

CHAPTER ONE

THE SMELL OF EUCALYPTUS ALWAYS MADE ME THINK OF SOUTHERN California, my home away from home; now it might forever be entwined with the scent of blood. I stood there with the strangely hot wind rustling through the high leaves. It blew my summer dress in a tangle around my legs, and spread my shoulder-length hair in a scarlet web across my face. I grabbed my hair in handfuls so I could see, though maybe not being able to see would have been better. The plastic gloves pulled at my hair. They were designed so I didn't contaminate evidence, not for comfort. We were surrounded by a nearly perfect circle of the tall, pale tree trunks. In the middle of that natural circle were the bodies.

The spicy smell of the Eucalyptus could almost hide the scent of blood. If it had been this many adult human-sized bodies the Eucalyptus wouldn't have had a chance, but they weren't adult-sized. They were tiny by human standards, so tiny, the size of dolls; none of the corpses were even a foot tall, and some were less than five inches. They lay on the ground with their bright butterfly and moth wings frozen as if in mid-movement. Their dead hands were wrapped around wilted flowers like a cheerful game gone horribly wrong. They looked like so many broken Barbie dolls, except that Barbie dolls never lay so lifelike, or so perfectly poised. No matter how hard

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I'd tried as a little girl, their limbs remained stiff and unyielding. The bodies on the ground were stiff with rigor mortis, but they'd been laid out carefully, so they had stiffened in strangely graceful, almost dancing poses.

Detective Lucy Tate came to stand beside me. She was wearing a pants suit complete with jacket and a white button-up shirt that strained a little across the front because Lucy, like me, had too much figure for most button-up shirts. But I wasn't a police detective so I didn't have to pretend I was a man to try to fit in. I worked at a private detective agency that used the fact that I was Princess Meredith, the only American-born fey royal, and back working for the Grey Detective Agency: Supernatural Problems; Magical Solutions. People loved paying money to see the princess, and have her hear their problems; I'd begun to feel a little like a freak show until today. Today I would have loved to be back in the office listening to some mundane matter that didn't really need my special brand of help, but was just a human rich enough to pay for my time. I'd have rather been doing a lot of things than standing here staring down at a dozen dead fey.

"What do you think?" she asked.

What I really thought was that I was glad the bodies were small so that the trees covered most of the smell, but that would be admitting weakness, and you didn't do that on the rare occasions you got to work with the police. You had to be professional and tough or they thought less of you, even the female cops, maybe especially them.

"They're laid out like something from a children's storybook down to the dancing poses and the flowers in their hands."

Lucy nodded. "It's not just like, it is."

"Is what?" I asked, looking at her. Her dark brunette hair was cut shorter than mine, and held back by a thick band so that nothing obscured her vision, as I still fought with my own hair. She looked cool and professional.

She used one plastic-gloved hand to hold out a plastic-wrapped page. She held it out to me, though I knew not to touch it even with

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the gloves. I was a civilian, and I had been very aware of that as I walked through all the police on the way to the center of all this activity. The police were never that fond of the private detective, no matter what you see on television, and I wasn't even human. Of course, if I'd been human they wouldn't have called me down to the murder scene in the first place. I was here because I was a trained detective and a faerie princess. One without the other wouldn't have gotten me under the police tape.

I stared at the page. The wind tried to snatch it from her hand, and she used both hands to hold it steady for me. It was an illustration from a children's book. It was dancing faeries with flowers in their hands. I stared at it for a second more, then looked down at the bodies on the ground. I forced myself to study their dead forms, then looked at the illustration.

"They're identical," I said.

"I believe so, though we'll have to have some kind of flower expert tell us if the flowers match up bloom for bloom, but except for that our killer has duplicated the scene."

I stared from one to the other again, those laughing happy faces in the picture and the very still, very dead ones on the ground. Their skin had begun to change color already, turning that bluish-purple cast of the dead.

"He, or she, had to dress them," I pointed out. "No matter how many illustrations you see with these little blousy dresses and loin-cloth things, most demi-fey outside of faerie don't dress like this. I've seen them in three-piece suits and formal evening wear."

"You're sure they didn't wear the clothes here?" she asked.

I shook my head. "They wouldn't have matched perfectly without planning it this way."

"We were thinking he lured them down here with a promise of an acting part, a short film," she said.

I thought about it, then shrugged. "Maybe, but they'd have come to the circle anyway."

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“Why?”

“The demi-fey, the small winged fey, have a particular fondness for natural circles.”

“Explain.”

“The stories only tell humans not to step into a ring of toadstools, or a ring of actual dancing fey, but it can be any natural circle. Flowers, stones, hills, or trees, like this circle. They come to dance in the circle.”

“So they came down here to dance and he brought the clothes?” She frowned at me.

“You think that it works better if he lured them down here to film them,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Either that or he watched them,” I said, “so he knew they came down here on certain nights to dance.”

“That would mean he or she was stalking them,” Lucy said.

“It would.”

“If I go after the film angle, I can find the costume rental and the advertisement for actors for his short film.” She made little quote marks in the air for the word film.

“If he’s just a stalker and he made the costumes, then you have fewer leads to follow.”

“Don’t say he. You don’t know that the killer is a he.”

“You’re right, I don’t. Are you assuming that the killer isn’t human?”

“Should we be?” she asked, her voice neutral.

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine a human strong enough or fast enough to grab six demi-fey and slit their throats before the others could escape or attack him.”

“Are they as delicate as they look?” she asked.

I almost smiled, and then didn’t feel like finishing it. “No, Detective, they aren’t. They’re much stronger than they look, and incredibly fast.”

“So we aren’t looking for a human?”

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“I didn’t say that. I said that physically humans couldn’t do this, but there is some magic that might help them do it.”

“What kind of magic?”

“I don’t have a spell in mind. I’m not human. I don’t need spells to use against other fey, but I know there are stories of magic that can make us weak, catchable, and hurtable.”

“Yeah, aren’t these kind of fey supposed to be immortal?”

I stared down at the tiny lifeless bodies. Once the answer would have simply been yes, but I’d learned from some of the lesser fey at the Unseelie Court that some of them had died falling down stairs, and other mundane causes. Their immortality wasn’t what it used to be, but we had not publicized that to the humans. One of the things that kept us safe was that the humans thought they couldn’t hurt us easily. Had some human learned the truth and exploited it? Was the mortality among the lesser fey getting worse? Or had they been immortal and magic had stolen it away?

“Merry, you in there?”

I nodded and looked at her, glad to look away from the bodies. “Sorry, I just never get used to seeing this kind of thing.”

“Oh, you get used to it,” she said, “but I hope you don’t see enough dead bodies to be that jaded.” She sighed, as if she wished she wasn’t that jaded either.

“You asked me if the demi-fey are immortal, and the answer is yes.” It was all I could say to her until I found out if the mortality of the fey was spreading. So far it had only been a few cases inside faerie.

“Then how did the killer do this?”

I’d only seen one other demi-fey killed by a blade that wasn’t cold iron. A noble of the Unseelie Court had wielded that one. A noble of faerie, and my blood kin. We’d killed the sidhe who did it, although he said that he hadn’t meant to kill her. He had just meant to wound her through the heart as her desertion of him had wounded his heart—poetic and the kind of romantic drivel you get when you’re used to being surrounded by beings who can have their heads chopped off and still live. That last bit hasn’t worked in a long time

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even among the sidhe, but we haven't shared that either. No one likes to talk about the fact that their people are losing their magic and their power.

Was the killer a sidhe? Somehow I didn't think so. They might kill a lesser fey out of arrogance or a sense of privilege, but this had the taste of something much more convoluted than that—a motive that only the killer would understand.

I looked carefully at my own reasoning to make certain I wasn't talking myself out of the Unseelie Court, the Darkling Throng, being suspects. The court that I had been offered rulership of and given up for love. The tabloids were still talking about the fairy-tale ending, but people had died, some of them by my hand, and, like most fairy tales, it had been more about blood and being true to yourself than about love. Love had just been the emotion that had led me to what I truly wanted, and who I truly was. I guess there are worse emotions to follow.

“What are you thinking, Merry?”

“I'm thinking that I wonder what emotion led the killer to do this, to want to do this.”

“What do you mean?”

“It takes something like love to put this much attention into the details. Did the killer love this book or did he love the small fey? Did he hate this book as a child? Is it the clue to some horrible trauma that twisted him to do this?”

“Don't start profiling on me, Merry; we've got people paid to do that.”

“I'm just doing what you taught me, Lucy. Murder is like any skill; it doesn't fall out of the box perfect. This is perfect.”

“The killer probably spent years fantasizing about this scene, Merry. They wanted, needed it to be perfect.”

“But it never is. That's what serial killers say when the police interview them. Some of them try again and again for the real-life kill to match the fantasy, but it never does, so they kill again and again to try to make it perfect.”

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Lucy smiled at me. “You know, that’s one of the things I always liked about you.”

“What?” I asked.

“You don’t just rely on the magic; you actually try to be a good detective.”

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do?” I asked.

“Yeah, but you’d be surprised how many psychics and wizards are great at the magic but suck at the actual detecting part.”

“No, I wouldn’t, but remember, I didn’t have that much magic until a few months ago.”

“That’s right, you were a late bloomer.” And she smiled again. Once I’d thought it was strange that the police could smile over a body, but I’d learned that you either lighten up about it or you transfer out of homicide, or better yet, you get out of police work.

“I’ve already checked, Merry. There are no other homicides even close to this one. No demi-fey killed in a group. No costumes. No book illustration left. This is one of a kind.”

“Maybe it is, but you helped teach me that killers don’t start out this good. Maybe they just planned it perfectly and got lucky that it was this perfect, or maybe they’ve had other kills that weren’t this good, this thought-out, but it would be staged, and it would have this feel to it.”

“What kind of feel?” she asked.

“You thought film not just because it would give you more leads, but because there’s something dramatic about it all. The setting, the choice of victims, the display, the book illustration; it’s showy.”

She nodded. “Exactly,” she said.

The wind played with my purple sundress until I had to hold it to keep it from flipping up and flashing the police line behind us.

“I’m sorry to drag you out to something like this on a Saturday, Merry,” she said. “I did try to call Jeremy.”

“He’s got a new girlfriend and keeps turning off his phone.” I didn’t begrudge my boss, the first semi-serious lover he’d had in years. Not really.

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“You look like you had a picnic planned.”

“Something like that,” I said, “but this didn’t do your Saturday any good either.”

She smiled ruefully. “I didn’t have any plans.” She stabbed a thumb in the direction of the other police. “Your boyfriends are mad at me for making you look at dead bodies while you’re pregnant.”

My hands automatically went to my stomach, which was still very flat. I wasn’t showing yet, though with twins the doctor had warned me that it could go from nothing to a lot almost overnight.

I glanced back to see Doyle and Frost, standing with the policemen. My two men were no taller than some of the police—six feet and some inches isn’t that unusual—but the rest stood out painfully. Doyle had been called the Queen’s Darkness for a thousand years, and he fit his name, black from skin to hair to the eyes behind their black wraparound sunglasses. His black hair was in a tight braid down his back. Only the silver earrings that climbed from lobe to the pointed tip of his ears relieved the black-on-black of his jeans, T-shirt, and leather jacket. The last was to hide the weapons he was carrying. He was the captain of my bodyguards, as well as one of the fathers to my unborn children, and one of my dearest loves. The other dearest love stood beside him like a pale negative, skin as white as my own, but Frost’s hair was actually silver, like Christmas tree tinsel, shining in the sunlight. The wind played with his hair so that it floated outward in a shimmering wave, looking like some model with a wind machine, but even though his hair was near ankle-length and unbound, it did not tangle in the wind. I’d asked him about that, and he’d said simply, “The wind likes my hair.” I hadn’t known what to say to that so I hadn’t tried.

His sunglasses were gunmetal gray with darker gray lenses to hide the paler gray of his eyes, the most unremarkable part of him, really. He favored designer suits, but he was actually in one of the few pairs of blue jeans he owned, with a silk T-shirt and a suit jacket to hide his own weapons, all in grays. We actually had been planning on an out-

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ing to the beach, or I'd have never gotten Frost out of slacks and into jeans. His face might have been the more traditionally handsome of the two, but it wasn't by much. They were as they had been for centuries, the light and dark of each other.

The policemen in their uniforms, suits, and more casual clothes seemed like shadows not as bright, not as alive as my two men, but maybe everyone in love thought the same thing. Maybe it was not being immortal warriors of the sidhe but simply love that made them stand out to my eye.

Lucy had gotten me through the police line because I'd worked with the police before, and I was actually a licensed private detective in this state. Doyle and Frost weren't, and they had never worked with the police on a case, so they had to stay behind the line away from any would-be clues.

"If I find out anything for certain that seems pertinent about this kind of magic, I will let you know." It wasn't a lie, not the way I worded it. The fey, and especially the sidhe, are known for never lying, but we'll deceive you until you'll think the sky is green and the grass is blue. We won't *tell* you the sky is green and the grass is blue, but we will leave you with that definite impression.

"You think there'll be an earlier murder," she said.

"If not, this guy, or girl, got very lucky."

Lucy motioned at the bodies. "I'm not sure I'd call this lucky."

"No murderer is this good the first time, or did you get a new flavor of killer while I was away in faerie?"

"Nope. Most murders are pretty standard. Violence level and victim differs but you're about eighty to ninety percent more likely to be killed by your nearest and dearest than by a stranger, and most killing is depressingly ordinary."

"This one's depressing," I said, "but it's not ordinary."

"No, it's not ordinary. I'm hoping this one perfect scene kind of got it out of the killer's system."

"You think it will?" I asked.

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“No,” she said. “No, I don’t.”

“Can I alert the local demi-fey to be careful, or are you trying to withhold the victim profile from the media?”

“Warn them, because if we don’t and it happens again, we’ll get accused of being racists, or is that speciesist?” She shook her head, walking back toward the police line. I followed her, glad to be leaving the bodies behind.

“Humans can interbreed with the demi-fey, so I don’t think speciesist applies.”

“I couldn’t breed with something the size of a doll. That’s just wrong.”

“Some of them have two forms, one small and one not much shorter than me.”

“Five feet? Really, from eight inches tall to five feet?”

“Yes, really. It’s a rare ability, but it happens, and the babies are fertile, so I don’t think it’s quite a different species.”

“I didn’t mean any offense,” she said.

“None taken, I’m just explaining.”

We were almost to the police line and my visibly anxious boyfriends. “Enjoy your Saturday,” she said.

“I’d say you too, but I know you’ll be here for hours.”

“Yeah, I think your Saturday will be a lot more fun than mine.” She looked at Doyle and Frost as the police finally let them move forward. Lucy was giving them an admiring look behind her sunglasses. I didn’t blame her.

I slipped the gloves off even though I hadn’t touched a thing. I dropped them onto the mass of other discarded gloves that was on this side of the tape. Lucy held the tape up for me and I didn’t even have to stoop. Sometimes short is good.

“Oh, check out the flowers, florists,” I said.

“Already on it,” she said.

“Sorry, sometimes I get carried away with you letting me help.”

“No, all ideas are welcome, Merry, you know that. It’s why I called you down here.” She waved at me and went back to her murder

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scene. We couldn't shake because she was still wearing gloves and carrying evidence.

Doyle and Frost were almost to me, but we weren't going to get to the beach right away either. I had to warn the local demi-fey, and try to figure out a way to see if the mortality had spread to them, or if there was magic here in Los Angeles that could steal their immortality. There were things that would kill us eventually, but there wasn't much that would allow you to slit the throat of the winged-kin. They were the essence of faerie, more so even than the high court nobles. If I found out anything certain I'd tell Lucy, but until I had something that was useful I'd keep my secrets. I was only part human; most of me was pure fey, and we know how to keep a secret. The trick was how to warn the local demi-fey without causing a panic. Then I realized that there wasn't a way. The fey are just like humans—they understand fear. Some magic, a little near-immortality, doesn't make you unafraid; it just gives you a different list of fears.