

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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A Caress of Twilight  
Laurell K. Hamilton

## About the Book

*Most of you will know me as Merry Gentry, private investigator, but my real name is Princess Meredith NicEssus and I am heir to a throne - if I can stay alive long enough to claim it.*

My cousin, Prince Cel, is determined to see that I don't. As long as we both live, we are in a race for the crown: whoever reproduces first gets the throne. The men of my royal guard - frighteningly skilful warriors - have become my lovers, auditioning for the role of future king and father of my child. Of course, they must still protect me - for unlike most of the Fey, I am part human and very mortal.

But now, in the City of Angels, people are dying in mysterious and frightening ways. What the human police don't realise is that the killer is hunting the Fey as well. I sense chaos is close at hand; the very existence of the place known as Faerie is at grave risk. So while I enjoy the greatest of pleasures with my guardians, I know I must soon confront an ancient evil that could destroy the very fabric of reality - yours, and mine. And that's just the day job...

**Welcome to the world of Laurell K. Hamilton - a world full of earthly delights and dangerous magic, of grotesque ambitions and thrilling adventure.**

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A CARESS  
OF TWILIGHT

LAURELL K.  
HAMILTON

This one's for J., who brought me endless cups of chai and, for the first time, watched the process from beginning to end. He loves me still, and for all of you married to us artistic types, you know just how much that says about both of us.

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# Chapter 1

MOONLIGHT SILVERED THE room, painting the bed in a hundred shades of grey, white, and black. The two men in the bed were deeply asleep. So deeply that when I'd crawled out from between them, they'd barely stirred. My skin glowed white with the kiss of moonlight. The pure bloodred of my hair looked black. I'd pulled on a silk robe, because it was chilly. People can talk about sunny California, but in the wee hours of the night, when dawn is but a distant dream, it's still chilly. The night that fell like a soft blessing through my window was a December night. If I'd been home in Illinois, there would have been the smell of snow, crisp enough, almost, to melt along the tongue. Cold enough to sear the lungs. So cold it was like breathing icy fire. That was the way air was supposed to taste in early December. The breeze crawling through the window at my back held the dry tang of eucalyptus and the distant smell of the sea. Salt, water, and something else, that indefinable scent that says ocean, not lake, nothing usable, nothing drinkable. You can die of thirst on the shores of an ocean.

For three years I'd stood on the shores of this particular ocean and died a little bit every day. Not literally - I'd have survived - but mere survival can get pretty lonely. I'd been born Princess Meredith NicEssus, a member of the high court of faerie. I was a real-life faerie princess, the only one ever born on American soil. When I vanished from sight about three years ago, the media had gone crazy. Sightings of the missing Elven American Princess had rivaled Elvis sightings. I'd been spotted all around the world. In reality



I'd been in Los Angeles the entire time. I'd hidden myself, been just plain Meredith Gentry, Merry to my friends. Just another human with fey ancestry working for the Grey Detective Agency, where we specialized in supernatural problems, magical solutions.

Legend says that a fey exiled from faerie will wither and fade, die. That's both true and untrue. I have enough human blood in my background that being surrounded by metal and technology doesn't bother me. Some of the lesser fey would literally wither and die in a man-made city. But most fey can manage in a city; they may not be happy, but they can survive. But part of them does wither, that part that knows that not all the butterflies you see are actually butterflies. That part that has seen the night sky filled with a rushing of wings like a hurricane wind, wings of flesh and scale to make humans whisper of dragons and demons; that part that has seen the sidhe ride by on horses made of starlight and dreams. That part begins to die.

I hadn't been exiled; I'd fled, because I couldn't survive the assassination attempts. I just didn't have the magic or the political clout to protect myself. I'd saved my life but lost something else. I'd lost the touch of faerie. I'd lost my home.

Now, leaning on my windowsill with the smell of the Pacific Ocean on the air, I looked down at the two men and knew I was home. They were both high-court sidhe, Unseelie sidhe, part of that darkling throng that I might someday rule if I could stay ahead of the assassins. Rhys lay on his stomach, one hand hanging off the bed, the other lost under his pillow. Even in repose that one visible arm was muscled. His hair was a shining fall of white curls caressing his bare shoulders, trailing down the strong line of his back. The right side of his face was pressed to the pillow, and so I couldn't see the scars where his eye had been taken. His cupid-bow mouth was turned upward, half

smiling in his sleep. He was boyishly handsome and would be forever.

Nicca lay curled on his side. Awake, his face was handsome, bordering on pretty; asleep, he had the face of an angelic child. Innocent he looked, fragile. Even his body was softer, less muscled. His hands were still rough from sword practice, and there was muscle under the velvet smoothness of his skin, but he was soft compared to the other guards, more courtier than mercenary. The face did, and did not, match the body. He was just over six feet, most of it long, long legs; his slender waist and long, graceful arms balanced all that length. Most of Nicca was shades of brown. His skin was the color of pale milk chocolate, and the hair that fell in a straight fall to his knees was a rich, dark true brown. Not Brunette, but the color of fresh turned leaves that had lain a long, long time on the forest floor until when stirred they were a rich, moist brown, something you could plunge your hands into and come away wet and smelling of new life.

In the moonlit dark I couldn't see his back, or even the tops of his shoulders clearly. Most of him was lost under the sheet. It was his back that held the biggest surprise. His father had been something with butterfly wings, something not Sidhe but still Fey. Genetics had traced his back with wings like a giant tattoo, except more vibrant, more alive than any ink or paint could make it. From his upper shoulders down his back across his buttocks flowing over his thighs to touch the backs of his knees was a play of color: buff brown, yellow tans, circles of blue and pink and black like eyespots on the wings of a moth.

He rested in the dark drained of color so that he and Rhys were like two shadows wrapped in the bed, one pale, one dark, though there were darker things to be had than Nicca, much darker.

The bedroom door opened soundlessly, and as if I'd conjured him by my thoughts, Doyle eased into the room.

He shut the door behind him, as soundlessly as he'd opened it. I never understood how he did that. If I'd opened the door, it would have made noise. But when Doyle wanted to, he moved like the fall of night itself, soundless, weightless, undetectable until you realized the light was gone and you were alone in the dark with something you couldn't see. His nickname was the Queen's Darkness, or simply Darkness. The queen would say, 'Where is my Darkness? Bring me my Darkness,' and this meant that soon someone would bleed, or die. But now, strangely, he was my Darkness.

Nicca was brown, but Doyle was black. Not the black of human skin, but the complete blackness of a midnight sky. He didn't vanish in the darkened room, because he was darker than the moonlit shadows, a dark shape gliding toward me. His black jeans and black T-shirt fit his body like a second skin. I'd never seen him wear anything that wasn't monochromatic except jewelry and blades. Even his shoulder holster and gun were black.

I pushed away from the window to stand as he moved toward me. He had to stop gliding at the foot of the king-size bed, because there was barely room to squeeze between the bed and the closet doors. It was impressive simply to watch Doyle slide along the wall without brushing the bed. He was over a foot taller than I was and probably outweighed me by a hundred pounds, most of it muscle. I'd have bumped into the bed a half-dozen times, at least. He eased through the narrow space as if anybody should have been able to do it.

The bed took up most of the bedroom, so when Doyle finally reached me, we were forced to stand nearly touching. He managed to keep a fraction of distance so that not even our clothing brushed. It was an artificial distance. It would have been more natural to touch, and the very fact that he worked so hard not to touch me made it the more awkward. It bothered me, but I'd stopped arguing with

Doyle about his distance. When questioned, he only said, 'I want to be special to you, not just one of the mob.' At first it had seemed noble; now it was just irritating. The light was stronger here by the window, and I could see some of that delicate curve of his high cheekbones, the too-sharp chin, the curved points to his ears, and the silver gleam of earrings that traced the cartilage all the way to the small hoops in the very pointed tops. Only the pointed ears betrayed that he was a mixed-blood like myself, like Nicca. He could have hidden the ears with all that hair, but he almost never did. His raven black hair was as it usually was, in a tight braid that made his hair look clipped and short from the front, but the braid's tip hung to his ankles.

He whispered, 'I heard something.' His voice was always low and dark like thick candied liqueur for the ear instead of the tongue.

I stared up at him. 'Something, or me moving around?'

His lips gave that twitch that was the closest he usually came to a smile. 'You.'

I shook my head, hands crossed over my stomach. 'I have two guards in bed with me and that's not protection enough?' I whispered back.

'They are good men, but they are not me.'

I frowned at him. 'Are you saying you don't trust anyone but you to keep me safe?' Our voices sounded quiet, peaceful almost, like the voices of parents whispering over sleeping children. It was comforting to know that Doyle was this alert. He was one of the greatest warriors of all the sidhe. It was good to have him on my side.

'Frost... perhaps,' he said.

I shook my head; my hair had grown out just enough to tickle the tops of my shoulders. 'The Queen's Ravens are the finest warriors that faerie has to offer, and you say no one is your equal. You arrogant ...'

He didn't so much step closer - we were standing too close for that - he merely moved, pressing close enough

that the hem of my robe brushed his legs. The moonlight glinted off the short necklace he always wore, a tiny jeweled spider hanging from the delicate silver chain. He bent his face down so that his breath pushed against my face. 'I could kill you before either of them knew what had happened.'

The threat sped my pulse faster. I knew he wouldn't harm me. I knew it, and yet ... and yet. I'd seen Doyle kill with his hands before, empty of weapons, only his strength of flesh and magic. Standing, touching in the intimate darkness, I knew beyond certainty that if he wished me dead, he could do it, and not I or the two sleeping guards behind me would be able to stop him.

I couldn't win a fight, but there were other things to do when pressed together in the dark, things that could distract or disarm as well or better than a blade. I turned minutely toward him so that my face was pressed into the curve of his neck; my lips moved against his skin as I spoke. I felt his pulse speed pressed against my cheek. 'You don't want to hurt me, Doyle.'

His lower lip brushed the curve of my ear, almost but not quite a kiss. 'I could kill all three of you.'

There was a sharp mechanical sound from behind us, the sound of a gun being cocked. It was loud enough in the stillness that I jumped.

'I don't think you could kill all three of us,' Rhys said. His voice was clear, precise, no hint of sleep in it. He was simply awake, pointing a gun at Doyle's back, or at least I assumed that's what he was doing. I couldn't see around the bulk of Doyle's body; and Doyle, as far as I knew, didn't have eyes in the back of his head, so he had to guess what Rhys was doing, too.

'A double-action handgun doesn't need to be cocked to fire, Rhys,' Doyle said, voice calm, even amused. But I couldn't see his face to see if his expression matched his tone; we'd both frozen in our almost embrace.

'I know,' Rhys said, 'a little melodramatic, but you know what they say: One scary sound is worth a thousand threats.'

I spoke, my mouth still touching the warm skin of Doyle's neck. 'They don't say that.' Doyle hadn't moved, and I was afraid to, afraid to set something in motion that I couldn't stop. I didn't want any accidents tonight.

'They should,' Rhys said.

The bed creaked behind us. 'I have a gun pointed at your head, Doyle.' It was Nicca's voice. But not calm, no, a definite thread of anxiety wove his words together. Rhys's voice had held no fear; Nicca's held enough for both of them. But I didn't have to see Nicca to know the gun was trained nice and steady, the finger already on the trigger. After all, Doyle had trained him.

I felt the tension leave Doyle's body, and he raised his face just enough so that he was no longer speaking into my skin. 'Perhaps I couldn't slay you all, but I could kill the princess before you could kill me, and then your lives would mean nothing. The queen would hurt you much more than I ever could for allowing her heir to be slaughtered.'

I could see his face now. Even by moonlight he was relaxed, his eyes distant, not really looking at me anymore. He was too intent on the lesson he was teaching his men, to care about me.

I braced my back against the wall, but he paid no attention to the small movement. I put a hand in the middle of his chest and pushed. It made him stand up straighter, but there really wasn't room for him to go anywhere but on the bed.

'Stop it, all of you,' I said, and I made sure my voice rang in the room. I glared up at Doyle. 'Get away from me.'

He gave a small bow using just his neck for there wasn't room for anything more formal, then he backed up, hands out to his sides to show himself empty-handed to the other guards. He ended between the bed and the wall with no

room to maneuver. Rhys was half on his back, gun pointed one-handed as he followed Doyle's movement around the room. Nicca was standing on the far side of the bed, gun held two-handed in a standard shooter's stance. They were still treating Doyle like a threat, and I was tired of it.

'I am tired of these little games, Doyle. Either you trust your men to keep me safe, or you don't. If you don't, then find other men, or make sure you or Frost are always with me. But stop this.'

'If I had been one of our enemies, your guards would have slept through your death.'

'I was awake,' said Rhys, 'but truthfully I thought you'd finally come to your senses and were going to do her up against the wall.'

Doyle frowned at him. 'You would think something that crude.'

'If you want her, Doyle, then just say so. Tomorrow night can be your turn. I think we'd all step aside for an evening if you'd break your ... fast.' The moonlight softened Rhys's scars like a white gauzy patch where his right eye should have been.

'Put up your guns,' I said.

They looked at Doyle for confirmation. I shouted at them. 'Put up the guns. I am the princess here, heir to the throne. He's the captain of my guard, and when I tell you to do something, you will, by Goddess, do it.'

They still looked at Doyle. He gave the smallest of nods.

'Get out,' I said. 'All of you, get out.'

Doyle shook his head. 'I don't think that would be wise, Princess.'

Usually I tried to get them all to call me Meredith, but I had invoked my status. I couldn't take it back in the next sentence. 'So my direct orders don't mean anything, is that it?'

Doyle's expression was neutral, careful. Rhys and Nicca had put up their guns, but neither one was meeting my

eyes. 'Princess, you must have at least one of us with you at all times. Our enemies are... persistent.'

'Prince Cel will be executed if his people try to kill me while he's still being punished for the last time he tried to kill me. We have six months' reprieve.'

Doyle shook his head.

I looked at the three of them, all handsome, even beautiful in their own ways, and suddenly I wanted to be alone. Alone to think, alone to figure out exactly whose orders they were taking, mine or Queen Andais's. I'd thought it was mine, but suddenly I wasn't so sure.

I looked at them, each in turn. Rhys met my gaze, but Nicca still wouldn't. 'You won't take my orders, will you?'

'Our first duty is to keep you safe, Princess, and only second to keep you happy,' Doyle said.

'What do you want from me, Doyle? I've offered you my bed, and you've refused.'

He opened his mouth, started to speak, but I held a hand up. 'No, I don't want to hear any more of your excuses. I believed the one about wanting to be the last of my men, not the first, but if one of the others gets me with child, according to sidhe tradition that person will be my husband. I'll be monogamous after that. You'll have missed your chance to break a thousand years of forced celibacy. You haven't given me a single reason good enough for that kind of risk.' I folded my arms across my stomach, cradling my breasts. 'Speak truth to me, Doyle, or stay out of my bedroom.'

His face was almost neutral, but an edge of anger showed through. 'Fine, you want truth, then look at your window.'

I frowned at him, but turned to look at the window with its gauzy white drapes moving ever so gently in the breeze. I shrugged, arms still held tight. 'So?'

'You are a princess of the sidhe. Look with more than your eyes.'



I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and tried not to respond to the heat in his words. Getting angry at Doyle never seemed to accomplish anything. I was a princess, but that didn't give me much clout; it never had.

I didn't so much call my magic, as drop the shields I had to put in place so that I wouldn't travel through my day seeing mystical sights. Human psychics and even witches usually have to work at seeing magic, other beings, other realities. I was a part of faerie, and that meant I spent a great deal of energy not seeing magic, not noticing the passing rush of other beings, other realities that had very little to do with my world, my purpose. But magic calls to magic, and without shields in place I could have drowned in the everyday rush of the supernatural that plays over the earth every day.

I dropped the shields and looked with that part of the brain that sees visions and allows you to see dreams. Strangely, it wasn't that big a change in perception, but suddenly I could see better in the dark, and I could see the glowing power of the wards on the window, the walls. And in all that glowing power I saw something through the white drapes. Something small pressed against the window. When I moved the drapes aside, nothing was on the window but the play of pale color from the wards. I looked to one side, using the edge of my sight, my peripheral vision, to look at the glass. There, a small handprint, smaller than the palm of my hand, was etched into the wards on the window. I tried to look closer at it, and it vanished from sight. I forced myself to look sideways at it again, but closer. The handprint was clawed and humanoid, but not human.

I let the drape fall shut, and spoke without turning around. 'Something tried the wards while we slept.'

'Yes,' Doyle said.

'I didn't feel anything,' Rhys said.

Nicca said, 'Me, either.'

Rhys sighed. 'We have failed you, Princess. Doyle's right. We could have gotten you killed.'

I turned and looked at them all, then I stared at Doyle. 'When did you sense the testing of the wards?'

'I came in here to check on you.'

I shook my head. 'No, that's not what I asked. When did you sense that something had tested the wards?'

He faced me, bold. 'I've told you, Princess, only I can keep you safe.'

I shook my head again. 'No good, Doyle. The sidhe never lie, not outright, and you've avoided answering my question twice. Answer me now. For the third time, when did you sense something had tested the wards?'

He looked half-uncomfortable, half-angry. 'When I was whispering in your ear.'

'You saw it through the drapes,' I said.

'Yes.' One clipped, angry word.

Rhys said, 'You didn't know that anything tried to get in. You just came through because you heard Merry moving around.'

Doyle didn't answer, but he didn't need to. The silence was answer enough.

'These wards are my doing, Doyle. I put them up when I moved in to this apartment, and I redo them periodically. It was my magic, my power, that kept this thing out. My power that burned it so that we have its ... fingerprints.'

'Your wards held because it was a small power,' Doyle said. 'Something large would still get through any ward you could put in place.'

'Maybe, but the point is that you didn't know any more than we did. You were just as in the dark as we were.'

'You're not infallible,' Rhys said. 'Nice to know.'

'Is it?' Doyle said. 'Is it really? Then think on this - tonight none of us knew that some creature of faerie crept to this window and tried to get in. None of us sensed it. It

may have been a small power, but it had big help to hide this completely.'

I stared at him. 'You think Cel's people risked his life tonight, by trying to take mine again.'

'Princess, don't you understand the Unseelie Court by now? Cel was the queen's darling, her only heir for centuries. Once she made you co-heir with him, he fell out of favor. Whichever one of you produces a child first will rule the court, but what happens if both of you die? What happens if you are assassinated by Cel's people and the queen is forced to execute Cel for his treachery? She's suddenly without heir.'

'The queen is immortal,' Rhys said. 'She's agreed to step down only for Merry or Cel.'

'And if someone can plot the death of both Prince Cel and Princess Meredith, do you really think they will stop at the death of a queen?'

We all stared at him. It was Nicca who spoke, voice soft. 'No one would risk the queen's anger.'

'They would if they thought they wouldn't get caught,' Doyle said.

'Who would be that arrogant?' Rhys asked.

Doyle laughed, a surprised bray of sound that startled us all. 'Who would be arrogant enough? Rhys, you are a noble of the sidhe courts. The better question would be who would not be arrogant enough?'

'Say what you like, Doyle,' Nicca said, 'most of the nobles fear the queen, fear her greatly, fear her much more than they fear Cel. You have been her champion for eons. You don't know what's it like to be at her mercy.'

'I do,' I said. They all turned to me. 'I agree with Nicca. I don't know anyone but Cel who would risk his mother's anger.'

'We are immortal, Princess. We have the luxury of biding our time. Who knows what tricky serpent has been waiting

centuries until the queen was weak. If she is forced to kill her only son, she will be weak.'

'I'm not immortal, Doyle, so I can't speak for that kind of patience or cunning. All we know for certain is that something tried the wards tonight, and it will bear a burn on its hand, or paw, or whatever, a mark. It can be matched just like fingerprints.'

'I've seen wards set up to harm something that tries to break them, or even mark the intruder with a scar or burn, but I've never seen anyone take imprints before,' Rhys said.

'It was clever,' Doyle said. Which from him was a great compliment.

'Thank you.' I frowned at him. 'If you've never seen anyone do something like this with a ward, how did you know what you were seeing through the drapes?'

'Rhys said that he had never seen anything like it. I did not say that.'

'Where else did you see it?'

'I am an assassin, a hunter, Princess. Tracks are a very good thing to have.'

'The print on its hand will match this, but it won't leave tracks as it travels.'

Doyle gave a small shrug. 'A pity, it would have been useful.'

'You can make a creature of faerie leave magical tracks?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'But they would see them with their own magic and ruin the spell.'

He shrugged. 'I've never found the world big enough to hide quarry that I tracked.'

'You're always so... perfect,' I said.

He glanced past me at the window. 'No, my princess, I fear I am not perfect, and our enemies, whoever they may be, know that now.'

The breeze had become a wind, billowing out the white drapes. I could see the small-clawed print frozen in the glittering magic. I was half a continent away from the nearest faerie stronghold. I'd thought L.A. was far enough away to keep us safe, but I guess if someone really wants you dead, they'll catch a plane or something with wings. After years of exile I finally had a little slice of home with me. Home never really changed. It had always been lovely, erotic, and very, very dangerous.

## Chapter 2

THE WINDOWS OF my office showed a nearly faultless sky, like somebody had taken a single blue cornflower petal and stretched it to fill the air above us. It was one of the most perfect skies I'd ever seen over Los Angeles. The buildings of downtown sparkled in the sunlight. Today was one of those rare days that allows people to pretend that L.A. sits in an eternal summer where the sun shines constantly, the water is always blue and warm, and everyone is beautiful and smiling. Truth is that not everyone is beautiful; some people are downright grumpy (L.A. still has one of the highest homicide rates in the country, which is pretty grumpy if you think about it); the ocean is more grey than blue; and the water is always cold. The only people who go into Southern California waters without a wetsuit in December are tourists. We actually do get rain occasionally, and the smog is worse than any cloud cover I've ever seen. In fact, this was the prettiest, most truly summery day I'd seen in over three years. It must happen more often than that for the myth to survive. Or maybe people just need some magical golden place to believe in, and Southern California seems to be that for some people. Easier to get to and less dangerous than faerie, I guess.

I actually hated to waste such a beautiful day inside. I mean, I was a princess; didn't that mean I didn't have to work? Nope. But I was a faerie princess; didn't that mean I could just wish for gold and it would magically appear? I wish. The title, like so many royal titles, came with very little in the way of money, land, or power. If I actually

became queen, that would change; until then, I was on my own. Well, not exactly on my own.

Doyle sat in a chair by the windows almost directly behind me, as I sat at my desk. He was dressed as he'd been last night, except he'd added a black leather jacket over the T-shirt and a pair of black wraparound sunglasses. The brilliant sunlight sparkled in all those silver hoops and made the diamond studs in his earlobes positively dance, sending tiny rainbows across my desk. Most bodyguards would have worried more about the door than the windows. We were twenty-three stories up, after all. But the things Doyle guarded me against were as likely to fly as to walk. The creature that had left its tiny pawprint on my window had either crawled like a spider or flown.

I sat at my desk with sunlight pressing warm against my back; a rainbow from Doyle's diamond sat on my clasped hands, bringing out the green in my fingernail polish. The polish matched my jacket and the short skirt that was hidden under the desk. The sunlight and the emerald green cloth brought out the red in my hair so that it looked like spun rubies. The color also brought out the green and gold of my tricolored irises, and I'd chosen eye shadow to bring out more of the green and gold. The lipstick was red. I was all color and joyous light. One of the good things about not having to pretend to be human was I didn't have to hide the hair, the eyes, the luminous skin. I was so tired my eyes burned, and we still had no clue what, or who, had come to my window last night. So I'd dressed up for the office, just a little extra makeup, a little extra sparkle. If I died today, at least I'd look good. I'd also added a small, four-inch knife. It was strapped to my upper thigh so the metal hilt touched my bare skin. Just the touch of steel or iron could make it harder for any fey to do magic against me. After last night Doyle had thought it wise, and I hadn't argued.

I had my legs politely crossed, not because of the client sitting across from me, but because a man was under my

desk, hiding in the cave that it made. Well, not man, goblin. His skin was moonlight white, as pale as my own or Rhys's, or Frost's, for that matter. The thick, softly curling black hair cut short was the perfect blackness of Doyle's hair. He was only four feet tall, a perfect male doll, except for the stripe of iridescent scales down his back, and the huge almond-shaped eyes a blue as perfect as the day's sky, but with striped elliptical pupils like a snake's. Inside his perfect cupid-bow mouth were retractable fangs and a long forked tongue that made him lisp unless he concentrated. Kitto wasn't doing well in the big city. He seemed to feel best when he could touch me, huddle at my feet, sit in my lap, curl against me while I slept. He'd been banished from my bedroom last night because Rhys wouldn't tolerate him. Goblins had taken Rhys's eye a few thousand years ago, and he'd never forgiven them for it. Rhys tolerated Kitto outside the bedroom, but that was about all.

Rhys stood in the far corner near the door where Doyle had ordered him to stand. His clothing was almost completely hidden under an expensive white trench coat just like Humphrey Bogart used to wear, except that it was made out of silk and was more for looking at than keeping off the weather. Rhys loved the fact that we were private detectives, and he usually wore either the trench coat or one of his growing collection of fedoras to work. He'd added his daywear eye patch. This one was white to match his clothes and his hair, with a pattern of tiny seed pearls sewn into it.

Kitto smoothed a hand over my hose-clad ankle. He wasn't trying to be overly friendly; he just needed the comfort of touching me. My first client of the day sat across from me, from us. Jeffery Maison was just under six feet tall, broad shouldered, narrow waisted, and designer suited, with blunt-fingered hands manicured and brown hair perfectly coifed. His smile was that bright perfect whiteness that only expensive dental work can create. He



was handsome, but in an unremarkable bland sort of way. If he'd paid for surgery, he'd wasted his money, because it was the kind of face you recognized as attractive but you'd never remember it. Two minutes after he walked out the door you'd have a hard time remembering any one feature. If he'd been wearing less-expensive clothing, I'd have said he was a wanna-be actor, but wanna-bes couldn't afford perfectly tailored designer-name suits.

The perfect smile never faltered, but his eyes flicked behind me, and the eyes weren't smiling. The eyes were worried. His gaze kept flicking to Doyle, and it seemed an effort not to look behind him at Rhys. Jeffery Maison was very unhappy about the two guards being in the room. It wasn't just the feeling that most men got around my guards, the feeling that if it came to a fight, they'd lose badly. No, Mr Maison talked about privacy; after all I was a private detective, not a public one. He'd been so unhappy that it was tempting to have Kitto bounce out from beneath the desk and yell 'Boo.' I didn't do it. It wouldn't have been professional. But I amused myself with the thought while I tried to get Jeffery Maison to stop harping on the guards and actually mention something that might be job related.

Only when Doyle had said in his deep rolling voice that it was an interview with either all of us or none of us had Maison gone quiet. Too quiet, he'd sat and smiled but told me nothing.

Oh, he'd talked. 'I've never seen anyone whose true hair color was Sidhe Scarlet. It's like your hair is made of rubies.'

I'd smiled, nodded, tried to get down to business. 'Thank you, Mr Maison, but what brings you to the Grey Detective Agency?'

He opened that perfectly detailed mouth and tried one last time. 'I was instructed to speak with you in private, Ms NicEssus.'

‘I prefer Ms Gentry. NicEssus means daughter of Essus. It’s more a title than a name.’

The smile was nervous, and the eyes looked self-deprecating, golly shucks ma’am. It had the feel of a look he practiced in the mirror. ‘Sorry, I’m not accustomed to dealing with faerie princesses.’ He flashed me the full smile, the one that filled his eyes with good, clean humor, and a deeper flash of something else, something I could pursue or ignore. That one look was enough. I was pretty sure how Jeffery was paying for the designer suits.

‘Princesses are rather rare these days,’ I said, smiling, trying to be pleasant. But truth was, I hadn’t gotten much sleep and I was tired. If we could just get Jeffery to go away, maybe we could have a coffee break.

‘The green of your jacket brings out the green and gold in your eyes. I’ve never seen anyone with tricolored irises before,’ he said, and the smile warmed.

Rhys laughed from his corner, not even bothering to try to turn it into a cough. Rhys was as versed in surviving at court as I was. ‘I’ve got a tricolored iris, but you haven’t told me how pretty I am.’ Rhys was right; it was time to stop being polite.

‘I didn’t know I was supposed to.’ He looked confused, a genuine, unpracticed look at last.

I uncrossed my legs and leaned forward, hands clasped on my desk. Kitto’s hand slid up my calf, but he stopped at my knee. We’d had a talk about what the limits were if he hid under the desk, and the limits were my knees. Above that line and he had to go home. ‘Mr Maison, we’ve delayed our day and rearranged a number of appointments to accommodate you. We have been polite and professional, and complimenting me on my beauty is neither polite nor professional.’

He looked uncertain, but his eyes were probably the most sincere they’d been since he stepped through the door. ‘I thought it was considered polite to compliment the

fey on their appearance. I was told that it was a deadly insult to ignore a fey when they are obviously trying to be attractive.'

I stared at him. He'd finally done something truly interesting. 'Most people don't know that much about fey culture, Mr Maison. How is it that you know?'

'My employer wanted to be sure that I would give no offense. Was I supposed to compliment the men, as well? She didn't tell me I was supposed to do that.'

She. I knew his employer was female. It was the most information I'd gotten from him the entire time he'd been sitting across from me. 'Who is she?' I asked.

He looked at Rhys, at me, eyes flicking to Doyle, and then finally back to me. 'I am under express orders to tell only you, Ms Gentry. I ... I don't know what to do.'

Well, that was honest. I felt a little sorry for him; Jeffery was obviously not good at thinking on his feet. And that was being charitable.

'Why don't you call your employer,' Doyle said. Jeffery jumped at the sound of that deep, rich voice. I didn't jump; I shivered. His voice was tremblingly low, a sound that made my insides quiver. I let out a low breath, as Doyle said, 'Tell your employer what's happened, and maybe she can come up with a solution.'

Rhys laughed again. Doyle gave him a less-than-friendly look, and Rhys stopped laughing, though he had to cover his face with his hand and cough. I didn't care. I had the feeling that if we made fun of Jeffery, we'd be here all damn day.

I turned the desk phone around to face him. I pressed the code to get him an outside line and handed the buzzing receiver to him. 'Call your boss, Jeffery. We all want to get on with our day, right?' I'd used his first name deliberately. Some people respond to the respect of titles, Mr and Ms, but some people need bullying to get them moving, and one way to bully is to use their first name.

He took the receiver and punched buttons. He said, 'Hi, Marie, yes, I need to talk to her.' A few seconds of silence, then he sat a little straighter, and said, 'I'm sitting across from her right now. She has two bodyguards with her, and they refuse to leave. Do I talk in front of them or just leave?'

We all waited as he made small hmm noises, yes, no; finally he hung the phone back up. He sat back in his chair, hands folded in his lap, a slightly worried look on his handsome face. 'My employer says I may tell you her request but not her name, not yet anyway.'

I raised eyebrows and made a helpful face. 'Tell us.'

He gave one last nervous glance at Doyle, then let out a long breath. 'My employer is in a rather delicate situation. She wishes to talk with you but says that your ...' He frowned, groping for an appropriate word. It looked like it might take a while so I helped him.

'My guards.'

He smiled, obviously relieved. 'Yes, yes, your guards would have to know sooner or later, so sooner it is.' He seemed inordinately pleased with himself for that one small sentence. No, thinking wasn't Jeffery's forte.

'Why doesn't she just come into the office and speak with us?'

The happy smile faded, and he looked perplexed again. Puzzling Jeffery slowed things down; I wanted to speed things up. The trouble was, he was so easily puzzled, I couldn't figure out how to avoid it.

'My employer is afraid of the publicity surrounding you, Ms Gentry.'

I didn't have to ask him what he meant. At that very moment a pack of reporters, both print and film, was camped out in front of the office building. We kept the drapes closed at the apartment for fear of telephoto lenses.

How could the media resist a royal prodigal daughter coming home after being given up for dead? That alone

would have earned some uncomfortable scrutiny, but add a huge dose of romance, and the media couldn't get enough of me, or should I say, us? The public story was I'd come out of hiding to find a husband among the royal court. The traditional way for a royal of the high court to find a spouse was to sleep with them. Then if she became pregnant, she married; if not, she didn't. The fey don't have many children; the royals have even fewer, so a pairing, even a love match, that doesn't produce children isn't good enough. If you don't breed, you don't get to marry.

Andais had ruled the Unseelie Court for over a thousand years. My father had once said that being queen meant more to her than anything else in the world. Yet, she'd promised to step down if either Cel or I would just produce an heir. Like I said, children are very important to the sidhe.

That was the public story. It hid a lot, like the fact that Cel had tried to kill me and was even now being punished for it. There was lots the media didn't know, and the queen wanted it kept that way, so we kept it that way.

My aunt told me that she wanted an heir of her own bloodline, even if that blood was tainted like mine. She once tried to drown me as a child because I wasn't magic enough and thus, to her, I wasn't really sidhe, though I wasn't really human either. It was good to keep my aunt happy; her happy meant fewer people died.

'I can understand your employer not wanting to get caught up in the media circus outside,' I said.

Jeffery gave me that brilliant smile again, but his eyes were relieved not lustful. 'Then you'll agree to meet with my employer someplace more private.'

'The princess will not meet your employer alone anywhere,' Doyle said.

Jeffery shook his head. 'No, I understand that now. My employer simply wants to avoid the media.'

‘Short of using spells that are illegal against the media,’ I said, ‘I don’t see how we could possibly avoid them all.’

Jeffery was back to frowning again. I sighed. I just wanted Jeffery to go away at this point. Surely the next client of the day would be less confusing, Goddess willing. My boss Jeremy Grey had a nonrefundable retainer. We had more business than we knew what to do with. Maybe I could just tell Jeffery Maison to go home.

‘I’m not allowed to say my employer’s name out loud. She said that would mean something to you.’

I shrugged. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Maison, but it doesn’t.’

His frown deepened. ‘She was very sure that it would.’

I shook my head. ‘I am sorry, Mr Maison.’ I stood up. Kitto’s hand slid down my leg so that he could hide himself completely in the little cave that my desk made. He didn’t melt in sunlight, contrary to folklore, but he was agoraphobic.

‘Please,’ Jeffrey said. ‘Please, I’m sure it’s because I’m not saying it right.’

I crossed my arms under my breasts and did not sit back down. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Maison, but we’ve all had a long morning, too long a morning to play twenty questions. Either tell us something concrete about your employer’s problem, or find another private detective firm.’

He put his hand out, almost touching the desk, then let his hand fall back to his well-tailored lap. ‘My employer wishes to see people of her own kind again.’ He stared at me as if willing me to finally catch on.

I frowned at him. ‘What do you mean, people of her own kind?’

He frowned, clearly out of his depth, but doggedly trying. ‘My employer isn’t human, Ms Gentry, she’s ... very aware of what high-court fey are capable of.’ His voice was hushed but sort of pleading, as if he’d given me the biggest hint he was allowed to give me, and he hoped I’d figure it out.