

Swindlers

By K. M Shea

“Morgan! You look fantastic, chicka! Married life certainly suits you.”

I choked when Esmeralda squeezed me in a hug so tight my breathing was restricted. “Good to see you, too, Esmeralda,” I said, patting her on the back. Although I hadn’t seen her since my wedding—and only briefly then—she hadn’t aged a day. It was a “perk” of being a vampire.

“Do you have your bags?” I asked.

“Yep, I only brought this,” Esmeralda said, kicking a black, rolling suitcase.

“Awesome. Let’s go. I parked in the hourly parking garage across the street, and they really take you to town with parking fees,” I said, leading the way out of the airport.

“Thanks for coming to pick me up,” Esmeralda grunted as she dragged her suitcase behind her. “With the vampire conference starting today, just about all safe transportation services are booked up.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“No, seriously. I feel kinda bad, asking an MBRC Department Head to pick *me* up.”

“We’re friends, Esmeralda. I don’t mind. Besides, it’s in my best interest that the conference runs smoothly, and I want you there to keep Madeline on a tight leash,” I confided.

“Gotcha,” Esmeralda laughed. “Congrats, by the way. The Public Relations department is way lucky to have you. Didn’t Aysel get promoted at the same time, too? What’s his title now?”

“He’s working his way up the Administration Department.”

“I bet he’s aiming for Administrator. Everyone knows Administrator Moonspell is totally trying to bag a seat with the Fairy Council,” Esmeralda said.

“Yeah,” I acknowledged as we entered the parking garage, the click of my high heels echoing loudly in the barren structure. “But Administrator Moonspell won’t snag a seat for at least another year or two, thankfully,” I said, leading the way to my car.

“Nice ride,” Esmeralda whistled as I popped the trunk and helped her heave her suitcase inside.

“Thanks,” I grunted.

On an extreme whim, I had bought a Lexus sedan—which the MBRC had considerably subsidized for me as I was one of a few department heads/persons of influence who could drive. This meant I frequently had to chauffeur high-profile guests around.

“Okay, we haven’t had time for girl talk in *ages*, so you have to spill,” Esmeralda said as we climbed into my car.

I paused to wave at Harrison as he glided out of our shadow and slipped into his car. The stone-faced goblin was parked directly behind me, probably pouting because I wouldn’t let him drive Esmeralda and me.

“Spill about what?” I asked, twisting in my seat and looking suspiciously around the parking garage for crazies who might hit my precious car as I backed up.

“How Devin got you to marry him,” Esmeralda said. “I mean, Madeline totally called that you two were going to get married when you were still in high school, but neither of us thought he would actually wear you down until you were like...thirty. I thought you wouldn’t be engaged at least until *after* you were out of college.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s what I was planning,” I acknowledged as I backed up. “But Devin swindled me into it.”

“He *what?*”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got the rest of the drive.”



I was in my first semester of my senior year at college when Devin made his move. I was already twenty-three—I took a year off to work with the MBRC and the Fairy Council before entering college. I was eager to snap through the university system, so I had stupidly filled my schedule, cramming the usual four-year program into three. (It helped that the summer I spent with the Fairy Council counted as an internship and gained me a hefty number of college credits.)

As a result of this ambition, my semesters were quite full, and finals were always an...*interesting* experience.

“Morgan, are you really certain you need *all* these books?” Devin asked, swiveling a stack of textbooks so he could study the titles.

“Yes. Thanks, Krusher,” I said, taking an armload of books from Harrison and dropping them on my desk. We were in my office at the MBRC—with the door locked to avoid any interruptions during my study session. “Is this everything? I think this is everything. No, I forgot my drinks!”

“The cases of Red Bull in your trunk, right?” Devin asked, slipping his hand into my jean pocket to snag my keys. “I’ll bring them here.”

“Could you bring my coffee thermos, too?” I asked.

“Red Bull doesn’t contain enough caffeine for you?”

“Never!” I said.

“Even though it’s probably the cause of your eyebrow twitch?” Devin asked.

I self-consciously slapped a hand over my left eyebrow—which had started jumping up and down the week before when I began gearing up for finals.

Devin chuckled. “You don’t have to hide it. *I* think it’s adorable,” he said. He tried kissing me on the lips, but I moved at the last moment, so he got my cheek.

“One day, Morgan, I will get you,” Devin promised.

“Mmm, I need my Red Bull.”

Devin rolled his eyes as he slipped on a black coat. “Sometimes I think you confuse the title of boyfriend with butler.”

“Thanks, Devin,” I said as the Pooka walked to the door.

Devin winked. “I will miss you as I miss air when I hold my breath,” he said before ducking out of the room to avoid the pencil bag I chucked at his head.

“Krusher, I think I have questionable taste in boyfriends,” I said.

“Yes, Miss Fae,” Harrison said, drawing a grin from me.

Devin and I had what could very loosely be considered a relationship. Between my crazy school schedule and his position as a Councilmember with the Fairy Council, both of us were incredibly busy and saw each other infrequently.

I trusted Devin not to wander—since we started “dating” when I was still a senior in high school, he had cut off all dalliances and appeared to be fine—if not thriving—in his new

monogamous status. However, I never considered the two of us “serious,” as we hardly saw each other.

My finals were the first time I was seeing Devin since the semester started—although we conversed through Magic Mirrors once or twice a week. We were just...low-key. I didn’t mind the lack of pressure; I enjoyed it, even.

That was how Devin was so easily able to swindle me.

But I’m getting off track here.

While Devin retrieved my energy drinks, I set up my work station. I piled my textbooks in the order I would need them, dug up my notes, and had just started going through them when my door flew open.

I looked up to see who had managed to open my *locked* door, and my lip curled up in disgust. “What do *you* want?” I snarled.

“It is beyond me how the bulk of the MBRC board finds you ‘charming,’” Aysel said, looking at me like I was a bug he found in his food.

“I’m busy. I don’t have time to play with you today,” I said.

Aysel looked repulsed. “I did not come here to *play*; I came to make an offer.”

“A what?”

Aysel took a stack of study guides off a chair positioned in front of my desk and placed them on the floor. “You will graduate next semester, so it is time you thought about procuring a job.”

“The MBRC has already offered me a fulltime job in the teaching department,” I said.

“So I heard. I want you to reject it.”

“And *why* should I play to *your* whims?”

“Because I have a better offer to make.”

I guiltily glanced at my textbooks before I leaned back in my chair. “I’m listening.”

“The MBRC hasn’t expanded since it was initially built, even though every year we receive more requests to hold conferences, to expand our available curriculum, and requests from magical beings looking to enter our rehabilitation program.”

“So?”

“I believe it is time for the MBRC to facilitate new programs and enter into new revenue streams. It is Chicago—not New York or LA—that is becoming the magical center of America. If the MBRC is to remain the number one rehabilitation center in the world, we must change to match the growing interest of the magical community. There have been some *changes* in the most recent years, most of them sparked by you. In that light, I would like to ask you to enter a business partnership with me.”

I almost fell out of my chair in surprise. *Aysel*—the resident know-it-all—was asking me to *partner* with him? “What?” I said when I finally got my mouth working.

Aysel scowled. “Although I clearly have superior Administration capabilities, I would be remiss if I did not admit your abilities to spark change and move people are perhaps...greater than my own.”

I stared at Aysel, my brain silent with shock. “My head is filled with studying schedules right now, Aysel, so I need you to be upfront. What is your end-goal?”

“I wish for us to be Co-Administrators of the MBRC.”

“Co-Administrators?” I echoed, shocked to the core. Everyone knew Aysel was ruthlessly pushing his way up to the top of the MBRC. But it was **not** his personality type to drag a person with him.

Aysel's face warred between a scowl and a glare before he sighed. "You are skilled, Morgan. You understand people—humans *and* magical beings—in ways I don't. I need that to make the MBRC better."

"You don't share power, Aysel. You don't share *anything*. What could you possibly get out of our partnership that would inspire you to suggest it?" I said.

Aysel straightened his robes. "After a considerable amount of pondering, I decided I would rather share power and run the finest Rehabilitation Center in the world than to solely rule one that is merely great."

"If you want me to be your partner, why should I reject the position in the teaching department?"

"Because there will be a position in the Public Relations Department that will soon open up, and that one will more swiftly pose you for a climb to be a department head," Aysel said.

"You have this all planned out, don't you?"

Aysel sniffed. "Of course."

I groaned and massaged my forehead. "Let me get through finals first. After that, we can talk."

"You are interested?" Aysel asked.

I gave the high elf a half smile. "Yeah, I am. Now beat it; I *have* to study."

"You are quite unlikeable."

"And you are soooo charming. Scram," I said, making a shooing motion at the high elf.

"Think on it," Aysel said before he slipped out of my office.

"That was weird," I said.

"Yes, Miss Fae," Harrison said.

"And totally *bizarre*."

"Yes, Miss Fae."

"That was real, right? It wasn't a hallucination from all the Red Bull I've been drinking?"

"It was real, Miss Fae."

"Weird," I repeated before returning my attention to my books.



"Ready for a break?" Devin asked, easing his weight on the edge of my desk before he temptingly offered me slices of banana and apple.

"Yes," I groaned, pushing aside my textbook for my entrepreneurship class.

"How is the studying?" Devin asked. After dropping off two cases of Red Bull and attempting to steal a kiss, he had left to attend a meeting with the MBRC board. I hadn't even heard him enter my office.

"Good," I said, eating an apple slice and sipping on my Red Bull. "Had the weirdest thing happen, though."

"Oh?" Devin asked, moving to stand behind me so he could massage my tight shoulders.

"Yeah—That feels wonderful, thanks. Aysel asked me to partner up with him... I *think* so we can take over the MBRC and rule the rehabilitation world."

Devin abruptly stopped massaging my shoulders. "He what?"

"Yeah, that was my reaction, too," I said, pushing a banana chunk around the plate before nibbling it and wishing Devin would start massaging me again.

"How late do you plan to study tonight?" Devin asked.

"Pretty late. Why? What's up?"

“Nothing. I just realized I forgot something in my room. What did you tell Aysel?”

“That we could talk about it after finals,” I said.

“Wise idea,” Devin said.

“What do you think about it?”

“About his offer? There are worse things than to be offered a free ride on his coattails. He’ll get you up in administration much faster than you could hope for. He’s been working at it much longer. Of course, you would be partnering with *Aysel*. That alone could be considered a downside,” Devin said as he started rubbing my shoulders again.

I laughed.

“So, you really are committed to the MBRC, then?” Devin asked.

“Yeah. Why, you were cheering for me to switch to the Fairy Council?”

“A man can hope,” Devin chuckled, his voice rich and throaty.

“Thanks for the food...and the massage,” I said, eating another apple slice.

“Time to get back to studying?”

“Yeah,” I sighed.

Devin bent to kiss me on the top of my head. “Good luck. I’ll leave you to it for a bit. I need to go pick up something,” he said, pausing to open another Red Bull for me.

“Thanks,” I said, stretching my arms above my head before I attacked my notes with renewed vigor. “Let’s do this!”



“Morgan, are you sure this is healthy?” Madeline asked me with a frown as I chugged another Red Bull late that night.

“Of course I’m sure I can’t shut my eyes this is so awesome,” I laughed.

“You sound like Toby,” Madeline said, referring to a caffeine-addicted hobgoblin I’ve worked with before.

“My heart is beating sooooo fast,” I said, a Red Bull in one hand, my coffee thermos in the other.

“And cramming like this will actually help you perform well on your tests?” Madeline asked, her voice seeped in doubt.

“Studying!” I cheered.

“You aren’t even making sense anymore.”

“Did you know that moms represent the biggest market share most marketing teams for mainstream products worry about?” I asked.

“That’s it. I’m calling Westfall,” Madeline said, rising out of her chair.

“Tell him I say hi,” I said, highlighting a portion of my notes.

“Morgan, this isn’t okay.”

“It’s called a caffeine rush. College students live off ‘em,” I said, my hand holding the highlighter was shaking so bad I highlighted the wrong thing.

“That doesn’t make it *right*.”

“I’m back. Thanks for watching her, Madeline,” Devin said, appearing behind my vampire friend.

“You need to stop her from doing this,” Madeline insisted.

“After tonight, she will never binge on caffeine again,” Devin said. “I promise.”

Madeline gave him a look that said she didn't believe him before she hugged me. "See you later, Morgan," she said before skipping out of the room. I vaguely noticed that Harrison followed her out and stood guard outside.

"Studying!" I cheered again.

Devin grinned as he pulled a chair up to mine. "Think it's time to call it quits? You need to sleep."

"No way it's an all-nighter tonight I can feel my heart beat in my wrists," I said, turning a page in my notebook.

Devin opened a small, white box and removed a sparkling ring. One of the bands—there were two of them—was made of platinum; the other was studded with small diamonds. There were three bigger diamonds in the center: two smaller ones that were a pale yellow like the moon and placed on either side of the large one that glowed like it was on fire.

"Pretty," I said, sipping my Red Bull.

"Will you marry me?" Devin asked with a smile that I noticed was oddly crafty.

"Totally! Will you get me more coffee?" I asked.

"Sorry, but no. I think you've had enough," Devin said, slipping the ring on my ring finger.

"But I have to study," I complained.

Devin ran a hand through my hair. "I'm sure you'll do fine. What are you studying?"

"Marketing!"



The following morning, I woke up at my desk with a dry mouth and the awful taste of stale Red Bull, a throbbing headache, and a stiff neck.

"I'm getting too old to pull all-nighters," I said, clutching my temple before rubbing the back of my neck. I paused when I felt my hair snag on something. I held both of my hands in front of me, fingers spread wide, and froze when I noticed the gorgeous engagement ring on my finger. The night's events came back to me in hazy details.

I tried pulling the ring off. It wouldn't budge—it wouldn't even twist.

"DEVIN!" I screamed, shooting out of my desk. "I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!"



"So he got you to agree by waiting until you were too hyped up on caffeine to keep your head straight?" Esmeralda asked.

"Yeah," I said, changing lanes. "He purposely made himself scarce the whole next morning."

"I imagine so. You would have killed him if you found him."

"Probably," I agreed.

"So what happened after?"

"What do you mean?"

"Obviously, he must have officially proposed, or you would have kicked his butt to the curb. Or did he say 'no take backs' or something?"

I laughed. "He convinced me quite well when I found him later that afternoon."

"How?"



“DEVIN!” I growled as I kicked open the door to Devin’s suite in the MBRC that afternoon.

The Pooka was there, dressed in a black dress shirt and nice jeans, holding a rose. Behind him was a table piled with gifts, but I didn’t see that. I was still so enraged, I was practically seeing red.

“What is THIS?!” I demanded, pointing to the ring on my finger.

“Your engagement ring,” Devin said with a charming smile.

“Harrison, if I kill him, do you think you could make it look like an accident?” I asked my bodyguard as I rubbed my hands together.

“Yes, Miss Fae.”

“Hold up; just wait a moment. You can’t be that mad—you’re still wearing the ring.”

“I’m still wearing it because it is **MAGIKED ONTO MY FINGER**,” I roared.

“Harrison, could you give us a minute?” Devin asked.

“Are you sure that is wise, sir?”

“I think I can handle her.”

“I’m going to rip your pretty-boy hair out!” I said, stalking across the room.

“If you say so, sir,” Harrison said before stepping out, closing the door behind him.

Devin caught my hands when I launched myself at him. “Morgan, you are right. The ring is charmed.”

“I knew it!” I said, starting to get a hold of myself. “You better—,”

“It’s charmed so that as long as you love me, it won’t come off,” Devin said, interrupting me.

I blinked. “It what?”

“It’s what the magical community calls an Evermore. It will stay with you as long as your love for me lasts,” Devin said, bringing my hand with the ring up to his lips so he could kiss my fingers.

I frowned at the beautiful ring. “You didn’t have to trick me into marrying you. I was planning to, eventually.”

Devin chuckled and scooped me closer. “I know, but I wanted to stake an obvious claim before anyone got any...ideas.”

“I thought you promised your proposal would be romantic. This was not romantic,” I complained.

“I said nothing about my proposal; I only said I would shower you with love for the rest of your life. It’s important to make promises I know I can keep,” Devin teased me. “And the first part of my proposal wasn’t romantic, but we haven’t reached the second part yet.”

“Second part?” I asked, perking with interest.

Devin pulled me forward by my hand, leading me to the table of gifts.

“This one first,” Devin said, passing me a knobby bundle wrapped in white and gold paper. I cautiously opened it, my forehead wrinkling. “A...horse brush?” I asked, picking up the brush to study it.

I jumped when Devin’s room faded like smoke, and I suddenly found myself standing in the middle of a stable.

Devin laughed and slid his arms around me, moving me to face a stall.

To my shock and surprise, I saw *myself* walk down the stable aisle. “Good afternoon, Westfall,” my twin said as Westfall—a bay-colored unicorn—retreated to a hay pile. My twin

turned on her heels and looked back and forth between a white horse and a black horse. “And which one of you is the kelpie I’m supposed to brush?” my twin asked.

The white horse sniffed contemptuously, but the black horse released a friendly nicker.

Devin tilted his head against mine as he watched the image play out. “When I first saw you, I was captivated instantly—intrigued by your willingness to interact with the magical community. I actually heard about you and purposely planted myself there,” Devin said, kissing my cheek. “Poor Westfall tried to tell you what I was. I don’t think I ever apologized,” he admitted.

My twin complained about Frey as the black horse—Devin—brushed her cheek with a velvet muzzle. Once or twice, Westfall tried to speak to me, but whenever I turned to face him, horse-Devin would leer murderously over my shoulder.

After a few minutes, the scene faded away, returning Devin and me to his room.

“Is there one I need to open next?” I asked, my eyes sifting over the huge pile of presents.

“Nope, I just wanted to start with that one,” Devin said.

I selected a package wrapped in lilac purple paper. When I ripped it open, a Monarch butterfly made of sparkling, paper-thin metal fell into my hand, and I found myself standing in a field in early spring.

I recognized where we were this time—it was my first date with Devin since we had become “official.” He had taken me to some private land a buddy of his had in southern Illinois, and we had a picnic lunch. He had transformed into a horse to give me rides, spoiled me with all my favorite foods, and waited on me hand and foot, but the butterfly had plopped us down at my favorite moment of the day.

“Ready for something spectacular?” Memory-Devin asked.

“As your first penance for flirting? This better be good,” Memory-me laughed, splayed out on the ground, my head resting on Devin’s calf.

“It will steal your breath away,” Devin promised me. He checked his watch and glanced up at the sky before dropping a seed on the grassy knoll we were sitting on. When the seed touched the ground, it unfolded into a monarch butterfly, which took flight—but it wasn’t just one. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of butterflies launched into the air, their brilliant wings adding so much color that Memory-Me—that *right now* me—started to choke up at the sight.

“This was when I realized that waiting several more years for you was going to be a trial,” Devin said, tangling his hands in mine. “The butterfly glamour was pretty hard to get crafted, but it was worth it. You are *stunning* when you laugh.”

After a few moments, the scene faded, and we were back in Devin’s room.

Many of the gifts were small items with memories attached. In each moment, Devin had a side comment to add—something he loved about me, or an explanation about what he felt at that moment.

We visited our first kiss, the time when Devin moved the entire MBRC to get my memories back for me shortly after I first met him, our two-year anniversary, and more.

Some of the gifts were actual gifts with nothing attached—there was a platinum necklace with a horse pendant, three dozen yellow and white roses, and—what touched me the most—a collection of framed photos. Some were of me at work; there were a few family photos; and a bunch were of me and my friends—magical and normal alike. Most of the photos had Devin in them, with me. The frames were a glossy black, but when I touched them, they made the noises and sounds associated with the picture.

“Devin, this is *amazing*,” I said, rubbing a picture of Fran and me posing at Disney World during spring break the previous year.

“I hoped it would make you rethink your reaction,” Devin said.

When I turned to face him, the Pooka was down on a knee, holding an open white box that contained two gold bands with a few swirls etched into the surfaces.

“Devin?” I said uncertainly.

“I lied about the engagement ring. There is a charm to take it off—although it’s a bugger to complete. But these are true Evermores.”

“What are they?”

“Wedding bands, one for you and one for me. My band is charmed so it will stay on my finger as long as you love me.”

“And my band?”

Devin smiled. “Your band is charmed so it will stay on forever.”

“Why forever? That seems impractical.”

“Because that’s how long I will love you,” Devin said.

I had to bite my lip to keep from crying.

“Marry me, Morgan. I am not a great man, but I will do everything in my power to make you happy, and to show you every day just how much I love and treasure you.”

I was so touched, I could only nod, my eyes misty with tears of joy. Devin snapped the box shut before he stood and planted a passionate kiss on my lips.

I clung to him and buried my head in his chest when he pulled away. “But you’re right about one thing,” I said.

“What’s that?” Devin asked, his hands sliding around me.

“I will **never** binge on caffeine again. Who knows what you would do next time?”



“That is so cute!” Esmeralda cooed. “I didn’t think the Pooka had it in him to be so attentive, but you have that boy trained!”

“I can’t take credit,” I dryly said as I pulled into the underground MBRC parking lot. “If we had followed *my* life plan, we wouldn’t be married for another year or two.”

“I’m glad you two got married sooner. You’re both very happy.”

“We are,” I agreed, parking and turning off my car.

“Are you ready for the next adventure?”

“Adventure?” I asked, getting out of my car as Harrison pulled in behind us.

“Having a brat. You gotta give birth to the next Pooka, you know,” Esmeralda said, dragging her suitcase out of the trunk.

I wrinkled my nose at the beautiful vampire. “I think I’ll wait a little longer for that one, thanks.”

“Right. We’ll see how that goes,” Esmeralda said, rolling her eyes. “Thanks for the ride!”

“Of course. If we go in through the entrance, there should be a siren waiting to show you where to store your luggage for the rest of the day,” I said.

“Thanks, Morgan. Take care. I’ll see you for dinner tonight,” Esmeralda said, hurrying to the parking garage door.

“Yes, see you then,” I said before I turned to talk to Harrison about my plans for the day. I didn’t get a chance to speak to my tall bodyguard, though, because my Magic Mirror rang.

“Hey, Devin. What’s up?” I asked, looking at the small, phone-shaped mirror.

“Nothing, just missing you terribly,” Devin said. The mirror showed him propping his chin up on his hand. “The Councilmen are having a hard time adjusting to our new council location.”

“I thought the Fairy Council found a beautiful place. South Korea is amazing,” I said.

“Come visit me, then?”

“No way. You’ll be back home in a week; we can suffer until then,” I laughed.

Devin fondly smiled.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just love you,” Devin said.

“I know,” I said, holding up my hand so Devin could see my wedding band. “Me, too.”

“Thankfully,” the Pooka wryly said, studying his wedding band.

“Come home soon, okay?” I asked.

“What happened to ‘we can suffer through’?”

“Devin,” I said, wrinkling my nose at him.

Devin laughed. “As soon as I can escape, I’m all yours.”

“Yes, you are.”

The End