

CHAPTER ONE

Paige stared into the depths of her coffee cup, looking for any sign in the foamed milk that would tell her how to get away from this boring date without offending anyone. She smiled and nodded, realizing that the guy across from her, Troy, had said something that required a response. He seemed satisfied and carried on talking.

She cast her eyes around the coffee shop, looking for a distraction, anything more interesting than Mr. Boring going on and on about – well whatever it was he was talking about. She only just saw him out of the corner of her eye and she turned her head slightly to get a better look.

He was just sitting quietly in the corner, sipping a latté and reading the paper. He didn't look like anything special, but there was something about him; something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Paige found herself staring. She knew that it was rude, because she was supposed to be on a blind date

“Um, excuse me?”

“Oh, sorry. I was drifting there.” Paige tried to smile at the man across from her, but her eyes were drawn back to the other side of the room. She forced them back to her date. “It's been a long day that's all.”

“I thought you said that this was your day off?” Troy didn't look impressed with her. He had to know that she was lying. She thought back to what she had said to him earlier, but it was a blur of grey. She had dismissed him right from hello.

“Uh, well, um. It's just that...” Paige glanced back at the stranger across the room and sighed. “Honestly, you're boring.”

“Maybe, I should just go then.” She could see the movement in the corner of her eye, but she didn't really care about him leaving. She did care about what Tina would think of her blowing off her blind date like that. He had been boring, but she hadn't meant to be rude about it.

She studied the man across the room, trying to discover what it was about him that drew her attention this strongly, but he remained stubbornly ordinary. Normally, she could know at a glance why someone pinged on her radar. It bothered her, not knowing, and she wanted desperately to figure out why.

Her eyes were drawn away from him for just a moment as the screeching of metal on metal and the sound of woman screaming grabbed her attention. An SUV was barreling towards the large picture window on the other side of the store, a battered newspaper vending box preceding it only slightly.

Paige threw herself under the table and raised her arm over her face as it came crashing through the window, sending glass flying in every direction. Her eyes darted back up to the man sitting in the booth. He had hardly moved at all.

Glass was flying around him as he flipped the page of his paper and placed his cup back down, his hand covering the top. As the vehicle came to a rest inside the store he lifted the cup to his lips and drained the last few drops. Paige could already hear the sound of sirens as she watched the man neatly fold his newspaper, place it on the table and walk out the back door.

She hesitated for a moment, knowing that she shouldn't leave, but she had to find out more. His total lack of a reaction had been too much for her to ignore. He was officially the kind of interesting that she knew she had no choice, but to find out about. She scrambled out from under the table, over the broken glass and ran after him.

She searched the busy sidewalk, her eyes frantically scanning over the people. She caught a brief glimpse of his jacket just before the crowd swallowed him. It was enough. Trying her best not to slip on the icy sidewalk, Paige ran after him.

She was only a few feet from him when she slowed down, no longer sure if she really wanted to find out exactly what kind of interesting he was. In her world interesting could often mean dangerous, something she had forgotten a time or two to her detriment. For nearly a block she walked blindly behind him, arguing with herself, when she bumped into someone.

"Oh my gosh. Sorry, I wasn't..." her voice trailed off as she realized just who it was that she had bumped into. She had been consumed with her thoughts and she hadn't noticed that he had stopped. He didn't seem angry with her, but he didn't look impressed either.

"Why are you following me?" He had the slightest accent that she couldn't quite place.

Paige remained silent as she took in every detail that she hadn't been able to notice before. He wasn't as ordinary she had thought. At this distance, she could read him better and she could tell that he was more than what he appeared, but in what way she still couldn't be sure.

He lifted a cigarette to his lips and blew smoke in her face; his eyes glinting behind the hazy screen. It was enough to bring her back into herself. Paige coughed and took a step back. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You were following me. You must have a reason." He glared at her, his eyes narrowing in a way that made him look as though he had murder on his mind. Paige wanted to turn away from that glare, but she forced herself to stay still.

"I thought you were interesting. Really, that's all." Paige did her best to look cool, like she really didn't care if he was mad. She wanted to pass it off as a just a whim and not something she had done by design, but she doubted that she could convince anyone of that.

He leaned in close; his nose was only an inch from hers. "Stay away from me."

"How did you know?" Paige wanted to run away, but she couldn't stop herself from just blurting out the question. She needed to know and she could feel her chance to ask quickly disappearing.

"Know what?" Michel took a small step back, obviously confused by the question. He glanced past Paige towards the coffee shop that was now out of view and frowned. "You were there."

Paige nodded. It wasn't a question, but she didn't want the conversation to end now. "You acted like you had known it was going to happen. No surprise, no shock – just a single sideways glance for the briefest moment."

"You're bleeding." Paige looked down at her hands. They were covered in cuts, a couple of which looked deep. It had probably happened when she had crawled out from under the table. She hadn't even noticed.

"Huh. How did you know?" She was too interested to let herself be distracted by a little bit of blood. It wasn't that bad anyway, she'd had worse before. She'd heal.

"Leave me be." He seemed angry now, or maybe he was just annoyed. He leaned in close again, but this time he whispered in her ear. "I'm a dangerous man and the best place to be is somewhere far, far away from me."

He turned to walk away and this time Paige couldn't make herself follow him even though she longed to find out more. She watched as the crowd which seemed to avoid him without ever looking in his direction stole him from her view.

Finally, she could make herself move again. She ran down the block trying to find him, but he had truly disappeared this time. Cursing under her breath, she turned her attention back to her hands. There was enough blood now to draw attention from some people. There was a corner store just a bit down the block and she headed in there to clean herself up.

CHAPTER TWO

"I'm telling you, it was the strangest thing. This guy-"

"I don't care Paige. How could you have been so rude to Troy? I heard all about how rude you were."

Paige sighed and rolled her eyes at the phone. "He was a tool Tina. Besides, haven't you heard a word I've said?"

"Yeah, you haven't stopped talking about the mysterious and angry stranger who isn't scared of sudden events and loud noises. He's probably some sort of serial killer and you'd be better off to stay far away from him."

"At least he'd be more interesting than the guys you keep trying to set me up with. Seriously, where do you find these fools?"

"Mostly, they work with Matt." The line went silent for a moment and then Tina laughed. "And you're right, a lot of them are tools, but they're single and decent looking and not potential serial killers."

"I really doubt he's a serial killer. He may have looked murderous for a second, but I don't think he would have hurt me. He's not that kind of guy."

"Earth to Paige - You don't know him from Adam!" Tina's voice went up an octave and Paige tried to suppress her smile – even though Tina couldn't see it.

"Sure do. Adam is that delicious gay guy at my favourite coffee shop downtown. This was definitely not Adam." Paige stared out the window of her loft at the old church across the street and she gave a little shudder. "Anyway, there are far worse things to worry about in this city than ordinary old serial killers."

"Do not get started on that; I don't want to hear about it. It's nothing, but a load of superstitious bullshit combined with your overactive imagination."

"I don't care if you don't believe any of it, but I know it's true. I've seen." Paige turned her back on the window.

"Paige..." It was a warning. One Paige knew only too well. This was not a topic that was open for discussion.

"Okay, okay. Fine, I'll stop talking about it."

"And...?"

“And I’ll try to be more interested in the guys you set me up with,” Paige threw herself on to the couch and stared up at her ceiling, “If you promise to set me up with someone more interesting.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that.” Tina sighed. “And maybe, just maybe, you’ll think about moving out of that drafty old loft?”

“Are you going to bring that up again?” Paige groaned. Sometimes her friend had a bit of a one track mind.

“Yes. You can move in with me and Matt. We have a spare room and—”

“And I’m not moving in to the new part of town. I keep telling you that I feel safer here in the shadow of the church.”

“Safer with no one around except for the ancient priest and that crazy ex-cop? Right.” Tina sounded exasperated with her.

“Not talking about it. Remember? Your orders.”

“Ugh. Whatever. I’ll talk to you tomorrow okay?”

“Sure. And remember, more interesting.” Paige ended the call and tossed her phone on to the table behind her head. She stared intently at the shadows on the ceiling and tried not to let her mind wander too much, but she couldn’t not think about the mysterious stranger.

He had looked just so damned ordinary. That was the oddest part. Most people passed beneath her notice, barely even blips on her mental radar. It wasn’t that she didn’t like people, she liked them well enough, it was just that most people really weren’t that interesting.

Until he hadn’t reacted to the accident, he should have qualified as not interesting, but he had drawn her attention long before that. She could only remember a few other instances where that had happened – and each of those had been the sort of people that she couldn’t talk to Tina about, not really.

There was one person she could talk about it with; someone that might know more than she did. In fact, Paige was sure he knew more than he would ever, or perhaps could ever, let on. She got up to look out her window at the church. This time she paid closer attention to two of the windows on the second floor, looking for the dim hint of candlelight from inside.

It didn’t take her long to see it. She hesitated, knowing that it wasn’t only Father Brannigan who might be up and about in the old church. There were others that called that place their home; others that she would prefer to avoid. Paige took a deep breath and headed for the door, her curiosity drove her past her hesitations.

The main doors of the church were never locked. There was no reason to lock this place up; only a fool would think to try to cause trouble here, but Paige didn't bother with the heavy front doors. There was a smaller door off to the side, hidden in the shadows of the overhanging archway.

She entered into a small passage way that paralleled the congregation hall. This was her least favourite part of the journey. Only a small handful of people knew about the passage and most of them were the kind of interesting people she preferred avoiding when she could.

She walked to the end of the hallway which gave her three choices. She chose the door to her left that would take her to the rooms at the back of church, behind the congregation hall. She knew the one on the right would take her towards the bell tower and the one straight ahead lead down stairs – to what, she had no idea and hoped to never know either.

She followed the hallway around and up until once again she was facing a choice of doors. She knew where each of these ones went to and there was unlikely to be anything, or anyone, behind them that she didn't want to see. She knocked on the main door right in front of her and waited patiently.

It was a few moments before Father Brannigan opened the door looking as though he had been expecting her to drop by any moment. "Hello my dear child, come in."

"Hi Father, how are you this evening. I hope I'm not bothering you. I know it's late." Paige knew it was only a formality. It could have been two in the morning and it would have made no difference. Still, he had taught her that the little things mattered.

"Of course not, you are always welcome in this house. Tea?" A steaming pot of tea sat on the lonely table beside the candle whose light was probably the one she had seen. The church had electricity, but Father Brannigan seemed to prefer candlelight. She had asked him about it once and his only response was that old habits die hard.

Paige took a seat at the table and waited while Father Brannigan poured a mug of the perfectly brewed tea. She took a deep whiff and smiled. It was one of her favourites, Dublin Cream. He had been expecting her to show up tonight, she was almost sure of it.

He poured his own tea and took the seat across from her. His smile was serene as he waited for her to break the ice on why she had come to see him. Paige sipped at her tea and tried to figure out the best way to frame her question. She wasn't too sure what she wanted to ask, but she knew that there was a good chance that she would find her answer here.

"There was this guy." Paige hesitated for a second before committing herself to what she was about to say. "At the coffee shop. He was unusual. You know how I can notice people that are more than ordinary and this guy was not ordinary. Only, I don't know how he wasn't ordinary."

She took another moment to consider her words, glad that Father Brannigan was a patient man and not prone to interrupting. "He had this feeling about him as though he was angry with the world, but somehow forlorn at the same time. I'm not sure if I can explain it right at all. I'm sorry. I do know that he wasn't in the shadow or the light. He should have been below my radar."

"It's alright. You're doing fine." He patted her hand and gave her an encouraging smile. "Tell me more."

"There was an accident in the coffee shop. That wasn't odd, but what was strange was that it never even phased him. The glass was flying right by his head. None of it hit him and all he did was finish his coffee, calmly fold his newspaper and walk away. Like it was any old day, like nothing horrible had just happened right in front of him."

Paige took another sip of her tea and swirled the cup, watching the few tea leaves that had escaped the sieve make pictures at the bottom. "I felt unusually drawn to him. I don't even know why, but unlike most of the people that I notice, there was something about him that made me want to know more. Even when he was trying to be scary, I never felt truly scared."

Father Brannigan scratched at his chin and then finished his own cup of tea. "That is a fascinating tale indeed."

"That's all you have to say?" Paige couldn't hide her disappointed. She had been hoping for more; she wasn't sure exactly what she had been hoping for, but that was definitely not it.

"Now, now. Don't get ahead of yourself or ahead of me for that matter." Father Brannigan poured another cup of tea for both them, but Paige didn't really feel like drinking any more right now. "Sometimes these things require a bit more thought than what first comes to mind."

"But what comes to mind first?" Paige wanted to know everything he knew.

"Just that maybe this is someone who needs your help. Maybe someone much like you in a way." Father Brannigan sipped his tea and sighed. "However, that is only my initial reaction. There is too much subtext to this. I need time to process it properly."

Father Brannigan gazed out the window into the night and sipped at his tea. It was clear that he was giving the matter a lot of consideration, but Paige was impatient. She knew that there was no reason to be. Chances were, she would never see the man again, but still she felt as though time was essential.

"I think," Father Brannigan said after quite a few minutes had passed and both had finished their second cup of tea. "That this man is dangerous. Not intentionally, but dangerous all the same. I would advise you to keep your distance, but I don't think that will be possible."

"You sound like my friend Tina."

“Wise friend. You should listen to her more often. She does have your best interests at heart, but don’t forget to listen to your own heart and mind as well.” Father Brannigan stood up and stretched. Paige remained seated, waiting for him to say something more.

“You’ll see him again. I think that much should be obvious, but I do believe that you ought to tread carefully in this matter until you know more. I don’t know anything about this man and I cannot even begin to guess at what his story is.”

“I understand. You’re sure I’ll see him again?” Paige stood up. She was pretty sure that she wasn’t going to get much more than this from Father Brannigan. She felt a little disappointed, but she would be seeing her mystery man again – if Father Brannigan was right and he was rarely wrong.

“Yes, my child, you will.” Father Brannigan opened the door to the hallway and smiled. “Just be sure to find out his story when you do. Our future is written in our history. If you know the past, you’ll know the future too.”

“Thank you, Father, good night.” The door closed softly behind her with no response from Father Brannigan. Paige was used to that. He was a friendly, wonderful man, but he was peculiar. He definitely qualified as an interesting person in her view. She had known him for nearly ten years now and she still could not quite figure him out.

She left the building, encountering no one along the way. It was a relief to be back in her own place where everything was safe and familiar. Yet, she didn’t feel safe. A shiver ran down her back and she thought about Father Brannigan’s warning. She wanted to ignore it, but there was a ring of truth to what he had said.

With her thoughts running around in her head like a dog chasing its tail, she fell into bed. Her night was restless, filled with dreams that she could barely remember in the morning. All she knew is that her mystery man had played a large role in them and that they had left her more anxious than ever. She was starting to really believe that he was dangerous.