

CHAPTER 1

My breath puffed out in angry little clouds as I shivered under the star-streaked sky that stretched above my patch of frozen mountain. Jaw clenched, I shoved a key into the lock on my front door with enough force to jerk the purse off my shoulder. It slid down, snagging at my elbow, and the shift in weight jostled the dome-covered cake balanced in my other hand.

I couldn't believe James had stood me up again. After all his promises. Twenty minutes standing outside his house. Then a quick call about unavoidable business at the gallery. Sure he'd apologized, given me his usual line about making it up to me "another time." But another time never seemed to come for James and me.

I twisted the keys. Those not in the lock dug into my palm.

Another time. If he said those words again, I was going to run him over with my Jeep.

The door stuck, swollen by moisture. I growled and pushed harder, hissing when my weight settled onto the freshly re-knit muscles of my right leg. I gave the door another shove, and it finally gave way, slamming into the adjoining wall with a *bang*, my keys still dangling from the lock.

I froze in the doorway. My living room was occupied.

I'd been looking forward to curling up with my cake and my anger. Habits formed through years of solitude were hard to break, and I still wasn't used to having roommates. Company was going to put a serious crimp in my plans.

Kai and Chase were sitting across from each other on my faded furniture, cards and poker chips on the coffee table between them. Neither seemed surprised by my dramatic entrance.

"You're home early." Kai glanced in my direction, and his eyes were swirling galaxies of color rather than the deep brown of his glamour—the human disguise he wore less and less these days. He was a fae knight from the Realm of Enchantment who'd been living in my guest room for about a month, most of which was spent saving the world from a murderer with a magic, world-eating box. He

cradled a hand of cards to his chest so his opponent couldn't cheat. "Didn't think we'd see you till much later."

"Or tomorrow," added Chase without looking up.

I'd let Chase into my home when I thought he was just a cat, before I knew he was actually a fae who could change form at will. I let him stay because he saved my life. Of course, when I made that deal, the understanding was that he'd remain the gray tabby I'd taken in last summer, but he'd been spending more time with fingers than fur lately.

"Call." He dumped a handful of colorful plastic chips onto the pile already on the table.

"Yeah well . . ." I pulled my key out of the door and kicked it closed behind me. "Plans change."

Chase glanced up and raised a silver eyebrow over one luminous green eye. "You've replaced James with a cake?"

The plastic dome I hugged gave a clear view of the decadent chocolate cake I'd picked up on my way home.

"This is my consolation prize." I lifted my chin and carried the calorie-laden confection to the high counter that separated the kitchen from the living room. "Don't judge me."

"Let me guess." Chase tossed his long silver braid behind his shoulder, making his pointed, slightly furry ears twitch. "Something came up."

"Again," Kai added. He spread his cards on the table. "Two pair."

"Full house," Chase said with a grin. He scooped up his winnings.

Kai looked over at me. "It's important to know when to fold."

I'd been thinking the same thing all the long drive home. I'd done my best with James. I'd really put myself out there. But after all the excuses, and conflicting schedules, and missed dates. . . . I'd been down this road enough to know where it ended. I'd had my fill of waiting for men who never showed up. Still, I wasn't about to give Kai the satisfaction of an "I told you so."

I crossed my arms and dropped onto the couch next to Kai. “That little tip just lost you a piece of cake.”

His smile went slack. Kai had the biggest sweet tooth I’d ever seen. “You’ll get fat if you eat it all on your own.”

I gestured to Chase, who was stacking his winnings into neat little piles. “Chase can help me.”

Chase shook his head. “Cats don’t eat chocolate.”

“They don’t normally eat pizza either, but that’s never stopped you.” I “accidentally” nudged the coffee table with my knee, sending Chase’s carefully stacked poker chips cascading across the surface.

“Hey! Don’t get pissy at me just because your old stiff couldn’t follow through.”

“James is *not* an old stiff,” I said. “He’s refined. Something you wouldn’t understand.”

He snorted. “Whatever you say.”

I turned to Kai. “Back me up here.”

“Will it earn me some cake?”

“Ha,” roared Chase. “Spineless elf.”

“Mangy stray,” Kai shot back.

Chase took a bow and began to melt, shrinking and shifting until a gray tabby sat on the faded beige cushion of Chase’s chair.

Sighing, I lifted a blue poker chip and rolled it over my knuckles. “What were you betting?”

Kai tipped his head to one side and frowned. “Little bits of colored plastic, obviously.”

I rolled my eyes and tossed the chip back on the pile. “The chips are usually backed by money, but I guess you and Chase aren’t exactly rolling in human cash.”

“Actually, I received my first paycheck last week.”

When Kai made the decision to stick around the mortal realm to instruct me in all things fae, he also started working part-time at a convenience store owned by a registered halfer who owed him a

favor. The job was dull, but necessary to get a work visa from the PTF—the Paranatural Task Force that policed interactions between humans and fae—which was the only way a full-blooded fae could legally stay in the human realm.

“Congratulations.”

“I’ve been thinking about what to do with it, though I hadn’t considered rolling in it. I believe humans have a custom of paying a portion of the expense of shared living space, so I thought I might do that.”

“You mean rent?”

He thrust a finger at me. “Exactly. What do I owe you?”

I lifted one shoulder. “On the house.”

“Yes. What do I owe on the house?”

I rolled my eyes. “It means forget about it. I don’t need your money.”

“Are we not roommates?”

“Sure, but it’s not like this is a permanent arrangement. We haven’t even talked about what happens after my trip to court.” My breath hitched, as it often did when anyone mentioned my summons to the fae Court of Enchantment. Kai had convinced the powers-that-be—namely my long-lost great-grandfather—that I wasn’t ready, hence his new job as my personal tutor. But we had no idea how long the arrangement would last. Maybe I’d never be ready for life among the fae.

He frowned. “I still feel I should contribute.”

“How about groceries? Between you and Chase, the fridge is almost always empty.”

“Deal.” He thrust out his hand and I shook it, trying not to laugh at his triumphant expression.

Chase, who’d been watching our exchange, perked up at the word “groceries.” Once the deal was struck, he sprang into my lap and nuzzled his head against my chin.

Without thinking, I stroked his back and scratched around his ears.

“You know that’s still Chase, right?” Kai watched us with a mixture of amusement and frustration. “You shouldn’t treat him differently just because he looks like a cat.”

I shrugged. “I can’t help it.”

Kai made a disgusted noise and scooped the cat out of my lap, dropping him unceremoniously to the floor. Chase gave an indignant hiss and sauntered off.

“If you can’t even deal with that riffraff, how do you expect to get by at court?”

I nibbled a piece of loose cuticle and hunched deeper into the sagging couch cushion, wishing for the millionth time that life could go back to the way it was before Kai showed up at my door. Back when I thought I was human.

Most halfers—fae-human hybrids—returned to their regular lives after registering with the PTF, but that wasn’t an option for me. Unlike the vast majority of fae offspring, I wasn’t allergic to metal. Hell, it was how I made my living. And according to Kai, there was only one bloodline capable of producing fae that could handle iron. That was why Kai was still there, why I had to take faerie protocol lessons, and why Uncle Sol, the man who’d raised me since a car crash killed my mom, was doing his best to keep my name off the PTF registry.

I rubbed the intricate tattoo that wound its way up my right arm. Learning I was the by-blow of a fae-human love affair untold generations ago had been a hard pill to swallow. Finding out I was royal had been a kick in the head.

“I still don’t see why I have to go. Your mission was a success, the killer was brought to justice, and gramps got back his magic death-box. Why can’t we just leave it at that and all go our merry ways?”

Kai pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’ve gone over this. There is no going back. The gift my lord gave you to boost your powers also marked you as his blood-kin. There’s no hiding who you are now.”

“I could hide just fine if I stayed here,” I argued. “But parading around a fae court with the Lord of Enchantment is going to make me pretty damn conspicuous.”

There was a time I would have been happy to have a long-lost relative come and claim me, as any orphan would, but I held no delusion that he’d found me out of kinship or caring. I was one of only three living imbuers—a rare gift. No fae would pass up his claim to an imbuer, regardless of how tenuous the connection or how weak the blood of the halfer.

Kai rolled his eyes—an expression I was pretty sure he’d picked up from me. “You’re a member of the court now, like it or not. If you don’t go to them they will eventually come to you, and I guarantee you would not enjoy that experience. In either case, learning our customs and traditions is the best way to protect yourself. Besides, there’s no one in this world or any other who can instruct you in the art of imbuing as well as my lord.”

I crossed my arms, frowning. “My abilities are fine the way they are.”

Truth be told, there was a lot I still had to learn about my powers, and magic in general, but that was the one subject Kai had steadfastly refused to cover. Mostly our sessions consisted of mind-numbing etiquette and history lessons, although he’d recently begun teaching me how to fight with a sword.

“It’s important for you to understand how the fae world works before you take your place in it. To that end . . .” He picked up an old leather-bound book from a pile on the floor and held it out. “A little light reading before bed.”

“Haven’t I suffered enough tonight?”

“It’s the chronicle of your family tree. I thought you might be interested to see where you came from.”

“I know where I come from,” I snapped, but I took the proffered tome just the same.

“You know less about yourself than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind.” He waved his hand as if wiping the words away. “I’m turning in. I have an early shift at the store tomorrow.”

“How’s that going, by the way?”

He shrugged. “I play tricks on the customers to entertain myself when it’s slow.”

My jaw dropped. “If someone reports you, your visa will be revoked. You’ll be deported back to the reservation.”

“Don’t worry.” He grinned. “Humans haven’t got a clue.”

I scowled. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

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I woke feeling sluggish and heavy, as though my bones and muscles had turned to jelly in the night. The dusty tome Kai had given me was a weight on my chest, pages crumpled from its fall. I smoothed the bent corners and pressed the cover flat, running a hand over an embossed coat of arms. A stylized flame sat at the center of an eight-pointed star, crossed with a sword and hammer.

My eyelids sagged, but a flash of silver in the pre-dawn light drew my attention. Shifting slightly, I peeked over a mound of crumpled covers to a waterfall of silver hair that stopped just shy of covering the naked butt of the man lying next to me.

“Chase!” I lurched away with a shriek, grabbing the sheets as I tumbled to the floor. Struggling to my knees, I clutched the tangled fabric to my chest and glared over the side of the bed.

With a yawn, Chase rolled onto his back and stretched from fingertips to toes.

My face became a furnace. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I *was* sleeping.” He scratched a hand over his chest, across his abdomen, and—

I jerked my eyes back to his face. “Get out of my bed!”

“You seemed lonely. I thought you could use a little company. Besides, you didn’t have any objections last night.” He closed his eyes and seemed to doze off again.

Bunching my fists in the sheet to stop from strangling him, I counted to ten. Then I grabbed the pillow and yanked it out from under his head.

“What the—”

I swung the pillow.

“Get. Out. Of. My. Room.” Each word was punctuated by a smack from the pillow as he struggled into a sitting position.

“Stop that!” He grabbed my wrist.

“Get out!”

“What’s going on in here?” Kai stood in the doorway, rubbing sleep from his kaleidoscopic eyes.

I looked from Kai, dressed in a pair of Buzz Lightyear pajama pants that hung low on his skinny hips, to Chase, naked in my bed, and wondered, not for the first time, what had happened to the quiet, solitary life I’d enjoyed only a month before.

Shaking my head, I gritted my teeth and growled, “Everybody out.”

Chase tugged on my wrist enough to plant a soft kiss on the inside of my arm, then let go with a laugh. He sprang off the bed before I could react, melting and shifting as he sailed through the air so it was the silent paws of a gray tabby that hit the floor at Kai’s feet and bolted out of the room.

“None of my business.” Kai smirked and pulled the door closed.

I let out an inarticulate scream of frustration and threw my pillow at the closed door, then I flopped onto the bed with a groan. Was it too late to revoke the offer to let them stay?

Twenty minutes later, I sipped steaming tea and watched snowflakes flit through the air from my favorite chair by the front window. Morning had brought with it a flurry of snow, filling the sky with white and blanketing the land in silence. Towering pines and the bare branches of aspens stood sentry around my property, cloaked in winter. The landscape did wonders to soothe my thoughts as the dim glow of the sun rose above the treetops to brighten the overcast sky.

Kai strolled into the living room in loose sweats and a Grateful Dead t-shirt. He headed straight for the dining table, which was covered with books and papers, and clapped his hands. “Ready to review your etiquette?”

“And I was having such a nice morning.” I drained the last of my tea and took my cup to the sink. “Weren’t we supposed to have sword practice today?”

Those lessons I actually enjoyed, and unlike knowing the proper depth of a bow to make to a member of the fae court depending on their rank in relation to my own, sword skills might actually be useful in the real world.

“You need to focus more on your weaker areas. You’re a terrible swordsman, but you can probably manage not to die long enough for help to arrive. On the other hand, you will almost certainly insult someone important within moments of your arrival at court, and that can be just as deadly.”

“I’m not that bad at the sword,” I pouted.

“Not for someone with a week and a half of training,” he conceded. “But most fae have had hundreds of years to practice. By our standards, you’re a toddler with a pointy stick and no motor control.”

“Ouch.”

He shrugged. “You know I can’t lie.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to be so honest,” I grumbled.

“Look, we—” Kai cut off mid-sentence. His head snapped around and he stared at the front door in wide-eyed horror. “Oh no.”

“What is it?” I sprang to my feet, adrenaline coursing through me. I hadn’t heard anything, and there were no cars in sight through the large window that overlooked the front of my property.

“Alex.” He grabbed me by the shoulders, pulling me to face him. “You need to remember everything I’ve taught you.”

“What are you—”

A sharp knock sounded against the door, and Kai practically flew across the room to open it, leaving me to stagger after him.