

CHAPTER 1



Ian watched her, just as he had for more than a month. Damn Detective O'Malley anyway. Yes, he'd managed to get him out of a couple of scrapes when he was younger, and he had helped him get on the force when his time in the military was up, but this was too much. Essentially it was babysitting.

Each day she left the women's shelter early in the morning, a ratty looking, charcoal gray hoodie the only thing keeping her from freezing in the elements. Her skin-tight jeans were threadbare, her sneakers were—well, who knew what color they'd started out.

Dark hair obscured her features, but he'd spoken with her often enough he knew exactly what she looked like, in fact, she sometimes haunted his dreams. Young, completely screwed up, but pretty. Picking up his coffee, he got out of his car and began his daily trek as he locked his cruiser. She froze at the sound, her shoulders slumping but didn't turn around and glare at him as she did most days. This was their ritual.

He stayed well back; she didn't like him to get too close and Ian wondered for the millionth time who'd hurt her. It was odd really; she didn't appear to be afraid of him, just annoyed by his presence.

Without stopping she pulled a black glove and a folded-up trash bag from her pocket, picking up the first of her bottles.

Continuing on they approached her first dumpster a block away. Looking at his watch Ian leaned against the brick wall of the building, careful not to step in any refuse lying nearby. She quickly climbed the metal rungs, dropped over the side and disappeared from sight. He wasn't worried. After six weeks he knew the schedule by heart. The trash had been collected last night, so there couldn't be much in there to injure her and sure enough she was out before he moved closer. Three blocks away it would be a different situation. Sighing he moved on, dogging her footsteps and trying not to breathe too deeply.

His eyes scanned the area as they crossed at the next intersection and she turned left heading toward the alley. It was dim and fairly narrow, but at least the buildings provided some protection from the cold wind. There were three huge trash receptacles at the very end and God forbid, she skipped even one on her mission.

"Hi, Angie," she called to a young girl leaning against a graffiti scrawled, steel door.

Ian tried not to stare at the shivering figure in torn fishnet stockings, heels and a mini-skirt. The fur jacket she wore barely covered her midriff, which was bare.

"Bad night, love?" his charge asked sympathetically.

"Too cold," the girl replied, her lips quivering.

"Here, reach into me back pocket."

Sticking out her butt she held still as Angie dug her hand in and pulled out some bills.

"Aw, I couldn't," she said softly as she looked at the money longingly.

"Aye, I want you to. I wish you'd come to the shelter with me."

"They don't want my kind; besides, I do all right when I'm not freezing my ass off," she said as she tilted her chin up and shot a suspicious look at the cop who'd been Irelynn's shadow for a while. "I see you still have your watchdog," she teased, stuffing the money

down her top. "Maybe you should come and join me. With your looks we'd clean up in this town."

His target giggled but when he took a quick step forward she shot him a look over her shoulder.

"I don't think I'm ready for that, love. I'm not sure I even like men anymore. This one's really gettin' on me nerves."

"I don't know, he's pretty cute," Angie quipped before giving her a quick hug and darting toward the street. "Somewhat serious, but still attractive. Let me know if you change your mind and thanks for the loan. I gotta find somewhere to warm up and maybe get some breakfast. See ya."

"Aye, see ya."

Narrowing his eyes, Ian opened his mouth to say something and decided against it. No sense getting into another useless argument, not when it was so damn cold, and he knew she wouldn't stop until she finished her 'route'. Her bag was still nearly empty and in her misguided judgement she would continue until it was full. When she began to climb the rungs of the next dumpster he stepped closer. This one was full and could hold anything.

"Stay back," she barked.

He obeyed. It wasn't until she'd nearly tumbled head first over the side that he tossed his cup away and grabbed her by the waist of her jeans. Dangling over the edge, her backside was directly before him and he wanted nothing more than to smack it a good one. In fact, he'd like to slap it several times. God, he hated this assignment!

"Just hold onto me," she called, puffing her hair out of her face. "I see a few I can reach without gettin' down in."

"A blessing," he mumbled, turning his face away from the stench. Lord, if it smelled this bad in the winter, imagine how it will stink come summer. "I've got you, but don't go wiggling away or these jeans will come right off you," he informed her, taking a bigger handful of her pants. "I can't believe I'm helping you do this when I should be carting your ass away for vagrancy," he growled.

"You can't," she replied, her voice muffled and soft as though she

too was trying not to breathe. "I have the exact amount needed to prevent that in me shoe and we've been over this before, Officer Sullivan."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, come on before you get stuck with a dirty needle and I have to take you to the hospital." Dodging the bottles she was throwing out, he swore. Finally, she started backing up and he snatched her around the waist and plopped her on the ground. Instantly, she pulled away and scrambled to pick up her finds.

"Look, Miss O'Malley, why the hell don't you get a job or something?" he demanded, his hands on his hips.

"I have a job," she snapped, staring up into his angry eyes.

"What, dumpster diving? I think you could find something more constructive than that," he continued with a snort.

"I'm savin' the planet, Officer Sullivan. Better that than followin' innocent people around and snoopin' into their business."

"Listen, Princess Hooligan, you know I'm only doing this at the request of your cousin, Rory. Why don't you move in with your family where you belong instead of being just another strain on the taxpayers of this county?"

"How am I a burden on the taxpayers?" she asked worriedly, a frown drawing her eyebrows down in confusion. "I admit, although I'm a citizen of this country, I don't understand all the rules."

"You're a burden on people like me because it's my dollars that pay to support you and the other women in that shelter," he snapped. "Now, I'm not against helping when it's needed, but there's no reason for you to be living there at all, not when you have family."

"I don't need their help, and for your information the shelter is entirely supported by charitable contributions. That means big wigs with money get a nice fat write-off and I get a place to stay until I decide what I want to do and where I want to do it. You should get your facts straight, so kindly stop your blatherin' about thin's you know nothin' about." Snatching up her bag she stomped away.

“What have you got against the O’Malleys anyway?” he demanded, easily keeping step with her.

“Why nothin’,” she replied, surprised. “I love them, but I didn’t come all the way from Ireland to leech off me kin. Aunt Maeve and Uncle Sean have plenty of their own to care for,” she insisted. “I’ll make me own way, thank you very much.”

“Fine, be a stubborn little brat. You keep picking garbage and I’ll just keep following you,” he snarled. “Like I don’t have anything better to do.”

Irelynn picked up her pace and he smiled evilly. Her short legs were no match for his long ones, so at least she couldn’t out run him.

“That’s Rory’s doin’,” she hissed, making the street and heading for another alley. “‘Tis nothin’ to do with me.”

“It has everything to do with you. If you weren’t so all-fired perverse you could be nice and warm, eating one of your aunt’s delicious dinners tonight instead of standing in a soup line. Why I’ll bet she’s even got some homemade pie.”

Ian could almost see her mouth watering as she paused and looked up at him. Maybe this time his words would convince her, he thought hopefully. Damn, she was pretty with those wide blue eyes. For a moment he thought he had her, but she squared her shoulders and marched on.

“I don’t mind the food at the soup kitchen and I always help clean up, so I sort of feel like I’m doin’ me part. I’m sorry if me way of livin’ offends you, Officer Sullivan, but ‘tis really no concern of yours.”

“It does offend me, Miss O’Malley. It offends me very much. So much in fact, if I wasn’t a cop and obligated to uphold the law, I’d find a stoop, pull you over my knees and spank some sense into you. Then I’d cart your sorry little ass off to your aunt’s and make you stay there until you came up with a reasonable plan for your future,” he informed her darkly.

“Then ‘tis a blessin’ you’ve chosen the law for your profession,

for if you tried such a thin' I'd have to make you sorry you were ever born," she hissed.

He watched her face flame in embarrassment as she looked around, but when her foot came up to kick him, he smiled.

"Please do, Princess Hooligan," he drawled. "Assaulting an officer is exactly the excuse I need to take you in. Kick me hard, I want you to leave a nice big bruise for evidence. Then Rory will have to deal with you. Besides, I'm freezing."

"'Tis sorry, I am, Ian," she said sweetly, lowering her foot. "Why don't you go and get a cup of coffee to warm ya? I'm a might chilled meself."

His heart melted a little as he watched her shiver. It was damn cold, and he was much better dressed than she. Could he trust her not to give him the slip? O'Malley wouldn't like it much if anything happened to her on Ian's watch and this was a pretty seedy area. On the other hand, if she was as cold as he was, she'd want that coffee.

"All right," he said sternly. "I'm going into that little store there," he pointed, "and you'd better be here when I get out. What do you take in your coffee?" he asked, rubbing his hands together.

"A bit of cream and sugar," she replied, shivering dramatically.

"I mean it, Irelynn," he warned as he backed away. "Don't you move an inch."

"I won't," she promised.

Five minutes later when he came out, she was nowhere to be seen. Hurrying back to his patrol car he drove her usual route with no luck. Returning to the shelter he pressed the buzzer.

"I'm looking for Miss O'Malley. This is Officer Sullivan."

"Have you a warrant?" a chilly voice questioned.

"No, I just want to see her."

"I'm sorry, but there are no men allowed in here. If you must see her, you'll have to return with a warrant and a female officer."

"I only want to know if she made it back here safely."

"We don't give out any information about our residents, officer. Surely, you know that by now."

“Yes, I do, I only...”

“Good day, Officer Sullivan. If Miss O’Malley returns I’ll tell her you were asking after her and that’s ‘if’ mind you. Our residents are fairly transient.”

“Will you call me if she doesn’t return?” he growled in frustration.

“Have you a warrant?” she asked again. He was sure he heard a giggle in the background.

“No, I don’t have a damned warrant. Pardon me for giving a shit if she’s safe or not,” he bellowed into the speaker. “And don’t think for a moment I don’t recognize your voice, Shelly. I have half a mind to speak to the sergeant about you!”

“I totally agree with at least part of what you said, Sullivan,” she snickered. “But you leave my husband out of this! He knows the rules, same as you,” she snapped back. “Now, how about you use that half a mind you say you have and be on your way?”

Cursing, Ian stomped away. Once in his car, he keyed up his radio.

“This is Sullivan. Inform Detective O’Malley his little pigeon is MIA. Tell him I’m going home to shower. He’ll know why. Sullivan out.”



IRELYNN WENT up the stairs after thanking Shelly and entered her cubical of a room. Gathering some clean clothes, she showered and tossed her dirty things in the machine wondering how many more washings they could take before she opened the washer only to find a tangle of threads. Brushing out her long, dark hair she collapsed on her bed and pulled the shade. In a few hours she needed to head over to the soup kitchen at St. Paul’s and give them a hand preparing the evening meal. After she would make her rounds again and hit the places she’d missed today. It was probably best if she changed up her schedule, thus avoiding Officer Sullivan alto-

gether. If he came around for a few mornings and didn't see her out, maybe he'd inform Rory his wayward cousin was no longer around, and they'd leave her alone.

It was ironic. When she first met Sullivan, she thought she'd seen a ghost. He looked very much like Jamie. Same strong build, well over six feet tall, same dark wavy hair, much shorter, of course, but very similar. Even his dark eyes reminded her of everything she'd left behind in Ireland.

The decision to come to America had been an impulsive one but something no one from her small circle of friends and family was surprised at. They'd counted her out long ago as someone capable of sticking with anything. She changed her mind, often based on the way the wind blew or her mood at the time. Now, she was here in the country of her birth, yet a virtual stranger.

The O'Malleys would take her in, after all, blood was thicker than water, but they wouldn't understand her, ever. All her cousins were successful with jobs and homes, spouses and children; they'd never truly accept her ways. A 'will-o'-the-wisp' she was called, flighty others said, a good-time lass who wanted a cold beer and a jig more than she did a husband and family.

She would have married Jamie, she sighed as a tear slipped down her cheek, but he'd left her, suddenly and violently in a tragic accident, his body so mangled there had been no viewing. No chance to say goodbye. Often, she wondered if he were really in the casket she watched lowered into the ground, or had he decided to simply get out, away from the girl everyone thought was trouble.

Here, she could start over, begin anew. She wasn't ashamed to be living in the shelter. Most of the women were much like her, their dreams destroyed by the harsh reality that was life. As long as she did her part to help out and didn't break the rules she could stay, and that's what she intended to do if only to assure herself she could commit to more than a good time.

The money from the bottles she collected was donated back but for the small amount she set aside for Angie and the other girls. It

wasn't much but it did help. For some reason, men were not anxious to take off their clothes in Angie's room when the weather was bitter, so business was slow.

Irelynn made a point of not judging others. Her soft voice with its slightly foreign lilt was comforting to newcomers and she well understood their fear and loneliness. After all, you couldn't be more alone than Irelynn O'Malley.