

The background of the book cover features a composite image. On the right, a woman with dark hair, wearing a black leather jacket over a green top and tan pants, is posed leaning against a stone balustrade. The balustrade has decorative, rounded balusters. In the background, a city skyline is visible under a warm, orange-hued sky, with a prominent skyscraper having a bright light at its peak. In the lower-left foreground, there are green bushes and red flowers. A waterfall is visible in the middle ground, partially obscured by the city and foliage.

MOTOR CITY FAE

— URBAN —
ARCANA

CINDY
SPENCER PAPE



Detroit artist Meagan Kelly has had a strong sixth sense all her life, but that doesn't mean the gorgeous stranger's crazy story—that she's a half-elf, half human heiress—is true. But Meagan can't deny the evidence of her own eyes—he's Fae. A tall, blond, handsome, pointy-eared elf—and a man she just can't get enough of.

Ric Thornhill's assignment just got a lot more complicated. The more time he spends with Meagan, the harder it is to see her as a political tool to prevent an all-out war between humans and Fae.

Now Meagan's in a race to master her newly released powers in time to prevent the conflict, convince a jealous Queen not to strip Ric of his powers, and find out if she can build a life that straddles two worlds.

Book I of Urban Arcana

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If you'd asked me what I'd be doing a year ago, I never would have conceived I'd be working with the brilliant team behind Harlequin's digital program to bring you a new and exciting digital-first imprint. I have long been a fan of Harlequin books, authors and staff and that's why I'm so pleased to be sharing these first Carina Press launch titles with you.

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Happy reading!
~Angela James

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Motor City Fae

Cindy Spencer Pape



Dedication

For my husband Glenn, for his unwavering support, his continual offers to help with “research” and never worrying when I ask questions like, “What is the sound of a baseball bat smacking a human body?” or “Did Jake or Elwood say, ‘Hit it’?”

Prologue

The dream began as it always did. Meagan Kelly found herself sitting on a carved stone bench in the most beautiful rose garden her imagination could conjure. A fountain tinkled nearby and blooms of every size and color filled the air with a rich perfume. She sighed, relishing the peace of this place, her secret haven, even if it only existed in her dreams.

Now the vision would change. Meagan knew she was dreaming—she always did. This was the point where things would shift, warning her of what was coming. If the sky grew dark, if thunder boomed and lightning flashed, she'd know something awful would happen tomorrow. Twice she'd sat here through storms...the nights before each of her parents had died. Gray drizzle meant a less traumatic but still unpleasant event—a broken relationship or getting fired from a job. If birds sang and a euphoric sensation filled the air, she'd know something wonderful was headed her way...a new friend, an important sale, or maybe even a really hot date. She hadn't had one of those in forever. Meagan sat on the bench and waited, praying the sky overhead would remain bright and blue.

It did, causing her to breathe a sigh of relief as she waited for the birds.

Instead, she heard the jingle of tiny silver bells, followed by raucous laughter.

Looking over, she saw someone sitting on the stone edge of the fountain. A thin man, with elongated features and pointed ears, wore a jester's motley, complete with belled hat and pointed shoes. As he stared at her and laughed, he juggled, almost too quickly for her to see that the objects in his hand were a tiny guitar, a bottle of diet cola and a flashing silver sword.

Weird. She'd been having these dreams since she was a kid, but she could never remember one quite like this.

The jester laughed again, a coarse, unsettling sound. He sent her a wicked grin and winked, before he vanished.

Meagan awoke, muzzy-headed and confused. What the hell had that been all about?

She'd had dreams foreshadowing good and bad. This one was neither. This one had been just plain weird.

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 co-op.

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 beeringed 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.

Chapter Two

The butterflies in her stomach were doing gymnastics as she faced Ric across a linen-draped table a few minutes past midnight.

“What do you recommend?” he asked. They were in an elegant Italian bistro a few blocks from the club.

She shrugged. “I’ve never been here before. It’s outside the budget for a starving artist.”

“Aren’t you able to make a living from your paintings?” His hand touched hers on the table, a fleeting caress that left her wanting more.

“I do now,” she admitted. “But only recently. Up until the last few years I was trying a more contemporary, abstract style and it wasn’t working out.”

“No, it’s obvious that your heart is in the landscapes. That’s what drew me to that window this afternoon.” He paused and sent her an enigmatic smile that seemed to shimmer in the light from the candle on their table. “A circumstance for which I’m rather grateful at the moment.”

How was she supposed to respond to comments like that? He was miles out of her usual league. She knew she wasn’t exactly a schnauzer; men didn’t run from her screaming, but she sure wasn’t supermodel caliber either. Short and curvy with out-of-control hair that usually had paint in it, she was a definite girl-next-door type. That didn’t seem like the kind of woman to attract someone as

gorgeous and talented as Ric.

“Wine?”

She blinked. “Uh—okay, I guess.” Great, what had happened to her resolve to stay sober around him?

He ordered the wine in what was probably flawless Italian, so she had no idea what he was asking for. She let him order her food for her too. She hoped it wasn’t squid or snails or something, but one look from those incredible gold eyes and she’d probably eat worms raw. Worse yet, she’d like them.

“So did you grow up here in the Detroit area?” The question was standard, but his warm expression made her think he might be genuinely interested in getting to know her.

“Mostly. I spent a couple years in California when my dad got transferred out there, but when he retired, we moved back to Michigan.”

“And your parents, are they still nearby?”

“No.” She fought back a wave of sadness. “They were both in their late forties when I came along. Dad died about five years ago and my mom passed away last year.”

He reached over and took her hand, sincerity radiating from his gaze. “I’m sorry for your loss.” He could sense her grief, but there was nothing in her thoughts that told him what he needed to know.

“Hey,” she rallied, forcing a smile. She made a half-hearted attempt to pull her hand away, but gave in when he resisted. “At least I had great parents and a happy childhood. That’s more than a lot of people can claim.”

He guided the conversation into more neutral waters and she let him. No need to get too personal too fast. Music was the obvious starting point, though she thought she already knew what he liked. To her surprise, his tastes

turned out to be almost as eclectic as her own, ranging from soulful ballads to raucous punk.

The longer they talked, the more she liked him. She told him about her art and he laughed at her stories about her students at the co-op, seeming to have a sense of humor almost as warped as her own. Every so often their hands brushed against one another's as they reached for a morsel. Each time, Meagan felt the touch all the way to her bones.

The food was too good to ignore, so they focused on that, chatting idly as they ate. He'd grown up in Wales, he told her, but now lived in the San Francisco area when he wasn't touring. She also learned that he liked to touch the person he was talking to.

By the time they polished off Giannola's to-die-for Gorgonzola ravioli and a bottle of pinot noir, they were both eating with one hand, with their others clasped atop the table. It should have felt awkward, given how recently they'd met, but it didn't. And oddly enough, her arm hadn't gone to sleep either, now that she thought about it. Maybe he really was as magical as his voice.

"Shall we go?"

Ric's words startled her out of her thoughts, making her choke on the water she'd drunk. She went into a spasm of coughing.

He was around the table before she even saw him move, on one knee beside her with an arm around her waist. "Breathe. You can do it." His gentle whisper was as soothing as his touch.

He handed her a clean napkin when the coughing subsided. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she lied, wiping her eyes. Great, she thought, grimacing at the mascara and eye shadow streaks on the

snowy white linen. She not only looked idiotic, she probably looked like an idiotic raccoon.

“Shall we go?”

Shoulders slumped in embarrassment, she nodded, refusing to look up at him as he stood and signaled their waiter. As soon as she stood, she excused herself and dashed off to the restroom.

Ric sat back in his chair to wait for Meagan. He’d stalled all he could. Now that dinner was over he needed to start asking the difficult questions. She’d said nothing to verify his belief that she was the missing Rose heiress, but none of her comments had proven otherwise, either. He’d even dipped into her thoughts, but he’d picked up little more than an instant attraction that rivaled his for her, along with a few self-deprecating asides to herself that almost made him laugh out loud.

He drained the last dregs from his espresso and glanced around the room. The middle of a delicate mission was no time to be losing his edge. A man in the far corner of the dining room allowed Ric to make eye contact and raised his wineglass in a mocking toast.

All the blood drained from Ric’s head. Owain le Faire. Son of a bitch, this was one complication he hadn’t expected. How had the queen’s most powerful enemy tracked him here, not just to Detroit, but to this very restaurant? Were those really goblins Ric had seen earlier and were they working for Owain, following Ric? Or had Owain honed in independently on the idea that Meagan was the heiress—the one person who could thwart Owain’s plan to overthrow the queen and claim the Seelie throne?

Ric immediately stood and met the waiter halfway to

the table. He thrust a wad of cash into the man's hand and continued toward the restrooms. How to get out without Owain following? The other elf undoubtedly had accomplices nearby. Ric had to think of something fast.

A couple stood from a table near the back hallway, ready to leave. Perfect. Ric hummed a quick spell and formed a glamour around them. The short, sixty-something man now resembled Ric, while his silver-haired wife looked like Meagan. A Fae like Owain would be able to see through the illusion, but only if he thought to look. Ric made sure the glamour would fade in a few minutes, before any harm came to his unwitting accomplices. Then he waited outside the ladies' room door for Meagan.

Hands settled on her shoulders as she stepped out of the ladies' room and Meagan let out a shriek. "Something's come up, I'm afraid."

She whirled to face Ric. "Don't do that!"

"Sorry, I seem to make a habit out of scaring you. I really don't mean to." He hummed a few notes and Meagan swore the world shimmered around her for a moment. His strong hands were still holding her in place, halting her progress toward the dining room.

"I'm fine." She forced her breathing back under control, smiling with nonchalance she was miles from feeling. "Are we ready to go?"

"Right this way." He turned her toward the rear exit, away from the door they'd come in, catching her arm in a firm grip.

He didn't say a word as they walked, his pace so rapid she was practically running to keep up in her high heels. Was he in *that* much of a hurry to get away from her?

When they pulled into her drive, he stared into space for a moment. He'd climbed out and opened the passenger door before Meagan had gathered her wits enough to do it for herself. Numbly, she accepted his hand on her arm as she walked up the short path and single step to her front porch.

"Thank you for dinner," she managed. "It was...nice." She held out her hand for him to shake. Might as well end things on a grown-up and civilized note.

Ric looked down at her hand, frowning. When she started to draw it back, he growled low in his throat and gripped both of her shoulders, pulling her close.

"This isn't the end, Meagan." He stared into her eyes. "Something truly did come up tonight."

He was good; she had to admit it. Of course, it helped that she wanted to believe him. Wanted it so much.

"This is not how I wanted this evening to end." His normally velvet-smooth voice was harsh, raspy. "I *will* be calling you, Meagan. Meanwhile, I want you to do something for me. Go inside and lock your doors. Do you have an alarm?"

She nodded. Now that her paintings were selling, her insurance carrier and her agent had practically demanded it.

"Use it." He pulled a card from his back pocket and stuffed it into her hand. "And if anything, *anything*, bothers you, call this number. Immediately."

"Ric, what's going on?" She clutched his sleeves. She suddenly remembered a discussion with Jase about the Novaks and organized crime. And Ric was a close friend of theirs. What had she gotten herself into?

"I'm not sure, love, probably nothing. Do me a favor, though and call me if anything unusual happens tonight,

will you? Otherwise, I'll talk to you sometime tomorrow. Maybe I can explain then. Okay?" His voice was soothing, almost hypnotic. She shrugged off a feeling that he was trying to somehow compel her to relax.

"It's okay." It wasn't, but she didn't know what else to say. His face was so close to hers she could practically feel his breath on her lips. The salty scent of sweat and male flesh mixed with garlic, wine and coffee was enough to make her sway against his hands, even though she was both worried and furious. "I have an early meeting at a gallery tomorrow, anyway, so I need to go in and get some sleep."

Without taking his gaze away from hers, Ric lowered his head and gently laid his lips on hers. Her eyes fluttered shut. Time hung suspended as they tasted each other, gently at first, then with a hunger that bordered on desperation. They were both breathing hard and her skin was damp with sweat when they finally pulled apart.

"I really, truly have to go. I'm sorry." His silky voice hitched into what was almost a groan.

"Me too," she admitted, leaning a hand against his hot, damp chest to steady her shaking knees. "You'll really call?"

"It's a promise."

God help her, she believed him. "But you don't have my number."

He clapped his hand over his eyes, his shoulders shaking with self-deprecating laughter. "Ah, love, I'm a prime idiot." He pulled another card from his pocket and a pen from the cell phone holder clipped to his belt and held them out to her. "Please?"

Shaking hands and the dim glow of her porch light made the number slightly less than legible, but he read it

off when she handed it back and Meagan nodded dumbly.

“Remember. Anything at all, any trifle that makes you uneasy, I want you to call. Promise?”

More uneasy than she already was? Scary thought. Still, she nodded and drew an *X* across her chest with one index finger. “Promise.”

He took the key from her unresisting fingers and turned it in her lock. “Good night. Don’t forget the alarms.” He leaned over, dropped a quick peck on her nose and shoved her gently through the door.

“Well, bard, have you completed your quest?”

“No, my queen.” He spoke into his cell phone as though his boss was across town instead of in a different dimension. The enchanted phone was one of the so-called perks of his job. In reality it was a way for Llyris to keep tabs on him.

“Time is not in your favor. You remember the punishment you face if you fail?” He pictured her as she spoke. Her silver-blond hair would be piled into some ridiculously elaborate arrangement as she lounged on her favorite divan. Her icy blue eyes would be narrowed and her inhumanly beautiful features would be drawn tight, probably with disapproval, since she couldn’t possibly be feeling something as pedestrian as fear.

“Of course.” The reminder made his palms start to sweat.

“Then find her.”

His jaw tightened. His queen was a stone cold bitch when she wanted to be. “I intend to, Your Majesty. I may have a lead, but complications arose before I could be certain.”

“You don’t have time for complications.”

Duh. “Owain is here.” He sat in his car, a block down from Meagan’s house, watching. So far there had been no sign of trouble.

“Ah.” Static crackled over the line. Well, at least now the queen was pissed at somebody other than him. “I was unaware that he suspected your assignment. Do you think he knows the whereabouts of the woman?”

“I’ve no idea, Majesty. He may have been following me, or he may have been trailing the possible heiress. We were dining together when I saw him. He made no secret of his presence, though.”

“How vexing.” Llyris sounded more bored than vexed, but Ric knew there was some real stress behind her words. “Is Lord Green Oak aware that Owain is in his domain?”

“He knows now.” The first thing Ric had done was call the local guardian, who had been predictably pissed. The second had been to contact the queen. He took a swig of coffee, wishing it was something stronger.

“So Owain did not travel through the Detroit portal, nor did he follow protocol and inform the Detroit guardian of his presence. That means we can rule out coincidence. Inform Lord Green Oak that he is to maintain surveillance on the traitor. Your mission must not be compromised. You have four days left, bard. Do not waste them.”

“Yes, my queen. Are you sure, however, that there isn’t a simpler way to resolve the issue? An—accident perchance?” Ric didn’t care for playing queen’s assassin, but if it came down to a choice between that and wholesale war, he’d swallow his qualms and do the job. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“No. His heir is just as dangerous. Their faction is too powerful and Owain’s hold on each of his supporters is

too strong.”

So much for that idea. It had been a long shot anyway. Of course she'd investigated all the angles; she'd been handling court intrigue for over a thousand years. She'd probably already tried bribery, blackmail and every other means of persuasion to pull Owain's supporters back into her camp. Ric ran his hand through his hair.

“With Owain's heir in the le Faire seat, the council vote will still go in his favor and I'm sure he has members of his line secreted well enough that even you couldn't find them all in time. Only if the election is tied can I cast the deciding vote and retain my throne. And a tie will only occur if you find Emery of Rose's missing daughter.”

“And if she can be convinced to vote in your favor.”

The queen's frigid silence was a palpable reprimand. He could envision her eyes narrowing to slits, her thin lips pinching tight. “Precisely why *you* were given this assignment. Find her, convince her and bring her to me. Use any means necessary, but get her here.”

“Of course, my liege.” He almost bowed out of habit, but stopped himself in time. That would be stupid over a cell phone, even if she was watching. He also resisted the baser urge to flip her the bird. “I remain, as always, your humble servant.”

“Oh, cut the crap, Thornhill.” He winced. Where had she learned that modern phrase? Probably from him. One of these decades, he was going to have to learn to watch his mouth. “Go find me that girl!”

“You got it, boss.” He waited until she'd broken the connection to hit the end button. It was a good thing elves didn't need to sleep much, because it looked like it was going to be a long night.

“How sure are you?”

“Not terribly,” Ric sighed into his phone a few minutes later. He was grateful that Aidan had known him too well for too long to mess around. The other Fae also had a more than vested interest in finding Emery’s missing daughter. Ric rubbed the bridge of his nose. He’d been in the human realm way too long. Elves weren’t supposed to get headaches.

“But you think there’s a chance?”

“I might be grasping at straws. She talked about her parents, but didn’t mention adoption. And there’s something about her that—I don’t know—calls to me. My intuition has never failed me before and right now it’s telling me that she’s the one.”

“Meanwhile, it would seem I’ve been elected to keep tabs on the villain of the piece.” Aidan’s tone darkened. “Are you sure I can’t simply kill him? It’s long overdue.”

Ric laughed, but there was no real amusement in it. “Now you sound like me. I asked Her Majesty the same thing.”

“And I take it she declined.” Aidan gave a chuckle as dry as Ric’s own. “Pity. Oh well, I can have him watched, probably. If he’s shielding as well as I suspect, it will be tougher, but I have some interesting allies in this place. You said he made no secret of his presence?”

“None. The bastard actually toasted me.” Ric knew he probably sounded like a sulky brat but he didn’t care. This whole business was making him crazy.

“If you really think this girl is the heiress, your job is to guard her. You’re sure she’s safe?”

“I’m at one end of her street. Greg is watching the other end.”

Aidan snorted out a laugh. “Hopefully none of her neighbors calls Animal Control.”

“I’m pretty sure he prefers doing surveillance with opposable thumbs and the ability to speak.”

Another chuckle, but Aidan’s voice grew serious. “If you think she’s really my cousin, you should probably bring her here. I had some business associates arrive tonight. Invite her to the party.”

Ric nodded thoughtfully. “That should work, if she doesn’t think I’m a complete lunatic after tonight.” *Or if she isn’t too pissed off at me for dropping her like a hot rock.*

“Show up with flowers and grovel. You’re a bard, for Lady’s sake. Convince her. And remember to tell her about the pool. Make sure she brings a swimsuit. Preferably a skimpy one.”

Red spots swam in front of Ric’s eyes for a moment until his frazzled brain got the message. “Right. Swimsuit. Faery mark. Got it.”

“Of course, if she is my cousin and you hurt her, remember I’ll have to kill you.”

“Bite me.” Ric wished he was sure his friend was kidding.

The insistent electronic chirping of the phone woke Meagan from the fitful slumber she’d finally fallen into several hours after Ric had dumped her on her doorstep. She pulled a pillow over her head, planning to let the machine pick it up, but as soon as it did, the caller hung up and apparently hit redial, because the ringing started all over again. Twice.

On the third set of rings, she gave in to the inevitable, reached out and grabbed the phone, knocking a lamp and

a half-full glass of water off her nightstand in the process.

"Somebody better be bleeding," she growled into the receiver.

"Would groveling be okay?"

There was silence on the line for a few moments as her semi-conscious brain tried to place the warm, sexy voice. Maybe this was a dream. Judging by the way her nipples were tightening up, it was possibly even a wet one. Then it occurred to her that she actually knew that voice. "Ric?"

"None other."

She shook her head to clear it, make extra sure it wasn't a dream. "What time is it?" She peered at the clock, now tilted at a weird angle. "Why are you calling me at seven o'clock in the morning?"

She sat up and her leg bumped against something cold and metallic. Ah. She'd been so scared last night she'd taken her favorite softball bat to bed with her.

"To apologize?" Ric's reply sounded like a question.

"You couldn't have done that at a reasonable hour?"

"And to check on you."

"Huh?" Did this have to do with his *lock your door and set the alarm* rambling last night? "I'm fine." Well, unless you counted being really, really cranky due to frustration and lack of sleep.

"Look, I need to talk to you. Can I come in?"

"Come in? Where are you?"

There was a pause. Then he cleared his throat. "Um—in your driveway."

She crawled out of bed and crept over to the window, peeking out from under the blinds. Sure enough, there was the shiny silver Jag, sitting right behind her car. He must have seen her, because the lights flashed when she looked.

"Yes, Meagan, I saw you," said the warm voice over

the phone, as if he was reading her mind. "Can I come in? Please? I brought coffee."

She couldn't refuse him, damn it. He sounded too sincere and his kiss had been too darned hot. "Oh, all right. I'll be down in two minutes." She slammed the phone down and dragged on a pair of red running shorts, which probably clashed horribly with the orange and blue Detroit Tigers T-shirt she'd been sleeping in. She shook out her snarled-up hair and sighed. There was no way she was going to be able to untangle it without a shower. Grabbing an elastic band, she pulled the curling mess back into a haphazard ponytail as she scrambled down the stairs. She paused in the bathroom long enough to use the facilities and brush her teeth.

"Only salesmen and other psychos are up this early. You'd better not be an axe murderer or anything," she grumbled as she opened the door after disarming the alarm. "If you kill me, I swear I'll haunt you and make the rest of your life miserable. Same goes if you try to sell me life insurance."

He paused on the threshold, clearly fighting a laugh. "I hope that's an invitation, of sorts. I come bearing gifts." True to his word, there were large take-out cups in both hands. A paper grocery sack with handles dangled from one wrist. He looked too good to be true, even dressed more casually than the day before. His jeans were well worn and fit perfectly, showing off more of his sleek physique than yesterday's chinos. The dark green polo shirt looked as soft as silk and molded his chest like he was the model the designer had intended it for.

He was so well put together that she felt even rattier by comparison, damn it. No one should look that good this early.

“All right already. Come in, already. Sheesh, what are you, a vampire?” He was certainly good looking enough and weren’t they the ones who had to wait for permission to enter a house?

Nah, couldn’t be. It was a bright, shiny summer morning. *Yuck.*

He gave her a brief, twisty grin. “No, merely a guy who knows he has ground to make up after running off on you last night.”

Her traitorous cat was twining about the man’s ankles, rubbing his head on Ric’s faded jeans.

She stepped aside to let him in and he handed her one of the cups. “Smells good. Too bad I can’t stand the stuff.” She handed it back.

His eyes widened in horror. “You don’t drink coffee?”

“Nope.” She sent him a nasty smirk, enjoying his momentary discomfiture. “Love the smell, hate the taste. Thanks for the thought, though.” She waved him through her tiny living room into the even smaller kitchen. “You go ahead and get started; I’m going to make some tea.”

Glowering, he preceded her into the kitchen.

“Things-You-Didn’t-Know-About-Meagan 101,” she announced, following him through the archway. She grabbed the teakettle off the stove, ran fresh water into it before putting it back on the burner. “Meagan hates coffee. Violently. Also, I am not in any way a morning person. At all. In my reality, civilized conversation does not occur before noon. Ever.”

“But you said you had an early meeting this morning.” His height and the intensity of his presence filled the tiny room, crowding her, even though she was several feet away.

He didn’t seem to notice. He plunked the bag and cups

on the table and dropped into a chair, looking as comfortable as if he'd been there a hundred times. He didn't seem to mind when the cat hopped into his lap. He stroked the furry beast's ear as though they'd been friends forever.

After setting the kettle on the burner she turned to glare at him, hands on hips. "I lied."

"Okay." That didn't bother him either. Jeez, what would it take to get a rise out of this guy? She couldn't handle him before caffeine, that much was certain.

She turned her back again to dig mug, strainer and tea leaves out of the cupboard, and spoke over her shoulder. "The orange furball is named Calculus, in case you were wondering."

The bastard laughed. "Why Calculus?"

"Well, cats are always so inscrutable, like they know all the secrets of the universe and you don't. I figured that anyone who really knew stuff beyond the realm of human understanding would have to be a whiz at math."

She put the leaves in the tea ball, dropped it into the mug. Normally in this weather she'd pour herself a glass of diet soda, but fussing with the tea paraphernalia gave her time to deal with the fluttery feeling his arrival was causing in her stomach. "Did you get your business resolved?"

She could almost feel his grimace, even though she didn't turn around to see it. "Sort of," he admitted. "It's been addressed, but I doubt it's over."

"Want to talk about it?"

This time he snorted. "Not yet."

Okay, be cryptic, see if I care. "I didn't really expect to see you again." Where had that admission come from? She couldn't seem to control her own tongue around him.

The words popped out before her brain could censor them.

“I figured.” She heard his chair scrape against the hardwood floor, followed by soft footsteps behind her. “I wasn’t lying last night. I would have much rather been with you.”

She turned into his chest, forced herself to look up into his glorious eyes. He’d put down the cat and laid his hands gently on her upper arms. “I’m getting that,” she admitted, inhaling the clean, crisp scent of sandalwood soap and warm male skin. “I’m just not sure why.”

“Lots of reasons.” His voice was a low, sexy growl next to her ear and she felt goose bumps form on her skin. “Mostly this.”

His touch was every bit as electric in the morning light as it had been the night before. Hot, strong hands gripped her shoulders and he stepped closer, pinning her back against the counter. He moved slowly, carefully, giving her time, she supposed, to back away, but nothing short of a nuclear explosion was likely to make her budge. Giving in to the madness, she reached out, grabbed his soft cotton polo shirt with both hands and held on for dear life as his head moved inexorably down toward hers.

The first touch of his lips was electrifying. Warm, tender yet demanding and full of raw sexual promise. Conscious thought deserted her as every nerve receptor in her body focused on Ric and Ric alone. She wouldn’t have noticed if the house burned down around them and she was pretty sure they were generating enough heat to make it happen.

She strained upward, plastering her body against his, feeling his heat through their two layers of clothing, as his soft, talented lips moved against hers. When she opened

for him, his tongue plunged in, tasting of coffee and sex and she wasn't sure if the low moan she heard came from her or from him.

His hands slid down from her waist, cupping her butt, grinding her hips into his rock-hard thighs for a moment before lifting her to the counter. Her legs opened wide and he stepped even closer, his blatant erection rubbing hungrily against the damp nylon crotch of her shorts.

This is crazy. His lips left hers and began to trail down her throat. Then she forgot all about why when his hands started to wander up inside her T-shirt.

"I know," he agreed, sounding raspy and out of breath. Had she spoken out loud? "Want me to stop?"

"God, no!" She ended on a keening moan as he closed his long fingers over her aching breasts.

Needing to feel skin-on-skin, she tugged his cotton shirt free of the waistband of his jeans, exulting in the smooth heat of his flesh. She reluctantly relinquished her hold for long enough to let him pull the polo off over his head. His chest was lean but sculpted, his muscles well defined without being bulky. A light sprinkling of fine golden hairs covered his skin and surrounded his flat copper nipples.

Then she lifted her arms over her head as he grasped the hem of her shirt.

"So sweet." She barely heard his reverent whisper over the pulse pounding in her ears. Then his voice sharpened, almost cracked, as his whole body tensed and he pulled his face away from hers. "What the hell?"

Meagan opened her eyes and blinked, waiting for reality to re-coalesce around her. Then she heard it. The pounding wasn't just in her ears. Someone was hammering, loudly, on her front door. She buried her face

in her trembling hands as Ric echoed the line she'd used earlier.

“Somebody better be bleeding.”

Chapter Three

“Now, who the hell is it?” Meagan slid off the countertop and tugged her clothes back into place. “Nobody ever comes over this early in the morning and now suddenly it’s freaking Grand Central Station.” She moved toward the front door as she muttered.

Ric took a second to adjust himself before moving. No sense in letting his too-tight jeans amputate something he might have a use for later. He didn’t bother with his shirt, but moved silently through the archway that divided the kitchen from the living room of her small but undeniably charming bungalow. He leaned against the wall a few feet behind her as she checked the peephole before she opened the door to reveal Greg Novak.

Greg ignored Ric and smiled at Meagan. “Hi, I’m Greg.”

She nodded warily and shook his hand.

Greg turned to Ric. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Meagan had stepped back and picked up Calculus, who glared nastily at Greg. Ric suppressed a grin. The overfed furball apparently knew a predator when he met one.

“Sure.” He followed Greg out to his car. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I spotted a couple of thugs,” Greg whispered as he took a guitar case out of his battered red pickup and handed it to Ric. “Or something anyway. Kind of small,

but they looked like they were up to something and when I got closer they vanished.”

“Shit.” More goblins? Ric took the case. “This isn’t mine.”

Greg shrugged. “So? She doesn’t know that.”

“True enough.” Ric put the case in his own trunk, waving as Greg drove off. Meagan appeared to be frozen in place, so Ric closed the door and lifted the cat from her arms. Her glossy curls tumbled around her shoulders. When had he pulled the band from her hair?

She was skittish now, he could sense that much from her jumbled thoughts. Not the time to pick up where he’d left off. He dropped down on the plush, lime-green sofa, a good five feet away from her. “I almost forgot why I came over so early.”

“You said you came to apologize.”

“Well, that was part of it,” he admitted easily, cranking up the charm he’d spent centuries perfecting. “I also have a favor to ask.”

“What kind of favor?” She looked like a suspicious pixie sitting in the Hawaiian-print wing chair with her knees drawn up to her chest and her hair falling all around her.

“The friend I’ve been staying with is having this party,” he began. “And I really have to show up...”

“And?”

“And whenever I’m in Detroit, Aidan has a bad habit of trying to fix me up with someone.” It was a complete lie, but one Aidan would be willing to go along with. “So it’s a lot safer if I just bring my own date.”

“Yeah and I’m sure that’s such a huge problem for you.” She didn’t look offended, thank the gods. Her lips were curving upward and the twinkle was back in her

eyes. "Is this a really roundabout way of asking me to go to a party with you?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

Okay, this was going more easily than he'd expected. "This afternoon. Well, all weekend, really. It's a house party, a weekend thing. Some of the guests have already arrived."

"O-o-okay. I guess that explains the early wake-up call. So where is this shindig? And just what is a house party, anyway? I've never heard of one outside a Regency novel."

He smiled at her stream of consciousness questions. "Let's see, in order: yes, that's why I arrived early; Aidan's home is in Grosse Pointe; and a house party is a gathering that goes on for more than one day with overnight accommodations."

"Private accommodations, or would I be expected to share?" Her tone was cautious, but he couldn't tell if she was objecting or not.

He felt his face heat as he flushed, something he didn't think he'd done in centuries. He studied her bright, cheerful living room to avoid looking in her eyes. The luxurious fabrics, bursts of vibrant color and dozens of potted plants reminded him of Meagan herself, full of beauty, texture and life. "You'll have your own room," he promised.

She nodded. "Fair enough." Then her eyes widened. "Grosse Pointe? What in the hell am I supposed to wear?"

"Anything you like. I was hoping to spend at least part of the afternoon in the pool, though, so if you can manage a swimsuit, I'd appreciate it."

"Okay, I think I can handle that."

Relief flooded him. She was going to come with him, without magic or coercion. Whatever she decided to wear, he looked forward to peeling it off her satin skin before the night was over.

“Wow.” Meagan fought the urge to panic as Ric’s Jaguar passed through the wrought-iron gates of the Grosse Pointe compound. “So this friend of yours,” she asked Ric, her mouth dry. “Is his last name Dodge, Ford, or Chrysler?” A place this palatial could only belong to auto-industry royalty.

“Greene.” Ric chuckled and reached over to squeeze her hand. She supposed it was meant to be a reassuring gesture, but the electric charge that still flared whenever they touched only unnerved her more. “Aidan Greene.”

“That sounds familiar.”

“He’s the CEO of Underhill, Inc.”

“Oh.” She slumped back in her seat. Yikes! Not auto industry, but pretty much everything else, from credit cards to toothpaste, along with hotels and professional sports teams. She looked down at her white capris, green cami and Hawaiian-print shirt. “I am so underdressed.”

What was she doing here, anyway? This mansion and this guy were so far out of her usual league they made her stomach churn. She was certain that at any moment some security guard was going to stop the car, identify her as a commoner and boot her underdressed butt right back to Royal Oak.

“Stop it.” Ric, as usual, seemed to be reading her mind. It felt intimate, though coming from any other guy it would probably seem creepy. “You’re an invited guest, you look fantastic and after seeing the painting that Aidan has hanging in the foyer, all the other guests are going to

be climbing over one another to meet you.”

That got her attention. “What painting?”

“The forest scene, the one I bought yesterday.”

“And why is that hanging in Aidan Greene’s foyer?”

“Because when I showed it to him, he loved it. When I told him I was inviting you, he suggested displaying it, to see if it drummed you up some more business.”

“Oh.” Wow, what a compliment. And he was right. With the people liable to be here this weekend, some of them just might come down to the gallery and buy a painting, if only to keep up with the Greenes as it were. Judging by the array of luxury cars in the circular parking area, they could definitely afford it. “That was really thoughtful.”

“Aidan is a thoughtful guy. Stop worrying, please. You’re here to enjoy yourself.”

“If you say so.” Her misgivings continued to grow as Ric ignored the valet and parked in the barn-sized garage. He was apparently a regular guest, judging by the way the employees nodded and waved at him.

Ignoring the portico-covered main entrance, he ushered her through a small French door on the rear side of the fieldstone mansion. That took them into a book-lined library that would have looked perfectly at home on *Masterpiece Theatre*.

Meagan stared around in awe, her jaw probably hanging halfway to the floor. Speaking above a whisper would have seemed somehow sacrilegious. “This is fantastic!”

“Thank you.” The accent was just like Ric’s but the voice wasn’t as musical and had a slightly deeper pitch. She spun around to view the man who had emerged, in perfect silence, from behind a shelf.

The magazine photos had not done justice to what had to be the single most perfect specimen of maleness on the planet. Tall with a rangy athletic build, he had rich walnut-colored hair with just a few mahogany highlights and eyes the color of the most perfect emeralds. He may have lacked Ric's earthy sensuality, but in his perfectly tailored suit and raw silk tie, he more than made up for it in elegance and style. Ric quickly introduced the other man as Aidan Greene.

"Have we met?"

One corner of his perfectly sculpted mouth twitched upward into a grin. "Perhaps in another lifetime. You seem familiar to me, as well, but I'd never have forgotten such a lovely face." The kind words and his lopsided smile made him seem less like a marble statue and a lot more approachable. For the first time since they came through the gates, Meagan started to relax.

She shook the hand he offered, feeling like a princess, until Ric cleared his throat and wrapped an arm around Meagan's waist, tugging her close. She looked up to see his jaw tighten and his eyes narrow.

Oh, God! Ric was jealous.

"She's in the room next to yours, Ric, just as requested." Aidan glanced down at Meagan with another off-center grin. "There's a connecting door, but it locks from your side. He doesn't have a key. Go upstairs, unpack and come down when you feel like it. After seeing your painting, several of my other guests are looking forward to meeting you."

"Sounds good. We'll catch you later." Ric picked up Meagan's bag with his free hand, his left arm remaining firmly around her waist. He led her down a wood-paneled hallway to a grand foyer, complete with a curving marble

staircase and her framed painting, prominently displayed.

“Wow.”

“He’s just a guy, Meagan.” She’d never heard testiness in his voice before and it was kind of cute.

“Wow, the house. Not wow, the zillionaire. And wow, that’s *my* painting—in this house.”

“It’s just a house.”

She laughed at his grumpiness, unable to resist slipping her own arm around his waist and giving him a playful squeeze. Why was it that she couldn’t seem to stop touching this man? “Not to us mortals, it isn’t. The only times I’ve been in places like this, I had to buy a ticket. I promise not to get hung up on it, but you could let me wallow for just a moment.”

“Wallow away. But don’t forget who brought you, all right?”

She turned to look at him and had to catch her breath at the raw sexual promise in his golden eyes. “Don’t worry. That isn’t going to happen, Ric.”

“Good.” He tugged her up the grand staircase, down another corridor paneled with burnished golden oak and finally stopped at the second door from the end of a long hallway. “This is your room. Mine’s the next.”

“With a connecting door.” She was short of breath but not from the stairs.

“And a shared bathroom.”

“I think we can handle that.”

“I promised not to pressure you, but you’re killing me here. If you don’t want me inside, you’d better keep that damned door locked.” Did he mean inside the room, or inside *her*? The thought had her nipples tightening and her thighs clenching.

He turned her to face him, gripping both of her

forearms so tightly it almost hurt. Then he inhaled a ragged breath and stepped back, releasing her arms. “Meanwhile, how about a swim? If I’m lucky, the water will be ice cold.”

He opened the door to her room and her jaw dropped again. The huge room was furnished with carved walnut and crisp white linens. The scent of lavender and lemon oil gently suffused the air, along with the fragrance from a vase filled with roses that stood on the dresser. Huge leaded windows filled the entire far wall, fronted by a velvet-covered window-seat. A thick oriental carpet in pink and white filled the center of the glossy wood floor.

“How’s life down the rabbit hole, Alice?” The humor was back in his tone.

“Can you read my mind, or what?” she demanded, stepping past him into the palatial chamber.

“Only when you broadcast your thoughts so loudly.” He chuckled in a way that made her long to rip his clothes off and handcuff him to the nearest bed—which just happened to be a magnificent four-poster piled with pillows.

When she shot him a glare, he laughed again and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Okay, okay. Let’s just say you have a very expressive face.” He lifted her by the waist and kissed her soundly.

She relaxed against him and shrieked in surprise when he strode into the room and tossed her onto the white duvet.

He grinned and took a step back. “Now I’m going to walk out of here, before I give into the urge to try out that bed.”

Ric tensed when he heard the knock on the connecting

door. This was it. The moment of truth. He held his breath as he opened the door to see Meagan standing there in a plain navy blue swimsuit. An exceptionally *modest* one-piece swimsuit. The high neckline covered her plump breasts, flattening them somewhat, though he could still see her nipples poking out, tempting him to touch. A faded turquoise beach towel was wrapped sarong-style around her waist.

Most importantly, he reminded himself, he couldn't see if the mark was there or not.

He forced his gaze away from her spandex-covered curves, while disappointment warred with appreciation. "Shall we go?"

She took his arm and followed him down to the pool.

Throughout the afternoon, Ric cursed himself a hundred times for not keeping Meagan locked in their suite, naked. He sat on the edge of the Olympic-sized pool, sipping a beer and watching her as she joined in an energetic game of water volleyball with several of the younger guests. He gave himself just a moment to enjoy the show before he went back to worrying about his mission. Her generous curves were well-covered, but they still bounced deliciously as she jumped and splashed. Her riotous curls were drawn up into a high ponytail, but they still tumbled past her shoulders in back and he still wanted to bury his hands in them.

All he knew was that mission or no mission, he wanted her with a bone-deep yearning he couldn't remember feeling in all of his eight hundred years. And he damn sure wasn't letting Owain le Faire, or anybody else for that matter, lay a hand on her.

Forcing his temper down and his expression to remain neutral, Ric glanced around the pool-patio area. A

movement at the garden gate caught his eye and he raised a hand to hail Greg, who snagged a drink from a passing waiter and ambled over.

"Thanks for coming." Ric held out a hand, which Greg shook before kicking off his flip-flops and dropping to the tile beside Ric to dangle his feet in the pool. With his shaggy mane of black hair, tie-dyed T-shirt and cut-off jeans, Greg couldn't have looked more out of place, but his supreme self-confidence allowed him to fit in anywhere.

"No problem. Watching a pretty girl at a swanky party isn't exactly hard labor." He downed his drink in a single swallow. "She's a cutie."

"Right." It nearly came out as a growl.

"Relax, *Ernie*. I get the message. No poaching." More than a few female heads turned their way at the sound of Greg's rumbling laughter and Ric winced, hoping none of them had heard the irritating nickname.

"Subtle, Novak. Surveillance is supposed to be subtle," Ric muttered between his teeth.

Greg laughed again. "Not the way I do it." He waved at the group in the pool and winked at a sunbather in a skimpy bikini. Turning back to Ric, he lowered his voice. "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing. Rin Tin Tin is on the job. So she's the one you've been searching for, huh? Kind of anti-climatic running into her in my bar."

"Yeah, well Fate's a bitch with an odd sense of humor. I *think* she's the one." He stared at Meagan, who was still engrossed in the game, laughing and splashing with the teenagers.

Eyes shaded by mirrored sunglasses, Greg scanned the crowd. "Quite an accumulation of guests. There are a few types even I don't recognize."

And with Greg's nose for strangeness, that was saying something. Ric snickered. "The gorilla tending bar is probably a troll."

Greg grinned. "Cool. How about the old lady in pink?"

"Gnome." Ric tipped his head toward the dainty woman in Chanel and her companion. "Dude with her is a djinn."

"God, I love this place. Most parties, I'm the freak."

"You're always a freak, Spot." Ric punched his friend in the arm. "Has nothing to do with genetics, just your charming personality." As stressed out as he'd been, it felt good to be sitting in the sunshine bullshitting with an old friend. Still, his gaze never wandered from Meagan for more than a second.

"Yeah, well, you're an asshole, but I put up with you anyway." Greg snaked out one arm and shoved Ric into the pool.

Chapter Four

Ric's surprised howl turned into a gurgle as his head disappeared below the water. Turning to look at him, Meagan missed seeing the volleyball that smacked into the side of her face. Caught off-balance, she tipped over sideways and got a dunking as well. When she came up sputtering, Ric was dragging his still-dressed friend in by the feet while the kids from the volleyball game cheered him on. She shoved her wet hair out of her eyes and waded over.

"Having fun, boys?" Even though she'd only met Greg for a few minutes, she was relieved to see a familiar face, especially one that looked almost as out of place as she felt.

Greg emerged from the water wearing dripping wet tie-dye and a distinctly feral grin. As soon as he noticed Meagan, however, the smile softened and the corners of his dark eyes crinkled as he held out his hand. "Hi there, Meagan. We meet again."

Meagan knew that his growly voice and those intense dark eyes really wowed the women at his club and in his clinging wet clothes she could tell that his body, though shorter and broader than Ric's, was nonetheless made of solid sculpted muscle.

As she shook Greg's hand, she couldn't help darting a glance at Ric and his luscious tan chest with its brighter gold hairs. He was slender, true, but his swim trunks

revealed a taut, toned body. His lean muscles glided gracefully when he moved. Meagan felt a moment of panic as she wondered, again, just what the heck he was doing with someone as ordinary as her.

As if sensing her sudden onslaught of doubt, Ric wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her closer, dropping a kiss on her hair in a move so overtly possessive that even she understood it. Jealous again! She didn't get it, but it was sure a kick.

With a short snicker, Greg pulled his soaked shirt over his head and tossed it to the side of the pool, where it landed with a wet splat. Then he winked at Meagan and moved off to take her place in the volleyball game, leaving her standing alone with Ric in the shallow end of the pool.

His skin radiated warmth along her side where they were pressed together and the intensity of the contact made her shiver, which caused his fingers to tighten around her waist. They dug into her flesh through the nylon of her suit and she was suddenly aware of just how little fabric actually separated their two overheated bodies.

Ric's low chuckle broke the tense silence that stretched between them. "We could just quit fighting this and go upstairs now," he offered, a wry note roughening his beautiful voice.

She swallowed hard. "We could," she agreed. "It's just..." Just what? What the hell was she waiting for?

"I know." He turned her in his arms to face him, brought his other arm up to circle her waist as well, his hands resting dangerously low on her backside. "Believe me, Meagan, this isn't normal for me either. Whatever is going on between us has me as confused as you are."

Impossible. She stared up at him, shaking her head. Her lips were dry and she flicked her tongue over them nervously, drawing a groan from Ric.

“Tell you what, sweetheart. Let’s move farther into the pool, okay. And do me a favor, walk in front of me while we do. This is kind of embarrassing.”

Of course she looked. She was only human. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw the size of the erection that tented his trunks. Whatever she might or might not know about Ric, he was certainly every bit as turned on by her as she was by him. Or else he belonged in some kind of record book. The kind they only sold from age-restricted sites on the Internet.

Ric laughed again and turned her so she faced away from him. His massive erection brushed against her backside and she shuddered, taking slow steps toward deeper water.

“Mr. Thornhill!” A crisp, businesslike voice with the same accent as Ric and Aidan broke through the haze of intimacy and jolted them back to reality. Meagan looked up to see an impossibly thin woman with a blond chignon approach the pool. She managed to walk right up to the edge without a drop of spray marring either her elegant silk suit or her ivory Italian pumps. She cast a disapproving glance at the cheerful mayhem of the volleyball game, with slanting aqua eyes that exactly matched the color of her suit. Then she gave Meagan a glare that could have frozen the pool.

“Mr. Thornhill, Lo—I mean Mr. Greene wishes to speak with you in the library.” She lifted her perfect nose as she looked pointedly at Meagan. “Alone.”

“Tell him I’ll be along shortly, Fianna.” Ric was still kneading Meagan’s shoulders and showing no interest at

all in the blonde.

"I'm afraid I must insist. Apparently it is a matter of great urgency." The ice-bitch tapped her foot impatiently. Meagan leaned back into Ric, enough to feel his warmth along the length of her spine.

Ric sighed and his talented hands stopped moving. Meagan tipped her head back to look at him and met his gaze, full of resignation and concern. "Would you mind? Aidan doesn't panic easily. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"That's fine," she lied.

"Hey, Meagan, we need you in the game." Greg chose that moment to call from across the pool. She thought he caught Ric's eye over her head and apparently some signal was exchanged between the two men, because Ric's tense posture and his grip on her shoulders suddenly relaxed. "Jennifer left, so teams are uneven." Sure enough, one young woman had just climbed out of the pool.

"Be there in a second." She went up on tiptoe and pressed a quick kiss on Ric's lips. "Hurry back."

His return kiss was brief and hard. "I will." Then he hauled himself out of the pool and followed the blonde.

He hadn't returned when the game ended fifteen or twenty minutes later. Meagan sat at a tiny table under a rose-trellised pergola near the patio bar, sipping a frozen cocktail while Greg, her self-appointed babysitter, had ducked inside to, as he so elegantly put it, drain the lizard.

"I'm surprised to find such a lovely young lady out here all alone." Meagan looked up to see a trim, dapper man with silver hair standing beside her. He wore a pale gray linen suit and one hand held a glass of white wine while the other shaded his eyes from the sun. "Would you object to some company for a few moments, my dear?"

“Of course not.” Meagan gestured to the chair Greg had vacated and smiled at the older man. His accent was more pronounced than either Ric’s or Aidan’s; he was obviously on foreign soil. He accepted the proffered seat with a courtly bow and smiled at her with such old-world charm that she could almost imagine herself wearing couture in a European ballroom, instead of a damp swimsuit on an American patio.

“Where are my manners?” he cried, shaking his head. “Please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Owen Ferris.” He held out a hand that was perfectly manicured and showed no signs of age. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the silver hair and a few thin lines by his ice-blue eyes, Meagan might have thought he was closer to thirty than the fifty his clothes and bearing suggested.

“Meagan Kelly,” she replied, meeting her hand with his. Instead of shaking it, he shocked her by pulling it to his face and kissing it. She knew it was supposed to be flattering, but somehow, it seemed a bit—well—icky. He held on a moment, until she awkwardly tugged it back.

“Ah, the artist. I saw your work in the foyer, my dear. Extraordinary! Regrettably, I’m told that Thornhill refuses to part with it. Would you happen to have any others available for sale?”

This kind of high-end demand could really make her career. She thanked him for the compliment and offered him the name of the gallery that sold her work. “I’m sure Elise would love to hear from you. I have some of her cards upstairs. I could go get you one.”

“Let me escort you,” he offered with a kindly smile. “I’m sure you’re still a bit lost in this great rambling pile.”

She was, but she didn’t want to seem like a total peasant, so she wasn’t going to admit it. Besides, she was

smart enough to not invite strange men, even kind-looking older ones, to walk her to her bedroom. Who was this guy, anyway?

“Are you a business associate of Aidan’s?” she asked as she began to scoot her chair away from the table.

“Not business, really. More of a...” He hesitated briefly. “A long-time acquaintance of the family. You could say we were practically related.”

“Owain.”

Meagan jumped. When had Ric come out of the house? His voice was harder and colder than she’d ever heard it. He stood behind her, one strong hand clamped down on her shoulder. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Simply chatting with our delightful young artist.” Owen’s kindly features sharpened as he looked up at Ric. “Is that a problem, Alaric?”

Alaric? She’d assumed Ric was short for Richard. She filed that away to think about later. Right now she was focused on the hostility between the two men.

“I don’t believe you were invited,” Ric replied. His grip on her shoulder was starting to hurt. Okay, time to separate these two before they came to blows at Aidan’s party.

“Mr. Ferris was asking about my painting,” she interjected. “Ric, maybe you could walk up to our room with me to get Elise’s business card.”

“Who’s Elise?”

Jeez, sometimes she forgot how little they knew about one another. “The person who sells my paintings. I’ve got her cards in my purse.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Meagan. I believe Mr. *Ferris* will be leaving.” There was so much menace

in his icy tone and rigid stance that even Meagan was tempted to flee. That was assuming she could wriggle out of his death grip.

Ferris narrowed his own gaze in response. "My, my, the bard is being protective of his pet. How touching. Is she that good, or is screwing her merely a side benefit of your errand? What better way to influence her in favor of your boss than charming her into your bed? Have you even told her yet that your meeting was no coincidence? That she's nothing more than your latest assignment?" He smirked at Meagan's stunned look. "I didn't think so."

Ric growled, his fingers digging even harder into her flesh. She shrugged at the pain and he lightened up. "You are not welcome here."

There was a torrent of words back and forth in some language she didn't recognize. Maybe Welsh? Whatever it was, she was beginning to feel like a rope caught between two pit bulls playing tug-of-war. All the hairs on her arms were standing on end and it was starting to piss her off.

"Look, guys, this is really no big deal. Mr. Ferris, if you want to look at my paintings, contact Elise Sutton at the Parkside Gallery in Birmingham. Meanwhile, I think *Alaric* and I need to have a conversation in private."

"Fine." Still snarling, Ric waved his hand toward the enormous bartender, who nodded once, then set down his cocktail shaker and wiped his hands on a towel.

When the giant rounded the bar—with his shaven head, he looked more like a professional wrestler than a waiter—Ferris sighed. "Why must you always insist on dramatics, bard? It's so positively *human*." His shudder made sure the word was an insult. Then he turned a kindly expression on Meagan. "Don't fall for his lies, my dear.

His motives for finding you are far from altruistic and though I suspect he's quite capable of using you for a dalliance, it isn't your charming person that has drawn his attention."

He handed her a card. "When you'd like to learn the truth about your situation, call this number. I'll be happy to enlighten you."

The burly bartender reached the table and Ferris sighed again, with a condescending sneer. "It seems I shall be going now." With dexterity and speed unexpected in a man of his age, he ducked under the arm of the larger man and disappeared around a corner of the house. The bartender, or maybe bouncer was a better word, moved to follow, his pace steady and swift until he, too, rounded the corner and was out of sight.

Meagan whirled on Ric, confused, pissed and mostly hurt. "Care to explain what *that* was all about?"

"Not here, no." His voice was colder than she'd ever heard it, sending shivers down Meagan's spine, reminding her that she really, really didn't know him all that well. She was beginning to come to the conclusion that this whole weekend was a whopping huge mistake.

"Was he lying?" She met Ric's gaze squarely, daring him to tell more lies. Her fingers tapped rhythmically on the table.

Ric opened his mouth, but winced visibly at whatever he'd been about to say. He closed his eyes, pressed his lips into a thin white line and tipped his chin as he seemed to make up his mind. "Not entirely, no." Now he met her gaze and she thought she could see honesty shining in his eyes. If she hadn't been so furious at his manipulation, she might even have been able to forgive him.

"But why me? I'm not rich enough to ransom or

blackmail and you certainly don't need to con women into having sex with you. Why pick me for whatever game you're playing?" Pure indignation gave her the strength to speak past the lump in her throat.

"It isn't a game, Meagan." He flopped into the chair next to her, his voice pitched low, his tone rough. "Yes, I was looking for someone and I suspect it may be you. But that isn't the only reason I asked you out. Whatever has been going on between us has nothing to do with the other, I swear it."

"That still doesn't explain why me."

He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it more mussed than before. "Do you really want to do this here, in full view of everyone, or can we move it inside?"

She glanced around and realized they had attracted quite a bit of attention. She bit her lip and shook her head. "Neither. All I want right now is to go home. Maybe later, when we both cool off, you can call me and explain."

"Fine. Let me get my car."

"No." She held up a hand to fend him off. "Call me a cab. Or maybe your friend can loan you a chauffeur, or something. I don't want to be with you right now." Because anger was losing ground to hurt and she'd rather have hot needles poked into her eyeballs than let him see her cry.

Ric rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He looked torn, like he was weighing two equally unacceptable options. Finally, defeat registered in his amber gaze. "Would Greg be an acceptable chauffeur? I know he's my friend, but I promise, you can trust him. You can even call your friend Jase and stay on the cell the whole way home. I'd feel better if you weren't in some cab with a stranger."

He really seemed upset by the idea of her leaving in a cab, so she caved. Greg seemed like a reasonable choice, as long as he didn't spend the whole trip trying to convince her that Ric was a good guy. She nodded. "As long as Greg doesn't mind leaving the party to drive me home."

Ten minutes later she was in a battered red pickup heading out the back gates. Now this was much closer to her usual style. She leaned back against the seat, closed her eyes and tried to relax. After she'd wrestled her tears under control, she decided it was time to get some answers.

Greg remained silent, for the most part, answering direct questions with monosyllabic grunts, which wasn't helping her temper any. The longest response he seemed capable of was the oft-repeated refrain, "Maybe you should ask Ric."

She stared at her escort, trying to make sense of him, Ric, the whole situation. Then she giggled, despite her miserable mood.

"What?" His voice was low-pitched and sexy as hell, but it didn't make her toes curl. That only happened with Ric-the-rat. "Do I have lipstick on my collar or something?"

"Not your collar. It's on your ear." He'd brushed his longish, tangled black locks behind his ear, revealing an ice-pink smear on the upper curve.

He swore and scrubbed at it with his right hand, easily guiding the truck with his left. Then he chuckled. "Busted. Now you know why it took Ernie so long to find me. Aidan's new secretary is one hot babe."

Okay, now she knew he was nuts, unless the blond ice queen suffered from multiple personality disorder. Still, to

each his own. She smiled back, even though Greg was watching the road and couldn't see her. "Why do you call him Ernie?"

He hesitated, but finally replied. "It's a long story, kind of an inside joke. You'll have to ask Ric about that one, okay?"

So they were back to that refrain. Ask Ric. She wanted to scream. Finally, as they turned onto her block, she tried one last time. "At least answer this. Do you know what this is all about?" Even she could hear the hurt and anger that laced her voice.

But Greg ignored it. "Yes."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"Not my place."

"Please, Greg, I need to know this much." She wasn't sure why, but she'd decided she could trust this man's answers. He was too abrupt and straightforward to be a liar. "Was Ric's meeting me really an accident?" She didn't know why she wanted so badly to believe that the whole thing hadn't been some elaborately contrived plot. After all, she should have known a guy like that wouldn't have gone crazy over someone like her.

Greg turned his pickup into Meagan's driveway, killed the engine and looked at her with an exasperated sigh. "Accident, coincidence, fate—depends on what you believe in. Ask yourself this, Meagan. Doesn't the guy deserve the chance to make his own explanations?"

She shrugged, fighting back tears. "Maybe. Later." When she wasn't too hurt to cope with answers she didn't want to hear, or too pissed to listen.

"Well, don't wait too long. Bad things are going down and you might be caught in the middle." He hopped out of the truck, slamming his door. She scrambled out herself,

grabbing her tote bag as she did. Greg stopped at her door, set down her garment bag and held out his hand, apparently waiting for her key.

“What bad things, Greg?” She handed him the key, not caring enough to fight about the small stuff.

“Again, not my place.” He paused while she used the remote to deactivate her alarm, then he pushed open the door and stepped inside, closing the door right in her face.

She was too stunned for a moment to do anything. Before she could even yell or pound on the door, he came back out, this time holding the door for her to proceed inside.

“You can believe this,” he said as he followed her in. “Ric Thornhill is one of the good guys and he has your best interests at heart. Owen Ferris is definitely a bad guy. Don’t trust him. Listen to your instincts and as soon as you get a grip on yourself, call Ric.”

Her stomach clenched and she leaned against the doorjamb for support. “But I still don’t understand,” she whispered. “What can any of this possibly have to do with me?” All kinds of things had run through her mind—drugs, prostitution, organized crime—but none of them made any sense at all.

Greg raked his eyes up and down her, shaking his head. “Ask Ric. But there’s something he needs to know and he’s been too worried about offending you to ask the sixty-four thousand-dollar question. So now I’m going to do it for him. Were you or weren’t you adopted as an infant?”

Shock waves rolled through her system. How had he known? Was *that* what this was all about? Did Ric and his friend know something about her natural parents? Her knees weakened and she leaned hard against the wall next

to the door.

“Yes.” Her whisper was so soft and broken even she didn’t hear it, but Greg seemed satisfied. He took her arm and guided her to her couch.

“Call Ric.” His voice was still gruff, but with an underlying gentleness that soothed her frazzled nerves.

“He’s on your side, I promise.”

Chapter Five

Ric sat in the car, waiting for Meagan to call. Greg had assured him that she would, she simply needed some time. He hoped like hell that his friend had been right.

Even though he'd been waiting for it, the shrill chirping of his cell phone startled him and only his cat-like Fae reflexes saved him from dumping hot coffee all over his lap. He mentally flicked the hands-free switch, without bothering to check the display. Mistake.

"Must I send another agent to Detroit? One who isn't as likely to be distracted by a pretty face? Madog *is* available."

Ric cringed at the glacial fury in his queen's tone.

"Did your sources also mention that Owain crashed Aidan's house party? Not only do I have to find your heiress and persuade her to give up her entire life as she knows it to take her place at your court, I have to protect her from your enemies at the same time. If you want something to keep Madog busy, sic him on Owain." Madog ap Arnoc was a half-ogre/half-elf, who had been the queen's personal enforcer for centuries. He was devoted and loyal to her but had absolutely no other scruples. Ric didn't even want to think about him anywhere near Meagan. He'd always gotten along decently with Madog, despite the differences in their styles, but if the massive bruiser laid one meaty hand on Meagan, Ric was going to have to kill him.

“Are you certain that this girl is the one? You only have two days left, bard. You had best not be wasting your time and mine in pursuit of, how do they phrase it? Oh yes, a nice piece of tail.”

Ow! He hated it when Llyris resorted to human idiom. It meant she was beyond pissed and that Madog’s next assignment might well be the assassination of an errant bard.

“Well, Alaric? Are you convinced that she is the one?”

He didn’t have proof yet. But the instincts that had guided him for over eight hundred years all pointed to only one possible outcome. Besides, it was the only answer she wanted to hear. “Yes, my liege. Meagan Kelly is the daughter of Emery of Rose and his human wife.”

“Then quit wasting time and bring her here.”

“She has to be willing, Your Majesty. If we abduct her against her will, she’s likely to side with Owain. He’s already done a thorough job of planting doubts in her mind.” *And whose fault is that?*

“Fine. Seduce the chit and *then* bring her to me. But get on with it, bard. Or prepare to spend the rest of your miserably short life as a human.”

Ric slumped in the seat, leaning his forehead on the steering wheel. Two weeks ago, living out a meager human lifespan with no access to Fae magic or resources had seemed like the worst fate imaginable. Now he wasn’t so sure. At least if he was human, he might get to be with Meagan, though he was pretty sure that when the truth came out she wasn’t going to want anything to do with him, powers or no.

The real problem with failure was that the consequences stretched far beyond the life and powers of a single bard. If Owain’s faction managed to remove

Llyris from the throne, all hell was going to break loose here on the material plane. A thousand years ago, a treaty of non-interference had been negotiated between Ric's people and the newly civilized population of the mortal realm. The Fae had, for the most part, retreated to their own dimension, known as Elfhome, or Underhill, leaving the mortal plane to the humans. The pact had been kept, even during times when the humans had nearly destroyed themselves and their planet with nuclear weapons. Owain, however, was violently racist. In his mind, humans were lesser creatures and should only exist as servants and playthings. If he won the elven throne at the council election he'd managed to call, his first official move would be to revoke the agreement, instigating full-scale war between the worlds of human and Fae. Ric was a selfish, hedonistic bastard, true, but even he couldn't stand by and watch the destruction of either world. He was too much a part of both.

Meagan stepped back from her easel and frowned. The colors weren't coming together and it was all Ric's fault. Instead of the dreamy, mystical landscape she'd been trying to paint, the scene on the canvas held a darker enchantment, the trees reaching and grasping, the misty darkness swirling ever closer to the viewer. *Ugh!*

She wiped her hands on a damp towel, stuck her brush in the cleaning jar and turned toward the sliding glass door she'd had installed in one of her downstairs bedrooms. With southern exposure and lots of big new windows, the tiny room made a perfect studio. Normally it was her favorite place to be, her refuge from reality. Today it made her itchy. With Calc twining around her ankles, she let herself out the back door and onto the

sunny patio, smiling as she registered the shabby homeliness of it: cracked concrete, weedy edges and all. Hard to believe that only a few hours ago she'd been lounging in the sun at a Grosse Pointe estate.

"Mmmrrowww." Calc seemed to agree that this was where she belonged. As Meagan sat down on the wobbly cement steps, Calc leapt into her lap, settling his bulk with a regal disregard for her opinion on the subject.

Meagan's giggle sounded cracked, even to herself and she buried her face in the cat's warm silky fur, blinking her eyes against the threatening tears.

"Figured you'd be painting."

"Oooh-owww!" Meagan's startled jump dislodged Calculus, who dug his claws into the skin of her thighs for purchase. Her tiny cry of surprise crescendoed into a wowl of pain.

"Hey, there." Jase reached out a hand to steady her and lifted the cat off her lap. Meagan blinked up at her neighbor and tenant while Calc stalked off to inspect the nearby trees. One of the greatest joys of Meagan's life was that renting out the tiny apartment above her garage had gotten her a great neighbor and one of the best friends she'd ever had.

"If you thought I'd be painting, why are you here?" One advantage of having another artist for a neighbor was that they knew enough to leave you alone while you were working. Usually.

Jase shrugged sheepishly, probably blushing beneath his chocolate complexion. "Just wanted to make sure you got home all right last night."

"Jase it's what—four o'clock in the afternoon? I know you sleep late, but..." Her voice trailed off as she really looked at him. "Oh, my. Those are the same clothes you

had on last night. Did you *just* get home?"

"Umm-hmm." Now she knew he was blushing. And grinning.

"Jase, you dog." They shared a wicked grin. "So how was he?"

"Incredible." Jase's dark eyes took on a dreamy expression. "This could be the start of something serious. I've never talked so much on a date before in my life."

"Only talked?" It was hard to keep her voice light and teasing. Happy as she was for Jase, she couldn't suppress a pang of jealousy.

"Well, maybe a bit more. But we talked for hours." Jase settled himself on a nearby lawn chair, leaning his elbows on his knees and his chin on his fists. "There's something delicious about him, Meagan. Lots of lovely layers and intricacies. Open, yet mysterious."

"I'm glad. Just, Jase—be careful, okay?"

He traced an *X* across his chest. "Promise."

"When are you seeing him again?"

"Tonight. He's playing at the club again, though this time without your friend Ric fronting the band. Which brings up the next subject. Judging by the gloomy expression, I'm assuming your date didn't go too well. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Try pulling the other one, sweetheart. I know fine and this isn't it. He didn't hurt you, did he?" Jase's friendly expression hardened and suddenly he looked every inch of his six-foot muscular frame. When he wasn't working with clay, he was usually working out on the equipment he'd set up in the lower part of the garage.

Her friend's big-brother protectiveness brought a smile. "No, you don't need to go beat him up. He didn't

really *do* anything, it turned out he had ulterior motives.”

“Explain.”

She did. Collapsing back against the sun-warmed aluminum screen door, she spilled it all, the attraction, the house party and finding out he was some sort of investigator looking for an adopted child. The only parts she left out were Greg’s veiled hints about “sides,” and “bad things going down.”

“So he must have known you’d be at the bar last night.”

It sounded crazy when he said it out loud. “I don’t know how he could have,” she admitted. “Even I didn’t know I was going to be there till the last minute.”

“You said he asked about your adoption?”

“Not really. Greg did, actually, when he drove me home.”

“You had a fight at this party and he had his friend drive you home. Then the friend asks if you were adopted. Have I got that right?”

“Right,” she admitted. Somehow it sounded even crazier when he said it out loud.

Jase continued. “But you blew him off? Why? I thought you were trying to find your biological parents?”

She had been, on and off. Since the death of her adoptive mother a year earlier, she’d felt so adrift and alone that she’d started a search, though an admittedly half-hearted one.

“Don’t you want whatever information he has?”

She did, but it was hard to explain. “It’s just...” She looked away from Jase, fighting back tears she didn’t want him to see. “You know how you said that George could be the one, right? Up till about two hours ago, I was having those same thoughts about Ric. Then it turns out

he was using my attraction to get close to me. It hurts.”

His warm hand rubbed her shoulder in a soothing massage. “I know it does. But it also makes no sense. Seems like all he had to do if he wanted to find out about your adoption was ask. He could have done that at any time. Sounds like maybe you were messing with his head as much as he was messing with yours.”

“Probably having a hard time deciding whether to do the job or get laid.” She tried and failed to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“Could be. Us guys are pretty stupid critters when the hormones get messed up with the thinking process.”

“Don’t even think about defending the rat!”

“You know better. I’d still be happy to go beat him up for hurting you, but I do think you should talk to him.” He held up a hand when she swirled to glare at him. “About the adoption stuff. Find out what he knows about your biological family. Then I’ll hold him while you slap him silly.”

That was a good plan, she had to admit. If he knew something about her origins, she owed it to herself to find out. She let out a breath. “Okay. I’ll call him.”

“Good girl.” Jase leaned over, dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Now I’m going upstairs to shower and change. I’ll also see what the cards have to say about all this mess. You call me if you need me, you hear?”

“Yes, sir.” She smiled again, for real this time. “I love you, Jase. Thanks for everything.”

He unfolded himself from the chair and patted the top of her head before walking toward the garage. “Love you too, sweetie.”

Heaving a sigh, she stood, walked back into the house and picked up the phone. Ric’s card still lay on the

kitchen counter, only inches from where they'd nearly made love early that morning. She picked it up, sucking in a breath as the memory of his touch seemed to radiate from the pasteboard and assail her.

Hands shaking, she dialed the phone, mentally trying out her words as she did. She had to get this right, had to stay tough, stay in control.

"Hi there, you've reached my voice mail. Since I'm sure I'll want to get back with you, please leave a message after the beep." His sexy, glorious voice was flattened into detached technological coolness.

Meagan closed her eyes, counted to three and spoke into the phone, hoping she managed a coolness of her own. "Ric, this is Meagan Kelly. I guess you were right, we really do need to talk, so please get back to me when you get the chance."

She switched off the phone, slid down into a chair and laid her face across her arms on the table. There was one thing you could say about the whole mess, she mused. Today couldn't possibly get much worse.

"What do you mean your people fucking lost him?" Ric shouted into the cell phone, still slouched in his Jag, watching the front door of Meagan's house. Six empty coffee cups littered the floor of the passenger seat and another, newly empty, was clutched in his hand. Absently, he crumpled the foam cup and conjured a replacement. Today, even caffeine, a potent drug to one of his kind, wasn't helping his mood. He wished he hadn't given up cigarettes years ago. They weren't going to kill him, after all. He'd done it out of concern for the humans around him. Well, that, plus he had to admit, the smell was disgusting. "I thought your people were *good* at their

jobs.”

“They are good,” Aidan growled, as pissed as Ric had heard him in years. “But so is Owain. Just go talk to the girl, all right? Use a spell if you have to.”

Ric started to snarl an answer, mostly profane, when he heard a loud knock on the window beside him. He jumped, this time succeeding in spilling the steaming hot coffee all over his lap. He swore as he pressed the automatic window switch.

Meagan’s friend Jase stood outside the car with arms crossed over his chest and a menacing look on his face. “Do I need to call the cops?”

“Why?” Busy mopping coffee off his singed privates, Ric wasn’t following the mortal’s train of thought.

“Stalking is illegal in this state.”

“Fuck me.” After tossing the pile of napkins he’d been using to the floor, Ric banged his forehead against the steering wheel. “I’m not stalking her; I’m trying to protect her.”

Better to have her friend on his side, if it came down to it, even if that meant Ric had to say more than he probably should. Llyris could always wipe the mortal’s mind later. “If she is who I think she is, she could be in danger. It’s complicated.”

“This has to do with her biological parents?”

“Yes.”

“Are you some kind of cop?”

“Not professionally.” Not for any authority in this world, anyway.

“Then how did you get involved?”

“I’m a friend of the family. They asked me to do what I could to help find their missing heiress.” That much was completely true, though not truly complete.

“Heiress?” Monroe’s dark eyes widened. “There’s money involved?”

Ric nodded curtly. “Money, land, power.”

“And somebody stands to lose if the missing heiress shows up.” He wasn’t stupid, Ric thought. For an artist, Monroe had a pretty quick grasp of the real world.

“That about sums it up.”

“Come on.” Monroe opened the door of the Jag, motioned Ric outside. “You two need to talk. I’ll make sure she lets you in the door.”

Ric followed, nodding his thanks.

“One last thing, Thornhill.” Right in front of Meagan’s door, Monroe halted. “Hurt her again, they won’t find enough parts to identify your body.”

Ric nodded. Oddly enough, he wasn’t offended. He’d have thought less of Jase if the artist hadn’t warned Ric off. “Understood.”

Monroe studied him for a moment, seeming to weigh his sincerity. He rang the bell. “You keep her safe, now. This is Detroit. I know enough people to make you disappear for good.”

Yeah, like George Novak alone. Though he bet Monroe didn’t know all of his new boyfriend’s secrets yet.

All levity fled the instant Meagan opened the door. She’d been crying, he noticed immediately and he fought down the urge to skewer someone. The man who’d made her cry was him and that knowledge cut deeper than any sword.

Ric detected the surface layer of Monroe’s thoughts and knew he planned to stay and support Meagan during the upcoming conversation. He sent a small surge of magical energy toward Jase, a tiny compulsion. He didn’t

need an audience and neither did Meagan.

"I found him pulling into your drive," Monroe lied, jerking a thumb toward Ric. "Figured you two have some things you need to talk about."

Meagan nodded and held open the screen door. "Come on in, Ric."

Ric entered, nodding his thanks to Monroe, who turned and walked down the driveway toward the garage. Ric followed Meagan into her kitchen and took the seat she gestured to at the table, though he would have preferred to stand. He probably should be on his knees, he thought, struggling to control the unfamiliar sensation of guilt. What was it about this woman that made him feel things he'd never before experienced?

He waited until she'd taken the seat across from him and looked up into her eyes. Their green depths brimmed with pain and distrust. "Where would you like me to start?"

She shrugged, obviously trying for a nonchalance she couldn't quite achieve. "The beginning, I suppose."

He expelled a short bark of laughter. "Hell, Meagan, even I'm not sure where this whole clusterfuck began." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Look, some of what I'm about to tell you is going to seem awfully far-fetched. Please promise that you'll listen first, hear me out, before you toss me out on my ass."

She must have seen something in his face, felt some trace of his own roiling emotions, because she held up her hand. "Stop."

He paused, grateful for the reprieve. He'd never had such a difficult time putting his thoughts into words in his life. All his bardic talents, training and magic deserted him as he looked into Meagan Kelly's eyes.

“Before you say anything else, there is one thing, just one, that I really need to know. You can answer either way, as long as it’s the truth. No matter what, I’ll still listen to your story, but I need complete honesty on this one issue first.”

“Go on.” He tipped his chin, gritted his teeth, waited for the bomb to drop.

“When you kissed me, was that for real, or was it part of the job?”

He wondered if the heartbreak in her expression was mirrored in his own. That she could think so badly of him made his entrails clench and the ache in his chest was a greater pain than he’d known he was capable of feeling. This time the words exploded from him before he could even consider the best response. “Goddess, no! I won’t claim to understand this mad attraction between us, Meagan, but I’ll swear on my life that it’s genuine.” Then she did the one thing he’d never expected. Not in a thousand years. She leapt out of her chair and hurled herself into his arms.

Chapter Six

The chair tipped as she landed in his lap, but his strong arms wrapped around her even as his long legs steadied the chair and kept them both from crashing to the ground. She followed her instincts and turned her face upward. Her lips found his and they fused together in a mind-altering kiss.

Lost in the wonder of his long fingers digging into her waist while his mouth plundered hers, she forgot about all the reasons she was supposed to keep her distance. She only knew that when he'd looked into her eyes and vowed that the magic between them was real, she'd believed him with every fiber of her being. She wasn't about to pass up what might be her last chance to be with Ric.

"This is *not* a good idea," he gasped, pulling his mouth away from hers. From his ragged breathing, the way his fingers clamped her in place and the strength of the erection poking against her bottom, she decided his body thought otherwise.

"Don't care," she murmured back, rubbing her nose along his ear, inhaling the fragrance of strong coffee and the musky, spicy scent that was uniquely Ric. She wiggled her butt in his lap, making him groan.

"We really need to talk." He was putting up a good fight, but he was nibbling her neck between the words.

"Later," she commanded and nipped his ear, which had an adorable little point to it that she'd never noticed

before. She ran her tongue around it, playing with the tip, enjoying the salty taste of his skin.

“Goddess!” She didn’t know if he was swearing, or calling her divine, but apparently his ears were really sensitive, judging by the way his hips began bucking as she nibbled and licked. “Later,” he rasped in agreement. Then he shoved her shirt up out of the way and lowered his head to her nipple and every conscious thought in her head leaked out into a giant puddle on the floor.

The pleasure that shot through her body was stronger and sharper than anything she’d ever felt. She wasn’t a virgin or anything; she’d experimented in art school like everyone else, but she’d never been all that impressed. Sure, sex was fun and the intimacy was nice enough, if you were with someone you cared about, but it had never been the earth-shattering experience she’d fantasized about as a teenager. Still fully clothed on a kitchen chair, Ric was proving that her previous experience was seriously lacking. His tongue and lips teased her already taut nipple into a rock-hard bead. He shifted her in his lap and switched to the other breast, while cupping the first in his hand.

Meagan could already feel the orgasm building, pulses of heat pounding through her abdomen and groin. She rubbed her wet, aching cleft against his leg, seeking pressure to fill the emptiness his touch was causing inside her, but careful not to move enough to dislodge his wonderfully talented mouth.

“So lovely,” he whispered between licks and she whimpered in reply. Then he opened his mouth wide and engulfed her, drawing her deep and suckling hard. Her whimper turned to a shriek as she tumbled over the edge and came. Her back arched into a bow, her legs squeezed

together and her arms wrapped convulsively around his back, chair and all.

He kept kneading with one hand, still suckling until she was finished, his other hand holding her limp, boneless form secure in his lap.

“Better?” His lazy drawl couldn’t quite hide his own desire.

“Mmmm.” She opened her eyes and gazed at him. “Nice hors d’oeuvres. Now I want you inside me.” When had she gotten all bold and demanding?

Ric didn’t seem to mind. “Oh, yeah.” He lifted her to the table and opened the button on her shorts. She lay on her back, knees hanging over the edge, her bottom wiggling in anticipation and her breath coming in short, heaving pants.

“Sorry I came without you,” she whispered, embarrassed but still so aroused. He smiled wickedly as he tugged her shorts and underwear down her legs and began working the button fly of his own jeans.

“Don’t be. I love how responsive you are. But I can’t wait any longer to get inside you. This time I’m going to feel you clench around me, milking me dry. Then later I’m going to use my mouth on you, watch your body twitch when you come all over my face.”

She didn’t have the heart to tell him she’d never managed multiple orgasms. Besides, with the way his words were turning her on all over again, making her thighs quiver and her inner muscles clench, she was beginning to believe that with Ric she might pull it off.

Ric shoved down his jeans and any underwear he might have been wearing went with them. He stood in front of her in his shirt, with his pants around his ankles. He looked proud and glorious, with a lower body that

should have been sculpted by Michelangelo and an erection that had her awed, maybe even frightened. A tiny pearl of moisture beaded at the tip, letting her know his desire was as urgent as her own.

He gently spread her legs, stepping up between them. His beautiful voice cracked as he whispered, "I'm going to fit perfectly, love. I'd never hurt you."

"I know." And she did. She leaned back on her elbows and watched as he took his jutting cock in his left hand, while his right massaged her entrance, spreading out the slippery moisture that drenched her dark curls. They both forgot to breathe. He rubbed himself against her, briefly brushing her clit and she cried out, instinctively spreading herself wider, welcoming his invasion. "Take me. I feel like I've been waiting for this forever."

He groaned and leaned over her with one hand bracing himself on the table. Then with one smooth, strong thrust, he slid home, filling her so completely she swore she could feel him in her fingertips. She was so stretched that it almost hurt, probably would tomorrow, yet nothing in her life had ever felt so right. She fell back against the tabletop, her arms coming up and around him, sliding underneath his shirt.

"I'm not going to last long," he warned, his mouth finding her breast, nipping between words. "Sorry."

She couldn't form the words to reply; all that emerged from her throat were breathy moans.

He slid slowly out, pausing right as the broad head of his penis grazed her outer rim, then drove back in with enough force to scoot them both an inch or so up the table. She thrust back, meeting him stroke for stroke, her cries forming the word *yes* over and over as he pounded into her. His fingers stroked the place where the two of

them were joined, tracing her stretched flesh before finding her clit and rubbing gently. She bucked harder, the added stimulus almost too much for her and dug her nails into the skin of his back.

The table was hard and cold against her back, but all it did was act as a contrast to Ric, hard and so hot above her, inside her. She wrapped her legs around his hips and heard a warm groan of appreciation as the altered angle allowed him even deeper. The added penetration, timed with a sharp tug of his teeth on her breast was enough and she tumbled over into the hardest, strongest, longest orgasm of her life. Her body seemed to turn itself inside out as the pulsing spasms racked her. Her back lifted off the table and she clung tightly to Ric as he shouted something she didn't understand and joined her. The wet, hot spurt of his seed into her channel triggered another long series of shocks through her already overloaded system.

As the firestorm dwindled, their mouths found each other and clung, sharing long, wet kisses as they slowly came back to Earth. Ric was slumped over her, his weight pressing her into the wood, but it was welcome, felt right and she didn't want him to move. Finally, though, he did, sliding out of her and off, still leaning heavily on the table for support.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. "Wow."

He smiled, his amber eyes crinkling at the corners and the beauty of that smile made her stomach clench. He shoved his long tangled hair back from his face and captured her hand with his. "Yeah. Wow."

She shifted on the table, finally noticing how her shoulder blades dug into the wood. With a concerned look, Ric helped her to her feet, holding her close against

him when her knees wobbled. She snuggled into his chest, enjoying the fragrance of him that tickled her nostrils—sweat and soap and pure masculinity. Then a brand-new sensation caused her eyes to fly open and had her swallowing hard. That wetness trickling down her thigh was semen. Holy hell, they hadn't even used protection. She shoved that thought aside. This moment was for pleasure. Terror could come later.

Ric lifted her into his arms and she cuddled against the soft silk of his polo shirt. He stepped out of the jeans that were still tangled around his ankles and moved with purposeful grace toward the stairs. Good. She wasn't done with him yet and this time a bed would be nice. She nuzzled his throat while they moved, licking the salty dampness from his skin. Then she slid down his body to stand facing his chest when he stopped beside her bed.

"Too many clothes." With one swift movement, Ric pulled the polo shirt off over his head. Then he reached out and gently removed her T-shirt as well.

"Mmm." She buried her nose in the crisp golden curls on his chest. "You smell wonderful." She couldn't resist the urge to find out if he smelled that good all over. Dropping to her knees, she trailed a line of soft, wet kisses down his chest and stomach. She'd never felt the urge to perform oral sex before, but right now she was pretty sure she wasn't going to survive another moment without the taste of Ric in her mouth.

She was trying to kill him. Sixty seconds ago he would have sworn he didn't have a thing left in him, but her soft words and gentle exploration had him hard all over again. When her hands and face drifted lower, following the line of hair down his belly, he groaned, widening his stance

and bracing one arm against the carved oak bedpost to keep from falling. When she went down on her knees on the fluffy blue rug, he nearly wept with pleasure and anticipation.

"I've never done this before," she whispered. "Let me know if I do something wrong. I don't want to hurt you."

"You're doing fine, love." Major understatement. Need pulsed through his cock, sending tremors up his spine. Did she know how much her words and actions turned him on? Probably not. Even he wouldn't have believed it before meeting Meagan. Somehow she pushed buttons he'd never even known he had. Her tongue was making exploratory circles around his shaft and it took all of his concentration to remain standing. He buried his hands in her lustrous hair and hung on for dear life.

With one hand cradling his balls, testing their texture and the other clamped on his butt, probably for balance, she ran her lips up and down the length of him, tracing the ridge from root to tip. After a moment she paused, looked up at Ric with a serious expression in her beautiful green eyes. "I don't think I can fit it all in my mouth."

He closed his eyes, let out a short bark of laughter. "It doesn't matter, love. Everything you do feels good." Too damn good. He was likely to come, again, just from her playing. If she took him into her mouth, he'd probably implode on the spot.

And she did. Her warm, wet lips closed around his tip and she sucked in her breath as she slid down, her hand wrapped around the lower half.

Fireworks burst behind his eyelids as he fought the orgasm. It was too soon; he didn't want this to end yet. Forcing together all of his reserves, he lay his hands on her shoulders to guide her off him, up to her feet.

“Sorry,” she breathed, probably sure she’d done something wrong.

“You’re too damn good, Meagan,” he grunted, falling backward onto the bed, dragging her down on top of him. A couple of slight movements later and she was astride him, lowering her hot, tight sheath onto his aching dick. He cried out as her wet heat closed around him and he thought she called his name as well. Her inner muscles gripped him like a fist while her hips instinctively angled to meet his own.

He wasn’t going to last. Again. In over seven centuries of enjoying sex, he’d never met anyone who made him feel like she did. She had more magic in her than anyone he’d ever known, at least when it came to this.

“Ric!” She shrieked his name, riding him harder and faster. He reached up, pinched both her nipples and rolled them between his fingers. It hadn’t taken him long to discover that her breasts were unusually sensitive. Which made him a lucky man, since he didn’t think he’d ever get tired of fondling them, tasting them.

He canted his hips off the bed, driving his cock a bit farther inside. She was so small and tight, it felt like a whole-body hug wrapped around him and he pounded up into her for all he was worth, losing himself in the silken feel and citrus scent of her. When the tremors began in her body, she keened out his name again and that was all it took. Two more thrusts and Ric was joining her, shooting so hard and fast, he wasn’t sure he’d survive the experience.

Moments later she collapsed on his chest, weak and spent. Feeling the same, he nuzzled her hair, delighting in the fresh lemony fragrance of her shampoo, overlaid with the heady musk of sweat and sex. Not wanting to move,

he cuddled her close, stroking one hand up and down the silky skin of her back.

“Thank you.” Her words were muffled against his chest, so at first he didn’t think he’d heard her correctly.

“Huh?” That was him, Mr. Eloquent. His bardic mentors would be horrified to hear him now, but Meagan reduced his brain to a puddle of mush.

She shifted sideways, rolling to her back but still pressed alongside him. One small, elegant hand cupped his chin. “I said thank you, Alaric Thornhill. That was—amazing.”

“Yeah.” And it was. Like nothing he’d ever known. He leaned up on one elbow and gazed down, enjoying the warm flush that suffused her skin, taking pride in the damp sheen of sweat that covered her limp body, which was still shuddering from occasional aftershocks. He brushed her tangled hair back from her face. “But I think you’ve got our lines confused. I’m supposed to be thanking you. You’re the amazing one.”

He looked at her, ready to face the music. As much as he’d love to keep her in bed for the next month, it wasn’t worth risking her safety to try it. He memorized the shining tumble of coppery curls, the soft, inviting glow of her emerald gaze and the lush, sexy pout of her swollen lips before moving his gaze downward toward her full, luxurious breasts, whose tips were still pointed and damp from his ministrations. After the next few moments, she might not let him see her like this again.

Sure enough, there it was. He’d spotted it when he’d first pulled her shirt off, but there hadn’t been enough blood in his brain for rational thought. Now that he could string two thoughts together, though, there was no doubt about it. The proof he’d been searching for was right in

front of his eyes. He leaned down and placed a butterfly-soft kiss on the flower-shaped birthmark that graced the upper curve of her luscious left breast. “But now, my beautiful Lady Rose, we need to talk.”

Chapter Seven

This was a conversation she didn't think she wanted to have. Well, at least part of her didn't. Sure, she wanted to find out what he knew about her birth parents, but she didn't want to admit that Ric had ulterior motives. And she really, really didn't want to talk it out naked, still damp from sweat and—well—everything else. She stopped him with a finger to his lips. "Give me five minutes." Then she grabbed some clean clothes out of the laundry basket next to her closet and dashed for the bathroom.

The only problem with that solution was that while standing alone in the shower, she couldn't shut up the voices babbling in her brain. They kept pointing out that there were now other things to worry about. Like having unprotected sex for the first time in her life. Twice. And she was irregular enough to have no idea which days were supposed to be safe.

Well, she'd always wanted kids. Someday. She could support a child, if she had to and at least in the art world being a single parent wasn't a social stigma. She wasn't even going to think about disease. Present circumstances aside, Ric didn't strike her as that irresponsible.

Unable to justify stalling any longer, she rinsed the conditioner out of her hair and turned off the water. A few minutes later she'd combed out her hair, pulled on jeans and a tank top and left the sanctuary of the bathroom to

find Ric. As soon as she stepped out into the hallway, she knew, somehow, that he was waiting in her studio. The house was almost uncannily silent, but somehow she simply sensed his whereabouts.

Taking a cleansing breath, she squared her shoulders and walked in to meet her fate. Every instinct she possessed was telling her that after this conversation, her simple, pleasant life was never going to be quite the same.

Ric stood framed in a block of sunlight, looking even more than usual like the golden statue of a god. He'd put his jeans back on and his shirt, but it was untucked, rumpled and he was still barefoot. His long hair was mussed around his shoulders and her mouth watered just from looking at him. He was so beautiful it almost hurt.

She saw his shoulders tense, knew he'd sensed her enter the room, but he kept his back to her, his face lifted to a painting on the far wall. It was the first of her impressionist landscapes, the one she'd been so compelled to paint and the one that had established her current style and direction. In a simple pine frame, it depicted a stone cottage, weathered with age, yet somehow timeless, set into a rose garden and surrounded by woods. She'd displayed it, had offers, but though she'd sold those that came after it, she'd never been able to part with this one piece of her soul.

"How did you paint this, Meagan?" Ric's voice was soft, husky. He held out a hand to draw her near, his gaze never leaving the painting. She took his hand, moved close, comforted by the arm he draped about her shoulders. "Have you ever seen this place?"

"I dreamt it." She'd never admitted to anyone except Jase that her landscapes were places from her dreams.

"A bit of a psychic, aren't you, love?"

She felt herself flush, turned her face to the floor, away from his knowing gaze. “Not really.”

He cleared his throat and asked the question she’d been expecting. “The Kellys were your adoptive parents, yeah?”

“Yeah. But they were the best, the only parents I ever knew. They got me when I was a few days old.”

“Lucky them.” He squeezed her shoulder gently and kept talking. “Do you know anything at all about your natural parents?”

“Not really. My mom, my adoptive mother that is, Margaret Kelly, was a nurse. She and my dad had always wanted kids, but couldn’t. Then a woman in labor checked into the hospital and asked if there was anyone there who would adopt her child.”

Meagan paused, tried to put the words in a semi-coherent order. She’d heard the story a dozen times when her mother had been alive, but somehow repeating it was more difficult than she’d expected. Her mouth was as dry as the years-old paint splotches on the floor.

“According to my mom, the woman seemed to know she wasn’t going to survive the birth. She swore the father was dead and there was no living family to take me. Mom promised that she’d raise me and the priest who came in to administer last rites witnessed it. Social Services tried to find a blood relative, but the woman had given a false name and they came up empty, so eventually the Kellys were allowed to adopt me.”

She’d turned into his embrace; her nose was only inches from his chest. She could smell him, his natural musk overlaid with the scent of recent sex. Now it was even harder to concentrate on ancient history. He squeezed her shoulder, a gesture so whisper-soft it barely

registered. "Go on."

"The only thing my birth mother asked was that my middle name be Rose. I suppose because of the birthmark." She knew he'd seen the small strawberry mark on her chest. He'd even kissed it right before she'd fled to the shower. "That's it."

"So that's the tale of Meagan Rose." He leaned down and pressed a slow, sweet kiss on her lips, then pulled back and drew her close to his chest for a hug. "Are you ready to hear what brought me to Detroit to find you?"

She nodded, though she wasn't sure she'd ever be truly ready. Ric took her arm, gently led her over to the ragged, paint-stained gray velour sofa in the corner and sat down beside her, still holding on to her hand.

"I know who your parents were, Meagan. The birthmark on your breast is the proof, but that painting is more evidence than anyone would ever need. That's the house your father grew up in. It's called Rosemeade and it's the estate of the family Rose."

Rosemeade. It sounded right, somehow, as if she'd always known the name. She lifted a hand to her chest, touched the mark through the fabric of her tank top. "Rose. The *family* Rose."

He nodded, his lips a fine straight line. His eyes were serious, even grim. "Your father's name was Emery, Lord Rose. He was killed shortly before you were born."

"Lord?" Her voice rose in pitch, she knew she sounded hysterical. "My father was a lord?"

"That's right. The oldest in each generation, the heir, always bears the mark of the rose. That's how we knew you had to be out there somewhere. If they'd succeeded in killing Emery's heir, the mark would have appeared on the next in succession."

“That’s silly. Birthmarks don’t just appear.” She tried to ignore the “killing” part.

“Not everything works the way you think it does, love. Please listen. I know this is going to be hard for you to accept, but you have to try. Meagan, your father wasn’t exactly...human.”

She didn’t answer, but stared at him, dumbfounded. Ric looked dead serious. Was he crazy? Drunk? Lots of musicians did drugs, right? Ric didn’t seem stoned, but maybe he’d had too much at one time or another and was having a flashback. Or maybe he was just wacko.

Then again, maybe it was a humongous joke and if she laughed hard enough, it would all go away. Eventually she found her voice. “So what was he, a vampire?”

“Have you ever heard of the sidhe?”

“She?” He couldn’t have said that other word.

“Sidhe. S-I-D-H-E. Otherwise known as the Fae.”

“Fairies?” Her voice squeaked up half an octave. “You have so-o-o got to be kidding.”

“I’m afraid not. Your father Emery was one of the Fae. What most humans call an elf.”

“Elf!” He seemed so serious, but this had to be a joke. A really bad one. Maybe she was being “punked” by some reality TV show. Whatever it was, it was starting to seriously piss her off. “Gee, are we talking about the kind that makes cookies, or the ones that help Santa make toys?” To her vast dismay, she felt tears welling up in her eyes. She always cried when she was pissed. She blinked them back, refusing to give him that satisfaction.

He leaned over, took both of her hands in his. “Look at me, Meagan. Look closely.” There was something in his voice too compelling to resist. She looked up, into his amber-gold eyes.

And she watched them change.

It wasn't a dramatic alteration. If she'd been a casual observer, she'd probably never have noticed the difference. But his eyes got a bit larger, their shape morphing subtly into something more almond-like, a touch more alien. The pupils elongated vertically, not to a cat-like slit, but a gentle ellipse. And they glowed. Not with passion, or anger, or even his music, like before. This time they were quite simply luminous.

With a trembling hand, she reached up and brushed back his hair, which hadn't changed. Her fingers grazed the tip of his ear. Sure enough, the tiny point she'd noticed when they'd made love was still there, only now it was even more pronounced.

"Yes, it's pointed." His voice was rough. Not with arousal, like before, but from some other emotion she couldn't begin to identify.

She looked back at the tightly drawn lines of his face. Were his cheekbones a smidgen sharper? His forehead higher? It was impossible to be sure. All she knew was that he was the same man she'd made love to a short while earlier and yet, at the same time, he wasn't. She drew back, leaning heavily on the padded arm of the couch for support.

"This can't be real."

"I assure you it is. This is me, Meagan. Whether you like it or not, this is what I truly look like." It was odd, but he almost sounded nervous. *Nah, couldn't be.*

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, almost pounded it on his chest in lieu of a handy wall. "Of course I *like* it. You have to know that you're gorgeous, either way. That isn't the point."

The taut cords in his neck relaxed, the stark whiteness

around his lips receded. This time, his tone was smoother, gentler. "Then what exactly *is* the point?"

"It's kind of unnerving coming face to face with a dream."

"A dream?" His face was still stony, but one corner of his mouth twitched upward for a second.

"The dreams, the ones where I see my landscapes. Sometimes there are people in them. People who look like you."

"But you don't paint them?"

"No. I'm not very good at portraits. Besides, I didn't want everyone to know I was nuts." Her forced laugh sounded sort of hysterical, even to her. She finger-combed her hair, tugging at the tangles. The slight pain reassured her that she was, in fact, awake.

"You're not mad, Meagan Rose." Warm hands clasped hers, pulled them out of her hair, into his lap. "And you're not dreaming at the moment either. You're a wee bit confused."

"You say my father was an—" She struggled to get the word out. "An elf."

He nodded. "That's correct."

"Like you."

"Also correct."

"And me?" The squeaky note of hysteria was back.

"Half-elf." His hands gripped tighter, holding her steady.

"Wouldn't I have known about something like that?" Surely there would have been signs. Her ears weren't pointy at all.

"Not necessarily. I'm fairly certain that your father cast a blocking spell, a sort of camouflage, for want of a better word, on you before you were born. That would

explain why it took us so long to find you. It would have hidden you from other elves and blocked your powers from being noticed by the humans around you and probably even yourself.”

“Powers?”

“Yes, love, powers. And later, when we have more time, I promise to help you explore them. Right now, though, there’s danger and I’d like to get you somewhere safe.”

A dreadful thought occurred and she sat up, tugging her hands free and crossing them over her chest. “We aren’t—related are we? You and me?”

He laughed and suddenly all the scary intensity was gone. He was Ric again, albeit with pointy ears and glowing eyes. “No, love. No worries on that score. Incest is as frowned on in my world as it is yours. Maybe more.”

She chuckled back in relief.

“You do have a cousin, though.”

“I do?” She’d spent years longing for family, more so since the deaths of her adoptive parents, who had both been only children themselves. “What’s her name?”

“Aidan Greene.”

It took a moment to register. When it did, she gulped. “Aidan Greene? The zillionaire?”

“I suppose, though that isn’t how he thinks of himself, you know.”

“Probably not,” she admitted, shaking her head. “Still, wow!” Then another thought occurred. “Does he know?”

Ric reached out and brushed a finger across her shirt, right over the location of her birthmark. “Not for certain. He knows as much as I did before I arrived on your doorstep tonight.”

“What does he think about the possibility?” It would

be just her luck, to finally discover a family, then to have them disapprove of her, or worse, refuse to acknowledge her at all.

“He’s utterly delighted. He and Emery were close when they were young. The Fae aren’t a prolific lot, you understand. Kin are few and far between for most of us.”

There were so many questions she wanted, needed to ask, that she barely knew where to start. But there was one that had haunted her all her life, one question that had cast a dark shadow over her heart for as long as she could remember.

“Why did they give me up?” Her eyes were brimming with tears, she was so overwhelmed by the emotional onslaught of Ric’s revelations. “If I have relatives, why didn’t they come forward to claim me when my mother died?”

Ric’s heart broke to see Meagan’s pain. Without conscious thought, he gathered her into his arms, holding her close. “They didn’t know where you were. Emery’s shielding spell was powerful. We believe he cast it as he was dying, fueled it with the last of his energy. We knew he’d sent his wife into hiding, but we didn’t know where. It’s taken years to trace you to Detroit.”

“So how did you find me now?”

He sighed, leaning back against the back of the sofa, still holding her securely in his lap. He wasn’t going to examine too closely the reasons why he simply couldn’t seem to let her go. “A tedious mixture of magical seeking and old-fashioned human detective work. Magic does leave some signature—energy trails, more or less. Aidan has been searching for years, as he traveled around the country. A few years ago he picked up a trace of something familiar here in Detroit. My guess is he

somehow came across one of your paintings, but not one that caught his attention directly, one that he could identify as Fae. That's when he requested assignment as the guardian of the Detroit portal, so he could look for you here."

"Underhill relocated their headquarters to Michigan fairly recently," Meagan confirmed. "Hard to believe that such a huge corporation moved here because of little old me."

"You underestimate your own importance, my lady." Ric couldn't help but laugh at the sarcasm edging through the hurt and confusion in her voice. Even when her world was turned upside down, Meagan didn't stay down for long.

She sat up so quickly she banged the top of her head on his chin. "Ow!" She rubbed her scalp while he massaged his jaw. "Did you call me 'my lady'?"

He nodded carefully, not wanting to startle her more while she was still sitting in dangerous proximity to his crotch.

"Am I?"

He thought for a moment, making sure he was following the conversation correctly. "You're asking if you inherited your father's title?"

She nodded. "I mean, I was legally adopted. And I am female."

"Believe me, I've noticed. And inheritance works somewhat differently at the Seelie Court. They don't much care about human legalities. You are the eldest child of the eldest child. In fact, the only, for several generations, as far as I know. Therefore, you are in fact, my Lady Rose."

"But what about Aidan?"

Ric shook his head. "Other side of the family. Aidan's mother married Lord Green Oak. Her brother, Emery's father, married Lady Rose."

"So is Aidan a lord?"

"Yeah."

"What about you?"

That gave him a laugh. "Not I, my dear. You see before you a humble bard."

She smirked back at him. "Humble, my ass."

He couldn't help it, he reached behind her back and squeezed. "And a fine ass it is. But I mean it. I'm not noble, Meagan, not in any sense of the word. You outrank me by a mile."

"Even though I'm only half elf."

"Even though."

Her gaze grew clouded again. "Can you tell me about my parents?"

"Not much," he admitted. "I didn't know your father well and never met your mother. I know her name was Linda Jameson and she was a pretty girl, tiny, like you, but with strawberry blond curls and blue eyes."

She sighed and he went on. "I know your father loved her very much." Where had that comment come from? Ric was well known for his total disbelief on the subject. Even his songs reflected the futility of love; he never sang romantic ballads. He tried to tell himself that he was only offering a platitude to comfort Meagan, but he couldn't quite erase the chill that had run down his spine when he heard himself speak of love.

"Did she have a family?"

"Yes. Aidan has the details."

"I have to know, Ric. Where do you fit into this? And why does it feel like there's something more, something

immediate, that you haven't told me about?"

He sighed. She was way too perceptive. "Because there is," he replied, answering her second question first. "And I got involved as a friend of Aidan's, but primarily because I was ordered to by my boss. A bard is something more than a musician in my world. I'm also—well, call me an agent, of sorts. The rank is knight, but I don't usually get involved in actual combat. The nearest equivalent here would be intelligence operative, I suppose. The queen orders and I have no choice but to obey."

"Queen?"

"Queen Llyris Astrella, Ruler of the Seelie Court. She's a decent enough monarch, but watch yourself when you meet her. She is completely and totally ruthless in achieving her goals and only she knows for certain what those are." The thought of Meagan being used by Llyris was making his skin crawl. He knew, down to his bones, that if worse came to worst, he'd break the geas that bound him to Llyris if she tried to hurt Meagan. Even though the gesture would probably cost him his life.

"Of course. I get to meet the queen of the fairies. Can this day get any weirder?" Her snicker was shaky, but genuine.

"Oh, probably." Her resilience amazed him. He couldn't resist a kiss, a quick smack on the lips. She didn't turn away and he took that as an encouraging sign.

"So why, after all this time, were you suddenly sent to find me? You mentioned danger and I'm still getting this sense of, well, urgency, which doesn't quite compute."

"Because you are at risk. Llyris has enemies. There is political intrigue in every reality and Elfhome is no exception. You, like it or not, have inherited your father's

seat on the Seelie Council. That makes you a playing piece in a bitter, long-running chess match. Both factions would prefer that you end up on their side.”

“And Owen Ferris belongs to one of these factions?”

Ric growled. “Owain le Faire—aka Owen Ferris—is the leader of a group of radical racists. The Ku Klux Klan of elvenkind. He’d like nothing more than to seize control of the throne and break the compact that has kept peace between the worlds for the last thousand or more years.”

“And I’m somehow involved in this?”

“Yes.” This was the critical moment. Ric knew his magic was strong enough, he could compel her to believe him, force her to accompany him, but if he did, she would eventually find out and she might never trust him again. And he didn’t think he could stand for that to happen. He grasped her shoulders, looked into her eyes. “You are in danger, Meagan. If Owain can’t control you, he means to kill you. The next in line for your house is one of his toadies. With you out of the way, he’ll control the council and take the throne. Then the gods help both our worlds.”

“Then why hasn’t he hurt me before now?”

Ric winced. “That’s my fault. He probably couldn’t find you either. But when he saw us at dinner last night, and saw your painting today, I’m sure he came to the same conclusions we did.”

“Last night?” She raised one eyebrow in accusatory question.

He nodded. “He saw us at the restaurant. That’s why I hustled you out the back. And why I left you in such a rush. I needed to report in, let my boss and Aidan know that Owain was here in Detroit.”

“Your boss, the queen.” She was shaking her head, obviously still astounded by the whole concept. He

couldn't blame her and he hoped she didn't end up blaming him either.

"My boss, the queen. Are you ready to go meet her yet?" He tried to curb his impatience, but his foot tapped out a rapid beat on the wooden floor as he tried to hurry her along. Talking was important, but he also needed to get her somewhere safe.

"I—I don't know. How do we get there?" He stopped tapping and groaned. The vulnerability in her eyes was ripping out his heart.

"There are portals scattered all over the world. The one for the Detroit area is at Aidan's house."

"Aidan. My cousin."

Ric nodded. "He's dying to know, by the way. We could stop there for a bit. Finish our conversation. Talk to Aidan." He wondered why he hadn't thought of that before. There were three days left before the council meeting. She'd be safe under the protection of himself and Aidan's security force and she'd have time to acclimate, to ask her questions before being whisked through the portal to a whole other world.

The more he thought about it, the better it sounded. More security for Meagan was suddenly at the top of Ric's priority list. Ric knew his boss. As soon as Ric presented Meagan, he'd be sent out on another mission, while Llyris kept Meagan sequestered at the palace. The longer he could keep her out of the queen's clutches, the better.

In fact, Ric mused, Aidan could probably even be convinced to accompany them. After all, he'd have to show up for the council vote, anyway. If Aidan went along, Meagan would be more comfortable and have a personal ally at court. Then Ric wouldn't have to worry

about her every second. Aidan was about the only other individual Ric trusted with Meagan's physical and emotional safety.

He looked over at Meagan and could practically see the wheels turning behind her clear green eyes. He wondered if she'd been considering any similar possibilities. She smiled thinly. "Well, hell. How long will I be gone?"

"I don't know." He honestly didn't. "Time gets a bit weird when Llyris is involved."

"What about my house, my art, my class, my cat?" He could tell that she was trying hard to restrain the faint undertone of hysteria that crept into her voice and he wanted nothing more than to promise her that everything would be all right. But he never made promises he wasn't sure he could keep.

"Ric," she asked, eyes wide. "Will I ever be able to come home?"

"You will and soon. On my life and soul, I promise that." So much for not making promises. Much to his own surprise, he meant every word. He'd never yet broken a true vow and he wouldn't this one. One way or another, Meagan Rose was going to be able to return home safely, or Ric would die trying to ensure it. "Aidan will make sure the house is taken care of, he can probably even find a replacement..." He saw her shudder, stressed the next words. "A *temporary* replacement to teach your class."

"And Calculus?"

"We'll take him with us. Aidan likes cats and they seem to make the transition between worlds particularly well." Llyris hated the beasts, but he could call in enough favors with her to overcome that problem. He hadn't been her agent for over six centuries without knowing where a

few of the bodies were buried. Literally, in some cases.

“I’ve always thought cats were sort of out-of-this-world.” She pulled her hands from him and stood, squaring her shoulders and ignoring the tremor he could still see in her fingertips. Goddess, what a woman! “So, elf-boy, what do I pack to meet the queen?”

Chapter Eight

Getting Calc into his cat carrier proved to be easier than Meagan had expected. Ric seemed to have some natural affinity with even the crankiest of animals. Then again, assuming the story he'd told her was true, maybe he put a spell on the poor beast. She shivered and tossed her comfiest pair of jeans into her suitcase while Ric watched, his golden eyes intensely following her every move. She hoped like hell he hadn't used some similar magic on her. She'd been acting out of character since the moment she'd smacked into him outside the co-op. If she was going to go nuts over a guy who claimed he was an elf, she'd at least like to think the insanity was her own and not something he'd invented.

As she packed her clothes, her thoughts whirled. It was as though her brain belonged to someone else. Maybe even several someone elses. Part of her mind was numb while another part raced. Yet another sat back and watched, making snarky comments and marveling at the improbability of the whole thing. She shouldn't believe Ric's explanation, of course. She had to admit, his story sounded insane. Elves didn't exist. But she couldn't seem to help believing him. In some weird, twisted way, it made sense, tied so many loose ends together in her world.

She'd never understood her dreams, with their fantasy settings and prophetic tendencies, but they'd always been

a part of her, one she'd suppressed while her ruthlessly practical and staunchly Catholic parents had been alive. They'd loved her unconditionally, but they'd never understood the wilder side of her nature. She knew they'd privately wondered if her mother had been a drug addict, if there was some small chemical imbalance that made Meagan different from the other girls at St. Francis School. When she'd channeled that restless energy into her art instead of her personal life they'd been relieved. Now Ric was telling her that she'd been right to feel like she never quite fit, that her weirdness was inherited from her elven father and it was sort of scary how desperately she wanted to believe him.

She tried to tell herself that it was only her lust for Ric that made her want to believe him, but she wasn't buying it. Every bit of intuition that she possessed, along with the evidence in front of her own eyes, since he hadn't resumed the glamour and still sported the pointy ears, was telling her it was true. Looking at his oversized, almond-shaped eyes, sharp cheekbones and long, pointed ears, it was pretty much impossible not to believe.

So here she was, packing a suitcase while Ric sat on her bed and watched. She could tell by his edgy fidgeting that he was in a hurry, but unlike other men she'd known, he didn't rush her, didn't push. In fact, he hadn't spoken a word except to answer direct questions since he'd followed her up the stairs.

"So did you really grow up in Wales?" She couldn't help but wonder how much of what he'd told her was truth, how much was fiction.

"Sort of," he grimaced, turned his face away from her gaze. "It's kind of like overlapping dimensions, I guess. The world map is essentially the same, though and the

place I was raised is analogous to the Welsh mountains.”

“So your people—they inhabit the entire world?”

“No, just the British Isles and parts of Western Europe. There are other races in other parts. Gnomes and trolls in Scandinavia, ogres in the Black Forest, djinn in the Middle East.”

Okay, that made sense, though the concept of an entire world populated by what she’d always considered fairy-tale creatures was—well—overwhelming. She packed her underwear, blushing as Ric watched with a heavy-lidded gaze.

Unfortunately, she’d been uninvolved for so long that most of her undies were of the practical cotton variety, though in a wide variety of colors. With the hope that she’d get the chance to model them for Ric, she did include her small selection of lacier stuff, blushing even more at his broad grin and raised eyebrow. Her body was still tingling from the best sex she’d ever had and the looks he was giving her said they weren’t through yet. If this was all a fantasy, she was pretty sure she didn’t want it to end. It helped, somehow, to know she could make him squirm. It made him seem more real, more “human,” she supposed. Which was weird, because sitting there on her pale blue bedspread, without his illusion of humanity, he looked so exotically handsome that she could barely keep her hands off him.

“So if this portal is in Grosse Pointe, does that mean we’ll end up in the Michigan of your dimension?” She had to get her mind off of sex and trying to figure out how this alternate reality thing worked was a pretty damn good distraction.

“No, the portals traverse distance as well as what you call dimensions. We’ll appear in the entry hall of Llyris’s

palace.”

“Which is in Wales?”

“England, actually. Near Stonehenge, which is another portal, though a primitive one. Many of the standing stones in Europe are early portal markers.”

“I guess that makes sense. So you didn’t grow up at the palace, or whatever it is?” She wanted to know him, know everything about him. She could tell he hadn’t always had an easy life and all her repressed nurturing instincts were clamoring to comfort him somehow, ease the pain she glimpsed behind those glowing gold eyes.

“No, my father’s home was in the Welsh countryside. I lived there until his death. Then I moved to the palace.”

“I remember you said he died when you were young. How old were you?”

“Fourteen.” His response was curt, clipped.

“Ouch!” This was obviously an area he didn’t want to talk about, but probably needed to. Great, now she was Meagan the shrink. Well, it beat being Meagan the nosy bitch, she supposed. “I’m so sorry. How did he die?”

“He drank himself into a stupor, and walked off the edge of a cliff into the sea. At least that’s the preferred version. I’d rather think it was a drunken mishap than outright suicide.”

She had no idea how to respond to that except for a hug. Sensing that he didn’t want sympathy, she kept it quick and darted back to her closet. What did one wear to meet the queen of the fairies?

“I am not a fairy.” Ric growled when she asked. “Fae or elf are fine, but that other word has come to mean something far different in recent years.” He waggled his eyebrows. “And I think I’ve proved rather conclusively that I’m straight.”

She turned her face to the closet, to hide yet another blush. She hadn't been in enough relationships to be so open about discussing sex. She barely heard him move and jumped when she felt his hands on her shoulders, his lips brushing her temple.

"It doesn't matter what you wear, Meagan. You're beautiful in anything, even paint-covered jeans. I'm partial to the way you look without any clothes, but I'd rather you didn't make Aidan's eyes fall out of his head. He is your cousin, after all. Once we're through the portal, anything you need will be provided. You're quite a wealthy woman Underhill, you know."

She leaned against him with a sigh, closing her eyes. He felt so strong and solid against her back and it was so tempting to lean on him forever and let him be in control. But Meagan had stood on her own two feet for too long and she wasn't about to turn into a jellyfish simply because he'd rocked her world. After taking a moment to enjoy the feel of his strong, warm arms around her, his freshly showered scent overlaid with a hint of her lemon balm shampoo, she opened her eyes and pulled away.

"Seriously, Ric, what will this Queen Llyris expect? A business suit? Evening gown? Give me some help here, please!"

He stepped away, looking as annoyed as most men at being asked to ponder the intricacies of feminine garb. "A suit, I think. She goes in for the formal fantasy look, but she knows what's going on in this world as well. She'll recognize a business suit as a sign of respect, an indication that you take her seriously. And you need to take her seriously, Meagan. She's a good ruler, but ruthless. If she thinks her kingdom would be better off with you dead, she won't hesitate for a moment. Right

now you're her best hope to thwart Owain, but if anything changes her mind, you could be in serious danger and I really don't want you to get hurt." The concern in his expression warmed her heart.

"But you said I'm already in danger from Owain, right?"

He nodded, reaching for the suit she'd pulled from the closet. He laid the coral-colored linen carefully into the garment bag she'd left open on the bed, while Meagan rummaged for her bone leather pumps. This was her meet-with-buyers-and-gallery-owners suit and she'd never been gladder that she'd made the investment.

"I'll do everything I can to protect you, of course. And Aidan will be in your corner, as well. He's got a lot of clout at court and he was close to your father. You won't be on your own."

Meagan tossed pantyhose—*yuck*—and an ivory silk shell into her suitcase. Finally, she zipped it shut and flopped down on the bed. "This all takes a lot of getting used to, you know."

"I know."

She reached out a hand, traced his jaw, the line of his ear and felt him shudder when her finger brushed the tip. She smiled shakily, let her hand fall back to her lap. "Hard to believe we've only known each other for about twenty-four hours. I'm not usually like this, jumping into bed with someone so quickly."

"I know that, too." His voice was low and soft. "There's something special between us, Meagan. I don't know what it is, but it matters. You matter. Whatever happens at court, whatever stories you hear about me, don't let them get to you. I'm a lot of things, sweetheart, including the queen's agent, a wandering musician and

mostly a miserable bastard, but I give you my vow that I will never lie to you and I'll never do anything to intentionally cause you harm." He repeated some words in a strange and lilting language, the same one, she was sure, that he'd used while making love. Then he took her hand and looked into her eyes. "That's an elven oath of fealty, a binding promise, on my honor and my life. As long as I live, anyone who tries to hurt you will have to go through me."

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them back. *Thank you* seemed kind of inadequate, so she didn't know what to say. Acting on pure instinct she leaned forward and touched her lips to his, sealing his promise with a kiss.

Moments later she was flat on her back, crushed to the bed by Ric's weight. His knee was wedged between her thighs and she was kissing him for all she was worth and running her hands up under his shirt. Nothing had ever felt more natural.

"Goddess, woman!" With a groan, Ric pulled himself off both Meagan and the bed. "Much as I'd like to keep you in bed for a fortnight, we don't have time." He grimaced and adjusted himself inside his jeans.

Meagan watched, licking her lips at the sight of his erection straining against the butter-soft denim. One word went through her brain and she barely stopped herself from saying it out loud. She knew this relationship was probably only temporary, but for however long it lasted, the only word she thought of when she thought about Ric's considerable endowments was a simple, primitive, *mine*.

His erection grew even further, almost as if he'd heard what she was thinking. "Love, if you keep staring at that,

it's going to overpower my brain, be out of my trousers and inside of you faster than you can blink. We need to get to Aidan's, catch him up on what's going on. But I promise there'll be time later to make use of that lovely guestroom. We aren't going to deal with Llyris till tomorrow. Tonight you're all mine."

"Right." She pushed her hair out of her face and scrambled to her feet. Ric picked up her suitcase, while Meagan grabbed the garment bag and her purse, oversized to accommodate a sketchbook, and followed him down the stairs. He loaded the bags and the cat carrier into his car while she locked her front door. He held open the passenger door of the Jag, dropping a kiss on her hair as she slid into her seat.

She looked back at her house. Would she ever see it again? When he climbed in beside her, he must have sensed her mixed emotions, because as the powerful engine purred to life, he reached over and squeezed her hand. "It's only a visit, love. You'll be back before you know it, with none of your neighbors the wiser."

"I don't know," she admitted, turning her neck for one last look as they turned the corner. "I have this really weird feeling that it will never be home again."

Aidan met them at his front door when they arrived, his features taut with what she supposed was anticipation. Ric's call as they drove had been cryptic at best. All he'd said was that he and Meagan were on their way. He didn't mention the birthmark or anything like that, but she knew that Aidan, or Lord Green Oak, or whatever his real name was, had to be wondering. According to Ric, he'd been looking for her for ages.

As she walked up to the door she couldn't help staring

at Aidan and looking for a resemblance. It was there, she decided, in the reddish tint to his dark brown hair and his bright green eyes. She was a whole lot shorter and plumper, but she fancied that she could see traces of herself in the angular planes of Aidan's face.

"Ric." Aidan's acknowledgement was curt, perfunctory. His eyes never left Meagan's, just as hers were glued to him. His intense regard was a little intimidating, so she reached for Ric's hand, grateful for his supportive presence beside her. Aidan's gaze didn't miss the gesture, or Ric's protective stance. One eyebrow arched, but he didn't say a word.

Meagan smiled weakly at her cousin as he stepped aside, gesturing for them to precede him into the foyer. Muted sounds from down the corridor reminded her that the house party was still in progress and that it had only been hours since she'd been here before.

Aidan led the way to the library and beyond into what was obviously his private office, his inner sanctum.

Meagan dimly registered the oak paneling, Persian carpet and other luxurious appointments surrounding her. All her focus was on the two men who flanked her like a rock star's entourage.

"Sit." Aidan gestured at a grouping of three leather club chairs that curved around a massive stone fireplace. Despite the August heat outside, the room was cool and a fire flickered cheerfully in the hearth. At an encouraging nudge from Ric, Meagan sat in the center chair and Ric pulled one of the outer chairs closer, so he was seated well within her reach. Aidan poured three snifters full of a thick amber liquid from a sparkling crystal decanter and handed one to each of them before seating himself in the third chair. He swirled his glass, took a long swallow and

swirled the remaining liquid again, while Ric sipped his own drink and Meagan waited.

Finally, Aidan looked up at Ric and spoke. "Well?"

Ric nodded. Meagan watched as the two men faced off, each eyeing the other warily. "It is over, Aidan. You can stop searching, stop wondering. She has the mark."

"As her cousin, I suppose I should ask how you found it, but I probably don't want to know." He turned to smile at Meagan. "Welcome to the family, my dear."

"Thanks." Needing an anchor, she reached out a hand to Ric. The firm warm clasp of his fingers around hers helped steady the overwhelming turbulence of her emotions.

Aidan frowned at Ric, narrowing his eyes. "My thanks, bard. Apparently I should have asked for your help some thirty years ago."

Ric didn't appear to be bothered. If anything, he slouched into his chair and held Meagan's hand even more tightly, as he gave his head a slow, negligent shake. "Aidan, you know perfectly well that I'd have helped any time you'd asked, but to tell you the truth, I don't think it would have worked. Fate had more to do with finding her than any skills or magic of mine. The cloaking spell on her is some of the strongest magic I've ever encountered. I'd have never been able to penetrate it. Perhaps now is simply the right time."

Aidan nodded slowly and reached across to clasp Ric's hand in a brief, conciliatory gesture. "You're probably right and I still owe you my thanks. Rest assured, Meagan, I am delighted that you've been found at last. Anything you need or want, anything I can do, you've only to ask."

Meagan looked back and forth between the two men,

who were both suddenly so important in her life. She knew Aidan was offering her a blank slate, including wealth beyond her wildest dreams, but all she really needed now was information.

“There’s so much more I want to know,” she said, studying Aidan’s lean, unlined face, framed by the tiniest flecks of silver in his hair. She guessed he was in his early forties. “You don’t look much older than me. How can you have possibly known my father?”

Aidan slanted his head at Ric, who shrugged.

“Didn’t get to that part.”

Aidan sighed and Meagan watched as her cousin’s glamour began to fade. The gray strands disappeared and like Ric’s, his features elongated and sharpened. As a human, he’d been stunningly handsome. As an elf, her cousin was masculine beauty personified. Even so, while she appreciated him from an artist’s point of view, his looks didn’t hold the visceral appeal of Ric’s more rugged sexiness. Which was a good thing, since she now knew they were related.

“The gray is part of his glamour,” Ric explained. “Our people age more slowly than the average human, so when we’re living on this plane, we periodically add some cosmetic changes in order to stay undetected.”

That made sense, she supposed, though it left some niggling worries in the back of her brain. Pushing those aside for now, she turned back to Aidan. “I’d really like to know more about my birth parents. What was my father like?” In her own voice she heard the wistful plea of an abandoned child, the eternal hope that someone, somewhere was thinking of her.

“Look into the fire.”

She did and as she stared, a face began to appear in the

flames. The image was three-dimensional and it slowly took form until it was as clear as if he were with them in the room, with the bottom edge fuzzy where it met the flames.

It was a face she'd seen in her dreams. Similar to her own and Aidan's but different enough to be a distinct individual. It was a youthful, friendly face, without the hard planes of Aidan's or Meagan's softer roundness. Meagan stared, barely feeling the twin tears that rolled silently down her cheeks.

"You're a lot like him," Aidan said softly. "But with your mother's bone structure." Another face began to appear alongside the first; a young, clearly human woman, whose brilliant smile, freckled, heart-shaped face and vivid blue eyes were radiant with love.

"You knew her, too?" Meagan didn't know why she whispered, but she was afraid to move in case it broke the spell.

"Not really. I only met her once, at their wedding. But their love for one another, the strength of the bond between them—no one who'd ever seen them together could have doubted it. They had only just learned she was pregnant and they were so thrilled, so full of hope. Even before you were born, they both loved you, Meagan."

The images blinked out and Aidan cleared his throat, as if uncomfortable with the level of emotion that had filled the room. Meagan sipped at her drink, coughing as it burned her throat on the way down.

"What is this stuff?"

Ric laughed, squeezing the hand he still gripped in his own. "Cognac. Old and rare. Your cousin enjoys his creature comforts."

"Which explains why you like to visit." Aidan swirled

his drink again. "Have you told the queen?"

"She knows that Meagan's been found. I thought we'd wait until morning to make the trip. Meagan's had a lot to deal with today and I thought she might want some time to adjust to the idea before she has to face the court. I also thought it might be easier on her if you were to accompany us."

"Fair enough," Aidan agreed, looking at Meagan. "Llyris can be a bit overpowering. I'd be happy to lend some moral support. Anything else I should know?"

Ric nodded. "In order to survive at court, Meagan's going to need access to her powers. I tried to break the blocking spell, but I couldn't put a dent in it. Since Emery was your cousin, I hoped you might be more attuned to his magic, be able to unravel the spell."

"It's possible," Aidan agreed thoughtfully. He lifted the glass out of Meagan's unresisting left hand and set the brandy on the hearth, clasping her now-free hand in his own. He closed his eyes for a moment, his features taut with concentration.

"I can, I think," he said moments later when his eyes fluttered open. He set down his own drink and reached across the rug for Ric's hand to complete a circle. "But damn, it's going to be close. I never realized Emery was that good. I could use your help, Ric."

Ric clasped Aidan's wrist and tightened his grip on Meagan. She could feel the energy flow among the three of them, as though by joining hands they'd completed a circuit. She marveled at the electric tingle she now recognized as magic.

After long moments, she felt something pop and it was as if an enormous weight had suddenly been lifted from her shoulders. Sounds were clearer, colors crisper and the

whole room pulsed with energy. The men shook their heads, released one another's hands and looked at each other.

"You didn't mention the *mionn*." Aidan sounded almost shocked as he spoke to Ric. Meagan had no idea what they were talking about.

Ric shrugged. "You didn't ask."

The corners of Aidan's mouth twitched. "This keeps getting more interesting. You know the queen is not going to like it."

"No kidding."

Aidan bowed his head almost formally and spoke to Ric. "My self and my house are in your debt. Any and all to you and yours. My oath on that, my life on my oath." It sounded like Aidan had returned Ric's so-called oath of fealty on behalf of her family.

A lump formed in her throat. Her family. Impulsively, she leapt out of her chair and hugged her cousin.

"Thank you, Aidan. For everything."

"You're welcome. I'm so glad you're here at last." His return hug was warm and tight. "And one day soon, we'll sit down and I'll bore you for hours with stories about your father. But for now, I think, you need food and some rest. With the spell removed, your powers will be trying to surface. It may be a bit disorienting."

"Powers?"

"Yeah, I think I mentioned those earlier," Ric answered. "You've always had the rudiments—your dreams, your intuition. Those will be stronger, sharper, more under your conscious control. There will be others, too. It will take you a while to control the magic, but Aidan and I will be here to help."

"I think a meal is the first order of business," Aidan

repeated. "I'll have something sent up. I've already sent your luggage to the guest suite, along with cat food and a litter box." He stood and strode to the door of the room. "I'll also take care of increasing my security measures. Get some rest and we'll talk more in the morning."

"Well, that went better than I expected." Ric chewed on a bite of the steak that had been waiting for them on a covered tray in his room. They sat next to each other at the small round table near the window, close but not quite touching. Meagan hadn't said much since they'd left Aidan's study and Ric could practically hear the gears grinding in her head as she processed all the information that had been dumped on her in one day. She ate slowly and methodically, her eyes focused on some distant point beyond the window, her cat curled up and purring at her feet. Calculus had polished off a dish of lobster tidbits and what Ric assumed was genuine Beluga caviar. Nothing but the best in Aidan's household.

"What's so funny?"

Ric nearly dropped his fork, the soft sound of Meagan's voice startling after such a long silence. He smiled at her and pointed at the empty crystal bowl on the floor. "Caviar and lobster. I'm guessing that's not his usual dinner."

That earned him a snort of laughter and he was absurdly pleased at having made her smile. "Mine either." She used her fork to gesture at her plate. "And while I'm not real fond of the caviar, the lobster is absolutely yummy. How's your steak?"

"Excellent, I suppose." He looked down at his half-empty plate. "I didn't even think about it."

"I've been doing nothing but think for the last half

hour and it was giving me indigestion, so I stopped.” She grinned and popped another bite into her mouth.

He couldn’t help but return the smile. They finished the meal quietly, only this time the silence was an easier one. It was uncanny how comfortable he could be with Meagan.

When they finished eating, Ric stacked their plates on the tray and set the tray in the hall outside the door. Meagan stood, stretching her arms over her head. The move lifted her breasts, outlined them beneath her thin knit shirt and Ric slammed the door, ready to pounce. Then she leaned down and picked up the cat and Ric could have sworn the massive feline sent him a smug look. Before Ric could make his move, Meagan crossed the room and sat down in the single overstuffed chair, cat firmly ensconced in her lap.

“Tired?” He supposed he could keep his hands off her long enough for her to get some rest. Maybe.

Meagan shook her head, auburn curls tumbling about her shoulders. “Not really. Definitely too wired to sleep.”

That sounded promising. He glided up behind the chair and reached over the back to massage her shoulders. She moaned and leaned forward, giving him better access, but squishing the cat. With an indignant snort, Calculus hopped to the ground and padded over to the corner where his bed had been placed.

“I can think of some good ways to help you relax,” he murmured, bending down to her ear.

Her answering chuckle was soft and throaty. “I bet you can.”

He began to sing softly,

“Will ye go, lassie, go,
And we’ll all go together,
To pluck wild mountain thyme,
All around the purple heather...”

He didn’t put any compulsion into his song, that would have been cheating, but he did send a soothing note of relaxation and he suspected some of his own desire echoed through the ancient lyrics.

She went limp under his hands, but her breathing was quick and shallow. She didn’t object when his hands reached down to pull up the hem of her top, simply lifted her arms so he could drag it off.

He stopped singing and caught his breath at the sight of her taut nipples poking through the thin cotton of her bra. He couldn’t reach much from the position he was in, so he moved around the chair and sat on the arm, drawing her willing body toward his chest.

She groaned, low in her throat, but he could feel her pulse speed up as he cupped her breasts, rubbing slowly through the thin layer of fabric. She rubbed back against his hands, moaning with pleasure. After a few seconds, she turned and launched herself into his arms, sending both them and the chair tumbling to the floor.

“I thought you were tired.” His words were punctuated by nibbling kisses as they rolled on the carpet and clothes went flying.

“I am. What’s that got to do with anything?” Her voice was muffled as she kissed her way down the front of his body.

“Good point.” He barely grunted out the answer since her pointed tongue swirled around his navel, before continuing its downward path. When she reached her

target and took his aching cock into her hot, sweet mouth, Ric forgot how to speak. All he could do was groan at the intensity of the pleasure and fight to keep from coming

He let her explore, tasting, testing, a nibble here, a suck there. Oh, goddess, *there!* When he started seeing stars behind his eyelids, he grasped her by the shoulders and tugged, pulling her up and over him.

She made a small hum of pleasure as she wiggled herself into position. With one hand on her hip and another to position himself, he guided her tight, wet heat down onto his rock-hard cock. When she impaled herself fully, her muscles clenching like a fist around him, he called out to her in ancient Gaelic, words of love and desire.

His hips pulsed upward as she rode him fast and hard. He tried to relax his hands on her hips so he wouldn't leave bruises. He knew her nails were scoring his shoulder and he didn't give a flying damn. The universe had narrowed down to nothing beyond his hardness, her softness and the incredible friction between the two.

Half the guests in the house probably heard her scream as she came, her muscles milking his cock, sending him over the edge with her. He probably screamed himself. Too bad.

When they both finally floated back to Earth, Meagan was collapsed on Ric's chest, still astride him, while he was still semi-hard inside her. Even though he could have sworn he had nothing left to give, he still wanted her, still didn't feel like he'd ever have enough.

Her eyes were closed, her body limp and her breathing was almost as ragged as his own. He couldn't tell if she had slipped into sleep, but after the day she'd had, it was probably for the best.

He hated to disturb her, but even Aidan's antique wool carpets got a bit scratchy on a naked ass. Gathering strength from somewhere, he shifted slowly, cradling her against his chest. Long, slow moments later, he managed to get to his knees, then his feet and carried her to the wide, satin-covered bed. A mental nudge shifted the comforter down and he laid her on the soft linen sheets. She murmured and wriggled when he let go, reaching toward him. Another thought dimmed the lights and he crawled into the bed beside her. As soon as he gathered her back into his arms, her restless whimpers stopped and she snuggled into him. Moments later a tiny snore escaped her dainty lips and Ric smiled into the dark.

A guy could get used to this, he mused. She was soft as silk against his skin and she smelled of lemons and sex and *him*. In all his years, he couldn't remember ever feeling quite like this and that worried him more than he wanted to admit.

He'd thought he'd given up on caring about anything or anyone centuries earlier, back when he realized that his debt to Llyris would never be fully satisfied. His jealous boss and occasional lover would never permit him to leave her possession. She didn't mind him fooling around, but the last time he'd thought about getting serious had been back in the Middle Ages. Llyris had nearly allowed a young elf to be burned as a witch, just to keep her from Ric. He'd learned his lesson and had never gotten close enough to another lover to draw the queen's wrath. He'd have to be careful tomorrow and warn Meagan to keep things light when she met the court. He couldn't openly acknowledge their togetherness, would have to back off once they were back on his home turf. Aidan would protect her of course and right now Llyris needed her, but

Meagan would still need to watch her back.

The thought of leaving her left him feeling like he'd been kicked in the gut. How had she become so important to him in such a short time? This had been a job, an assignment like any other and now that it was done, he shouldn't have any trouble moving on. But he did and there was a burning suspicion that he knew the reason why.

No, damn it! He couldn't allow it, couldn't even think it. But here in the dark, with his body still sticky from sex and Meagan soft and warm in his arms, his greatest fear was taunting him, pulsing at the base of his brain. By all the gods, surely he hadn't been so stupid as to fall in love with Meagan Rose.

Chapter Nine

Meagan woke to conflicting sensations. Something warm was pressing up against her chest and there was something cold and damp on the backs of her thighs. Her whole body ached and all her senses tingled. Damn, she hadn't had a hangover in years, but she must have really tied one on last night...

Her eyes flew open with an almost audible pop as the memories flooded in. *Ric! Elves! Danger! Aidan! Parents! Ric! Oh, God, Ric!* Moving slowly, she rotated her head. Sure enough, there he was, disgustingly wide awake, sprawled bonelessly beside her, golden eyes glowing and a broad, mischievous smile on his pointy-eared face. She managed a limp grimace in return, as she flopped her head back on the pillow and squeezed her eyes shut, her head still whirling. *Ric. Right.* Well that explained the clammy dampness between her thighs, too. If she was remembering correctly, she'd more or less passed out before she'd had a chance to clean up. And, oh, lord, they hadn't used a condom. Again.

What was wrong with her? She'd never been careless before, but something about Ric made her forget everything she'd always insisted on. Was her biological clock trying to tell her something? Did she want to be tied to him for life? No, that couldn't be it—not yet—though something in her heart was telling her she did want a connection to him.

“Breathe, Meagan.” One finger tapped her nose and startled her into inhaling. “That’s better, love. Let’s not start the morning off with a panic attack, shall we?”

“Uhhh, sure. I mean, no. That is...” That was as far as she got before he rolled over and put a stop to her babbling by giving her lips something better to do. Apparently Ric was like potato chips or chocolate bars. One taste and you couldn’t stop craving more. Without even knowing she’d moved, she wound her arms around his back, pulled him closer and returned the kiss, her whole body plastering itself against his.

The sunlight streaming through the gap in the velvet curtains was at a much steeper angle by the next time they came up for air. Meagan’s body felt like a limp noodle and she noted smugly that Ric didn’t seem much better. He’d flopped heavily beside her, his breath still ragged and his head still pillowed on her chest.

“Goddess, woman,” he rasped. “You should be registered as a lethal weapon.”

“Huh,” she gasped in return. “Don’t blame me for this. I’m boring and mostly frigid. Just ask my last boyfriend.”

“Your last boyfriend must have been a eunuch. If you were any hotter we’d have set fire to the bedclothes.” He lifted his head and grinned. “We didn’t, did we?”

She looked around without lifting her head. “Nope, no smoke. Sure felt like it though.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” He shifted, sat up against the pillows and gathered her up against his chest. “Mmm. My favorite way to greet the day. Good morning, my Lady Rose.” He dropped a kiss on the top of her head as she snuggled close.

“Morning,” she mumbled, already drifting pleasantly again.

“But now, I think caffeine is in order.” He narrowed his eyes for a second and reached his hand out to the side of the bed. A familiar plastic bottle appeared and he roused her to sit beside him, while he opened the bottle and handed it to her. She gulped the diet cola gratefully, while he repeated his actions, this time coming back with a steaming cardboard cup.

“Where did that come from?” Did Aidan really have room service here?

“A favorite coffee shop keeps these ready for me. The soda is from Aidan’s kitchen. Transporting small items is fairly easy magic, as long as you know where to pull it from.”

“Magic. Right.” Took another swallow. “Neat trick.”

“I live to please. Anything else I can get you?”

She was awake enough now to remember a few of her ongoing concerns. “I don’t suppose you’ve been pulling any magical form of birth control from your bag of tricks? Otherwise, we haven’t exactly been careful so far.”

Ric caught the coffee cup before it spilled in his lap, barely and turned to her with eyes wide. “Uh, no. I’m afraid not.”

Meagan nodded grimly. She tried to count the days in her head, but the numbers kept tangling up in her brain. Math was not her strong suit. “Well, I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“Maybe not.” Ric set his coffee cup down and turned to Meagan, laying both of his hands flat against her lower abdomen. “Put your hands next to mine, touching them. Might as well introduce you to some of your powers sooner rather than later.” She set her soda down on the nightstand and followed his instructions, bracketing his hands with her own.

“Now concentrate on your body, your womb. Between us, we should be able to detect any changes taking place, including the presence of another life.”

She swallowed hard, nodded. Another life. It sounded so—so permanent. She closed her eyes, held her breath and concentrated.

“You have senses other than the five you learned about in school. You’ve used them all your life, but now I want you to tap into them consciously. Let your thoughts sink down into your body.”

It was weird, but she understood what he was trying to tell her. She could feel him on a mental level, feel the psychic nudge as he directed her thoughts down and inward. She could tell when he found her uterus and she could detect, in some bizarre way, its normal, non-pregnant, non-fertile state. It would be a few days before she ovulated. She breathed a sigh of relief, broke the connection and opened her eyes. “That was incredibly weird.”

He hugged her close. “But informative. Relieved?”

“Duh.” She wasn’t about to admit she was also a tiny bit disappointed. It had to be her biological clock ticking, she told herself, because no way in hell was this the right timing for *that*.

“Right. I guess I’ve some shopping to do this afternoon.” His voice was a slightly unsteady and she shot him a glance.

“Can’t you—you know.” She snapped her fingers.

“If you don’t pay for it love, it’s still stealing, even if they don’t know where it went.”

That sort of made sense. “But the coffee?”

“The owner of the shop is an old friend. We have an arrangement.”

Okay, that was more than she could ponder at the moment. “Back to the whole safe-sex thing. Isn’t there some sort of spell, or something that could cover it?”

“Yeah, well, that’s sort of frowned upon in my world.” Ric grimaced and reached for his coffee. He needed the caffeine, having gotten absolutely no sleep the night before. While he’d enjoyed watching over Meagan while she slept, he could have used more rest than his rioting brain had allowed. “I think I mentioned that we’re not a prolific group. Population pressure being what it is, the council actually forbade the use of magic for contraception, oh, about four hundred years ago.”

“That must have made for some unhappy elves.”

“We were none of us thrilled, I’ll admit. Reliable prophylactics were a rather long time coming.” He didn’t feel like telling her he’d broken that law anyway. The queen had allowed the exception, not wanting to share his time with a wife or child. In any normal woman, her possessiveness might have seemed at odds with her threat to turn him mortal, but that was Llyris. She’d rather see him dead than lose him to someone else.

“*We*? Exactly how old are you?”

“I was born during the reign of Henry II, in 1185.”

“So that makes you...” He could see her trying to do the math in her head.

“Eight hundred twenty and change.” He finished her sentence. “More or less middle aged for one of my race. Average lifespan is a bit this side of two thousand.”

Her eyes were enormous, her jaw hung open. “Two *thousand*?”

“Fraid so, love.” He watched carefully hoping she’d take this well. She had a lot more to absorb in the next several hours.

“How old is Aidan?”

A small chuckle escaped as he shook his head. “I don’t know, exactly. He’s older than me and it isn’t polite to ask.”

“Hah! Who cares about polite? I need to know this stuff.”

She faced him, sitting cross-legged and pulled the covers up to her chest, quite spoiling his view. Her brilliant green eyes were wide, studying him avidly. “How about me? As a half, I won’t live that long, will I?”

“Not that long, probably, but longer than the average human. I’m not that sure how the genetics work, but I think it varies from individual to individual among halflings.”

“Halflings?” she queried. “Is that what I am? I thought that was another word for hobbits, like in *Lord of the Rings*.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but halfling is what we call our half-human offspring.”

“*Our* offspring, buddy boy?” Her eyes narrowed. “And how many of those do you have running about?”

“None. I’ve always been careful.” Until her.

“Even when there were no, how did you phrase it, oh yeah, ‘reliable prophylactics’ available?”

“Even then. I was an—umm—unplanned child myself and it didn’t go well. I wouldn’t wish that on another. Whenever there was the possibility, I’ve always made it a point to check back and be sure there were no surprises left behind.” And he had—on those few occasions when he hadn’t used magic. He’d never have allowed a child of his to go unclaimed, unwanted. “Anyway, as I said before, we’re really not that fertile. I guess that kind of makes up for the long lifespan, keeps us from overpopulating the

world.”

She obviously had a thousand more questions, but the insistent ring of Ric’s cell phone interrupted them. Since he’d turned the bloody thing off the night before, it could only be one caller. Llyris. He sighed and strode across the room in search of his trousers.

“This may take a bit.” He glanced at the display. There was no return number, just a name. The Seelie Court wasn’t exactly a Nextel exchange. “It’s Her Majesty.”

“Okay.” She nodded, lips thinning. “I think this would be a good time for me to take a shower.”

He nodded and waved her toward the bathroom. “Good morning, Your Majesty. I have definitely found the missing heiress. She has a few affairs to wrap up here, but I’ll have her at court by this afternoon.”

“Now would be preferable.”

“She’ll come more willingly if she has time to arrange things. She’s asked for an appointment with Lord Green Oak, to answer questions about her parentage.” That was safe. Llyris liked Aidan.

“Very well.” Her tone was as cool as usual and he couldn’t detect any hint that she suspected anything untoward, but he wanted to keep this brief to be on the safe side. “You are within your allotted time. You know the punishment that awaits you for failure.”

“Trust me, Majesty. I’ve no intention of failure. The geas will be completed today.”

She cut the call abruptly and he sagged onto the mattress, his face in his hands.

Ric was off doing something when Aidan’s secretary caught up with Meagan, who was eating breakfast on the patio, amid a scattering of Aidan’s other guests. She’d

almost forgotten about the house party, but it had continued. Odd, how the rest of the world kept right on going, when her life had been turned upside down.

A few of the guests she'd met yesterday had waved or smiled, but none had approached her directly. Of course that might have been because Gunter, the bouncer/bartender, had apparently been assigned as Meagan's bodyguard. Meagan's new super-senses were telling her that Gunter wasn't an elf, but he wasn't exactly human either. She wondered if it was considered impolite to ask.

Meagan heard the clacking of high heels on the slate floor of the courtyard and looked up to see Aidan's secretary, the skinny blond ice queen. When she stalked up to the table, she sent Meagan a look so condescending that Meagan thought about telling her to fuck off. Today she wore a lavender suit that had to have cost as much as Meagan's car. Studying the other woman carefully, Meagan thought she could detect pointed ears and elongated eyes through the glamour. Great. Not only was she perfect, she'd be perfect for hundreds of years.

"Mr. Greene would like to speak with you in his study." Her perfectly shaped lip curled at the sight of Meagan's bagel slathered with cream cheese and sliced strawberries.

Bite me, bitch, Meagan thought, but she managed to keep her cool and nod. She stood to follow the secretary, but she wasn't ditching her breakfast. She picked up her plate and her diet cola before following with deliberate slowness. Without a word, Gunter rose and tagged along, his stone-faced expression revealing no opinions whatsoever. Meagan began to softly whistle "Me and My Shadow," as they trailed Ms. Perfect across the flagstones.

She thought she heard a chuckle from behind her, but even with her improved hearing, she wasn't quite sure.

Aidan looked up from his desk and smiled when they entered. "Good morning, Meagan. Thanks, Fianna. Why don't you and Gunter go take a break?"

Fianna looked less than pleased, but she nodded sharply. "You do need to spend some time this morning with your guests, my lord—um—sir. The dj—umm—er, gentlemen from the Middle East have been waiting to speak with you."

"I'm well aware of my responsibilities, Fianna. Assure the *gentlemen*," he stressed the word, "that I will be with them at noon. In the meanwhile, please close the door behind you and see that we aren't interrupted. Gunter, after your break, please go check on perimeter security, will you? Wallis is good, but I'd appreciate your insights."

Who knew elves could blush? At Aidan's subtle reprimand, Fianna's face turned a bright pink that clashed with her lavender jacket. Gunter nodded and tipped his shoulders forward in what she supposed was a bow, first at Aidan then at Meagan. She could have sworn he winked before disappearing out the door. Ignoring Aidan's request to shut the door, Fianna turned and followed him out, her stiletto heels clicking on the hardwood as she stalked down the hallway.

Aidan waved at the door and it swung shut. Damn, she still wasn't used to the whole bibbidi-bobbidi-boo thing.

"Have a seat." His voice was warm, amused. She'd barely noticed his oversized oak desk last night, but today it was piled high with paperwork. A couple of leather club chairs, the same style as the ones that were gathered around the fireplace, faced the broad expanse of desk. She

sat.

Another gesture from Aidan had the paperwork gathered into two tidy piles and the desk between them cleared. She set her plate and glass down, leaned her elbows on the glossy burnished wood. “Handy skills. I’m going to guess that drink rings on the desk aren’t a real problem either.”

The grin he returned reminded her so sharply of the one she sometimes saw in her mirror, it sent a weird tremor through her stomach. “Not at all. Feel free to finish your breakfast. I’m sure there are...”

“I have like a million questions...” Both of them had spoken at once.

“Go ahead.” They said the words at the same time. Then they both cracked up.

“This is so weird.” Meagan found her voice first, still chuckling.

“Amen.” The expression in Aidan’s green eyes was so intense that she would have been scared if she hadn’t been sure he was on her side. They softened, still glowing with warmth. “But it’s a nice sort of weird. I’m so glad to have you here at last.”

“Me too.” She realized that wasn’t quite right. “I mean, I’m glad to be here. To meet you. Knowing that somebody out there cares, that I wasn’t rejected—it’s every adopted child’s dream.”

“Never that, dear one. Your parents wanted you so desperately and I’ve spent the last thirty years searching. You were never, ever rejected.” Aidan radiated such sincerity that Meagan choked up.

“Thanks,” she replied thickly. “That—means a lot.” Way more than she could begin to express.

“How much has Ric told you about your heritage?”

“Bits and pieces. There’s so much. I’m not sure he even knows where to begin and I’m too overwhelmed to know what to ask,” she admitted. “I can’t quite get past the whole elf, magical, Lady Rose part. It doesn’t seem real.”

“Understandable. Anything I can do to help, anything you’d like to ask, know that I’m here for you.”

“How old are you?” she blurted. “Ric said he didn’t know, that it wasn’t considered polite to ask, but it’s driving me crazy.”

“Polite doesn’t matter among family. I was born in the year 895, I think. We don’t always measure time the same way and the mortal calendar has shifted a bit in the interim. I’m a bit over eleven hundred years old.”

“How old was my father?”

“Younger than I. Emery was under a thousand when he died. Far too young by elven standards.”

“I still don’t really know what happened to him and why I was hidden. Were my parents criminals, or something?” That was one of the things she’d been worrying about since the notion had occurred to her in the shower this morning. “Is it illegal for one of your people to hook up with a human?”

“No, nothing like that.” He was quick to assuage that particular concern. “But there are those who frown on it, especially since your father was a lord and any child he produced would one day head one of our noble houses. The Fae have their social and political activists like any race and one of the groups is focused on the idea of racial purity, especially among the ruling class.”

That she understood. “Sort of like the Nazis.”

Aidan nodded, his lips drawn thin, his expression grave. “A great deal like them, I’m afraid. They believe

that interacting with mortals dilutes our culture and that mating with mortals dilutes our bloodline. Sometimes one of these activists goes further than speeches at council and resorts to murder. I'm fairly certain that Emery was the target of such an assassin; there had been an uprising of anti-mortal sentiment that year. It explains why he used the last of his energy to hide you from his killer."

"But you knew I was alive, somewhere." Ric had explained that, though she hadn't really gotten the whole story. Her hand drifted to her chest, unconsciously touching her birthmark through the thin material of her shirt. "Something about my birthmark."

"That's correct. Each of our noble houses has a mark that appears on the skin of the heir only after the passing of his or her predecessor." He rolled up the sleeve of his crisp white dress shirt to reveal his left wrist. Right above the black leather strap of his Movado watch, she saw a dark green spot that she would have taken for a tattoo. She looked closely. About the size of a thimble, the mark was an intricately drawn oak leaf.

"My mother had the same mark—the Green Oak indicator. It always appears on the current ruler of my house. Seconds after my mother died, it appeared on my arm. The family Rose mark, the one my cousin had, is a pink rose that lies above the heart." His features tightened. "Ric assures me that you carry it. If you hadn't survived, it would have appeared on the next in line and believe me, he would have wasted no time claiming the title."

"So that must mean I have at least one more relative," she reasoned, her head cocking sideways. "Whoever would have been the next heir, right?"

"Don't get your hopes up, my dear," Aidan warned. "There are other distant relatives living and of course I'll

make a point of introducing you to all of them, but none were close to your father. As for your heir presumptive, he is not likely to welcome you with open arms. Diarmud is one of the elven purists and I've always suspected he had a hand in Emery's murder. You'll need to be extremely careful around him."

Meagan set down her bagel, her mouth gone suddenly dry. "It just doesn't make sense. Until yesterday I didn't even know that elves existed, let alone that I was partly one. How can I be a political player when I don't even know the rules, the history, the sides? Why on Earth would anyone in your world care what I think or do?"

"You're a player because you have a hereditary seat on the Seelie Council and an important vote is scheduled to take place in two days." He rubbed his eyes. "Didn't Ric explain any of this?"

She shook her head and Aidan made a noise that in a less sophisticated man might have been taken for a snarl. "What the hell have you two been doing the whole time?" He paused, shook his head and held up a hand. "Never mind, I know, but I don't really want to hear about it." A snifter filled with a dark amber liquid appeared next to his hand. It looked like the cognac from last night, but this time instead of a sip, Aidan took a long pull. "Did he at least mention Owain le Faire?"

"Yes, though he told me his name was Ferris."

"Owen Ferris is his current alias. We all adopt locally appropriate names when we're traveling in the mortal realm. His elven name is Owain and he's called le Faire for his pale coloring. Surnames are a relatively modern invention; you'll want to pay attention to that when you go to court. By our tradition, your name is Meagan, Lady Rose, not Meagan Rose Kelly."

“And I should refer to you as Lord Green Oak, not Mr. Greene.”

“That’s right, but you’re always welcome to call me Aidan. I’ve been Oakley Green, A. Daniel Oakland and a dozen other variations in the last few centuries. We have to change personas every generation or so to blend in and to disguise our lifespan.”

She opened her mouth to ask about Ric, but Aidan forestalled her before she could say a word. “Ask him yourself. Right now we have more important things to discuss, like the Seelie Council.” Great. Aidan could read her mind, too, like Ric. She wondered if she’d develop that power in time.

Aidan went on. “Right now, you are the only thing that stands between Owain and the elven throne.”

“Huh?” Ric hadn’t exactly gone into detail on that part.

Aidan ran his hand through his hair, leaving one piece sticking up straight. He took another swallow of his drink and Meagan sat up straight, trying even harder to pay attention and follow his explanation.

“Our government is called the Seelie Court and the governing body is known as the Seelie Council. The council is made up of the heads of the twenty-one noble houses, similar to England’s House of Lords. The monarch is elected from among the council, but once elected, usually serves for life, or until they choose to step down. Llyris Astrella has been queen for over a thousand years and despite being a cold, ruthless bitch, she’s done a reasonably good job. She’s also more than a bit power-hungry, so she’s in no hurry to relinquish the crown.”

Meagan nodded her understanding.

“If a sufficient number of council members call for a

vote, Llyris becomes subject to recall. Owain has, through bribery and blackmail, gotten enough signatures to force an election. He has also, according to the queen, gathered enough supporters to win the vote. And if Owain le Faire becomes the new elven king, things will get very bad, very quickly. Early in her reign, Llyris negotiated a treaty with the mortal leaders, pledging that the Fae would never try to take control of their realm. Owain is rabidly anti-human and seeks to revoke that agreement. His goal, we believe, is to either destroy or enslave all of the inhabitants of the mortal realm.”

“You have got to be kidding!” This was the stuff of every late-night B movie she’d ever seen. Maybe someone had slipped her a mickey in the club the other night and everything since had been some sort of drug-induced dream.

“It’s no dream, Meagan. Unfortunately it’s all too real. The way the council is structured, the queen may only vote in the event of a tie. With your seat empty, the vote will be nine to ten, in Owain’s favor. Your vote for Llyris would create the tie, allowing the queen to cast the deciding ballot. That is why the bard was ordered to find you, to produce you for the council meeting. Diarmud of Rose is one of Owain’s supporters. If the House of Rose falls to him, Llyris will be dethroned and the treaty overturned. If that happens, the fate of both races could hang in the balance.”

Ric was stalling. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was. He’d long since finished any useful errands he’d had to run. Meagan’s home was well and truly warded against intruders, except for Jase, who Meagan was going to ask to water the plants and take in the mail. Ric had hoped to

find Jase in his apartment over Meagan's garage, but the man had obviously not been home since the night before.

Ric had also stopped by a drug store and made the purchases he'd promised. Several boxes in fact. On a whim he'd also picked up a dozen coral-colored roses. He wanted to give Meagan something to show how much last night had meant to him. He couldn't believe he'd been so rash as to take her without protection—several times.

In the centuries he'd lived, of course Ric had thought about siring children. He'd spent a great deal of time thinking about why he wasn't going to and how to insure that he didn't. There was no place in his life for a mate or a child. Llyris had made that abundantly clear.

He drove back to Aidan's cautiously, checking with both eyes and magic to be sure he wasn't followed. Owain wouldn't give up without a fight, of that much Ric was certain.

He found Meagan in Aidan's office, looking shell-shocked but determined.

"I want to meet them, Aidan." Her tiny foot tapped the floor in a staccato beat. "Now. Before I get whisked off to who-knows-where for who-knows-how-long."

"I thought you understood that it isn't safe," Aidan argued. Ric lounged against the doorframe. Obviously the two had been going at it for a while and Aidan had underestimated Meagan's hard-headedness. A soft smile curved his lips as he watched.

"You and Ric will keep me safe." Ric felt a thrill at her staunch confidence in his abilities, even while he shook his head.

Aidan looked up at Ric, raking a hand through his hair. "*You* talk some sense into her. She's decided she has to meet her grandparents before she leaves for court."

“Ric!” Meagan’s smile was blinding as she spun around to see him. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

He shouldn’t have missed her so much, not when he’d been gone such a short time. It took everything he had in him not to sweep her into his arms and kiss the daylights out of her, but he settled for catching the hand she held out and dropping a quick peck on her wrist. If they were heading to court today, he had to learn to keep his hands to himself and she was going to have to learn to hide her response to his presence.

“You need to work on your listening skills, love.” He wrestled his hormones under control. “You’ll be at a huge disadvantage at court if you can’t hear them coming.”

She grimaced. “I know. The senses this morning have been pretty weird. Most of the time I can handle the brighter colors, the sharper smells, but once in a while, something will catch me off guard and everything spins for a second.”

“You’ll get the hang of it, never fear,” he assured her. “So you’ve decided to meet Linda’s parents, have you?”

“Well, duh!” Her snort left no doubt as to her opinion of his question. “If either of you had bothered to mention yesterday that I had grandparents still living, we’d have had this conversation already. I told you that both of my parents were older when they adopted me. I’ve never had grandparents before and I’m not going anywhere till I get to meet them.”

“They’ll be over the moon, you know,” Ric mused to Aidan. “When I spoke with them last week, they made me promise I’d keep them informed.”

“You’ve met them too?” Her eyes narrowed and the foot resumed its tapping. “Explain!”

Ric hated to deny her, but Aidan was right on this one.

“When the queen sent me here, I had Aidan introduce me to the Jamesons. I’d hoped that if I got to know them, I might be more likely to recognize you if I found you. But that was well before Owain knew I was here. I’m sorry, love, but I think your cousin has the right of it this time. If Owain finds them, he could use them as leverage against you.”

Her face fell; she understood.

“I promise, as soon as everything is sorted out, I’ll personally take you to meet them.”

“Fair enough.” There was resignation in the sigh she heaved. “But it isn’t at all fair that you got to meet them and I didn’t. What were they like?”

“Nice people. Frank Jameson is a retired pipe-fitter and Ruth taught first grade for many years. Your mother was the youngest of three, so they do have other grandchildren and I believe, great-grandchildren. But they never gave up hope that one day you’d be found.”

“I have aunts, uncles and more cousins, too.” Her smile was dreamy. “And they’re here, in Detroit?”

“Windsor, actually,” Aidan replied. “Apparently when Linda went into hiding, she didn’t stray far, but she did have the good sense to muddy the waters by crossing the international border.”

“I keep getting the feeling that she knew she was going to die.” Meagan sighed. Ric and Aidan exchanged a look. Who was going to tell her this part?

“She probably did,” Aidan finally admitted, with a glare at Ric. “It’s a ritual called life-bonding. Once their life forces were tied together, neither could survive without the other for long. Her pregnancy would have been the only reason she survived as long as she did.”

“O-o-o-kay.” Meagan’s brow furrowed and she gave

her curls a shake. She looked like she was thinking about that topic a lot harder than Ric really wanted her to, so he decided it was time to change the subject.

“We can get back to that later. Right now I have another idea I wanted to discuss. I think Meagan should take the painting I bought and present it to Llyris as a gift when she arrives at court.”

“But that’s yours,” Meagan demurred. “You paid for it and everything!”

Aidan was nodding thoughtfully. “Yes, but Her Majesty really likes presents,” he agreed. “Artistic talent is highly valued among the Fae. The fact that your paintings represent the faerie realm will make them even more popular, especially among those who spend time here and will enjoy the reminders of home.”

“But that one belongs to Ric,” she insisted, eyes narrowed, chin thrust out. The foot started tapping again and Ric knew he was sunk. “If you want one for Llyris, we’ll get her a different one. It’s not like I don’t have plenty of others.”

“I can go back to your house, collect whichever one you’d like me to bring.”

“Can’t you—you know?” She snapped her fingers in the air. “Poof it here?”

He squeezed his eyes together. More explanations. “Not really. It’s not always a perfect translation. Molecular rearrangement, or something. It’s fine for coffee, or clothing, but not so good for works of art. There’s a reason I never blink my guitars.”

“Or electronics,” Aidan added. “My MP3 player never worked quite right again after the first time Fianna tried it.”

“Well, if we’re going out, we might as well pick up

one from the gallery instead of my house. Those are already framed and matted and everything. That should make an even better gift.”

They tried, of course, to talk her out of it. Tried to tell her it was dangerous, that Ric could handle the errand alone. Meagan stood her ground and a few minutes later they all stood to leave.

“The djinn representatives are going to be most displeased, my lord.” Fianna sat stiffly beside her desk, her lips pursed when Aidan stopped to tell her he was leaving. Ric rolled his eyes at Meagan, as if to say that he’d enjoy watching Aidan take her down a peg.

“The djinn representatives understand the mechanics of deal-making,” Aidan replied. “But they have been patient. Move my meeting with them up an hour and start clearing the rest of the guests out. I want to be able to break free and be Underhill by five.” He smiled at Meagan. “I want to see the queen’s face when you hand her that painting.”

Fianna shot a disgusted glare at Meagan before replying primly. “As you wish, my lord.”

“It’s *Mister* Greene, Fianna,” Aidan shook his head ruefully as he walked Ric and Meagan to the door. “She’s a fantastic secretary, but it’s going to take years to train her to behave in this realm,” he grumbled.

Chapter Ten

Elise Sutton wasn't what Ric had been expecting.

That the gallery owner was on-site on a Sunday afternoon was surprising but not as surprising as realizing that Meagan's friend and patron was a part-blood herself, and unless Ric missed his guess, also a very powerful witch.

Elise's dark eyes narrowed as she studied Ric, much as she might examine a particularly repulsive piece of art brought to her attention. He saw the spark of recognition when she realized what he was. Then Elise's attention turned back to Meagan and her jaw dropped. All her veneer of sophistication was lost for a brief but telling moment. Elise hadn't had any idea that Meagan was half-Fae. Now she did.

"Elise, I'd like you to meet Ric Thornhill. Ric, Elise is the genius who figured out how to sell my work."

"Delighted." Ric held out a hand and waited to see if she'd take it. Swallowing hard, she did, for about half a second, but she didn't look any too pleased.

"I'm going to be out of town for a few days," Meagan told her friend. "Contact Jase if you need anything, I guess."

"Actually, she can get a message to you through Aidan, if necessary," Ric reminded her. He pulled a business card for Underhill, Inc. out of his pocket and handed it to Elise.

“He’s my cousin, believe it or not,” Meagan added with a weird smile. “It’s such a long story, but apparently I’m a long-lost heiress. I have to fly out to California to sort out all the legal details.”

“Cell phones work in California,” Elise replied dryly. She stuffed the card into a pocket and shot Ric a hard, knowing look. “Underhill...Inc., huh?”

“Exactly.”

“Meagan, could you do me a favor? A new sculpture came in this morning and I’d appreciate your input on the display.” She pointed through an open archway into the next room of the gallery.

Meagan snickered but shrugged when Ric nodded his approval. Meagan would be out of earshot, but not out of his line of vision. “I promise, Mom, he’ll have me home by curfew,” she called over her shoulder as she slipped off toward the niche.

“What have you done to her?” Sutton’s whisper was low and vicious.

“Removed the best damn blocking spell I’ve ever seen,” he whispered back, mindful that Meagan’s hearing was now enhanced like his own. His eyes never left her adorably swaying butt. “What you see now is all Meagan, believe me. And she *is* Aidan Greene’s cousin and a missing heiress.”

“But not in California, right?”

“Exactly.” Who the hell was she and how much did she know? Ric was going to have a serious talk with Aidan. “She’s got to make an appearance at court. She’ll be back in Detroit soon enough.”

“She’d better be.” The black eyes had narrowed to slits, but widened again in a smile when Meagan came back with a comment about light and placement.

Apparently Elise really did trust Meagan's judgment, because Elise nodded thoughtfully.

"You're right, as usual. I knew there was something I needed to fix, but I couldn't get a grasp of what. I'll have Fred move it first thing in the morning." She stuck her hand into the neckline of her ivory linen shirt and came up with a smooth green stone on a black silk cord, which she pulled off over her head and looped over Meagan's.

"This is malachite. It's for protection. Keep it on you, next to your skin *at all times* and don't trust anyone you meet there. If you're in trouble, hold it in your hand and concentrate. Help should be forthcoming." She leaned over and kissed Meagan on the cheek. "Be careful." With a withering glare at Ric, she turned and stalked off on her black stiletto boots.

"O-o-o-kay." Meagan watched her friend's retreating back with a look of stark confusion.

"She's an interesting individual. I wonder why Aidan didn't mention her."

"Why would he?" Meagan turned on him. "And what the heck was that all about, anyway?"

Ric grinned. There were others within possible earshot, so he leaned down and whispered. "Well, sweetheart, for some reason, your witchy friend seems to have a thing against elves."

"Ha ha. And she's not a witch. She's really nice. Normally."

Ric laid a hand at the small of her back and guided her toward a deserted corner. He stood, pretending to observe a starkly modern painting and whispered. "Not bitchy, witchy. As in practitioner of the magical arts. And unless I miss my guess, your friend isn't just any witch, but a *Wyndewin* witch. That means she's a member of a

powerful clan of witches and wizards. She has the gift of recognizing the races and she knows about Underhill. She was surprised to see you without your blocking spell in place.” And she’d gone pale beneath her golden skin tone when Ric had mentioned Aidan Greene.

But she’d given Meagan a powerful gift. He toyed with the amulet, studied the Asian character etched into the polished stone, awed by the strength of the protective magic it radiated. Meagan’s witch friend meant business.

Meagan shifted restlessly, drawing Ric’s attention. “I didn’t even tell her that we were here to steal back a painting.” She tugged on his hand. “Come on. We need to go pick one out.”

She took his hand and tugged him to an alcove with a soft Aubusson carpet cushioning the white marble floor. Vases of roses stood in the corners, while diffuse light and moss-green velvet drapery highlighted the soft, rich colors and dreamlike quality of six of Meagan’s landscapes.

Like the others he’d seen at Meagan’s home, they were all so strikingly lovely that the viewer longed to be pulled right inside the picture. As much as Ric preferred spending his time in the human realm, he had to fight a surge of homesickness while gazing at the scenes before him.

“Well?” Meagan elbowed him in the ribs.

He shook his head, searching for words. Finally he settled on the only one that seemed to fit. “Magnificent.”

“Are they all...you know?”

“Underhill? Yes. I’ve been there.” He pointed to the third painting, a wooded glen centered on a tilted sandstone obelisk. Delicate wildflowers dotted the foreground and a tiny stream meandered across a back corner. “It’s an ancient portal in Cornwall. The others are

vaguely familiar, but not locations I recognize. I suppose you'd be upset if I bought all of them."

"It would feel awfully weird," she agreed. "Besides, we need one for the queen."

"How about the other five? I don't know why it would feel weird." Though he did, sort of. But she was so much fun to tease. "You said you have all my CDs."

Meagan giggled and clapped her hand over her mouth as the sound echoed off the marble walls. "It's not the same. I only paid twelve bucks apiece for the CDs, you idiot."

"And if I don't buy them, Aidan probably will. I'm really surprised that he hasn't already discovered this place. Part of his job as regional guardian is to keep track of magic users in the area."

"Oooh, looks like Big Brother missed one." Meagan smiled in the way that made something in the vicinity of his stomach twist into knots.

"Or something," Ric agreed, still entranced by the artwork.

"I should *give* one to Aidan," she murmured. "He's spent so much time and money trying to find me, after all. Which one do you think he'd like best?"

"Any of them. But the oak tree would be the most symbolic. For the queen, I think that one." The waterfall with a Romanesque folly in the background was the most regal and grand of the lot.

"Good call." She nodded cheerfully and squeezed his hand before disengaging from him. "Wait here!" She bounded away. He followed at a distance and planted himself in the corridor outside Elise's office. It allowed her a bit of privacy to talk to her friend, but no one would be able to get past to hurt her.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Elise looked less than pleased as she marked off the invoices on the three paintings Meagan had specified. A staff member had been directed out to the gallery to remove and wrap them and replace them from the supply Elise kept in storage. She’d waved off Meagan’s offer to pay for the frames, saying they’d deal with it later. “You know what he is, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but one of these days, you’re gonna have to explain how *you* do,” Meagan returned. “It’s weird, having family again all of a sudden and even weirder knowing there are people out there who want me...out of the way, but, oh God, Elise, it’s also the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“If you’re sure you want to do this, you have to promise me you’ll be careful. Their politics, their values, they’re not what you’re used to. Human life doesn’t mean a lot to them.”

“What happened to you, Elise?” Meagan had never seen her friend this intense about anything other than a sale. Or her daughter. When it came to Adina, Elise could be downright draconic.

Elise shook her head, her dark hair swinging above her shoulders. “We’ll talk about it another time. Be careful and keep the amulet on at all times, okay? And, Meagan?”

“What?”

“Aidan Greene isn’t always a nice man, but he is honorable. If it comes down to it, you can probably trust him to keep you safe.”

“You know my cousin?” This kept getting weirder.

Elise nodded, her lips still drawn in that grim, white line. “So it seems. Destiny can be an outright bitch

sometimes, but she sure has a twisted sense of humor.”

“O-o-o-kayyyy.” Meagan sensed she wasn’t going to get any more information out of her friend and she knew that she and Ric really did need to be on their way. “Look in on Jase for me, will you? Make sure he eats now and again?”

“Don’t worry, mama bird, your chick will be fine.” Elise leaned forward and kissed Meagan on the cheek, a rare gesture of emotion from the normally stoic businesswoman. “Get me a message if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” Meagan blinked back a tear. She was still puzzling over Elise’s odd behavior when she met Ric at the door with three large packages in his arms. He didn’t say a word until they were in the Jag with the paintings lodged carefully in the back seat and the top up to protect the cargo.

“Three?”

She shrugged. “You said you have an apartment in San Francisco and a place at the court. With the one you bought the other day, now you can keep one in each place.” And have something to remember her by when he moved on, she thought sadly. For herself, she could already envision long nights spent listening to Ric’s music and reminiscing about their time together.

“The obelisk?” he asked softly.

“Umm-hmm. If you want it, that is.” He could have been flattering her when he’d offered to buy the lot. “If not, Elise will take it back.”

He swung his right arm out and dragged her across the console between their seats, smacking a kiss on the top of her head. “Uh-uh. You gave it to me; it’s mine. She can’t have it back. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She was glad he couldn’t see the stupid grin she probably had plastered to her face.

“Want to stop for lunch on the way back?” he offered. “One last meal in the mortal realm?”

Yikes! He didn’t have to make it sound so ominous.

“I’ll give Aidan a call, so he doesn’t send out the cavalry.” Ric snapped his fingers and his phone popped into his hands. He apparently also dialed it magically, since his fingers never touched the keypad. His eyes never even flickered from the road as he navigated the busy traffic with smooth precision.

Even with her enhanced hearing, she could still only make out every third or fourth word from the other end of the conversation, so she decided to try again to contact Jase and left yet another voice mail. It was unlike Jase to ignore his calls for so long, but if his hot new romance was going anything like Meagan’s, she could certainly understand. “Call me when you come up for air.” She hung up and turned back to Ric.

It only took a few seconds before Ric said, “See you later,” flipped his phone shut, and poofed it, she supposed, back into his pocket. She was really, really going to have to learn how to do that. She wondered if it worked for laundry, or cleaning bathrooms.

“Hey, wait a minute! I thought you said you couldn’t poof electronics. How come you can do it with your phone?”

“First of all, we call it blinking, or transporting, not ‘poofing.’ Secondly, look at the brand name.” He poofed—uh—blinked it back into his fingers and handed it to her.

“Underhill Electronics. So what? Underhill makes all kinds of stuff. That’s why Aidan gets the mansion, right?”

“That phone isn’t one you’ll find on the market, it was a ‘gift’...” She could practically hear quotation marks around the word. “From Queen Llyris, so she can keep tabs on me. It’s put together with a lot more magic than technology.”

“Okay.” Yet another totally weird, yet weirdly logical explanation. If it kept up, Meagan’s brain was going to explode. Since Ric was smiling, she assumed he’d won his argument with Aidan. She smiled back. “So what’s for lunch?”

They ended up at a busy chain restaurant along the freeway where, Ric explained, they should be safe, since the bustling crowd provided its own sort of anonymity. Ric cheerfully plowed through a tower of onion rings while Meagan toyed with her salad. So much for thinking she was starving.

“Might as well enjoy it now. You can’t get stuff like this Underhill,” he noted, popping another crispy ring into his mouth, closing his eyes and humming with pleasure at the taste. “Want one? Self-defense.”

That made her grin. She accepted a small one and munched thoughtfully. “So even the food’s different, huh?”

Ric grinned around a mouthful of food and wiggled his hand in a gesture of ambiguity. She loved watching those hands with their long fingers and short, neat nails. With or without his glamour, the fingertips on his left hand bore thick calluses from his guitar strings and she found that small consistency comforting. After he swallowed, he replied, his voice pitched soft and low.

“Not so much different as less creative. Think traditional English cooking, but with a mostly vegetarian bent. Quite formal, carefully prepared, but rather bland.

And it's all good for you, or mostly. Of course, you can request anything you want, you'll be in a position of power, after all, but some things..." He waved at the empty onion ring dish. "Some things they never get quite right."

"Will I be able to paint?"

"Of course. You won't be a prisoner. I mean, I expect Llyris will keep you pretty close till the meeting, but after that, your time will be your own. You'll be able to stay, come home, or whatever. If you do decide to stay awhile, you can contact someone on this side, like Aidan and arrange to get anything you need, paint, canvas, Diet Coke. That's one of the reasons that we maintain a presence in this realm."

After lunch they walked slowly back to the car. Meagan was having some serious cold feet and even Ric seemed to be stalling. As he started the engine, she pulled out her cell phone.

"Still trying to reach Jase?"

"Yeah." She pushed the speed dial and waited, but didn't bother leaving another voice mail before flipping the phone shut. "I don't suppose we could stop by my house on the way back to Aidan's?"

"You're that worried about him?"

"I guess." She shook her head, gnawed on a lock of hair. "Hell, I don't know. I'm probably being silly, but it isn't like him to ignore my messages all day like this. I wanted to ask him to take in the mail and whatnot."

"He might be—occupied. You did say things sounded pretty hot and heavy between him and George."

"Maybe. But Jase is such a worrier and I felt sure he'd want to know how our talk turned out last night. I really expected him to call me first thing this morning for a

complete rundown.”

He squeezed her thigh. “We can check. Meanwhile, why don’t you try calling the New Moon? Greg or George should be there about now. Maybe Jase is there with them.”

He rattled off a number which she dialed as he spoke. A cheerfully gruff Greg answered the call. “Nope, gorgeous, haven’t seen him today. But George is right here, want to talk to him?”

“Sure.”

But George hadn’t seen him either.

“No, he hasn’t called me back today and he never showed up for our lunch date. I figured he’d changed his mind.”

He sounded so dejected, Meagan had to reassure him. “I’m sure that’s not it. Yesterday when I talked to him, he was really looking forward to seeing you again.”

“Well. I guess that’s good news and bad. I’ll make a couple calls, see what I can find out. If I do hear from him, I’ll tell him to give you a call, right away. I’m sure he’ll turn up with a perfectly rational explanation.”

“I hope so.” But nothing much had been rational in her life for the last few days, so she wasn’t counting on it.

She heard a minor scuffle on the other end of the call and Greg’s lower voice came back on. “Hey, Meagan, let me talk to Ernie for a minute, would you?”

“One of these days you’ll explain that.” She laughed and handed over the phone. Ric um-hmmed a couple of times. “No problem, Spot. We’ll call you when we get there.”

It only took a few minutes to reach Meagan’s house, especially at the speed Ric was driving. She wondered if he had a spell that protected him from traffic cops, but she

didn't want to distract him by asking. She held on to the armrest with a white-knuckled grip. When they pulled into her driveway, safe and unticketed, she let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"I don't suppose you'll wait in the car while I check things out?" Ric sounded resigned. Ah, how well he was coming to know her and how quickly, too.

She patted his thigh and grinned. "Not a chance, ear boy."

"At least stay behind me while I check the wards on your house, all right?"

"Fair enough." It wasn't like she'd recognize a ward if one smacked her in the face. She obediently waited in the driveway while he strode up to her back door and seemed to study it intently. He squeezed his eyes shut and straightened his shoulders before turning to face her. Uh-oh, that couldn't mean good news.

"Owain's been here," Ric told her flatly when he returned to the car and leaned close to her opened window. "Not in the last hour or so, but today. He didn't get through my wards on the house, but who knows what that means?"

"How can you tell?"

"Magical activity leaves, well, we call them energy trails. They're like fingerprints, no two alike. And they fade after time. These are still pretty fresh, but not brand-spanking new. Now, can we skip the magic lesson and go check on your friend?"

She climbed out of the car and gestured for him to lead the way back to the two-story garage. An exterior staircase led up to the small balcony that opened on to Jase's apartment. Ric's footsteps slowed as they walked back toward the garage.

“The trails are getting stronger and for lack of a better word, slimier. Something nasty happened here, Meagan. Maybe you should go back to the car and call Aidan.”

Oh, God, he thought Jase was dead and he didn’t want her to see the body. Squaring her chin, she grasped his hand and looked straight into his eyes. “Together.”

The one word had been enough. He nodded and pulled her closer, though still slightly behind him, where he could shield her body with his own. Some abstract part of her brain that wasn’t occupied with Jase and imminent danger was warmed by the gesture.

She was surprised when Ric didn’t head up the wooden staircase, but instead moved to the small window of the garage itself and peered inside.

He swore, snapped his fingers and handed her his magically appearing phone. “Star six. Now.” He made an arcane gesture, humming under his breath.

She’d never seen him look this grim, not even when he’d told her she was an elf. She opened the phone and hit the asterisk and the six. Greg’s gravelly voice answered before it had even started to ring.

“Yo.”

“Greg, this is Meagan. Apparently we’ve got a problem here.”

“What’s going on?” The softness left his tone, was replaced by a razor-sharpness a person could cut herself on.

“Trouble.” Ric spoke loudly enough to be heard over the phone even though Meagan still held it to her ear. Ric’s eyes never left the glass. “George might want to get over here.” He might have said more, but at that moment Meagan’s phone chirped and they both jumped like a cannon had gone off.

Ric pulled Meagan's phone out of her pocket. After checking the number he flipped it open, announced without a hello, "Aidan, we've got trouble."

There was a brief pause, during which she watched Ric's knuckles turn white and his breathing go shallow. "Son of a bitch! You have got to be kidding me!"

Meagan heard Greg's voice shouting from the phone she still held limply in her own hand, but she didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything, just tried to breathe.

"No!" Pause. "Shite, shite, shite!" There was more, but she couldn't comprehend it.

Meagan gulped and lifted Ric's phone back to her ear. "Uh, Greg?"

"Yeah?"

"Ric's swearing at Aidan, in Welsh, or something. Apparently, there's some sort of problem. Another one."

"No shit, Sherlock. Where are you right now?"

"Standing outside my garage." She dragged in a breath, fighting back tears. "R-Ric saw something inside. I think it's...Jase, but he h-hasn't said."

"Tell Ric to sit tight. We'll be right there. Aidan's goon squad is pretty good, but mine's better." Hmm, maybe the rumors of organized crime ties hadn't been all that exaggerated. Right now, she could only be glad he was on her side.

She turned to relay the information to Ric, who had finished swearing at Aidan. She was just in time to hear him finish.

"Do what you can and for goddess's sake, stay in touch. Meanwhile, since your staff is off-limits, where can I find a healer I can trust?" There was a brief pause. "Well, fuck me sideways." He flipped the phone closed,

handed it back to Meagan and wiped his sweat-dampened hair out of his eyes with the back of his hand. “Could you please call your friend Elise and ask her to come over? I’m pretty sure Jase isn’t dead. Yet.”

Chapter Eleven

Meagan stared at him with glassy eyes, but she blinked hard and traded him phones. Obediently, she dialed Elise's number and waited for an answer. Meanwhile, Ric pulled her onto her back porch, away from the garage.

"Elise? This..." She gulped back a sob that wrung Ric's heart. "This is Meagan. Ric needs to talk to you."

She shoved the phone at him, and sat down on the concrete step, resting her chin on her fists and biting hard on her lower lip.

"Ms. Sutton? Ric Thornhill here. There's been trouble and Aidan Greene tells me you're the best healer in the area. Could you come over to Meagan's house right away?"

He heard her suck in her breath, but her voice stayed taut, controlled. "Is Meagan okay?"

"Meagan is fine. It's Jase Monroe. And, I'm not sure, unfortunately. He's in some kind of magical trap. All I can tell you is that I still sense life force. But not much." He saw Meagan stiffen and blink back tears.

"On my way."

"Elise has a daughter," Meagan interjected. "We can't ask her to come here if it will put her or Adina in danger."

"Owain already knows about her connection to you," Ric told her as he handed back the phone. Elise had hung up without further comments. "You gave him the name of the gallery, remember?"

“Shit.” She leaned into him as he sat beside her and wrapped an arm about her shoulders. Her breath hitched before she asked, “Why aren’t we going in there to rescue Jase?”

“Because right now he’s in some kind of stasis,” Ric admitted. “Apparently he set off a trap that was probably waiting for you. I’m not the world’s greatest mage and I don’t want to try to disarm the trap until we have a healer standing by for him and a back-up bodyguard for you, in case the trap backfires on me.”

“Got it.” Her voice cracked, but she soldiered on. “And there’s something wrong at Aidan’s which is why he can’t send anybody to help, right?”

“Right.”

“Care to explain?”

“I’d really rather wait and do it once, if you don’t mind. And right now, I’m kind of busy watching for further trouble.”

“Got it.” After a long, nearly painful silence, she swallowed hard, her butt wiggling on the step. “You said my house was still warded, right?”

“Yeah.” He was proud of how well she was holding things together, though he could see the effort it cost her not to ignore his advice and run to her friend.

“Can you play watchdog from inside?”

“I suppose. Why?”

“‘Cause if we’re going to be here a while, I’d really like to use the bathroom while we wait.”

The Novaks arrived about five seconds before Elise pulled up in her shiny blue Beemer. With Meagan’s Mustang, Jase’s car, Greg’s truck and Ric’s Jag all in the driveway, it looked like she was having a party. Ric was actually glad Meagan had suggested moving inside, as it

would reduce the probability of curious neighbors wandering over to join the fun. They'd have to move to the garage as soon as he had the troops fully briefed, but hopefully by that time he'd have been able to construct some sort of look-the-other-way spell. Meagan wanted to come home after the council meeting and it wouldn't do to have the neighbors trying to burn her as a witch.

Greg shot a suspicious look at the elegant gallery owner, but politely held her car door open after seeing Ric nod his approval from Meagan's front porch. The three of them had barely entered the room when yet another car screeched to the curb and a tall, male part-blood emerged and strode across Meagan's lawn to join them.

"Who are you?" Ric didn't have time for manners.

The dark-haired man pulled off a pair of aviator shades and jerked his thumb at Elise. "Her brother. Desmond Sutton. Elise said you might need a wizard and I was in the neighborhood."

"Lord, this keeps getting weirder," Meagan grouched as she hugged Elise. "I didn't even know you had a brother."

Ric shooed the motley crew into the living room and shut the door, gesturing for everyone to find seats. "You're a *Wyndewin*?" he asked Sutton, who nodded curtly. "Thank you, goddess, that's the first break we've gotten all day. Start with a SEP spell around the property. Don't want the neighbors thinking Meagan's having a huge party and maybe they should come over to join in."

Sutton nodded, stepped back out onto the porch and shut the door. A few seconds later he reentered. "Done."

"What's an SEP spell?" Meagan asked.

Desmond Sutton replied. "Somebody else's problem. Making six cars invisible would take a lot of magical power, but it's fairly easy to give the whole thing an aura

that makes people want to look the other way.”

“Got it,” she replied. “Sort of like ‘these aren’t the droids you’re looking for.’”

“Exactly,” Ric replied. “Now can we get down to business? Preferably before the bad guys return and try to kill the lot of us?”

“Let ’em try.” Greg’s growl was practically a laugh.

“No,” Sutton barked. “The goal here is simple extraction. Once we get the non-combatants out of danger, you fang-faces can go hunting to your heart’s content.”

Ric didn’t much like Sutton taking charge, but he was right. George, however, snarled at the mage and Ric saw Meagan glance in surprise at the feral sound. Sutton responded with a derogatory, “Down boy!”

Greg had to physically restrain his brother from leaping across the room. Time to intervene. Opening his throat, Ric sang a high note with more than a touch of compulsion in it. Finally, everyone shut the hell up.

“Have a seat.” He didn’t actually sing the command, but he pushed a hefty note of bardic power into it. Though Sutton’s eyes narrowed and George pouted, they all sat.

“Here is what we know so far...” Without pausing for breath, he filled them all in on Meagan’s history, the council vote and Owain le Faire. He explained what he’d discerned about the magical trap in Meagan’s garage. “They’ve also attacked on another front, trying to block Meagan from reaching Underhill. The portal at Aidan’s home has been tampered with. Gunter, one of Aidan’s security staff, tried to use it this afternoon and the end was extremely messy.”

Even though they weren’t touching, Ric felt Meagan’s horror and sorrow at the senseless death of the bodyguard,

whom she'd only met the day before. He reached across the back of the chair he stood behind and squeezed her shoulder, wishing he could offer more comfort. The connection between them had grown so strong, so fast, that her roiling emotions threatened to swamp Ric as well. He didn't have time for that, not when Meagan's life depended on him and this rag-tag group of defenders. There would be time to mourn later, once she and Jase were safe.

Her spine straightened as she drew herself together. He gave her shoulder one more squeeze and continued.

"Since only key members of Aidan's team have access to the portal, the traitor must be someone close to him. We can't rely on any of his people. Once we release the trap and hopefully heal Jase..." he nodded at Elise, "...then we need to arrange a safe house for him and probably the rest of you until this whole mess blows over. Greg, can you handle that part?"

"Monroe will be safe," Greg vowed with a feral grin. "Your man messes with my pack, he's going to seriously regret it." Ric didn't doubt him.

"And Elise and I will have a sudden urge to visit our parents in Vancouver," Sutton decreed. "Our uncle lives there with them, making three retired *Wyndewins*, plus the two of us. No one's going to get through those wards."

Probably not, unless... "You should know, Aidan thinks they're using blood magic. They found a dead homeless man on the edge of his estate."

"Son of a bitch!" Now even Sutton looked perturbed. Good.

"What's blood magic?" Meagan asked.

Elise replied succinctly, in her cool, elegant manner, "It's pure, fucking, concentrated evil."

Her brother was more explicit. “The sacrifice of a living being to fuel a spell. It’s been banned by about every arcane society for at least two thousand years.”

Meagan didn’t understand much of what was going on, but she’d figured out that the bad guys weren’t playing games. The danger was real, to her and to anyone close to her. Apparently Owain hadn’t figured out yet that Jase’s lease allowed him use of the garage and he’d put his trap for Meagan in there.

“The good news,” Desmond Sutton announced to the group gathered on Meagan’s driveway a few minutes later, “is that this trap was designed with a part-blood in mind. The magic is designed to bind a half-Fae, not a full human. Which is probably why Monroe is still alive. The blast of negative energy would have likely killed Meagan.”

George growled and the vicious sound sent a chill down Meagan’s spine. Elise’s brother glared at him.

“Since the magic is elven in nature, the bard probably has the best chance to unravel it without it blowing up in our faces. I can lend support and power. Elise, you stand by.” He turned to the Novak brothers. “You two are on lookout duty. This could be a giant distraction, so keep an eye open for trouble. If the bard and I do blow ourselves up, get the women the hell out of Dodge. Keep them safe until Aidan Greene or the *Wyndewin* Council comes up with another alternative.”

Both brothers managed short, quick nods. Greg cocked his head at Ric, whispered something in his ear, before disappearing behind the garage. A few moments later, a large, black wolf appeared.

“What the hell?” Where had that come from? And why

didn't anybody else look surprised?

Ric squeezed her arm lightly. "That's Greg. His eyes and ears are better in that shape, not to mention his nose. He's going to patrol the yard, watch for trouble."

"Oh." A werewolf. Of course. It made as much sense as anything else had in the past few days. "George too?"

Ric nodded. "He wants to be there for Jase, so he won't change unless it comes down to a fight."

Wow. A gay werewolf. That's something you didn't see on the late-late show. Wasn't anyone what they seemed?

Ric and Desmond agreed that the side door to the garage was probably a safer entry point than the overhead metal one in front. Elise had dragged some votive candles out of her oversized purse and placed them in a circle around the garage, filling in the area between them with salt, straight out of the pour-spout can. Next, she pulled out a giant Ziploc bag full of dried greenery and added a layer of that as well. Finally, a larger candle was lit right in front of the door and Elise used it to ignite a small bundle of dried herbs, which she laid on the sidewalk. The musky scent of burning sage filled the air.

A neighbor walked by on the street and Meagan managed not to wave. The young woman with the baby stroller walked blithely by, apparently unaware of the commotion in Meagan's yard.

Elise joined hands with Ric and her brother and the three of them chanted softly, led by Ric's beautiful baritone, while Meagan stood by her favorite oak tree several yards back, flanked by Greg and George. She managed, barely, not to pet Greg on top of the head, which came to her waist. George gripped Meagan's hand in his, clearly as worried about Jase as she was. She

squeezed back.

"I'm sure he'll be okay." She wasn't sure why she was whispering; it simply seemed like the thing to do.

"He's got to be," George whispered back.

"Does he know..." Meagan's voice trailed off. Her eyes never left Ric. He finished the chant, broke ranks with the Suttons and sent Meagan a reassuring smile. She smiled back, or tried to, anyway. It probably came out more like a grimace. Ric was literally putting his life on the line for Jase. She'd never been more frightened in her life.

"That I'm a werewolf? No. Not yet. That information is pretty much reserved for permanent life partners."

"And on a need-to-know basis, I guess." She tipped her chin at the scene before them. "Like now."

"Yeah."

Elise came and joined them, sliding in between Meagan and Greg. She took Meagan's hand and rested her other on top of Greg's furry black head. Together they watched as the two men disappeared into the garage.

"I can't believe that all this time you were a halfling and I never knew it," Elise murmured. "And you're Aidan Greene's cousin. What a small, small world."

"And you're a witch. An honest-to-goodness spells-and-magic witch. How come I never knew about that?"

"Need-to-know," Elise replied with a soft laugh. "I'm not much of a witch, mind you. I'm a healer and I do okay with protective magic, but Des is the one with the power in the family. If anybody can help your bard unravel the trap, it's Des."

"He isn't my bard, Elise," Meagan countered wistfully. "Not really."

"Baloney. The currents flowing between the two of

you could scorch lead. That kind of heat—well, it only comes along once in a while. You need to hold on to it, if you can.”

Meagan heard the sadness in her friend’s voice, knew there was a story she wanted to hear, but this wasn’t the time. She heard Ric’s soaring voice through the thin walls of the garage and she squeezed tighter on the two hands she held in hers. The others, too, lapsed into silence to wait.

After a few minutes, the song intensified to a crescendo and the garage erupted in a crack of what looked like lightning. The side door burst off the hinges, came flying out into the yard. The glass pane cracked in the single, small window and the metal garage door rattled and bowed. There was a moment of dead stillness, utter silence, before Des Sutton’s booming voice called from inside, “Elise! Now!”

Meagan and George were right on her heels as the healer dashed into the shuddering structure. Tools, glass and other debris littered the floor and protruded from the wall. As Meagan’s eyes adjusted to the darkness, she heaved a huge sigh of relief to see Ric sitting on the cement floor, leaning on Jase’s now even more battered weight bench. Jase was draped limply across Ric’s lap, but his eyes were open and he smiled weakly at Meagan and George. Elise raced to his side, knelt beside him and laid her hands on his temples.

After a few seconds, Jase’s ashen skin began to resume its normal rich color, while Elise grew pale. Finally she lifted her hands and smiled at Jase. “There. Good as new.” She tried to get to her feet, swayed and was caught by her brother, whose own face showed a number of small cuts and bruises. George reached out to help Jase to his feet

and crushed him in a bear hug, which Jase enthusiastically returned.

“Are you all right?” Meagan dropped to the floor next to Ric, her fingers trailing across an angry abrasion on his left cheek and tracing a huge lump on his right temple. A heavy crescent wrench lay next to his hip and he was surrounded by shards of wood and metal.

He drew in a ragged breath. “I’ll be fine.” He ran his hand over his face and winced as he must have found a tender spot. “Just got a bit blasted by flying objects.”

She looked at his arms, which were a road map of scratches and cuts. “Can Elise fix you up, too?”

Ric shook his head. “Probably not. She’s going to need time to recharge. Jase was pretty far gone; it must’ve taken her an awful lot of power to bring him back. And we can’t stick around until she recovers. I’m sorry, love, but we need to hit the road as soon as possible. The sooner we get you out of town, the safer they’ll be.”

She swallowed a mouthful of sour saliva and tried to muster a smile. “Let’s go.”

Ric leaned heavily on the weight bench as he pulled himself up to a standing position. When he brushed the back of his hand across his face, it left an ugly reddish-brown smear and Meagan’s stomach gurgled ominously. She reached out a hand to help him, but he ignored it, swaying slightly as he levered himself away from his prop.

“Bard. Wait.” Desmond handed his sister over to Greg, who had resumed human form and a brief pair of denim cutoffs. “I’m not in Elise’s league, but here...” He strode to Ric and pressed a hand to his temple. Meagan wrapped a supportive arm around Ric’s waist, though she wasn’t really sure which of them was more in need. Desmond

closed his eyes, as did Ric, and Meagan watched the worst of his cuts start to close and the angry swelling on the side of his head receded to a small bruise. Des was breathing heavily by the time he blinked.

“Sorry, that’s the most I can do and still get Elise and Adina to safety. If you can get some rest, you should be okay.”

“I’ll be fine. Thanks.” Ric reached out and shook the other man’s hand, while his other arm wrapped around Meagan’s shoulders. She could feel the difference in his strength from only moments earlier, but he was still a little wobbly. “That was a nasty concussion. The scrapes I can live with.”

“The concussion’s not gone, but you won’t be passing out before you reach your car now.” Sutton shot a stern look at Meagan. “But you should drive. He needs some rest.”

“You heard the man, Ric. Hand over the keys.”

The fact that Ric complied without comment worried her more than almost anything else. Meagan jingled the keys as she blinked back a tear. “Okay, so let’s all hit the road.” She turned to her friends. “Take care of each other, okay? And thanks. All of you.”

They all nodded. “Remember the amulet,” Elise called weakly as Meagan and Ric moved out of the garage.

Jase broke free of George to give Meagan a hug. “You owe me one hell of an explanation, baby girl,” he muttered, before turning to Ric. “You best be taking care of my girl, here.”

“I will,” Ric vowed. “George and Greg will explain everything.”

Greg walked with them to the car and Meagan thought she could still see a hint of the wolf in his alert posture

and watchful brown eyes. "Call me," he told Ric as Ric folded himself into the passenger seat. "You need me, I'll get there."

Ric clasped his friend's hand. "Thanks. Contact Aidan if you can, see if he needs you."

"Got it." Greg straightened and saluted Meagan who was trying to adjust the driver's seat for her much shorter legs. "Take care. And don't let all the prissy posers get you down."

She'd wanted to drive the Jag, but not under these circumstances. She pulled out of her driveway and looked at Ric. "Where to?"

Ric reached up and pulled a pair of black Ray-Ban sunglasses off the visor. He put them on, snapped his fingers and handed her another pair. "Chicago."

She put on the sunglasses, grinned and shifted the purring engine into first gear. "Well, Jake, it's a hundred and six miles to Chicago. We got a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it's dark and we're wearing sunglasses."

Actually, Chicago was closer to three hundred miles and it was still broad daylight, but Ric got the reference. He snickered, leaned his head back against the headrest and replied, "Hit it."

Chapter Twelve

Ric was asleep by the time they hit the interstate. He was so exotically handsome in repose that it was all she could do to keep her hands on the wheel instead of on him. The only other thing holding her back was the knowledge that he'd been hurt. Because of her. That really sucked big-time. Normally she'd have worried about letting him sleep off a concussion, but Desmond had told her it was the best thing for him.

All this time Meagan had known Elise, she hadn't even known she had a brother, let alone that they were both some sort of magic-users. Which, of course, wasn't quite as weird as the Novak brothers turning out to be werewolves. And she was a half-elf. Who else in this world was more than they'd seemed? Well, there was that one ex-boyfriend she could have sworn was a vampire. Who knew, maybe he really was? The world was turning out to be a lot stranger than she'd ever believed.

It wasn't quite rush hour yet, so they got out of Detroit pretty quickly. Meagan hoped that the spell for being ignored by the cops was on the car instead of on Ric, because she was putting the Jag through its paces.

The problem with being the only one awake was that there was way too much time to think and Meagan had done more than enough of that already. Now she just wanted to get on with it all, find some kind of resolution so that nobody else got hurt. And maybe, if she was really

lucky, she'd get some semblance of her life back. That would be nice, too.

Except that her old life hadn't included Ric. And going on without him was going to be a bitch.

When had she fallen in love with him? Somewhere before the sex, probably, which meant before she'd seen the pointy ears. Even then, she had known he was a professional musician, out of her league and always on the road. She'd been fully cognizant that, to him, this was a temporary thing. She had only herself to blame for falling head over heels.

She turned on the stereo, wishing that she had some of Ric's music to listen to, to keep her company, but of course he didn't listen to himself in his own car. Instead, she pushed Play and cruised along to the sounds of the punk rock he'd had on earlier.

That was fine. "Sunshine Highway" seemed strangely appropriate as she drove. So did frequent checks of her rear-view mirror, even though she had no idea who—or what—she was looking for.

They were past Kalamazoo when Ric finally woke. His headache was mostly gone. He owed the *Wyndewins* now and wizards wouldn't forget. Still, favors owed and returned was part of being a successful spy and when you came down to it, that's what he was. Llyris's spy. Shit was going to hit the fan when the queen found out about the *mionn* he'd sworn to Meagan. It was going to take all of his skill to make sure the fallout landed on him, instead of on the woman he loved.

"You awake?" Meagan must have seen him stir.

He straightened in his seat, relieved to find most of the pain had vanished during his nap. "Yeah," he replied,

reaching across the gearshift to squeeze her thigh. "Thanks for driving."

"No problem. I've been wanting to get behind the wheel of this baby. How're you feeling?"

"Pretty much like I've been flattened by a truck." He saw her wince and amended his answer. "But better than before. Sutton did a good job with the healing. I'll be fine after I get some food and a chance to stretch out the kinks." By the look of the sky it was early evening, which meant they'd probably get almost to Chicago in the daylight. Good.

"We're getting low on gas, anyway," she told him, flashing that rueful smile that made his stomach clench. Or maybe it was only hunger. "We could stop at the next truck stop."

"Sounds like a plan."

His stomach growled and she laughed. "Couldn't you blink yourself some food?"

Duh! Seconds later he had a coffee cup in his hand and a diet soda for Meagan. Another blink and a pair of warm, buttery scones sat in his lap. He'd have to add a few bucks to his monthly check.

"Thanks." Her murmur was muffled, since she already had a mouthful of scone. She washed it down with a swig of the soda and stuck the bottle between her thighs, since the Jag predated the era of cup-holders. *Lucky bottle!* "I have got to learn how to do that."

"Soon." He'd teach her that at first opportunity. Transporting small objects was easy, one of the first tricks Fae children usually learned. Hopefully he'd have time in the next few days to teach her some basics, so she didn't look totally helpless at court.

"I don't suppose you could collect our luggage?" Her

voice was wistful. "Or at least my suit? I'm not looking forward to meeting a queen in a pair of filthy shorts and a tank top."

"When we get to Chicago." He'd be able to, if he remembered exactly what he was teleporting and where it could be found. Otherwise it could get tricky. But if need be he could have the Chicago Guardian arrange to have something delivered.

"Do you think they're following us?" They'd drifted along in silence for a while, so the question startled Ric, who'd been nodding off again.

"Yes." He was too off-kilter to prevaricate.

"Oh."

Damn, now he'd scared her. That was good, in a way, because if she was scared, she'd be more careful, but he didn't want her unhappy. "But they can't be absolutely sure of where we're heading. Cleveland is actually the closer portal to Detroit. Hopefully, they'll think we're going there."

"So why aren't we?"

"Partially because it's the most obvious." She nodded at that, quick to pick up on the strategic advantage. "Also because the Guardian in Chicago is someone I trust implicitly. Unless she's hit by the same kind of treachery as Aidan, the Chicago portal is likely to be safe, whereas I seem to recall that Cleveland has a few of Owain's followers on the staff."

"Got it." Her fingernails tapped softly on the steering wheel for a second, as though she was having an inner debate. Finally she gritted her teeth and turned to glance at him. "She?"

Ric laughed. Goddess, she was jealous. Silly though it was, the thought of her being possessive of him was

flattering and, well, warming, in some strange way. "She. Lady Deirdre of the Night Sky, or as she goes by in this incarnation, Diandra Knight. She's an old friend of mine."

"Friend or *friend*?" She practically growled the last word. He could see her skin flush, feel her own embarrassment over her reaction.

"Both, I suppose, though we haven't been *friends* since long before you were born. We had a moment or two, back in the Victorian era, before we decided we preferred each other as friends without the benefits."

"Just out of curiosity, how many of your former *friends* can I expect to encounter at court? And are any of them going to be trying to skewer me when my back is turned?"

"You'll meet a few. With a lifespan like ours and a culture that doesn't blink at promiscuity, you get around a bit. I can't think of any with cause for animosity, however. I've not gone around breaking hearts. It's always been a bit of fun on both parts." No, the only ex-lover he could think of who might have a grudge against Meagan was Llyris herself and that wasn't about love at all, but power and possession. His headache came back. He needed to tell Meagan about his relationship with the queen, to explain why he couldn't admit to caring for Meagan once they crossed the portal.

"There's a truck stop." She pointed at the upcoming exit ramp. "Should we take a break?"

"Please." A good stretch would do wonders for his stiff and aching muscles. Some real food would do even more.

Fifteen minutes later they'd fueled the Jag, fueled themselves with some personal-sized pizzas and availed themselves of the restrooms. Meagan was clutching a

jumbo soft drink as they headed back to the car. She'd also purchased a doughnut for now and half a dozen chocolate bars, claiming she was going to need them in "Elfland." Goddess, she made him laugh almost as often as she made him hard.

Ric was still looking shaky, but he insisted he was fine. He'd demanded his keys back, blinking them out of her hands when she'd refused. Elf guys were still guys, she supposed. Still had to be all macho and tough, still hated to let a girl drive their car.

"Did it take a long time to learn magic?" There was so much to learn about this wild new world and so little time.

"Did it take you long to learn to paint?" he countered. "Or is it something that was always part of you and grew as your knowledge and skills increased?"

"Got it." It made sense if you looked at it that way, she guessed. As least as much as the terms *magic* and *sense* could go together.

Next to the parking lot was a small grassy area with two scarred wooden picnic tables. It wasn't exactly a park, but after two hours in the car, it looked awfully inviting. She gestured. "Can we sit outside for a minute?"

Ric hesitated a moment before nodding and turning toward the grass. "Only for a bit, mind. We need to keep moving."

"As soon as I finish my doughnut." She'd gone for the biggest, gooiest, chocolate-frosted, cream-filled concoction available, figuring that after the day she had, she'd earned some chocolate therapy.

Ric sat right beside her on the bench. They leaned back against the table, facing the parking lot. When Ric draped an arm around her shoulder, she snuggled into his comforting heat.

There were people in the lot, but no one paid much attention to anyone else, so she didn't resist when Ric leaned over and kissed a glob of Bavarian cream off the side of her mouth. Instead, she kissed him back, keeping her hands to herself, but letting him know with lips and tongue what she'd like to be doing if they were alone. There was a sweetness to this kiss as well as the usual hunger and the rightness of it almost brought tears to her eyes. She felt like she belonged here in his arms like she'd never belonged anywhere else. Ever.

She was so caught up in the mind-blowing heat of Ric's lips and tongue and hands that she never noticed the two men who must have been hiding behind the scraggly trees. She only knew that when Ric wrenched himself away from her, dragging her bodily off the bench and behind him as he stood, she felt as though a part of her had been unceremoniously hacked off.

Meagan heard a pathetic whimper that probably came from her. Ric didn't say a word, but an enormous, glowing sword appeared in his hand. She had to peek around his shoulder and wished she hadn't. Two men...no, elves—they hadn't bothered with a glamour—stood facing them. They both had glowing swords, too and they were advancing on Ric and Meagan with cold, calculating *death* in their tilted eyes.

Ric stepped forward, one hand brandishing his sword, the other pushing Meagan more firmly behind him. Meagan's eyes were locked on that giant hunk of sharp, shining metal and so were those of Ric's opponents. She could tell he wanted their attention focused on him, not her. When she got through being scared, that was liable to piss her off.

Where was a state highway cop when you needed one?

Meagan looked frantically toward the parking lot for help. Surely someone would notice a sword fight, even if they'd ignored an R-rated kiss. That's when she spotted something really odd. The patch of grass where they stood seemed to be encased in a giant soap bubble. A filmy, iridescent dome surrounded the area. Without her new elf-ray vision, she doubted she'd even be able to see it, but she'd bet anything it shielded them from the view of the other customers of the truck stop. Way too many people were looking right past three pointy-eared guys in leather jackets wielding swords. Obviously, this spell was a lot stronger than the look-the-other-way spell Desmond had used at her house.

Maybe it was a force field. To test that theory, she threw the remains of her Super-Gut-Buster soda at the shimmering dome. Sure enough, it sizzled where it hit and bounced right back onto the grass. Damn, so much for running for help.

The two assassins closed in on Ric, seemingly content to deal with him first and ignoring her. The metallic clash of sword on sword echoed harshly through the enclosed space, while outside, people pumped gas and wiped windshields in total oblivion.

Ric was magnificent and her heart soared as she watched him thrust, pivot and parry with preternatural skill and speed. Unfortunately, so did his opponents. She had no doubt he'd be more than a match for these two if he'd been at full strength, but he wasn't and after a few long, long minutes, even she could see he was flagging.

All three had scored hits. Both opponents were bleeding from several minor cuts and Meagan had to bite back a scream when one of their blades bit deeply into Ric's thigh. She knew no one outside could hear, but she

didn't dare distract Ric. They had him flanked now and it didn't look like he'd be able to hold out much longer.

If only she had a weapon. They were so focused on defeating Ric that they were completely ignoring her. She looked around the clearing for something to use as a weapon, maybe a fallen branch, or a beer bottle, or anything.

Nothing. Even the boards on the picnic table were securely bolted down. Damn it, what she wouldn't give for her bat right about now. She could practically feel it in her hand as the picture of her favorite softball bat formed in her brain. It was twenty-eight inches of tip-loaded aircraft aluminum, in shocking pink with a turquoise handle. It hung on a rack on the side of her garage, but she'd give almost anything to hold its familiar weight in her hands.

And then it was.

How it got there she had no idea, but she wasn't about to question a miracle. She crept up behind the combatants, lifted the bat to her shoulder and took her stance. As the one with his back to her lunged forward at Ric, she swung for the bleachers.

The wet thwack of the bat echoed off the force field. She'd hit him in the side of the head and he went down, hard.

"Meagan!" Ric cried out and grinned as he stared down his remaining opponent. "That's my girl!"

The other elf must have been distracted by seeing his buddy fall. He failed to parry and Ric's sword bit cleanly into his chest.

Almost as if he were in slow motion, the elf crumpled to the ground. His own sword dropped from his hand and he grasped Ric's blade as if trying to dislodge it from his

rib cage. After a moment, his hands fell and his eyes went blank.

Ric wiped his sword on the assailant's jacket and reached for Meagan. She took his hand, her eyes never leaving their attacker as his body slowly faded, eventually disappearing from view. She blinked and realized that even the bloodstains on the grass were gone.

Meagan spun, looking for the one she'd hit, since she wasn't totally sure he'd stay down. He, too, was gone. She looked up at Ric, questions in her eyes.

He touched his finger to her chin, gently closing her gaping mouth. Since his other hand still held hers, that must mean he'd blinked the sword away. The sounds of cars and footsteps intruded and she realized the bubble had disappeared too. And there she stood with a battered, bloody elf and a bright pink bat in her hand.

"What..."

Ric eased her back down on the bench and gently tugged the bat from her hand. He weighed it thoughtfully. "Nice choice. And you wield it well."

"Three-time all-state batting champ," she replied. "I know I don't look like much of a jock, but my parents insisted on me getting some exercise."

"Where did it come from, Meagan? Was it under the table or something?"

"No. It was in my garage, I think. I was thinking about it, wishing for it and suddenly it was here."

Ric shook his head. "You're a powerful force, Meagan Rose. And it's grateful I am that we're on the same side."

"Where did they go?" She was pretty sure the one was dead, but how had they disappeared like that?

"It's a spell that was cast on all of our people about a century ago. Modern forensics can detect the differences,

so none of us can end up in a human morgue. Whenever one of us dies in this realm, the body is immediately transported back home.”

“And the blood?”

“Contains cells, so is part of the corpse and transported as well.”

“So they’re both dead?” She felt nauseous and laid her head over her crossed arms on the picnic table.

“I’m afraid so, love.” His hands were gentle, massaging her shoulders, smoothing her hair. “I’m so sorry, Meagan, but if it’s any consolation, they’d have murdered the both of us without a trace of remorse. Those were hired assassins and they were here for you. I’d far rather it be them than us.”

He was right of course. Still, the nausea surged and she stumbled off the bench and into the weeds to vomit. Ric was right beside her, holding her hair back and speaking softly until she was done. Once she stopped, he handed her a damp washcloth he’d ported in from Aidan’s house and drew her into his arms as she burst into tears.

“Shh, love, it’s all right. I’m so sorry, but so glad that you’re safe. I thought it was over, that I’d failed to protect you, but out of nowhere, you saved us both. I’m terribly proud of you, Meagan.”

She wept even harder and he sat on the bench, pulling her into his lap.

“You only did what you had to do to survive, sweetie. I know it’s horrid, but you’ll cope, I promise.” His words were whispered and punctuated with tiny kisses to the top of her head. He kept her there, holding her close and whispering comfort while he let her cry it out.

Somebody must have stopped, because she heard him

murmur something to someone else, but she couldn't hear him over her sobs. It wasn't until later, when they were back in the car, that she remembered to ask how he'd explained the situation.

Ric flushed, actually turned red to the tips of his ears.

"Come on, 'fess up."

"I told them you were scared to tell your parents about the baby," he admitted. "And a bit car sick."

Meagan was mortified for a second and then laughed. With Ric's charm, she was sure the good Samaritans had bought it, hook, line and sinker. And it's not like they were anyone she'd ever see again. She adjusted her seatbelt and turned on the ignition. "How'd you explain the blood and the bat?"

"I blinked the bat to the car," he replied. "It's behind your seat, should you need it again. As for the other, my glamour covered the damage. Look closely."

Sure enough, she could see the faint aura overlaying his image. His natural state was clearer to her now than his glamour, but she could fuzz her vision and see the other. And in the glamour, his clothes were undamaged and his skin unblemished. The cuts and stains vanished like the points on his ears.

"I have so got to learn how to do that." It would be awesome when she got paint on her clothes.

Looking down at his leg, she saw that though he'd wrapped a cloth around his upper thigh, blood was still seeping through. "You need a healer again, don't you? I should just get you to a hospital."

"A human hospital would be a bad idea, love."

"A healer, then." He really didn't look good.

"I'll survive, though a painkiller or six might help a bit. Don't suppose you've got any in your purse?"

"Yeah, help yourself. They're in there somewhere." After a short pause, while she backed out of the parking space, another thought occurred to her. "Do they work on elves?"

"Better than on humans, actually. Our metabolism is different; some drugs hit the system faster and harder."

He rummaged through her purse, found something and set her purse back on the floor, before blinking one of his coffees into his hand and swallowing the painkillers.

"Can you get me a soda?" She'd pitched hers at the bubble.

"Get it yourself. I know there was some in your fridge."

"But I don't know how."

"You did with the bat," he reminded her. "Visualize what you want, where it is, where you want it. I've never known of anyone who could transport items without any instruction. You've a lot of power, Meagan. You can do it."

They were still in the parking lot, so she pulled over to the curb and tried. She visualized the one-liter bottle of diet cola that she'd left in the fridge. She thought about the size, the label, the flavor of the liquid. She pictured it here, in her hand.

It took a while. She didn't have the adrenaline rush that must have helped her before and Ric, damn him, wasn't being helpful at all. But on the third try, there it was, tall and cool and sliding out of her hand.

"I did it!" She caught the bottle, unscrewed the cap and took a long swig.

"You sure did, my love." Ric gave her a warm glance. "I can't wait to watch you set all those stuffed shirts at court on their pointy little ears."

After one more drink, she wedged it between her knees and wished she hadn't dropped her doughnut. At least Ric had rescued her bag of Snickers bars. She rummaged for one, let herself savor the rich salty sweetness of the chocolate, caramel and peanuts before she put the car back in gear.

Ric turned on the radio. "Let's go, Meagan. Next stop, Chicago."

Chapter Thirteen

It was starting to get dark as they left the Indiana Turnpike for the Chicago Skyway. Meagan had made the road trip to Chicago before, so the industrial decay of Gary, Indiana, was familiar, but somehow, this time it all seemed different. So much in her world had changed. She kept checking the rearview mirror for trouble.

“Relax, love, we’re almost there.” Ric’s voice was tight with pain. His eyes were squinted half-shut and the bandage on his leg was soaked through with blood. Relax? Not likely.

“How do you know they won’t be waiting for us in Chicago?” She managed to keep her voice calm and even, though she was damn near hysterical with fear.

“Because I called while you were in the bathroom to put Deirdre on alert. If there’s trouble on her end, she’ll blink my watch off my wrist. Since it’s still there, I know she’s all right.”

That was clever, she had to admit, even if she didn’t really like the idea of another woman, especially an elf, knowing Ric well enough to be able to blink items off his person.

“Dee’s husband, Blaine, is about the best there is at wards and guards,” Ric continued without hesitation. “Unless the bastards have gotten someone into her inner circle like they did Aidan’s, the portal there should be safe.”

“Husband?”

Ric slanted her a teasing glance. “Did I forget to mention that Dee is married? She hooked up with Blaine about fifteen or twenty years ago. Blaine’s a mage, which I imagine comes in quite handy for a Guardian’s spouse.”

“Aren’t you all mages? I mean you can all cast spells and stuff.”

Ric shook his head and winced. Damn, she’d forgotten all about the concussion. He needed medical care. Hopefully someone in Chicago could provide it. “We can all do magic, but some of us specialize in certain types. I’m a bard. Most of my magic is in my music. Some are healers, while others, like your cousin Aidan, are natural leaders, whose main gifts are charisma and a sharp brain. A true mage, like Blaine, can channel far more power through spells than the rest of us.”

“Can he heal you?”

Ric wiggled his hand in a so-so gesture. “Probably some. Not like a true healer, but he should be able to help a bit, at least enough to get me back to court. The queen’s healers are used to patching me up.”

Aghast, Meagan spun her head sharply. “You do this often?”

“It happens now and again, yes. I told you, Meagan, I’m an agent of the queen. I’ve had to track down renegades from time to time and sometimes they fight back. A bit of danger is part of my job description.”

Her brain chewed on that one as the Lake Michigan shoreline whizzed by on her right. If she were to have any kind of relationship with Ric, she’d have to share him with his work. And that meant playing second fiddle, pardon the pun, to both his music and his clandestine work for the queen.

Ric was running on caffeine, magic and willpower by the time they turned on to Michigan Avenue. Mostly willpower. Normally he loved the bustle and grandeur of Chicago's Golden Mile, but today he wished every single shopper and club-goer to hell. His head was throbbing unmercifully, his leg was a solid mass of flaming pain and most of all he was terrified for Meagan. If they came at them again, he was going to be pretty much useless. He was too weak to lift his sword and he'd depleted most of his magic reserves to slow the bleeding and remain conscious.

That last attack had come far too close for comfort. Without Meagan and her bright pink bat, they'd have been finished. Ric could have taken the two assassins if he'd been at full strength, but with the concussion and his power drained from disarming the life-trap, he'd been overmatched. But Meagan had come to his rescue.

He'd never heard of anyone being able to blink objects without any instruction before, but Meagan's precocity had saved both their lives. He hoped her tender heart could come to grips with the fact that she'd killed in self-defense.

He directed her to pull the car into the circle drive in front of an ornate Victorian building. Almost instantly, a uniformed valet was there to take the car and a doorman was waiting to usher them inside.

"Luggage, sir?" The doorman tipped his hat at Ric, who braced his hands on the doorframe to pull himself out of the Jag. As soon as Meagan climbed out of the car, the doorman bowed. "Welcome, my lady."

"Just my guitars and the three paintings in the back, Axel," Ric replied. "Handle them carefully; they're gifts

for the queen.”

The big man paled beneath his ebony complexion. “Fine china it is, sir.” Ric wondered if Meagan, who seemed bemused by Axel’s deferential treatment, could tell that the burly doorman was a quarter ogre, as well as being a former defensive lineman for the Los Angeles Rams. Axel snapped his fingers at the valet, who lifted the wrapped paintings and set them gently into the padded baggage cart that had suddenly appeared.

Ric dragged in a breath and held it as he tried to pull himself upright. His arms worked, but as soon as he tried to put weight on his injured left leg, it buckled and he sagged hard against the car.

“Ric!” Meagan rushed around the hood, but Axel beat her, wrapping one meaty arm around Ric and supporting about ninety percent of his weight. Bless the man for not picking him up and carrying him in. Ric liked to think he had some pride left, after all. Meagan immediately insinuated herself under Ric’s other arm, providing lateral support. Ric leaned into her, grateful for any excuse to touch.

“To the penthouse,” Axel instructed the valet. “Come back for the car.”

“Aye, sir.” Ric didn’t recognize the valet, but there was a distinct brogue to the voice. Brownie? Leprechaun? His head throbbed and he squeezed his eyes shut. Time to think about that later. Right now he needed to get to a bed and collapse. With Meagan. He wasn’t up to doing anything tonight, but he wanted to know she was beside him and safe.

He allowed Axel to half-carry him through the empty lobby of Dee’s exclusive hotel. A gilded cage-style elevator waited and Ric knew from experience that the

antique only stopped at one floor—Dee’s penthouse. She hadn’t lived here when they’d been involved, but the building had been the Chicago-area safe-house for over a century and was a fairly regular stop on Ric’s musical tours. Axel used his free hand to push the relevant buttons and the gold-plated gate slid shut as the cage slid into the darkness above.

“This place is incredible,” Meagan breathed at his side.

“We like to think so, my lady,” Axel agreed. “One hundred percent original décor, exactly as it was built in 1863.”

“Have you been here the whole time?” Ric could tell she was trying to make conversation, to stay cool. He felt a glow of pride that she’d seen through Axel’s glamour, recognized him as Fae.

“No, I met up with Lady Dee in Los Angeles,” Axel admitted. “I retired from football about the same time she stopped modeling.”

Ric heard a snort. “Modeling. Of course. What *could* I have been thinking?”

Ah, his kitten had her fur ruffled, did she? He could see in her eyes the moment she placed the name Diandra Knight. Dee had had a pretty good run in the fashion magazines a decade ago. He should tell Meagan that in his eyes she was every bit as gorgeous as the supermodel and lots more fun, but at the moment, he didn’t have the strength for nonessential conversation.

Meagan tried not to be awed by the grandeur of the hotel. The elevator gate opened into a stunning marble-tiled foyer. The ornate plasterwork ceiling had to be at least thirty feet overhead and the center rose into a windowed cupola. At one end a wide marble stair rose to a wrap-around balcony and the other end led to an

enormous pair of carved wooden doors.

The doors flew open and a couple rushed into the foyer. Meagan almost laughed. Somehow she hadn't imagined the elven supermodel would be waddling. Of course she was still drop-dead gorgeous even at what looked like ten months pregnant.

"Holy shite, Dee!" Obviously Ric was surprised as well. His accent always thickened when he got distracted. "Why didn't you say something? We'd have never brought this trouble to your doorstep if we'd known."

"And that would be why she didn't say anything, my friend." Blaine reached out a hand and shook Ric's. "This is the most secure safe-house on the continent. You needed to come here." He raked piercing blue eyes up and down Ric's disheveled appearance, taking obvious note of the cuts and bruises and turned to Axel. "I'll take over from here. You need to get back on the door. Full lockdown until further notice."

Axel allowed his boss to slip in between him and Ric, so gently that Meagan barely felt the weight shift. "Aye, sir," he answered. "Nobody in, nobody out." He tipped his head at each of them in turn. "Good night, sir, my ladies, bard."

"Good night, Axel," Diandra said for all of them, as Axel stepped back into the elevator and closed the cage. Nobody spoke until the elevator had disappeared from view, though Diandra smiled brightly at Meagan. "Welcome to my home, Lady Rose. I'd shake your hand, but you seem to be using it. Let's get Alaric to a bed, shall we?"

She led them back toward the double doors. "I'm Dee, as you probably figured out. This is my husband, Blaine Black. Or Blaine *the* Black, Underhill." She flashed a

glance of true adoration at her husband and her stunning features took on an even greater beauty.

Blaine the Black. Sort of a scary name for a magician, but Meagan assumed it referred to his looks and not to the type of magic he practiced. With unkempt dark hair and dark gray eyes, he looked positively normal compared to all the other elves she'd met so far. Oh, he was attractive enough in a craggy sort of way, but he didn't have the uncanny beauty of Aidan, or even Ric. Meagan was glad. She felt out of place enough among the Fae without being the only ugly duckling.

"Nice to meet you," she replied mechanically.

"The good news is that Maeve is here." Diandra went on, turning to Ric. "She'll have you fixed up in no time."

"Thank you, goddess!" Ric's tension relaxed palpably. He squeezed Meagan's waist. "Maeve is Blaine's sister and a top-notch healer. That's a boon I hadn't expected."

They were led into a small but sumptuous bedroom where a dark-haired woman waited. She was obviously Fae, but like her brother, she was relatively plain. Meaning she was only in the prom-queen category as opposed to her magazine-cover sister-in-law. She was dressed simply in jeans and a pink cotton tank top and was sorting through a basket of herbs on the bedside table. Several fat white candles filled the room with a warm, soft glow.

"Fearghus called up to say you were hurt." Her eyes assessed Ric as Meagan and Blaine helped him to the turned-down bed. "What happened?"

"Two of Owain's thugs caught up with us at a truck stop," Ric spoke slowly, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Since you're here, you obviously won." Blaine's voice was dry as he stepped back from the bed. He

glanced at Meagan. "Are you hurt, my lady?"

Meagan looked up at him, startled. It hadn't even occurred to her that she could have been hurt as well. All her concern had been for Ric. "No, they ignored me. Both of them went after Ric."

"Which was their final mistake." The pride in Ric's eyes and voice warmed Meagan's heart. "Meagan blinked in a baseball bat and got in a swing from behind. You should talk to her, Blaine. She's had her powers for less than twenty-four hours and no instruction."

"And she 'ported something?" Blaine raised one bushy black eyebrow and regarded Meagan more closely. "I'm impressed, my lady and I would like to talk to you when we get the chance."

"Sure." But she didn't budge from Ric's side.

"Meanwhile I need to clean out those wounds." The healer interrupted the conversation with a wave of her hand. "And that means getting him out of his clothes. So one of you can stay to help with that and the rest of you get out of this room."

"I'll stay," Blaine offered. "I've assisted Maeve often enough to be useful."

Meagan shook her head. "I'm staying. No offense, but there are people out there trying to kill me and the only person I know in this room is him. I'm not going anywhere." She crossed her arms and leaned in against the headboard.

A small smile curved Dee's perfect rosebud lips. "As you wish, Lady Rose. Do I take that to mean you won't be wanting the room we prepared for you?"

Ric groaned. "Knock it off, already. Dee, Meagan. Meagan, Dee. She's not comfortable being 'miladied' yet. And no, I'm not letting her out of my sight until that

damned council vote is over, so cope with it. Blaine, take your wife to bed and let your sister get to work. We'll talk in the morning."

Blaine chuckled and his smile transformed his plain features to handsome. "Sounds like a plan. Good night, Meagan, Ric. Bathroom's through there. Yell if you need something." He pointed at a door across from the bed and took his wife by the hand and gently led her out of the room, closing the door behind them.

"Hand me that washcloth." The healer got to work, giving Meagan cool, crisp instructions. "Next, get his boots off. I'm cutting the trousers, but you can help with the rest."

Meagan did as she was told. Ric's black Harley-Davidson boots were splattered with blood and mud, but they could be cleaned, so she gently eased them off his feet and set them aside.

"Laundry basket." Maeve gestured toward a wicker basket on the floor as she cut the side seam of Ric's jeans, slowly and carefully. "Boots and all. Fearghus will have it all cleaned and mended by morning. Brownies love that kind of challenge."

Ah. Meagan moved the boots to it and added Ric's socks after she peeled them off, trying like crazy not to jostle his leg as she did. The pants leg on his left side was completely soaked in blood and Meagan gulped. How much more could he have stood to lose?

"If you were human, you'd be getting a transfusion right now." Maeve examined the sword cut she'd just unwrapped. "Actually, you'd probably be dead, because I'm guessing you used a hell of a lot of magic to slow the bleeding. Even for an elf, you're damned lucky that he hit a secondary artery and not the femoral."

Ric grunted, his face lined and white. Meagan wished she could absorb his pain into herself. It killed her to know he'd been hurt defending her. She held his hand, trying not to wince as he squeezed down in his pain.

"Can't you use magic to heal him?" Meagan asked. She watched intently as Maeve cleaned the angry gash with painstaking attention.

"I will." The healer spoke without turning from her task, even for a second. "But you don't want to close a wound with junk in it. That's messy even when dealing with magic. The edge of the sword left bits of dirt, shreds of denim and whatnot in the leg. Once it's clean, I'll heal it." Moments later, she laid the bloody washcloth in the basin of equally bloody water and placed both hands over the wound. The healer closed her eyes and chanted something in the language Meagan was privately calling Elfish. Meagan watched, her gaze never leaving the bloody gash as it drew closed and the skin knit together. Finally, only an angry white line remained.

"Whew!" Maeve opened her eyes. "Give me a minute and I'll get to the rest. Meagan, can you help Ric with his shirt? And maybe you could clean up some of the nicks on his chest and arms."

Meagan remembered how Elise had nearly passed out after healing Jase and she understood. Without a word, she followed the healer's instructions, pulling the polo shirt up and over Ric's head as he raised his arms and leaned forward from the pillows to help. She took a clean washcloth and started rinsing out the smaller cuts with a bottle of drug-store antiseptic. She chuckled when Ric winced at the sting.

"You can stand a sword slash, but not a dab of alcohol? What a wuss."

Ric smiled back. "Yep. Don't even get me started on hypodermic needles."

Why would an elf even have been exposed to syringes? Meagan didn't want to go there, so she grinned and went back to playing Florence Nightingale. By the time she was done, Maeve's color had returned and the healer moved up to the head of the bed.

"Concussion first, before I handle the worst of the scratches. All right?"

"Whatever you can do." Ric lay back against the pillows, looking a bit better than he had when she'd started. "I can function now, if you need to stop. I'll be at court tomorrow, anyway." His expression grew serious. "Is everything all right with Dee? I mean, I assume that's why you're here."

"Dee and my nieces are doing fine." The healer flashed a happy smile. "But it is twins and she's close to delivery. They've been trying for years and Deirdre miscarried a couple of times, so Blaine's a basket case."

Meagan remembered Ric saying that elves weren't a fertile people. She shivered, thinking about what Dee and Blaine must have gone through.

"I didn't know," Ric murmured. "That's rough. We really shouldn't have come here right now."

"Don't worry about that." Maeve laid her hands on Ric's forehead. "We'll be safe here. Not even Owain is stupid enough to mess with Blaine. Now close your eyes so I can work on the concussion."

When Ric opened his eyes a few seconds later, he felt like a spear had been removed from his skull. The sudden absence of his pounding headache left him almost giddy with relief.

"Ah, Maeve, you're a goddess! The *Wyndewin* did

what he could, but he can't hold a candle to you. I'm in your debt, my dear. Any favor you ever need, let me know."

Maeve laughed. "Yeah, that's what they all say." She touched a few of the medium-sized cuts scattered over Ric's shoulders and arms and each one instantly disappeared. She made him roll over so they could tend to his back. Once again, Meagan cleaned while Maeve healed. Soon, Ric's skin was good as new, except for the stark white scar on his thigh. He lay back against the pillows in nothing but a pair of green cotton boxer-briefs, smiling at the women. Maeve smiled back and walked to the door. "Go take a shower, bard. Fearghus will come in and change the sheets while you wash."

On her way out, she brushed a hand along Meagan's shoulder and Meagan felt all of her aches and tension drain away. "Sleep well, my Lady Rose. You were a great help and I'm glad to meet you."

"Thank you, Maeve. Thank you so much, for everything."

"I'm only doing my job." She smiled and shook her head in protest. "Now good night." And with that she slipped out the door, leaving Meagan alone with a suddenly revitalized Ric.

Meagan looked down at the bed and saw the erection stretching the fabric of his briefs.

"Weren't we supposed to take a shower?" Meagan asked, licking her lips. The sight of that bulge made her hot, made her wet. She squeezed her thighs together, but it didn't help. She wanted Ric inside her with a desperation she'd never felt before.

"Later." He reached out one hand and clamped it around her wrist. He drew her to the bed and pulled her

down into his arms. "I need you *now*, Meagan." His whisper was harsh as he pulled her face to his. "Let me inside you."

"Oh yeah!" He let her say that much before his mouth covered hers, making speech impossible. His hands were busy too, tugging away her shorts and top, fumbling with the clasp of her bra. She was pretty sure he ripped her panties, but she was too far gone to care.

Ric rolled with Meagan, pinning her to the bed. His underwear had disappeared too and they lay pressed together, skin to skin. She loved the feel of his weight on top of her, flattening her breasts, pressing her into the mattress. His penis was hard and thick against her stomach, the rough thatch of pubic hair tickling the tops of her thighs. Meagan shifted, widening her legs, urging him inside.

"Oh, gods, Meagan, I nearly lost you today!" Ric raised himself up on his elbows, stared down at her.

"It's over and we survived, Ric." She groaned, her hips wiggling against his. "Now, I need you inside me. Please!"

He kissed her hard, before he positioned his cock with his hand. "My pleasure," he whispered, as he impaled her with one powerful thrust. She nearly wept at the beauty of it, the fullness and the completeness of his rock-hard shaft inside her. He bent his face down to take one aching nipple into his mouth and she did cry.

Tears ran down her face as she clutched his head to her breast and pumped her hips in time with his. He switched to the other nipple, sucking strongly, not gentle at all and she came, convulsing around him, but he didn't stop, didn't even slow down. He kept thrusting and suckling until she felt the pleasure building again.

She tugged his face up, wanting to kiss him on the mouth. He complied, thrusting his tongue between her lips with the same rhythm as his cock was pounding into her body. She wanted, needed to be even closer, so she tilted her pelvis up into his, wrapped her legs around his waist and locked her ankles, holding on for dear life.

She could feel his body tense as his orgasm built and it was all she could do to hold back her own explosion. As his spine stiffened, he grew even larger, stuffing her almost to the point of pain. She dug in her nails and held on, forgetting even to breathe. The scream started from the base of her own spine and emerged as she shattered, mixing with Ric's hoarse shout as he spewed into her, pulsing and pumping for long, beautiful moments, while Meagan twitched and spasmed around him. Even after they'd both stopped coming, he stayed inside her while she held him tight, wishing she never had to let go.

Chapter Fourteen

“Now try again, but this time picture the object exactly.” Blaine’s voice was starting to get ragged as his patience frayed. Ric fought a laugh at the snotty look Meagan shot the mage.

“I did. It’s not my fault I got the Diet Coke without the bottle.” Both Meagan and Blaine were damp, wearing a good bit of the errant soda.

“You were probably focusing on the taste of the liquid and not on the container.” Ric couldn’t help the snicker that came out with his words. “A common mistake this early in the game.”

“True enough.” Blaine wiped his shaggy black hair away from his face. The man looked positively frazzled and Ric couldn’t blame him. Twins due any day and a Faerie assassination plot dumped on his doorstep.

“If they haven’t already mentioned it, you’ve come amazingly far in such a short time.” Dee wandered into the sitting room carrying a glass of milk and a banana. “Porting an object with no training at all, even under the influence of an overload of adrenaline, is an impressive feat. Once you get a handle on things, you’re going to be very powerful, especially for a halfling.”

Meagan beamed. “Thank you, Dee. How are you feeling this morning?”

Dee smiled back. “Fat. Sluggish. But otherwise marvelous, thank you for asking. Have you any children

of your own?"

Meagan flushed and shook her head. "Always figured I was too much the flaky artist to make much of a parent. Never ran into a man I wanted to make babies with, either."

Flaky? His Meagan? Bollocks! Ric couldn't believe his ears. But the thought of her making babies with any other man made him want his sword in his hand.

Dee took a seat on the couch next to Blaine and his arm went around her automatically, almost as if the man didn't even register his own motion. What must it be like to be that tuned into another being? Ric had no lingering feelings for Deirdre other than friendly affection, but now, he was actually jealous. Only he didn't want Dee, he felt an absurd longing for what she and Blaine had together and a sick feeling grew in his stomach as he realized he only wanted that with Meagan. Like it or not, he'd fallen completely in love with her.

"It happens when you least expect it." Dee was reassuring Meagan. "Look at it this way. If you'd already had a husband and kids, how much more awkward would your present situation be?"

"You've got a point." Meagan nibbled on a croissant from the tray on the cocktail table in front of them and looked around, as if for a drink. Her tea was long gone, Ric noticed and she was too polite to ask her hosts for her normal beverage. He snapped his fingers and handed her a diet cola, fresh from her own refrigerator.

Their gazes locked as she took it from him, unscrewed the cap and took a long swallow. When she finished, she closed her eyes as if in ecstasy. "I still hate it that you can read my mind, Ric, but thanks. I needed that."

The funny thing was he hadn't skimmed her thoughts.

He'd simply known that's what she was missing this morning.

He caught a quick flash as Blaine and Dee exchanged a knowing look. Fuck, they were on to him. He looked down at his hands and spoke briskly. "How about now we focus on your luggage?"

"The whole suitcase or piece by piece?"

"One item, to begin with. Something easy to replace, but familiar. Like your toothbrush. You have to be able to picture it's location, in order to grab hold of it."

"Wasn't there one in your bathroom?" Dee, ever the attentive hostess, asked with concern.

"Of course there was, love, that's why it's expendable." Blaine patted his wife's hand. "Good call, bard. Now, Meagan, close your eyes and concentrate on that toothbrush. Visualize the color, the shape, the weight of it and where you saw it last. Now imagine it in your hand."

She squeezed her eyes shut and held out her hand. The others waited, watching in rapt silence. Suddenly, there it was. Her well-worn purple toothbrush appeared in her hand. Meagan opened her eyes and squealed. She launched herself at Ric, throwing herself into his lap, her arms around his neck.

"I did it! I did it! Did you see?" She hugged him hard and planted a smacking kiss on his lips. "I can't believe it!"

What the hell, his friends already knew he was a goner. He hugged her back. "Aye, love, you did it."

"Now I can get my suit!"

"There's a designer boutique downstairs." Dee's violet eyes twinkled. "You don't need to worry about clothing. Help yourself to anything you'd like."

“That’s really sweet, but...”

“But you’ll feel more confident in your own things.” Maeve had joined the group, coffee in hand. “Not all of us are as casual about clothing as you are, Dee. I imagine that Meagan will want her own armor in place for meeting our fearless leader.”

“Exactly.” Meagan finally seemed to notice she was still on Ric’s lap. Her face turned a bright pink as she scooted off of him and back to her own spot on the sofa.

“I can blink you your suitcase, Meagan.” Ric missed her weight already. “I wanted Blaine to teach you some basics before we leave. But we do need to get moving. The queen isn’t known for limitless patience.”

Blaine snickered. “Not hardly. I want to weave a few more protective charms around the two of you before you go. That amulet is good, but some more oomph won’t hurt. And if you need to leave court in a hurry, be sure to come here. I’ve got wards set against incoming nasties from that side as well. They’ll be tuned to let you through.”

Ric ‘ported in Meagan’s luggage and left her in the bathroom of their suite, doing whatever it is that women do. Meanwhile, he wandered back out to have a private chat with Blaine. He filled him in on everything that had happened in the last several days, leading up to the fight at the truck stop.

“You’re going to have to be careful at court. She won’t be safe there, but you can’t come across as the overprotective lover, or Llyris will gut her herself.”

“I know.” Ric downed a mouthful of the Scotch Blaine had poured. “Llyris told me to seduce the heiress if I had to, in order to get her to come. If I pretend that I’m only attentive to keep Meagan in line, I should be able to stick

close enough to keep her safe.”

“Sounds like a dangerous game, my friend. Your Meagan doesn’t seem like much of an actress.”

“I wasn’t going to tell her. Goddess, no, every thought she has shows on that face.”

Blaine laughed and Ric ground his teeth. “What?”

“You are asking to have your balls handed to you in a brown paper sack. Have you forgotten that the woman just killed a professional assassin with a fucking baseball bat? Lying to her is almost as stupid as playing games with the queen.”

Ric glared at Blaine through narrowed eyes. “I’ll do whatever I have to do to keep her safe. That’s all that matters.”

Blaine shook his head and sipped his drink. “Love makes fools of us all, doesn’t it?” With a laugh, he raised his glass to Ric and drained it. “On that note, I’m off to make sure that my wife stays off her feet.”

“You do that.” Ric raised his own glass, returning the salute. “And, take care of her, Blaine. You’re one lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

Blaine whistled, badly off-key, as he left the room. “That I am, lad. That I am.”

The portal itself was far less impressive than Meagan had expected. Of course, she hadn’t really had any idea what to expect. Other than that the butterflies in her stomach were determined to continue playing rugby for the foreseeable future.

She dressed in her own coral linen suit and heels, with her adoptive mother’s pearls glowing at her neck and earlobes. She’d even put on makeup. When she’d started to pin her hair back, though, Ric had intervened.

“Leave it down.” It hadn’t been an order or a suggestion, but almost a request. What red-blooded woman could turn that down? “It adds a bit of wildness that will come across as exotic and exciting Underhill.”

Exotic and exciting? Her? Oh, well, she’d have to take his word for it. But she left it down and turned to Ric. “Do I look all right?”

She could have sworn those golden eyes actually glowed as they gazed down at her. He ran one hand over her hair and gently kissed the tip of her nose. “Perfect.”

Yeah, right. She felt like an ugly duckling next to him. He’d changed into an outfit straight out of a Renaissance festival catalog. His gold ruffled shirt had leather lacing at the neck and full, gathered sleeves. Tan suede pants looked painted on and were tucked into above-the-knee boots in a darker shade of brown. Several gold earrings glinted in his left ear. She wondered whether it would be more fun to paint him dressed like this, or dressed in nothing at all.

“Nothing. Definitely nothing.” She jumped when she heard herself. Had she muttered that out loud? There was no contest really, but if she painted him like this, she could show it to others. She wasn’t sharing any pictures of him naked.

“Anytime you want, love.” Ric’s whisper was low and rough. “Glad you approve.”

One of these days she was really going to have to get a handle on the whole mind-reading thing. Including the how-to-shield-your-brain part.

“You’ll be fine.” Ric rubbed her shoulders as he reassured her, obviously still reading her thoughts. “Blaine says your shields are actually quite good for as little training as you’ve had. It’s a lot harder to block

someone with whom you've been intimately connected." He gave her a sexy, sleepy-eyed smile.

"Ready, kids?" Dee stood at the door to their room, Axel and Fearghus behind her. Fearghus the Brownie had cleaned and repaired all the clothes they'd arrived in last night. Even Ric's sword-slashed, blood-covered jeans were in pristine condition. Fearghus picked up Meagan's suitcase, while Axel held the three wrapped paintings in a reverent grasp. Ric carried two guitar cases over his shoulder, leaving Meagan to grab only her purse.

"Fearghus and Axel have already been through to check the portal and the entry hall." Dee was calm and collected, every bit the warrior queen. Meagan shuddered, thinking of poor Gunter. "They'll stay with you till you're settled at court. I also sent a case of Diet Coke ahead to your rooms, Meagan. Thought you might need a boost after your introduction to Her Majesty." Dee led them through what had to be her private office.

"Thank you!" Meagan gave in to the impulse and enveloped the elven woman in a quick, careful hug. Dee and her family had been so nice, so helpful, that Meagan was ashamed of her initial jealousy. Besides, whatever had once been between Dee and Ric had obviously been over for a long, long time. The love between her and Blaine was the kind stories were written about. What Meagan wouldn't give to have that kind of bond for herself some day. She looked up at Ric and sighed. Problem was, she only wanted it with him and he hadn't said a thing to give her hope of continuing their relationship once his assignment was over.

Ric squeezed her hand, urged her forward. Dee had stopped in front of a wooden door, no more or less ornate than any other in the apartment. In fact, Meagan had

assumed it was a closet. "Ready?" she asked.

Ric nodded. "Meagan?"

She squared her shoulders and smiled. "Ready. Thanks so much for everything, Dee. Take care of yourself and the twins."

Dee flashed her billion-dollar smile. "That's why I have Blaine and Maeve." She dropped a kiss on Meagan's cheek, tugged Ric's down and planted one there as well. "And you two be careful as well. The danger isn't over, not by a long shot. Take good care of each other, right?"

"Right," they replied in unison.

Dee opened the door and there appeared to be nothing but a misty darkness behind it. Axel stepped into the blackness first, disappearing from view. Fearghus followed closely behind. Seconds later, Axel's face and shoulder emerged. "All clear." He vanished back into the inky mist.

Stepping up to the doorway, Ric wrapped his arm around Meagan's waist. "Let's go." And together they stepped over the threshold and into—nothingness.

There was a moment when the only thing Meagan could see, hear, or smell was Ric. There were no walls, ceiling, or floor, except for a static-charged haze that wrapped around them like an octopus engulfing its prey. Ugh, no more Animal Planet for a while. Suddenly, her feet were back on solid ground. Only this time the floor was smooth, polished marble instead of thick wool carpet.

Meagan must have blinked, because when she opened her eyes, a room had taken shape around her. And what a room! Tall stone pillars supported an ornate plasterwork ceiling that soared high overhead. The smooth stone walls of the octagonal chamber were decorated with gilded carvings and vibrant tapestries.

“Wow,” Meagan whispered. “This is incredible.”

“No, this is a hallway.” Ric spoke in a normal volume, his tone teasing. “Wait till you see inside.”

Axel and Fearghus waited a few steps out from where Meagan and Ric were standing. She looked back over her shoulder to see that they’d come through a stone archway, filled with the same misty blackness as the doorway in Chicago. On the wall across from the portal was a pair of enormous double doors made of elaborately carved and inlaid wood. Two men, or rather elves, in silver tunics and blue leggings flanked the doorway. Meagan gulped when she saw that each of them carried a wicked-looking sword. Those didn’t look like they’d come from any reproduction catalog.

One of the guards stepped forward and addressed Ric, ignoring Fearghus and Axel. “Bard.” He nodded with what looked like genuine respect. “Her Majesty is expecting you.”

Ric nodded back. “Thank you, Dugald. May I present Meagan Kelly, the new Lady Rose?”

Both guards turned to Meagan and bowed at the waist. Their eyes never left her, however and she noticed their hands never left their sword hilts. “Welcome to court, my lady.” The one Ric had called Dugald spoke politely, but without expression. “Your apartments have been prepared, but the queen wishes to speak with you immediately.”

It’s good to be queen, Meagan thought, suppressing a giggle. But since Ric had told her to expect this, she quickly hid her smile and nodded. “Of course.”

Ric unslung one of his guitar cases and handed it to Fearghus. He selected one of the paintings from Axel. “Thanks, guys. Think you can put that stuff in my room?”

“Certainly.” Axel didn’t seem surprised about not accompanying them to the throne room, so things must be going as planned. So far.

Meagan still wished she knew what the hell was happening, but she wasn’t going to embarrass herself by whining. She smiled at the guards. “Whenever you’re ready.”

She could have sworn that one of them almost smiled. “Right this way, my lady.” He held open the door, gesturing for Meagan and Ric to precede him through. She took Ric’s arm and headed into fairyland.

Two steps in and she almost turned and fled. Why was it that every place she went lately was even more opulent and fantastic than the last? Her artist’s eyes were dazzled by the glittering crystals, gleaming polished woods and glowing silver. This was some sort of lobby area, furnished with seating areas scattered around several indoor fountains and flowerbeds. Sumptuous silk fabrics were everywhere, along with what had to be genuine gems the size of her fist. It was, however, as empty of people as the chamber they’d just left.

“Where do we go next, because I don’t think there is another step up from this,” she breathed.

“Hah. Wait till you see the throne room.” Ric squeezed her hand. “That’s where she was *trying* for ostentatious.”

“Yikes!”

Another pair of guards opened another set of double doors and Meagan saw what he meant. It was every child’s imagination come to life and then some. There were simply no words to describe the place beyond the obvious. Fairy. Tale. Palace. On steroids.

In this massive hall, there were people milling about. Some were seated on velvet-covered chairs and sofas,

while others strolled. There appeared to be waitstaff, but they didn't carry laden trays. Instead, they appeared to blink in whatever was requested, while others, dressed more plainly, bustled around blinking out empty glasses and plates. Everybody looked like a character from *Lord of the Rings*. Except for Meagan in her coral linen suit.

When she saw the dais at one end of the chamber, she forgot about anything else.

Seated in a jewel-encrusted throne made from either pure silver or platinum and cushioned in white fur, was one of the most stunningly beautiful creatures that Meagan had ever seen. And also the coldest. Icy blue eyes made contact with Meagan's from across the room and Meagan shivered down to her toes.

"Buck up, love," Ric whispered, still holding her hand in the crook of his elbow as he formally escorted her forward. "Remember, she needs you, not the other way around."

"Gotcha." She kept telling herself that, but her subconscious wasn't buying it.

"And, Meagan, if I seem, well, different, remember that I am a spy and it's my job to play a number of roles. I will always tell you the truth in private, but don't be surprised by anything I say or do in public."

"Gotcha there, too." She'd known things would be different here, that her magical interlude with Ric would end when he'd delivered her to the queen.

The crowd parted as they approached the dais and Meagan could feel the weight of maybe a hundred gazes. She straightened her spine, sucked in her gut and plastered her have-I-got-a-painting-to-sell-you smile on her face. She'd faced down Sister Mary Ignatius in seventh grade and survived. She could handle an elven

queen.

“That’s my girl.”

As she watched, Ric’s demeanor changed.

All the warmth and laughter disappeared. His face turned to stone and his posture stiffened, pulling subtly away from her. If he hadn’t warned her ahead of time, Meagan would have been terrified by the transformation.

The queen’s platinum blond hair had to reach past her butt, Meagan thought waspishly. It was done up in an elaborate arrangement of braids and curls, twined with ribbons and studded with crystals that were probably real diamonds. Her gown was a shimmering silvery blue, exactly matching the shade of her eyes. She couldn’t have weighed more than ninety pounds dripping wet. Meagan knew she’d have to paint her some day, though she hated the woman on sight. Right from the diamond-studded tips of her delicately pointed ears to her silver-slipper-covered toes.

Her own smile was probably more please-don’t-eat-me than please-buy-my-painting, but at least it stayed in place and her knees weren’t knocking. All in all, that was probably the best she could hope for.

“Your Majesty.” Ric swept into a low formal bow, dragging Meagan into the curtsy they’d practiced that morning. She managed to pull it off without falling, but now her knees were wobbling, damn it! He helped her to her feet while she defiantly returned the queen’s cool stare.

“You barely made your deadline, bard.” Her voice was low, melodic and practically dripped icicles.

“Ah, Majesty, but make it, I did.” Ric’s accent had thickened, his lilt grown more pronounced. “Having fulfilled my quest, may I present the results? ’Tis my

honor, Your Majesty, to introduce Miss Meagan Rose Kelly, lately of Michigan. Meagan, meet Her Majesty Llyris Astrella, Queen of Elfhame.”

The queen turned to look down her nose at Meagan. “You are the offspring of Emery of Rose?”

Meagan tipped her chin a fraction of an inch. “So I’ve been told.” She wasn’t going to add the “Your Majesty” bit to every sentence. She was an American, after all.

“Show me the mark.” She couldn’t have looked less interested. She didn’t bother to even look at Meagan when she spoke and did everything but yawn in overt boredom.

“Here? In front of all these people?” Okay, so she’d been a nude model for one art class. One. And she’d discovered that exhibitionism really wasn’t her thing.

“The mark is present, Majesty,” Ric interjected. “And remember that Lady Rose was raised in a far more—inhibited society. I’m sure she’d be willing to display the mark in a more private setting.”

She’d been warned that things were different here. Meagan looked around. Several of the women wore gowns that showed more skin than Meagan’s beige satin bra. She shrugged out of her suit jacket and handed it to Ric. “Here. Hold this.” She held her head high while she tugged off the ivory silk shell and pulled the left bra strap slightly aside, revealing what she still thought of as her birthmark. She lifted her gaze to meet the queen’s.

The elven monarch actually seemed to be fighting a smile. She gestured to one of the guards flanking the throne, who thumped the staff he was holding, rapping it sharply against the floor in three sharp cracks. The queen straightened her pose in the throne and raised her voice to the assembled crowd. “Hear this!”

All conversation and movement ceased. All eyes

turned toward the throne.

“I hereby declare this woman, Meagan Kelly of Michigan, to be Lady of Rose, heiress to all titles, estates and privileges held by her father, Emery, Lord Rose.” She lowered her tone, nodded briefly at Meagan. “Well done. You may now resume your clothing.”

“Thank you.” Meagan pulled her top back on and fluffed her hair out from under the neckline. When Ric tried to hand over her jacket, she took the painting he was carrying instead. “I’ve brought you a gift, Your Majesty.”

The queen made a gesture and two men dressed in the same blue and silver as the guards stepped forward from the sides of the dais. One took the painting from Meagan, while the other, at the queen’s signal, carefully removed the brown paper wrapping.

The room was utterly silent except for the crackle as the paper was removed. The guards’ faces were devoid of expression while they slowly revealed the canvas. The queen stared coldly while Meagan struggled to keep her head held high. Finally, when the last of the paper was removed, the queen scanned the painting and nodded at Meagan.

“I am pleased. The bard claims that you have painted scenes from your dreams. Is this true?”

Meagan nodded and swallowed before she could frame a reply. “It is, Your Majesty.”

“I see. Well, we shall choose to accept that as further evidence to support your inheritance.” She turned to the guards. “See that this is hung in my private quarters. Immediately.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” The only thing the guard didn’t do was salute. Meagan assumed that must be a human tradition. But the painting was handed off to another

guard dressed in the same uniform but with less trim. He handled it carefully as he scurried out of the room. Meagan couldn't see or hear Ric moving next to her, but she sensed his relief. Apparently the queen had liked the gift.

"Eada will show you to your quarters," the queen continued, her stern gaze now focused back on Meagan. "There will be a banquet in your honor this evening and I will meet with you privately on the morrow."

Meagan remembered her coaching and dropped a curtsy. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty." An older elven woman had approached the throne. Her gown was far simpler and sturdier than those worn by the others, but still looked like something out of a fairytale to Meagan. Up close, Meagan could spot a few silver strands threading through the woman's reddish-blond hair and the faintest trace of crows-feet around her clear blue eyes. It was the first sign of actual aging Meagan had seen on any of Ric's people. The older woman turned to Ric and gave a smaller bow. "Sir Bard."

Finally, she turned to Meagan and dropped all the way to the ground. "My lady," she whispered, with what sounded like tears in her voice. "Praise the Goddess, you've come at last."

"Meagan, this is Eada," Ric told her. The name sounded like "Ay-tha." He reached out to help the older woman rise. "She'll help you find your way." He turned and dropped a bow to the queen. "And I'll be finding my way to my own humble abode, if it pleases Your Majesty. It's been some time since I've been home."

"You may go." The monarch dismissed Ric with a casual wave. "Attend me in my quarters an hour before

the meal.”

Meagan suppressed a surge of jealousy. She could tell there was more to Ric’s relationship with his boss than he’d bothered to mention. She tugged her blazer from his hands and pulled it on. Ignoring Ric, she turned to the woman who was smiling at her like she was Ed McMahon with a million-dollar check. “Hi, Eada. Thank you.” After a farewell curtsy to the queen, she turned and followed the older woman out of the throne room.

Chapter Fifteen

Well, so far, so good. Nobody had denounced her as an imposter and the queen hadn't yelled, "Off with her head!" And Her Majesty had seemed to genuinely like the painting. Meagan owed Ric for that idea, even if she was pissed at him at the moment.

Meagan supposed that was probably about the best she could hope for. She followed Eada down the hallway, trying not to gape. After the opulence of the throne room, the corridors seemed downright plain, but the simple grace and elegance of the carved wood and vaulted ceilings were still stunning.

She really wished they'd let Ric accompany her. It was hard to maintain a mad when she missed him so desperately after only a minute. She was a big girl, had been on her own for a long time and was a fully functional, independent human being, *damn it*. So why did she feel so lost without him beside her? Probably because she had come to think of him as her guide through all the insanity. He was her anchor, her one link to what she still thought of as the real world. Without him, she was truly alone in a place she didn't understand.

"This is your apartment, my lady." The elven woman had stopped in front of a door covered in intricately carved rosebushes. The petals were overlaid with rose-tinted gold leaf, while the leaves appeared to be verdigris, either oxidized copper or bronze.

She reached out to touch it, but instinctively pulled back, as if waiting for the museum guard to growl at her. She'd always had the urge to touch works of art, as if she could somehow absorb a sense of the artist's genius through her fingertips. *Who knew?* She had all sorts of powers she knew nothing about. Maybe she had always been a touch psychometric and she'd never known. More likely it was just a whimsical feeling of connecting to the past.

Eada must have seen her hesitation, because she smiled.

"It is your door, my lady. You may touch it all you like."

Of course it was. Meagan grimaced. And she had to remember she was in a place where mind reading was a matter of course. Hastily she re-erected the shields Blaine had taught her about earlier. The older woman didn't seem to notice; she opened the door and motioned for Meagan to precede her inside.

"Your father was like that as a child. Always needed to touch everything he saw. I think he was able to read past emotions from the object, link himself to those who had touched it before."

"Oh." So apparently she had inherited that trait from him, along with her red hair and green eyes. She tilted her head and looked back. "You knew my father?"

The older elf stepped into the foyer behind Meagan and closed the door. The carvings were echoed on this side, as well, Meagan noted absently, her attention fixed mainly on the woman.

"Well, of course I did," Eada replied. "Didn't they tell you? I've been housekeeper for the family Rose for almost fifteen hundred years. I held your father in my

arms the day he was born.” She burst into tears.

Meagan had no idea what to do. So she followed her instincts. She dropped her purse and wrapped her arms around the sobbing woman. Eada was taller than Meagan, but felt thin and frail. Meagan was afraid to squeeze, concerned she might accidentally break something. The servant obviously felt no such qualms. She hunched over to gather Meagan close and hugged her till Meagan couldn’t breathe.

“You’re so much like her,” the older lady sobbed. “But with his hair and eyes. We’ve waited so long, my lady, but we never gave up hope that one day you’d be found.”

We? Meagan glanced behind her and saw that several other elves had gathered in the room from elsewhere in the apartment.

The one in the center was a male, tall and thin like the other elves she’d met, but like the woman in Meagan’s arms, also older. He caught her gaze and bowed.

“Theobald, my lady. Your butler.” When she smiled helplessly, he came forward and detached the woman, who was now merely sniffing, from her arms. “There, there, dear. Let’s get our lady inside, shall we? Time for the rest later.”

“Of course,” Eada sniffed. The man handed her a handkerchief and she straightened her spine and blew her nose, before flashing Meagan a bright, determined smile. “So sorry, my lady.”

“No problem,” Meagan assured her. And it wasn’t. Of all the surprises she’d had in the last few days, finding people who had known and apparently loved her natural parents was by far the best. She glanced around the huge, elegant and yet somehow comfortable room. Though this apartment was pretty cool, too. It lacked the baroque feel

of the throne room, though it still screamed money and privilege. The rich patinas of natural wood and marble took center stage, while silk and velvet in various shades of rose covered the furnishings. A huge vase of multi-colored roses dominated the wall by the door. *Beautiful.*

"Welcome, my lady." One by one the others bowed or curtsied. Meagan didn't think she'd ever get used to that. But she gave each of them a tentative smile.

"We're only a skeleton staff, of course," Theobald informed her. "When the estate is reopened, you will have to hire more."

"More?" A quick count told her there were seven people present. She didn't know what she'd do with one servant, other than cleaning this place. What was she supposed to do with more?

"Here are Cian and Mairi, the caretakers for Rosemeade." One couple bowed. "Liam is the master of stable and hounds." She smiled back at the man in leather, with work-worn hands. Stable and hounds? She had horses and dogs? Wowsers!

Liam stepped ahead of the line and spoke. "If my lady will forgive me, I brought a pair of the hounds with me. There is some possibility that danger will threaten, and Gondor and Grendl are trained to guard."

"Okay." Calc was going to hate this when he showed up, but she wasn't stupid. Guard dogs would definitely help her sleep at night. "Thank you."

He nodded his head and allowed Theo to introduce the last two individuals.

"Quinn is the captain of your personal guard. He is in charge of security." Yeah, he looked like a soldier. She hadn't missed the chain mail shirt or the functional-looking sword at his waist. She smiled and he saluted.

God, she had her own army. "And this is Sinead. She was your father's tutor and has agreed to act as lady's maid, for the present."

The last lady looked faintly disapproving, but nodded politely.

Meagan managed what she hoped was a gracious half-smile in response. She hadn't watched *Pride and Prejudice* half a dozen times for nothing.

They all stood staring at her expectantly. Sinead narrowed her gaze a tad. "We've all gathered to welcome you to your new home, my lady. Everyone here knew and cared for your father and most of us for his parents before him. A few words from you would be appreciated at this juncture."

Oh, great, the schoolmarm was at it already.

"Of course," she replied, trying desperately to think of something to say. Ric's words from earlier echoed in her brain. *Be yourself*. So she took a deep breath and let it out slowly before she spoke.

"It really means a lot to me to meet people who knew my biological father. I've always wondered about him and now I finally have the chance to find out what he was like. I understand that some of you also met my mother when she was here and I'd love to hear your impressions of her, too."

So far, so good. "I'm sure you've all heard that I only found out about my heritage a few days ago, that until I met Ric and Aidan, I didn't even know that magic really existed. So this is all awfully new to me. I promise to do my best, but I know I'm going to make mistakes and I'm going to rely on all of you to help me make as few as possible."

They were smiling. She took another breath and

plowed forward. "So I hope you don't mind a lot of stupid questions and please don't be afraid to speak out if you see me goofing up. I'm not used to this whole lady thing yet, either, I'm afraid. Now before we go any further I have one really urgent question that I need answered right away." She turned to Theobald and Eada.

"What is it, my lady?" Eada asked.

"Anything," Theo assured her in the same breath.

"Where's the bathroom in this place?"

Ric walked back to his room in a funk. It went totally against the grain to allow Meagan out of his sight.

The room was clean and comfortable, with enough luxury to suit, but without the gilded opulence of most of the palace. It was usually a pleasure to return here after any length of time spent Overhill, so why did it suddenly seem so lonely? Hell, there was only one answer to that and it wasn't one he even dared to think about.

He walked through the sitting area to the tiny, curtained-off alcove that held his bed and tossed himself, boots and all, onto the mattress. The coverlet was mink, the sheets silk, but it might as well have been a pile of moldy straw for all he cared. Without Meagan beside him, it didn't feel right. His whole body ached to see her coppery hair spread out across his soft down pillows.

Hell. He had to snap out of this and fast. If he got any more depressed, he was going to start singing the blues at dinner tonight. Wouldn't that surprise Her Royal Bitchiness? Of course, punk was always good when he was depressed. Maybe he'd crank out a few Sex Pistols or Ramones tunes instead. It was high time someone set these over-bred, self-important twits on their collective pointy ears. Maybe if he did something truly outrageous,

they wouldn't all be watching Meagan, waiting for her to make one wrong step so they could all laugh. That might even be the safest course for Ric himself. Because if they belittled her in front of him, he was liable to take somebody's head off with his sword. And then the shit would really hit the carved ivory fan.

"Well, boyo, what can you do about it?"

Great, now he was talking to himself. But he was right, he definitely needed a plan.

Time to think strategically. What was the goal?

Protect Meagan.

Definite no-brainer.

Somewhere in the last few days, keeping Meagan safe from harm had become Ric's first, last and only priority. But protect her from what?

Duh, from everything. Owain. The queen. Humiliation at the hands of a bunch of supercilious elves. Himself.

Yeah, himself. The last thing she needed right now was to get dragged into his shit. Even if it meant he had to stay apart from her more than he liked.

Okay, that was the objective. What were his resources?

Resource number one: the queen needed Meagan. That was significant, though not without limits. Llyris would sacrifice Meagan in a heartbeat if the situation shifted and Meagan became more liability than asset.

Resource number two: Aidan would kill anyone who tried to hurt his newfound cousin. Slowly and painfully and with excruciating attention to detail, which was a characteristic Ric liked in his friend. But at the moment, Aidan was still tied up with problems of his own.

Resource number three: paybacks. Ric had been at court for a long, long time. He'd been in demand much of that time for both his music and his sword. He had a lot of

favours he could call in and a pretty good idea of which players he could trust. And if he couldn't be around Meagan all the time, he might be able to find someone who could.

He stood and strode over to the scrying sphere in the far corner of his room. There was a certain member of the queen's personal guard who had once wanted to impress a lady with poetry, but was barely literate at the time. He'd been squarely in Ric's corner since the sixteenth century. So was his son, who was a direct result of Ric's help with the poetry.

It was somewhere to start.

Once he finished his call it was time to prepare for his meeting with the queen. This was going to be maybe the most delicate mission of his life and he was more nervous than he'd been on his first, centuries before. He dressed with care, in full court regalia, making sure his doublet and hose were flamboyant enough to show respect for the occasion, but not flashy enough to look like he was reaching above his station. When it all came down to it, he was nothing more than another servant to Llyris.

He put his guitars away and pulled his favorite lute from its cabinet on the wall. He stroked the oak neck and ivory frets, feeling the centuries of history that connected him to the instrument. It was the first one his teacher had placed in his hands, when Ric had been a homeless young orphan thrust upon the court. The queen had assigned him a guardian, one who was too busy to be bothered with such an awkward responsibility and had fobbed Ric off on tutors and lesson masters. What Ric had lacked in the way of parental affection, he'd made up for in learning, receiving instruction in everything from swordplay to dancing and mathematics.

He missed Clyde, his music tutor and the closest thing Ric had ever had to a father figure. He could sure use Clyde's sage advice right now. The old elf had been killed on a mission for Llyris during the reign of Richard III. That's when Llyris had decided to have his pupil take his place. With no one to turn to and nowhere else to go, Ric had agreed, especially since his first mission had been to avenge Clyde's death. And the rest was literally history.

Ric strapped on his ceremonial sword and slung the lute's strap across his shoulder. He forced himself to whistle a cheerful tune as he made his way through the corridors of the palace to the queen's chambers, trying not to feel like he was off to the gallows.

He passed by the guards at Llyris's door with relative ease, since he'd been expected. She waited for him in her private sitting room and she was dressed, thank the gods. Ric had been having unpleasant visions of having to say no to the queen. The idea of having sex with anyone but Meagan turned his stomach. Besides, he was pretty sure that he wasn't going to be able to get it up for anyone else. Falling in love was a bitch.

He swept into a full court bow in front of the queen who was reclining on a silver brocade chaise and waited until she told him to rise.

"Oh, do sit down, bard. I've no wish to strain my neck looking down at you. Or up," she added as Ric stood. She waved him to a chair.

He sat carefully on the spindly straight-backed chair. "You're looking lovely, Your Majesty. Hopefully, now that we've recovered the missing heiress, all will be well."

"And you look as though you've tangled with a giant." Her gaze was openly critical. "Lady Night Sky sent a message about your injuries. The assassins are dead?"

Ric nodded. "But Owain wasn't with them. I wouldn't be surprised if he went through Cleveland on his way here."

"The guards are on alert."

"He used blood magic to foul the portal in Detroit. He may well have a back door into this palace."

Llyris nodded. "I expect he does. I certainly would, in his position. So we should continue to guard the girl."

Ric bowed his head in ostensible submission. "You are wise, as usual, Your Majesty."

"And I suppose you had to sleep with her to get her here. I expected as much."

Ric went stock still.

"You may continue, if you wish. At least until the vote is complete."

He inclined his chin in what he hoped was a thoughtful gesture. "If Your Majesty wishes."

Llyris narrowed her eyes and stared at him. "And the geas remains, as well. Fail to produce her for the council meeting, fail to ensure that her vote is in my favor and you will become human. I have known you far too long to trust you entirely."

"Of course." He bowed his head again, though every cell in Ric's body vibrated with fury. How dare she leave him under that threat after he had accomplished his task?

But of course, Llyris wasn't going to answer. She waved her hand, indicating that their private conversation was finished and several of her ladies entered the room, giggling and chattering.

Llyris arched one eyebrow at him and drawled, "Play something, bard. Never forget that your primary purpose is to entertain me."

Meagan stood as still as she could while Sinead put the finishing touches on her gown for the formal dinner. Never mind that it was barely lunchtime in Meagan's reality, she was about to be presented at a major court banquet. This apparently involved dressing like someone out of a stage production of *Sleeping Beauty*. She glanced down at her cleavage, which was on blatant display. Okay, maybe an X-rated version of *Sleeping Beauty*.

The clothes had belonged to some distant ancestor, but since fashion here hadn't changed much since the Middle Ages, it didn't matter. The exquisite confection of a dress looked and even smelled brand new. Magic did have a lot to recommend it as a moth and mildew repellent. It also made alterations a breeze. Sinead had made no bones about the fact that Meagan was far too short and chubby for an elf, especially an elven *lady*, but Meagan couldn't do much about her size. Sinead could and did, however, modify the length and girth of the garment with a few words and some waves of her hands. Once the clothing met with her approval, she tackled Meagan's hair, which she brushed and tugged and pinned until Meagan began to fear she'd show up at dinner bald. Finally, Sinead gave a brief nod that seemed to signify, if not actual approval, at least resigned acceptance that this was the best they were going to get.

Sinead made a gesture at the wall and an ornate silver filigree mirror appeared. The surface started out opaque and cloudy, but slowly cleared till Meagan could see her reflection. At least she assumed it was her. The face looked familiar, but she'd never imagined her hair could look like this, not in a million years. And the cream and gold, Cinderella-style ball gown accentuated her curves,

sucking in her waist and pushing her breasts up and out, while the low neckline displayed them, right down to the edge of her nipples. It was probably no more revealing than a tank top, but even swathed in yards of fabric, she still felt naked.

"That amulet needs to go." Sinead's voice was bored and condescending.

"No!" Meagan's hand flew up to grasp Elise's gift before the other woman could remove it. She remembered Elise's instructions to keep it on at all times, remembered Blaine agreeing that it was a powerful charm. "The amulet stays."

"It's all wrong with the gown."

"I don't care."

"Hmmm..." Sinead eyed it appraisingly and nodded, granting Meagan a hint of a smile. "I see. 'Tis warded. Not a bad thing, that. Let's try a bit of camouflage."

While Meagan watched in the mirror, the black silk cord changed into a fine golden chain and lengthened, till the warm green stone disappeared into the bodice of the gown, nestling between Meagan's breasts.

"Much better." Sinead gave a crisp nod.

Meagan blinked. "You can actually change silk into gold?"

"Not at all. For a limited period of time, however, I can convince the silk to take on the appearance and properties of gold," Sinead corrected. "When you wake tomorrow morning, it will have resumed its natural form."

"This is all way too Cinderella," Meagan muttered. It got even more so when Sinead blinked in a jewelry case about six inches square and four inches tall.

"Most of what your society believes to be fairy tales have some basis in fact." Sinead didn't bother to

elaborate. "Now, for your first official function, you'll need to wear the Rose family regalia." She waved open the velvet box and withdrew an intricate, glittering crown.

"Coronet." Sinead apparently read the word out of Meagan's mind. "The queen wears a crown. Each of the noble houses, however, has a coronet."

"Whatever." Damn, she really had to work on shielding her thoughts. As Sinead placed the gem-encrusted circlet on Meagan's head, Meagan was forced to admit that it did make her look nobler. It was magnificent and somewhat intimidating, made of yellow and white gold, with red-gold roses woven throughout and decorated with rubies, diamonds and pearls. When Sinead placed it on Meagan's head, Meagan could swear the reflection in the mirror actually started to glow.

"Well, no one will be able to deny that you are indeed the rightful heiress." Sinead's tone remained completely devoid of expression. "The coronet only re-sizes itself and illuminates for its true wearer."

Peering into the mirror, Meagan saw that the circlet had gotten smaller and daintier than when Sinead had held it. It was now a much more feminine version of itself.

Sinead waved again and another case appeared. This one was flatter and Meagan was unsurprised when Sinead withdrew a necklace and clasped it around Meagan's neck. It was a collar-style choker that matched the coronet, with an impossibly large teardrop pearl suspended from the center. The pearl felt warm where it nestled right at the start of Meagan's cleavage and Meagan couldn't help wondering what Ric would think about making love to her in the necklace and crown. And nothing else. Her skin flushed and she started to get damp from thinking about it. She was saved from eternal

embarrassment only by the fact that she'd managed to throw her mental shields up before she'd let her mind wander. Sinead either didn't know what Meagan was thinking about, or she was good at ignoring things.

Sinead kept up her steady stream of instructions as they left the apartment and were escorted down the wide marble-lined corridor to the queen's dining room. Two of the queen's own guards led the way through the maze of gilt and statuary, while Quinn, Liam and the two wolfhounds brought up the rear. Meagan had to fight the urge to grin at the thought of her own personal entourage. The whole thing would have been a lot more fun, though, if Sinead would have shut up for even half a second.

"If she tastes a dish and nods, you may proceed. If she frowns, ignore that dish and wait for the server to remove it."

"I heard you the first six times, Sinead. Don't eat anything the queen doesn't like. Don't speak unless spoken to, don't dance, don't laugh, don't play with matches or run with scissors. I get it, already."

"Fine!" The elven woman's mouth pinched shut and she glared down her nose at Meagan. "My lady."

Meagan used every ounce of willpower she possessed not to roll her eyes and snort. *Remember Catholic school*, she told herself. *You survived nuns with rulers. This should be a piece of cake.* Except, of course, that at school, no one had been trying to kill her.

Chapter Sixteen

Dinner was—well—interesting. Meagan had never seen so much opulent excess in her life. Not even on old reruns of *Dynasty*. The only thing that kept her from hysterical laughter was abject terror. As guest of honor, she was seated right next to Her Majesty, of course. Ric was playing on a small dais away from the table, Aidan hadn't arrived and Sinead was seated at a different table, so Meagan was on her own in the shark pool. Now she wished she'd paid more attention to Sinead's instructions.

"I am pleased with your gift. The likeness to the folly on my estate is remarkable."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"I am also informed that you were able to transport an object with no training whatsoever. Is that also the case?"

Meagan kept her eyes fixed firmly on her plate and nodded again. "It was a life-or-death situation, Your Majesty. I'm not sure I could have done so under normal circumstances."

"Possibly not. But the feat is nonetheless commendable. I have far more use for both of you alive than dead. My thanks for saving his sorry hide."

"Not necessary, Your Majesty. I prefer my own hide in one piece, too." She repressed a giggle, but couldn't quite stop the grin that quirked her lips up. She hastily took a sip of the wine from her ornately carved silver goblet.

Apparently the queen was in an indulgent mood,

because she smiled back. “Understood.” Then she peered at Meagan more intently. “And the bard? Do you prefer him intact as well?”

Uh oh. Meagan swallowed carefully trying not to choke on the wine and set her cup on the snow white tablecloth. This was the minefield she’d been expecting. She didn’t get the feeling that Llyris was the sort of girl who liked to share her toys. She’d spent half the time Sinead was poking and prodding at her thinking of a response to this exact query.

“Ric has become—a friend,” she admitted. “I’ve come to respect his judgment and, I must admit, he’s no hardship to look at or listen to.” Keep it light, she’d decided. That was the way to play her relationship with Ric. She figured she could admit she enjoyed him, as long as she didn’t let anyone suspect that it went any further than that. Play the role of flaky artist for all it was worth.

“No, he has always proven to be—entertaining company.” The queen’s eyes were narrowed as she regarded Meagan.

Meagan forced herself to look at all the impossibly handsome elves lining the high table and to grin suggestively. “But the scenery here is full of attractions, isn’t it, Your Majesty? A girl could be entertained for quite some time.”

She must have hit it right, because a gleam of approval flickered in Llyris’s icy blue eyes. “Exactly, Lady Rose. I believe you will be a pleasant addition to our court.”

The queen spent the next several minutes being charming. She pointed out various members of the elven nobility and regaled Meagan with amusing anecdotes. Meanwhile, Meagan couldn’t help wondering which of these faces hid minds ready to wage war on the entire

human race. Owen Ferris wasn't present, thank God. She doubted she was a good enough actress to play nice with him. Also conspicuously absent was the cousin who was next in line for Meagan's title.

"So the council meeting is tomorrow?" Meagan asked the queen. "Is there anything special I need to know before the meeting? Some sort of oath or special protocol, any of that?"

"You will be thoroughly briefed prior to the session." The monarch's tone turned cold again. "My lord chamberlain intends to meet with you in the morning."

Meagan shivered. She had no doubt that if she even hinted about voting the wrong way, really bad things were going to happen. She nodded a polite thank you and turned her attention back to her food.

"Will ye go, lassie go..."

Meagan chewed her bland piece of—well, she supposed it was duck or chicken, or some other bird—and suppressed a smile. Without a direct word, Ric was reminding her he cared. After all, no one else in the room would know this was the song he'd sang to her the other night, right before they'd made love. Sure enough, not one of the diners even raised an eyebrow or turned to look at the bard in the corner.

His Meagan was doing him proud. She played the spoiled, slightly ditzy artist to perfection, without making herself look like an idiot. He wished he'd been prepared for the way she looked in full court regalia. Not only was she drop-dead gorgeous in the elaborate ball gown, but seeing the glowing coronet entwined in her flame-colored hair served to remind him that she was utterly out of his league.

He knew she didn't understand the *mionn*, the vow of loyalty he'd given her that night in her bedroom, but it was the second-strongest oath one of his kind could make. His life for hers. Hell, she had that anyway. All she'd had to do was smile.

Llyris suspected something was up with him, that was a given. She'd have removed the geas if she didn't. But it looked like she was accepting Meagan at face value, thank the goddess. So far the others at the table had been at least polite to her, some openly curious about her life in the mortal realm. She was holding her own and Ric couldn't have been prouder. He couldn't tell her so, not in so many words. But there were other ways. He strummed his lute and sang the song he'd known for centuries, but would now forever associate with Meagan.

"Will ye go, lassie go..."

After the formal dinner ended, Ric was allowed a brief time to eat in the kitchen of the queen's apartment, while the diners refreshed themselves prior to the dancing and other entertainment. His mouth full of roast swan, Ric smiled a welcome as another man slid into the chair across from him.

"You called for help?"

Ric nodded and swallowed.

"With what?"

"You've heard about the new Lady Rose?" Ric poured another mug of cider, handed it to the guardsman before taking a drink of his own.

"Not being dead or deaf, I've heard." Kieran chuckled and raised his mug to Ric. "Good job on finding her at last. I caught a glimpse in the throne room this afternoon. She's got guts. Not to mention a nice pair of..." He broke off when Ric's fist clenched around his throat.

“Sorry.” Ric forced himself to let go.

“Eyes,” Kieran finished hoarsely, with a knowing grin. “Cute little thing, isn’t she?” He gulped his cider, wary eyes never leaving Ric’s face.

Ric scrubbed his hand across his face. “Shite. I am sorry, Kieran.”

Kieran waved a hand. “No worries. It had to happen sometime, lad, even to you.” He laughed. “Need me to write some poetry, do you?”

Ric laughed back. “No. I was thinking more along the lines of guard duty. Think you can put together a small cadre of volunteers to be assigned to the new arrival? Men you’d trust with your own life—or your mate’s?”

Kieran nodded. “The purists will be trying to put a knife in her back, no doubt about it. Aye, I can round up a team. Myself and Sean to start.”

“No. Not Sean.” Ric could ask his friend to risk his life, but not his son.

“’Tis only for a day, correct?”

Ric nodded. “The ball tonight. Then tomorrow until the hour of the council. I’ll convince the queen it was her idea.”

“Aye, that will be best. I’m off duty for the ball, but I can rearrange plans.” He raised one eyebrow and looked sideways at Ric. “You’ll be guarding her personally through the night?”

“Goddess, I hope so!”

“Well, there’s another layer of defense.” He drained his mug and stood. “I’ll see you at the ball in an hour.” With that promise, the guardsman left the room as swiftly and silently as he’d entered.

“Well, Cinderella, welcome to the ball.” Meagan

shook her head in wonder at the sights and sounds around her. The clothes were for the most part the same ones worn at dinner, but necklines had mysteriously lowered and the men's leggings had mysteriously tightened, leaving virtually nothing to the imagination, for either gender. Meagan had to surreptitiously check her own gown, to be sure nothing had been modified.

"Stand up straight!" No, nothing had changed. Sinead was still standing at her elbow, hissing commands. Criminy, put the woman in a black habit and she could have taught at St. Francis. Thank God she didn't have a ruler.

"So we've moved from Alice to Cinderella?"

Meagan jumped when she heard the soft voice whisper in her ear, the one away from Sinead. "Ric!"

He steadied her with a warm hand on her bare elbow and dropped into a bow. "My lady."

She bit her lip to keep from telling him to knock it off. He wasn't mocking her, she knew that. He was mocking his own overblown culture. "Get up, you idiot."

He gave her a conspiratorial grin as he did. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine." She'd been treated like a sideshow freak at dinner by some and she was heartily sick of Sinead, but the effusive welcome from Eada and company more than made up for that. "Be better if I could breathe in this dress without fear of falling out."

He groaned. "Oh great. Now I've got that image in my head. Knew I shouldn't have worn leggings."

She rolled her eyes and laughed. Pointy ears or not, he was still such a guy.

"Damn straight," he whispered. "And thinking about sex every seven seconds is only the average. I like to

think I'm ahead of the curve."

"Oh there's not a damn thing average about you and you know it. So what am I supposed to be doing here? Mingling? Sinead seems to think I should do nothing but stand in a corner and smile."

"How about a dance?"

"Yeah, right. Like I know the steps. What is that they're doing, a minuet?"

"Something like that. But I've got an in with the band. Can you waltz?"

"Yeah. For some odd reason, they taught us ballroom dance in PE at Catholic school. Since I'm short, I usually even got to be the girl."

His laugh was almost as intimate as a caress. "Then I'll go see what I can do. Want me to bring you something to drink when I come back?"

"Sure, as long as it's low-octane. Something tells me I really don't want to be table-dancing at this party."

"One sparkling water coming right up." He turned to a man behind him and gestured. The older man—at least she thought he was older; it was still so hard to tell with these elves—wore the uniform of the queen's guards. "And one waltz. Meanwhile, Meagan, this is Kieran. The queen has assigned him as your bodyguard for the next forty-eight hours."

She snorted. "Like I need another one?"

Ric glared and it looked like the guard suppressed a grin. Meagan knew the danger was genuine, but it still seemed so surreal, she didn't know how much more she could take without falling down in hysterical laughter. She smiled back. None of this was his fault after all. "Nice to meet you, Kieran."

He bowed, then gave her an actual smile and shook her

hand. "Delighted, my lady." He nodded at Ric, who faded off into the crowd.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?"

Meagan nearly jumped out of her skin as she turned toward the new, surprisingly friendly voice.

The tall, dark-haired woman who stood there was dressed as opulently as everyone else in the room, but something about her appearance was different. It took Meagan a second to figure it out. "You're human."

"You're observant. My name is Belinda Bennett, or it was. Here, it's been Lady Willow for the last century or so." Her accent was English, Meagan thought.

"You've been here a hundred years? You don't look a day over forty."

"I'm life-bonded to a member of the Fae. Didn't anyone tell you about that?"

Life-bonding. Oh, yeah, she remembered the phrase. "That's why my mother died right after I was born."

Kind blue eyes clouded over as they gazed at Meagan. "Oh, I'm so sorry. That is the risk we take. When you link your life to another's, neither can survive long without the other. But there is a positive side. Instead of my husband's life span being shortened to match mine, mine has been extended to match his. I was thirty when we married. That was in 1893."

"Have you ever been back?" Meagan's brain was processing the new information.

"For visits. Frequently while my mother was living and our children were young, but less often as time went on. My husband was assigned to Paris for a few years after the Second World War. Mostly, though, his duties have revolved around the court, so we've been based here."

“And your duties?” Meagan quirked an eyebrow. “How in the world do you occupy yourself amid all of this?”

Belinda laughed, a warm, throaty chuckle. “You mean other than order servants around and eat bon-bons?” Her pink-painted lips twisted into a grimace, but her eyes twinkled. “I’d go crazy in a week. Actually, I write.”

Ooh, another artist of sorts. “Really? What do you write?”

“Novels. Mostly romance these days.” There was a knowing grin on the lovely face.

“And are your books sold in this world, or the other one?”

“Both. I’ve had a number of pseudonyms over the years, of course. Can’t let one incarnation go for more than a handful of decades. But it keeps me out of trouble. It also helps that we don’t live here. Not in the palace. I know you’ve only seen this piece of it, but there is a whole world outside these walls, you know. We have a portal between our apartment here and our home. I’d be surprised if you didn’t have the same.”

Did she? “I’ll have to find out. Thank you.”

“No problem. I do remember how awkward it was to adjust. And I had a husband to help. Anything you need, let me know. Have you learned to use the scrying balls yet?”

“No.” Though she’d seen one in the corner of her sitting room.

“Well, we’ll make sure that’s the first lesson, as soon as that bloody council meeting is over. I know my Cynric is terribly worried about that. What happened to your parents—it could have been any of the mixed couples at court. I don’t think Cyn let me out of his sight for a year

after Emery was killed. There were two or three other assassinations at that same time. Then one of the killers was caught and executed and things died down again for a while. Now it seems to all be coming back.”

“So why aren’t you hiding?” Meagan was slowly coming to grips with the idea that race and political intrigue were going to be issues for the rest of her life. She would always be a halfling, always be on the radar of the elven equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan. Life had been a whole lot simpler when she was just a flaky artist.

“Mainly because I choose not to.” The older woman tipped her head at the man standing directly behind her and he nodded briefly in response. “Hiding would be giving the bastards too much power over my life. I take precautions. Like you, I have bodyguards when needed. But my value as a target is reduced, since I have two grown children who would inherit Cynric’s seat on the council. I’m afraid your father was targeted in an attempt to seat one of Owain’s supporters in his place before he could produce an heir. I’ll wager Diarmud watched his mirror for days, waiting for the mark to appear. When it never did, it became apparent that somewhere in the worlds, you existed and the seat remained vacant till you were found.”

Meagan shook her head. “This all seems so surreal. There’s still a part of me that thinks somebody must have slipped something in my drink that night at the bar when I met Ric and that everything since has all been one long acid trip.”

Belinda reached out, the candlelight shooting sparks off the gems that dotted her soft white fingers. She took Meagan’s chilly fingers and squeezed them softly. “You’ll be fine. And, yes, I know what an acid trip is. In

order to stay current for my books, I do spend some time every year in the human realm. I've even grown addicted to a few television programs. One of my daughters is in New York at the moment. She TiVos episodes of *Lost* and saves them for when I visit."

She shook her head and bit her lip as if debating whether or not to continue, but she tipped her chin and did. "But if by Ric, you mean Alaric the Bard, please remember that finding you was an assignment for him. He's been the queen's favorite agent for many, many years and quite openly her favorite sex toy, as well. And according to Cynric, the price Llyris demanded for failure was an extreme one. I'm afraid he has quite the reputation for breaking hearts."

"Ah, Belinda the beauteous. Love you too, darling." Ric had slipped up beside Meagan without her noticing and he leaned over to take Belinda's hand. He bowed over it and placed a kiss on the jeweled fingers, giving Meagan a rueful smile. "And the price was a steep one indeed. Fail to find the heiress and I'd be spending the next fifty years or so living out a miserable human existence."

Belinda gasped, but Meagan only snorted as she took the goblet he held out to her. "Humans are not necessarily miserable."

He released Belinda's hand and captured Meagan's, which he raised to his lips for an altogether different kind of kiss. Meagan fought to appear unaffected, even though the small of her back broke out in a sweat and her knees turned to rubber. Then Ric sighed and his expression turned serious. "No, I'm aware of that. But if I'd failed, Owain's faction would be revoking the nonaggression treaty. And I'm afraid the mortal realm would have become an unpleasant place indeed."

“That’s me. Meagan, warrior princess, savior of the universe.” She sipped the sparkling water with a happy sigh.

“All of which is more true than you’re willing to accept.” Ric’s face was still set in harsh lines, his voice dead serious. He nodded at Belinda. “And yes, it’s true I serve the queen. In whatever capacity she requires, whether I care for it or not.” His gaze softened as it returned to Meagan. “I told you I’m not a nice man.”

“It’s okay. I’m not as naïve as you think, Ric. I had figured a few things out on my own.” She hated the thought of Llyris touching him with those skinny fingers, but she wasn’t about to admit it.

“I believe I see my husband across the room.” Belinda’s chuckle was barely audible. “And I’m clearly unnecessary here. We’ll talk sometime soon, Lady Rose. Stay safe.” She whirled away in a flurry of silken tissue.

“Well, it looks like you’ve made a friend.”

“Yeah, it was kind of nice to have someone not look at me like I was a two-headed poodle. She seems nice.”

“As far as I know, she is. And you will make friends here, Meagan, I promise. There are a lot of good people at court. There are also a lot of snakes. I’d trust Lady Willow to help you sort them out from each other. Making friends with her is a good start.”

“Cool. Now isn’t that the waltz you promised me?”

His smile went straight to her heart. “I believe it is.” He bowed low over her hand. “Lady Rose, may I have the honor of this dance?”

After setting her goblet aside, she smiled and nodded, mimicking the behavior she’d been observing. “Indeed.” With her hand in his, he led her out to the dance floor.

Waltzing with Ric was like being in a dream sequence

in a movie. It was so perfect it wasn't quite real. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed being in his arms all day. He was so much taller than her that her nose fit perfectly into the depression between his pecs. His velvet tunic was belted over a blousy silk shirt, padding the hard planes of his chest when she laid her cheek against it.

"Have I told you how lovely you are tonight?" His rich baritone was soft as silk against her hair. "Almost as beautiful as you are in a tank top spattered with paint."

"Goof." But it meant a lot to know he still saw the real Meagan, not just Cinderella in the gown. "Don't suppose you can sneak into my room tonight."

"Mmm. As a matter of fact, I have royal permission to keep you in sight until after the council meeting. After that—well, you've met the queen. I can't promise anything, Meagan. All I can do is promise you that I'll always be honest about things, at least when we're alone."

It wasn't enough, not nearly. But she knew that his honesty was a gift in itself and she forced a brave smile. "Then that's a promise I'll take, Sir Alaric. If all we have is a few stolen moments, we'd better make the best of them hadn't we?"

He was still mulling over ways to keep that promise as they walked back to her apartments. Her guardsman and master of hounds led the way and Ric had to admit the dogs were a good idea, though he hoped he was in the room when Calculus was introduced to the household. And he didn't really like the idea of leaving Meagan in the hands of anyone whose loyalties he couldn't vouch for personally. Fortunately for his peace of mind, Kieran followed behind, sword ready. There was no way Owain didn't have more dirty tricks up his sleeve and it was

driving Ric nuts waiting for the next attack.

“Have you seen this place?” Meagan squeezed his arm. “I can’t get over it.”

“Yeah, I saw it. When I was assigned to find you, I did do my research first, you know. And if you think the apartment’s something, wait till you see the estate. That’s where the family actually *lived* you know.”

“Speaking of that...”

Uh-oh. Ric tensed, waiting to hear what her agile mind had come up with this time.

“Nobody ever told me exactly where Rosemeade is—geographically, I mean. You said the palace is near Stonehenge and you grew up in the Underhill version of Wales. Where does my family come from?”

“Ireland, actually. On the southern coast.”

That was cool—how fitting that her adopted parents had been of Irish descent. She smiled and went on. “Belinda says there’s probably a portal between the apartment and Rosemeade. Do you think there is?”

“There is.” *Oh, shite*, he could see where this was going and the security crew wasn’t going to like it a bit. “I used it to visit the estate before I came to Detroit.”

“Great! Then you can show me how to use it!”

“After the meeting—”

She cut him off before he could finish. “No. Not after the damn meeting. Now. Tonight. I’m damn sick of my entire life revolving around some stupid vote.”

He looked down, saw her arms crossed over her chest and her jaw set in an unmoving line. She wasn’t going to budge on this and if he didn’t help her, she’d probably sneak off on her own. “Fine.”

“Really? You mean it?” Ever-volatile, she was instantly elated, and she threw her arms around his waist

and hugged him tight. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

He did manage a quick conference with the security detail first, of course. Since the Rose family staff had been using the portal regularly, he was pretty sure it hadn't been booby-trapped, and the guards would go through first, of course, to make sure the place was secure.

Once Kieran gave the all-clear, Ric took Meagan by the hand and stepped through the doorway. They'd both changed into jeans and Ric wore his sword belted around his waist. He'd also had Meagan leave her Louisville Slugger in a nice prominent place, where she could easily 'port it if needed. Unsatisfied, but out of ideas, he led her through the portal.

"Oh my God!" Meagan's voice was hushed with awe. They'd stepped into a small chamber frescoed with climbing roses all over the walls and ceiling. A few pieces of carved and upholstered furniture nestled in the corners, along with a small desk.

"This is basically a reception room," Ric explained. "If you had important guests coming who didn't want to travel conventionally, you might have them come through the apartment to here, so a servant would be stationed at the desk to check them off and announce them as they arrived." Not to mention guards to make sure it was only the right guests, but he didn't think she needed to hear that right now.

"Those roses look positively real." She reached out to trace the line of a petal with her fingertip. "I wonder if one of my ancestors painted these. Maybe the artist thing is inherited."

"Your great-grandmother, my lady." The estate

steward and his wife stood in the doorway. “She was brilliant, by all accounts. Many of the rooms are decorated with her work. And the carvings here and at the apartment were done by another ancestor.”

“It’s so weird.” Meagan shook her head and raised wide eyes to Ric. “My whole life I was a blank page, no history at all. Now suddenly there’s so much. I can’t take it all in.”

He understood. A lump formed in his throat as he thought about his own parents. At least Meagan now knew that she’d been loved and wanted. He knew he’d been thrown away.

He kept quiet as the servants gave Meagan the grand tour. She cried when she saw the portrait of her parents, one painted from a photograph taken at their joining ceremony. Emery had married his bride legally for her world in Las Vegas, before he brought her here to merge their life essences. Ric knew Aidan had witnessed the ceremony and taken the pictures, and he was sure that one day soon, Aidan would sit down and share all those memories with his newfound cousin. For now, all Ric could do was hold her close and dry her tears.

Chapter Seventeen

It was night by the time Meagan got her first look at Underhill outside the palace. For the most part it looked like anyplace else she'd ever been. Same sky, same moon, same stars. Except that maybe they seemed a bit—closer? Brighter? Something.

And then there was the rose garden.

Rosemeade was phenomenal, of course, putting Aidan's Grosse Pointe mansion to shame. But she'd sort of come to expect that. What she hadn't expected was the incredible sense of family history that permeated the place. She knew that when she had the chance, she'd have to spend a few weeks here going through photo albums and diaries and such. Not now, but later, when she could get a handle on her emotions.

She also had totally spaced out about the issue of technology in the elven world. On the surface, everything seemed so medieval; she hadn't expected to find a stereo and a stack of record albums in her father's old bedroom. Or a KitchenAid mixer in the kitchen. Ric had explained that the technology worked, sort of, powered by magic instead of electricity. But it was considered impolite to display it in public and there were no broadcasts, or Internet to tap into. She was glad that the social restrictions didn't apply to plumbing facilities. Now that she thought about it, the bathrooms in the palace had been fully functional.

But the rose garden was simply—magical. There was no other word for it. Tiny lights like fireflies or Christmas tree lights twinkled in the greenery, but there were no cords.

“The origin of the phrase ‘fairy lights,’” Ric murmured.

“Are they alive?”

“No. Just magic.”

Just magic. She didn’t know if she’d ever be able to be cavalier about it.

The roses glowed in the light of the sparkles and stars. The garden was huge, she couldn’t see where it ended, but that might have been careful design as much as size. Trellises arched over the cobblestone pathway and carved stone benches nestled between beds. The ground was carpeted with lavender and flowering thyme, filling the air with a spicy counterpoint to the heady aroma of the roses.

They followed the winding path, hands twined together. Right before they made a turn, she paused and looked at the house. Though palatial on the inside, from the outside it resembled a simple cobblestone cottage. “It is the house from my first painting, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“All this time, I thought they were only dreams.”

“No.” They walked on till they came to a small white wooden pergola, covered, of course, with tiny pink climbing roses. Inside was a cushioned bench and Ric drew her into it, pulling her close for a kiss.

It seemed like forever since they’d been together in Chicago, though she supposed it had really only been sixteen hours or so. But so much had happened and so much had changed that it felt like a lifetime.

“Goddess, I missed this!” Ric’s groan echoed her own thoughts. He sat on the bench, drawing her down into his lap. She molded her body to his, trying to get as close as humanly—or magically—possible and burrowed her hands up under his Ramones T-shirt.

“Is anybody else likely to come out here?” She managed to speak only after his lips left hers to travel down the side of her throat. His hands were already inside her tank top, cupping the sides of her breasts while his thumbs rasped across her nipples.

“Not if they don’t have a death wish.” He nipped the tendon where her shoulder met her throat. “I told the guards to keep watch outside the rose garden until we get back.”

“Smart man.” She shifted so she was straddling his legs, pressing her damp jeans down against the bulge in his. “With way too many clothes on.”

“Umm-hmm.” He captured her mouth for another kiss, one that had her grinding against him. Then he pulled back and dropped a feather-light kiss on the tip of her nose. “Wanna see a cool trick?”

“Sure.” He’d already shown her more than she’d ever known about making love. She trusted him.

He held his hand out to the side and concentrated for a second. Then Meagan squealed as she realized he now held her jeans in his outstretched hand. He’d blinked them right off her body.

“Oh, that is cool. But don’t ever do it when I’m not expecting it.” She closed her eyes and thought for a second and sure enough, there was his T-shirt, wadded up in her hand. “Awesome.”

“Oh yeah?” There went her shirt. And her bra. They were both giggling like idiots. She ’ported off his jeans,

leaving him in nothing but his boots and socks, which he must have gotten rid of on his own, because a second later they were gone. She kicked off her canvas sneakers before he could blink them. All that remained between them now was a wet pair of blue cotton panties. "Are you attached to those?" His voice was a low, raspy purr.

"Not really." Hers was nothing more than an airy puff.

"Good." Instead of blinking away her underwear, he reached around her back, grabbed hold with both hands and ripped.

She shifted, allowing him to pull the shreds away from her body before she shimmied back against him, rubbing her cleft against the hard ridge of his cock. She wanted him inside her desperately, but another part of her wanted to draw things out, to savor the moment. She slid her hands through his long, silky hair and leaned forward to nip the point of his ear.

"Goddess!"

"Mmm. Pointy and sensitive. I love your ears, Ric." She sucked the tip between her lips and tickled it with her tongue.

"And they love what you're doing to them. But now it's my turn." He laid her back, supporting her with his hands as he lowered his mouth to her breasts. He dropped a kiss on one, briefly brushing it with his tongue before he switched to the other, settling there for a longer, wetter kiss. She groaned out loud when he sucked the pebbled peak into the heat of his mouth, swirling his tongue in slow, luxurious circles.

She gripped his arms for support as she leaned backward, her spine arching upward while he continued to suckle. The heavy fragrance of the rose garden tickled her nose and mixed with the scent of Ric's sweat and her own

musk.

“Beautiful!” he crooned when he finally kissed his way across her chest to her other nipple. He treated it to the same thorough attention as its mate and he tugged gently with his teeth, making her breath catch in her throat.

“I wanted this to last.” His strong hands pulled her upward, pressing her close against his chest. “But I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

“Then don’t.” Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she rose up higher on her knees, giving him room to position himself at her entrance. Then she tipped her face to his and kissed him. Their lips clung tenderly while she slowly, slowly sank down onto his strong, thick shaft, savoring every second as he filled her bit by bit.

One of his hands tangled in her hair, the other gently cupped her ass. For a long time they stayed still, only their lips moving in a slow, seductive dance. Eventually, though, the need became too overpowering to resist and Meagan pushed herself up with her knees. Their bodies slid against each other easily, she was that wet, as she rose to the point where only the head of his penis remained inside her. Then she wiggled her hips as she inched back down.

Ric’s tongue pushed into her mouth at the same time and she sucked on it instinctively, wanting all of him, any way she could get him. His fingers tightened, the tug on her hair almost painful. He was probably going to leave bruises on her butt, but she couldn’t care less. Every moment of making love to Ric was worth whatever the price.

It was Ric who finally speeded up the pace. Without dislodging his penis from her sheath, he shifted one leg so

that he straddled the bench and laid Meagan back onto the fluffy cushion. With infinite tenderness, he lifted her legs to rest on his shoulders, kissing the side of each calf as he went. Then he took her hips in his hands and thrust hard.

“Oh!” The new angle took him even deeper than before and Meagan clutched the cushion with her hands to avoid being shoved up along the bench by the force of his thrust. She tightened her calves around his shoulders and pushed back, meeting him with each stroke. Once they had the rhythm, he released one hip and his fingers came up to find her clit, rubbing gently on the sensitized nerve bundle. Her building orgasm coiled almost painfully in her belly, tightening like a fist. “Ric!”

“I love you, Meagan!”

She couldn’t have heard him right, but it didn’t matter. His guttural words were enough to push her over the edge, and she called his name again as lightning burst behind her eyelids and shot sparks along her skin. The explosion of sensation seemed to go on forever. She barely registered Ric’s own groan or the hot, wet spurt of his seed into her womb.

Afterward, he slumped over her, easing her legs down across his thighs. Still lodged inside her, he kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, her nose and finally her mouth.

“Yum.” She smiled up at him mistily. “I could become really fond of this rose garden.”

“I already am.” His soft chuckle was as warm as his touch. Then he straightened his arms, levering his chest away from hers. He bit his lower lip, a rare look of vulnerability flitting across his handsome features. “I meant it, you know.”

Meagan lifted one hand and brushed a strand of his wheat-gold hair behind his ear. She kept her expression as

neutral as she could, but her heart began to pound with hope. "Meant what?"

He sat up the rest of the way, linking the fingers of both hands through hers to pull her up with him. In the dim light, she could still see him peering into her eyes.

"I love you, Meagan Rose Kelly. And that's something I've never said to a living soul. Not in more than eight hundred years."

There was so much she wanted to say, but her throat seemed to have swollen shut and her eyes welled with tears. She licked her lips and nodded, hoping he understood.

He must have, or else he was reading her mind, because the strain in his expression dissolved as his eyes crinkled at the corners. "I've finally managed to render you speechless, have I?" Their hands were still entwined, so he leaned down to kiss away the single tear that had spilled down her cheek.

She'd never even known that the word speechless could be taken literally before. She nodded again, swallowed hard and forced out the words. "I love you, Ric."

His broad, trembling smile was the sweetest thing she'd ever seen. Once that was said, the rest was easier. "And I'm more afraid of that than I am of Owain and his purists. We both know there are problems here. Not the least of which is your boss."

"I know. I'm trying to sort that out, I promise. After keeping you safe, it's my first priority. I never thought I could feel this way, Meagan. I always thought that falling in love was for suckers. The ultimate con. And I was far too smart to get taken. And yet here I am. Head over heels in less than a week." Something somewhere in his past

had hurt him more than he either realized or wanted to admit.

“Love isn’t a scam, Ric. It’s a gift, to be treasured.”

He didn’t have any idea how to respond. All his experience with love had been to laugh at it. He didn’t know how to express his own. So he tried to laugh. “You’re a gift. That much is certain.”

“Who was it, Ric, who hurt you so badly? Who taught you that love can’t be trusted?”

Goddess, she was too damn insightful. And he absolutely could not look her in the eyes and lie, or even equivocate. “My mother.”

“She left when you were young, didn’t she?”

He nodded. “She never wanted children, just wanted to have a good time. She gave it a go for a decade or so, before she got bored with playing house and ran off with a djinn. It broke my father’s heart. He was a drunken wreck of a man after that, which takes a bit for an elf. Liquor doesn’t affect us like it does a human.”

“I’m so sorry, Ric. I can’t imagine ever abandoning a child, but there’s no accounting for some people. It doesn’t mean there was anything wrong with you, you know.”

He managed a weak smile. “And you say you can’t read my mind.”

“Did I mention I minored in psych?” She wrinkled her nose and grinned, obviously trying to lighten the mood. “Now maybe we should get dressed and figure out where we’re going to sleep tonight.”

He heaved an exaggerated sigh. “If we must. Though I much prefer you naked.”

She released one of his hands to give him a mock

punch on the shoulder. "Yeah, well nobody else gets to see that. And when we head back to the house, there will be people there. It's going to take me a while to get used to this whole servants thing. What the hell am I supposed to do with them?"

"Let them do their jobs." He stood, wincing as the skin of his ass stuck to the cushion for a second. "While you do yours. I know you need to paint, Meagan, as much as I need to sing. You won't be here all the time anyway. But when you are, will it be such a problem to leave the cooking and cleaning to someone else?"

"I guess not." She chuckled to herself while she tugged on her top and jeans. Ric donned his own clothes and stuffed the tattered remains of her panties into his pocket. They both carried their shoes as they followed the smooth stone path back to the house. "Can we stay here tonight and go back to court in the morning?"

He debated that for a second. The apartment was smaller, easier to secure. But he understood her need to connect with her past and even a cynic like him could feel the wealth of love and happiness that echoed through this house. And he'd be beside her, with guards right outside the door. "All right."

They reached the house and Ric raised one eyebrow at Kieran. "We're staying here tonight. Does that work for you?"

The guardsman nodded to Ric, gave Meagan a friendly smile. "I've got a team waiting on the other side of the portal, keeping it clear and I'll be right outside your door. You'll both be safe here until morning."

The housekeeper led them back up the rosewood staircase to the master bedroom, which had obviously been prepared in their absence. All traces of a masculine

presence had been subtly softened and an abundance of fresh-cut roses filled the room. Chilled champagne, fruit and cheeses waited on a small table by the window. And a white lace nightgown lay across the satin duvet, along with a man's silk bathrobe.

"I guess they were on to us, huh?" Meagan's eyes danced in the soft glow of the magical lamps that lit the room and her shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"Looks that way." He grinned back, feeling suddenly awkward. It felt—it felt like a wedding night. He had no idea if they'd be able to be together after tomorrow, they were both still in danger, but they had tonight. And he wanted with all his heart to make it a night she'd remember fondly for the rest of her life. He already knew he would.

"If I remember correctly, there's a bathroom through that door, right?" She pointed to a paneled wooden door in the corner of the room.

"I think so."

"With a really bi-ig bathtub." Her eyes were crinkled up again and her mischievous grin was back.

He waggled his eyebrows and grinned back. "Could be." He'd toured the place with her earlier. There was a sunken marble tub. Definitely big enough for two.

Meagan blew him a kiss and darted toward the bathroom door. "Race you!"

The night was magical, but morning came far too early. Ric opened one eye and growled toward the insistent knock on the bedroom door. "Go away!"

"Message from the queen."

Shit, that was Sean's voice. What the hell was Kieran thinking, getting his son involved in this mess? Ric pulled

the duvet up over a still-sleeping Meagan and dropped a kiss on her forehead before he slid out of bed and tied on the jacquard silk bathrobe the housekeeper had provided. With a finger to his lips he cracked open the door and slipped out.

Sure enough, Kieran's son stood outside the door in his guardsman's uniform. Another man in the same garb stood watch at one end of the corridor, while a man in the Rose family livery held the pair of deerhounds at the other end.

"What does she want?"

Sean snorted and hid a grin as he ran an appraising eye over the robe. "You, apparently."

Ric winced and thumped his head against the paneling. "Fuck. I don't suppose there's any coffee in this place?" There was no way he was going to be able to face Llyris without a hot shower and caffeine first.

The younger elf grinned and pointed toward a serving cart. Sure enough, a porcelain urn sat on a warming pad, next to an oversized stainless-steel travel mug. "Seems somebody warned the housekeeper."

"Thank you. Or your father, whichever." He poured the contents of the carafe into the travel mug and sipped appreciatively. "Now what the hell are you doing here, Sean?"

"My job, bard. I know you like to think of me as an infant, but I've been a sergeant for forty years. Time does move on."

Ric did the mental calculations and realized that Sean was probably well over two hundred years old. Certainly not a child anymore. "Fuck." He took another swallow of the strong coffee. "I need a shower."

Sean glanced at his watch, one of the few items of

technology Llyris allowed on her employees. “You’ve got twenty minutes, give or take, before Her Majesty has kittens.”

“Yeah, yeah, we should all be so lucky.” Ric was already opening the door. A tiny smile twitched at the corners of his lips as his eyes immediately sought out the lump in the covers that was his beloved. “Let Lady Rose sleep another hour or so. She is not a morning person.”

“There’s someone named Sinead cooling her heels in the library as we speak,” Sean told him, his expression amused. “She apparently thought she was in charge.”

Ah. Ric was sure Sean had quickly disabused Meagan’s self-appointed minder of that particular notion. She’d growled at Ric all through the ball last night and pitched a hissy fit when they’d decided to come through the portal and visit the estate. He knew she was steering Meagan right, but also knew the shrew was putting his darling through her own version of elven boot camp. Let her stew for a while. “An hour.”

Meagan didn’t wake while Ric showered and dressed. He debated the idea of blinking her fresh clothes, but decided against it. She had the ability to do it herself.

She roused when he bent over to kiss her goodbye.

“Is it morning already?” She returned his kiss before using both hands to shove her long tousled curls back out of her face.

“Afraid so. Sorry I didn’t let you get much sleep last night. You’ve got another hour or so before you have to get ready for your meeting with the lord chamberlain, but I’ve been summoned.”

“Bugger.”

He laughed and kissed her nose. “Exactly.”

“I won’t see you again before the council meeting, will

I?” He made out the last words even though they were muffled by a prodigious yawn.

“Probably not.” He nearly winced at the regret in his own voice. “But you’ll be safe. And you’ll be wonderful at the meeting, I’ve no doubt. I’ll come find you when I can. Somehow, I promise, I’ll come up with a way for us to be together.”

“I know.” She gave him a beatific smile and sat up, tugging the blanket up around her breasts. “We’ve got all the time in the world, Ric. We’ll work it out, don’t worry. We don’t have to solve everything this morning.”

Her cheerful confidence humbled him. “As wise as she is beautiful. Now take care, my love. And knock ’em dead.” He sat on the bed and took her in his arms for one last kiss.

“Goddess, how am I supposed to leave after that?” He winced as his suddenly too-tight trousers threatened to amputate a certain portion of his anatomy.

“Get used to it.” She grinned and snuggled back down into the pillows with another yawn. “Love you.”

“I love you, Meagan.”

Saying goodbye to Ric proved to be the highlight of Meagan’s morning, which didn’t bode at all well for the rest of the day. Well, not so much saying goodbye to him, but hearing him say he loved her, promising to work on a way for them to be together, that meant more than all the estates and apartments and tiaras that elf-world here could come up with.

The lord chamberlain, whatever the hell that meant, was like Sinead squared. He explained the governing process of the Seelie Court and Council in such excruciating detail a kindergartener could have

understood. She fought the urge to shoot him with a spit wad. It was clear he disapproved of her on principle, but she didn't think it was because she was a halfling. He didn't seem worried about that. Apparently the problem was her having spent the formative years of her life in the mortal realm.

Still, it was useful to know what to expect from today's council meeting. She now knew she'd be formally presented by the queen before assuming her seat and before any other business was attended to. That business being, of course, Owain's petition to unseat the queen and elect a new monarch in her place.

Despite Sinead's objections, she dressed in a simple silk suit for the meeting. She knew the coronet was a requirement, but she wanted an outfit that made her feel confident, not like she was dressed up for a Halloween party as a fairy princess. Despite her grumbling, Sinead had managed to find something in rose silk, with a jaunty, 40s flair, which Meagan loved instantly.

So now she had an hour to kill before the main event and her stomach was way too full of butterflies to allow her to eat or anything practical like that. She grilled Sinead about the other members of the council until the tutor threw up her hands in frustration.

"Enough. If you have any more questions, we can go to the library and you can look up the answers yourself."

"Library?" No one had mentioned one of those, but of course there would be. "Cool. Let's go."

The library was apparently in the same wing of the palace as the council room, so her team of babysitters decided it was an acceptable use of time. Boy, were they going to be having some interesting conversations as soon as this election nonsense was over. One of the reasons she

liked painting for a living was not being constantly under the thumb of a supervisor. Meagan Kelly was not cut out to be anybody's minion, especially someone who technically worked for her.

So finally they all trooped down to the library. Sinead, Quinn, Liam with the two humongous dogs and the queen's two guards, Sean and Alasdair. The only one of the entire entourage who treated Meagan like a person was Sean, the guardsman who claimed to be the son of Kieran from the night before. The whole overlapping generations thing was definitely going to take some getting used to. Kieran and Sean looked way more like brothers than father and son. At a guess she'd have put both of them in their thirties, but based on Sean's remarks he was over two hundred and his father was a contemporary of Ric's. She wondered if she'd ever get the hang of this place.

The library turned out to be a series of spacious, book-lined rooms with small, high windows and vaulted ceilings. At Quinn's quiet request, they were given a private reading room, in the back of the library complex. Obviously reserved for VIPs, it was plush and comfortable. Golden sunlight streamed through the transoms high in the smooth plaster walls, while the magical light globes-filled candelabra centered on two wide oak reading tables.

Sinead murmured something to the librarian, who was the first elf Meagan had seen with fully gray hair. Not white-blond like the queen, this man had a thick iron-gray mane. With sparkling blue eyes, a pointed gray beard and thick, bushy eyebrows, he reminded Meagan of Gandalf the wizard. After a quick explanation from Sinead, the librarian nodded and hurried from the room, returning a

few seconds later with a fat red leather-bound book and a handful of glossy magazines.

“Here are the official biographies of the current council, my lady.” He placed the book on the table in front of Meagan. “And here are a few more popular items.” He set the stack of magazines neatly beside the heavy volume.

“Thank you.”

He smiled, bowed and quickly backed out of the room, while Meagan turned her attention to the stack of material in front of her.

Of course there were magazines here. Meagan lifted the top one and scanned the cover. *Underhill Unlimited*. The cover photo was of a gorgeous elven woman sitting side-saddle on a unicorn and it promised articles on everything from new spells for healthier gardens to a feature on Lord and Lady Willow. “Cool, it’s Belinda!” Setting that one aside, she looked across the table at her tutor. “Can I check things out to read later?”

Sinead nodded, gazing pointedly at the official tome. Meagan rolled her eyes at Sean, posted by the door with Liam and the hounds. Quinn and the queen’s other guardsman apparently waited outside. Meagan picked up another magazine. *Court Quarterly* featured the queen on the cover and promised a run-down of the latest decisions and activities of the Seelie Council. Sort of a Fae version of C-SPAN. Perfect.

It listed the issues and who voted, which gave her the overview she’d been hoping for. The focus of the story was on the petition to call for a new monarch. By studying the names of the various speakers and who voted how, she began to get the feel she wanted for who was likely to be for or against the queen at today’s meeting.

Aidan, of course was listed, as was Deirdre, Lady Night Sky and Belinda's husband Cynric, Lord Willow. A few others she remembered from dinner, or from the lord chamberlain's briefing.

She was so intent on her reading that she barely noticed the knock on the door of the reading room, or Sean's murmur as he cracked it open. She did register the load blast of sound that thundered through the chamber a heartbeat before the world went black.

Chapter Eighteen

Ric hovered in the corner of the council gallery, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. His audience with the queen earlier had been anything but productive. It had been nothing more than a power play on Llyris's part. She'd summoned him to play for a group of her ladies, leaving him no time at all to try and convince her to release him from her service.

The session was due to start in less than half an hour and already the council members were beginning to file in, most accompanied by guards. He watched for Meagan, failing to notice when Aidan slipped up beside him, toting a cat carrier.

"Here." Aidan thumped the plastic crate against Ric's chest. "You hold on to that hell-beast my cousin calls a cat!"

"I see you got the portal fixed." Ric peered into the carrier and sent a tendril of reassuring energy toward the glowering form of Calculus.

Aidan nodded. "Desmond Sutton gave me a hand. Even though I swear he'd have rather stuck a knife in my ribs. One of these days I'm going to have to figure out why he's so pissed off at me. I know I went out with his sister years ago, but she's the one who ended things with me. This seems a bit over the top."

Aidan had dated Elise? Ric wondered if Meagan knew about that, but he figured she probably didn't. Still, her

cousin's history was of fairly minor significance compared to everything else going on today, so he filed it away to mention to Meagan later.

A few other spectators were trickling into the gallery—reporters, political hangers-on and the spouses of one or two council members. Ric smiled and nodded as Belinda of Willow took her seat in the front row, directly across from her husband's position on the dais. Aidan cocked one eyebrow as Blaine the Black walked up and assumed Deirdre's seat on the platform. According to Seelie law, a life-bonded mate had the authority to act for his or her spouse, even to the extent of sitting in council. But that had only ever happened in truly unusual circumstances. Judging by the lines of exhaustion bracketing the wizard's idiotic grin, he'd be passing out cigars at the end of the session.

"Twins," Ric whispered to Aidan. "Damn lucky bastard."

Aidan nodded. "Where the hell is Meagan? Aren't you supposed to be guarding her?"

Ric growled low in his throat. "Her Majesty had other ideas. By the time she cut me loose, there was no point going to look for her. I left a pair of hand-picked guards with her, though, along with her own people. But she should be here by now."

Most of the seats on the dais were filled, while other members of the council and their attendants were still filing through the doors. One of the other lords called Aidan over and after sharing a worried look with Ric, he moved up to his seat, still anxiously scanning the crowd.

After a loud hiss, Ric realized he was still holding Calc, so he looked around for a good spot to stash him. Meagan would be thrilled to have her pet back, but not

until after the meeting. Ric found a promising corner, set the carrier on the floor and leaned back against the wall to observe.

Prominent among the audience members was Meagan's heir apparent, Diarmud. The man was a shifty, greedy bastard, who'd been a council wanna-be his whole life, first as Emery's second, then as heir to the missing child. He had a complacent smirk on his lips that Ric didn't like at all. Ric crossed his arms over his chest and continued to watch.

Amidst a crowd of supporters, Owain entered and took his seat. Weapons were strictly forbidden in the council chambers, so none of the thugs who stood with him were armed, but Ric had no doubt that all of them had swords, if not guns ready and waiting to be blinked to hand. Well, for that matter, so did he—and probably every other member of the council as well as most of the audience.

Owain didn't look worried about the outcome of the vote. In fact, the shit-eating grin on his face looked downright—smug. A prickle of unease ran along Ric's spine and he narrowed his gaze. He took in each of Owain's supporters, some eager, some probably coerced and decided most of them had no idea of how this whole mess was going to turn out. Owain himself and Diarmud, however, were different. Ric would swear they knew something.

A herald thumped his staff and the double doors at the back of the dais were opened. Everyone in the room stood, eyes focused on the doors.

"Her Majesty, Queen Llyris Astrella, Sovereign of the Fae and High Councilor of the Seelie Court." The herald thumped his staff again as Llyris stepped into the room. Oh, shite, the queen had arrived and Meagan hadn't.

Something was definitely wrong.

When he saw Diarmud look down the front of his tunic, as though checking to see if a mark had appeared, Ric's blood ran cold.

"Isn't it time to begin, Your Majesty?" Owain turned to the queen with a bored expression. "It has never been the policy of this council to delay for latecomers."

"Until and unless I am removed as head of this council, my pleasure remains the policy." Llyris retained her typical expression of ennui, but Ric knew her too well not to see the tension radiating through her slender form. She glanced out into the gallery at Ric. "Well, bard, have you lost your charge already?"

Ric struggled for composure. "Unfortunately, Your Majesty, someone decided this morning that my time would be better spent entertaining the ladies of the court, rather than guarding our newest council member. If you recall."

What might have almost been a passing moment of regret flashed through the icy blue eyes.

"Perhaps a page could be sent to the lady's apartment, simply to be certain she recalled the time correctly?" Aidan's interjection was calm, rational, but Ric saw the worry in his friend's green eyes.

The queen nodded at a servant, who scurried off, presumably to run and fetch Meagan. Ric watched Owain and Diarmud, certain that they knew more than they were letting on. If either of them had hurt Meagan, today would be their last.

Several long tense minutes later, the servant returned. He scuttled directly to Madog, Llyris's chief bodyguard and whispered something.

The half-ogre let out a growl and motioned the man

over to the queen. The page repeated his message to the queen and darted back out the door.

“According to Lady Rose’s household staff, she opted to visit the library on her way to the meeting. Finn has gone to retrieve her.”

The library? Ric weighed the matter and decided it was well within the realm of possibility. Meagan liked knowing things.

“Your Majesty, I really must protest. According to the rules of this council, the vote must be called. Only urgent council affairs should be conducted at this juncture and only one such urgent matter lies before the council. The reason is unimportant. The fact is that the Lady Rose is not present and therefore is unable to vote.”

Llyris pursed her lips and Madog glowered, but the damnable truth of it was that Owain knew the law. Right when Llyris looked like she was going to give the go-ahead, the door to the chamber burst open and the page Finn returned, half-carrying a battered and limping Sean.

“The Lady Rose has been taken,” Finn yelled to the assembled nobles. “We were attacked in the library. Alasdair is dead, Sinead and Liam are unconscious and Will the librarian is missing.”

Ric vaulted the rail to Sean’s side in an instant, even beating Madog to the door.

“What about Lady Rose’s guard captain?”

Sean sneered. “In on it. He’s the one who opened the door. Probably also the one who let Owain know where she was.”

“Fuck!”

“Well, as it appears that Lady Rose’s arrival is not imminent; perhaps we can get on with the vote?” Madog clamped a beefy hand on Ric’s shoulder when Ric turned,

ready to pounce after Owain's smarmy remark.

The queen paled, but sighed. She spoke slowly and with more cold disapproval than Ric had ever heard in one voice, even hers. "Unless there is any other council business..."

"Wait!" Ric gathered his courage and prepared to lay it all on the line. With this next move, he could be settling his future, assuming that Meagan was found. If she wasn't, it wouldn't matter anyway.

"I will sit in place of Lady Rose." This was it. He forced himself not to blink or flinch. "I claim right of life-bonding."

Even the queen gasped. Aidan nodded and smiled grimly.

"You have completed the joining ceremony?" Llyris tilted her head imperiously. "Without my permission?"

"No, Your Majesty." There was no way to fake that; one of the wizards would be able to detect the mingled life essences if requested. "But we have agreed to do so. We planned to approach you privately after today's meeting." Which wasn't entirely untrue.

"Your Majesty, I must protest. There is no proof that the bard speaks the truth." Even Owain looked like he might be growing a bit nervous. Good.

"Well, bard? Do you have any proof to support your claim?" Llyris turned back to Ric.

"I can attest to the bard's statement." Aidan's voice rang out over the murmur of the crowd. "My cousin has indeed agreed to be his wife and life-bonded mate."

Blaine nodded. "Both Lady Night Sky and myself were also aware of this development. Alaric speaks the truth."

Ric saw Lady Willow nod, then her husband spoke.

“And I do believe she asked my wife to help her organize the wedding,” Cynric of Willow added.

Llyris nodded. “Three members of the council have vouched for Alaric the Bard. By the laws of the council, the mate of a council member has the right to vote in his spouse’s name.”

She paused, every eye in the place but Ric’s on her face. Ric still watched the enemy, noting how Owain had paled. Diarmud looked ready to bolt, but a quick whisper to Madog had the guard standing between the weasel and any avenue of escape.

“I claim that he lies,” Owain shouted. “I demand that he be made to prove his status.”

“I willingly submit to that challenge, my lord. In fact, I insist. I claim the right of trial by combat.”

Llyris nodded. “So be it. A challenge of trial by combat between two council members is indeed council business. As head of this council it is my choice as to which order of business comes first. I deem that the challenge is a more immediate concern than the vote and therefore the challenge is to be carried out immediately. Lord Rose.” She gave Ric a nasty look as she accorded him the courtesy counterpart to Meagan’s title. “Do you have a second?”

“He does, Your Majesty.” Aidan rose to his feet.

“And Lord le Faire?”

Owain looked none too pleased about this turn of events, but apparently he couldn’t think of a way around the coming duel. One of his sycophants on the council spoke up, giving him a second.

Madog gestured and a pair of the queen’s guards cleared the area between the gallery and dais rails. Owain was escorted down, where he stood across from Ric,

mouthed vile curses and empty threats. Ric merely nodded, while their seconds were sent to join them. Once all four men had both been searched by the guards for any hidden weapons, they faced each other and the queen stood at the rail overlooking the area, Madog by her side.

“My lords, produce your swords.”

Consciousness crawled slowly into Meagan’s skull. Had she been drinking? Her head sure felt like it, but she couldn’t remember partying...

Shit! The events of the past few days flashed into her mind and she bolted into a sitting position, which made her head feel like it was being stabbed with an ice pick. Her stomach lurched, so she closed her eyes and sucked in a breath, barely managing not to hurl.

When the world stopped spinning, she cautiously opened her eyes and looked around. She was in some kind of cell. Or cage. There were stone walls on three sides and metal bars on another. She was sitting on a narrow shelf built into the stone of the wall farthest from the bars, which seemed to be covered by a pad of some sort. A thin one, judging by the bruises she felt along her back. Apparently someone had tossed her onto the ledge none too gently.

Well, at least she wasn’t dead. Moving slowly, she stretched, testing muscles and joints. Nothing appeared to be broken or too badly damaged. That was good. The throbbing behind her eyeballs began to recede, but she still leaned both hands against the cool stone walls for support as she stood.

Once she got to her feet, she paused long enough to be sure she wasn’t going to fall and walked over to the bars. Somewhere along the way she’d lost her bone-colored

pumps, so her bare feet made almost no sound on the hard stone floor.

So this is what a dungeon looked like. Three walls of a larger room were lined with cells about the same as the one she was in. Hers was the first one in the U-shaped pattern and appeared to be the only one occupied, other than by spider webs and dust bunnies. On the fourth wall, a large wooden desk sat next to a heavy-looking door. The only light in the entire place came from a small light globe on the desk. Much to Meagan's surprise, the desk chair was occupied.

She didn't recognize her captor, but he was definitely an elf. The pointed ears gave that away. He obviously wasn't too worried about her doing anything. His feet were up on the desk, his arms crossed over his chest and a small snore escaped his parted lips.

Unfortunately for Meagan, his own snoring seemed to startle the guard awake. He jolted upright, his eyes flying open. Odd, she noted. His eyes were almost as green as her own.

"Hey, you're awake."

She nodded grimly as he looked her up and down like a used car. "Where the hell am I?"

He snorted. "Like I'm going to answer that. I'm not stupid, cousin."

"Cousin?"

He nodded, still running an assessing gaze over her face and figure. "Distant enough, though. My name is Neal and I'm Diarmud's younger brother."

"Cool. More annoying relatives." Meagan forced herself to stay calm. "Why the hell have you got me locked up here?"

"Because from my point of view, you're more useful

alive than dead. Which is more than I can say for my dear brother. He wanted your throat cut. But I'm tired of taking orders from him, so I have a proposition for you instead."

This was obviously a much younger elf than most of the ones she'd met so far. His speech patterns were almost American. "I'm listening."

"If Diarmud gets the title, I'll be forced to kowtow to him for the rest of my life. And frankly, I'm sick of that. So here's the deal. I keep you here long enough to miss the council meeting. Meanwhile, you agree to a handfasting, making me Lord Rose. Then we both live happily ever after."

"Yeah right." Meagan shook her head. "And what do I get out of this? A husband I don't want? I don't think so. Why not off me and your brother?" He really didn't look like he had the guts for outright murder. God, she hoped her intuition was right on that count.

"Unfortunately there are two sisters in between us. And getting rid of all of them might start to look suspicious. This way is much better. Marry me and you get to live. I'll even let you draw, or whatever it is you do. You let me rule Rosemeade and sit on the council in your place."

He'd *let* her draw? What an ass! Meagan wished he'd get off his butt and come closer. She could blink in her bat, but he was too far away to hit. Hmm... Was that her purse there under the desk? With the nice can of pepper spray she kept in it. Good thing she'd brought that with her. She visualized the can of pepper spray. Moments later, she held it in her hand.

Apparently her new cousin was the impatient type. She heard him scoot the chair back and stand.

"Well?" She heard footsteps, seconds later saw him at

the bars. Keeping her body turned so he couldn't see the can, she approached the door to her cell.

"Well, what?" She looked back over at the desk. Cool, there were the keys, sitting right where she could see them. He must not have heard she'd already learned to blink things. "Let me out of here and we'll talk."

"No way. I told you I'm not stupid. We can handfast through the bars."

"And how are we supposed to prove it? We're not talking about life-bonding here. Who's going to believe—or even know, for that matter—that we're married?"

"Video camera." He pointed up to the corner of the room. Sure enough, damn it, there was a video recorder in the freaking dungeon.

Okay, time for plan B. If he wasn't going to unlock the door, maybe she could. She stared at the keys, imagining them in her free hand. As soon as she held them, she blasted what's-his-name in the face with the pepper spray.

"You bitch!" He screamed, covering both eyes with his hands, while Meagan reached through the bars to wiggle the metal key into the old-fashioned lock.

She almost quit breathing till she heard the tell-tale snick of the lock coming free. Thankfully, Cousin Twit was still busy rubbing his eyes, so she gave him a swift push as she came up behind him. A few seconds later, he was in the cell, still screaming and swearing, while Meagan shoved the door shut behind him. But how to keep him there? As soon as he was done screaming, he could do what she did. Except, didn't you need to know where something was in order to blink it? She wasn't sure exactly how that worked. Could he get it from her pocket if her pocket was moving? Opting for safety, Meagan closed her eyes and visualized the rose garden where she

and Ric had made love the night before. She blinked the keys into the fountain, doubting her cousin would think to check there.

She fled the dungeon at top speed, keeping her pepper spray in hand as she went. Once she was out in the corridor, she looked around and took stock of her surroundings, realizing she had absolutely no idea where she was, or which way to go. Well, up was probably a good bet. The stairs were dark and cool, more carved stone. When she got to the top, she paused at another heavy wooden door. The last thing she wanted to do was to run into any more cousins, or any of Owain's followers. She figured she probably wasn't at court, which meant they'd brought her through a portal. One she had no idea how to find or even use, once she found it.

She laid her ear against the door and listened. Nothing. Well, she couldn't stay in the dungeon forever. She turned the door knob slowly and opened the door a crack. Great, another dark room. Her eyes were somewhat adjusted to the dim light by now and she slipped into what looked like a large pantry or storeroom.

Now what? She chewed on her lip and fiddled with the stone amulet around her neck.

The amulet! Duh! What had Elise told her to do? Hold it in her hand and call for help? What the hell, it was worth a try.

To be on the safe side, she clutched the warm, smooth stone in both hands and murmured her plea out loud. "If anybody's out there, I could really use some help right about now."

Both Ric and Owain blinked in their swords and handed them to their seconds, who held them up to

Madog for inspection. The half-ogre was thorough, checking each blade for hidden mechanisms and testing the weight, handing them off to one of the queen's wizards to check for spells.

"Both swords are acceptable."

"Devlin, ward the area." Llyris nodded at the wizard, who spelled the floor between gallery and dais. Once the duel began, no one would be able to enter or exit the area.

Aidan collected Ric's sword and started to hand it back. Suddenly Aidan's eyes went wide. "Elise!" He pushed the sword into Ric's hand. "Sorry, old man. Have to go!" He gestured for Blaine to come take his place, bowed to the queen and left the room at practically a run.

"What was that all about?" Blaine paused by Madog to be searched and took Aidan's place at Ric's side.

"I have no idea." And Ric didn't have time to worry about it now. Aidan was a big boy and could presumably take care of himself.

"Trial by combat is to the death." Llyris's voice rang cool and firm above the murmur of the crowd. "Is that clear, my lords?"

Ric nodded, glad he and Meagan were not actually life-bonded. This way, if he lost, she wouldn't die with him. Owain tilted his chin in agreement as well.

"Then let the trial begin!"

Okay, she'd called for help. Now what was she supposed to do? Wait for it? Hide? She had no idea if the amulet would even work and if it did, what form would the help arrive in? Meagan visualized the softball bat she'd left on the bed in her apartment at court. Pepper spray was good, but she felt more confident with the Louisville Slugger.

Well, whatever form help came in, it probably wasn't going to find her if she stayed holed up in somebody's pantry. Hitching the bat up on her shoulder, she inched toward the door.

She was only a foot or so back when the door burst open.

"Elise!"

Meagan was so shocked to hear Aidan's anguished cry that she dropped the bat with a loud clatter. "Aidan!"

A light globe appeared above Aidan's head as he peered into the room. "Meagan? What are you doing here?"

"Umm, trying to escape. What about you?" She picked up her bat and stepped closer to her cousin. Now that he was here, her knees began to shake in reaction.

Aidan caught her shoulders to steady her and his eyes fastened on the amulet. "Did Elise give you that?"

"Umm-hmm." She tilted her head and looked up at him. "How do you know Elise?"

Aidan winced. "We can get into that later. Who brought you here?"

"Another cousin. This one claimed he wanted me to marry him, so he could beat out his older brother for the title. I've gotta tell you, this whole ladyship thing is proving to be a major pain in the ass."

"Yeah." Aidan eyed up the bat. "Did you kill him?"

"No, just stuffed his sorry ass in the cell where he had me."

"That will work. Now let's get you back to the council meeting."

"Right with you on that one." She followed him out the doorway and down a hall. When they reached an arched alcove, she saw an unconscious guard slumped on

the floor. “Your work?”

Aidan nodded and showed her the police baton he held in the hand that wasn’t on her shoulder. “I was in a hurry.”

“How did you know where I was?”

He pushed her into the alcove in front of him. “The amulet has the equivalent of a GPS spell on it. It automatically showed me the nearest portal and led me to you.”

“Cool stuff.”

Aidan nodded as he followed her into the alcove, where a shimmering curtain of energy blocked her vision. When it dissipated they were in the main portal chamber of the court.

“I should warn you before we go in...” He was practically dragging her down the corridors at a run, two guardsmen from the portal chamber keeping pace. Meagan was really glad she didn’t have her heels on.

“Warn me about what?” She was panting and her hair was probably a total disaster. Wasn’t the queen going to love this!

“Ric challenged Owain to a duel. They were getting started when the amulet triggered.”

“Damn it! Is he going to win?” Her blood ran cold at the thought of Ric dying on the end of a sword.

“I have no idea. They’re both good. The thing is...” He paused at an ornately carved door, pulled Meagan close and whispered, “Ric told them you were engaged. It was a stalling tactic to keep Owain from forcing the vote with your seat empty. I backed him up, so did Blaine. So if you’re going to turn him down, do it after today’s meeting.”

Turn him down? Not in this bloody lifetime. She

motioned to the guards to hurry up and open the door. She had to see for herself that he was alive.

When the doors opened, the sounds of clanging metal crashed into the hallway. Meagan clutched Aidan's arm tightly as they stepped inside. They were stopped at the doorway by one of the queen's guards. He closed the door behind them and they leaned up against the carved oak panel. Meagan watched in horror as Ric and Owain circled and danced. She only tore her eyes away for a second when one man in the gallery stood and stared at her before he made a run for the far door. Another of the queen's guards grabbed him by the shoulders and held him in place.

"My cousin Diarmud?"

"Afraid so." Aidan returned her whisper, but both of them kept their eyes focused on the fight.

Both men were bleeding and breathing heavily. Meagan recognized a shimmering dome of power around them, like the one Owain's assassins had erected at the truck stop, but this one was transparent, allowing the audience a full view of the combat. Blaine Black stood behind Ric and another man she didn't recognize stood in the far corner. The queen and her bodyguard watched from the rail above the fight.

Meagan whimpered as Owain's sword sliced into Ric's hip. The same leg that had been hurt last time.

"Shh. Don't distract him!" Aidan let her clutch his hand, didn't seem to mind how tightly she squeezed. She didn't think Ric was even aware of her presence in the room, he was so focused on the fight. Owain's eyes did fly wide and that moment of distraction cost him, as Ric's sword bit into his shoulder, causing his own weapon to clang to the floor. Owain slumped and Ric's weapon flashed, pausing right at Owain's exposed neck.

Chapter Nineteen

“Mercy, my queen?”

Ric didn't even look at Llyris as he asked. The question was routine, but he knew Llyris too well to think she was going to let him spare Owain's miserable life. No, the queen would use this as an excuse to make somebody else, namely Ric, the villain in Owain's demise.

“Granted.”

The dome vanished as Ric pulled back his sword. Shocked at Llyris's pronouncement, he let his eyes flash to the queen, which proved to be a critical mistake. Owain 'ported in a knife, which he buried in Ric's chest.

He felt the burn, but his reflexes kicked in to bring his sword back around and shove the blade into Owain's throat. Blood fountained, metallic-smelling and thick as Ric slumped to his knees. He heard screams, thought one sounded like Meagan.

“Meagan!” His own voice sounded distant. He looked down at the blade sticking out of his chest. He'd be okay, he thought. It looked like it missed the heart or lungs and Llyris's healers could fix about anything else. As long as they did it soon. There was an awful lot of his own blood pouring down his tunic.

Blaine's hands wrapped around him and eased him to the ground. He heard his tunic rip, felt the burn of magic as Blaine laid his hands on Ric's chest. “Get me a

goddess-damned healer!” His vision was starting to blur, but he forced his eyes open as Meagan ran to his side.

“Don’t you dare die on me, damn it! Not when you just promised to marry me.” Trust his Meagan to have learned about that already. Ric tried to smile.

“He’s not going to die.” That was a woman’s voice, vaguely familiar.

“Lady Storm.” That was Blaine again. “If you can stabilize the wound, I’ll get the knife out.” Ric decided he really owed Blaine a drink after this. He let his eyes close as he felt a second set of healing hands on his chest. Meagan gripped his hand on the side away from the wound. There was a horrendous burn as the blade was removed and the world went black for a moment.

“The council will recess while someone cleans up the remains of Lord le Faire. And someone else find his heir.” Ric heard Llyris in the back of his head as his brain started to un-fog. The murmurs of the healer had stopped, along with the pain in his chest, so he figured it was safe to open his eyes and sit up.

The first thing he saw was Meagan kneeling above him, tears streaking her beloved face. “Don’t cry. It’s over.”

“Never, ever do that again, do you understand? No more swordfights. Ever!” She sniffled, wiped her eyes with the back of the hand that wasn’t clutching his.

He sat up and drew her into his arms, neither of them worrying about the blood. “Shh, love. I’m fine.” He buried his face in her tangled hair and remembered why he’d been fighting Owain in the first place. “And where were you? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. I’ll explain later. Right now we need to talk to the queen.”

“You know what I told her?” He was more scared now than he’d been facing Owain. What would he do if she denied him?

She pulled back far enough to look him in the eyes. “Did you mean it?”

He nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. “If you’re interested. Otherwise, please go along with it for today and you can dump me publicly tomorrow.”

“Only if you want me to.”

They were whispering, but Ric didn’t forget for a moment that every eye in the place was still on them. He bent and kissed Meagan on the mouth, shutting her up. Then he whispered in her ear. “I love you. We’ll sort out the rest when we’re alone.”

She nodded, her eyes bright with tears. “Back at you. Now let’s do this council thing.”

Ric unfolded his legs and they helped each other to their feet. Owain’s body had disappeared and most of the blood was gone, except for the pool where Ric had been lying. As soon as they stepped away from it toward the railing, servants descended on that mess as well.

“Majesty.”

Llyris nodded briefly at Ric and before turning her steely gaze on Meagan. “I see Lord Green Oak managed to find you, Lady Rose.”

“He did.”

“She was abducted by Neal of Rose.” Aidan joined them at the rail. “We left him in a cell, but I’d like to take a couple of guards back to retrieve him.”

“And the videotape.” Meagan said.

Llyris nodded. “Go.”

Aidan left and the queen turned back to Meagan and Ric. “Lady Rose, the bard here claims you agreed to

marry his sorry hide. Did he speak the truth?"

Meagan nodded. Ric was proud of the way she stood up to the queen without flinching. "He did. Is that a problem?"

Llyris tilted her head from side to side. "He is sworn to my service. So you tell me. *Is* it going to be a problem? After all, there is still the matter of a geas, is there not, bard?"

"I am willing to accept the consequences, Your Majesty." Ric bowed his head, praying the queen would take out her anger on him instead of Meagan.

But apparently, his amazing halfling had some ideas of her own. Ric watched as Meagan narrowed her beautiful green eyes and gave the queen a smile so cool and calculating it was worthy of Llyris herself.

"Since I believe there is still a vote scheduled today, I don't see a problem. You want my vote, you release Alaric from your service and the geas."

"I could still have you killed." Llyris lifted one eyebrow. Ric couldn't tell if it was anger firming the queen's lips or—could it be approval?

Meagan nodded, crossing her arms over her chest. "You could. But then you wouldn't have my vote, now would you? Face it, I'm more useful alive than dead and after seven hundred years, it's high time you found a new toy anyway. Let him go. Please."

"You make a valid point." Ric watched the queen's face, unable to breathe. He could swear the corner of her mouth almost—almost—twisted into a smile. Then her bored expression returned and she waved her hand. "Fine. Keep him."

Ric felt Meagan stagger, knew her relief was as overpowering as his own. "Thank you, Your Majesty. We

continue to be your servants.”

“Yes, well, right now, you are a pair of decidedly smelly servants. Go change your clothing so the council can reconvene, will you? I wish to put this entire cursed business behind me.”

“As you wish.” Ric bowed and Meagan dropped a curtsy as they hurried out of the room.

“My place or yours?” Meagan’s laugh was a touch hysterical as soon as they left the council chamber.

“Mine’s closer.” He ached to pull her into his arms, but was afraid that if he did, the witnesses were going to get an eyeful. “This way.” Taking her hand, he practically dragged her down the corridor to his room. As soon as the door closed behind him, he pulled her close and pinned her body against the door.

“Meagan, will you marry me? For real? Be my life-bonded mate?” He searched her face for any signs of doubt or hesitation. “I’m sorry I never got to properly ask.”

“I love you, Ric.” Nothing but unbounded love shone in her bright green eyes. “Marriage, life-bonding, whatever you want to call it, I’m already yours.”

He crushed his lips down on hers, sealing the promise. They had more to discuss, but the details could wait. Apparently, Meagan couldn’t, based on the way her clever artist’s fingers were stripping off his clothing.

He helped by pulling the tattered remains of his tunic over his head. Meagan whimpered as she spotted the new pink scar on his left pec, which she leaned in and kissed. “No more of these. I can’t take it.”

“I’ll try, love. Now that I’ll just be a musician, I think I can manage to stay out of knife fights.”

Her giggle was weak, but at least it was a laugh. He

continued. "And no more getting kidnapped for you, either. Do we have a deal?"

"Deal." She stepped out of her skirt and tugged off her jacket and blouse. Ric let out a groan as she pulled him back into her arms, his naked erection pressing against the soft skin of her belly. He reached behind her and unhooked her bra while she wiggled her panties off with one hand.

The adrenalin rush they were both still riding made foreplay redundant. He slid one hand between her thighs, found her already wet and swollen, while she nipped his lips between impatient murmurs. He put both hands under her arms and lifted, pressing her back against the door with his chest to hold her in place. Then using one hand to brace himself, he positioned his cock with the other before sliding home into her hot, tight sheath.

Oh, yeah, home! She wrapped both arms around his neck, both legs around his waist and dug her teeth into his shoulder while he pumped into her in short, fierce strokes. In a few lightning-fast seconds he felt her muscles tighten, heard her breathing hitch and she gripped him with arms, legs, teeth and pussy as she peaked, a wordless cry muffled by his skin.

The tight pulsing of her channel felt like a fist and it only took Ric a couple more thrusts before he exploded himself, driving so deep into Meagan that he felt like he could drown. He fell forward, his face against the oak door, his chin resting on the top of her head and struggled for breath.

"Wow." She gently kissed the spot where she'd bitten him, which Ric had no doubt would be a bruise later on. And he didn't care a bit. His Meagan was welcome to mark him whenever and however she pleased.

But all he could manage to say over the pounding of his pulse was, “No kidding.”

“I suppose we really need to clean up and get back.” He heard the wry humor in her tone and smiled.

“Yeah, probably. Think you can blink yourself something to wear?” He was ridiculously proud of how far she’d come with her magic.

“Yeah. But I sure as hell hope you’ve got a shower in here.”

Everyone was waiting for them when the court reconvened, but Meagan didn’t give a damn. She wore jeans and a cotton sweater, while most of the other councilors wore formal attire, but she didn’t give a damn about that either. Or the fact that both she and Ric were grinning from ear to ear.

Aidan was in his seat when they arrived, while a pair of burly guards stood over three chained-up prisoners. Two of her cousins, Meagan thought in disgust. The third, oddly enough, was Aidan’s secretary, Fianna. One stiletto was broken and her suit coat was torn a bit and Meagan couldn’t help but shoot her a “take that, bitch” sort of look. Ric took up a position by the prisoners, standing near Kieran and Sean, who looked mussed but healthy.

Also looking discomposd but intact were Liam and Sinead, who sat in the gallery with the rest of Meagan’s staff, except, of course for Quinn, who had turned out to be in league with Owain. Meagan smiled at all of them for their support and took her seat as the queen’s herald called for order.

The vote was the first thing dispensed with, after swearing in the two new members of the council, since Meagan hadn’t been present for the earlier portion of the

meeting. Owain's heir proved to be a son who was every bit as oily as his father, but without quite as much pull, apparently. Instead of the vote ending in the expected tie, Llyris retained her throne by a landslide margin.

"Now it has become time to see to the punishment of these offenders. Lord Green Oak, whom do you bring before this council for judgment?"

Aidan stood and gestured at his secretary, who slumped in her corner, refusing to look up. "Fianna of the Meadow, my queen. She has admitted to allowing Owain le Faire access to the Detroit portal, which allowed him to bespell it. That spell caused the death of Gunter, one of my men."

"Fianna of the Meadow, is this true?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. It was I who allowed my uncle access to the portal. But I had no idea he planned to place a deadly trap on it. He said his aim was merely to stop the halfling from taking her place on this council."

"Her *rightful* place?" The queen glared at the prisoner.

"Humans and their offspring have no place in the Seelie Court!" Fianna was practically spitting now. "She should not be allowed Underhill at all, let alone in a position of honor!"

"Do you seek the penalty of death?" The queen arched an eyebrow at Aidan.

"No. She is only repeating what she was taught. I have a different punishment in mind, if it please Your Majesty."

"Go ahead."

"Thank you." Aidan dipped his head and continued, his gaze focused on Fianna. "The relationship between Fae and human has always been a complex and interdependent one. Without their world, ours would lose

many of its new ideas and much of its innovation. As a race, we are actually more fertile if we intermarry and I still believe this genetic co-mingling is healthy for both races. There was even a time I believed my own heir would be of mixed blood, though now I doubt I shall ever sire one at all. But Fianna is young and has not spent sufficient time with humans to begin to understand the richness of their culture, or the vibrancy of their spirit.

"I think this oversight should be corrected, Your Majesty. I believe you should visit on her the punishment you intended for Alaric the Bard. If Fianna is forced to be human for a time, perhaps she will have a greater sympathy for and understanding of our mortal cousins."

"No!"

Fianna's scream was completely ignored by Llyris who nodded thoughtfully. "An interesting proposal, Lord Green Oak. Does the council agree?"

Meagan nodded along with the others. "As long as somebody keeps an eye on her to make sure she doesn't cause any more trouble," she muttered.

"True." The queen pursed her lips for a second and looked at Aidan. "Done. Lord Green Oak, you will have custody of the human prisoner, as soon as she is stripped of her powers. She is to be given menial duties outside of the safe-house, but will remain under close observation. Do you agree?"

"I do, Your Majesty."

"What of the other two? Lady Rose, did one of these miserable excuses for Fae hold you prisoner?"

"The shorter one did, Your Majesty. He said his name was Neal and that he wished to marry me to gain my seat on this council."

"And the other?"

“Neal said he was ordered to kill me by his brother, who would inherit my seat.”

“I see. I suppose you wish leniency for them as well?”

Meagan weighed that thought. “Well, I don’t think I want them dead. But I don’t want them anywhere near me, either.”

“I’ve an idea,” one of the councilors chimed in. “The safe-house in Brisbane could use a couple new members on the janitorial staff. *Human* members of the staff, that is. Strip them of their powers too, Your Majesty. Then I’ll take custody of those miscreants and teach them respect for humans.”

Llyris yawned and glanced at Meagan. “Lady Rose?”

“That would be fine.” Meagan smiled at the gentleman who’d spoken. “Thank you.”

“Finally, I’ve an announcement that the succession is secured for one of our noble houses.” Llyris smiled briefly at Blaine. “Lady Night Sky has been delivered of a healthy set of female twins. Congratulations, my lord.”

Blaine grinned like an idiot as the assembled crowd echoed the queen’s good wishes.

“Now if Lady Rose, Lord Green Oak and a few others would get on with their duties in this respect, this council would feel greatly reassured.” Meagan caught Ric’s eye and blushed. He didn’t look like he had any objection to helping make that a reality. Aidan, on the other hand, looked sad. What had happened with him? Meagan started to put together a bunch of seemingly unrelated details and decided that she really needed to talk to Elise. Meagan had a sneaking suspicion that Aidan already had his heir. A little girl named Adina Sutton, with eyes as green as Meagan’s own.

When the meeting ended, the queen stopped Meagan

from leaving with a raised hand and gestured for Ric to meet them at the rail. She waited till most of the crowd had left before turning to the pair of them.

“The joining ceremony will be held within the week.” It was an order, not a question, but that was fine with Meagan and Ric didn’t voice an objection either. “I presume you wish to host it at Rosemeade?”

Meagan nodded. She’d love to marry Ric in the same rose garden where her parents had wed.

“Acceptable. Schedule it with the lord chamberlain. Most of the council will wish to attend. I suggest you get busy. I expect to be well entertained.”

Then she turned and swept away, leaving them both gape-jawed in her wake.

“Did she invite herself to our wedding?”

Ric nodded. “I believe she did.”

“What about our other friends, like Greg and Jase? Will they be able to come?” She had no idea what the rules were on inviting humans—or werewolves—to fairy-land.

“I think we can work that out. We’ll also have to get married back there as well, if you want things to be legal in your world.”

Oops, she hadn’t thought of that, but of course he was right. She remembered hearing something about Las Vegas and her parents. “And I want to meet my grandparents. Maybe we can invite them to that wedding, too.”

“Whatever you want.”

A loud yowl erupted from the back corner of the room and Meagan spun. It sounded like Calculus.

Ric started to laugh. “Another country heard from.”

Meagan dashed over to the cat carrier and pulled Calc

out into her arms. Ric approached cautiously, giving Meagan a crooked smile when Calc ignored him.

“Well, my lady, I guess we’ve got weddings to plan. Shall we go back to your place and get started?”

“Hmm.” She smiled up at him. “Maybe even get a head start on the honeymoon.”

Ric picked up the carrier and started toward the door. Meagan fell into step beside him, her heart overflowing with happiness. He murmured in her ear, “And I think tonight would be a good night to get started on that heir the queen wants.”

“If you’re interested.” Actually, she thought it might have already happened that afternoon. She hoped he didn’t mind.

“I can’t think of a single task I’d enjoy more.” He dropped an arm about her waist. “If you’re sure you’re ready.”

Her life had changed so much in such a short time, but she knew with all her heart that it had all worked out exactly the way it was supposed to. If a child was on Fate’s agenda for them, Meagan didn’t have any complaints about that at all.

“Bring it on, bard.” She chucked Calc on the head and leaned into Ric. “I can take anything you feel like giving me.”

About the Author

Cindy Spencer Pape is an avid reader of romance, fantasy, mystery, and even more romance. According to *The Romance Studio*, her plots are “full of twists and turns that keep the reader poised at the edge of their seat.” *Joyfully Reviewed* said her “colorful characters and plot building surprises kept me spellbound,” and *RT Book Reviews* says her “characters are appealing, and passionate sex leads to a satisfying romance.”

Cindy firmly believes in happily-ever-after. Married for more than twenty years to her own, sometimes-kilted, hero, she lives in southern Michigan with him and two teenage sons, along with an ever-changing menagerie of pets. Cindy has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher and an elected politician, but mostly an environmental educator, though now she is lucky enough to write full-time. Her degrees in zoology and animal behavior *almost* help her comprehend the three male humans who share her household.

Cindy loves to hear from readers. To contact her, or for more about Cindy and her books, you can find her on her Web site, www.cindyspencerpape.com, or her blog, www.cindyspencerpape.blogspot.com.



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