

Chapter One

Suburban Detroit was a truly odd place.

Ric Thornhill's vintage Jaguar convertible roared down Woodward Avenue, a wide car-clogged boulevard lined with all manner of businesses from elegant boutiques to seedy liquor stores. To his right loomed an enormous stone church that could have been in medieval Europe. On the left was a strip mall with a Chinese restaurant, a nail salon and a paycheck advance center.

Find Emery of Rose's long-lost daughter before the next Seelie Council meeting, or live out a miserable human lifespan as a powerless mortal. That was the *geas* that his boss, the elven queen, had cast on Ric. In other words, find the girl or die. His death sentence would simply take forty or fifty years to be carried out. The *geas* was a result of telling Her Majesty off the last time she'd sent him on a fool's errand. One would think he'd have learned by now to keep his mouth shut. The sad part was that on this job, he'd have done his best anyway. The fate of both realms could hang in the balance if he didn't.

In over eight centuries of existence, he'd been in plenty of sticky situations, but none as bad as this. He'd started the search in New York, where Emery had died. No luck there. He'd also tried Windsor, Ontario, the hometown of Emery's human wife. Nothing. Two other agents of the queen had mysteriously disappeared or been killed and now Ric was the only one left. And he was here in Detroit on nothing more than a hunch held by one of Emery's cousins. Aidan Greene believed his missing relative was somewhere nearby. Now Ric only had five days remaining and he'd gotten nowhere but here, which wasn't good.

The place was dismal and depressing—hot, gray and muggy on this August afternoon and the five-o'clock Friday traffic royally sucked. Ric had spent the last week checking out every new-age shop, so-called psychic and alternative club in the area—every place he could think of that a half-Fae would be drawn to. If his mediocre scrying skills hadn't led him to the right place this time, he was probably toast. He was supposed to be at a certain corner in Royal Oak at a certain time. Yeah, he had lots of info to go on.

He accelerated through a yellow light, cranked up the volume on his stereo and settled his black Ray-Ban sunglasses on his nose despite the overcast day. What the hell, might as well go down in style.

Meagan had been walking around all day waiting for something weird to happen.

She finished teaching her once-weekly class at the Royal Oak art co-op, washed her hands and gathered up her keys. She was one of the lucky ones. Her paintings were finally selling well enough to support her. She only kept up her weekly class at the co-op as a way of giving back to the place that had kept her from having to wait tables during her own lean years. Well, that and to make sure she actually got out of her house and spoke to another human being at least once a week.

Normally she loved it, but today she was wiped. After last night's dream, she'd spent the whole day waiting for the other shoe to drop—or a piano, with her luck. Having dreams that acted as early-warning signals sucked sometimes, especially when all you knew was that *something* was about to happen.

Lost in her thoughts, Meagan wandered out the door of the art co-op on autopilot, barely remembering to wave to the art student at the front desk.

Since she wasn't watching where she was going, of course she plowed straight into

someone. The chest her face smashed into was as solid as a concrete wall.

“Ow!” Her eyes watered at the sharp pain in her nose and her feet got tangled up in her flip-flops. A pair of long, strong arms wrapped around her waist to steady her as she wobbled.

Stinging pain and watered-up eyes fought for sensory dominance with a bizarre electrical tingle. As the swirling in her head started to clear, she felt a weird ripple of something that felt a lot like lust. The silk-covered chest might be as broad and solid as the side of a building, but it sure smelled a lot better. She let herself enjoy one moment of inhaling the warm masculine scent before she gripped lean muscled arms and found her footing.

“Excuse me.” Damn, even the voice was sexy, a rich baritone with a slight British accent that curled her toes.

She reluctantly pulled her face out of his chest and lifted her chin. His face was a long way up and it was every bit as compelling as the rest of him, slim and sculpted, with golden-brown eyes over high, sharp cheekbones and a pointed chin, all framed by shoulder-length dark blond hair. If the planes and angles weren't so masculine, he'd be almost too pretty. Just her luck to make an idiot out of herself in front of the hottest guy she'd seen in years.

“Are you all right?”

Meagan gulped. “Uh, yeah.” *Smooth.* “I'm fine. Sorry.”

“No problem.” The man cracked a rueful grin. His slightly tilted, oddly intense, amber eyes crinkled at the corners and Meagan felt her insides melt. “I never mind having beautiful women run into me. You're sure your nose isn't damaged?”

She let go of his arm and rubbed her abused appendage. No blood, no swelling—everything seemed to be intact. “No, just my pride.” She stepped back and he instantly disengaged his hands, causing the lovely tingle to go away. “I'm really sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going.”

He hesitated, before giving a tiny shake of his head, his straight golden-blond hair sliding about his shoulders. “Good afternoon.”

He turned back to stare at the painting in the co-op window. One of hers, Meagan noticed with pride. She almost told him, but common sense intervened and she turned away. Wishful thinking, she told herself, but she could almost swear that those intense golden eyes followed her as she walked to her car.

“Down, boy,” Ric murmured to the part of his anatomy standing at attention as he watched the woman walk to her bright yellow Mustang convertible. With her thick tumble of curly auburn hair and a petite form that didn't even reach his shoulders, she wasn't his usual type, especially as she was dressed in orange leggings and a turquoise tank top, with mismatched earrings. She was cute as hell, though and the mystical zing he'd gotten when his hands contacted her skin was like nothing he'd felt in years, maybe centuries. Judging by her nervous reaction, she'd noticed it too.

But he was on a mission, one he couldn't afford to ignore to chase a pretty girl. His scrying had told him to be on this corner, this afternoon. He needed to find out why.

He glanced back into the window of the art co-op. The painting in the window was a landscape, with a hazy, fantastical quality to it that reminded him of home. Could the artist be *Tuatha de Dannan*? Ric's host, the guardian of the local portal-house, hadn't mentioned any Fae artists in the Detroit area. A psychic human, perhaps? Or could it possibly be the half-elven heiress he sought?

He searched for a signature but there were only initials. *M* and *K*, superimposed on a

coral-pink flower. The stylized version of a half-opened rose was all too familiar.

The emblem of the house of Rose.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He pulled open the door and strode into the cop.

The receptionist was young, probably an artist herself from the look of her purple hair and multiple piercings.

“I’d like some information on one of the paintings in your window.”

The young woman looked him over appraisingly, running her eyes over his silk shirt, pleated twill trousers and Italian leather boots and smiled warmly. “Which one?”

“The forest scene,” Ric replied with a smile that usually got him what he wanted from women, even without putting any glamour behind it. “Is it for sale?”

“Sure.” There was cunning in the narrowed eyes and wide smile. “But it isn’t cheap.”

“I wouldn’t expect it to be.” And he didn’t care. “I’m surprised to see something of that quality at an art school instead of a gallery. Is the artist a student here?”

“Oh, no.” The purple hair flew as she shook her head. “Ms. Kelly is one of our instructors. In fact, you just missed her. Most of her stuff is at a classy Birmingham gallery, but each teacher contributes one work a year for our annual fundraiser.”

“Ms. Kelly, you say?” Ric pulled out his wallet, his mind racing, his mouth dry. He’d missed her? Could it be the woman who’d knocked into him? Was that what the strange tingle had meant? Damn, he’d missed her because he’d assumed it was merely attraction.

“Yep, that’s our Meagan.” After eyeballing the platinum credit card he handed her, the young woman unfolded herself from her tall metal stool and drifted over to the window where she extracted the landscape. “This sure didn’t last long. I only set up the display this afternoon.” She held the back of the painting toward him, her black-tipped finger tapping the tag with the four-digit price.

When Ric nodded, she rang up the charge and carefully wrapped the canvas in brown paper before handing it over. “Enjoy.”

He smiled back. “I’m sure I will. By the way, you said I could find more of her work at a gallery. Mind telling me which one?”

“No problem.” She handed him a card from beneath the counter, with the address of a gallery in a pricier, snootier suburb.

Ric stuck it in his pocket and held out his hand. “Thanks for all your help.” He shook the beringed hand she placed in his and dropped a light kiss onto the back of her left wrist.

As he left the gallery, Ric felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He had the oddest sensation he was being watched. He scanned both sides of the busy street and at first, saw nothing that accounted for the impression. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a short, slight figure walking away, a bit too quickly. He dropped the painting in the back seat of the Jag and hurried after it.

Something wasn’t right. Was it a small man or a tall child? He squinted his eyes, trying to see past any glamour. There was something—but the figure turned into an alley, disappearing from view. Seconds later Ric turned the same corner, only to find the alley empty.

Goblin? Hell, was Owain allying himself with the Unseelie Court now? That was a development Ric needed to report. He returned to his car and got inside. It was too late now to visit the gallery—he’d have to save that for tomorrow. Right now, he had another job to do. He’d called in a bunch of favors for this mission and tonight he’d agreed to pay one of them back. He had barely enough time to drop off the painting and grab his guitars.

At least now he had a name. Was she really the sexy redhead whose fragrance still filled his nostrils? Ric had quit believing in coincidences centuries earlier.

How had she let Jase talk her into this?

Meagan's nose was rapidly clogging up from the cigarette smoke that filled the small, dark-paneled basement tavern on Detroit's riverfront. Judging by the old photographs on the walls, The New Moon still looked much like it had as a speakeasy in the 1920s. Her stomach rumbled and she realized she'd forgotten to eat dinner—she'd been so caught up in thinking about the man she'd met this afternoon. Huh. Usually, that only happened when she was painting.

"I am glad that George is playing tonight." Her best friend slid into the booth across from her, a pitcher of light beer in one clay-spattered hand and two glasses in the other. "Greg, too, of course and the rest of the band." The silver beads braided into Jase's long dreadlocks jingled musically. "Word up at the bar is there's a special guest musician tonight. Some friend of Greg's who is absolutely to die for."

Meagan accepted half a glass of the light beer Jase poured and smiled. "Greg is pretty hot himself, you know," she teased. Both of the brothers who owned the club were good-looking in a dark, dangerous sort of way. Jase had a major crush on the younger brother and had been trying to work up the courage to ask George Novak out for weeks.

"T'ink so?" Jase cast her a speculative gaze. "You could do worse. You haven't had a date in months. I could try to set something up for you." Because trying to set up Greg would be a perfect reason for Jase to approach George.

She almost hated to tell him no. Especially since it had been closer to years than months since she'd had a real date. The last one had been scared off when he'd walked in and found her singing a Monty Python song about lumberjacks at the top of her lungs while she cleaned her paintbrushes. Meagan knew that she couldn't sing worth beans, but still...

"Don't, please." She held up a hand imploringly. "While I can appreciate a work of art when I see one, the dark and swarthy type never really flipped my switch. I'll let you know if I see something that does, okay?"

"Spoilsport." But he said it with a grin and a reassuring squeeze of her hand. "Hey, maybe that's why the cards told me to bring you tonight. Maybe you're supposed to meet someone."

"Anything's possible." She didn't have the heart to tell him how unlikely that was. After the encounter this afternoon, she doubted she'd respond to any lesser mortal than the blond god she'd slammed into nose-first. At least now she knew what the premonition of something weird had been all about. Her response to him had definitely been out of the ordinary. She swallowed an allergy tablet with a swig of beer and settled back to wait for the band.

It wasn't long until she heard "Bad Moon Rising," the house band's signature piece. When the last chords faded, Greg Novak's growly bass voice came over the microphone. "Thanks for coming out, folks. We've got a real treat in store. Ladies and gentlemen, let's give it up for my good friend Ric Thornhill."

Meagan's ears perked up. "Why didn't you tell me Ric Thornhill was playing? I love his music!" She had several of his CDs at home, though she'd never had the chance to hear the obscure artist live. She'd never even seen a good, clear photo since his album covers were usually landscapes, he didn't perform on television and made few public appearances. His Celtic folk and rock guitar riffs were phenomenal and his rich baritone was pure, bottled sex appeal.

She'd always wondered if his looks measured up to the promise of his voice.

Jase shrugged. "I didn't know. Now will you believe the cards?" Jase had gotten her here tonight by claiming his Tarot cards had insisted.

"Maybe." She winked and grinned while she clapped furiously. Then she whistled through her fingers and stomped along with the rest of the crowd as an impossibly tall, whipcord-lean man took the stage. Would he be as sexy in person be as his music suggested?

One look at his six-foot-plus physique and shoulder-length golden hair had Meagan's hand hanging limply in space, the whistle dying on her lips.

Oh, God, it was *him*.

Ric smiled out at the crowd, acknowledging their raucous welcome, though he was getting far less of a kick out of it than usual. He was distracted tonight by his mission and by the woman he'd met this afternoon. He wouldn't let it affect his performance, he owed Greg better than that, but it was sure putting a dent in his mood.

Settling back onto a tall stool in front of the mike, he lifted his favorite acoustic guitar off the stand beside him and launched into a folk ballad. It was a favorite with audiences and the Novak brothers and their band-mates knew it well, having spent plenty of late nights jamming with Ric in L.A. and San Francisco.

"The minstrel boy to the war has gone,
In the ranks of death, you will find him.
His father's sword he has girded on,
And his wild harp slung behind him."

As he moved into the second verse, he allowed his gaze to wander about the audience, grinning conspiratorially at the men and flirtatiously at the women. Eye contact was one of the differences between an ordinary musician and a bard. That and the magic, of course. Drawing from within himself, he let a trickle of power flow through his voice to the audience, easing tension, soothing minor hurts. It was Ric's way of thanking them for listening to him sing.

He ignored a couple of openly inviting gazes from the younger crowd, both male and female. While Ric might normally have taken one of the women up on her invitation, tonight he had no time for dalliance. As soon as his set was over, it was back to work for Alaric of the Thorny Hills, queen's bard and knight of the Seelie Court.

The song ended and at a word from Greg on the drum kit, Ric switched to his Fender Strat. The band launched into a jazzier, more upbeat tune. Ric resumed his perusal of the faces in the room. It was a good crowd tonight; the place was packed, with lots of finger-tapping and humming along. The scents of hops and humanity mingled in the warm humid air and Ric smiled at those too.

In the back corner booth was a tall young man with chocolate skin, beaded dreadlocks and a trim goatee. His liquid dark eyes gazed longingly, not at Ric, but at George. Ric made a mental note to point him out to George at the break. There was a woman beside him, but her face was obscured by the heavy-set man in front of her. When the man moved to the side, Ric made a point of establishing eye contact with this last listener.

His fingers stopped on the strings. Literally stopped moving. He had to consciously think about closing his mouth. He managed not to drool, but he couldn't manage to stop staring.

Her.

The whirlwind woman from the art co-op, the copper-haired cutie and if the gods were kind, the artist named Meagan Kelly. She was sitting in the back of Greg's club, a glass sliding

from her limp fingertips and a look of shock on her face that probably mirrored the one on his own.

Lana, the bassist and Greg's cousin, nudged Ric with her elbow as she wiggled beside him in her tight leather pants. Ric shook his head and grinned at her as he picked up the rhythm and started playing again. He was glad George was carrying the melody. Lana gave him a wicked smirk and shimmied off in the other direction, stopping to lean suggestively into Vince at the keyboard.

Whoa. Ric carefully kept his gaze away from the back corner. No one had ever affected him enough to make him stop playing before, not in eight hundred years as a musician. Mission-related or not, that spelled trouble.

Somehow he made it through the rest of the set, though he had no idea afterward what they'd played. As soon as they stopped, he pulled George aside and talked him into introducing Ric to the woman in the corner. It didn't take too much work. Apparently George had been keeping an eye on her friend for a while.

"Jase Monroe, right?" George held out a hand to the dark-haired man. "I'm George Novak. We've met before."

The young man's eyes went wide and he took George's hand with a shy grin. Ric suppressed a smile at the excitement Monroe was obviously trying to hide. The young man's thoughts were right at the surface and they were all about George. "Uh-yeah, I'm here a lot. Your music is fantastic." His soft voice betrayed more than a hint of the Caribbean.

"Thanks. I'm glad you like it." George beamed, clearly pleased. He nudged Ric forward. "This is Ric Thornhill, an old friend of mine from San Francisco."

Ric shook hands with the young human, but all his senses were focused on the woman who'd been utterly still since their approach.

Monroe gestured at the woman across from him. "And this is my dear friend, Meagan Kelly."

Ric turned his gaze on his quarry. "So we meet again, lovely Meagan." She was dressed less casually tonight, her paint-splotched leggings and tank top having been traded for a figure-hugging halter in lime green over a short, snug, black leather skirt. She looked so delicious his mouth practically watered.

He captured her hand as he slid into the booth beside her. There it was again, that zing, that magical electric charge radiating from the spot where his skin touched hers. He didn't resist when she tugged her hand away. It was far easier to think without the added distraction.

"Apparently we do." She spoke so quietly that only he could hear. Someone had turned on the sound system and was playing a loud punk anthem. A quick glance told him George had sat down beside Jase and would undoubtedly keep the other man's attention focused for quite some time.

"I'm not stalking you or anything," Meagan continued in a rush of words that let Ric know she was as affected as he was by whatever it was that sparkled between them. Once again, he couldn't pick up anything but nerves from her jumbled thoughts. "When I ran into you this afternoon, I had no idea who you were."

"The thought never crossed my mind." His actual thoughts had been running more to the ideas of fate, destiny, kismet.

"I am a fan, though."

"How's your nose?"

Their words popped out simultaneously and they both laughed.

“My nose is fine.”

“Glad to hear it. And I’m glad you enjoy my music.”

After a few moments of awkward silence, he looked over at the pair across the table.

“George was trying to screw up his courage to ask your friend out. I hope you don’t mind that I asked him to bring me over here with him?”

“Jase will be thrilled.” She dropped her voice to a whisper, forcing him to lean even closer so he could hear. “He’s had a crush on George for months, but he’s shy. He’s a brilliant potter, but right now he’s still struggling, so he doesn’t see himself as much of a catch.”

Judging from the small smile playing at George’s lips, he’d heard, but Monroe probably hadn’t. It wasn’t Ric’s place to mention that like him, the Novaks had better-than-human hearing. Instead he turned his attention back to Meagan.

“And you’re the talented Meagan Kelly, who paints lovely, idyllic landscapes.”

He thought she flushed, although even with his elven senses, it was hard to tell in the dimly lit club. “Guilty as charged.”

“I bought it, though I didn’t know at first that it belonged to the whirlwind I’d encountered. So I guess you could say I’m a fan of yours, as well.”

Meagan could barely breathe.

Simply listening to his voice, with its soft, warm baritone and the slight British accent, was enough to make all her female parts start to melt. Finally, there was the man himself, dressed in the same black slacks and maroon silk shirt as earlier. His long, muscular thigh was plastered alongside hers in the narrow confines of the booth and his potent, masculine scent made her feel overheated and woozy.

Meagan gulped at her beer, before she caught herself and slowed down. Something told her she’d need all of her faculties to deal with this guy.

They chatted for a few minutes about nothing important—Detroit, her work, his music and the club. All the while, undercurrents kept pulling her closer to him, even as part of her wanted to pull away. She looked over at Jase and George and told herself to stop being a coward. If Jase could go after the guy of his dreams, so could she. Even if it was only for this one night. She grinned in response to the anecdote he’d related.

“I’d like to talk to you after we’re done playing,” he murmured and the bright, intense look in his eyes radiated sincerity. “Can I take you out for a bite to eat after the show?”

Alone? With him? A warm thrill skittered up her spine and she clenched her thighs together. “Sure.” Her voice trembled as she smiled up at him and nodded.

“Till later.” He kissed the back of her hand and slid gracefully out of the booth. George stood as well and together she and Jase watched them make their way back to the stage. She could still feel the imprint of his lips on her skin.

“Meagan, would it bother you if I let you drive my car home?” Jase’s words didn’t quite cut through the fog in her head. He reached over and tapped her chin. “Close it, girl, no need to catch flies.”

Meagan tore her eyes away from the stage and looked up. “Oh. Sorry. I’ve got another ride, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Found one that flips your switch, eh?”

She shivered and took a sip of beer. “That man flips switches I didn’t even know I had.”

The band struck up Warren Zevon’s “Werewolves of London.” Meagan gestured to a passing waitress and ordered a diet cola. If she was actually going out with Ric Thornhill in a few hours, she wanted to be stone-cold sober.