,” Veducci said.

“Are you saying, Mr. Veducci,” Biggs said, “that you are beginning to doubt the validity of the charges made against my clients?”

“If I find out that your clients did what they are accused of, I will do my best to punish them to the greatest extent that the law allows, but if these charges turn out to be false, and the king has tried to use the law to harm the innocent, I’ll do my best to remind the king that in this country no one is supposed to be above the law.” Veducci smiled again, but this time it wasn’t a happy smile. It was more predatory. That smile was enough; I knew who I feared the most on the other side of the table. Veducci wasn’t as ambitious as Shelby and Cortez, but he was better. He actually still believed in the law. He actually still believed that the innocent should be spared, and the guilty punished. You didn’t often see such pure faith

in lawyers who had spent more than twenty years on the bar. They had to give up their belief in the law to survive as a lawyer. But somehow, Veducci had held on. He believed, and maybe, just maybe, he was beginning to believe us.