

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is shown from the chest up, looking down at a glowing, multi-colored mandala she is holding in her hands. The background is dark with many bright, out-of-focus light spots, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is serene and spiritual.

Mandy M. Roth

Peace Offerings

Book One

PEACE OFFERINGS

By

Mandy M. Roth

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Chapter 1

"Get the thought out of your head, girl. He'll bring you nothing but worry and pain. It's not worth a moment of bliss for an eternity of bein' damned." I heard Dina's voice ringing in my ear.

Dina made it difficult not to hear her. She seemed more than capable of projecting her abnormally loud voice out so all the world could listen in. I often wondered why my mother hadn't employed her to be the announcer at the faerie games. She could easily make herself heard over the roar of thousands of immortals without the use of magic. She made a hissing noise at me, and I felt certain that the residents of the neighboring town knew that Dina was not pleased with me at the moment.

"Quiet ... he'll hear you," I whispered back to her. I glanced towards the center of the courtyard to make sure that the object of my desire was not

looking in our direction. I was safe. His attentions were on the two men he had arrived with. I tried to listen as they talked quietly amongst themselves, never once noticing the weight of my stare.

They'd come to speak with Moya, the Queen, about faerie matters. The war between the Blessed and the Unblessed Courts had ended a little over a year ago. Since the end of the war, peace negotiations had been underway. The tension was thick in the air. After a hundred years of fighting, peace had come so suddenly that adapting to the change was more difficult than fighting the war.

My dear, loving mother had decided that the best way to ensure peace between the courts was to promise my hand in marriage to a member of the royal Unblessed Court. When I had rounded on my mother, Queen Moya, with my anger over this decision, she simply laughed. "Oh, my dear Mackenzie, do not fear. I have heard that Prince Elwyn is quite the catch. Many of little Fay have tried to win his heart, but none have succeeded until now."

I didn't have the energy to point out the obvious, which was that I had not succeeded in winning his heart either. Rather my heart was bargained off to him as honey to sweeten the deal between the courts. I'd been informed that I was to be his wife, I was never asked. Even for the faerie courts, this was archaic. We'd been allowed to marry our mate on our own terms for close to a hundred years now. I felt like I'd taken a step back in time, to a time when women had no rights, and I didn't care for it too much.

I'd been sick with dread over meeting my soon-to-be husband for weeks now. After all, it was common knowledge that members of the Unblessed Court were fond of torture, bondage, multiple sex partners, and dark magic, all of which I found to be unsavory. Well all, that is, except for the multiple partners one. A girl's got to have her releases, you know.

"Mackenzie, let's go before one of them gets a notion to come this way. You're about to be a married woman. Someday soon you'll be their Queen, and they don't need to be gettin' no ideas about you." Dina's accent was laced with old Gaelic. Mine wasn't free of the old language either, but I'd been raised with tutors who'd tried their best to break me of old habits.

I frowned at her and wished, just this once, that she wasn't my best friend. Her long, curly red hair was pulled back in a long braid. That was the norm with her nowadays--the uptight look. I feared that she'd lost her

ability to let herself go and have a good time. She'd been more than willing to lose her inhibitions the night before last when we'd run naked through the stables trying to catch the eyes of the stable hands. We'd succeeded and the night had ended with pleasures that were much needed for the both of us. Oh, yes, Dina had no problems with shyness when she and I were together.

My gaze wandered back over to the dangerous stranger that had paid us a visit. He was spectacularly stunning with his long, dark brown hair so close to black that I wasn't sure what to call it. It was sleek, straight, and hung to his mid-back. I wondered what it would be like to have him above me with that glorious crown of silk flowing all around me.

I knew the touch of a man well. Being a faerie naturally made me sexually charged. What I'd rarely known was the touch of a man I desired. Don't get me wrong, the men who graced my bed were admirable bedmates, but none possessed my heart, my soul, my mind. None that is to say, except for one, but he had passed away over a year ago. Since then I had been searching for the one who would make my inner thighs tighten again with just the thought of being near him. I was pretty sure that I'd finally found him. The only problem I could see was that my mother would lose her mind if she found out that I had bedded a low level-messenger of the Unblessed Court. I toyed with this idea in my mind, and decided that I would risk her wrath. Besides, it would be so very like me to push her limits.

I headed right for the tall, dark-haired stranger. I heard Dina's cries for me to stop, and blocked them out. When I was within two feet of him, he stopped speaking to his friends and looked at me. His dark chocolate eyes scanned my body. They stopped to linger over my thin white gown, and to stare at my more than blessed chest. I blushed slightly. This caught me off guard, I never felt embarrassed or ashamed. What power was it that this man possessed? Yes, he was a gift from the Goddess herself, but still that ought not cause me to turn into a silly schoolgirl at the very sight of him.

I looked at his chiseled face and could not remember a time when I had seen a faerie with skin as bronzed as his. More often than not, we faeries ran a bit on the pale side. Some of us did, however, break the mold.

"I'm Mackenzie. And you are?"

He stopped staring at my chest and directed his attention towards my face. "I am Rowan. So, you are the lovely Princess Mackenzie. I have

heard much about you. I fear that my informants have understated just how magnificent you truly are."

"What, may I ask have you heard of me then?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but the thought of not hearing that deep rich voice again made me shudder.

He held out his hand to me. I took it. His fingers were rough. He was most certainly a warrior. Men of wealth and honor rarely had coarse hands. I'd found that most of the men I'd bedded were as silky smooth as myself. Rowan was a refreshing change. "My dear Princess, your beauty is known throughout the lands. Lesser beings talk of your hair, as gold as the sun with streaks as white as snow, of your eyes, as green as newly formed leaves, and of your body, which is rivaled only by the goddesses themselves."

My pulse quickened. Many men had made futile attempts at flattery with me, but this one was different. This man called Rowan made me want to prove him right. He made me want to show him how much more I could really be.

"I dare say that you flatter me so with your kind remarks." I gave a small curtsy. "Am I to assume that what you've heard about me is true then?"

His dark eyes lit up. "Oh no, I think that words cannot possibly do you justice."

"Then how do plan on telling Prince Elwyn of me? It would have been so much easier for him to come personally to see me. I requested this, but of course, he never responded. Just like an Unblessed, thinking they don't have to answer to anyone but themselves.... Are you to house an image of me in an orb?"

My obsession with human culture almost caused me to slip and say photograph, I was pleased that I caught myself. Orb images were livelier than a two dimensional photograph, but dated all the same. I'd not yet received one of the Prince. I was flying blind as to what he looked like. I'd impressed my image into an orb on the off chance he'd request it, but he had not.

Rowan looked amused by my comments. "I take it from your tone that you're not happy about the current arrangement."

I tossed my hand in the air and laughed. "Oh, please. Don't tell me for a minute that if you were me you'd be happy marrying that barbaric beast!"

Rowan and his two friends burst into laughter. The blonde one actually clutched his gut. I wanted to smack him square in the back of his head, but resisted. "Barbaric beast? What makes you think that the Prince is a barbarian?"

"Oh, that's simple. He is to be King of the Unblessed Court one day, what else could he be? I hardly think they have kind gentleman roaming about to lead an army of demons. No thanks, I'd rather marry a Goblin and that's not saying much, is it?"

Rowan's grip on my hand tightened. I had offended him. I didn't care. I had spoken the truth, and that's all that mattered. I could respect his loyalty to his Prince, but even he had to admit that someone from the Unblessed Court had to be a scoundrel. I grew tired of this little game with him. I knew that he wanted me, and I him, so there was really no point in continuing.

"The Prince is not what I want to be focused on at the moment," I said, as I took a step towards him.

He leaned closer. "And, what exactly is it that you are interested in focusing on?"

I stood on my tiptoes to be near his ear and whispered. "Why you, of course."

His laughter bellowed out and around me. I felt as though I could wrap his deep voice around me, and it alone would be enough to bring me pleasure. He turned and looked at the men who had accompanied him on his journey. Without question, they walked away, leaving the two of us standing near one another.

"So tell me Mackenzie, now that you have my undivided attention, what do you plan to do with it?"

I smiled at him as I put my lips on his. I pushed my tongue into his receptive mouth and inched it around. We explored the deep recesses of the other furiously. A tiny moan escaped him. All would have been perfect if it wasn't for a tiny tingling sensation that started on my arm. Someone's negative energy pressed down on me. I reluctantly pulled away from Rowan, and turned to see Dina glaring at me.

"Dina?"

She stomped her foot on the ground and crossed her arms over her chest. It was her way of taking a stance. I ignored her and turned back to Rowan. I would not let my chance with him be spoiled. I grabbed hold of his hand. "Come."

Without question, he followed me. I pulled him through the courtyard gates and down the tiny winding stone path towards the river. Halfway down, I veered off the path and pulled him through a seemingly endless tangle of vines. He never complained, he simply held tight to my hand and let me pull him along. I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew every inch of the Blessed Court's grounds. I had never been allowed off of it growing up, so this gave me plenty of time to explore every nook and cranny. My destination was within sight. A moment later, we broke through the tangled mess and stood in a small clearing on the edge of the river.

"I must say, I am impressed," Rowan said from behind me.

I reached down and began pulling my long gown over my head. I lifted it slowly up my body. I knew that he watched me and I intended on giving him a good show. I pulled it up and over my waistline, exposing the thin patch of blonde curls that lay nestled between my thighs. He drew in a deep breath, and I continued pulling my gown over my head.

Rowan's hands slid up my waist, and to my arms, to help ease the garment completely off. My long hair spilled out and over my breasts. The sun kissed strands acted as a veil and left most of my body covered. He brushed the stray strands out of the way, and in the process grazed my erect nipples. I let out a small cry of joy, causing him to yank his hand away.

"You know that the Prince will not be pleased that you let another man touch you."

"I could care less what Prince Elwyn thinks of me. When I marry, I wish it to be for the sake of love and passion, not to maintain peace. Furthermore, the Prince and I are not married yet, so what I do is of no concern to him. If he was truly that worried, he'd have come himself and not sent you in his place. Let that be a lesson to him."

"I see. So, you do not care about the repercussions that this could bring upon us?"

I tipped my head back and laughed. "Why in the world would I care what he thinks? It is written plainly in my marriage contract with him that I shall be allowed to bed whomever I choose, so long as it remains strictly for sexual pleasure."

I had made my mother put that revision in after I'd read the first draft and found it to be completely unacceptable. After much debate, she had finally given in to my demand, and sent the contract off for approval. It, to my surprise, arrived back within two days signed by the Prince and bearing his seal.

"Ah, yes. The marriage contract," he said, tilting his head to the side as he smiled with only one side of his mouth. "I must say, the Prince has caught much backlash for allowing you to have such freedoms."

I was on the verge of being angry, but his beautiful brown eyes helped me hold my temper. "Backlash, he's caught backlash? I've never even laid eyes on the man I'm to marry, and he's concerned with negative feedback! Oh, that is truly rich! Suppose he is as ugly as a troll, what then, am I expected to spend the rest of my days lying next to him? I shall have to consume my food in another end of the castle for fear that I won't be able to digest it."

I knew what I said was harsh and untrue. I had no problem with unattractive beings in my bed, and had even been known to lay with some unsavory characters, but that wasn't the point. I only had problems with being forced to do something I did not wish to do. I latched onto any reason not to wed him even if it was an insanely untrue one.

"Are looks really that important to you?"

I didn't know how to answer him. I knew that I came off as a spoiled little princess, and I had reason to be. Being forced to marry a man that I had never even met was beyond wrong. It was cruel. I searched deep within myself to see if I could honestly love something as ugly as a troll. My initial reaction had been no, but as I looked into Rowan's eyes, I knew that I was attracted to him in a way that physical beauty could not contain. Sure, he was perfect in every way, but he had something else about him. I couldn't put my finger on it, but he felt right. There was something about him that made me not care what he looked like. It had been that way with only one other, but now that he had passed it did not matter. "No, I suppose that one's beauty is not all that matters to me."

He seized hold of my bare shoulders, yanking me close to him, and kissing me heavy and hard. I didn't protest, instead, I welcomed it. Dampness lined my inner thighs as each swipe of his tongue drove my body into more of a frenzy.

I let my fingers dance along the buttons on Rowan's shirt. With my eyes closed and mouth preoccupied with his, I freed him from the cloth that restrained him. I slid my hands in and felt his warm skin against my cool hands. I inched my way down to the tops of his pants, fumbling around for a moment with the tie holding them up. He moved his hands down to aid me in his release.

The moment his pants were undone, I felt the tiny hairs leading to his most prized possession under my fingertips. I was normally one for foreplay and taking my time, but this was different, this was primitive -- raw. I wanted to have him in me now, and I didn't want to delay it any longer. I reached down and tried to cup him in my hands. He was long, hard, and too big for me to hold steady with just one hand. I moved my other hand around and let it slide along his smooth shaft. He tightened in my hand as he reached around my body, easing me to the soft earth.

His kisses came quicker now, moving down towards my breasts. The minute that his warm lips drew my nipple in, I cried out. I pulled at his body to get him to take me, touch me, fuck me.

Rowan let my swollen nipple fall free from his lips. "You taste so sweet, but this is only a small sample of all that you have to offer. I have to taste you, Mackenzie. Let me taste you."

My body burned for him, and I screamed out for him to taste me, taste all of me. He ran his long fingers down the length of my body, finding my clit swollen and my pussy drenched for him. I cried out when he ran his fingers over my nub. He edged a finger into me slowly, swirling it around, before pumping it in and out of me. My legs quivered. I bit my lip to avoid digging my nails into his back as my orgasm took control of me.

I'd had many partners before him and none had ever brought me to orgasmic peak with just one touch. If he could do that with just the stroke of his finger, imagine what he could do with other things.

Rowan pulled his finger from my body and brought it to his lips. Seeing him lick my cream from his fingertip drove my body into another state of need. His eyes met mine and he gave me a wicked little smile, before

placing his finger in my mouth, allowing me to savor the fruits of his labor. "You like that, don't you?"

"Mmm," I said, sucking on his finger. "I want to taste you too."

He reached down and grabbed hold of his rigid cock. "I'd like to feel your lips wrapped around me."

I rolled to my knees and went for him, cupping him in my hand, as I licked the mushroom shaped head of his penis. I slid my mouth over his silken shaft and worked my way down him. He gripped my hair, encouraging me to take all of him. His cock was to the back of my throat before I was to the base, so I brought my hands up to help. I worked the base, rolling his balls around gently, as I moved my head up and down on him. Pre-come leaked into my mouth and I licked the tiny hole at the top of his cock, causing more to flow.

I gently scraped my teeth along the sides of his shaft. Rowan cried out and pulled my head to his body, tighter, thrusting his hips forward. He fucked my mouth and let his magic build. I opened the door to my power as well, as I cupped him in my hand and took him in my mouth. His sac tightened, his balls pulled up, and hot seed filled my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. I swallowed and sucked until every last drop of him had spilled out.

"Ah ... Mackenzie, oh...." he panted. He eased my body back to the ground and positioned his head between my legs. He took a deep breath in. "Goddess, the smell of your cunt is making me hard again."

He parted my slit and pushed his fingers into my creamy channel. Rowan's mouth slid over my clit and he sucked gently on it, causing my legs to shake. I thrashed around, clutching the ground, trying hard to find anything to center myself. I'd never been so out of control in my life, and I wanted more.

"Rowan, please ... please fuck me."

He pulled back slowly from me and slid up and over me. His lips came crashing down on mine. The taste of my sex on his mouth made me crazy with lust. I bit at him, drinking him down. The head of his cock waited at my entrance, but he didn't move. I tried pulling on his strong arms to get him to enter me sooner. I felt the head of him ready to dive in. He teetered with amazing skill on the edge of my opening. I tugged harder on him, but he did not budge.

"Are you sure that this is what you want?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

I slid my hands into the back of his long brown hair. It was impossible for a faerie to lie during moments of passion. That, if anything was our one fatal flaw. Many a murder plot had been foiled throughout our history by way of secrets coming out in the bedroom. I looked into his dark brown eyes. Everything about him was perfect. I felt as though I'd known him all my life. Could this warrior be the one I'd been waiting for?

"Yes," I said with the utmost certainty, and with that, he entered me. I cried out. He was so large, both in width and in length, that I wasn't sure I could handle him. To my delight, my tightness eased and I opened enough to form around him perfectly. I gasped as I sheathed his entire thick mass.

Rowan pulled himself out slowly. I thought he was going to exit me completely, but he plunged back down hard, sending shockwaves of pleasure throughout my body. My magic was building slowly, trying to come to the surface, and I could smell his building as well. The faint scent of lilacs in the morning dew filled my head.

It was common for a faerie to secrete a scent from nature during moments of passion. We are after all the caretakers to it, so it is not considered abnormal. What was abnormal was the honeysuckle smell that soon followed. Only the most powerful of faeries had enough magic to release more than one scent. He was very powerful, so much so that it caught me off guard. I had not expected the King to send someone with this much magic to review the conditions of my marriage to his son. My stomach tightened hard as my power threatened to tear free of my body.

I repeated the word "yes" over and over again, as Rowan, the wondrous lover that I'd just found, ground my body into the earth. My toes started to tingle, and the sensation moved up my inner legs to my groin, where it left me throbbing, pulsating, and crying out in delight. I pushed my body hard up towards him, and let my magic spill out. It hit him with such a force that he cried out as he thrust himself into me, filling me with his powerful juices. He collapsed on me, and lay there quietly for a moment, still housed deep within me.

"Mackenzie."

"Yes," I said, breathlessly.

"I fear that you have indeed stolen my heart."

I grabbed hold of the sides of his face and pulled it up so I could look into his dark eyes. It'd been rumored throughout faerie history that it was possible to fall in love with another with just one touch, but it was not common. It was much more common for a faerie to go through his or her life with hundreds of different partners, never finding one that pulled on your heart strings and made you forget that anything but them existed. But, Rowan had just confessed his love for me. I knew that that he spoke the truth, we were in the height of a passionate moment, and that's what terrified me the most.

"No, you must forget about love. You must only ever regard this as casual pleasure, nothing more. Do you understand?"

He tipped his head slightly, looking a bit love struck. "I've tasted your power, and I have no doubt that we were meant for one another. I will not deny my feelings for you."

He hardened, flexing his cock deep within me. I wanted him to take me again, but I feared for his safety. I'd agreed in my contract not to bed a man I was in love with or who loved me. Casual sex was completely acceptable, and for the most part, encouraged. Only a few Fay unions forbade this, and my contract with Prince Elwyn did not. However, sex with love was forbidden. Sex with love for a faerie could result in a child, and for the sake of royal blood remaining pure, it was strictly forbidden. The pressure of his full erection took my mind off of my problems at hand, and I fell into a state of need, not worry.

My body craved Rowan's, as I'd never craved anyone before. I wanted to allow him to take me any way he could. After a moment of pulling and tugging at him, I managed to get him to let me turn my body around. I pulled my knees up and under me. The soft earth felt glorious on my hands. I let Mother Nature's power crawl through my veins and deep within me. Humans have grossly underestimated the rejuvenation properties of nature for centuries now. We faeries are more than aware of how magnificent nature truly is.

I waited on all fours as Rowan moved his strong body behind mine. His hand inched up to find my dripping wet entrance. His fingers twirled around within me, the trail of our mixed juices following as he pulled his fingers back out. I turned my head to watch him rub it along his shaft until it glistened. I wanted to lick it off, but the need to have him buried in me was too great. I stayed in place.

His eyes locked on mine and I knew in that moment that he would belong to me for all eternity, if I decided to take him. He eased himself into my silk binding. Taking him this way, on my hands and knees, made him feel even larger. I hadn't expected that. I screamed out with a mix of pleasure and pain. This only served to add strength to his already tremendous thrusts.

"Oh, my...." I panted.

"Does ... this ... please ... you?" he asked between thrusts.

He slid his fingers into the back of my hair, clenching a handful of it tightly, as he rammed himself into me. He laid his body against mine, lessening his momentum, and reached his free hand up to cup my breast. I clenched my teeth, grinding down to find some sort of release for the pressure that brought so much pleasure to me. He moved his hands down, rimming the edges of my ass.

"This will be mine soon too," he said with a low growl.

I wanted to scream at him to be rougher, to take it and ram his cock deep within it. I wanted to demand that he push with all his might. I was crazy in the moment, and wanted him to take me past the edge of acceptable and into the realm of unexplained, but as our magic began to build I lost control and released it.

Our bodies shook together as we climaxed, leaving me little chance to cry out anything more than a moan. He pulled out, and a small amount of his magical juices dripped onto the back of my legs. It tickled as it ran down towards my knee. I giggled and flipped on to my back.

He plopped down on the ground next to me, and took me into his arms. I snuggled close to his chest, feeling so safe and loved next to him. Loved? I had never felt loved in another man's arms before. Did this mean that I had fallen for him as well? Even the one man whom I had fallen for prior to Rowan, had never seemed to reciprocate the feelings I had for him.

"Tell me your thoughts," Rowan said, nuzzling his lips to my neck.

"I'm afraid."

He stopped kissing me. "What are you frightened of?"

"Marrying Prince Elwyn."

"Mackenzie, do not fear the Prince."

"He'll never let me see you again."

He propped himself up on one arm and looked at me with serious eyes. "Would you deny your love for me to the Prince?" I was about to answer, but he put his finger to my lips. "Think hard before you respond. Would you really risk your life to proclaim your feelings for me?"

"No, I...."

He looked stunned, and then hurt. He pulled away, shaking his head as he went. "I see."

"No, you didn't let me finish. What I was trying to tell you is no, I wouldn't risk your life. I will go and confess that I have fallen in love with another, but I will not reveal whom. I will take your name to the grave with me."

A sigh of relief came from him. "It warms my heart to hear you say that, but I truly believe that we have nothing to fear."

"Why is that?" I asked, wanting to know what made him so sure that we'd be safe.

He laughed softly. "The Prince is not quite the monster that you have been led to believe."

"I don't know, Rowan, I've heard horror stories of what the Unblessed are capable of doing when provoked. They're monsters you know. I've heard that they eat their young."

This brought a tiny chuckle from his tender lips. I didn't find my concern to be funny, and was about to scold him when a rush of heat danced through my lower abdomen. It felt as if a hundred tiny butterflies were fluttering around in it. I grabbed it, trying to soothe away the inevitable.

"Oh, no!"

"What's wrong?" he asked, leaning over me.

"Go now, and tell no one of our encounter," I said, as I stood slowly. He caught hold of my shoulders and pinned me to the ground, gently.

"No, I'm not going anywhere, what's going on?"

I looked into his loving brown eyes, and let my finger trace his curved ear. "You must leave. My mother and the Prince will stop at nothing to find you now."

"Why is that?" His hand slid down to find mine, still resting on my lower abdomen. When his hand came into contact with my stomach, the butterfly feeling intensified and a faint, glowing shimmer came forth from my skin to his. It spilled out and onto him, creating a halo effect above us both. He didn't pull his hand away as I expected him to do. Instead, he slid his body over mine and pressed himself against me.

"Don't you understand what this means?" I was on the verge of hysteria.

"Yes, it means that my heart was correct, you are my eternal soul-mate, and it means that together, our love could create life." Rowan slid his fingers between my legs searching out my dampness, exploring the place that had been created just for him, at least according to my magic. "I love you Princess Mackenzie.... I love you."

I tried to find it in me to lash out at him. I wanted to strike him across the face for his ignorance to the seriousness of our situation. I didn't. I opened my legs wide for him to enter me. He grabbed hold of the backs of my knees, and lifted them high above my head, giving him deeper access to me. He wasn't gentle when he entered me again, and I didn't want him to be. He rode me with white-hot passion, and I savored every moment of having him deep inside of me.

"Mine, you are mine now, Princess," he said, in a low voice.

He let his power pour forth with every thrust. He was soaking me down with his magical juice. That is how faerie children get their powers. Their mother's wombs are 'showered' with powers over an extended period of time. It would take one full year of regular intercourse with a soul-mate to ripen my womb enough to accept a seed. In a sense, I was only a potential mother-to-be. If he and I did not lay together many, many times over the course of the next year, then our union would not produce a child. It had to be this difficult for us to conceive. If we could have a child with just anyone easily, then we would be so overpopulated that we would not survive.

I cried out from the joy of him bringing me again, but was interrupted by the sound of someone clearing his throat near us. Rowan stopped thrusting himself into me and turned to see one of the men he had arrived with standing five feet from us. Normally, I wouldn't have given any

thought to having an audience, but under these circumstances, it meant that now there was a witness, and he would surely tell the Prince of this. I lay still with my legs high in the air and my eternal soul-mate, Rowan, still deep within me.

"What do you want, Glyn?" Rowan asked, deprecatingly.

The man standing near us bowed his head. "Forgive me, Sir, but the Queen wishes for you to come before her. She is very eager to discuss the upcoming wedding."

Glyn tried, very unsuccessfully, to not stare at my naked body. He hovered near us. "Glyn, please inform the Queen that I have already had the pleasure of meeting her daughter." He plunged into me again. I cried out and glanced over at Glyn. I bucked against Rowan and tried to sit up. He pinned me to the ground. "Mackenzie, don't go."

I slid from under him and rolled over to grab hold of my crumpled gown. I turned and looked at Glyn, who was now looking directly at his feet. Rowan, who stood, looked at me with eyes so sweet and innocent that I knew that he couldn't possibly fathom the severity of our situation. "Now the Prince will surely find out about us."

Glyn's head popped up as he looked towards the two of us. Rowan's hand rose quickly. "No, I think that our secret is safe from the Prince, don't you, Glyn?"

"Umm, umm, yes sir." Glyn turned quickly and walked back into the vines.

I was nearly done pulling my gown back on when Rowan's strong arms encircled my body. He planted the tiniest of kisses all over the side of my neck. I wanted to stay with him for all eternity here, but I knew that would mean his death, as well as my mine. I couldn't do that do him. I couldn't let him be punished for my sake. I'd been the one to approach him in the courtyard. I'd been the one that lured him here, by the river, to enjoy the pleasures of his wondrous body. No, I would not allow him to die because of me.

I let my power build up. I concentrated hard on hiding it from him. He was so powerful that I wasn't sure I could bring the amount I needed, without him noticing it. My mind raced, and then it hit me. I turned into his gentle kisses and met them with my own. I made mine long and passionate. Prickling energy throbbed in my hand. I timed my strike

perfectly. I lifted my hand to his chest. "Know that I do this because of my love for you," I said softly.

Before he could respond, I let my magic out. It slammed into him and sent him hurdling to the ground. He looked so perfect with his long brown hair spread about him on the grass that I hated to leave him unattended, but Glyn would come looking for him soon. I knew that I'd put enough into that to keep him asleep for a few hours. Quickly, I turned and set off to see my soon-to-be husband.

Chapter 2

I was disappointed in myself for my impulse to see the Prince. I would look most disreputable if I ever did get to see him. My wet gown clung tightly to me as the evening air began to cool.

After knocking Rowan out, I had to cross the river to head in the direction of the Unblessed Court. I could have gone back to the main path and followed it to the bridge, but I was sure that I would be spotted. As much as I pretended to be modest about my looks, I knew well enough that my beauty was the topic of discussion at many pubs. Sneaking away from the watchful eye of my mother was my favorite pastime. I often visited the pubs in disguise and listened to the townspeople talking. The men would make comments to the effect of "she's no Princess Mackenzie, but she'll do nonetheless." It wouldn't take long for someone to recognize me, and the news of my journey would travel fast to my mother. She'd send out the royal guards to bring me home, then she'd carry on like there was no tomorrow, and for me, there most likely wasn't one.

I'd never been past the boundaries of the Blessed Court, and now knew why. The forest grew denser by the minute, and the noises coming from it were terrifying me. "It doesn't matter," I told myself.

I knew that the Prince would do worse to me soon. I was not thrilled with the idea of running to my own death, but the thought of Rowan being tortured ripped at my gut. I would never let that happen. Perhaps the Prince would excuse this blunder of mine because we were not yet wed? I had to have hope. More than likely, he would see me hanging from the end of a rope, strip me of my powers in the process, and then strip me of my life as well.

I continued on the ever-narrowing path. Night fell fast upon me, and I had trouble seeing. I could've used my magic to cast a soft light out before me, but I'd been warned all my life about the creatures that lurked in the forest at the entrance to the Unblessed Court, and I certainly didn't want to draw attention to myself. When I was a child, stories of the Gorilliantes that roamed these lands had made me so scared that I refused to leave the castle to go and play for one whole week. I even spent a night sleeping in my wardrobe because I was convinced that one would come and eat me during the night. Gorilliantes were well known for their brutality. With four arms, the body of an ape, and the head of a man, I didn't know how they would not be considered dangerous. During the war between the Courts, the Unblessed unleashed many of their demons on us. Many of my immortal friends met with unnatural endings to their lives. After all, it is rather hard to survive being torn to shreds by a half Gorilla, half faerie warrior, even if you are immortal. It's not like your head is bound to reattach itself you know.

Cedric, my childhood playmate, and later in life, lover, had been forced to go off to the war. I had begged my mother not to send him. She explained that it was in effect, out of her hands. Cedric's father was the head general for the Blessed side and that dictated his participation in the war. Before he left, the two of us sat down together and researched every known creature of the Unblessed Court. When the day for Cedric to leave came, we both knew that we'd never see each other again. It had been a year and a half since I'd last seen my beautiful, auburn-haired lover. News had traveled back to me a week before the end of the war that he had perished. I thought that my heart would forever have a void in it, until I'd met Rowan. No, he'd never fill Cedric's spot, but he would serve as a healing force for my loss.

A loud noise rustled ahead of me. I had little time to call upon my power before a dark shadow leapt before me. I screamed, and sent a blast of energy at it. I turned and ran into the forest, and heard it grunt. I didn't stop to see if I had inflicted any damage on it, I just ran. My bare feet were used to the soft, glorious ground of the Blessed court. I almost never

wore sandals when I was home. Now I was seriously regretting that decision. The forest floor was covered in sharp twigs, rocks, and vines with thorns. I wanted to sit for a minute to caress my aching feet, but I could sense the creature from the path moving in on me fast. A sharp pain shot through the bottom of my foot. It felt like someone had rammed something straight through it. I stumbled down and drove my knee into a large rock. I screamed out as I rolled onto my back to see how close my pursuer was to me. I couldn't see him so much as I could sense him. I picked up on his energy, his aura, and it was negative if I'd ever felt one. He was extremely close to me. He circled me like a wolf surveying its prey. I slid my hand down slowly and clutched the rock that I'd rammed my knee into. I waited until I was sure that he was close enough to me before I turned quickly and smashed the rock into him. He cried out in pain, and flung energy at me. It hit me hard and took my breath away. I tried to scramble to my feet, but was struck with another wave of his power. Darkness surrounded me as I went crashing to the ground.

Chapter 3

I woke to such a stench that vomit threatened to rise in my throat. It took me a moment to focus. Whoever had knocked me out had done a fantastic job. The pressure behind my eyes was overwhelming. It would take strong wine and even stronger magic to rid me of this ache.

I looked at my surroundings. Straw and dirt covered the hard stone floor that I lay upon. I sat up slowly, listening as every bone in my body cracked and creaked. It took a lot of power to render me useless. It would take even more for me to regain my full strength.

"Oh, my word, she's awake," a soft feminine voice said from behind me.

"It's about time she got up. Sleepin' her day away won't make it any easier on her," I heard a second woman's voice saying. I turned and looked. I saw two women standing near the iron bars, to what I presumed was a cell. The taller one looked to be the younger of the two. She had delicate features, the kind of softness that makes someone appear to be very young, but her eyes told her real age. She was older than me. The other woman was very short, and very plump. What I couldn't quit staring at was her enormous nose. It was larger than any I'd ever laid eyes on before. Her wiry black hair was tucked haphazardly into a white bonnet. They were cleaning wenches -- that much was obvious from their shabby attire.

"Excuse me, but may I inquire as to my whereabouts?" I asked them.

The large-nosed woman let out a hoot. "Oh, yeah, all mighty one, you can 'inquire' all damn day. It don't mean it's gonna make it any better for ya to know."

"Please ma'am, I mean you no ill will. I'm looking for Prince Elwyn. I need to speak with him, it is urgent."

Again, she cackled as though it was the funniest thing she'd heard all day. The tall, delicately featured one, smiled sheepishly at me. "Sorry my lady, Harride's always that way."

"Shut-up Sasha. Don't be calling her no lady. Look at her, soaked to the bone, and on the floor with the mice."

I jumped to my feet. This made Harride laugh even harder. I didn't care if she knew I was scared of rodents. I tried to bring my power to strike at her, but nothing came. Damn, I should have realized that they would put binding spells on the cell I was in to prevent me from using my magic.

"Stop it Harride!" Sasha said, sliding a small cup of water under the iron bars to me. "Why do you want to see the Prince?"

I had half a mind to just turn my back on her, but she was being a greet deal nicer to me than her friend. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but I'd rather tell the Prince my news personally."

Harride let out another deep laugh. I tipped my head to the side and caught a good look at her skin color, it was pale green. "You're a hag?"

That made her stop laughing. Her beady black eyes glared at me. "I am. What of it?"

I clapped my hands together and squealed in delight. I had always wanted to meet a real live hag. The Blessed court only had the finest full-blooded faeries, and that was very boring after a while. I smiled and the look on Harride's face softened.

"The girl's completely nuts. She's plain ol' batty." She pushed a small bowl of soup under the bars to me. "You got a name?"

I bent down to retrieve the soup. I was famished. I hadn't eaten all day. I put it to my lips and slurped it down quickly. Some of it ran down the corners of my mouth. I didn't care. I wiped it off with the back of my hand and looked at Harride and Sasha.

"I'm Mackenzie."

Their faces went white. Sasha stepped away from the bars and backed right into the cell behind her.

"What?" I heard a deep male voice say.

Sasha turned and looked into the cell across from me. "Sorry bout' that, lad."

Harride came close to the bars. "Come here girl." I did. When I got close enough for her to touch me, she did. Her fingers were cold and clammy. I wanted to jerk back from her, but I didn't. She pulled on my chin, and brought my face level to hers. "Well, Sasha, I've heard stories 'bout them green eyes of hers. Looks like we got ourselves a Princess."

Sasha looked dumbfounded. No surprise there. Harride turned slightly and looked towards the cell that Sasha stood near. "Let's go, I suppose that they'll want to be catchin' up."

I watched the two of them walk away. Catching up? What in the world were they talking about? I scanned the cell in front of me. A large pile of rags that I assumed to be a man, lay with his back to me. His hair was a dirty tangled mess, and I could definitely identify him as the source of the stench I'd smelled. If I hadn't have just heard the man speak, I would have thought him dead.

"You there. Who are you?" I asked.

The lump of a man moved a tiny bit. Then I heard him growl. "What is it to you? Who the hell are you?"

That voice. I knew that voice. I'd spent my entire life listening to that wondrously deep, erotic voice tell me stories, and whisper passionate sayings in my ear. My heart felt as though it would leap from my chest. "Cedric?"

The smelly man turned around quickly in his cell. Nothing on him was recognizable. He was a filthy mess. His face was covered with a long dirty beard, but his eyes, his beautifully blue eyes, stared out at me. "Cedric! Is it really you?"

"Mackenzie?" He sat up slowly. He was so thin now. I couldn't believe it was him. "Mackenzie, tell me that my eyes aren't deceiving me. Tell me it's you. I've fought long and hard not to go mad, tell me that I've succeeded."

I pushed my body against the bars and reached my hand out to him. "It is me, Cedric. It's me ... I'm real. Oh, gods ... I was told that you'd been killed."

He put his arm out through his bars and our fingertips touched. It felt so good to touch him again. "I suspected as much. No, I don't know if I'd call this living, but I've been here since they captured me."

I was horrified. "You've been down here for sixteen months and ten days?"

Cedric looked elated. "Mackenzie, I didn't think you were counting."

My fingers laced in his. "Each day that you have been gone has felt like an eternity, Cedric."

I wanted to find out all about his capture and how he had managed to survive, but footsteps in the hall silenced me. I looked down and saw Harride returning with two very large men. Cedric gasped and pushed my hand away from his. I heard his voice in my head, Get away from the bars Mackenzie. Go! We had developed the gift to read each other's thoughts at a very early age. The older faeries were all quite impressed. They had never known a pair that possessed such a talent before. I did as he said. I put my back against the furthest wall of my cell and waited.

Harride and the two men came to a stop in front of my cell. Both men stood almost seven foot tall. Their shoulders were massive as were their forearms. Both men had shaved heads that showed off their curvy ears. Their eyes were a great deal wider than any faerie I'd ever seen. They were no ordinary faeries. No, they were mixed with something large.

"Are you part giant?" I asked.

Cedric begged me to shut-up. I truly had no idea why I asked them that. The pale-skinned one pulled out a set of keys and went for my cell door. The deep cocoa colored one sneered at me.

"If you are lying about being the Princess, then you shall see what part of me is truly giant," he said in a voice so deep that the floor shook when he spoke.

The pale-skinned one turned to him. "Duane, stop scaring the poor thing," My body relaxed. He wasn't going to let the other one hurt me. "Let me do the terrifyin'."

Well, so much for that happy thought. I backed into the corner of the cell. The pale one headed straight for me. I waited until he was within range before I threw my foot out hard. It slammed into his kneecap and brought him down quickly. I seized hold of his ears and clawed at them as he bent before me. His hands came up and grabbed hold of my wrists. I brought my injured knee up hard into his face. We both screamed out in pain, as he let go of my wrists. I took off towards the open cell door. I would have only one shot at this, and I knew that I had to make it count.

Duane blocked the exit quickly. I didn't have time to think. I lunged at him, and took him by surprise. I'm sure that it's not often that a one-hundred pound, five-foot-six-inch faerie princess comes leaping out at you. Yeah, that would catch most men off guard, I was sure of that. The force of my body hitting his pushed us just outside the door of the cell. The binding spell lifted from me. I mustered up all the energy I could and sent it flying into Duane's stomach. He doubled over and clutched himself on the hallway floor. I turned and looked at Harride, she was wide-eyed and smiling.

"It's 'bout time someone taught them boys some manners." She looked into the cell I'd been in. "Dermot's goin' to be real mad with you."

I turned and saw Dermot rising to his feet. He charged at me. I lifted my hand and pushed the door to the cell shut. It latched. I turned my attentions to Cedric's cell door. His hand wrapped around mine quickly.

"No, leave me. Go, get out while you can!"

"I will not leave you here to die!" I pushed his hand away and screamed at him to get out of the way. "Fire, I call upon you, do not fail me now!" A surge of heat rushed through my fingertips and out onto the cell bars. I watched as the bars melted away, leaving a large hole for Cedric to crawl through.

"Oh my, you really are the princess, aren't ya?" Harride said behind me.

"Yes," I said, grabbing hold of Cedric's thin hand. "Now which way do we go?"

"I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders. It was stupid of me to ask him. Being locked in a tiny cell for a year had left him with a limited sense of direction. He had no clue which way was out. Harride hovered for a moment then let out a tiny giggle.

"Follow me," she said.

I looked at Cedric, he shrugged. Our choices were limited, so we followed her. She led us down the hallway to a small door. "Go through here. Don't stop for nothin'. At the end of it, you'll find the forest. From there you're on your own!"

I bent down and kissed her on her enormous nose. She blushed, and signaled for us to go. We did. The two of us had to walk single file to fit down the narrow passageway. It smelled damp and moldy, that didn't really bother me. What did bother me was the tiny sound of rats running out of our way. A shudder ran over my body. I hate rats!

Cedric's hand touched my shoulder. He'd known me all my life and he knew all my fears. "They won't bother you."

This, surprisingly, made me feel a thousand times better and I quickened my pace. The cold night air hit us in the face as we crawled through the tiny window to the outside. I was suddenly thankful that Cedric had lost so much weight. At his normal size, which was not fat, but very, very muscular, he would have never fit.

My feet hit the forest floor and I winced in pain. I turned and helped Cedric pull himself through the tiny opening.

"What will happen to Harride?" She was the only reason we'd gotten out and I didn't want to see her punished. Dermot and Duane would be livid with me for getting past them.

Cedric's hand came out to rest on my shoulder. He was extremely weak. That was to be expected. "Nothing. Harride will be just fine."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because, she is the one who raised the terrible twosome."

I thought of the old hag Harride, and did not think it possible for her to give birth to the two of them. My apparent confusion over the matter must have shown on my face, because Cedric laughed softly.

"Dermot and Duane were the end result of Giants pillaging their mothers' village. The two were, of course, unwanted by their very Sidh mothers, and were left to die. Harride found them and raised them as her own."

"Poor woman." I wasn't sure if she needed a medal of honor or her head checked.

Cedric chuckled as he bent down to kiss my cheek. I pushed him away quickly. "Cedric, you stink, and you're hairier than a Yeti." This made him laugh more. I had to put my hand to his mouth to get him to quiet down.

"I have dreamt of the moment I would see you again." He put his head down. "I had feared that I'd never know your touch again."

I didn't know how to tell him that he never really would know the touch of my skin against his again. Yes, I wanted to be near him desperately, but there was the matter of my marriage to Prince Elwyn, and now Rowan. I hadn't thought of Rowan once since I'd seen Cedric. What did that mean?

Chapter 4

I let my head rest against the large oak tree near the edge of the river. I watched as Cedric put his wet brown wrap over a tree limb to dry. All the power I had left was used up when I conjured the necessary items we needed to cleanse ourselves. Normally, I would have been able to do that easily, but after fighting Dermot and Duane I was tired and weak.

I caught sight of Cedric's bare backside and felt flushed. I truly had missed seeing him naked. Granted, he was a considerable degree thinner than he'd been when I'd last seen him, but that did not take away from his beauty. What did attempt to take away from it somewhat were the scars that he had all over his body. It was evident that he had been beaten and tortured. I asked him about them, but he refused to answer me.

The scar that most disturbed me was the one on his neck. I had not noticed it when his beard was thick and long. The scar ran from his right ear to the center of his neck. Someone had tried to slit his throat -- that much was clear. When I found out who it was, I would kill them. Yes, when I found the person who had been responsible for marring my sweet Cedric's body I would deal with them personally. They would suffer a wrath like no other.

Cedric came closer to me. He was completely nude. Nudity was so common among faeries that were close, that it just seemed normal to me. His hand ran up my smooth leg. The touch of his fingers sent a shiver up my spine. I pulled away from him. I could not be this close to him naked now. So many things had changed. We could never be the way we'd been before. I glanced over at the limb where I'd hung my gown after washing it. It was still wet. I had no choice but to remain nude. I didn't have the energy to summon the wind to dry our clothing.

Cedric leaned over and put his head on my shoulder. His long auburn hair spilled down and over my bare breasts. I closed my eyes. I would not endanger him. If the Prince did not order his execution for escaping, he would most certainly order it for bedding his soon-to-be bride. Cedric had one more threat to his life, one that he wasn't even aware of yet -- Rowan. I was sure that Rowan would not take kindly to another man

touching his soul-mate. No, I didn't want to put Cedric in any more danger.

"So tell me what has happened since I've been away." His voice was deep and smooth as he leaned against me by the tree.

I told him about the events of the last year and a half. He was surprised to learn that the war between the courts had ended right after his capture. Neither one of us could figure out the reason as to why he hadn't been released. I told him that my mother and I had grown even more apart since his departure. He winked at me when I told him that and put his arm around me to hold me tight. When I got to the part of my mother's idea for maintaining the peace between the courts, he grew quiet.

"What exactly did your mother do?" He sat up and looked directly into my eyes. He would know if I were to lie to him. He was the only one who could tell by just looking at me. He didn't need passion to get the truth from me and that was rare indeed.

"She thought it best that I get married to insure that peace lasted."

He grabbed hold of my chin. "Mackenzie."

The way he said my name assured me that he knew there was more to the story than I was revealing. "She ... she's arranged for me to marry Prince Elwyn of the Unblessed Court."

Cedric jumped to his feet and stormed towards the river. His power rose. This was both good and bad. It was good because he had spent so long in a bound cell that we weren't sure if he'd ever be able to do magic again, but bad in the sense that that made him a threat to anyone around him. So much had changed since we'd last seen each other. He'd spent a year in Hell and I was sure that he had had to harden himself to deal with that. What I wasn't sure of was how much?

"Cedric, on a good note, I saw to it that a marriage contract was signed a few weeks back." He turned and looked at me. Fury flew across his face, no part of him was the sweet lover I'd known, this behavior was foreign to me.

"You have no idea how serious this is, do you? I knew your mother was power hungry, but giving her daughter away to a madman is too much, even for her. That maniac won't honor a marriage contract. Mackenzie, you are a fool."

I felt no need to defend my mother. Cedric was right, she was power hungry, but Rowan had tried to convince me that the Prince wasn't so bad. "I was informed that the Prince was not as bad as I'd thought him to be."

He came flying towards me quickly. "Take a good long look at me. You know the scars you were so curious about. He's the reason I have them."

I took a quick breath in. Surely, he was mistaken. How could my mother promise me to a man who would do that to someone? I reached my finger out and ran it across the shiny scar tissue under his neck. I watched him close his eyes slowly.

"Look at me," I said softly.

His blue eyes opened and locked on me. "Mackenzie, Prince Elwyn is insane, and yes, he did this to me." My gut tightened. He was telling me the truth. I couldn't bear to see the hurt in his eyes any longer. I lifted my head to meet his and kissed his lips. I had intended my kiss to be chaste. I had wanted to comfort him in his time of pain. When I felt his tongue deep within my mouth I knew I'd gone too far. Cedric had not known the touch of a woman in over a year. He was deprived and elated all at the same time. I wouldn't push him away just yet, I couldn't.

The warm sensation of his hand running up my thigh caused my body to lift towards his out of habit. He'd been my lover for many years. I could navigate around him with my eyes closed. Thoughts of the way things used to be came flooding into my head. I remembered all the ways our bodies had joined. How Cedric had left no hole undiscovered, and how he'd seemed to cherish every moment of being with me.

Everything had been so simple, so pure, before Cedric went off to war. Everyone had thought that we would one day marry. Whenever he heard these remarks he laughed. The idea of marrying his very dearest friend seemed absurd. He had never stopped to ask if I thought it as silly as him, because I didn't. The day I had been informed of his death, I was devastated. At that very moment I wanted nothing more than to be holding him in my arms, I would have welcomed the chance to hear him laugh again about taking me as his wife. Now that I had him back, everything should have been right. It was far from it, now there were so many other factors to contend with.

I pushed on Cedric's shoulders gently, signaling him to stop. A low throaty laugh came from him. It sent goose bumps all down my body.

This new and aggressive Cedric was exciting and refreshing. His kisses came harder. I lost myself in them.

Cedric's head snapped back. "What was that?"

I looked around. All I could see were the edges of the river and the surrounding trees. It was hours until dawn would break. The forest was so thick that even then it would still be difficult to see. I was about to tell him that I heard nothing when the sound of snapping twigs echoed around me.

Cedric was crouched next to me in an instant. They would not be taking him back alive, that much was clear. He was a fool, and in no condition to take on the Unblessed Court's guards. They would tear him to pieces before he knew what hit him. I wouldn't watch him be slaughtered. I crawled around and positioned myself in front of him. He tried to push me out of the way, but I held my ground. I left him no choice but to use force to get me to move and I knew he'd never do that.

I stood slowly, listening for more evidence that someone was near. My skin tingled. It was that feeling I got when I was near something magical. Cedric mirrored my every move. He had given up trying to get me to let him lead, which was a good sign that his mind wasn't completely gone. I concentrated hard on the scent of the earth. The dampness of the forest floor and the smell of bark helped me to call upon the power I needed to help us. I was no warrior, so my hand-to-hand combat skills lacked severely. My magic on the other hand, went way beyond my years. Being royalty equaled being powerful. Calling on power gives the same sensation as when a limb falls asleep. It's like that numbness followed by a prickling feeling that you cannot escape. My only exit from it is to release it, how it manifests itself is dependant upon my state of mind. I heard another noise off to my left and turned to face that direction. My hand instinctively rose up in the event that it would be needed. A quick sudden burst of movement came charging out at us. I was about to flay it when Cedric grabbed me by the waist and yanked me to the ground.

"What are you doing?" I tried to get back on my feet, but his grip was too tight.

"Look," he whispered.

I followed his gaze to the edge of the river. There stood a large horse-like creature. Its skin was a medium green and its mane looked matted. I could make out tiny bumps that looked to be warts all over it. My eyes

scanned down its massive legs. There was webbing between the v-shape of its hooves. I had no clue what it was. All I did know was that it had come very close to being incinerated. I looked at Cedric, who was still bear-hugging me.

"What is it?"

"I really thought that you were paying attention when we studied the creatures from this side of the mountain. Were you too preoccupied by my presence to bother?" His voice was steady. He sounded like his old self again.

"Seriously, it looks like a horse, but I'm sure it's not."

"It's a Kelpie. Remember, they haunt the riverbeds here." His grip loosened on me as his hands slid down my arms. I shivered slightly. "Are you cold?"

I nodded my head and felt him snuggle in close to me. The heat from his naked body began to warm me. Cedric's fingers danced along my ribcage. I let out a small laugh. That sent the Kelpie splashing out and into the water. It disappeared within seconds of breaking the surface.

I was happy that I didn't have to face the guards from the Unblessed Court. I had lost my interest in finding the Prince. After talking with Cedric, I had no intention of honoring my end of the agreement. No, I would not agree to be his wife. I let my hand slide up and dance along the scar on Cedric's neck. His jaw stiffened. He was still every bit as gorgeous to me, even with this minor imperfection.

As we lay there, we began to discuss what our next move would be. I wanted to go back to the Blessed Court to have my mother straighten things out for us. Cedric balked at the idea of letting me walk back into my mother's venomous reach. He did have a good point, she had basically made a deal with devil.

I drifted off to sleep with Cedric's arms enclosing my body. No decision had been reached as to where we were headed. The only thing we'd been able to agree on was that Cedric was right. My mother was not to be trusted.

Chapter 5

"You're a hard one to find."

My eyes opened quickly. I looked up. The sun was blocked by a figure standing directly above me. My stomach tightened, and I turned to roll away. Strong hands grabbed me by the back of the arms.

"Hey, hold on. It's me."

I stopped trying to flee and turned around. The sun was still at his back, but now that I was not flat on the ground, I could clearly make out Rowan. I turned and looked next to me. Cedric was gone. I scanned the edges of the river. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, I thought you would at least want to apologize after yesterday," Rowan said. He put his hand out to me. I reached up and took it. He helped me to my feet.

"I must say, I do like your choice of sleepwear."

I looked down. I was still completely nude. Rowan came closer to me. His hand brushed the side of my cheek. I waited for him to strike me. After all, I had knocked the man out cold the day before. Instead, he leaned forward and planted a kiss on my lips. "Please, do not feel the need to make such dramatic exits all the time."

This made me laugh. I lifted my face to his and kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you to try and stop me. I had to try to speak with the Prince myself."

He put his hand on my shoulder and eased my body back against the tree. "Well, I take it that you were not successful in finding the castle."

"No, I found it alright," I said. He took a quick step towards me. Worry flashed over his face. "Well actually, it sort of found me."

"What happened?"

"Something dark, like a moving shadow, jumped out at me. I tried to fight it, but it was too powerful for me. I awoke in a cell in the dungeon."

Anger ripped through his chiseled features. He tightened his grip on my shoulder. Already pressed tightly against the tree, I had nowhere else to go. "They put you in that rat infested filth hole?" I nodded my head slightly. He let out a strange sort of grunt. "Tell me that they let you go when you announced who you are."

I didn't know what to say. He looked like he was ready to rip someone's head off. Mine was the closest and I really didn't have that on my to-do list.

"Not exactly," I said.

An enormous rising wave of his power pushed against my skin. He was ready to blow. "What happened?"

"I umm, I sort of let myself out." I tried to swallow, my throat tight. "I attacked Dermot, then Duane, and left."

Rowan's gaze flickered down my body. He snatched up my left arm. My wrist had a perfect, huge bruise, in the shape of Dermot's hand on it. He looked at my other wrist -- it was identical. His head dropped slowly. I was still being pinned to the tree by his hand. "By the looks of it, they attacked you first."

I just stood there silently. This must have said everything because he let out a howl. "It was foolish to go off on your own. You're lucky that you're still alive."

Now I was the one getting angry. "Foolish? I'm foolish? I was trying to save your life! You're welcome. I can't believe that...."

He cut me off in mid-protest by shoving his tongue into my mouth. I didn't fight back. No part of me wanted to harm him for loving me. I closed my eyes and let his mouth pull at mine. Each kiss made my body buck against his.

His thick fingers found their way to my silk binding and he pushed them into me, never stopping to ask my permission. He was one who took what he wanted, and now he wanted me. I clenched my opening around his

fingers and felt myself creaming. He fingered me with a fury matched by his mouth. I cried out and swayed my hips against the tree. Rowan pulled his fingers from me and untied the front of his pants.

Thinking I was going to get to take him in my mouth, I edged my way down. He grabbed hold of me and lifted me off the ground. He slammed my body against the tree, impaling me with his erect cock without notice. I screamed out and pulled at his hair. It seemed only to encourage him.

Rowan crammed himself into my tight channel until full hilt and then stopped, leaving me pinned to the tree by his invasion. He looked me in the eye and moved his hand to my face. "I love you and you could have been killed by your foolish actions. Never do that again!" His lips came down on mine and the pain I was feeling subsided, giving way to the pleasure he was more than capable of inducing.

I bit at his lip while he moved himself in and out of me. Panting and unable to form any sort of words, I just clung tightly to him as he proved to me who was the dominant one in our relationship.

"Mackenzie, you're so tight ... you feel so good ... ah!" he shouted, spilling his seed deep within me.

My body seized hold of him, milking him, as my orgasm coincided with his. Rowan slid out of me slowly, easing my feet to the ground, and putting his now sated cock back in his pants. He pressed himself against me and pulled my chin up.

"Never do anything that foolish again. Promise me."

"Let go of her!" Cedric's voice came booming from my right.

Rowan and I turned quickly and saw Cedric standing about fifteen feet away from us. He held berries and fruits from the forest, and he was still very naked. Rowan's energy surrounded me so much that I could barely breathe. He turned and looked at me then back to Cedric. I could only guess what went through his mind, and I was positive that it wasn't good.

"It's not what you think," I said quickly.

Cedric took a step closer to me, letting the fruit fall to the forest floor. Mackenzie, get away from him. I heard his deep voice in my head. I looked over at him and raised my eyebrow.

Rowan turned his attention back to me. His jaw was tight. He was enraged. "Please tell me what this is then, I am all ears."

Run, Mackenzie! Go, I will hold him off. Go! Cedric's voice crowded the thoughts in my head. I had to push out at him with all my might to block him out.

"He's my friend. I ran into him. He, we had to clean up. Our clothes were soaked." I turned and pointed at the limb where my dress still hung. "We fell asleep, that's all."

Rowan turned and looked at Cedric. "Do you often wander this far from the Blessed Court?"

Cedric's blue eyes squinted slightly. He was close to his breaking point with Rowan too. Cedric, no. It's okay, I pushed this out at him without actually saying the words. His tall frame and long auburn hair looked magnificent in the morning sunlight, but his eyes looked horrified. I couldn't worry about that right now. Rowan was a hell of a lot stronger than Cedric was at the moment. I was pretty sure that one strong strike of power on the part of Rowan would leave Cedric seriously injured or dead.

"Have we met before?" Rowan asked.

Cedric took another step towards Rowan and I. The look on his face told me that he was a little shocked. His lips curved into a tiny smile. "No ... no I don't believe that we've met before. I'm James."

I opened my mouth a bit to object to Cedric lying to Rowan about his name when I felt Cedric inside my head again. Do not breathe my name Mackenzie. It could cost me my life. The threat of losing him scared me so, and I did as he wished.

"Yes, James, this is Rowan." It felt awkward using Cedric's middle name.

Rowan turned his attention back to me. He looked me over and then did something quite unexpected. He leaned down and kissed me. My body gave way to the pleasure of having him near me. The butterflies in my stomach returned and I felt sure that I'd let him take me right there if he wanted me. He pulled back quickly and left me standing there with my eyelids droopy with the need for sex.

"Mackenzie, did you have sex with James last night?" he asked.

Being under the influence of his passionate kiss left me in a state of complete disclosure, and he'd planned it that way, I was sure of it. I was happy that Cedric and I had not had sex last night. Had Rowan asked me if I'd ever had sex with James and not specified a timeline then I'm sure I would have said yes. As it stood I was able to answer "no" with complete honesty.

Rowan let out his breath and pulled me close to him. "That is good. I'm not sure I could bear the thought of my soul-mate sharing her body with another man."

"Soul-mate?" Cedric asked, sounding appalled.

I turned my attention to him and had to look away when I saw the hurt in his eyes. Rowan stepped forward and stared at Cedric. I felt Cedric in my head again. Are you still able to perform glamour? he asked. Glamour was another way of saying faerie magic, and was often used when referring to one Fay using magic of deception against another. I had always been good at it. I nodded my head. Good, make my scar disappear.

I did what he asked of me with little to no effort. All I had really done was make it impossible to see. His scar would always be there. I had just hid it from the eyes of others. Rowan moved in closer to Cedric and looked him over. He nodded, satisfied that he truly didn't know Cedric. This made me feel relieved and I wasn't even sure why.

Rowan turned his attentions back on me. "We should get you back to your mother. She is worried sick over your well-being."

The thought of my mother worrying about anyone other than herself was amusing. She never shed a single tear the day that the news of my father's death reached us. He had been on the battlefield during one of the many fights between the Courts and never returned. My mother never so much as lit a candle for him, let alone shed a tear. I, however, had spent a month locked away in my room. Cedric had been the one to help me through it. Without him, I wasn't sure I could have made it.

Rowan pulled on my arm and led me over to my now dry dress. He handed it to me and looked at Cedric with a watchful eye. "Let's be on our way. I want to get you home before your mother sends out another regiment of guards to find you."

I pulled my dress over my head and looked up into Rowan's brown eyes. "Actually, I was thinking that I would not be going home."

Both Cedric and Rowan's mouths dropped open. "What do you mean?" Rowan asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I have no intention on marrying Prince Elwyn and my mother is hell bent on it, so I see no reason to return home."

It was Cedric who made an odd sound. I looked over at him and he looked away. He couldn't hide his feelings from me if I saw his eyes and he knew it. "You, James, have you ever had the honor of meeting the Prince?" Rowan asked.

Cedric's eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. I knew him well enough to know that he fought the urge to speak back to Rowan. I'd seen him make the same exact face to his father on more than one occasion. I searched his face for a sign that it was okay to end this charade. I found none. "No, I can't say I've ever had the honor of meeting Prince Elwyn. I have heard many things about him."

Rowan tilted his head to the side and gave Cedric an odd look. I knew that he tried to judge Cedric's character. It was something most faerie men did upon meeting another. In many ways, they were sizing the other up. I was overcome with a strong desire to put an end to this madness.

"Yes, I do say...I will not marry this Prince. I do not care what comes of this. I will send word back to the Unblessed Court of my change of heart. They will no doubt find me in breach of contract. I do not remember a death clause. I fear that another war may break out, but it is a risk I must take. I will say it again. I refuse to marry that monster."

"That's absurd. I have told you that the Prince is not the monster he's portrayed to be. Even if he was, where is it that you plan on going?"

I hadn't really given it much thought. The first thing I blurted out caught me off guard as well. "To the human realm."

Cedric and Rowan spun around and looked at me. It was unheard of for a faerie to go willingly to live among humans. Few had done it over the years and they had become the stuff of stories. Humans had spent centuries blaming us for their mishaps when in reality we had nothing at all to do with them. We never stole their children and replaced them with changelings. What on earth would we want with a human child? They

took years to grow up, possessed no magical abilities, and had a life expectancy of only seventy-five years. No, we really had no use for them. As for mischief-causing faeries, they did exist, but were distant cousins to us. We would never bother with causing mayhem amongst the humans. To most faeries, humans were disgusting creatures that continued to threaten the delicate balance that we'd created. To me, humans were magnificent creatures I longed to learn more about. Cedric had lived among them for several months during his training. It was required that certain levels of the royal guards be trained in all warfare. This often left a select few to go and train with the human military. I looked over at Cedric and winked.

"James is one of my personal guards. He shall accompany me on my journey. It is his job to see to it that I am cared for."

Rowan looked Cedric over one last time and then smiled. "So, tell me James, if my soul-mate decides to live among the humans can I trust you to accompany her and keep her safe?"

"You won't try and stop me?" I asked, surprised by his decision to let me go.

Rowan let out a low laugh. "Oh, I think that would be dangerous, considering the last time we parted you left me dazed and unconscious for the greater part of the afternoon."

Cedric laughed softly. I ignored him and focused my attentions on Rowan. There was something that he wasn't telling me and I was sure that Cedric knew what it was. I wanted to demand answers to the questions I had, but common sense prevailed and I simply gave a slight bow. Rowan caught my arm in his hand and spun me around to him.

"Kiss me before you go and promise to let me know of your whereabouts once you are settled."

He gave me no time to think about his seemingly simple request. His warm lips pressed against mine and stole my question. I closed my eyes and got lost in the moment with him. His love for me was clear and I had thought prior to finding Cedric that mine was too. I pulled back from him slowly and smiled up at him.

Chapter 6

"What do you mean? How does it work?" I asked, most curious about the large square object that he put the food on. Cedric let out a laugh. He pulled me to him and wrapped his arm around my waist.

"It cooks the food. You place these pots," he motioned to the object on the counter top and then back at the stove, "on it and turn it on. Fire comes up and warms the bottom to cook the food properly."

I scrambled to think of how food preparation worked at the Blessed Court but I came up empty. I truly had never seen anyone preparing my meals before. Plates of food just materialized when I was hungry and vanished when I'd had my fill. The fact that I was truly a pampered brat had been sinking in more and more over the last couple of weeks.

Cedric knew all the tips and tricks to survive living amongst humans. He knew about their currency, their customs, and most of all how to blend in. It was easy for him to come up with money for us to secure a place to stay. It wasn't very big, and was fairly remote, but it did the trick. It also kept me away from the Prince and was somewhere that my mother would never think to look for me.

I let Cedric finish with the food preparations. He'd all but insisted. I think that he was afraid that I'd burn the house down, or cabin, as he called it. I looked around the one room log home and never remembered seeing anything sweeter in my life. I could get used to this and most of all I could get used to Cedric being with me.

He put weight on slowly and I saw the Cedric I knew poking out more and more. The only difference was, this new version of him seemed a bit worldlier and had a harder edge.

The smell of bacon filled the tiny cabin. I turned to find Cedric standing near the small table, putting food onto plates. He looked over at me and winked. He looked so handsome with the light from the window catching

the reddish colored highlights he had in his hair. My glamour had held and his scars still weren't visible. I'd offered to drop it, but Cedric seemed disappointed, so I left it up.

I walked over to take my seat. Cedric stopped what he was doing and moved closer to me. I closed my eyes and tried to prepare myself for the feel of his touch. Hot breath blew on my face as he whispered to me. "Mackenzie, don't shut me out," he said, touching my eyelids softly. If I looked into his blue eyes I'd give in and make love to him, and I couldn't do that. I'd already made a big enough mess of things, and I didn't need to add to it.

"Mackenzie...." His sexy voice danced around in my head.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I can't say no to you. I've never been able to say no to you," I said.

He let out a small laugh. "If only that was true."

This comment made me open my eyes. I looked up at him with a questioning look. "What do you mean?"

He kissed my forehead softly. "It's okay. I understand that you don't share my feelings. You don't have to pretend."

"Pretend to what? Cedric ... explain what in the hell you're talking about."

His large hands cupped my face gently. "Mackenzie, I thought you knew.... I mean your mother told me that you said yourself that you didn't love me ... that's why she didn't allow me to marry you before I left.... I tried, I even had my father try ... still she said no, and when I heard that you'd told her that you'd never be caught dead marrying a guard."

My stomach lurched and my head fogged. Cedric's arms circled around me to keep me from falling. I thought about everything that he'd just told me and still couldn't make sense of it. "What? Are you saying that you wanted to marry me?"

"Yes, I've loved you since we were seven. I wanted to make you mine and to know that you were spoken for, so no other would try to have his way with you while I was gone, but, wait ... you didn't know, your mother said...."

I cut him off. "My mother is a sadistic bitch. I went to her too, before you left and asked for permission to mate with you. She laughed in my face and told me that I was a fool, that you didn't love me and that you'd spent the last days before your departure bedding the chambermaids."

His eyes hardened. I reached up and brushed my fingers through his long hair. "Don't Cedric, don't let her win now. We're here and we're together, that's all that matters." I brought my lips to his and felt him let his anger go. I pulled away from him slowly. "I can't do this with you, not until you tell me what's going on with Rowan."

Cedric let out a wicked laugh. "I think you mean Elwyn Rowan Lockland."

"You mean Prince Elwyn ... Rowan is...." I couldn't even bring myself to say it. How could my beautiful Rowan be this evil man? "Oh gods, that's why he spent so much time defending the Prince when I spoke ill of him." I thought about the magic we'd shared, and how he'd woken my womb to accept his seed. Cedric looked at me and his eyes widened.

"What?"

I had to look away from him. I couldn't hurt him anymore. "I didn't know, Cedric.... I swear that I didn't know. He shared his magic with me, during sex."

Cedric seized hold of my upper arms, spinning me around to face him. "He did what? Tell me that you're not serious. Mack, this means that he could father a child with you ... oh, gods, you didn't did you...? You're not with...?" He panted, seeming to choke on the words.

I shook my head no, and he let out a sigh of relief. "I should have guessed that something was up when I was taken before him and all he wanted to know was about you. He didn't seem interested at all in the Blessed Court's plan of attack, he only wanted to know about you, and when I refused to tell him he slit my throat. He waited as I bled to the brink of death then he mind-raped me, Mack. He put his hands on my head and leeches out the memories of you."

I felt sick to my stomach and flushed. I had to turn away from Cedric for a moment to be able to breathe. Rowan had been the one that did those horrible things to Cedric? He'd been the one to leave Cedric scarred both mentally and physically? I reached down and grabbed my stomach. We'd formed a bond, a union, and I would never be able to resist his advances. My body would crave his touch and I would die without it. I turned quickly to Cedric. "He must die."

Cedric's eyes filled with tears. In all the years I'd known him, I'd never once seen him cry. "Mackenzie, if I was to kill him now then you would perish within a few short months of his death. As much as I dreamed of the day I'd get to see him take his last breath, I can't do that. I can't lose you."

"Then I'll do it," I said, turning and heading towards the door. Cedric grabbed my arm and spun me around, coming down hard on my mouth. His tongue pushed in and his hand moved up and under my dress. His fingers came to a rest between my legs. I wanted him to touch me more, but he stopped and looked at me.

"I think that if what you say is true, and you love me still, even just a little, we might be able to overcome his magic in you."

I moved my hand to his bare stomach and pulled on the waistband of his pants. I let the glamour I'd been using drop and watched as Cedric's scars reappeared. He tried to pull away from me, but I held tight to him and leaned up and licked along the large scar on his neck. I nibbled on his chin and tugged lightly on his bottom lip. "Cedric James McKinney I've never stopped loving you."

He lifted my body high off the ground. I wrapped my legs around him, and hugged him tight. It felt so good to be near him again. I kissed the edges of his jaw until I came to his soft lips. Cedric smelled of jasmine and lilies. He too, was powerful and a year locked away in a dungeon hadn't taken away from that. I took in all that he had to offer and savored the scent of him. I had missed it so.

I ran my fingers through his silky hair and it fell all around us, enclosing us in a shell of warmth, a shell of Cedric. His fingers kneaded my bottom as he held me off the ground. He moved towards the bed that we had shared for the past few weeks, but had never actually had sex in. He laid my body down gently on it then slid up and over me. Our mouths never once lost contact and the heat building between us was almost suffocating. I wanted to be touched by him, to be loved by him.

He pulled away from me. I wanted to protest, but didn't when his hands parted my legs. He separated my velvety folds and opened me to the marvel of his gentle touch. I grabbed at the sheets as his tongue flickered over my clit. His fingers pushed into my tight channel, followed close behind by his long tongue. I tipped my head back and cried out as his tongue dove into me again and again. It wasn't long before my thighs were threatening to seize hold of his head from the involuntary jerking that he caused in me. The combination of his warm tongue and his fingers encased in my body proved to be too much, and I let my magic loose on him.

My power flowed over his face first then move down his body. Cedric pulled back from me and looked down at himself, he was glowing. "Mackenzie?"

I shook my head. I didn't understand what was going on anymore than he did. "Do you feel alright?"

He slid his pants down, exposing the full weight of what he carried to me. I let out a breath that I hadn't known I held. He was perfect. He was erect, unmarred, and ready to enter me. I had worried that perhaps he'd sustained some damage during his year of torture, but as far as I could tell he looked fine. No, better than fine, perfect. I moved up the bed and slithered towards him. I stopped long enough to remove my dress, then continued onward with only one thing on my mind, pleasing Cedric.

He stood as still as a statue at the foot of the bed, waiting for me to reach him. I cupped him in my hands and let my fingers wrap around him. I nibbled at the base and licked the edges of his tight auburn curls. He moaned and I knew that he loved every minute of it.

I took the head of him into my mouth and rolled it around with my tongue. His fingers moved into my hair and laced gently into it. I varied the speed at which my hands stroked him and took all ten inches of him into my mouth. It was hard to do, but somehow I managed. I cupped his sac in my hand and worked at it with a ginger touch. I found a steady rhythm with sliding my mouth over the length of his veined cock and stuck with it. I closed my mouth tight around his shaft and sucked hard, pulling my mouth up as I went. When I got to the top, I stopped and pushed my tongue into the tiny hole at the head of his penis.

I laughed softly as he moaned and bucked against me. I wanted to wear his seed, bathe in it, never be without. I had missed him so and never

wanted to be without him again. I slid my mouth back over him and repeated my sucking.

Cedric's legs tightened along with his grip of my hair. I reached around and seized hold of his butt, pulling him closer to me, taking every bit of him deep into my throat, sucking, tugging, fucking him with my mouth. His sac tightened, followed quickly by his release. I drank his hot come down, and licked slowly as I pulled away, not wanting to miss any of his salty delights.

Cedric tackled me to the bed and covered me with kisses. The taste of the others sweet juices on our mouths drove us crazy with desire. He pulled me close to him and wrapped his body around me. "Mackenzie, will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Time stood still for me. I didn't know what to say. Of course I wanted to be Mrs. Cedric James McKinney. I had ever since I'd been a young girl, but so much had changed, so many things stood in our way now. "My mother will never allow it."

He kissed my forehead. "I'm not expecting to take you back to the Blessed Court for a ceremony. We could do it here, like the humans do. What do you say?"

"It won't be legal. It will never hold up at the Blessed Court."

He let out a small chuckle, and kissed my forehead. "I know, but it would mean something to us. We could hand fast if you'd prefer. I'll take anything, Mack. Anything that will add to our bond and make you mine."

I moved my body in closer to his and kissed his cheek. "Yes, I say yes."

Epilogue

Cedric and I are doing well. We decided to stay in the cabin. It's turned into quite a cozy little home for the two of us. Being this close to nature keeps our magic strong, and being this secluded keeps our whereabouts a secret. It's a treat to get to walk among the creatures of the earth each and every day. We went ahead with a traditional human ceremony and are now considered man and wife. This is of no value in the eyes of faerie law but it means something to us. We would have been better off hand fasting. At least that way my mother would be forced to acknowledge us as a couple.

Cedric is working in the city as a security consultant. His military background and past time spent here gave him all the credentials he needed. I volunteer at the local women's shelter and am still trying to learn to cook. Most of my time is spent scanning the surrounding areas with my powers to try and pick up on any faeries that may be closing in on us. I'm certain that my mother is searching for us, as is Rowan. I had made him a promise to let him know where I was once I was settled and I haven't held up my end of the agreement. I'm not sure what I'll do if I see Rowan. Cedric thinks that we were successful in breaking his hold over me, I'm not so sure.