

## Chapter One

The woman in front of him ducked into an alley, and it was everything Luke Jackson could do not to curse. If he didn't have this blasted bum leg, he'd have had no problem keeping up with her—or remaining undetected. Another glance at the photo his ex-squad mate, Flannery, had sent him three days ago, and he gritted his teeth and picked up his pace. Every stride sent a dull pain from his knee. It had been replaced almost two years ago after being shot out on what was supposed to be a routine search and rescue. The doc said he'd made a startling recovery. She'd called him a miracle. He sure as hell didn't feel like a miracle when they were serving him his walking papers.

But there was no use thinking about what he lost.

He was here to keep Ryan Flannery's idiot childhood friend safe. She was the reason he'd been camping out in Cork and ghosting around Blarney Castle for the last forty-eight hours. Her sister was sure that she'd go here first, so this was where he'd shown up to pick up the trail.

What kind of woman just upped and left her life behind to backpack through Europe alone?

Obviously not a smart one.

It was because of her impulsive decision to take off with only a text message

as goodbye that he'd been sitting in the rain for so goddamn long, he was in danger of never getting warm again. It was worse in a way, because it'd just been a fine mist all day, rather than a torrential downpour that would make it easier to justify staying indoors. If he and Flannery hadn't been in the PJs together and fought their way through hell and back more times than he could count, he wouldn't be in this goddamn country, camped out because he couldn't guarantee that this woman wouldn't make an appearance.

Sure enough, she'd waltzed up around lunchtime, and now here they were.

He reached the alley entrance and rushed around the corner. With his luck, the woman was going to get jumped before he could catch her. He hadn't expected her to hike back to Cork from Blarney Castle, and he hadn't been able to risk a cab for fear that she'd get into trouble while he wasn't watching her.

He never should have agreed to this favor.

Luke turned the corner—and got kicked in the face.

He hit the wall hard enough to bruise, and barely got his hands up in time to deflect the next blow. *It's been too long. I'm out of practice.* But he managed to block her next few punches despite that, his body going through the motions like it had a thousand times before. He got a flash of hazel eyes and a determined expression and then Alexis Yeung zeroed in on his damaged knee. Pain exploded behind his eyelids, but even that wouldn't have normally slowed him

down. No, it was the damn knee giving out and sending him tumbling to the ground that did him in.

Luke rolled onto his back just in time to catch sight of a can that looked suspiciously like pepper spray. *Fuck that.* “What the hell?” He lurched up and grabbed her wrist, shoving her arm wide so the spray hit the ground next to him instead of his face.

“Why are you following me?” She tried to jerk away, but he wasn’t letting her go anywhere until he had control of the canister.

He squeezed the pressure point in her wrist and snatched the can as it fell from her hand. It was only then that he registered her question. “What?”

“Why are you following me?” She scrambled back a few steps, but her voice was low and calm despite the circumstances. “You know what? Don’t bother answering that. I’m calling the police.”

*Shit.* That was the last thing he needed. As he climbed to his feet, Luke searched for something to say that would make her pause enough to listen to reason. He couldn’t tell her the truth—Flannery had been pretty damn clear on that. If she knew her friends and sister back home didn’t trust her on this quest to find herself or whatever, Alexis would never forgive any of them. Which sounded pretty damn juvenile, but it was the least of his concerns right now. If she called the Garda, he would have no choice but to come clean. “What are you

talking about?"

"You've been following me ever since I left the castle. I might be a tourist, but I'm not stupid."

If he didn't have a bum knee, she never would have known he was there. The failure burned his throat almost worse than the pepper spray would have.

"You're crazy. It was a nice day so I wanted to walk."

"Even with that limp? In the rain?"

*Well, hell.* She'd noticed a lot more than he would have given her credit for, even with his staying well back on the road. "I'm not a cripple." Though when he compared his limits now to what they'd been before his injury, he sure as hell felt like one. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "And you obviously thought it was a nice enough day for a walk in the rain. Pot, meet kettle."

She paused, clearly taking him in. Alexis Yeung, nurse and apparently sufferer of a mental breakdown when her perfect life didn't go exactly as planned. Really, she was just throwing a temper tantrum by jetting off to Europe to find herself or whatever it was that high maintenance women did.

She didn't look like much. Oh, sure, she was beautiful in a very busty Asian babes way, but what kind of woman spent the day hiking down a road and managed to look so perfectly put together? It wasn't natural. Her jeans were rolled up to show off her hiking boots and her white T-shirt didn't have a

smudge of dirt on it. He tried not to notice how the fabric strained over her breasts, and failed.

“Stop staring at my chest.”

“Woman, you just attacked me for no reason. The *least* I deserve is to check you out.” She crossed her arms under breasts, and he raised his eyebrows.

“You’re not exactly helping my concentration, darlin.”

“You’re a pig.” The woman had a stare on her that made him think of his Auntie. He shoved the comparison away. Aunt Rose wasn’t anything like Alexis. She didn’t run from her problems—or other people’s problems, for that matter—not even when they were literally knocking on her door. This woman obviously did, or he wouldn’t be in a back alley in Cork getting grilled.

Alexis looked like she wanted to kick him again. “Why did you turn down the alley?”

This, at least, he had an answer for. “You’re a woman alone. I thought you might be in danger.”

“So you came riding to my rescue on your white horse?” And now she was laughing at him.

He coughed, hating the slow heat of embarrassment working its way through him. *He* wasn’t the one in the wrong here. “Only an idiot wanders down a dark alley alone.”

“I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

A fact Flannery had left out in his description of her, which made Luke wonder what else he’d left out. “Against a man with a bum leg.” Which hurt like a bitch after the combination of the hike and the beating she’d given it.

“Whatever you have to tell yourself to sleep at night.” She paused. “Give me back my pepper spray.”

“Not a chance.” There was nothing to guarantee she wouldn’t try to spray him again, and he’d suffered through enough shit today without tussling with her again.

“It’s mine.”

“Yeah, well, you lost the right to it when you attacked me.” He sounded like a grumpy old man, but her very presence pushed on buttons he didn’t know he had.

No, that was a goddamn lie. He knew every single one. Hell, he was more button than man these days.

She glared. “I’m leaving now. If you try to follow me again, we’ll go another round and I’ll come out on top. Again.”

If there wasn’t the slightest wavering in her voice, he might actually believe she was an international badass like she seemed to think. Then again, if this little slip of nothing could get the drop on him, then he’d fallen even farther than he

could have guessed. Humiliation tore through him, demanding he win back some of his damaged pride. “Darlin, you got the drop on me once. It wouldn’t happen again.”

“Right. Because you’re not following me.”

“Nope.” Though he kind of wanted to douse her in cold water for how smug she sounded. Luke shrugged out of his pack. He heard more than saw her tense. “Relax, Rambo. I’m just tucking this away for now for safe keeping.” He shoved the pepper spray into his pack, needing to do something to keep her from taking off. He didn’t know how much more jaunting around he could take today. Add in the bonus of not knowing where the hell she was staying—or where she was going next—and he had to do something drastic. “The least you can do is buy me a drink after attacking me.”

“Attacking you? That’s rich. Maybe you shouldn’t be creeping into alleys after lone women. When you’re acting like a predator, expect to be treated like one.”

She had a point, which only served to annoy him more. Luke shifted and tried to hold back a wince when his knee protested. “Buy me a drink and we’ll call it even.” At least that would give her crazy ass a reason to sit still for a little while. If he could get her talking, maybe he could figure out her next step to self-discovery or whatever the hell she was trying to accomplish over here in Europe.

Her sister and Flannery hadn't been the least bit helpful on that note.

"That's funny. You should be a comedian." She shook her head. "If anything, *you* should buy *me* a drink for scaring me half to death."

It was a seriously perverse joy to throw her own words back into her face. "You can handle yourself."

She threw up her hands. "Forget this. You're obviously not suffering from any issues besides being an ass. Have a nice life."

*Damn it.* He'd let his mouth get away with him — again — and fucked this all up. Luke limped after her. "Hey."

Alexis paused at the mouth of the alley. "You reconsider that drink?"

He didn't want to. Buying her a drink was all but admitting that she was right. But his pride couldn't hold up to the throbbing in his knee. He took a deep breath and tried to wrestle down his anger. It wasn't completely her fault. If he wasn't damaged goods, they wouldn't be in this position to begin with. "First round's on me."

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Alexis Yeung wasn't sure whether to be proud of herself or feel bad for taking out some stranger who apparently was only following her to save her from some imagined bad guy. It was almost enough to make her feel guilty for attacking him, especially when he was blatantly trying not to favor his knee



because of the hit she'd gotten in. *Great job, Alexis. The guy is trying to be a Good Samaritan and you knock him on his ass.*

But every time he opened his mouth, the guilt threatening dissolved a bit more. This guy was no different from the ones back home—totally sure he knew better than the helpless little woman that she was. He was just like her ex-fiancé Eric—the kind of man whose masculinity revolved around being the strongest, smartest, best person in the room. Anyone who threatened that was taken down a few notches with pointed comments and, if that failed, all-out bullying.

She pegged this particular man as one who skipped the rest of the steps and jumped straight to being a bully.

It would be smart to tell him where to stick his crappy attitude, and head back to the hostel to shower and search out food in a less hostile environment, but she was tired and hungry and passing up a free drink would be silly. Plus, she was capable of spending a little more time with this guy, if only to assure herself that she really *was* growing and stronger than she'd been when she left Wellingford. That was the whole point of this journey she'd started, and she wasn't going to be doing any emotional growing while hiding in her hostel room.

She'd lived her entire life by the rules. Now it was time to take chances—just not stupid ones. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. With that limp, he had to have some kind of previous injury. Her one kick alone wouldn't cause

him lasting injury. *If he turns out to be a creep, I can outrun him with no problem. Or take out that knee again, and then run.*

Satisfied she wasn't making a stupid decision in the name of being strong, she said, "There's a little pub down this street. Sin é."

"I know it."

Of course he did. She bet he just knew everything. How a Southern boy—and there was no mistaking *that* accent—knew his way around Cork was a mystery. Even if he was a world traveler, he seemed more the type to immerse himself in Dublin's frenetic energy and partying than the slightly calmer western half of the country. Then again, it was Ireland. Drinking was practically the national pastime. This guy probably fit right in.

Which reminded her—she had no idea what his name was. Alexis turned around as they stepped back onto the street and nearly gasped out loud. She'd caught glimpses of him on the road back from Blarney Castle, but they'd been just enough to place the tall, lumbering blonde who seemed to cart around a chip on his shoulder. And then, when he'd come around the corner of the alley, she'd been more concerned with fighting for her life than checking him out.

Now... Now, she was forced to admit that he was attractive in a ruffled, roguish sort of way. His shaggy blond hair and almost-beard made him look like he'd be more at home wearing flannel and chopping wood than globe-trotting,

but who was she to judge? She almost laughed. Who was she kidding? She was judging the hell out of him. He wore faded jeans and boots that looked like they'd seen some use. Against her better judgment, she lifted her gaze to the black T-shirt hugging his shoulders and biceps, highlighting the tattoos crawling down his arms. Only one side was finished, though, but he moved before she could pinpoint exactly what the tattoos depicted.

“Why don't you whip out your smart phone and take a picture? It'll last longer.”

She didn't bother to correct him. Alexis had very specifically left her cell back in Pennsylvania when she left. She didn't want her sister, Avery, or any of their friends to have a way to track her down. This trip was something she had to do for herself, and that meant stepping away from her pregnant sister and the over-protective Flannery brothers. She wasn't anywhere near as close to them as her sister, but they were still like stand-in older brothers when it suited them. She had a feeling it would suit them just fine in this situation. It had been annoying when she was a teenager. Now, with Ryan an experienced pararescuer and Drew the town sheriff... Yeah, it had passed beyond annoying and into the downright ridiculous. The fallout when she got home was going to be a nightmare, but maybe then she'd finally feel centered enough to deal with it.

In the meantime, she had this guy to deal with. “What's your name?”

Commented [EE1]: At some point, a new reader will need more insight into who the brothers are.

He hesitated and she wondered if maybe he'd tell her to screw off. Getting a drink with him wasn't mandatory by any means, but she refused to do it while considering him "that guy" in her head. Finally, he sighed as if resigning himself to something—probably her company for however long it took to down a drink. "Luke. My name is Luke."

It seemed too clean-cut a name for him. He looked like someone who would be called Jake, or Murphy, or Adonis. She bit her lip. No, not Adonis. He was attractive, but he wasn't *that* attractive.

*Sure. Just keep telling yourself that.*

"I'm Alexis." Then, before she could talk herself out of it, she turned left towards the corner where she could already hear strains of a jaunty fiddle coming out of the pub.