



A Stroke of Midnight

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Laurell K. Hamilton

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Book by Hamilton Laurell K

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Extrait

CHAPTER 1

I hate press conferences. but I especially hate them when I've been ordered to hide large portions of the truth. The order had come from the Queen of Air and Darkness, ruler of the dark court of faerie. The Unseelie are not a power to be crossed, even if I was their very own faerie princess. I was Queen Andais's niece, but the family connection had never bought me much. I smiled at the nearly solid wall of reporters, fighting to keep my thoughts from showing on my face.

The queen had never allowed this much of the human media inside the Unseelie's hollow hill, our sithen. It was our refuge, and you don't let the press into your refuge. But yesterday's assassination attempt had made allowing the press into our home the lesser evil. The theory was that inside the sithen our magic would protect me much better than it had in the airport yesterday, where I'd nearly been shot.

Our court publicist, Madeline Phelps, pointed to the first reporter, and the questions began.

"Princess Meredith, you had blood on your face yesterday, but today the only sign of injury is your arm in a sling. What were your injuries yesterday?"

My left arm was in a green cloth sling that matched my suit jacket near perfectly. I was dressed in Christmas, Yule, red and green. Cheerful, and it was that time of year. My hair was a deeper red than my blouse. My hair is the most Unseelie part of me, sidhe scarlet hair for someone who looks good in black. Not the gold or orangey red of human hair. The jacket brought out the green in two out of the three circles of color in my iris. The gold circle would flash in the camera light sometimes as if it truly was metallic. The eyes were pure Seelie sidhe, the only part of me that showed that my mother had been of the golden court. Well, at least half.

I didn't recognize the reporter who had asked the question. He was a new face to me, maybe new since yesterday. Since yesterday's assassination attempt had happened in front of the media, on camera, well, we'd had to turn away some of the reporters, because the big room wouldn't hold more. I'd been doing press conferences since I was a child. This was the biggest one I'd had, including the one after my father was assassinated. I'd been taught to use names for reporters when I knew them, but to this one I could only smile and say, "My arm is only sprained. I was very lucky yesterday."

Actually, my arm hadn't been injured in the assassination attempt that got on film. No, my arm had been hurt on the second, or was that the third, attempt on my life yesterday. But those attempts had happened inside the sithen, where I was supposed to be safe. The only reason the queen and my bodyguards thought I was safer here than outside in the human world was that we had arrested or killed the traitors behind the attempts on me, and the attempt on the queen. We'd damned near had a palace coup yesterday, and the media didn't have a hint of it. One of the old names for the fey is the hidden people. We've earned the name.

"Princess Meredith, was it your blood on your face, yesterday?" A woman this time, and I did know her name.

"No," I said.

I smiled for real, as I watched her face fall when she realized she might be getting just a one-word answer. "No, Sheila, it wasn't mine."

She smiled at me, all blond and taller than I would ever be. "May I add to my question, Princess?"

"Now, now," Madeline said, "one question per."

"It's okay, Madeline," I said.

Our publicist turned to look at me, flipping off the switch at her waist so her microphone would not pick up. I took the cue and covered mine with my hand and moved to one side of it.

Madeline leaned in over the table. Her skirt was long enough that she was in no danger of flashing the reporters down below the dais. Her skirt was the absolute latest hem length of the moment, as was the color. Part of her job was paying attention to what was in and what was out. She was our human representative, much more than any ambassador that Washington had ever sent.

"If Sheila gets to add to her question, then they will all do it. That will make everything harder, for you and for me."

She was right, but . . . "Tell them that this is an exception. Then move on."

She raised perfectly plucked eyebrows at me, then said, "Okay." She hit the switch on her mike as she turned and smiled at them. "The princess will let Sheila ask another question, but after that you'll have to keep it to the original rule. One question per." She pointed to Sheila and gave a nod.

"Thank you for letting me add on to my question, Princess Meredith."

"You're welcome."

"If it wasn't your blood yesterday, then whose was it?"

"My guard Frost's."

The cameras flashed to life so that I was blinded, but the attention of everyone had moved behind me. My guards were lined up along the wall, spilling down the edges of the dais, to curl on either side of the table and floor. They were dressed in everything from designer suits to full-plate body armor to Goth club wear. The only thing that all the outfits had in common was weaponry. Yesterday we'd tried to be discreet about the weapons. A bulge that ruined the line of the jacket, but nothing overt. Today there were guns under jackets or cloaks, but there were also guns in plain sight, and swords, and knives, and axes, and shields. We'd also more than doubled the number of guards around me.

I glanced back at Frost. The queen had ordered me not to play favorites among the guard. She'd gone so far as to tell me not to give any long lingering glances to one guard over another. I'd thought it was an odd demand, but she was queen, and you argued with her at your peril. But I glanced back; after all, he'd saved my life. Didn't that earn him a glance? I could always justify it to the queen, my aunt, that the press would think it strange if I hadn't acknowledged him. It was the truth, but I looked because I wanted to look.

His hair was the silver of Christmas-tree tinsel, shiny and metallic. It fell to his ankles like decoration, but I

knew that it was soft and alive, and felt oh so warm across my body. He'd put the upper layer of his hair back from his face with a barrette carved from bone. The hair glittered and moved around his charcoal-grey Armani suit that had been tailored over his broad shoulders and the athletic cut of the rest of him. The suit had also been tailored to hide a gun in a shoulder holster and a knife or two. It had not been designed to hide a gun under each arm, or a short sword at his hip, with a leather scabbard strapped tight to his thigh. The hilt of a second sword rode over his shoulder, peeking through all that shining hair. He bristled with knives, and Frost always had other weapons that you couldn't see. No suit was designed to cover that much armament and hold its shape. His jacket couldn't be buttoned at all, and the guns and sword and one knife glinted in the camera's flash.

Cries of "Frost, Frost" filled the room, while Madeline picked a question. The man was another one I didn't know. Nothing like an assassination attempt to attract the media.

"Frost, how badly were you hurt?"

Frost is a little over six feet, and since I was sitting down, and the microphone was adjusted to my height, he had to lean down, way down. With a weapon of any kind he was graceful. But bending low over that mike he was awkward. I had a moment to wonder if he'd ever been on mike before, then his deep voice was answering the question.

"I am not hurt." He stood back up, and I could see the relief on his face. He turned away from the cameras, as if he thought he'd get off that easily. I knew better.

"But wasn't it your blood on the princess?"

His hand was gripping the pommel of his short sword. Touching his weapons unnecessarily was a sign of nerves. He leaned over the mike again, and this time he bumped my bad shoulder with his body. I doubted the press saw such a small movement, but it was too clumsy for words, for Frost. He braced a hand flat against the table, steadying himself. He turned eyes the grey of a winter sky to me. The look asked silently, "Did I hurt you?"

I mouthed, no.

He let out a sigh and leaned back to the microphone. "Yes, it was my blood." He actually stood back up, as if that would satisfy them. He should have known better. He had been decorative muscle for the queen at enough of these over the years to know that he was being a little too concise. At least he didn't try to go back to his spot behind me this time.

A reporter I did know, Simon McCracken, was next. He'd covered the faerie courts for years. "Frost, if you are not hurt, then where did your blood come from and how did it get on the princess?" He knew how to word the question just right, so we couldn't tap-dance around it. The sidhe don't lie. We'll paint the truth red, purple, and green, and convince you that black is white, but we won't actually lie.

Frost leaned over the mike again, his hand pressed to the table. He'd moved minutely closer to me, close enough that his pants leg touched my skirt. His sword was almost trapped between our bodies. That would be bad if he had to draw the weapon. I looked at his hand, so big and strong on the table, and realized his fingertips were mottled. He was gripping the table the way you grip a podium when you're nervous.

"I was shot." He had to clear his throat sharply to continue. I turned my head just enough to see that perfect

profile, and realized it was more than nerves. Frost, the queen's Killing Frost, was afraid. Afraid of public speaking. Oh, my. "I have healed. My blood covered the princess when I shielded her from harm."

He started to stand back up, but I touched his arm. I covered the mike with my hand, and leaned in against him, so I could whisper against the curve of his ear. I took in a deep breath of the scent of his skin, and said, "Kneel or sit."

His breath went out so deep that his shoulders moved with it. But he knelt on one knee beside me. I moved the microphone a little closer to him.

I slid my hand under the back of his jacket, so that I could lay my hand against the curve of his back, just below the side sweep of the big sword sheath. When fey are nervous, any fey, we take comfort from touching one another. Even the mighty sidhe feel better with a little contact, though not all of us will admit it for fear of blurring the line between royalty and commoner. I had too much lesser fey blood in my veins to worry about it. I could feel the sweat that was beginning to trickle down his spine.

Madeline started to come closer to us. I shook my head. She gave me a questioning look but didn't argue. She picked another question from the throng.

"So you took a bullet to protect Princess Meredith?"

I leaned into the mike, putting my face very close to Frost's, touching carefully, so I didn't get makeup on him. The cameras exploded in bursts of white light. Frost jumped, and I knew that was going to be visible to the cameras. Oh, well. We were blinded, vision blurred in bursts of white and blue spots. His muscles tightened, but I wouldn't have known it if I hadn't been touching him.

"Hi, Sarah, and yes, he took a bullet for me," I said.

I think Sarah said "Hi, Princess" back, but I couldn't be sure, since I still couldn't see well enough, and the noise of so many voices was too confusing. I'd learned to use names when I knew them. It made everyone feel more friendly. And you need all the friendly you can get at a press conference.

"Frost, were you afraid?"

He relaxed minutely against me, into the touch of my hand and my face. "Yes," he said.

"Afraid to die," someone yelled out without being called on.

Frost answered the question anyway. "No."

Madeline called on someone, who asked, "Then what were you afraid of?"

"I was afraid Meredith would be harmed." He licked his lips, and tensed again. I realized he'd used my name without my title. A faux pas for a bodyguard, but of course, he was more than that. Every guard was technically in the running to be prince to my princess. But we were sidhe, and we don't marry until we're pregnant. A nonfertile couple is not allowed to wed, so the guards were doing more than just "guarding" my body.

"Frost, would you give your life for the princess?"

He answered without hesitation. "Of course." His tone said clearly that that had been a silly question.

A reporter in back who had a television camera next to him asked the next question. "Frost, how did you heal a gunshot wound in less than twenty-four hours?"

Frost gave another deep, shoulder-moving sigh. "I am a warrior of the sidhe." The reporters waited for him to add more, but I knew he wouldn't. To Frost, the fact that he was sidhe was all the answer he needed. It had been only a through and through bullet wound from a handgun and no special ammunition. It would take a great deal more than that to stop a warrior of the sidhe.

I hid my smile and started to lean into the mike, to help explain that to the press, when the sweat along his spine suddenly stopped being wet and warm. It was as if a line of cold air swept down his back. Cold enough that I moved my hand away, startled.

I glanced down at his big hand on the table and saw what I'd feared. A white rime of frost was drifting out from his hand

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From the Hardcover edition. Présentation de l'éditeur

I am Meredith Gentry, P.I. and Princess Merry, heir to the throne of Fairie. I have departed the safe haven of Los Angeles to face the peril and deception of my first home, the Unseelie court. There, my enemies are many, and my guards may not be able to protect me from the treachery of the unseen foes that will stop at

nothing to keep me from the throne.

As for my quest to produce an heir and thereby save myself and all that is faerie from utter destruction - well, I am still trying. As pregnancy becomes ever more urgent, I must leave the protected beds of the Queen's Ravens and lie with other men, men whose designs and allegiances remain in question. And a night of delirious passion will transport me and my new lovers to another place, the mysterious dead gardens - an event that portends great unrest in the forces of magic.

In order to save myself and those I love, I must walk into the very mouth of danger, and visit the Goblins in their lair - as well as the cunning King Taranis himself, who has an astonishing proposal for me. For I alone hold the power to rescue the universe, even if it requires aligning with my greatest and most dangerous of adversaries. But I'm running out of time. . . .

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