

A Lick of Frost

Laurell K. Hamilton

Published by Bantam Books

Extract

All text is copyright © Laurell K. Hamilton 2006

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

I WAS SITTING IN AN ELEGANT CONFERENCE ROOM in the top of one of the gleaming towers that make up part of downtown Los Angeles. The room's far wall was almost entirely of glass, so that the view was nearly agoraphobic. They're predicting that if the big one—the big earthquake that is—hits, this section of L.A. will be eight to fifteen feet deep in glass. Anything on the streets below will be cut to pieces, crushed, or trapped underneath an avalanche of glass. Not a pretty thought, but it was a day for ugly thoughts.

My uncle Taranis, King of Light and Illusion, had pressed charges against three of my royal bodyguards. He had gone to the human authorities with charges that Rhys, Galen, and Abe had raped one of his court's women.

In all the long history of his reign in the Seelie Court he had never gone outside to the humans for justice. Faerie rule; faerie law. Or truthfully, sidhe rule; sidhe law. The sidhe had ruled faerie for longer than anyone could remember. Since some of those memories stretched back thousands of years, maybe the sidhe had always been in charge, but it tasted like a lie. The sidhe do not lie, for to truly lie is to be cast out of faerie, exiled. Since I knew that the three bodyguards in question were innocent, that raised interesting problems with Lady Caitrin's testimony.

But today we were just giving statements, and, depending on how that went, King Taranis was standing by for a group call. Which was why Simon Biggs and Thomas Farmer, both of Biggs, Biggs, Farmer, and Farmer, were sitting beside me.

"Thank you for agreeing to this meeting today, Princess Meredith," one of the suits across the table said. There were seven suits across the wide, gleaming table, with their backs to the lovely view.

Ambassador Stevens, official ambassador to the courts of faerie, was sitting on our side of the table, but he was on the far side of Biggs and Farmer. Stevens said, "A word on faerie etiquette: You don't say thank you to the

people of faerie, Mr. Shelby. Princess Meredith, as one of the younger royals, will probably not be offended, but you will be dealing with some nobility who are much older. Not all of them will allow a thank you to pass without grave insult." Stevens smiled when he said it, his blandly handsome face sincere from his brown eyes to his perfectly cut brown hair. He was supposed to be our voice to the world, but, truthfully, he spent all his time at the Seelie Court sucking up to my uncle. The Unseelie Court where my aunt Andais, Queen of Air and Darkness, ruled, and where I might rule someday, was too scary for Stevens. No, I didn't like him.

Michael Shelby, a U.S. Attorney for L.A. said, "I am sorry, Princess Meredith. I didn't realize."

I smiled, and said, "It's fine. The ambassador is correct, a thank-you won't bother me."

"But it will bother your men?" Shelby asked.

"Some of them, yes," I said. I looked behind me to Doyle and Frost. They stood behind me like darkness and snow made real, and that wasn't far from the truth. Doyle had black hair, black skin, a black designer suit; even his tie was black. Only the shirt was a rich royal blue, and that had been a sop to our lawyer. He thought black gave the wrong impression,

made him seem threatening. Doyle, whose nickname was Darkness, had said, "I am the captain of the princess' guard. I am supposed to be threatening." The lawyers hadn't known what to say to that, but Doyle had worn the blue shirt. The color almost glowed against the rich, perfect black of his skin, which was so black there were purple and blue highlights to his body in the right light. His black eyes were hidden behind wraparound black-on-black sunglasses.

Frost's skin was as white as Doyle's was black. As white as my own. But his hair was uniquely his own, silver, like metal beaten into hair. It gleamed in the tasteful lighting of the conference room. Gleamed like something you could have melted down and made into jewelry. He had tied the top layer of it back with a barrette that was silver, and older than the city of Los Angeles itself. The dove-gray suit was Ferragamo, and the white of his shirt was less white than his own skin. The tie was darker than the suit, but not by much. The soft gray of his eyes was bare to the room as he scanned the far windows. Doyle was doing it, too, behind his glasses. I had bodyguards for a reason, and some who wanted me dead could fly. We didn't think Taranis was one of the people who wanted me dead, but why had he

gone to the police? Why had he persisted in these false charges? He would never have done all this without an agenda. We just didn't know what that agenda was, so just in case, they watched the windows for things that the human lawyers couldn't even begin to imagine.

Shelby's gaze flicked behind me to the guards. He wasn't the only one who kept fighting not to glance nervously at my men, but it was Assistant District Attorney Pamela Nelson who was having the most trouble keeping her eyes, and her mind, on business. The men across the table gave the guards the glances men give when they see another man whom they are almost certain could take them physically without breaking a sweat.

U.S. Attorney Michael Shelby was tall, athletic, and handsome, with a gleam of white teeth, and the look of someone who had plans to rise above being the U.S. attorney for the Los Angeles area. He was over six feet, and his suit couldn't hide the fact that he worked out pretty seriously. He probably didn't meet many men who made him feel physically weak. His assistant Ernesto Bertram was a slender man who looked too young for his job, and far too serious with his short dark hair and glasses. It wasn't the glasses that made him

look too serious; it was the look on his face, as if he'd tasted something sour. The U.S. attorney for the St. Louis area, Albert Veducci, was here, too. He didn't have Shelby's tan. In fact, he was a little overweight, and he looked tired. His assistant was Grover. He'd actually introduced himself only as Grover, so I didn't know if it was his first, last, or only name. He smiled more than the rest of them and was attractive in that friendly, walk-you-home-on-campus way. He reminded me of guys in college who were either as nice as they seemed or absolute bastards who only wanted sex, for you to help them pass a class, or, for me, to be close to a real live faerie princess. I wouldn't know which kind of "nice guy" Grover was for a while. If things went well, I'd never figure it out, because I'd probably never see him again. If they went badly, we might see a lot of Grover.

Nelson was the assistant district attorney to *the* district attorney for Los Angeles County. Her boss, Miguel Cortez, was short, dark, and handsome. He looked great on camera. I'd seen him on the news often enough here. The trouble was that he, like Shelby, was ambitious. He liked being on the news, and wanted to be on the news more. This accusation of rape against my men had all the

earmarks of a case that could make your career or break it. Cortez and Shelby were ambitious; it meant that they would either be very cautious, or very incautious. I wasn't sure which mood would help us the most, yet.

Nelson was taller than her boss, close to six feet in her not-too-high heels. Her hair was a vibrant red that fell in waves around her shoulders. It was that rare shade that is deep, rich, and as close to true red as human hair can get. Her suit was well cut, but conservative and black, her button-up shirt white, her makeup tasteful. Only that flame of hair to ruin the almost mannish exterior she portrayed. It was as if she were hiding her beauty and drawing attention to it at the same time. Because she was beautiful. A sprinkling of freckles underneath the pale makeup didn't detract from the flawless skin, it added. Her eyes were green and blue at once, depending on how the light caught them. Those undecided eyes couldn't stop looking at Frost and Doyle. She tried to concentrate on the legal pad she was supposed to be making notes on, but her gaze kept rising, and finding them, as if she couldn't help herself.

That made me wonder if there was more going on than just handsome men and a distracted woman.

Shelby cleared his throat sharply.

I jumped and looked at him. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Shelby, were you speaking to me?"

"No, I was not, and I should have been." He looked down the table on his side. "I was brought into this as a more neutral voice, but let me ask my fellow members of the bar if they are having trouble forming questions for the princess."

Several of the lawyers spoke at the same time. Veducci just raised his pencil in the air. Veducci got the nod. "My office has dealt more closely with the princess and her people than the rest of you, which is why I'm carrying certain remedies against glamour."

"What sort of remedies?" Shelby asked.

"I won't tell you what I'm carrying, but cold steel, iron, four-leaf clover, Saint-John's-wort, rowan and ash—either the wood or the berries—have been known to work. Some say bells will break glamour, but I think high-court sidhe won't be bothered much by bells."

"Are you saying that the princess is using glamour against us?" Shelby asked, his handsome face no longer pleasant.

"I am saying that sometimes when dealing with King Taranis or Queen Andais, their presence overwhelms humans," Veducci responded. "Princess Meredith, being part

human, though beautiful—” He nodded in my direction.

I nodded at the compliment.

“—has never affected anyone so strongly, but a lot has been happening in the Unseelie Court in the last few days. Ambassador Stevens has filled me in, as have other sources. Princess Meredith and some of her guard have moved up the power grid, so to speak.” Veducci still looked tired, but now his eyes showed the mind inside that overweight, overworked camouflage. I realized with a start that there were other dangers besides ambition. Veducci was smart, and hinted that he knew something about what had happened inside the Unseelie Court. Did he know, or was he fishing? Did he think we’d give something away?

“It is illegal to use glamour on us,” Shelby said, angry. He looked at me now, and his look was no longer in the least friendly. I looked back. I gave him the full force of my tricolored eyes: molten gold at the outer edge, then a circle of jade green, and last emerald to chase around my pupil. He looked away first, dropping his gaze to his own legal pad. His voice was tight with controlled rage. “We could have you arrested, or deported back to faerie for trying to use magic to sway these proceedings, Princess.”

"I'm not doing anything to you, Mr. Shelby, not on purpose." I looked at Veducci. "Mr. Veducci, you say that simply seeing my aunt and uncle was difficult; am I difficult now?"

"From my colleagues' reactions, I believe you are."

"So this is the reaction that King Taranis and Queen Andais have on humans?"

"Similar," Veducci said.

I had to smile.

"This is not funny, Princess," Cortez said, his words full of anger, but when I met his brown eyes, they dropped from me.

I looked at Nelson, but it wasn't me distracting her; her problem was behind me.

"Which one are you staring at the most?" I asked. "Frost or Doyle; light or dark?"

She blushed in that pretty way human red-heads have. "I'm not . . ."

"Come, Ms. Nelson, confess, which one?"

She swallowed hard enough that I heard it. "Both," she whispered.

"We will charge you and these two guards with undue magical influence in a legal proceeding, Princess Meredith," Cortez said.

"I agree," Shelby said.

"Neither I, nor Frost and Doyle, are doing this on purpose."

"We are not stupid," Shelby said. "Glamour

is an active magic, not a passive one.”

“Most glamour, yes, but not all,” I said. I looked down the table at Veducci. They’d put him farthest from the center of the table, as if being from St. Louis made him less. Or maybe I was just overly sensitive for my hometown.

“Did you know,” Veducci said, “that when you see the Queen of England, they call it being in the presence? I’ve never met Queen Elizabeth, and I’m not likely to, so I don’t know how it works for her. I’ve never spoken to a human queen. But the phrase ‘in the presence,’ to be in the presence of the queen, means more when it’s the queen of the Unseelie Court. To be in the presence of the king of the Seelie Court is also a treat.”

“What does that mean?” Cortez asked. “A treat?”

“It means, gentleman, and ladies, that being king or queen in faerie gives you an unconscious aura of power, of attractiveness. You live in L.A. You see that it works in lesser ways for major stars or politicians. Power seems to breed power. Dealing with the faerie courts has made me believe that even us poor humans do it. To be around the powerful, rich, beautiful, talented, whatever, it isn’t just human nature to suck up. I think it’s glamour. I think that success of a certain level has a

glamour to it, and you attract people to you. They want to be around you. They listen to you more. They do what you say more. Humans have a shadow of real glamour; now think about someone who is the most powerful figure in faerie. Think about the level of power surrounding them."

"Ambassador Stevens," Shelby said, "shouldn't you have been the one who warned us about this effect?"

Stevens smoothed his tie, played with the Rolex watch Taranis had given him as a present. "King Taranis is a powerful figure with centuries of rulership. He does have a certain nobility that is impressive. I have not found Queen Andais as impressive."

"Because you only talk to her from a distance, over the mirrors, with King Taranis by your side," Veducci said.

I was impressed that Veducci knew that, because it was absolutely true.

"You're the ambassador to faerie," Shelby said, "not just to the Seelie Court."

"I am the United States Ambassador to the courts of faerie, yes."

"But you never step foot into the Unseelie Court?" Shelby asked.

"Uh," Stevens said, running his fingers over and over the watchband, "I find

Queen Andais a little less than cooperative.”

“What does that mean?” Shelby said.

I watched him play with the watch, and a tiny bit of concentration showed that there was magic on it, or in it. I answered for him, “It means he thinks the Unseelie Court is full of perversion and monsters.”

They were all looking at him now. If it had been purposeful glamour on our part, they wouldn’t have. “Is that true, Ambassador?” Shelby asked.

“I would never say such a thing.”

“But he believes it,” I said, softly.

“We’ll all make a note of this, and make sure the proper authorities know of your gross dereliction of your duties,” Shelby said.

“I am loyal to King Taranis and his court. It is not my fault that Queen Andais is a sexual sadist, and quite mad. She and her people are dangerous. I have said so, for years, and no one has listened to me. Now we have these charges, proving what I have been saying.”

“So you told your superiors that you feared the queen’s guard would rape someone?” Veducci asked.

“Well, I, no, not exactly.”

“What did you tell them?” Shelby asked.

“I told them the truth, that I feared for my safety at the Unseelie Court, and that I would

not be comfortable there without an armed escort." Stevens stood up, very tall, very certain of himself. He pointed at Frost and Doyle. "Look at them, they are frightening. The potential in them to do carnage, why, it just radiates off of them."

"You keep touching your watch," I said.

"What?" He blinked at me.

"Your watch. King Taranis gave it to you, didn't he?" I asked.

"You accepted a Rolex watch from the king?" Cortez made it a question. He sounded outraged, but not at us.

Stevens swallowed, and shook his head. "Of course not. That would be totally inappropriate."

"I saw him give it to you, Ambassador," I said.

He ran his fingers over the metal. "That's simply not true. She's lying."

"The sidhe don't lie, Ambassador, you know that. That's a human habit."

Stevens's fingers were practically rubbing a hole through the watchband. "The Unseelie are capable of every evil. Their very faces show them for what they are."

It was Nelson who said, "Their faces are beautiful."

"You are fooled by their magic," Stevens

said. "The king gave me the power to see through their deceptions." His voice was rising with each word.

"The watch," I said.

"So this," Shelby gestured at me, "beauty is illusion?"

"Yes," Stevens said.

"No," I said.

"Liar," he screamed, shoving his chair back so that it rolled on its wheels. He started walking past Biggs and Farmer, toward me.

Doyle and Frost moved like two halves of a whole. They simply stood in front of him, blocking his way. There was no magic to it, except the force of their physicality. Stevens stumbled back from them as if he'd been struck. His face contorted in terror, and he cried out, "No, no!"

Some of the lawyers were standing now. Cortez said, "What are they doing to him?"

Veducci managed to yell above Stevens's screams. "I can't see anything."

"We are doing nothing to him," Doyle said, his deep voice cutting under the higher-pitched voices like water undercutting a cliff face.

"The hell you aren't," Shelby yelled, adding to the noise of Stevens's screams and those of the others.