

Storm Warrior (The Grim Series) (4 page)

Relieved, she was straightening the twisted and wet curtains when another flash of lightning made her stop dead and stare. A familiar creature, blacker than the night, sat at the edge of the parking lot. Looking up at her.

TWO

The electricity's out.

Morgan simultaneously jumped and yelped at Gwen's voice.

"Did I frighten you, dear? I'm so sorry."

"No, no, it's okay. The storm's made me jumpy, that's all." Morgan could hear the clicking as Gwen pulled at the lamp chain several times to no effect.

"I was just saying the electricity is out. Perhaps, I should go downstairs to see if they've a torch we can have."

"That's okay, I can go. I'm already up."

"That's very sweet of you, thank you. But mind you be careful on the staircase and promise to tell me all about it if you see any ghosts. It's just the kind of night for it."

Morgan dressed quickly in the darkness. She suspected her sweater was inside out and one of her bra straps felt twisted around, but such things didn't matter under her jacket. She promised Gwen to ask about some milk for her and left the room. She was thankful to see a scattering of emergency lights in the hallway and along the sweeping stairs. Gwen's ghosts didn't worry Morgan—she was much more concerned about breaking her neck.

The lobby that had seemed so quaint and charming a few hours ago looked different in the dark. With its antique furniture and heavy woodwork, it resembled a scene from an old movie. A horror movie, maybe something with Boris Karloff or Bela Lugosi. All it needed were cobwebs. Morgan's ringing of the countertop bell brought no response, but she wasn't surprised, considering it was the middle of the night. She hadn't been overly optimistic about finding a flashlight—what Gwen called a torch. On impulse, she borrowed an umbrella that someone had left by the door and headed outside.

The storm had moved fast. Lightning now flickered in the hills, and thunder growled faintly after it. The rain hadn't diminished, however. Morgan gripped the umbrella with both hands and turned it against the wind, hoping it wouldn't blow inside out. She'd have a hard time explaining to its owner what she'd been doing. She wasn't sure she

could explain it to herself. She just had this burning need to make sure the dog was all right.

Rain blew under the umbrella and soaked her until she finally gave up on it altogether and folded it under her arm. She walked around the building slowly, using a hand to feel her way along the walls. The entire town was dark, its quaint streetlights useless. There were candles lit in the windows of the pub across the road, but there were no other signs of life as she rounded the corner to the back. Suddenly she caught sight of the dog. He was right where she had seen him from the window, still sitting in the mostly empty parking lot. And still staring at her.

Morgan hurried under the back-door awning. It didn't offer a lot of protection from the sideways rain, but it was something. "Come here, boy. C'mon, it's too miserable to be out here. Come inside with me like a good boy, c'mon." She crouched and waggled her fingers, then drew the tinfoil packet from her pocket and unwrapped the roast bone she'd saved. "Look what I brought for you." She waved it, hoping the animal would catch the scent. While she might have imagined the dog's surprise, there was no denying the dog wasn't moving. As still as a concrete statue, he stared at her as always.

"All right, then, bud, I'll come to you." She was already soaked to the skin, so a little more rain couldn't hurt. Experience told her that making eye contact with a strange dog communicated challenge or threat, and so she kept her eyes averted. She stopped five or six yards away and gently tossed the bone at his feet. Then she turned sideways and just stood there, waiting. Ordinarily that was a clear canine invitation to investigate. But the dog didn't come over to sniff her as she had hoped. Nor did she hear any sounds to indicate that he was checking out the bone. She turned her head and was amazed to find the animal was gone! The roast bone lay untouched on the wet pavement.

"Damn it," she muttered in frustration. Leaving the bone, she hurried back to the hotel and fumbled in her soggy pocket with cold, numb fingers for a key card. Which was worse, Morgan wondered, that she was being followed by a disappearing dog or that she'd been dumb enough to go out in such weather to try to help it?

I could have been struck by lightning, for heaven's sake.

And just what would she have done with the dog if she'd managed to coax him inside? The canine outweighed most humans. It would be like wedging a wet pony into her cozy hotel room. At least she had an understanding roommate. Gwen would no doubt have welcomed a chance to test the dog's energy or some such thing.

Morgan replaced the umbrella in the lobby, then decided to leave her soggy shoes by the radiator there. She peeled off her socks and hung them on the radiator as well—they wouldn't catch fire, would they?—then made her way down the hall barefoot, guided by the strange yellowish glow of the emergency lights. The hotel had a quaint cooler that offered slices of pie and cake, squares of cheese, and biscuits. Luckily, there was a pint of milk left, and she dropped the last of her pocket change into the cigar box next to the cooler. At least her roommate would have her sleep aid. Morgan wondered idly if any of the foods could help her resume dreaming.

Cake before bed will give you nightmares

, Nainie Jones used to say. Wasn't there anything that would give you incredibly sexy fantasies? Morgan would like nothing better than to continue the amazing dream she'd been having. Well, one thing could be better—if she really

did

have a lover she felt so deeply connected with.

At this point, no lover had appeared in her life at all. She had had plenty of dates and boyfriends, but no relationships that were truly serious, nothing that coaxed the embers of her heart into flame—or whatever was supposed to happen.

It's probably my own fault.

Morgan had never really looked for love, always supposing that she'd find someone

later

. Later, after graduation, after college, after she got through her practicum, after she set up her clinic, after she had more time... To be honest, she'd nursed a small hope that she'd meet someone special while she was on vacation. And wasn't that just narrowing things down for the universe?

Don't bother me with love until three weeks in such and such a year when I'm finally on holiday.

She laughed at herself even as she carefully watched her feet on the stairs—and she didn't see the monstrous dog sitting above her on the landing until she was nearly eye level with it! She yelped and gripped the railing, nearly losing both the milk and her footing. But in the seconds it took her to recover and look again, the creature had vanished.

“Okay, now this is just crazy.” Morgan looked down the hall. There was no place for such a big animal to hide. The emergency lights were sparse and faint, but she wouldn't miss seeing a black dog against a yellow wall. “I'm obviously overtired,” she muttered. She'd been thinking way too much about the dog lately—small wonder that she thought she saw him for an instant. The fact that she hadn't been thinking about the dog

at all

in the moments before she saw him notwithstanding. It was just a strange night, and she needed to go back to bed.

Gwen was delighted with the milk. Morgan was just grateful that her bare feet and wet clothes wouldn't be noticed in the dark. She toweled off her hair in the bathroom and hoped her clothes would be dry by morning. Her flannel sleep shirt felt like bliss. The bed did too; although, it had been a whole lot warmer in her dream.

She fell asleep thinking about the sexy stranger, but she dreamed of the dog instead. She was back in America, back in the Spokane Valley. Going about her daily tasks. Working at the clinic, shopping, banking, picking up the mail. And everywhere she went, the enormous black creature was at her side. His broad back was level with her waist, and she could rest her hand there as she walked. She could feel the warmth from the dog, the texture of his fur. More than that, she felt as if he belonged there, had always been there.

When morning came, she was surprised to find that she missed him.

Kindness was in the woman's voice; concern warmed her pale-blue eyes. For
him

. Most people in his country either pretended not to see him or made a hasty departure. They knew what he was about, what his dark purpose was, and they feared him.

Not Morgan Edwards. She didn't seem to be aware of the significance of his presence or perhaps didn't care. Instead, she had noticed him, watched him, even worried about him. She'd ventured out in a storm to make sure he was all right, not knowing he was unaffected by the rain. Offered him food, not knowing he didn't eat. And finally, she had invited him inside.

Inside.

He'd long forgotten what that was like. To be warm and comfortable, if he was able to feel such things, but also to be welcome. Wanted. Curiosity, in itself a novelty, compelled him to accept the woman's invitation, if only for a moment. He'd watched her with interest, admired the fearless efficiency in the way she moved. She'd been startled when she came face-to-face with him—but she hadn't screamed. He'd been startled too. Morgan Edwards was pretty by human standards and almost as finely featured as the fae themselves. Yet, while their hair was fine and icy white, hers was thick and glossy, its waves the color of a newly hulled chestnut. He didn't breathe, yet her scent had filled his nostrils, crept into his lungs to nestle by his unbeating heart and warm it. It shouldn't be possible.

He'd vanished then, returned to the elements outside, to the cold and familiar darkness. Yet a faint spark had been fanned to life inside him, some emotion he could not name. Emotion was a stranger, must be a stranger, and yet he felt something. Because of Morgan Edwards.

But the woman was marked, and he must not interfere. He was forbidden to interfere.

Destiny ruled over life and death

, the Tylwyth Teg had said, before charging him with his terrible task.

What destiny has decreed, you will herald. It cannot be altered or defied.

Yet, for the first time in centuries, he considered that perhaps the Fair Ones were wrong.

THREE

Spokane Valley, Washington, USA

B

arely home a week, Morgan found herself on the run from morning to night, and this day was no exception. She'd had four surgeries that morning and several appointments and walk-ins in the afternoon. Most were for dogs and cats, but a snake, a chinchilla, and a tree frog came through the door as well. She'd spent an hour after the clinic closed

poring through books and searching the Internet for the nutritional needs of pink-toed tarantulas, thanks to a frantic phone call from twelve-year-old Ryan White about his beloved Ozzie. The pictures creeped her out, but in the end Morgan was able to call Ryan back with some suggestions for Ozzie's diet.

Exhaustion dragged at her as she switched off the lights. The three animal health techs—Cindy, Melinda, and Russell—were working out wonderfully. As assistants, they had made a huge difference in the last few months, but the clinic was busier than ever. Maybe it was time to bring on a fourth vet. Jay was on call tonight, and Grady was already heading out to a local riding stable for a foaling. Morgan was just grateful it wasn't her turn as she locked the doors behind her. The clinic was located in an industrial park on the edge of town, and most people had gone home by now. It was blissfully quiet. She paused outside her car door to breathe in the cooling air, rich with the scents of late summer fields—