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THE  
HUNTER

YOLANDA  
SFETSOS

*The Hunter*

*By*

*Yolanda Sfetsos*

## **The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetsos**

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### **The Hunter**

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**Dedication**

This one's dedicated to Deanna and Sable, for their support of the Fae-Hunters series.

Last time, the faeries of Breena wanted to thank them. This time, I do. Thanks so much for the awesome, awesome cover...and the kick ass title.

## Chapter One

Miki Bloom could feel *him* watching her every move.

She had to keep moving, act as if she hadn't noticed the shaggy monster stalking her in the shadows around Sydney.

Days had passed since she'd last approached any of the faeries who needed to be returned to their rightful place in Breena. It just wasn't safe. She wasn't willing to offer the brute free passage to them. Not after he'd somehow found ones she'd had on assignment but hadn't gotten around to yet. She'd gotten there too late and walked in on what was left of their slaughtered corpses.

Everything in her life was out of whack at the moment.

Her home world was in the middle of a war she'd chosen not to take part in. The recently risen queen was pissed off at her, too. Shay Lee had delivered the news of a vision she'd had, one that involved Miki's death. With a goblin on her tail, the news had only confirmed what she needed to do.

The only bright spark left in her life was Peter. His lopsided smile was the only thing able to ease the confusion she felt inside. Even if some of that confusion was because of the way she felt about him.

The queen's assumption that she'd left Breena in a hurry to pursue the love of a human had stung more than she'd allowed it to show. How could anyone think her so stupid? Miki was a fae-hunter, a warrior at heart who chose to dedicate her life to the seek-and-find of their own people lost amongst the humans. Why would she forget her

## The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetso

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responsibilities so easily? Sure, the fact that love had been decreed legal only added to the attraction of losing herself in Sydney.

But it was never the sole reason.

Miki had known about the goblin for a while. Queen Rhiannon had always thought herself too smart, and for that reason had never paid consequence to her guards or the hunters she'd mistreated and overworked for her own gain. Miki knew things would be different now with Shay Lee at the throne, but her heart still ached at not being able to take part in the battle.

Her fight was here. She had to lure the goblin, Adolf, out of the shadows he loved to walk in. The fact he'd lingered in the darkness for so many days, even though he knew she was here, was nothing short of suspicious. She couldn't help but wonder what he was up to. Why had he slowed down after slaughtering so many hunters and changelings?

"There you are!"

Miki turned her head to meet Peter's gaze, and wisps of her pale blonde hair tickled her cheeks. Peter Thornton was a tall human man with short dark hair and sparkly blue eyes. There was a light sprinkle of stubble on his face, and he always had a warm smile for her. She'd never seen him out of his work uniform, which consisted of black pants and a white shirt most of the time. Everyone else who worked in the store seemed to dress casually and in the clothes they sold, but he always stuck to this one outfit. Miki thought he looked cute in it. Her heart jumped at the sight of his lopsided smile.

"I hope you don't mind that I grabbed you a sandwich." He pulled out the chair across from her. Peter unloaded the two white paper bags he was clutching, along with two small bottles of juice. He knew better than to try and get her any of those fizzy drinks humans loved so much.

She'd given it a go one time and nearly spat it out. The fizz had risen up her nostrils and settled in her stomach only to give her indigestion. Miki had never ingested anything so filled with chemicals. It wasn't natural to pollute the body with artificial things. Yet, she had been visiting the humans long enough to know just how much of their lives involved the artificial. They consumed, drove, lived in and wore artificial

things. She'd been shocked the night she chased down one of her hunts and ended up in a dingy club of some sort. There, chemicals were passed around to be inhaled, smoked and injected into their bodies. It made her sick, disgusted to see that an actual faerie was partaking in such self-pollution. Sure, he hadn't known he was fae at the time, but it still wasn't a good enough excuse.

"Thanks, Peter," she said with a smile. He always made her feel warm inside and gave her a reason to smile, something a warrior didn't get a chance to do often enough. Miki couldn't understand why a mere human made her feel this way. She'd never felt this with any of the changelings she tracked, or the faeries back home. Yet, the attraction – she'd finally admitted to herself it's what it was – had been instant.

She loved spending time amongst the humans and all their peculiarities. The Broadway Shopping Center had offered her a refuge for years. It had almost been a year since she first literally walked into Peter. "You're so sweet."

He returned her smile and sat down. "If I'm so sweet, why do you keep knocking me back when I ask you out?"

Her heart sank into her stomach. This was a conversation they'd been having for months. At first, she just couldn't see herself devoted to an actual human. But he'd managed to melt away that concern. Besides, she'd been raised in a place where love was forbidden. But when the law was changed and she finally felt ready to surprise him by actually suggesting they go out on a date, she'd discovered Adolf lurking behind her. It was too risky to get Peter involved in her crazy life.

As far as he knew, she was just an average woman who loved to shop. She used glamour to keep the shimmer of her real features dimmed enough for him not to be blinded. She knew firsthand the effect it could have on humans. She'd barely escaped the clutches of a faerie collector a few years back. They weren't common but were certainly out there. Average humans who couldn't let go once they'd spent time or tasted what it was like to be with a faerie. They could be eternally damaged or turned mad if the exposure wasn't dimmed. It was why she had to be so careful around Peter. She really cared about him. More than she cared to

admit to herself sometimes.

Admitting to Shay that she was in love with a human had been the only time she'd managed to say the words out loud. Though, her heart had known for a while.

She sighed. "I've already explained it—"

"Yeah, yeah, you've told me you've got a job to do and then we can enjoy some quality time together. But when will that be, Miki? I've been waiting for months." Peter tore open the paper bag in front of him. He removed the sandwich wrapped tight with thinner paper and looked at her.

"I didn't ask you to wait for me." Suddenly, the sandwich didn't seem as appealing. She looked at her untouched bag but didn't make a move toward it.

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean, then?" She raised an eyebrow in question, and he met her gaze.

His pupils were large inside his iris. It seemed to be getting harder for him to conceal his real intentions and desire for her. She suspected she mirrored him in that respect and probably only added to his confusion. But while Adolf was still on the scene, she refused to jeopardize Peter's life. Maybe one day...soon...she'd be able to tell him the truth without leaving out a single detail. That day wasn't today. She'd promised Shay that she would take care of this situation while the rest of them fought to keep Breena theirs. And that's what she intended to do. Besides, she knew the new queen would be back. There'd been no denying the passion burning in her eyes. Miki suspected Shay's passion for the welfare of other faeries would one day be her downfall.

Still, it was time the throne belonged to someone deserving. Rhiannon had caused too much pain and heartache for everyone in Breena. To rule with an iron fist, and with selfish intention, was never a good leadership quality. Everything she'd possessed in vanity and cruelty only hurt them as a whole. She didn't know much about the king, but with Shay by his side, she had no doubt things would be set on the right course. Miki couldn't wait to step back into Breena to see for herself.



## The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetso

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Peter bit into his sandwich. He chewed, swallowed, took a drink and then sighed. "Do you have any idea how much I like you?"

"Peter, don't." She looked away. Miki knew exactly how much he liked her because she felt the same way.

*"Peter don't..."* I've heard that too many times. You know, I'm starting to wonder if you're just gonna keep stringing me along because you don't want anything to do with me. Do you pity me, is that it?" He shoved another bite into his mouth and chewed vigorously.

"You know that's not true," she answered. Her eyes had cut across the food court. Near the automatic doors that led out to the parking lot, she noticed the shadow on the glossy tiles. Someone was hidden in the small gap between the last shop and door.

"No, I don't know that."

"Peter, can you drop it, please?" She met his eyes. Why couldn't he just let this go for now? They'd had this discussion several times already, and it always ended the same way.

"I've been dropping it for too long." He sat forward, blue eyes wide. He placed a hand over hers and massaged his thumb over the back of her hand.

She lowered her eyes for a second and enjoyed the way skin-on-skin contact felt. The warmth of his thumb against her skin filled her with heat that raced up her wrist and arm. There was certainly something between them. But this wasn't the right time to indulge. Too much unfinished business remained. Too many things she had to do before she could lose herself in love.

"I'm sorry, Peter, but I can't do this right now." It hurt her very soul to say those words. The disappointment in his eyes filled her with sadness. Miki knew it would be a matter of time before she lost him completely. As much as it pained her heart to realize, she had to put her duty before anything else. Her promise and devotion to the fae-hunters had to come above all else.

The truth was, being in love with a human wasn't allowed, even if love was now permitted amongst the faeries. She could still lose so much if she gave into him. Not to mention how much she would lose if the

## The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetso

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goblin got his hands on her. Shay claimed she'd had a vision of her death at the hands of the goblin. Goose bumps raced up and down her spine. If it took her own life to put a stop to the viciousness she'd witnessed with her own eyes, then she'd willingly sacrifice herself.

"When will you be able to do *this*?"

"Hopefully very soon, but I can't promise that for sure." She pulled her hand out of his grip, pushed her chair back and stood up.

"What about your lunch?"

"I'm no longer hungry."

"Sorry to put you off your food," he mumbled.

"You didn't—"

"Save it, okay? Just go and do whatever it is you do all day." After taking another bite, he looked the other way.

"Will you still be interested in seeing me later?" A lump formed inside her throat as she struggled between reassurance from him and the need to surprise the goblin.

Peter shrugged. He feigned total focus on the other side of the food court. He'd shut down.

Miki took a deep breath, walked around the edge of the table and headed toward the exit doors to the left. She took small, careful steps, staying close to the glass display fronts of each food stall.

Several workers approached her, but she avoided eye contact. This wasn't the ideal place to challenge Adolf, but she wanted to end this.

As she took a deep breath and prepared to charge around the side, she noticed the shadow on the tiled floor shift.

*Damn it!* Beyond the exit doors was a ramp that led to the car park. There was no way she'd get to him in time.

Miki ventured outside anyway. She spotted him up ahead, dressed in brown. He was shaggy all over. She gave chase down the ramp, grateful they were alone.

Her body felt heavy. Adrenaline shot through her system as she anticipated the showdown. By the time she jumped out, hand ready to reach for her weapons, the goblin was gone. In his place stood a child.

The little girl raised both hands, gray eyes wide and full. She didn't

## **The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetso**

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say a word, just pointed a small finger toward the parking lot.

## **Chapter Two**

Miki stalked around the corner and stood from a vantage point that enabled her to see most of the parking lot on this level. She took a small step forward, her boots silent against the concrete as she kept her hands near her waist, ready to snatch the weapons always available to her.

A few shoppers walked past her with a weird look on their faces. She ignored them and instead shut out every single noise except for the familiar buzz she now associated with the goblin. It was the strangest thing, but the few times he'd gotten to the faeries before her, Miki had heard a deafening buzz inside her head. Like static from human television sets. Sometimes it got so bad she'd have a headache for hours afterward. Usually it was a dull noise, but it gave away the fact he was near.

Now that buzz was completely gone, as if he'd never been there in the first place.

She sighed, dropped her hands to her sides and turned to head back inside. If she was lucky, Peter might still be at the table eating. Miki hated to string him along like this. Essentially, he was right. That's exactly what she was unintentionally doing. But there was no other way.

Miki had already decided to tell him her secret, but not until this goblin was dealt with. She sure hadn't expected him in the plans.

"He disappeared," a small feminine voice said.

Miki lifted her gaze and focused on the little girl who'd pointed out this direction. She stood on the section between ramp and parking area. She was a small child with long dark hair in matching braids. The strands

were so dark that they sparkled blue. Her eyes were almond shaped, the pupils large as if she was excited. Her skin was pale and partially hidden beneath a pair of jeans and a blue T-shirt.

"How do you know that?"

She shrugged. "I just do. Not sure why, but I can see things sometimes." She took a step closer and lowered her voice before she continued with, "Things that others can't see."

"Oh, right. And what kinds of things do you see?" Miki asked. She'd never been approached by a human child before. They were everywhere but always seemed too lost in their own fantasies to notice much else. A quality Miki noticed expanded into adulthood.

"I'm not allowed to speak about it." Her eyes were now focused on the ground between them. With both hands hidden behind her back, she looked as innocent as a child could be.

"Who told you not to speak about it?"

"My daddy," she answered. "But my auntie lets me talk about it sometimes because she thinks it's cute."

Miki nodded slowly. For a second, she wondered if it was possible that this child was... She dismissed the thought. She'd never crossed paths with a faerie child among the humans. It was certainly possible, but not common nowadays. Not since the fae-hunters had worked on such a tight schedule.

She didn't say another word, just looked at the little girl with mounting curiosity.

"Are you a faerie?"

Miki's pulse quickened at the question she thought she'd heard. "What did you just ask me?"

"I was wondering if you're a faerie."

"What makes you ask *me* that?" No, she added to herself. *Please don't let me have found a faerie child.*

"You look the same as the other faeries do." She shrugged, and color appeared high on her chubby cheeks.

"And what way is that?" Miki took another step forward.

The little girl moved from one foot to the other, as if she was

embarrassed or had been asked this question before. But who would ask her such a thing?

"You've got wings," she whispered. Her hands were now cupped around her mouth.

Miki stopped. There was no need to get any closer. This little girl, whoever she was, could definitely see faeries.

"What color are they?"

The little girl narrowed her eyes. "They're purple and look like butterfly wings. They sparkle very bright...and they're beautiful."

"My name is Miki." She held out her right hand. This wasn't a way faeries greeted each other, it was human etiquette. But she wanted to get a closer reading on the child.

"I'm Ciara." She placed her small hand in hers.

The warmth that radiated from this child wasn't human. It was very much a faerie trait. For a second, Miki felt the dust stir beneath her pores, an instant reaction when she crossed paths with other fae and made contact with them. For her, like many of the faerie people, it used to be connected to a sexual desire. But for a long time now, she'd managed to rewire herself so that releasing them didn't have to involve sex. She wasn't the type of faerie who could enjoy sexual intimacy as long as it provided the changeling freedom. Sex was sacred, and she hadn't engaged in any for decades. It was why she felt so deeply for Peter. She hadn't felt that tug of want with anyone of her own kind for a while. But with him, it was always there beneath the surface.

"It's nice to meet you, Ciara." She offered her a smile and released the girl's hand. The dust slowly faded beneath her skin. "How long have you been seeing faeries?"

"So you *are* a faerie?" she asked, surprised.

Miki nodded. "But it'll have to be our little secret. I don't think human adults understand."

She nodded. "No, they don't. And I've been seeing them since I was a baby. My daddy's started paying attention lately."

"Oh really?"

"Oh my God, there you are!" A frantic young woman ran down the

ramp from the main building and into the enclosed parking lot. Her hair was dark brown and cut very short. "Ciara, sweetie! How many times have I asked you not to wander off like that?"

"I was bored."

The woman rolled her eyes. "Just because you're bored, it doesn't mean you can take off like that. If your dad knew I'd lost you again, he wouldn't let me baby sit anymore. Besides, I'm too young to have a heart attack!"

"I won't tell him," Ciara said with a cheeky smile. To Miki she added, "Auntie Sonja always has fun stories to tell me."

Miki nodded. She doubted any of her aunt's stories could be as fascinating as what this child had seen.

"I'm sorry if she was bugging you," Sonja said with an apologetic smile. "She can't stay in one spot longer than a few seconds."

"No, it was no bother," Miki said with a shake of her head.

"You told me we'd get to see Uncle Pete!"

"We will get to see him. He was just out for lunch."

Uncle Pete? Miki's brain was certainly working overtime. There was no way they were talking about *her* Peter. There had to be thousands of human Peters in this city.

Sonja took Ciara's hand and started to lead her away.

"Will I ever see you again?" Ciara called over her shoulder.

"Maybe," Miki said as she watched them walk away. Though deep down inside, she knew she'd do whatever it took to ensure that they did cross paths again. The more she looked at the little girl, the more she realized there was something very familiar about her. But what? She certainly hadn't met her before—here or in Breena.

She must remind her of someone. And when the thought struck her, she couldn't stop thinking about it. What if that was it? What if Miki actually knew the child's mother? It was a long shot but definitely not impossible.

After several deep breaths, she headed back inside. But her heart sunk when her gaze cut across the food court to find the table she'd occupied with Peter was now empty.

### Chapter Three

One second, Miki had been wandering through Victoria Park all alone with a multitude of rampant thoughts. The next someone pressed her up against a tree with tremendous pressure against her throat. Her feet dangled in the air below, the knee-high boots weighing down on her legs. Her arms lay at her sides, useless and unable to grab her two weapons because she couldn't will any of her limbs to respond. The thick fingers wrapped around her neck squeezed tighter. She knew this was it.

Plans and visions flashed through her mind. There was so much she still wanted to do. The first thing on her list was to kill the creature that had turned the tables on her. But it looked like he'd beaten her to it. Miki hadn't even had enough time to respond to the familiar buzz. By the time it struck, he'd already grabbed her.

"I don't appreciate pretty little faeries on my tail," he whispered near her ear. The roughness of his scruffy hair and beard scraped her cheeks.

The putrid odor that emanated off his skin was nothing compared to the shock of him actually speaking to her. She tried to move her head, but he squeezed tighter. Oxygen failed her for several instances. Miki felt lightheaded as consciousness started to slip away from her grasp.

"I need you to do your job," he continued. His bad breath stank of alcohol and things she didn't want to think about. "I know you've seen me and have chosen to stop *working*."

Air rushed up her nostrils when he loosened his hold around her



neck considerably. His hand was big enough to wrap completely around her neck, and he was tall. They were at eye level only because he'd hoisted her up so savagely.

Not even the call of the moon already in the sky seemed enough to help her now.

"Continue what it is you do best, or I'll have no choice but to feed on your delicious blood." His large tongue slipped out between his lips, and he lapped at her left cheek. He pushed the back of her head harder against the tree.

"Why do you need me to do that, Adolf?" It came out as a mere whisper. She already knew the answer to the dumb question but wanted to keep him distracted. A little less pressure around her windpipe and she'd be able to kick his shins.

A bark of laughter escaped from him. His beady eyes peered into hers. "So you know me by name, do ya? Did that annoying sprite tell you? I thought we'd shut him up forever."

"No." She wasn't sure who he meant by sprite. The truth of how she'd found out his name roused sweat beneath her clothes. Miki had tried to scrub away the image of this brute's limbs entangled with those of the former Faerie Warrior Queen, many times. She'd intended to knock on the door to her quarters, as per the instructions from one of her guards. Instead she'd walked in on Rhiannon lost in the throes of passion and calling this beast's name over and over again in a chant she could still hear inside her head... "*Adolf, Adolf, Adolf!*"

The thought made her want to puke. Miki had gone undetected but since that night decided to find out just who this monster was. It was how she'd eventually found out he'd slipped out of Breena. Rhiannon had played dangerous games in her pursuit for power, and now the people she'd left behind were paying for it. While the final altercation had taken place inside the castle between Rhiannon and Shay, the goblin that now had Miki in his grip had slipped out of their world undetected. It was sickening. And she had to stop him.

"It doesn't matter who told you. All that matters is that you're the only one left in this city. From now on, you work for me."

"I work for the queen and king—"

"I don't care about your allegiance. My kind will breach the walls of Breena soon enough and will overthrow everyone in your world."

Miki realized he didn't know what was going on. Had he left without some sort of anchor with Breena? If that was the case, maybe she could use this to her advantage. Not at the moment, though. When she could think straight and enough oxygen was getting through to her.

"I won't help you slaughter any more faeries."

He narrowed his eyes and looked at her closely. "Exactly how long have you been following me?"

"Long enough to know you're a monster that needs to be stopped," she spat.

Adolf squeezed her neck again. "I have your kind for breakfast, so don't taunt me. I'll wander back into your world if I have to. I'll abduct another faerie and force her to find them for me."

"No!" Miki certainly didn't want him anywhere near Breena. Of course, she didn't know the situation at the moment either. But she was positive the war would be nearly won, if not already finished. Adolf didn't even know that much.

"Then you'll help me." It wasn't so much a question, as much as it was a demand. "With you on my tail, I knew there'd be no way you'd lead me to more of them faeries. Now we will work together. You find the pretty little faeries and I'll sweep in to eat them. Sounds like a fair deal, doesn't it, lovely one?"

"My name's Miki...and what do I get out of this?" She struggled to inhale enough breath and felt dizzy.

"You get to keep your life, of course."

"At the expense of innocent fae who don't even know what they are? I'll never help you." The grip he had on her still hurt but was no longer hard enough to suffocate.

"Give them to me freely, and you'll live. Refuse and I'll kill you, start on the humans and move on to the ones back in your world. You've got a whole lot more to lose than I do." Adolf's face was so close she could see hers reflected inside his dark eyes.

"I—"

"Miki... Miki, oh my God, it is you!" The voice that screamed the confused babble got closer.

Adolf frowned. His thick eyebrows knotted together as he grunted and dropped her like a bag of bones. He took a few steps back and then disappeared out of sight, with only the words "Remember our deal" clinging to the air around her.

Miki lifted both hands to her neck and coughed. The skin felt sensitive and sore, just like her throat did. Had he actually taken that as a deal maker? There was no way she was prepared to do something as vile as what he wanted from her. Then again, the other choices weren't appealing either. She didn't know much about the goblins, a detail she hadn't thought would be relevant. Kill, kill, kill was the one thing she'd wanted to do with this monster. She hadn't expected him to reason, threaten or even talk.

"Are you all right, Miki?"

She looked up and caught sight of Peter's face. *Talk about bad timing*, she thought.

He was kneeling on the grass, both arms wrapped tight around her as he rubbed her back. "What the hell was that thing?"

"I just got mugged, that's all." Her voice was husky and her throat hurt with every new word. Miki allowed herself the comfort of melting into his embrace. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, just enough time to inhale his sweet-scented aftershave. She'd loved this smell since the first time they'd crossed paths. Or, the first time she'd stumbled into him.

"That dude didn't look like a mugger to me. Where the hell did he go, anyway?" Peter looked over her shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. It's just getting a little dark, that's all."

"Getting a little dark?" Peter pulled his arms away from her body to look at her face. "Are you serious? You expect me to believe that I just walked in on some random mugger who had his hand wrapped around your throat and disappeared into thin air?"

She nodded. "That's exactly what you saw." Miki felt the heat of his touch slip completely from her limbs when he stood up and took a

step back. He looked angry.

“He had his hand around your throat!”

She didn’t answer, just coughed some more.

Peter reached inside his messenger bag and pulled out a bottle of water. He held it down toward her. “Here, take a drink.”

“Thanks.” She took the bottle, unscrewed the lid and drank what was left. “Sorry, I’ll get you another one.”

He shook his head. “Miki, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I do know that you’re in some sort of trouble.” He flipped his messenger bag closed and swung it around so the strap was tight over his shoulder and chest.

“It’s not like that,” she lied. A blatant lie, but what was the alternative? Give him all the information that would get him a one-way ticket to death? She could only hope Adolf didn’t make the connection between Peter being the one who stopped his little attack abruptly, and him being the same man she constantly visited in the shopping center. Damn, how could she have been so careless? She’d already put his life in danger, so lying now wasn’t going to protect him.

Peter crossed his arms over his chest. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen you around strange people. Who was the guy who walked into the shop the other day? He looked like some sort of wrestler or something, and even dressed like one. Not to mention that woman you spoke to. What were you discussing so intimately? Was she your sister or something?”

“No, she wasn’t my sister.” She held out a hand in the hope that he’d offer his for leverage to get off the grass. Her legs felt sore, more from the actual struggle than the fall.

“I need some answers from you.”

She lifted her hand a little higher. He extended his, wrapping his fingers around hers. That heat was back between them, and she felt it rise to her face and manifest as color she hoped couldn’t be seen in the twilight around them.

Peter helped pull her up. When she was on her feet, he pulled her in closer, up against his chest. While she was in these boots, he stood only

half a head taller than her. Other faeries chose flat boots to scoot around in, but she preferred the platform kind with thick buckle straps along the sides. She'd found and purchased these in a little shop in Sydney.

She craned her neck to meet his blue eyes. Even with the dim light around them, she could see how beautiful they were. He lowered his face toward hers, and she held her breath. Peter was about to kiss her. She just knew it. The anticipation pumped blood in and out of her heart in frantic motions. No, this wasn't right. As much as she wanted to be with him, she couldn't get involved until he knew the truth and had decided whether he'd still be interested in her or not.

*It's just a kiss, a little voice inside her head whispered. You've kissed for less reason than this before.*

Miki lowered her face away from his a second before their lips touched. She closed her eyes, mourning the loss of what might've been. And what could be. After so many denials, Peter would probably walk away forever. She was sure of it.

"Miki, I don't understand this game you're playing." He placed a hand beneath her chin and lifted it to face him. The hurt in his eyes shimmered as the traffic behind them switched on their headlights. Suddenly the noise of peak hour traffic on Parramatta Road pierced into her brain. It helped distract her from the pain that burned deep inside her heart. She hated unintentionally hurting him like this.

"I'm not playing any games, Peter. It's just..."

"It's just what?" His voice was no longer soft and comforting, it was demanding. The rigid set of his jaw only emphasized the change in mood. The fingers clutching beneath her chin tightened a little.

She winced, not from pain but from the reminder of the goblin's hands around her neck. What was she going to do? How could she get out of this sticky situation without jeopardizing everything?

"It's complicated," she answered with a release of breath.

"Well, uncomplicate it for me." His eyes widened in that handsome face of his. "I know you're holding back for some reason, but I don't know what. I think you're scared."

"Scared?"

"Yes, scared about how you feel when we're together. Miki, you might be trying to convince yourself that you don't want to be with me, but I know otherwise." He paused to sigh, and his warm breath played along her face. "I know you want to be with me as much as I want to be with you."

All she could do was nod. He'd captured her emotions and fears spot on, without the additional faerie baggage she carried around with her.

Her heart beat fast, but she felt calm and relaxed. He'd managed to soothe away all the distress the goblin stirred inside her. And although Adolf was still a problem she'd have to deal with sooner rather than later, Miki felt that now might be time to deal with the "Peter problem".

"Come home with me, Miki."

"I don't think that's a good—"

He shrugged. "So don't think about it. Just say you'll come home with me so we can sort things out. You've been stringing me along for too long. And there's only so much a man in love can take before he reaches breaking point." Peter pushed his chest closer against hers and whispered, "If I don't have you soon, I don't know what's going to happen to me."

Miki shivered at the words. In that one admission he'd spilled just how much he lusted for her as well as...*loved her*? He'd said *a man in love*. Was that just a figure of speech amongst the humans? She didn't know, had never hung out with human men or women long enough to know nitty-gritty things like that. She knew many of their customs and way of life because she'd become almost obsessed with this civilization, but she'd never ventured this close to one. What would he do or say after he found out she wasn't human?

"Well, are you coming with me or not? I promise not to try anything straight away." He chuckled at her reaction. "I'm only kidding. But say you're prepared to talk about this."

"I'm prepared to talk about this," she echoed with a nod. It might even be nice to stay under shelter for one night. Since she'd been in Sydney, this park had been her home. She slept beneath the trees or amongst the shrubs. With Adolf aware of her now, not staying here

## **The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetso**

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offered her more security.

“Good, let’s go. It’s only a ten minute walk to my place.” Peter stepped away from the intimacy he’d established and entwined his fingers around hers to lead the way.

## **Chapter Four**

"Welcome to my abode," Peter announced with a wave of his long arms as he held the front door open for her. "It's not the flashiest place in Sydney, but it's all mine." The huge smirk brightened his face as he pushed the flimsy wooden door wider in the faltering light of day.

Miki sighed. Night was her favorite time, and she anticipated its arrival every single day. The moon's influence played along the back of her neck as she stood on Peter's front porch.

He motioned for her to step inside with a nod of his head.

She hesitated before she took the first step inside and stopped just below the doorway. The scent of something horrible, yet familiar, taunted her nasal passage instantly. It was an unwelcome assault. One she couldn't place right away. Her senses had taken a beating by Adolf, and her body was still a little shaky. Walking hand-in-hand with Peter through the busy streets had helped clear her mind but not her problems. A little dread flowed through her body.

"You live here alone?" A small part of Miki hoped the answer was no. Otherwise she'd have to deal with the implications of that smell and how it related to this seemingly gentle man she wanted to be with so badly.

"Sure do." He grabbed her hand lightly, encouraging her farther inside into the dark corridor.

"Are you sure you live here alone?" She wanted a different response.



He closed the front door behind them and spun her around in a circle. Peter dropped her hand to press both of his to either side of her shoulders. "If what you're really asking is am I married, or do I have a live-in girlfriend, then the answer is no. I live here all by myself. Well, on occasion my brother and sister stay over, but that's very rare. Thank God for that!"

Miki offered him a smile for his very human reaction. He assumed her suspicion was roused by jealousy, when in fact she was concerned about the peculiar smell that tinged the air. She wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't even noticed it. But it hit her like a slap in the face. And now that she'd had several seconds to sniff it at its full extent, she knew what it was.

Faerie blood had a certain sweet scent, familiar to anyone else of their own kind. But why would a small house that Peter lived in smell like this?

She sighed. Maybe it was just old. There was a possibility, no matter how slim, that a faerie or two had died within these walls. The fae in Breena had been visiting Sydney for centuries. She was sure some had even died here. Not all humans were friendly. Just as some of those hunted turned out to be hostile.

"You can take your coat off, if you like." Peter's hands slipped from her shoulders as he turned around, re-inserted the keys into the deadlock on the door and turned them.

"No, I'm fine." She wrapped her arms around herself. There was a chill in the air. It was autumn in Sydney, but she'd never felt this type of chill so early on in the season. Or maybe she was just freaked out. It wasn't everyday that she was ambushed inside a human park by a goblin who wanted her to do his bidding. She shivered at the thought and wrapped the ebony coat tighter around her.

"I can put the heater on if you're cold." Peter interrupted her thoughts.

"No, that's fine."

"Are you sure, it's no problem."

Miki didn't respond this time, just looked around at the dark

surroundings of the corridor ahead of her. It was narrow and painted a beige color that didn't flatter the age of the place. Several closed doors lined both sides. She took slow steps behind Peter, scrutinizing every detail.

He looked over his shoulder. "I know what you need! A nice hot cup of tea should do the trick. You're still freaked out about what happened in the park, aren't you?"

"What happened?" she echoed, distracted. For a second she thought he was talking about their almost-kiss. That awful smell seemed to get stronger as they moved along toward the opening at the end of the corridor. She noted there were no paintings or frames on the walls, though there were sections that looked as if they'd once had some attached.

"Yes, the *mugger*?" He emphasized the last word before he turned his back on her and walked into the room that spread out ahead of them.

"Oh," she whispered. "No, I'm fine." No point in letting on just how freaked she was by the encounter with Adolf. How the hell would she get out of *that* situation without causing more trouble for herself and the other fae? Miki wasn't afraid to die. If she had to die in order to save and protect all the others of her kind, she was more than willing. But not now, not when the goblin could turn around and head back into Breena to make matters worse. No, she had to do something. Possibly lead him on into believing she would actually help him in his demented ploy. It would give her some time to think things over, work out what to do in the meantime. Maybe even try to contact Shay for advice...she'd seemed more than willing to help.

"You don't look fine." Peter had wandered over to the counter against the back wall with a window above the sink. A small round table and four chairs were situated to her left and a fridge to the right. A narrow stove that looked ancient was situated between counter and fridge. The slim door along the side wall made her wonder where it led to.

"You don't need to worry about me."

He swung around, messenger bag still wrapped around him. "But you see, Miki, I am worried about you! I saw a very large homeless man hold you up by the neck."

Homeless man? She supposed the scruffy nature of the goblin could easily be mistaken for a homeless person. Maybe that's how he made his way around the city undetected. She'd noticed most of Sydney's homeless were virtually invisible. No one took much notice of them. It seemed the perfect cover for Adolf.

"Was he trying to kill you?" Peter asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No."

"Do you know who he was?"

"No."

He sighed, turned around and wrapped his right hand around the handle of a white kettle. He placed it below the tap and filled it up before he put it back on the cradle and pressed the small button on top. He pulled the messenger bag strap over his head and placed it on the back of one of the chairs.

"You don't have to stand there, take a seat. Why are you acting like we don't even know each other?" He appeared a little frustrated.

*Because of that horrid smell in here,* she wanted to answer. "I don't know what you mean."

Peter took the few steps left between them until he stood in front of her. She craned her neck a little to meet his eyes. The lovely scent of his delightful aftershave suddenly pushed every other odor out of her nose. All she could inhale was him. The wonderful, comforting scent of the man who made her stomach twist into a hundred knots and heated her skin like no other had before him.

He was so close. She wanted to touch him.

"It feels like something's changed between us," he whispered.

She shook her head.

Peter lifted his right hand and caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "Your skin is so soft."

She closed her eyes to the sensations that a simple touch from him roused on her face. When she felt the movement, Miki didn't sway. She knew he'd moved closer, but did nothing to stop him. His soft lips pressed against the skin his hand had just caressed, and her body tingled all over. He removed them, only to press them against her other cheek.

His lips were soft and warm. The intimacy intensified when he wrapped his fingers around hers. Both hands were now holding hers, and she didn't move, didn't even react to intensify the situation. Miki simply enjoyed what he was doing to her.

She opened her eyes to find his blue gaze close to hers. They were so bright and beautiful, with dark lashes that rimmed them perfectly. He really was a feast for the eyes. And he didn't even need the extra shimmer the fae possessed to be so striking. He was just human, but all so gorgeous.

The kettle gurgled in the background.

"The water's ready." He made a move to turn around, but she squeezed his fingers. Peter's eyes widened as he gazed down at her and smiled.

She returned the smile, holding her breath in hopes that he'd attempt to kiss her again. Just as he'd done in the park when she'd stopped him. Her skin itched to be touched by him. The chill on her body would only be soothed by the touch of a lover. And this was the only man she'd had any intimate thoughts about for many years. She wanted him like she'd never wanted anyone before him. This time, she wouldn't stop him.

"You're..."

She lifted an eyebrow.

He sighed. "I was going to say beautiful. But that doesn't capture how stunning you are, Miki." Peter lowered his mouth closer to hers.

His breath tickled her face as she closed her eyes again. This time her heart thundered inside her chest as their lips finally made contact. The heat seeped in through her mouth and spread into her body like an uncontrollable current. Every part of her body tightened with desire. Only their lips and hands were connected, but it was enough for her.

Miki moved her lips against his, softly and in a rhythmic motion that set her heart on fire. He kissed her with such sweetness and care that she had to suck in a quick breath through her nose. She'd forgotten to breathe, she was so caught up in this very emotional act. The sound of a door slammed shut pushed her out of the intimate

moment. Miki took a step back and slipped her fingers from his as she prepared to defend herself and the man in front of her. She was still edgy.

"Oh sorry, Pete." A thin, lanky man with shaggy hair stopped in mid-step as he wandered into the kitchen from the door on the side wall. He hid his hands behind his back and color rose to his unshaven cheeks. "I didn't realize you were home yet."

"What are you doing here, Roger?" There was no mistaking the edge of anger in Peter's voice. They'd just broken the ice barrier between them, and Miki knew he was as disappointed as she was at the intrusion.

"Sorry to interrupt." The man's blue eyes were suddenly on Miki. "But I just needed to store something in your shed. You know I don't have any room in my unit."

"Okay, fine."

Miki took another step away from Peter. The way this other man looked at her made her uncomfortable. The air inside the room had changed. Had the smell of blood intensified since this stranger walked into the room?

"You can go now," Peter added.

But he didn't move, instead sticking his hands in his pockets and continuing to look from Miki to Peter with an amused grin. "Well, aren't you going to introduce me to your pretty girlfriend?"

Peter's face was suddenly red. He shifted from one foot to another, as if he'd rather be anywhere but inside this kitchen with this man cross-examining him. "Roger, this is Miki. Miki, this is my brother, Roger."

"Hi there, Miki, it's a pleasure to meet you." He nodded once with a smile on his face. "I'd offer to shake your hand but mine are a little filthy at the moment."

She didn't say a word, just looked at him with suspicion in her eyes.

"What did you leave in the shed this time? You know I like to keep things neat in there. I was planning to go in on the weekend to clean it up a bit—"

"You don't need to do that, let me take care of it." Roger was still smiling. "It's the least I can do after you let me use it so often. Are you

getting some tea together?"

"Don't you need to get home now?" Peter was beyond impatient. He appeared downright annoyed as he glared at his brother.

"Not yet. I'm waiting for Sonja to drop my little girl over."

"I really wish you guys would stop using my place as if it's Grand Central or something. I should take those keys away from both of you!" Peter turned away and headed toward the kettle. He grabbed three cups from the single white cabinet above the counter and went about preparing each one without another word.

Miki was stunned into silence. Had Peter's brother said the name Sonja? The little girl back in the parking lot had mentioned Pete. The odds were getting much slimmer. She had no doubt now that Peter, this man, the woman called Sonja and the little girl were all part of the same family.

When Roger stepped closer, dizziness almost overcame her. She took a step back and dropped into one of the chairs.

He winked at her as he passed and called, "I'm just gonna clean my hands, Pete!" Roger disappeared into the corridor. She heard a door open and close.

Miki rubbed her temples together. The scent of blood had been so overpowering a headache was forming.

"Are you all right?"

She looked up to find Peter looking at her.

"I'm so sorry about that. My brother and sister can be such pains sometimes." He stood by the counter, the cups temporarily forgotten behind him. "But they shouldn't be here for long, I promise."

She nodded and smiled.

"You look a little pale."

"Just think I'm getting a headache, that's all."

"Would you like an aspirin?"

"No." She refused to ingest anything that contained chemicals. There were natural ways to subdue the headache. "Can I ask you a question, Peter?"

"Sure."

"Do you...do you smell that?"

## The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetso

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He looked thoughtful for a second and seemed to be sniffing the air. "All I can smell at the moment is the tea. But maybe you've just taken a whiff of Roger. I don't know what the hell he's storing in there, but there's always a funky smell associated with it."

"Have you ever checked?"

"No. I hardly go out into the backyard, let alone the shed."

The sound of several knocks on the front door filled the house.

"Ah, that'll be them." Peter pushed off the counter and headed into the corridor.

As he disappeared, his creepy brother appeared. "So, Miki, was it? How do you know Peter?"

She sighed and looked down at his hands. There was definitely evidence of him having washed them, but she could still see the slight green tinge on the edges of his fingernails.

The thought made her sick to the stomach, but she didn't have a chance to dwell on it. Small pounding footsteps announced someone's arrival.

"Daddy, Daddy!" the familiar voice called as she raced into the kitchen and into her father's arms.

Roger hugged her tight with a huge smile on his face.

The little girl was Ciara.

## Chapter Five

Bright gray eyes stared into Miki's. She'd been debating whether to keep quiet about already having met the little girl, when the choice was taken out of her hands.

"Oh, hello," called the woman from the parking lot. Her cheeks were rosy, and she wore a denim jacket. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name earlier?"

"You know each other?" Peter asked as he wandered back into the kitchen behind her.

"Well, know would be taking it a bit far, wouldn't it?" Sonja said with a smile. She paused for a second, almost as if she wished she could retract from admitting anything.

That's when Miki remembered the reason she'd even crossed paths with Ciara in the first place. This woman had somehow temporarily lost the little girl. Maybe she should've kept quiet too. Ciara certainly wasn't saying a word.

"We met in the shopping center," Miki added, "as I was heading out this afternoon."

Sonja released a heavy breath, and Ciara flashed a smile as she sat on her father's lap.

"How do you and Peter...?" Sonja's voice trailed off as she looked from one to the other with utter confusion.

"This is Pete's girlfriend," Roger added with a wink.

Peter opened his mouth to say something but shut it again and



shrugged instead. He probably figured it would be better to just let assumptions lie. Miki thought the same. Besides, deep down she already knew they both wanted to be just that.

"Wow, it sure is a small world." Sonja's smile was large as she stood awkwardly and ran a hand through her short hair.

"Did you have a nice day with your auntie?" Roger asked his daughter.

She nodded. "It was great! She always takes me to the coolest places. Today, she bought me this." Ciara reached beneath her sweatshirt to pull out a large clear stone dangling from a leather cord. "Isn't this cool? It's supposed to ward away evil monsters."

"Ward away?" Roger looked at his sister with a frown. "Haven't I told you not to brainwash her with that hocus-pocus stuff you believe in?"

"I don't brainwash her, and it's not hocus-pocus." Sonja crossed her arms in front of her chest. Her eyes were narrowed to slits as she glared back at her brother.

Miki watched the display, noticing the qualities each of the siblings shared. They all had dark hair and those glittering blue eyes, but Roger's features were sharper with more edges to his face than the other two. There was also a spark in his eyes that disturbed her almost as much as the green stains on his hands. What was he up to in that shed? She had to find out. But how would she sneak in there without Peter knowing? Or was it now time to fess up and tell him what she was, what his own brother probably knew existed. Was it possible that he was as much a killer of the fae as the goblin?

She felt a cold shiver race down her spine and turned her face toward the window. The undeniable buzz was suddenly there, almost intense enough to blind her. Miki thought she caught sight of the shaggy head peering in through the kitchen window, but it was gone after she blinked.

*You're being paranoid.* Adolf hadn't followed her here. She would've felt the accompanying buzz, just as she felt it now. She hoped it was paranoia because whatever else was going on between these three siblings, if Adolf stood outside watching them...then she'd led him right

to them.

Right to the little girl she was convinced was also a faerie.

That thought alone resulted in many questions. How could Roger be the father of a faerie child to begin with? The buzzing stopped abruptly inside her head.

Miki turned her gaze away from the darkness outside and caught Ciara looking from her to the window.

"He's back, isn't he?" she whispered.

The others didn't seem to notice. Roger was too caught up in the argument he'd started with his sister. Peter stood between them trying to get them to calm down.

"Can you see him too?" Miki dared to ask the little girl who had now slid off her father's knee and stood in front of Miki.

"Yeah, but he's not pretty like you." Ciara's eyes were wide. "He's not like you, is he?"

She shook her head. "He's the opposite of what I am."

"What does he want?"

Miki bit her bottom lip. How much was safe to tell this child without posing a greater risk to her life? She leaned forward until she could whisper into her ear, "He wants to hurt all faeries. You have to promise me you'll keep that talisman around your neck at all times."

"Okay," she whispered back with a nod. Her matching braids were no longer neat. Several strands of her very dark hair were loose. The shimmer of blue streaks caught the small amount of moonlight that filtered in through the window.

"Your aunt did a wonderful thing for you by offering such protection." The need to shimmer dust over this child made her itch. This was the core of her duty, to release the faeries who didn't know what they were, stuck in a human society with rules and customs very different to their own.

Ciara took a step back and smiled. "I told you my auntie is full of wonderful stories."

"Come on, it's time to go home." Roger grabbed the little girl's hand a little rougher than needed, and she winced. "From now on, I'm

going to have to think twice about letting you baby sit her.” He stormed past them with the child in tow.

Ciara waved with a weak smile on her small lips.

“Yeah, well, maybe you should take your parental rights a little more seriously. Instead of taking off all the time and doing God knows what!” Sonja screamed as his footsteps retreated out into the corridor, echoed by the child’s.

The front door slammed behind them.

“What’s the matter with you two, can’t you see that Ciara was listening to every word?” Peter snapped at his sister. He looked flushed and furious.

Miki agreed with him, though it wasn’t her place to say anything. She was just glad neither of the siblings had noticed her talking to the child in hushed tones.

“I’m sorry, Pete...and you too, Miki. He just gets on my nerves so much! He asks me to baby sit at the last minute and then complains about what I spent my time doing.” Her thin face was flushed pink at the cheeks, her dark hair messy from continually running her fingers through it.

“I know what he’s like, Sonja—”

“Then why do you put up with his crap? You do know that half the time he brings his business—whatever it involves—here to your house, right? Don’t tell me you’re that naïve?” Sonja’s arms were now uncrossed. “I would take his key back if I was you. Here, you can have mine too if you like. Tell him you took the keys from both of us because you want your independence back.” She stuck her hands into her jeans pockets and pulled out a silver-colored key. Her blue eyes flashed to Miki, begging for understanding.

Miki kept quiet; she just watched the exchange. But she agreed with Sonja. After the residue of blood she’d noticed on Roger, she knew he was up to no good. And the shed would confirm it.

“Put it away, Sonja!” Peter called with a firm shake of his head. “Here, sit down and have a cup of tea with us. You don’t mind, do you, Miki?”

"Of course not," she answered with a smile. The truth was she found this exchange fascinating. Miki didn't have any siblings. Her parents were never together as a couple. Her birth had been strictly for the purpose of procreation. The no-love rule in Breena had facilitated in the non-commitment of the fae people for centuries. It was quite the norm to mate with a variety of faeries, as long as love didn't enter into the equation. She didn't even know if she might have half-siblings somewhere. Her parents had dumped her in the hands of the fae-hunters from the age of four. It was all she'd ever known. They were her true sisters.

Her gaze turned to Peter. Miki watched his back as he prepared the cups he hadn't had a chance to finish before. His jacket was gone, leaving him in the white work shirt. Although he had a tall and sleek build, his shoulders were broad. He was a feast for the eyes, and she couldn't believe no one had claimed him yet. She was lucky to have caught his eye.

The heavy stare of Sonja forced her from her musings. The woman stood with a small smile on her face after she'd caught Miki staring at her brother. Miki felt a little embarrassed at being caught out ogling him.

Even after such brief interaction, it wasn't hard to see that Peter was the connecting force between the siblings. His generosity was probably the only thing that kept them together.

"Pete's great, isn't he?" Sonja whispered.

"Yes, he is."

"I've heard so much about you. Most of the time, I can't get him to stop. I just didn't realize it was you earlier. I still can't believe it. And thanks for not saying anything before. If Roger knew I'd lost her again, it would've only added to his foul mood." Sonja stopped for a breath before she continued again. "He's always in a foul mood. Ever since Ciara was born he's been acting stranger than usual. I think there's something going on with him, but he won't confide in either one of us." She motioned her chin toward her other brother.

"What do you mean?" Miki sat forward.

She shrugged. "I can't pinpoint what it is, but he's just so secretive. As if he's hiding something, you know? I think it's gotta be something

bad. Maybe he's a drug dealer and he's using Pete's shed as a storage facility. I tried to get in there once, but there's a huge padlock on the door."

"Stop gossiping, Sonja!" Peter snapped as he dumped one cup in front of Miki and another in front of his sister. "I hope you don't mind that I accidentally gave you two spoons of sugar?"

"That's fine," Miki said with a smile.

"I'm not gossiping! I'm merely stating a fact, Pete. You should get out there and check out your shed. I'm sure there are drugs in there." Sonja glanced at her brother, concerned. "Thanks for the tea."

"I don't have a key to the padlock." He shrugged as he headed back to the counter to grab his own cup.

"You're kidding? What the hell are you doing letting him do that?" He returned to the table, and she hit him on the arm. "Do you want to go to jail when the shit hits the fan? Because you know he'll somehow make you take the fall, right? He'll guilt-trip you about Ciara, when we all know she'd be better off without him."

"That's a bit harsh."

"You don't spend as much time with her as I do. She seems too quiet sometimes. Stares off into space and always smiles at things that aren't there. I'm really concerned about her. Maybe she's got some sort of mental problem." Sonja's eyes shimmered with tears. "She's such a sweet kid."

"I think you're seeing too much into it," Peter said after taking a sip of his tea. "She seems like any other seven year old to me. She's got an overactive imagination, that's all."

"Well, she does have that... Do you know that one time she told me she can see faeries?" Sonja recalled with a small chuckle and wide eyes. "I think that's so sweet."

Miki almost choked on her tea. She sucked in too much and burned her tongue. Of course the child would've confided in someone about her talent. And who better than the auntie who filled her with fictional stories and bought her crystals to ward away evil?

"How did you know about the talisman?" Miki asked her as she

placed her cup on the table in front of her.

"Oh, I read a lot on the internet. And love to go to those New Age stores. You know there's one in the Broadway Shopping Center, right? That's where we got it." Sonja shrugged and pushed her fingers through her hair. It stood up on end in spikes. "It's all self-taught, I'm afraid."

"What she doesn't know, she makes up!" Peter added with a hearty laugh.

"Yeah, thanks, Pete." His sister rolled her eyes. "Yeah, my brothers are both quite the charmers...to everyone but me." But she didn't appear to be angry as she had with Roger. She took a long sip from her cup.

"Why something to ward off evil?" Miki continued.

"Ciara's been acting a little stranger than usual lately. Says she can see the boogeyman in windows. That he's chasing after faeries. So I thought this might help ease her anxiety a little."

Miki tried to conceal her reaction. That meant she'd been seeing Adolf as well. But how did she know he was after faeries?

"That's a nice thing to do," she said with a small smile. It always surprised her to find humans who actually opened themselves up to possibilities others didn't.

"Thanks." Sonja pushed her chair back and stood up. "Okay, I need to split now. Got places to be and people to see. You two have a nice evening."

Miki caught the wink Sonja gave her brother.

"I'll show myself out. It was great to meet you, Miki. I hope we get to hang out some more soon. This one's a keeper, Pete. Don't screw it up, huh?" And with that warning she was gone, leaving the kitchen with the warm ambience of her cheer. Sonja seemed like a calm and relaxed individual, and Miki realized she was probably the main reason Ciara was able to keep it together.

Silence filled the kitchen.

Miki looked at Peter, and he looked at her.

Finally he took a deep breath, released it and spoke. "I'm so sorry about my family. I didn't want you to see that. No, scrap that, I was hoping you wouldn't see my dysfunctional family and change your mind

## **The Hunter by Yolanda Sfetsos**

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about me.”

Her lips spread into a smile. “It’s not a problem. Something like that wouldn’t change how I feel about you.”

“And how do you feel about me, Miki?” Peter held her gaze as he stood up and headed toward her.

## Chapter Six

The words Miki wanted to say refused to leave her mouth. She couldn't voice a thing that formed inside her mind. Too much was going on at the moment, how could she get him involved? Although, now that she knew he was Ciara's uncle, she had no doubt Peter was already involved...even if he didn't know it yet.

"Well?" he asked her again. Peter stood close to her chair.

She remembered the way it felt when he'd kissed her, before they'd been interrupted by his family.

Miki cleared her throat to answer, but instead found her legs moving at their own accord. She stood and rose up on the tiptoes of her boots to press her lips to his for a small kiss. He deepened it, and she wanted to be close to him so badly that she obliged to his demanding mouth.

Peter surprised her by pulling back. "Oh, Miki, you're driving me crazy. I'm still a little confused about you. Is this really what you want?"

"This is exactly what I want." She inhaled his scent.

"What about the man in the park, and the other one in the store the other day? I need to know more about you. If you're in some kind of trouble, I want to help." His blue eyes were dark, filled with concern and confusion. He mirrored her feelings.

"You can't help." She shook her head firmly. The braid she'd knotted at the top of her head shook a little. Whatever happened between them was one thing, but she wouldn't risk his life over her business.



"So you *are* in some kind of trouble?"

Miki slid from his arms, turned away and headed for the window. She stood in front of the sink, looking out into the dark, unable to make out anything but her own reflection. She was surprised Peter still hadn't commented on the unusual shade and size of her bright violet irises. Still, she figured her glamour kept it toned down. Maybe it was time to let some of it slip away.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her reflection shone the same way it would in Breena. The only thing she kept at bay was her wings. No need to terrify him...yet.

"Miki..."

She spun around. "Why haven't you gone out there, to your shed?"

His brow was creased. "What...why?"

"Don't you want to know what your brother is hiding from you and your sister?"

"I don't think he's hiding anything."

"Your sister thinks otherwise."

"Sonja's just a little dramatic, that's all. She's never trusted Roger. They never talked to me about it in much detail, but I know that several years ago, something happened between them and things haven't been the same," he answered with a darkened expression on his handsome face. "It's not my place to pry, just like it isn't my business to hassle him about the shed. I never use it anyway, it doesn't hurt."

Her stomach twisted, and she bit back her response. If the tell-tale signs of green on Roger's hands were any indication, whatever he was doing out there *was* hurting someone. "He could be doing something dangerous."

He chuckled. "Don't let my sister's suspicion cloud your judgment about Roger."

"What do your parents think of all of this?"

His frown deepened. "My parents passed away a long time ago. We were raised by our aunt." He sighed and averted his eyes. "But, Miki, you're avoiding the issue here. I don't want to talk about my brother or sister. I want to know what's going on between *us*."

"It's complicated," she whispered.

"It doesn't have to be." He took a step forward, followed by another. His gaze was back on her. "I know how strongly I feel about you. I haven't been able to get you out of my head since the day we met."

Her breath was shaky. His desire swept her up with excitement. Her blood rushed to her head, washing away the headache that had formed earlier. The kitchen seemed to fade to black. The only important thing now was being with Peter. Her body shook with her own lust. Miki wanted him as much as he wanted her, and she couldn't hide it any longer.

"I'm in love with you, Peter." The words were loud and clear, stunning the silence with an honesty she'd been trying to conceal. But it felt right.

His expression was serious. His eyes pinned on hers as he seemed to ponder her shocking words. Maybe after she'd skirted this conversation for so long, he was convinced she'd never say them. But Miki couldn't keep quiet any longer. Things were moving quickly, but in her life that's how they always moved. She was a fae-hunter, a faerie warrior out in the human world to recapture and return lost faeries. She suspected that even though Peter didn't have a clue about the existence of faeries, the rest of his family did.

And now that she was convinced Ciara was at least half-fae, she'd be forced to take the little girl back to Breena, too.

"Wow," he finally said with a heavy sigh. "I didn't expect to hear that." His dark eyebrows arched higher.

Her heart dropped. "So you don't feel the same way?" She was positive she'd heard him refer to himself as a *man in love* back in the park. Had she imagined it?

"Are you kidding? I definitely feel the same way."

"Then what are you doing over there?"

His smile widened as his demeanor took on a little shy edge. He took the last few steps until he stood right in front of her, almost touching. "Miki..." He took her hands in both of his and massaged her palms "...I'm crazy about you."

"That's good to hear." She felt queasy, as if she would float away at any second. No one had ever admitted love to her, ever. It felt like a heady rush racing through every inch of her, both internally and out.

Peter's hands slipped from hers and paused on her narrow hips. He squeezed tighter against her sides, raised her up and placed her on top of the counter beside the sink. He stepped between her parted legs and moaned in her ear before his lips wandered lower to ravage the underside of her chin and neck.

"You taste so sweet." He licked her skin.

She tried not to flinch when his lips moved carefully over the bruise on her neck. It was still sensitive but wouldn't take long to heal completely.

Miki tilted her head back, giving him enough room to lick and suck at her skin. Her body reacted instantly. Thoughts of being entwined naked with him filled her mind, and she had to stay strongly focused on the here and now. She didn't want her clothes to naturally disappear as they could. Miki wanted this to be as human as possible for him. Though she would now have to tell him what she was. Sooner or later, at least *some* of the dust would dissipate from her body.

Peter slid her black coat down her shoulders and arms before he flung it back onto one of the chairs. His eyes met hers, and they were on fire. He was in an erotic zone of his own, and it excited her. Her own fire blazed inside her stomach and wandered lower into her gut. It wouldn't take long for it to reach even lower.

She gasped when he stuck a fingertip into the low neckline of her fitting corset top. He grabbed the cord that kept it together and pulled on it until it was loose. Instead of loosening it up, he yanked at it, slowly gathering a little more into his hand until the entire length of it was released from the tiny holes she had laced it through. He dropped it in the sink and spread the material open without hesitation.

A cool draft washed over her skin. Her nipples tightened. She wasn't wearing a bra. There was no need to with the size of her breasts and the tight hold the corset provided. She dropped her arms to either side of the counter and propped herself up. She pushed her shoulders

back to display her topless body to him.

Her pale skin glowed in the dim light of the kitchen. The fluorescent lighting was nothing compared to her. It was the main reason she liked nightfall. While other fae called on the sun, plants and even earth, she called on the moon. Her skin radiated whenever the moon was visible, especially on a full moon night like today.

"Your skin is luscious." Peter's gaze was focused on her breasts and stomach. He extended a shaky hand and ran his fingertips down the front of her body, in between her cleavage and down her flat stomach. He stopped just below her bellybutton, his eyes still captivated by her topless body. "Are you glowing?"

She nodded. Miki had to bite on her bottom lip to keep the lower half of her clothing from disappearing. Dust tickled her skin as it threatened to shake out of her pores.

"I need to tell you something, Peter." But all thoughts faded when he leaned over, wrapped his arms around her torso and took one of her nipples into his mouth.

Her legs hung uselessly on either side of him as his mouth left a damp trail of moisture along her cleavage. When he moved from one nipple to the other, she cried out.

The longing throbbed between her legs as he roused sensations Miki hadn't felt for years. Some she'd never felt before. The way her skin pulsed with a combination of excitement and pain only made her feel more alive than she had in a long time. She wanted Peter more than she'd wanted anything else in her life. It didn't matter that he might actually shun her when he knew the truth. Right now, all that mattered was the pleasure and want he made her feel.

He suckled on her nipple so hard she arched her back to meet his need. He nibbled on the end of it and released it slowly, only to rise a little higher to cover her mouth with his. Peter's lips were supple as he pressed them hard against hers, his tongue probing between and in search of hers.

"I want you," he whispered along her lips. "I've wanted you for so long now..."

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I need you," he continued as his fingers ran down her spine and back up to her face. Peter's fingers traced upward, lost in her hair, slowly pulling at the clip that kept the braid knotted on top of her head.

Her long hair slid down her back as he untangled the braid with eager fingers. The silky feel of it along her back added to the moment between them.

"I love your hair, Miki."

Miki groaned at his ability to turn her on further. She felt as if she were going to explode. Her fingers were between their bodies with just enough room to unbutton his shirt and spread it open. She pushed him back a little to stare at the flat expanse of his stomach. His abdomen was corded with muscle. The skin was bronze, as if still sun-kissed after the summer season was over. She'd never guessed this much perfection hid beneath the plain white shirt.

She ran her palms over his hard chest, and it twitched below her skin. A light sprinkle of dark hair tickled her fingers as she chased away his shirt and it fell to the floor. When one of his fingertips traced around her nipple at the same time as she did the same to his, she giggled.

Both of Peter's hands were now on her waist. His hands rubbed at the ends of her hair, and she shivered. He made his way to the front of her tight black pants to unbutton one small button after the other. He hooked his thumbs on either side and dragged the thin material down the length of her narrow hips and thighs. Miki lifted her hips for a second, and Peter paused long enough to kneel down to unbuckle and remove both her boots. He pulled the pants down and over her feet and discarded everything on the floor.

Miki was completely naked as he slowly made his way up toward her again with a hungry look in his eyes. Peter paused in between her spread legs.

She was very aware of the hard stare he gave her, and spread her legs a tiny bit more as her butt rested on the counter.

"I love you, Miki." He said it as if he were in a trance. Peter slowly moved forward on his knees. He reached out for her and placed both hands on either thigh to trace her skin with a matching feathery touch. "So

you're a natural blonde then?"

She giggled at his observation and then sucked in a breath when both his hands inched closer toward the juncture of her thighs. She anticipated his touch, but instead got his kiss. The whiskers on his face tickled the sensitive insides of her thighs.

"Oh," she said, holding on tighter to the counter on either side.

Peter inched forward and slowly buried his face between her legs. When his mouth connected with the inside of her moist lips, she unintentionally pulled back. He was already playing havoc with her. The jerking reaction had been instant but unwilling.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's just been—"

"Shh." Peter lifted an index finger in front of his lips and winked at her. He extended it forward and teased her pubic hair before slipping between her folds. He pulled his finger out then pushed it in again several times before his mouth found her aching center. He wrapped his free hand around her hips as she angled higher and his tongue circled her swollen clitoris ever so gently at first, until his lapping grew vigorous and frantic, as if he couldn't have enough of her in his mouth. His finger, which had stopped and remained lodged inside her, now continued to slip deep inside her, thrusting in deeper as his mouth continued its magic. Miki lost herself in all his pleasure. An orgasm made her body shudder with bliss. It grabbed her so hard she shook against him as rapid breaths escaped out of her mouth.

But he didn't stop, just twirled his tongue faster and kept his finger buried deep inside her until she came again. This time, it was so powerful she couldn't stop the first signs of dust from spilling.

Peter stopped as she breathed heavily.

He rose slowly, and she threw herself against him to kiss him deeply. Her hands worked his pants off his narrow hips until they slipped to the floor along with his boxer shorts.

Miki wrapped a hand around his penis and squeezed it. She needed to feel his erection, wanting nothing more than to devour it into her mouth. But when she made a move to climb off the counter, he stopped her by grabbing her hips.

"Maybe next time, right now I need to be...*inside*." He removed her hands from him and spread her legs as wide as he could get them while she remained on the counter. He stepped into her, his hands firmly planted on her hips and hers around his shoulders. He slipped easily between her wet folds.

They moaned in unison.

Peter slid in slowly, a little bit at a time. Miki was surprised at his size. When dressed in his work uniform, he seemed of average build. But naked, there was nothing average about him. He was sleekly muscled and had the largest penis she'd ever had the pleasure of feeling inside her. He pushed in as far as he could go, and she shook in his arms.

Peter pulled out all the way, until she mourned his loss and forced him back inside with a quick shove.

"Don't leave me now."

"I'll never leave you," he whispered as his breath played along her face. He plunged deep inside her, and she felt a spasm rock her.

She wondered if he'd still feel this way when he found out what she really was. With the amount of pleasure he roused inside her, total control would slip away very soon. It took all of her will and energy to keep the faerie dust from spilling completely. He hadn't seemed to notice the earlier shimmer of it.

Peter's slow rhythm slipped into something harsher and faster. Every time he pushed against her, digging that little bit deeper, she raised her hips to meet his thrusts. One thrust after the other, he filled her up so much she felt ecstasy like none before stir inside her.

"Oh, Miki, oh, Miki," he called out seconds before she felt him spill inside her. "I'm sorry...I couldn't...wait."

He rocked in her arms as the full extent of his own climax exploded. At the same time, her dust spilled. He'd made her come again, and there was no way to keep it from showing now.

"Neither can I. Peter, I'm a faerie." And at the admission, more dust than she'd ever released before showered their naked bodies. The orgasm tore through her body like a runaway train, and she soaked in the joy of this much pleasure.

He didn't say anything for a long time, just held on tight to her naked body as the dust literally settled around them.

Miki watched it fall to the kitchen floor at his feet. On a fellow faerie, it would seep inside his skin and he'd be awakened to his true nature. But with a human, it just fell around him like useless confetti. Some would think it a waste of her dust, but she didn't care.

As far as she was concerned, nothing was a waste with this man. And if Peter now decided that she was crazy, or just didn't want anything else to do with her, Miki could still treasure this one moment between them. She'd forever remember the tenderness and love that laced this one experience between them. And the way he'd wanted her to be enraptured with pleasure before he was.

"I'm sorry, I think I misheard you. Did you just say you're a *faerie*?" Peter finally said. His breath was a little ragged, and it warmed her bare shoulder.

"You heard me. Peter, I'm a faerie."

"As in, you're tiny and can sprout wings?" he asked the question as he continued to hold on tight to her.

"I'm not tiny, but I do have wings." Miki pressed her cheek into the crook of his shoulder and enjoyed the afterglow of their lovemaking. The moon's shine was on her back, warming her further.

"Really, where are they?" His hands caressed her bare back, and she shivered at his touch.

The sensitivity around her wings' spot was sexually arousing. She closed her eyes to the sensations and willed her wings to appear with a single thought. Miki made them flicker for his benefit before she retracted them again.

When she opened her eyes, he was looking at her face, his hands no longer on her skin.

"You've got purple wings," he muttered in awe.

"Yes, I do."

He took a step back and slipped out from between her legs.

"I'm a faerie."

"My niece talks about faeries all the time. They're supposed to be



things of fiction and fairytales. Not real people. Not a real woman that...I've fallen for." He took a few more steps back and nearly slipped on his discarded clothes. He pushed both hands through his dark hair and held his arms up near the sides of his head. The faraway look in his eyes was one she'd seen a hundred times on the changelings, the ones she sprinkled her dust on and made aware of their true self. But this was different. Peter wasn't fae. He hadn't changed.

She'd just broken the biggest rules in the faerie rule book. The fae were never supposed to fall in love, make love to or interfere with the humans in a way that would compromise their existence. Well, she'd just broken all of the above.

"I'm sorry to drop this on you, but your niece is right." Her body started to cool, but the moon's influence kept her wrapped up in its warmth.

"I can't believe this." He kept saying the words as if what he'd seen and heard couldn't be possible. "You're a faerie? I've just made love to a *faerie*?"

Miki jumped off the counter, and her feet felt the cold on the tiles instantly. The heat of their encounter cooled quicker than his confusion. "If you want me to leave, I understand. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, but I didn't know how you'd take it. And I didn't want to put you in any danger."

His eyes widened. "You're in danger from that homeless man in the park, aren't you?"

She shrugged as she bent over to take her pants and corset top off the floor. "He wasn't a homeless man. Peter, I'll leave now. Just pretend you never met me. That none of this happened. I'm so sorry to have confused you—"

"No, no, I don't want you to go." He shook his head and reached a hand out toward her. "Spend the night with me, please. I want to make sure you're really here, that when I open my eyes tomorrow, you'll still be here."

"Are you sure that's what you want?" she asked, holding her clothes in front of her. She didn't want to commit to taking his hand until

she read the surety in his eyes.

“Yeah, I’m positive.” Peter extended his right hand farther. His eyes were still wide, but they shimmered with concern and amazement, no longer as confused as he’d been with her initial admission.

Miki sighed and placed her hand into his tight hold. She couldn’t stop her mind from racing and her heart from singing as he led her toward his bedroom. She hadn’t slept on a comfortable surface for a while. She knew that tonight she would enjoy a peaceful sleep in the arms of the man she loved. But tomorrow, with the new day, there’d be new things to challenge them.

## Chapter Seven

Miki smashed the thick padlock with the end of one of her weapons. Her weapons of choice were two matching stiletto daggers she could easily conceal at her side. Each fae-hunter had access to their specifically unique weaponry. It was never a choice, but something that happened to each of them when the end of their training approached.

Hers were smaller than most, but no less lethal.

The metal of the padlock split instantly. She looked over her shoulder to ensure Peter hadn't snuck up behind her, or that she'd woken him with the noise. He was still in his bed, sleeping with a satisfied grin on his face. Before Miki had the opportunity to spend one comfortable night in his bed, they'd made love again. Before comfort had come bliss, several times.

She sucked in a breath and felt heat rush up her neck and into her face at the memory. The things they'd done together and the way he'd made her feel was enough to make her blush even now. Miki had never imagined one man could make her feel this way. That one person could satisfy every single facet of her emotionally and physically. But that's exactly what he did.

*Don't let the pleasure distract you,* she reminded herself. She was playing with fire here. Just because he seemed to have accepted the secret she'd revealed to him didn't mean that Peter would be able to bear everything else. The fact she was breaking into his property was enough to challenge his trust in her. And if she found what she suspected his

brother may be involved in, it would be another rude shock. Not to mention that his niece could see faeries, which meant Ciara was one of them.

Miki released the burdened breath. Why couldn't life present her with happiness and let her be? Why were the happy, joyous events always overshadowed by the darkness?

She turned back to the lock, half-expecting the goblin to pop out of nowhere and attack her. He wouldn't wait too long for a decision from her, and she was positive she'd seen him outside the kitchen window the night before. The same window that looked out onto the backyard she was currently in.

The sun was still weak this early in the morning, but it was enough to warm away some of the chill these thoughts were conjuring along her skin.

Miki unhooked the lock and let it hang lopsided on the outside of the metal hook frame. She took her first step inside the shed and regretted it instantly. Her left hand covered her nose in an attempt to keep the stench at bay.

She stuck her sharp weapons into their holster and continued forward. Her eyes took several seconds to adjust because it was so dark inside. A single light bulb hung above her head, but she couldn't locate the switch along the wall.

That undeniable stench *was* from faerie blood.

The green she'd spotted on Roger's hands had been what she'd suspected. But how had he gotten it, and why? The only way to get her answer was to keep moving forward.

The shed wasn't big, only as wide as Peter's kitchen, but stretched toward the back of the yard. Several metal shelves lined either side with bits and pieces. A few unused pot plants, gardening tools, car parts, and a multitude of other things she couldn't name. But there was no faerie stashed away in here.

Another step made her stop. The squishy liquid she'd trod on made her stomach sink. She looked down but couldn't see anything. She sighed, knelt down and touched the ground near her boot. She slowly rose and

inspected her fingers in the small amount of light that shone in from the dirty open door behind her. It was blood, green blood.

"Damn it," she whispered. Was he stashing a dead faerie in here? Had there been one of her own here the whole time she'd been inside the house enjoying pleasures from the brother of the man who'd done this?

Miki moved forward with her heart beating in her throat. The darkness of this situation made gooseflesh rise along her skin. She longed for a warm moonlit night, the kind she used to enjoy in Breena as a kid, when the light of the moon warmed her skin more than the sun.

She stopped when she kicked something metallic. She didn't need to kneel or see it to know it was a chain.

Miki moved forward and stopped in front of a doorway. The splintered door stopped several inches off the stained concrete floor. She was positive the blood had seeped from here.

There was no doorknob, just a hole where it should've been. She lifted her right hand slowly and pushed it inward, but it got stuck. As if something was pressed up directly against it.

Miki squeezed through the small opening and nearly threw up. The smell of blood was unbearable inside this small confined space. She couldn't see a damn thing, even though her eyes had adjusted. With a fast release of breath, she sunk to her heels and came face to face with a person.

"Oh no..." Her shaky hand carefully lifted the head that fell forward. It was a female with long, dark hair. After checking for a pulse, she sighed in relief. She was still alive, though the chain across her chest kept her restrained to the wall behind her.

The slight burn from touching the chain told Miki it was iron. Not something that could kill a faerie as easily as it could a goblin or a sprite, but it would eventually cause devastating damage.

"Can you hear me?" she whispered near the female's face. Miki had to get her out of here before Roger had a chance to return. Or Peter woke up and decided to look for her.

"Yeah, I can hear you."

The shock of the male voice forced her back to her feet. She turned

around quickly, limbs sore and heavy. Roger was in the shed. He stood just inside the open door. A frown etched his features, making him look older than she remembered.

“What’s the matter, the cat got your tongue?”

She quickly took the few steps necessary to leave the small area in which he’d enclosed his prisoner.

“What’re you doing in here?” He took another step forward. Now that the light didn’t frame him as brightly, she caught the danger burning deep inside his eyes.

“Why is she here?” was all Miki managed. Her body shook from the surprise, shock and repulsion. Did he know she was a faerie too? The thought that he had a half-faerie child in his care made her shudder with dread. “Where is Ciara?”

He chuckled. “Funny you should ask me that, because I came straight over to find out what you’d done with her.”

“I don’t know what you mean. You took her home last night—”

“Yes, I took her home, but when I woke up she was gone! Now tell me where you put her.” Roger raised his voice as he advanced a few more steps.

“I didn’t take her.”

“Bullshit! She told me what you are. Sweet child didn’t want to, but I have ways of making her talk.” The leer on his lips turned her stomach. “She claimed you were a faerie. I wasn’t sure, though I thought I’d smelt that familiar filthy stench on you. After a while the smell gets in your system. And you all share that putrid stench on your skin.”

He didn’t behave like a concerned parent. He actually appeared to be more concerned with what Ciara could help him with rather than the fact she was his child.

“I haven’t seen her.”

“No, maybe not, I guess you’ve been too busy seducing my brother!” He lifted his right palm and blew a line of faerie dust in front of him.

A cold shiver raced down her spine when she realized it was *her* dust. Probably some of what had been shed the night before in the

kitchen. "I didn't seduce him."

"When he finds out you're a dirty little faerie, he'll walk away. Tear out that unfeeling heart of yours."

She didn't bother to tell him that Peter already knew what she was. The crazed look on his face was dangerous, bordering on desperate, and she'd have to be careful with how she handled this. Her anger at what he'd done to the changeling made her want to kill him. But she'd already broken enough rules against the humans without adding murder to the list. Although, the way she felt right now, she would gladly kill him on the spot. She could treat him as if he were in the same league as Adolf. They both tortured and slaughtered her people for their own gain. But what was Roger's gain exactly?

"She's not turned yet, is she?" Miki asked.

Roger shrugged. "She still bleeds green, and that makes her a stinking faerie. I'm going to cash her in this afternoon, so you better not get any noble ideas about trying to save her."

"How did you find her?"

"The same way I find all of them." His casual answers were cold and unconcerned.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Using the one tool I've got at my disposal."

Miki's stomach turned at the realization. "You use your own daughter to hunt us down?"

"Easy money for a little pest control," he said with a shrug. "We don't need pests like you and that bitch over there in our world."

"What will you do with her?" Miki held her hands in tight fists at her sides so she wouldn't close the distance between them and smash him in the mouth. She wanted to hurt him so bad her skin burned.

"I'll turn her over to the organization, and they'll pay me big bucks. But this time, I'm going to give them two." A smile cut through his thin lips. He looked like evil incarnate. "Yeah, that's right sweetheart, I'm taking you in too."

"I won't let you take her or me!"

Roger moved too quickly. She didn't have a chance to react before

his right hand had already slapped her face. Blood collected inside her mouth and dribbled out between her lips. The back of her neck hurt from the impact, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. At least her bruised neck had healed already.

He was too close, could overpower her if she decided to keep her true strength and abilities at bay for much longer.

"In a matter of hours, you'll both be a distant memory, and I'll have a wad of cash in the bank. Now, I'm not going to ask you again, Miki. Where did you hide my daughter?"

"I don't know where she is."

Roger raised his hand again, but this time she caught his wrist and squeezed. His eyes bulged but didn't give her the satisfaction of showing pain.

"Miki, Miki...are you out here?" It was Peter. He was just outside the door to the shed.

She froze with her hand still squeezed tight around his brother's wrist. Her heart sped up at being caught in such a compromising position with Roger. How would he react?

"Miki... *Roger*, what the hell is going on in here?" The light bulb overhead was switched on and seemed too bright for her eyes.

She blinked a few times, squinted. Roger took her distraction as an opportunity to yank his hand out of her grasp and step away from her.

"What the hell happened to you, Miki?" Peter glared at her face in shock, then at his brother. "Did you do that to her?"

Roger shrugged. "The little bitch had it coming to her."

"What?" Peter frowned, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Don't speak about Miki like that. What the hell's the matter with you? And what's that smell?"

She was surprised he could smell it now. Then again, he had spent a night with a faerie. Maybe it had somehow made him a little more sensitive. Other humans never would've been able to detect the smell of faerie blood right away. She knew Roger could, because he'd obviously been intimate with a faerie at some stage in his life, otherwise there would be no Ciara.



"Peter, just walk away from her, okay? You have no idea what you're getting yourself into. If you continue this fling of yours, your life will be in danger." Roger reached out to grab his brother's shoulder, but Peter shrugged it off.

"This isn't a fling. I have no idea what's gotten into you, but hitting my girl isn't cool. I think *you* better walk out of here before I punch you in the mouth." The anger emanated off Peter's body. His jaw was clenched tight as he glared at his brother. He looked torn.

Roger reacted as if he'd been struck. He took a step back, crossed his arms over his chest and kept his brother fixed with his gaze. "Are you kidding me? We're brothers. We've been through so much together, and you're going to let some hussy get between us. You don't even know what she is. She's not human, man."

"I know what she is," Peter whispered, "and I don't care. I want to be with her, no matter what."

"This all sounds very romantic and I'd pull out my violin if I'd remembered to grab it, but I forgot because of the need to find my daughter!" Roger clamped his jaw shut for a second. "You better get over this infatuation fast, Pete."

"Why, where's Ciara?" he asked, concerned.

"I don't know, why don't you ask your girlfriend?"

Peter met her eyes, but she shook her head. "I have no idea what he's talking about, or where she is."

"She's right, she's been with me all night." Peter sighed as he pushed a hand through his hair.

Roger snickered. "Yeah, and did you happen to know she was out here poking around my private shed?"

A groan from behind her made Miki's pulse race. It was all coming undone. All she needed now was for Adolf to make an appearance.

"Who's that?" Peter looked over Miki's shoulder.

"No one," Roger snapped.

"There's someone there, I heard them." Peter pushed past his brother and stood in front of Miki. His eyes seemed to be asking so many silent questions as he surveyed the blood dripping from the side of her

mouth.

“Peter, your brother’s been harming innocent faeries—”

“Don’t listen to her crap!”

“See for yourself.” Miki stepped aside and allowed Peter farther into the darkness, until he gasped and cursed once he’d found the captive woman.

“Who the hell are you storing in my shed?” Peter raced back to confront his brother. His face was pale. The dark shade of his stubble appeared darker.

“No one, it’s not what you think.”

“There’s a woman chained to the wall, and she’s bleeding green blood all over the place. What else is it supposed to look like, Roger?” Peter shook as the confusion and anger seemed to overwhelm him.

Miki took one of his hands in hers and squeezed it. “I’m sorry, Peter, but it looks like your brother enslaves faeries and sells them to the highest bidder.”

His hand slipped from hers as he drew closer to his brother. “You...you knew about the existence of faeries?”

“It would make things much easier if you forget about any of this and hand the bitch over.”

Peter punched his right fist into his brother’s cheek and then pulled back. “I told you not to speak about her that way! And answer me. Tell me what the hell’s going on here.”

“There are too many dangerous people involved in this, Peter. You don’t need to get involved. Turn a blind eye to it and move on.” He wiped away a streak of red blood from below his nose.

“I can’t do that, I’m in love with her.” His voice was low, but in the silence inside the shed they all heard it loud and clear.

“She’s enchanted you, made you believe that you’re in love with her. Trust me. It’s happened to me before. Their magic and glamour can be overwhelming.” Roger raised his voice, as if that would get the point across better.

“How would you know, unless...”

“Unless I fucked one of these bitches and she got pregnant,” Roger

spat. "Don't look so surprised. You know the little thing that happened about seven years ago between Sonja and me. Yeah, that was because of what happened to Ciara's mother. Our sister can be very nosey."

"Are you telling me Ciara is a—" His voice cracked.

"Peter, your niece is half-faerie," Miki said from behind him.

"And where is she now?" Peter whispered.

"I don't know, someone's taken her—"

"No, her mother, what happened to her mother?" he interrupted his brother sharply.

Roger sighed. "I have no idea, and I want to keep it that way. Unlike Sonja, who almost got herself killed prying into my business! I'm involved with a very dangerous bunch that specializes in taking these faeries into slavery, prostitution and other things of the sort."

"So that's what you intend to do with the woman you've got tied up back there." Peter's frown deepened.

"That's what I intend to do with her and your girlfriend over there." He pointed a hand at Miki, no longer wiping at his damaged nose.

"I won't let you do that." Peter made a move to charge him, but Miki grabbed one of his arms.

"No, Peter, we need to concentrate on what's important. I think I know who's got your niece." Miki finally voiced the twisted thoughts she'd been pondering while the two brothers argued and more of Roger's disgusting secret was spilled.

Ciara could see faeries. Judging by the female in the back of the shed, she could also see them when they themselves didn't know what they were. Her own father had used the child for that one purpose. There was a goblin in Sydney who wanted the same thing. A detail that had confused Miki at first, because goblins could see faeries as well as they could see them. Adolf had slaughtered and fed on as many true faerie as he could in this city, but what he wanted now he couldn't see.

Adolf wanted the changelings but couldn't detect them. That's why he'd wanted Miki. But after she'd unwillingly led him to Peter's house and Ciara had been present, he must've realized she was a faerie too.

She was sure the goblin had taken the little girl. Miki had to get her

back.

"It better not be one of your faerie friends!" Roger yelled, making a move to lift his hand to slap her again.

Peter stepped in front of her. "Don't you dare touch her!"

She ignored him and took Peter's hands in hers. "She's in terrible danger if we don't get to her first."

"Where is she, who's got her?" he asked confused.

"I don't know where she is exactly, but I know where I may be able to find the one who's got her." Miki lowered her gaze from his. She couldn't deal with the look of betrayal and confusion deep in his eyes. "But first we need to get this woman safe."

"I think I can help with that," a woman's voice replied.

They all turned to find Sonja in the doorway. Her short hair was in a ruffled, messed up style, and her eyes were pinned on Roger. "I'm not going to let you do this anymore. I don't know how you managed to make me forget, but Ciara helped me remember." She looked past him to meet Miki's gaze. "Please, go and do whatever you need to do to get my niece back. I'll make sure the woman's all right."

Miki nodded. She took one step in front of the other with Peter beside her. She also grabbed a hold of Roger's arm as hard as she could to encourage him to move. "You're coming with us!"

## Chapter Eight

*Come on, come on, Miki said over and over again inside her head. I know you're in here somewhere.*

The undeniable sense of being watched prickled her skin. She buttoned up her fitted coat so that nothing was left bare for the breeze to chill. Miki looked over her shoulder to make sure Peter and Roger still stood behind her. The brothers were several feet away, concealed by one of the largest trees inside Victoria Park. It was the park situated across the busy road from the Broadway Shopping Center. The same place Adolf had attacked her the night before.

She couldn't believe so much had happened in twenty-four hours.

The human brothers stood close together, no words exchanged between them. Even from here, she could feel Roger's hostility toward her and Peter's anger at his brother. Both of their body language confirmed mistrust. She hoped Peter felt that toward his brother and not her.

Miki looked away, took a deep breath and let it calm her system. Her nerves were on edge, and she was having a hard time keeping them under control. This was a long shot. She may not be considered as a prize to the goblin any longer. Not now that he had a little girl capable of doing the job he wanted Miki to do for him.

The poor child didn't stand a chance. Whether she chose to obey and help him, or he forced her, Miki still felt saddened for the little girl. Her own father had used her as a tool for years. It was terrible, and she was determined to find the child's mother so that Ciara could know some

proper happiness in her life. It wasn't too late. The child's mother had to be one of the faeries from Breena.

Her head started buzzing.

"Have you made up your mind?" The gruff voice forced her from her thoughts.

Miki turned around slowly until she faced the tall brute. His hair and beard were brown and knotted. His teeth matched the hue, as well as his beady eyes. Every feature about these creatures was putrid. Looking at him now, it was no wonder Peter had thought him to be a homeless man.

She kicked the grass below her boots. Night wasn't far now. "You still want me to find faeries for you?"

"Of course I do, isn't that why you're here?" A smirk cut across his large mouth and confirmed he knew the real reason.

"Give me the girl." Miki cut to the chase. What was the point in stalling? She knew he had her, but not where. She recalled Shay warning her about her death. Well, it looked as if things would come to a head here in Sydney tonight. Miki was willing to face her destiny head on. Just as she always faced life. No point in hiding from pain or challenges.

Adolf shook his shaggy head. "And why would I do such a thing, faerie?"

"I'll give you one chance to hand her over willingly. If you don't, I'll kill you seconds after I get the information from you anyway." Miki shrugged and released a shallow breath. His putrid stench polluted the area between them. She was glad dusk surrounded them. The power of the moon caressed her skin, even below her coat and fitted pants. The same warm glimmer most received from the sun now coated her face.

He laughed and took a step forward. The green grass crunched below his feet. "You don't know who you're messing with, pretty one. I would never reveal any of my secrets to one of your kind."

"You did to Rhiannon!" She looked down at the grass he'd trod on. It had turned brown and withered away.

His eyes hardened at the sound of the name. "That faerie was a bitch, but the only one worthy to deserve the throne."

"Then you'll be sad to know she no longer holds the title of queen,"

Miki said calmly.

"Oh really, and who would be queen now?"

"I think that would be me."

Miki's heart skipped a beat as she looked to her left. Shay Lee stood beside one of the many trees in this park. Her pale skin was more vibrant than Miki remembered. Her turquoise eyes were narrowed to slits as she surveyed the goblin with obvious hatred.

"I've seen you before," Adolf said with disgust. "Rhiannon spoke about you often. You are not worthy of the throne."

"Tell my husband that." Shay hitched a thumb behind her before she crossed her arms in front of her stomach. Her shoulder length hair swayed in the wind. "He's right over there." A tall man with honey-blond hair, and the guard who had approached Miki in the store Peter worked in, stood to his left. The tallest female faerie she'd ever known, Cyan, stood to his right. They both looked dangerous.

Miki's stomach turned as she met Cyan's wide eyes and realized they looked familiar. She looked past the guards and spotted Roger, who seemed keen to walk away from his brother. Peter stopped him and pulled him back so they remained concealed from the action.

She chose to keep the rising suspicions quiet until after they dealt with the goblin.

"Don't let him get away!" Miki called out to Peter.

Shay followed her gaze and frowned. "You shouldn't have involved humans in this, Miki. I warned you about—"

"Adolf has taken a half-fae from one of them," she interrupted. Miki knew that once she eventually returned to Breena, the queen would hand out severe punishment for the many rules she'd broken, as well as the disrespect she continued to show toward her.

Shay's eyes widened. "A half-faerie? I didn't know there was such a thing."

Cyan didn't seem affected by the comment, and Miki wondered why. Had Roger also managed to keep her mind numb to what had happened, just as he'd done to his own sister?

"She's mine now!" Adolf said. "She belongs to me! With her beside

me, I shall find every changeling in this city and drink their blood. I'll slaughter them afterward and move on to another place to do the same thing there."

The queen flinched and took a step forward. As she advanced, the stone sword suddenly appeared in her hand. Shay clutched it tightly and pointed her weapon toward the goblin as the vines slithered over her wrist and hand. "None of my people belong to yours. And we were just victorious in a war against them."

"You lie. If and when the goblins breach your world, we shall feast on your kind and flood the streets and castle with your blood." Adolf spat on the grass between him and the queen.

Shay moved so fast Miki didn't realize what she was doing until the king called out behind her. "No, Shay, we agreed this isn't your fight."

Her arms trembled as she held the sword in mid-strike above Adolf's head. He grinned as if he'd won some sort of battle.

Miki didn't hesitate. This was her cue, her fight. It was the reason the king had asked his queen to stand down. Miki had told Shay herself that this battle was hers, and she would follow it through to the end. The other faeries were here to back her up if she needed their help.

Now that there was so much more than love at stake, she wasn't about to back down.

She reached for her stiletto weapons, one on a hip holster on her left, and the other on her right. She gripped each stone hilt tight in her palms and held the iron blades in front of her. The moon was high in the sky this early on, but it still glinted on the triangular cross-section on each end. Miki felt the power race through her, grateful that her world shared the sun and moon with the humans.

Adolf was preoccupied with Shay, watching her retreat her sword and back away to join the other three faeries.

Miki looked past all of them until her eyes met Peter's. She offered him a weak smile and a wink, knowing that after this was all over, he might still change his mind about her. He'd seemed supportive and even defended her honor against his brother, but this scene only added to the unreality of the situation he'd gotten himself into.



She charged forward, one stiletto high in the air, the other held out in front of her. When the lower blade pierced into the rough skin of the goblin's side, he jerked and backhanded her in the face. But she held her ground, following through with the stab until every long inch of her weapon was tucked inside his body. He thrashed away from her, but the damage was already done.

A single stab would have done the same thing, but to keep the iron inside his broken skin would only help them in the long run. It would slowly poison his system.

"Shay, stand clear!" She heard the king's voice, but the queen didn't listen.

Adolf lifted a hand in Shay's direction, and her feet left the grass as she flew backward. Shay's spine impacted with a tree across the park. The crunch echoed above the hum of traffic. The king ran to her aid as the guard stood his ground with Cyan beside him.

"I've got him!" Miki yelled to keep them out of the fight. She didn't want anyone else harmed because of her. The goblin was using magic.

"You little bitch." Adolf turned to face her. His body bent awkwardly to the side as he tried to pry the weapon protruding from his back. But she'd stabbed him in a spot too hard to reach. "Take this out of me now!"

"Tell me where the girl is and I'll consider it."

His grotesque face contorted as he glared at her and smiled in spite of the obvious pain. "I don't think I'll tell you. It will be my little secret. One I'll take to the grave if you don't take this iron out of me."

Miki placed her empty hand on her hip. The other still held her weapon in front of her. "I've got another one here. Maybe I could stab this one into your eye."

The grin disappeared off his face. He reached back but failed to grab the hilt. His hands continued to slip off. In frustration he spun around in a half-circle, lifted both of his hands in front of him and pointed them in Peter's direction.

"No!" Miki took a step forward as whatever magic this bastard possessed shot out of his hands in an invisible wave. Peter's eyes

widened, and he didn't have enough time to step away from something he couldn't see. Instead, he was pushed out of the way by Roger. The impact of the goblin's evil magic hit him in the chest and he fell to the grass.

"Roger!" Peter was on his knees, eyes wide as he looked at his brother.

Miki knew Roger was dead. There was nothing they could do for him now. Adolf had used some sort of death spell. Until now, she hadn't realized goblins had access to any sort of magic. But the way the grass died beneath his feet had already revealed the fact.

She wanted to run to console Peter, who now had his brother in his arms. But she couldn't. Miki turned her attention back to Adolf and didn't see the punch in the face coming. Her eyes stung as she took a step back and felt the blood gush from her nose. Damn it hurt, but she couldn't let her guard down. She held tighter to the weapon she still had but didn't get a chance to use it.

The goblin struck another blow, this time to her midsection.

The breath was punched out of her. She struggled to grab enough oxygen through her already damaged nose.

"I'm going to kill you with my bare hands," he taunted as he closed in on her. "Then I'm going to suck every drop of your blood and increase my magic."

She wanted to ask why but thought she already knew the answer. The night she'd caught Adolf and Rhiannon in bed together, she'd also noticed the sprite Xenoï hidden in the shadows of their room. They hadn't detected him, but Miki had. And she had no doubt he'd somehow helped Adolf acquire the power he had. And it probably all stemmed from the basic need for faerie blood. Her vision wavered for a second, but she could feel her regenerative powers kick into effect. She was already healing herself. The moon helped the process, and she opened herself up to it.

"Tell me where the girl is."

He punched her left cheek, followed by her right.

Miki's footing failed and she almost tumbled, but the trunk of a tree stopped her. The stiletto still in her hand tumbled to the grass. She

caught Cyan making a move toward her, but the guard caught her shoulder and shook his head.

She was glad. This was almost over.

Blood filled her mouth. It dribbled down her nostrils and between her lips, but Miki refused to back down.

As Adolf advanced again with his fist in the air, she ducked. He smashed it into the tree. Miki had enough room to duck beneath his arm. She stood behind him and drew out every bit of strength she could to kick him in the small of the back. He tumbled forward, trying to dislodge his fist.

She grabbed the hilt of the stiletto stuck into his back, and pulled it out from his skin in a quick move. He screamed. She stabbed it into him again, only this time between his shoulder blades. He'd never be able to pull it out from there.

Miki pushed as hard as she could, until he whimpered at the depth of the iron blade. She'd probably pierced his lungs.

As she surveyed the grass below to locate her other weapon, she caught the glint from the moon above. There it was. When she ducked to grab it, Adolf elbowed her in the face, and Miki stumbled back. This time her ankle twisted and she fell, landing flat on her back. The air was knocked out of her as she struggled to rise to her feet.

Adolf jumped on her, legs open on either side of her waist. His breath sounded wheezy, but it didn't seem to slow him down. A clawed fist slammed her square in the face. Every bit of self-healing she'd already done was reversed.

He stopped for a second, grabbing desperately at the stiletto sticking out of his back, to no avail. He grunted his dissatisfaction and lifted both hands up in the air. The scream that left his mouth made her skin crawl, but she didn't have enough time to dwell on it. The claws on his fingers scratched her left and right cheeks in alternate attacks.

Miki winced as her skin was pierced. It stung so badly she wanted to scratch the wounds. But every bit of pain she'd already suffered surpassed her threshold. There were too many aches to concentrate on just the one. She closed her puffy eyes and made an attempt to connect with

the moon. Miki could feel its power flow through her, but there wasn't enough energy. This was going to be her end. The healing necessary for these many injuries would take too long, and he delivered a new wound every second.

Her body grew numb.

Sound disappeared, details faded. Nothing but pain and Adolf still straddling above her filled the darkness. He seemed lost in his anger and madness, feral and shaggy as he attacked her continually. Her coat and shirt were the next things to tear. He'd skimmed the skin above her ribs. She was slowly dying.

Or maybe she was already dead. Darkness was at every angle and the other faeries had all faded. Where was Peter? Miki wanted to lift her head, but it wouldn't move. She couldn't move an inch. It felt almost as if body control no longer belonged to her.

She stared up at Adolf and noticed his crazed attack was now in slow motion. The way his hands moved seemed sluggish and slow, but she knew it wasn't him, it was her mind. Oxygen would stop soon, and then it would all be over.

A flicker of color caught her attention. Small orange wings moved behind Ciara's body as she hovered in the blackness around them. The little girl lifted a hand to her lips as she moved around until she hovered directly above and behind the goblin. Her small frame disappeared for a second, and still there was no sound.

Adolf's body shook and he turned back.

Ciara held the stiletto in her tiny hand. His yellow blood dripped from it, and she whispered, "Now, Miki, get him now."

She struggled to keep her eyes open, unable to understand what she meant until she turned to her left side. There, right beside her was the other stiletto. Shiny and new, the moon's light made it glow as she somehow moved one of her arms and wrapped her hand around the hilt.

Adolf reached for Ciara, with a look of mock surprise on his face. But she simply shook her head and pointed in Miki's direction. When he made a move to jump on top of her again, Miki lifted her body enough to jab the blade of her stiletto deep into his chest right through his heart. His

eyes widened, and the blood seeped from the wound instantly.

Suddenly Shay was in the darkness with them, just as he fell to his hands and knees. Her eyes were filled with anger as she limped toward him with both hands on the hilt of her sword.

Miki inched away a little when the queen's sword impacted with the goblin's neck. His head rolled off his shoulders, and the rest of his body went into spasm.

Cyan was now in the dark too. Her huge ax glinted a second before it tore Adolf's body in half. His severed body collapsed. She retreated the battle ax, blood dripping from its sharp edge.

The black shroud that had descended around them lifted in a rush. They were all back in Victoria Park. Sound returned with a sharp pop. Something warm dribbled from her ears. When she looked up, she noticed Cyan, Shay and Ciara had the same green trail from theirs. Wherever they'd gone, that dark, disgusting place wasn't meant for faeries.

Cyan was the first one to stick the ax back in its holster across her back. Shay's vines slithered away, and the weapon disappeared as she made a move to holster it at her side.

Miki sucked in a deep breath that hurt like hell. Every bit of pain he'd delivered to her body hit her with an impact that made her wince.

The king stepped up behind his wife. He wrapped his long, muscled arms around her shoulders and hugged her to whisper in her ear. She nodded, but her eyes remained on Miki.

Cyan was now staring at Ciara, who still hovered in the air with her vibrant wings and human outfit. The child turned to stare at the tall faerie, and her smile widened. Something in Cyan's face changed, but she looked confused. It was all the verification Miki needed to know she was right.

She wanted to lie back and sleep. She was so tired, unsure if she'd ever wake up again after this ordeal. The injuries were intensive. She knew that. And although her healing powers were aided by the moon above, she didn't know if it would be enough. Her eyes fluttered shut but opened again when she heard her name.

It was Peter's voice.

He ran to her side, pausing only for a second to watch as his niece fluttered back down to the grass and her wings disappeared. Ciara turned to glance over her shoulder, and tears glistened in her eyes when she looked back. Miki assumed she'd seen her dead father. She wanted to apologize, but couldn't summon the words.

"Miki, oh my god, Miki, are you okay?" He held her up just as he'd held his brother. She pressed her spine against his arm and her face into his chest. No matter where he touched her, it hurt like hell. But she didn't flinch or say a word. She needed his warmth right now, needed to remember how it felt when they'd been intimate together. It might be her last thought, and she wanted it to be a happy one.

"I'm sorry..." She coughed as blood seeped from her mouth "...about your brother."

His eyes were wide and sad as he pressed her bleeding face against his. Her blood stained him, but he didn't seem to care. At that moment, Miki knew they were meant to be together. Their love would've been able to overcome any hurdle, including the fact they were from different species.

"Can't any of you do something to help her?" he called to the faeries who had now moved closer.

Shay shook her head. "I guess Mai was right, her destiny was already sealed. I'm so sorry I failed you, Miki." Tears shimmered in her turquoise eyes.

Miki wanted to tell her it was all right, that this wasn't anyone's fault. But she couldn't get a word out. Her eyelids felt so heavy, and it was hard to concentrate on anything as Peter held her tight and rocked her body against his.

Consciousness faded slowly as someone else took one of her floppy hands. She looked up and saw that it was Ciara. Her wide child eyes were filled with warmth as she slipped something into her palm.

It was the last thing Miki focused on before all the pain and sorrow faded to nothing.

## Chapter Nine

"Oh, thank the gods you're awake!"

Miki swallowed hard. Her throat felt as if it had closed up. It was hoarse and dry, with a stale taste in her mouth. She made a move to sit up but stopped when her head throbbed and everything spun around in a wavering circle.

"Where's Peter?" she asked in a raspy whisper.

"He's okay, if that's what you want to know." Shay's pretty face came into view to her left.

Miki looked around. Her eyes seemed to have a limited range of sight, as if they were swollen. For a second, she'd forgotten the beating she'd taken from the goblin, Adolf. She was surprised she'd woken up again. So at least she could be grateful for that one miracle.

"Can I see him?"

Shay shook her head. "Not just yet. I need to talk to you about what happened in the park."

"The goblin's dead, isn't he? That's what happened. Thanks for your help. I'll have to thank Cyan too." Words were only making her throat hurt more.

"Go ahead, she's in here too." As if on cue, Cyan stepped out of the shadows, and Miki realized she was inside Peter's house, lying on the bed they'd shared the night before.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

"Who is the little girl that calls herself Ciara?" Shay asked as she sat down on the edge of the bed. She seemed to lower herself a little too slowly and winced in the process.

"Are you okay, boss?" Cyan took a step forward, but the queen waved her away.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"We really should get you to Breena so Phyllis can make sure your child hasn't suffered—"

"Your child?" Miki interrupted.

Shay nodded, and her hair swayed over her eyes. "Yeah, I'm expecting the heir to the throne. I did announce it at my wedding, but you weren't there. It's just like you to be missing from the war and the victory. But none of it matters at the moment. We'll all be heading for Breena soon enough. I promise I'll go to Phyllis then." She looked at Cyan, who backed off with a nod. "Answer my question, Miki."

"I'm so sorry, Shay. I hope..." Her voice trailed off when she recalled the way Adolf had sent her flying against a tree. She had to concentrate on the question. "Um...Ciara is Peter's niece. Roger was—"

"The man who died?" Shay interrupted.

"Yes, that was Roger. He fathered her. The little girl is a faerie. She can see our kind amongst the humans. She can see past the glamour and even spot changelings." Miki paused to press her head back against the comfortable pillows. It drummed so loudly she had to take a few seconds before she could continue. "It's why Adolf took her. It turns out that although he could see faeries here and slaughter them, he couldn't see changelings."

"That doesn't make any sense." Shay frowned. "The last time I was here, you told me he'd killed some of the ones you hunted."

She nodded and regretted it right away. Miki felt nausea stir. "Yes, what I didn't realize then was that the only reason he could find them was because the hunters were leading him straight to them. You know we watch and stalk the changelings before making a move to release them." Miki winced at the pain on her face. Her cheeks were itchy and so swollen she could see them through her puffy eyes. Every bit of her body was



bruised and battered, though the healing continued fast enough that she could feel it.

Shay's eyes hardened. "Well, we don't have to worry about that monster anymore. You made sure of that."

"With some help." Miki coughed, and her insides twisted with pain. Cyan stuck a glass of water in her face, and she drank every single drop. "Thanks."

"Those bloodthirsty creatures lose themselves with the lure of our blood," Shay said with a disgusted shake of her head.

"I think this goblin was drinking and killing faeries to fuel his magic."

The queen's brow creased. "Yeah, we all saw a display of his magic. He wasn't like the others."

"I think Xenoi had something to do with it."

Shay's jaw tightened, and she looked away. "What makes you say that?"

"He and Rhiannon had dealings with this goblin."

"Don't worry, I've made it my life's mission to hunt down that bastard and ensure he spends the rest of his life suffering." The glint in her eyes looked dangerous and very determined. "At least our work is done here. You need to come home now."

"What about Ciara...and Peter?"

"I think you're also forgetting the other one."

Miki didn't know who she meant. "What other one?"

"Sonja or something like that," Cyan said.

"Oh, yeah, she knows too. Did you get a chance to check on the changeling who'd been chained out back?"

"Yeah, listen, I didn't want to throw too many things at you in your condition, but what the hell was going on *there*?" Shay asked as she adjusted her sitting position. "I took a look inside that shed. There's much more than the blood of the one changeling."

Miki took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her lungs felt heavy inside her chest, and her ribs hurt. "Roger had been using his daughter to locate faeries and changelings. He sold them to some organization that

trades our kind."

"What?" Shay rose to her feet and started pacing the length of the room. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I suspected something when I met him last night and his hands were stained with green. He stank of faerie blood because he had her chained up in the shed." Miki's heart ached at the thought of how many other innocents he'd done this to.

"What do you know about this organization?"

"Nothing. But I'm sure if we go to his house, we'll be able to find something. But before that, I need to tell you something else." She paused to lick her dry lips.

"What's that?" Shay looked as if she were about to explode. Her usually dark brown hair was tipped with green. She looked a lot more dangerous than Miki remembered, before she'd been thrust into the position of royalty.

"I think I know who Ciara's mother is." She turned to look at the other faerie inside the bedroom. "I think the child is yours, Cyan Hue."

"What...what do you mean by mine? I've never had a child!" she snapped instantly. Her gray eyes were wide and angry as she took a step forward.

"What makes you think that, Miki?" Shay asked with a serious expression on her face.

"I don't know how, but I think he made Cyan forget she had a child. He made his own sister forget." The deception and actions of Roger Thornton still amazed and repulsed her. For a second she wondered if this organization was connected to the faerie collector she'd almost become a prisoner of years ago.

"That would mean... I've actually slept with a human, and I certainly don't recall that either!" Cyan was beside herself, so pissed off Miki hoped she wouldn't aim any of the anger her way.

"Didn't you see her? I'm sure that if you ask her, she'll confirm it."

Cyan shook her head. "This sounds preposterous. To suggest I had an affair with that dead man, gave birth to a baby and then abandoned her? I would never do something so heartless." She crossed her fisted

hands over her chest. "My duty is to recapture faeries, not dump them here. Surely I would have known."

"I know you wouldn't do it, unless you were made to," Miki replied a little too loudly. Her ears popped as she tried to sit up. "There's something terrible going on here, and I think you were as much a victim as the child. Cyan, if you look at her, you'll see what I've seen. She's a lovely child, very knowledgeable. I believe she's your daughter, and if we're headed for Breena, it wouldn't hurt to have Phyllis run some tests."

She made a move to speak, but Shay held up a hand. "Calm down, Cyan, I know this is a shock. I'm as shocked as you are, but Miki's right, there was something very familiar about the child. Something I couldn't pinpoint."

"That's exactly how I felt when I met her." Miki nodded. "I'm sorry, Cyan. I didn't mean to upset you, but if she's your child, you deserve to know. She deserves to know her mother, too...especially now that she's lost her father."

"I think we'll have to have a little talk to her," Shay said thoughtfully. "Why were you at Victoria Park anyway?"

"I was hoping to lure Adolf in. He'd taken Ciara and had her prisoner. Though come to think of it, I don't know how she got away."

"A question for another day," Shay said with a sigh. "Right now you need to rest a few more hours before we head back to—"

"I don't want to go back."

"The choice isn't yours."

"I'll go back for healing, but I'll return here to track down these humans—"

"You will do no such thing!" Shay said firmly. She suddenly stood by the edge of the bed again. Her eyes burned bright green. "Cyan and Gordo can do that."

"But—"

"But nothing, Miki! This is an order. You've disobeyed enough to last you a century. From now on, you're going to take a few orders directly from *me*." Shay towered over her as she lay helpless on the bed. Her eyes were still on her when she spoke to the other faerie. "Cyan, go to

Peter and ask him for Roger's address. I want you and Gordo on the case immediately. Search his house, see if you can find any clues and then return to Breana. We should have some results about the child by then."

Cyan nodded. Her dark hair spilled over her shoulders.

"Oh, and send Peter in after he's given you the information."

She nodded again and disappeared out the bedroom door without another word.

"So, do you really love this human, or was it just a lust you had to get out of your system? Don't look so shocked, I can tell you've been intimate with him." Shay laughed, and it sounded like sweet music to Miki's ears. "Anyone can tell. And I really need to know what you feel for him before I can make a decision about all of this."

It was only logical. She was actually grateful to be getting the opportunity to plead her case. Love with a human was forbidden and had never been allowed or encouraged. After what had happened with Roger and Cyan, she could understand just how bad it could get. But Peter was different, and she loved him with all of her heart. She'd never known love until she'd gotten to know him. Of course, this all depended on whether he still wanted to be with *her*. After his brother's death and all the other unreal things he'd seen in the park, he might not want anything to do with her. Even if all she wanted was to be with him.

Miki finally nodded. "Yes, I love him and I know he loves me. Not just because he told me, it's in the way he talks to me and the way we connect. I've never known anything like this before. If I don't have him, I don't think I'll ever want to risk my heart this way again." There it was. The truth was out in the open. She was fascinated by how easy she found it to speak and confide in Shay.

"Would you be willing to sacrifice your own life for him?"

"I would die for him."

"Okay." Shay took a deep breath and turned away from her. She seemed to be lost in thought as she circled back around and headed toward the end of the bed. Her shoulders were rigid with tension and the burden of everything that had happened. Miki was surprised she could still stand after what Adolf did to her. When she turned her turquoise

gaze her way, her face was serious and a little grim. "I've spoken to Glen about this, and even to the elder Mai. I couldn't make this decision on my own, although I did plead for you to be able to keep this love you've found. I know how it feels. I almost lost Glen, and if I had, a piece of me would've gone with him." Her hand absently went to her lower abdomen. "We've got a solution for you. Though, it may not be as happy as what you were expecting."

"Okay, I'm ready to hear it."

"If you chose to pursue your love with Peter, then you can."

Miki couldn't help but smile.

"But it will come at the cost of your duty. You will have to retire from being a fae-hunter. You will no longer be able to find changelings and bring them over. And you will have to live here, amongst the humans. Breena won't be blocked off to you, but you will only be able to visit after permission has been granted." Shay dropped her gaze. Was it hurting her to do this? Everyone knew how passionate Shay Lee was about the wellbeing of her kind.

Miki nodded. A bit of her soul felt as if it were being stripped away. But this seemed a fair deal. Life was all about sacrifice, and the happiness she'd found with Peter had to be balanced with a little punishment for what she'd defied along the way. "I agree to the terms."

"Okay." Shay took a few steps forward and touched her hand lightly. "Then you'll be free to love him. We'll be giving you a mirror to use for communication. If you ever need anything, you can get in touch with me directly. Also, for now, you and Peter as well as the child, her aunt and the changeling will all come to Breena. Until this organization is disbanded, you're all in danger and I won't risk any of you in Sydney."

There was a knock on the door.

"I think that's him. Good luck." The queen removed her hand, flashed another smile and made her way to the bedroom door with a slight limp. She opened it, and Peter stood in the doorway.

He moved to the side and gave her enough room to leave. He stood there for a few minutes, just looking at the floor before he finally walked through the doorway and closed the door behind him.

"Peter, I'm so sorry."

He held a hand up in front of him, and her heart fell. Was this it? She'd agreed to a sacrifice, and he didn't want her?

Peter ran a hand through his short hair and sighed. "You've got nothing to be sorry about. Roger got himself killed. I can't believe he got away with treating Ciara like that...and those poor faeries. It's unforgivable." He met her gaze with tears shimmering in his beautiful eyes. "So you don't have anything to be sorry for. Besides, you didn't kill him. That monster did."

"I'm still sorry."

"So that's your king and queen out there?"

She nodded.

"You must be really important in your world for them to take a special interest like that." Peter stopped at the end of the bed. "Jesus, look at what he did to you. He almost killed you, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to help."

"I'm not so important. I'm just a fae-hunter. Or at least, I was."

His eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

Miki shrugged. "Falling in love with humans is illegal in Breena. That's what my world's called."

"So I guess you'll be going back, then?" His gaze was back on the floor, arms hopeless at his sides. "Are you taking Ciara with you?" The pain in his eyes darkened his irises.

"Ciara belongs with the faeries. I think we've found her mother." His eyes widened at the comment. "And yes, I'll be going back to Breena, but you and Sonja need to come too. That's if you still want to be with me."

"You want us to go to faeryland?"

Miki laughed, and it pained her ribs. "Your brother was involved with some very dangerous people. You might all be in danger."

"That tall faerie mentioned something about it. She said she would check out his place, with that other big guy."

"Peter, I know this is all too much to absorb so quickly and you may not want to be with me. But if you do, I love you and I'm prepared to

leave my world to live with you." Miki got everything out in one breath, afraid she'd lose her nerve.

"Really?" Peter was now beside her. He sat on the bed, but she hadn't even noticed him move. A comfortable darkness was calling her again. He slipped something into her hand and whispered, "Ciara wanted me to give you this."

She enjoyed the feel of the talisman's stone and leather in her hand, and remembered the little girl slipping it against her palm after Adolf's attack. The child's kindness touched her heart. How had she lost it? It wasn't important. The only thing she needed to focus on right now was Peter.

"I don't want to be anywhere you're not," she whispered. Lethargy raced through her body as heat ignited inside her when he took her other hand in his.

"You need to get better." Peter's voice sounded so far away, his face blurred in front of her.

"I'll heal soon enough." Her mind was foggy, and he was slipping away from her. Or she from him, she couldn't be sure.

"I'll make sure you will. I'm going to be beside you every step of the way." His warm hand touched her cheek and pushed away the locks on her face. Peter leaned forward to brush his lips against hers for a soft kiss she couldn't return. "I feel the same way about you, Miki."

He kissed her again, a little deeper.

The kiss sent Miki into a place where she'd be able to rest and heal a lot faster. Knowing she'd wake up in Breana, with Peter by her side and ready to rejoice in their love, helped her settle into it completely.

### **Author Bio**

Yolanda lives in a suburb of Sydney, Australia, with her wonderful husband, cute daughter and adorable cat. She's been putting stories together since her early teens.

Now that her daughter is in school, she gets the opportunity to write every day, for most of the day, and she loves every minute of it!

When she's not writing, she spends as much time as possible with her small family. She also enjoys watching movies, TV shows and reading—she loves to read.

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