

## **Embraced in Darkness**

by  
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### **Chapter 1**

Hunter pulled his leather coat tightly closed and surreptitiously tucked his hands under his armpits. The breeze held a sharp November bite, and he had enough mortal blood in him to feel the cold keenly. He wished his mother had waited for spring to engage in this latest round of Court intrigue.

He slanted a glance in her direction. She was sitting beside him on the bench in Rittenhouse Square, looking serene and regal and not the least bit cold. The heavy mink coat that draped her body was for effect only. She must have felt his eyes on her, for she turned her head his direction.

Hunter abruptly looked away. No one, not even her son, wished to be the recipient of the full attention of the Queen of Air and Darkness.

“Are you growing impatient, my son?” she asked.

Her voice had a brittle, unsettling edge to it, and it chilled him more than the cold air. But showing fear in front of her was like waving a bloody steak before a wolf, so he stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankles, and tried to look bored. “We’ve been out here almost an hour,” he said, not looking at her. “When is this little morsel going to make an appearance?”

“Sooner than you think.”

Hunter sat up abruptly and turned to see his mother smiling at someone in the distance. It was the same smile she wore when she ordered a particularly gruesome execution, and he felt an instant of pity for the recipient of that smile. Then, he followed her gaze.

His eyes were drawn instantly to the woman who held his

mother’s attention. “Is that her?” he asked. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Queen nod. He pulled the brim of his hat down so that he could regard the target more closely without being seen.

His first impression was that she was rather unprepossessing. She was wearing an ill-fitted padded coat that hid any shape she might have had, and her cheeks were apple red from the cold. Her jeans were threadbare, but not in a fashionable way, more in an about-to-fall-apart way. Frizzy red curls peeked out from under an ugly knit hat pulled down all the way to her ears, and a mismatched knit scarf was wrapped around her throat. Warm she might be, but he wondered if she’d ever seen herself in the mirror in that get-up.

She must have inherited more than her fair share of her mother’s genes, Hunter decided. He couldn’t discern even a passing resemblance to Finvarra, the High King of the Daoine Sidhe. He cocked his head at his mother. “Are you certain she’s Finvarra’s get?” he asked.

The Queen smiled savagely. “Quite certain, my son. From what I’ve heard, he was staggering drunk the night he sired her. I suspect he never even noticed her mother’s face, being entirely absorbed with her . . . other charms.”

Hunter made a face at the thought. On a number of occasions after a successful hunt, he’d celebrated by visiting bars in the mortal world. He’d gotten pretty drunk a number of times, but never so drunk that he would accidentally bed someone ugly. The target—Kiera Malone—sat down on a bench only a few yards away, pulling a book from the pocket of her coat.

“The woman must be mad,” he muttered under his breath. No one in her right mind would sit out in this cold just to read. His own feet felt like lumps of ice in his heavy boots, and he suspected his lips were an unappealing shade of blue.

“Well?” the Queen prompted.

Hunter shrugged. “Ordinarily I wouldn’t give her a second glance,” he said with a faint curl of his lip. “But I doubt bedding her will be overly unpleasant.”

The Queen snorted. “I was not enquiring about your enthusiasm for your mission. I was asking if you thought you could manage it.”

Hunter sat up straight and turned a glare on her, hating that she knew so easily how to goad him. “Of course I can manage it!” he snapped. “She’s homely enough that she’ll be panting like a dog the moment I turn on the charm.” He had yet to meet a mortal woman he couldn’t seduce. The slump of this one’s shoulders, and a certain pinched look about her eyes, suggested a loneliness he could easily exploit.

The Queen’s eyes glittered dangerously at his tone of voice, and Hunter tensed. That glitter usually preceded a particularly painful disciplinary action. But he was so used to her discipline that he was almost inured to it. Almost.

“I will have difficulty performing my duties if I am in pain,” he told her in a mild, bland voice that sounded much calmer than he actually was. Only a fool would be calm when the Queen of Air and Darkness was angry with him.

Her cold, beautiful face broke into a smile that did nothing to warm her aspect. “Why, Hunter, dear, what makes you think I would hurt you?”

His insides twisted at the malevolence of her gaze. Being her son offered no protection, although other members of the Unseelie Court grumbled about perceived privileges. Hunter had known from the time he was a little boy that she would not hesitate to execute him—slowly and painfully—if he ever

displeased her. Just as she had executed his father when the foolish mortal had tried to take Hunter away from the Unseelie Court.

It took all Hunter’s effort to keep his hatred from showing on his face. No matter what he said or did, she would undoubtedly keep him alive and relatively unharmed until he had done her wishes and fathered a child on Finvarra’s bastard daughter. But he rather hoped to be kept alive afterward as well. So he fought the hatred that roiled within him, fought to keep his expression bland and thereby soothe her ire.

The Queen reached out and touched his cheek with her bare hand. He knew better than to pull away, no matter how much the touch of her hand made his skin crawl.

“My beautiful son,” she murmured, with something that could almost be taken for affection if he didn’t know better. “You will have Finvarra’s bastard flat on her back in no time, I’m sure of it.”

He nodded in tacit agreement, using the gesture to free himself from her touch. He raised his eyes for a moment to glance once more at the target.

She was looking right at him, and he froze like a rabbit. There was something odd about her gaze, something strangely knowing. His pulse quickened and he found himself unable to look away. Had he doubted for a moment that Faerie blood flowed in her veins, the otherworldly look in her eyes quelled that doubt. Then she blinked and turned away, frowning, and she looked once more like the mortal woman she was.

“Let us prepare you for the attack,” the Queen said, rising gracefully from the bench.

Two goblins, clothed in Faerie glamour that made them look

like street-dwelling mortals, rose from nearby benches, darting suspicious glances around the square as if assassins might be lurking behind any tree. When the Queen strode purposefully toward the apartment building where Kiera lived, Hunter hurried to follow, the goblins falling into step behind them. They were the Queen's bodyguard, but Hunter couldn't help feeling like they were in equal part his own jailors, keeping him trapped in his mother's company when his soul screamed for release.

Kiera tried to focus her attention back on her book, but her eyes kept straying. The man who had caught her eye stood on the border of the square, waiting to cross the street. She could see only his back now, but his image was still clear in her mind's eye: dark blue eyes that looked sad and haunted, pale skin that should have reddened in the cold but didn't, hair so dark it blended with the black leather of his coat so she couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

He was crossing the street now, walking just behind a tall, elegant woman wearing a full-length mink coat. Kiera was surprised no one had egged her yet. But she remembered the woman's face too, remembered the beauty of those patrician features, and the aura of power that radiated from her. When Kiera tried to imagine someone tossing an egg on that monstrosity of a coat, her mind rebelled and she actually shivered.

*What an odd reaction*, she thought. When she noticed the pair of them entering the lobby of her apartment building, she felt even more uneasy. Wondering at herself, Kiera dog-eared her page and stuck the book back in her coat pocket.

Being self-employed and working from her home, it was too

easy to turn into a recluse, so she forced herself to venture out at least once a day. Today, she had crossed to a coffee shop on the other side of the square, sitting in a plush couch sipping espresso and reading her book until she'd felt suddenly antsy. Not sure whether that was just the effect of too much espresso, she'd thought to sit out in the cold air for a while to refresh her mind.

Now, she didn't know what to do. It was colder out than she'd realized, and she very much wanted to go inside. Besides, she had work to do today. But for reasons she didn't want to examine too closely, she didn't want to go into her building while the woman in the mink coat was in there. She licked her chapped lips, wondering if her body could take another espresso. Maybe a decaf. But then the woman in the mink coat emerged from Kiera's building, striding off toward Walnut Street. She seemed to have attracted the attention of a couple of street bums, who followed about five yards behind. Kiera didn't imagine the woman would take kindly to panhandling.

The cold now seeping into her bones despite the fluffy coat and the heavy wool sweater she wore underneath, Kiera hurried across the street, her face tucked into her scarf to protect her cheeks and lips from the biting wind. She pulled the scarf down when she stepped through the glass doorway, flashing her habitual smile at the doorman.

"Thank you," she said as he held the door for her, and was rewarded with the warmth of an answering smile.

When she'd been dating Jon, he had needled her about saying "thank you" to the doorman every single time she passed through the doorway. He'd thought it excessive courtesy, but she couldn't bring herself to walk through without acknowledgment. She even waved to Carl, the ancient man who sat at the front

desk. He didn't respond to her greeting, and she realized he had nodded off, his chin tucked against his chest. She smiled and shook her head, but didn't have the heart to wake him.

When Kiera stepped into the cranky old elevator, she immediately noticed an unusual scent. There had been many a day when she'd ridden the elevator holding her breath because someone had apparently bathed in perfume, but this scent was different. The doors slid closed, and the elevator groaned and grumbled a bit before grudgingly beginning its ascent. Kiera closed her eyes and inhaled. Bay leaves and sandalwood and something else she couldn't define. Not a food scent, but like no perfume or cologne she'd ever smelled before.

Kiera reluctantly opened her eyes when the elevator dinged to let her know she'd reached her floor. Sighing, she stepped out, the tantalizing scent seeming to follow her to her door.

The uneasiness that had plagued her from the moment she'd set eyes on that man in the square showed no sign of going away. She tried to ignore it as she shed her heavy winter wear and sat in front of her computer. She really needed to get some work done. Designing a website for Jackson's pet-sitting services wasn't exactly the contract of a lifetime, but he *was* paying her for it, and she *had* said she'd get it done by tomorrow.

Feeling strangely grim for a woman who was playing around with pictures of kittens and puppies, Kiera tried to concentrate on her work.

The air smelled like freedom. Hunter leaned against the closed door and felt almost faint from the rush of pleasure. His very own apartment! He'd never had a place of his own, never been *alone* like this. Always before, when he'd been sent to the

mortal world to hunt down some wayward—and unfortunate—member of the Unseelie Court who had displeased the Queen, he'd been accompanied by a retinue of goblins. His to command, in theory at least. But he knew full well they were his mother's spies. The thought of spending several blissful weeks without the constant fear of being summoned before the Queen's throne, or being spied upon by her goblins, was as intoxicating as the strongest liquor he'd ever tasted.

When his heart had calmed, Hunter looked around the elegantly furnished apartment his mother had rented for him.

It was directly below Kiera's, and the floors were old and creaky enough that he would be able to keep track of her comings and goings. Even now, he could hear her footsteps as she crossed the floor above him. He had considered dawdling on his way up in an effort to share an elevator with her, but after the way she'd looked at him in the park, he'd thought it more prudent to wait. She might be too much on her guard if she bumped into him so shortly afterward.

Hunter found the coat closet and shrugged off his leather coat and rakish hat. Then, he toured the apartment, which was decorated in the best of taste, understated and elegant. The Queen had taken particular care to make the bedroom inviting. Textured burgundy wallpaper gave the room a warm, intimate glow, and a rococo iron tree against one wall held twenty pristine candles. A king sized bed, heaped with autumn-toned pillows, dominated the room. Hunter lifted the corner of the brocade bedspread and discerned cream-colored silk sheets below. Smiling, he ran his fingers over the soft fabric and imagined how it would feel against his bare skin when he tumbled into the bed with Kiera beneath him.

When he had finished his tour, Hunter returned to the living room, where his mother had considerately left a dossier on Kiera. Reclining on the sofa and propping his feet on the walnut coffee table, he opened the folder and began to read.

Her surname was Malone, which was her mother's maiden name. Thirty-one years old, never married. Her mother, Cathy, married only once and divorced shortly before Kiera was born. The timing suggested the divorce had something to do with Kiera's conception. Undoubtedly, the husband had known the child wasn't his. Did Kiera have any idea who her father was? It seemed doubtful. More than likely, *Cathy* didn't even know who she had tumbled into bed with.

Paper-clipped to the dossier was a business card, advertising Kiera's freelance web design services. Hunter slipped the card out and tossed the rest of the dossier aside. At the top right corner of the card was a picture of Kiera's smiling face. It was one of those false, I'm-about-to-have-my-picture-taken smiles, but it still made her look significantly prettier. Maybe with some makeup and a decent haircut . . .

Hunter cut off that train of thought. It wouldn't matter if she were the ugliest woman on the face of the planet—his job was to bed her and impregnate her. All that mattered was figuring out how to gain himself an invitation to her bed. If she allowed him the privilege just once, he knew she would never be able to resist him again.

But first, he had to meet her. A chance meeting in the elevator might not give him enough time to work his magic. He had to make her a captive audience, so to speak. The most obvious way to do that was to hire her to design a website.

What kind of business should he pretend to need a website

for? It needed to be something that would evoke her curiosity, make her take notice of him from the start as something other than just another customer. Not that she wouldn't take notice of him anyway, of course. He had no use for false modesty. His mother, for all her reprehensible qualities, was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and his father had been the kind of man women swooned over. Only the best for the Faerie Queen's bed.

Hunter shook off the bitterness, though it hovered ever around him. There was no point in bemoaning his fate. All he could do was try to stay alive and in as little pain as possible. If he succeeded in his mission, his mother would in less than a year have a new child to torment, and he would likely fade from her notice.

He forced his mind back to the task at hand before he could start thinking too much about the fate of that child.

Whatever business he invented for himself, it had to be something he could reasonably hope to fake. The optimal choice would be something Kiera would instantly associate with sensual pleasure. And yet his needed to be a respectable business, not something tawdry that might turn her off.

A slow smile spread over Hunter's face as a brilliant idea came to mind.

He abandoned his comfortable seat on the sofa to spend several long hours in front of the computer, searching the Internet for the equipment and instruction he needed to pull this off.

Kiera took a deep, steadying breath before she pulled open the diner door. Lunch with her mother was always an adventure and usually left her unsettled, or irritated, or just plain confused. However, with them both living in Philadelphia, it seemed there

was no way Kiera could shield herself entirely from her mom's goofiness.

Bells adorned the diner's door—no doubt in early preparation for Christmas—and they jingled loudly. Only the patrons nearest the door seemed to notice the sound. Kiera scanned the bustling crowd and soon picked out her mother's signature carrot-orange hair. Inwardly, she sighed. She would have thought once her mother went gray, she would have chosen a more . . . understated . . . color for her hair. Instead, she insisted on replicating the hideous orange that Kiera had always hated—both on her mother and on herself.

Her mother waved eagerly, and Kiera wove through the tables until she reached the booth. Cathy Malone beamed as though she hadn't seen her daughter in years.

"Have a seat!" her mother cried, sounding far more excited than the situation warranted. Her eyes shone with an almost manic glee, and Kiera's guard went up.

Kiera hung her coat on the metal hanger attached to the seat, then slid into the booth, still wearing her hat and scarf. The seat made an unattractive whooshing sound when she sat. "Have you ordered?" she asked, reaching for a menu. Not that she hadn't memorized the menu ages ago, but she desperately wanted to put some kind of distance between them before she could get sucked into her mother's madness.

Unfortunately, her mother ignored the question entirely. "Guess what?" she cried, loudly enough that Kiera glanced around to see if anyone was staring at them.

"It sure is cold today," Kiera tried, aware that her voice had an almost desperate edge to it.

Her mother laughed and plucked the menu out of Kiera's

hands, tucking it back in its holder. Kiera looked up, frowning. Her mother had never been beautiful, but she was striking, even now. The orange hair was cut ultra short, except for a coquettish curl that dangled over her forehead. Freckles dotted her nose and cheeks, and though she tended to wear too much makeup on her eyes and lips, she never covered those freckles with foundation. Her eyes were russet, but recently she'd taken to wearing green contact lenses. No one would mistake that kelly green for her natural color, and yet somehow it looked right on her.

Today, those eyes shone with glee. "No hiding, and no changing the subject," she scolded, the smile never leaving her face. "I'm blissfully happy, and I want to share that happiness with my daughter. There's no crime in that."

Kiera leaned back in the booth and regarded her mother skeptically. "The last time you were this happy was when you thought you'd found the best get-rich-quick idea you'd ever heard of and you got ripped off by a stupid pyramid scheme. The time before that, if I remember correctly, was when you did that past life regression therapy and 'discovered' you were a reincarnation of Boudicca, the Celtic warrior queen." Kiera felt her cheeks heating with indignation as she continued to catalog her mother's nutty missteps. "Then there was the time you went on your crusade to save the homeless and started inviting various drunks and junkies to spend the night in the warmth of your apartment and ended up homeless yourself when your landlord kicked you out."

Her mother crossed her arms over her chest, no longer looking quite so gleeful. "Don't forget the time I claimed to have slept with the King of Faerie and borne his child."

Kiera rolled her eyes. God, please don't let her go on about

*that* nonsense again! The only thing Kiera felt certain of about her birth was that her mom had been staggering drunk when she'd bedded down with her father—whoever he was. The man had probably been equally drunk. Kiera had no idea which of the two drunken nut-cases had come up with the King of Faerie idea, but if she had to guess, she'd say her mom. Any way she could find to make her life seem more dramatic and important than it was, Cathy Malone would seize with a single-minded gusto.

"I don't know how I managed to raise such a closed-minded cynic," her mother said with a shake of her head.

Kiera ground her teeth. "I don't know, Mom. Maybe it's because I've seen you screw up so many times and unlike you I'm actually capable of learning from your mistakes." This was turning out to be even worse than she'd thought it would be! She usually managed to convey long-suffering tolerance with her mom. Today, she seemed unable to contain her disdain.

A harried waitress finally arrived to take their order, delaying the resumption of hostilities. Kiera, her appetite stolen by the argument, ordered soup and salad. Her mother ordered a hot turkey sandwich and mashed potatoes. She would eat the whole thing, gravy and all, without gaining a single ounce. Her wild-eyed energy seemed to burn up the calories as fast as she could suck them in. The thought made Kiera even more grumpy.

"Well," her mother said brightly, "it doesn't really matter what you think of me or my way of life. Notice that one of us is sitting here with a big smile on her face and the other has a thundercloud hovering over her head. That isn't a coincidence."

Kiera folded her arms and felt like a sulky teenager. "I never said it was. You get quite a kick out of getting on my nerves, so of course you're having fun."

"Yes, dear, I live to make you miserable. Now, can I tell you my news, or would you like to sneer a little more first?"

Kiera was always amazed at how easily her mother shrugged off these little tiffs of theirs. Kiera would probably spend the rest of the day brooding about it, and here her mom was making jokes. She unfolded her arms and sat up straight. Her choices were to listen to what her mom had to say, or walk out. Even Kiera had to admit she had no cause to walk out. After all, she had started the fight.

"I'll wait until you tell me your news, then I'll sneer some more, okay?"

Her mom flashed her an ironic grin. "Yes, I believe you will." She paused dramatically before continuing. "I've found him," she announced with great ceremony.

Kiera bowed her head and tried to suppress a groan. There was only one "him" her mother could mean. For as long as Kiera could remember, her mother had been on a quest to find "him." In her mind, "he" was the Holy Grail, though Kiera thought it was more like one of those silly snipe hunts they sent you on in summer camp.

"So," she said, not attempting to hide her sarcasm, "does Mr. Right have a name?"

"No, he's an anonymous sperm donor. Did I mention I was pregnant?"

Kiera's head jerked up, her common sense momentarily on vacation while she thought for one fleeting instant her mother was serious. The waitress chose that moment to sling their food onto the table, breezing away before Kiera could remind her she'd ordered the chicken soup, not the clam chowder.

"I thought *I* was the one who's supposed to be gullible," her

mother said as she cut into her sandwich. “Of course he has a name.” She giggled like a school girl. “And, wouldn’t you know it, his name is Alonso Wright.”

That surprised a laugh out of Kiera. “Mom, that’s one of the oldest—and silliest—jokes in the world.”

“Well, it’s the honest-to-God truth. Wright is a very common last name, you know. And I’m sure Alonso has heard a million Mr. Right jokes in his lifetime. But just like I told you, sweetie, the moment I laid eyes on him, I knew he was destined to be my soul mate.”

Kiera’s stomach turned over at the sappy smile and the even sappier words. Her mom had dated quite a few men over the years, some of them for significant periods of time. Kiera knew at least two of them had proposed marriage. But though her mom had been fond of these men, maybe even loved one or two of them, she’d insisted that none of them was her mythical soul mate, her Mr. Right. Annoyingly, she had also declared that none of the men Kiera had ever dated was *her* soul mate either. Kiera wished she had married one of them and lived happily ever after, if only to prove her mother wrong.

“And does Mr. Wright share your certainty that you are destined for one another?”

“Well, we haven’t exactly met each other yet, so no.”

Kiera stared. “You haven’t met him, but you’re sure he’s your soul mate. Mom, you’ve always been a goof, but this is just a bit over the top even for you.”

Her mother wrinkled her nose. “I told you there was fey blood in our family tree—even before my little fling with your father. I’ve always had a little touch of magic, and I can tell you that Alonso Wright and I are meant to be together.”

“Uh-huh.” Kiera speared a cherry tomato and popped it in her mouth. At least if she was chewing, her mom wouldn’t expect her to offer any encouraging commentary.

“Alonso owns the Old World Charm Café—you know, that new little Italian restaurant that opened up right around the corner from me. His mother is an Italian who married an American, and he learned to cook from her. When I tried out the restaurant, he was making the rounds and stopped by my table. The moment he spoke to me, I knew.” Her mother’s smile turned sly. “You know, being more than half fey yourself, you probably don’t even have to speak to a man to know whether he’s your Mr. Right or not.”

Kiera considered stuffing another bite of salad in her mouth to avoid this conversation, but her appetite was nonexistent. “You forget, Mom: I don’t believe in this Mr. Right crap. If there were only one Mr. Right for every woman, the human population would be decimated because no one would ever find him. Hell, even if Alonso is your soul mate, you didn’t manage to find him until after menopause.”

“There are a lot of Mr. Almost-Rights and Mr. Hell-No’s out there, and women marry them and have kids with them all the time. Believe me, I know! I married a Mr. Hell-No, and I had a kid by . . . Well, I don’t know how to categorize your father. This isn’t about procreation. It’s about finding the one most suitable partner that exists for you. And believe me, it’s worth the wait.”

Kiera bit her tongue. She wanted to ask her mom how the hell she could know it was worth the wait when she hadn’t even *met* the guy. But that question would spur others, and Kiera’s temper was rising ever closer to the surface. Her mother reached across the table and grasped her hand, startling her.



“Kiera, honey, I know you think I’m just this side of certifiable, but even us crazy people occasionally get something right. You are my pride and joy, and I don’t regret for a minute the night I spent with your father. I so desperately want you to be happy.”

Some of the temper drained away at the earnestness of her mother’s expression. No matter how often she complained about her mother’s eccentricities, Kiera loved her dearly, and there had never been a moment’s doubt that her mother loved her. “I *am* happy, Mom,” she insisted, though perhaps without the vehemence she should have.

Her mother gave her a knowing look. “If you say so, dear.”

Kiera gently extricated her hand from her mother’s grip and made another attempt to eat her salad.