

Chapter One

“You have...no job experience. In anything.”

Sloan O'Malley did her best not to wring her hands when faced with the incredulous expression of the woman sitting across from her. Her potential future boss. Around them, the little diner bustled with early morning customers, either coming in before their day got started or ending their night shift. It felt like every single one of them was staring at her.

She realized she hadn't answered the question that wasn't a question and cleared her throat. “I'm a hard worker, and I learn fast.” Sloan hoped it was true. She'd never had to put herself to the test, and it was slightly horrifying to realize just how sheltered she'd been when it came to actual life skills. “Please. I need this job.”

The money her brother Teague had sent would last a few more weeks, but she didn't want to lose that precious cushion. Besides, she was so incredibly *tired* of sitting around while life passed her by. That was why she'd escaped her family to begin with, slipping out like a thief in the night and traveling from Boston across the country without a word to anyone. They would look for her—she'd be a fool to believe otherwise. And if Teague had to send her more resources, it would be too easy for her father to find her. Seamus O'Malley was a cold-hearted bastard who had millions in the bank and all kinds of unsavory connections. One daughter had already slipped his control, and Sloan wasn't sure his pride could take another hit.

She had to stand on her own two feet for the first time in twenty-four years.

She just hoped she wasn't about to fall flat on her face.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to produce a convincing smile. The owner of the diner, Marge, did not look convinced. What could Sloan possibly say that would make the woman hire her? “Marge—”

“Here’s the deal.” Marge sat back. She was an older woman with a no-nonsense face creased with laugh lines that spoke of a life well lived. Her graying hair was pulled back into a bun, and she wore serviceable clothes and a nondescript apron. She seemed like someone who could take anything life threw at her. “You look like trouble, and the last thing either I or this town needs is trouble.”

Sloan tried not to wilt at that, but Marge wasn’t through. She sighed. “But I have a thing for strays and you’re nothing if not that. I’ll give you a shot. You screw up, you’re done. You’re late, you’re done. You bring any unnecessary drama to my door, you’re done. Got it?”

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “You’re hiring me?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?” Marge shook her head and pushed to her feet. She had to be nearly six feet tall and she was built like a linebacker. “Show up tomorrow morning at seven. Dress comfortably, because I’m not going to be sending you home if your shoes pinch your feet. You complain—”

“I’m gone.”

A small smile graced Marge’s lips, then disappeared as soon as it’d come. “Yep. Now, get lost. You’re distracting the menfolk and these fools have places to be.” She turned and walked across the diner to the counter and snapped her fingers at the cook through the gap in the wall where the food was delivered. “Hurry up, Luke. You know damn well that the judge has places to be and he’ll be wanting his breakfast as soon as he walks through the door.”

Sloan got up and hurried out the door. *I got the job!* Her first impulse was to call Teague and tell him, but she had to remind herself she was only supposed to call in case of an emergency.

She missed her family, missed knowing that they were just a phone call away if she needed them. She hadn't counted on that.

She headed for the beach, needing to burn off her pent-up energy. With the way the interview had gone, she'd been sure Marge was going to tell her to get lost. She'd even prepared herself for it. To have the woman do exactly the opposite made Sloan's head spin. *She's taking a chance on me and she doesn't even know me.* Sloan could hardly believe it. In her world, people didn't take chances on strangers like that.

Except that wasn't her world anymore.

This was.

The sea air cleared some of the static in her head. She'd spent her entire life in Boston, but the ocean felt different on this coast. Wild. Free. Vast beyond comprehension. She slipped off her shoes and dug her toes into the sand.

Callaway Rock was about three miles from one side of the town limits to the other, all of it stretched out along the beach. The little house where she was living was on the southern outskirts, and the diner was smack dab in the middle. It might have been smarter to drive over, but she liked the walk. There might come a time when she didn't crave the sand beneath her feet and the ocean breeze in her face, but that day wasn't today.

Two weeks ago, she'd been in the middle of humid eighty-degree weather in Boston, but here it could have been fall instead of early August. The air had a crispness that never seemed to

go away, no matter the time of day. Even though it was warm enough that she wished for a tank top, the breeze coming off the water made it downright pleasant.

Everything about Callaway Rock was downright pleasant.

Her shoes dangling from her fingertips, she started walking, letting her mind wander. The last week had been the first time she had truly lived alone, and the learning curve was...strange. There were so many little things she'd taken for granted, things she'd never bothered with because the O'Malleys had a full-time staff to do everything from cooking to cleaning.

It turned out Sloan wasn't much of a cook.

I'll figure it out. All I have is time.

All she'd ever wanted to do was get away from life as the daughter of an Irish crime lord, to remove herself from the playing field where she'd never have control. And she had, with Teague's help.

Unfortunately, she couldn't turn off her brain, and she kept wondering how Keira was doing, and if Aiden was holding up under the increasing pressure as heir to one-third of Boston's underworld: O'Malleys, Sheridans, Hallorans. And Cillian. Last she'd heard, he'd been off in Connecticut with that woman. Had things turned out? They must have, because if something had happened to Cillian, Teague would have called her.

She hoped.

She trailed off to a stop, staring blindly at the tide coming in. Then there was Carrigan. Her big sister. The one she couldn't quite forgive, no matter how much time or distance was between them. It wasn't fair and it wasn't right, but Sloan couldn't let her betrayal go.

Maybe someday...

She inhaled deeply and started walking again. Thinking about her five remaining siblings, wondering what they were up to, wasn't going to do her a single bit of good. And thinking about Devlin, rotting away six feet beneath the ground...That way lay madness.

Up ahead, the bright green door of her house came into view. Well, technically it wasn't *her* house. Teague's wife, Callie, had gotten her aunt to agree to let Sloan live there. Sloan had woken every morning for the last seven days thinking that would be the day when Sorcha showed up, but the woman hadn't showed up. It was more than a little strange that she'd agreed to give Sloan a place to stay and then not been there upon her arrival. The only contact she'd had from the woman was a text from a random number saying to make herself at home. When she'd texted back, there had been no reply.

Frankly, a part of Sloan was relieved Sorcha hadn't made an appearance. She didn't know much about the woman except that she owned this house and seemed willing to do her niece a favor by housing Sloan indefinitely.

Against her better judgment, her gaze drifted to the house directly north of hers. She'd mistakenly gone there her first night in town, and her encounter with the surly man who lived there still made her shiver. *Jude*. He'd been like a junkyard dog guarding his territory, more interested in getting her off his property than hearing her out about an honest mistake.

If she never ran into him again, it would be too soon.

Still...She couldn't help being a little curious. Nearly every other local she'd come across had been friendly and welcoming. When they learned she was in the old O'Connor house, they always perked up and prodded her for more information, but wasn't that what small towns were known for? Everyone took care of everyone else, and if there was a bit of gossip involved, that was to be expected.

It just made Jude's horrible attitude stand out even more. He didn't care where she came from, didn't care what she was doing in town, didn't care about anything but getting her away from his house.

If she were a more curious woman, she'd wonder if he was hiding something behind those closed curtains and barred shutters. *Who owns a beach house and keeps all the windows blocked?*

"None of my business." She had enough trouble without borrowing more. If that...that...*jerk* wanted her to stay away from him, that was exactly what she'd do. End of story.

As she passed, the door in question opened and Jude emerged, a coffee mug in his hand. Sloan jerked to a stop, unable to tear her gaze away. His long dark hair was in a bun at the back of his head, which should have made him look feminine, but there wasn't a single thing feminine about the man staring at her. His jaw might as well have been chiseled from stone, and though she couldn't see his brown eyes across the distance, she knew they were like bitter dark chocolate and intense.

But what he was wearing...

Or, rather, *not* wearing.

Cargo shorts hung low on his hips, and he'd misplaced his shirt somewhere. Every muscle was defined, his body too perfect to be real. She blinked, but he didn't vanish like she'd half expected. Instead he lifted the mug to his lips, drawing her attention to his impossibly broad shoulders, which tapered to a narrow waist and, good gracious, what were those muscles called that created a V leading directly into his shorts?

Her face felt impossibly warm despite the mild August morning and she was suddenly sure that she was blushing furiously. *Keep walking. Just put one foot forward and keep walking.*

She couldn't move. She couldn't do anything other than stand there and stare at him until he nodded briefly at her, turned around, and walked back into his house.

What in God's name just happened?

[ORN_SB]

Jude MacNamara left his place as soon as night fell. He didn't like moving around Callaway Rock during the day. Fuck, he didn't like small towns in general. Everyone had too much time on their hands and felt like it was their God-given right to stick their noses into their neighbors' business. He'd had to run off over a dozen attempts to welcome him into town since he moved here three months ago, and that hadn't done a damn thing to dissuade anyone. If anything, it made the locals *more* determined to figure out everything there was to know about him.

They were wasting their time. He was here for a job. He sure as fuck wasn't staying.

He stalked onto the beach, pausing only to make sure no teenagers had thought it was a brilliant idea to have a beach fire tonight. *Clear*. Unlike the towns farther north, Callaway Rock didn't get much in the way of tourists. Maybe if they had, he wouldn't have had to actually buy a house here while he waited for his target to reappear.

Jude lifted a pair of binoculars. In his dark clothes and with the ocean at his back, he was damn near invisible on a night like this, especially with clouds covering the moon. He gave the beach to the north and south of him a cursory look to reconfirm that there was no one but him out tonight and then he turned to his real target.

The O'Connor house.

It had been unoccupied since he'd gotten to town, but a little over a week ago, a woman had moved in. She was about fifty years too young to be Sorcha O'Connor, and the coloring was

all wrong regardless. This woman—Sloan—had both dark hair and eyes, not the blond hair and blue eyes that ran through Sorcha’s family.

He paused his binoculars at each window, taking in the little changes that had come with the new resident. After he’d moved to Callaway Rock, he’d broken in and gone through the entire house, looking for clues to where Sorcha might have gone and familiarizing himself with the layout in the event that he’d need to return. There was nothing of the former, and the latter was laughably easy. With the massive windows and fact that the curtains and shutters were never closed, he hadn’t had to set foot in the place to figure out everything he needed to know. But it paid to be thorough.

What he couldn’t figure out was who the hell this Sloan was and how she was connected to Sorcha O’Connor.

For a second, right when he found her peering into his windows that first night, he’d half convinced himself that she was actually Callista Sheridan, come to visit her long-lost aunt. A coup like that... It made his adrenaline spike just thinking about it. What better way to make Colm Sheridan suffer than removing his beloved daughter from the equation? She was the only child he had left, after all—though recently she’d been too protected for Jude to even consider. He’d have to wait until things died down to circle back to Boston.

But as soon as the woman stepped into the light, he’d realized his mistake. Even if her coloring could be faked, this wasn’t Callista. He’d seen her a time or two over the years, and she carried herself as a woman used to having her orders followed without question, even before she took over the Sheridan empire.

Sloan? She seemed to have her shoulders perpetually hunched, as if expecting a blow. He couldn't tell if it was an abusive ex or something else, but she was fleeing something. *It's none of my fucking business if she is. She's not my target. Colm's sister Sorcha is.*

He'd bide his time and see how this played out. His vengeance had waited this long—it could wait a little bit more.

Every light was lit inside the house, and he watched Sloan walk through it, pausing to touch the marble kitchen counter, the thick mantel over the fireplace, the back cushion on the couch facing the massive windows. Then she disappeared, reappearing in the guest room, her hands going to the buttons at the front of her dress.

Jude's body sprang to attention when he realized what was happening. *Put the damn binoculars down. Sorcha isn't there, and this girl isn't your mark.* But he didn't put them down. Instead, he watched as she shrugged out of the dress, leaving her in only a pair of silk white panties and an equally white bra. She looked innocent, untouchable, and he could barely wrap his mind around it.

It took considerable willpower to lower the binoculars as she reached behind her to unhook her bra, but he wasn't a goddamn peeping tom. Jude laughed softly. *Sure, stand on your high moral horse. You fucking kill people for a living and you're going to be honorable about watching some woman who you've met once undress.*

There have to be lines. Even if they don't always make sense.

Mystery past or not, that woman **was** an innocent. It was...odd. These days, most of the people he associated with were people who made their living on the underbelly of society. They'd all seen things, same as him. They didn't blink at the choices he'd made or the path that had brought him to them.

Jude didn't spend much time around innocents.

He'd seen the way she looked at him this morning, though. Even across the distance between them, the hunger in her eyes had been readily recognizable. It made him hot just thinking about it. What would she do if he walked up to her front door right now and knocked? Would she answer in a robe? Would she submit if he closed the distance between them and kissed her?

Jude cursed long and hard, his cock so hard it was a wonder it didn't burst out of his jeans. He had no business thinking shit like that, not while he was on the hunt he'd spent his entire life preparing for and sure as fuck not about a woman who had some kind of connection with his target.

An innocent.

He was half-surprised he could even recognize that trait in another person. He'd never been one. He hadn't had a chance to be. That opportunity had been taken away the moment Colm Sheridan declared the death sentence on Jude's father and brothers—the same death sentence he would have delivered to Jude's mother if he'd known she was pregnant.

No, there was no room for innocence in his life.

There was only revenge.