



Echoes of Scotland Street: An On Dublin Street Novel

By Samantha Young

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Samantha Young and the *On Dublin Street* series

“Highly recommend this one.”—*USA Today*

“Truly enjoyable...a really satisfying love story.”—Dear Author

“[Young] is a goddess when it comes to writing hot scenes.”—Once Upon a Twilight

“Flirty, romantic and passionate.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“Wonderfully written, very upbeat, and easy to read.”—Under the Covers

“Delivers on all fronts—charismatic characters, witty dialogue, blazing-hot sex scenes, and real-life issues make this book an easy one to devour. Samantha Young is not an author you should miss out on!”—Fresh Fiction

About the Author

Samantha Young is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the *On Dublin Street* series, including *Fall from India Place*, *Before Jamaica Lane*, *Down London Road*, and *On Dublin Street*. She resides in Scotland.

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PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF SAMANTHA YOUNG

ALSO BY SAMANTHA YOUNG

PROLOGUE

Scotland Street
Edinburgh

I think I'd worn Gran out with my music and my yapping on and on about Ewan. Her eyes kept fluttering closed and popping open and she'd mutter, "Oh dear," every once in a while. My boyfriend, the aforementioned Ewan, would be in Edinburgh soon to pick me up, so I saw no harm in waiting out on Gran's front stoop and letting her take a much-needed nap.

When I kissed her papery cheek and said good-bye, Gran offered me a warm smile, her lids already drooping. Letting myself out of the large house, I hesitated a moment in the spacious hallway. Her house

hadn't seemed so big when Granddad was alive, but ever since he'd passed away three years ago, the house magically grew bigger and colder. Whenever I could, as I had done last night, I'd travel from my parents' house in our small town to stay with Gran for the night, sometimes even the whole weekend. Since Gran's house had always felt more like home than my parents' did, I took any opportunity I could to stay with her.

However, I couldn't stay the whole weekend because Ewan's band was playing a gig tonight and he wanted me there. He was the band's bassist. I was really excited to see him play, although I wasn't much looking forward to girls trying to chat him up after the show, like my friend Caro warned me would probably happen.

Shutting Gran's door, I turned and walked down a few steps to stand near the bottom of the stoop so Ewan could see me. He was seventeen, a few years older than me, and had just gotten his driver's license. He liked any old excuse to drive his wee, banged-up Punto, so I didn't feel bad about dragging his arse all the way to Edinburgh to come get me.

Digging through my bag for my phone and headphones so I could pass the time listening to music, I heard what sounded like a foot sliding along concrete behind me and I jerked around in surprise.

My eyes instantly collided with those of a boy.

He stood on the stoop of the house next door, a few steps farther up than me, and he was regarding me with something akin to shock. As I took him in, I felt my heart rate start to pick up.

His strawberry blond hair was slightly too long and disheveled, but he worked it because . . . I sucked in a breath, suddenly feeling a flutter of nerves in my stomach. The boy was utterly gorgeous. They didn't grow them like him at my school. As he stepped slowly down the stoop, the startlingly light green color of his eyes became clearer. They were "wow" eyes that I felt like I could drown in, and it occurred to me that perhaps I just might. When our eye contact finally broke, it was only because he was distracted by my hair.

Self-conscious, I tucked a strand behind my ear. The boy's eyes followed the movement. I'd been mocked for my hair for a long time when I was little, but as I got older I started to get compliments on it. This meant I was really unsure about other people's reaction to my hair, but I refused to change it. I'd inherited my hair from my mum. It was like the one thing we had in common.

It hung down to just above my bottom in soft waves and natural ringlets. Not ginger, not strawberry blond. It was closer to auburn, but even then it was just a hint too red to be auburn. When the sun or artificial light hit my hair, Gran said it was like a halo of fire around my head.

The boy's eyes returned to mine.

A really awkward length of time passed as we continued to stare at each other, and I could feel myself begin to squirm under the surprising tension that had sprung up between this stranger and me.

Searching for a way out, I dropped my gaze to his black T-shirt. It was a The Airborne Toxic Event shirt and I felt my lips curling into a pleased smile. TATE was one of my favorite bands. "Have you seen them live?" I asked more than a little enviously.

The boy glanced down at his shirt as though he'd forgotten what he was wearing. When he looked back at me, his mouth kicked up at the corner. "I wish."

I felt a rush of excitement at the sound of his voice and unconsciously stepped a little closer to the wrought-iron fence that separated us from each other's stoop. "I'd love to see them live."

He moved closer and I tilted my head back. He was tall. I was a small five foot three and the boy was almost a foot taller than me. My gaze wandered, no longer under my control, taking in his broad shoulders, down his lean, muscular arms to the big hand he had wrapped around one of the wrought-iron spearheads that embellished the fence. I felt a flip in my belly at the thought of being touched by one of those hands. They were masculine but graceful and long-fingered.

I flushed, thinking about what Ewan had done to me last week, except suddenly imagining this boy in his place. Guiltily, I chewed on my lower lip as I looked back up at the boy.

He didn't seem to notice that my thoughts had meandered into the indecent. "You're a fan of TATE?"

I nodded, feeling suddenly shy of this person who had elicited such a strong reaction in me.

"They're my favorite band." He gave me a small grin and I instantly wanted to know what he looked like when he laughed.

"One of mine too."

"Yeah?" He leaned in a little closer, his eyes searching my face as though I was the most interesting thing he'd ever seen. "What other bands do you like?"

The thrill of having his attention broke through the uncharacteristic shyness and I rattled off all the bands I could think of that I'd been listening to lately.

When I was done he rewarded me with a smile, and that smile winded me it was so good. There was something flirtatious there but at the same time boyish, charmingly boyish and utterly endearing. It was a great smile. A really, really great smile.

I sighed inwardly and leaned farther into the fence.

"What's your name?" he asked me, his voice low because we were so close now we could whisper and we'd hear each other. I could actually feel the heat from his body, and realizing we were standing quite intimately made me hugely aware of my own body as well as his. I flushed inwardly again, thankful I wasn't a typical redhead with blush-prone skin.

"Shannon," I replied, sure there was a hush in the air between us and afraid to break whatever it was by being too loud. "Yours?"

"Cole," he said. "Cole Walker."

That made me smile. It fit him perfectly. "You sound like a hero."

Cole grinned. "A hero?"

"Yeah. Like if there was a zombie apocalypse, the hero who tries to save everyone would have a name like Cole Walker."

His chuckle warmed me through and through, as did the way his eyes brightened with amusement. "Zombie apocalypse?"

"It could happen," I insisted because I never liked to rule out any eventuality in life.

“You don’t seem all that worried that it could.”

That was because I wasn’t. I shrugged. “I’ve just never understood why people are afraid of zombies. They move really slowly and are brain-dead.”

Cole snorted. “Two very fair points.”

I smiled. “So, are you a hero, Cole Walker?”

He scratched the side of his chin, looking off into the distance. “What is a hero, really?”

Surprised by the deep and apparently serious question, I shrugged. “I suppose it’s someone that saves people.”

His eyes flicked back to me. “Yeah, I suppose it is.”

Trying to lighten the mood, I gave him a flirty smile. “So, do you save people?”

Cole laughed. “I’m only fifteen. Give me a chance.”

We were the same age, then. I was surprised. He could pass for eighteen. “You are really tall for fifteen.”

His eyes drifted over me, a small smile playing on his lips. “A lot of people must seem tall to you.”

“Are you calling me short?”

“Are you saying you’re not short?”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not delusional. It’s just not polite to comment on a girl’s shortness. For all you know I’m really mad at the world because I’m vertically challenged.”

“Maybe I’m really mad at the world because I’m tall.”

I gave him a look that said *as if* and he burst out laughing.

“Okay, I’m not mad at being tall. But you shouldn’t be mad about your height.”

“I’m not,” I hurried to assure him. “I was just making a point.”

“A pointless point.”

I giggled, thinking over our bizarre conversation. “Yeah.”

Cole smiled, and I felt myself go all hot inside again at the way he was looking at me. “I doubt anyone notices your height anyway. You’ve got all that great hair and those amazing eyes to distract them.” As soon as he said it he flushed and ran a hand through his own hair, as if embarrassed he’d complimented me out loud.

My cheeks burned with pleasure. “You’ve got amazing eyes too.”

His momentary shyness instantly disappeared at my compliment. Cole leaned forward over the fence. “Please tell me you live here.”

Before I could answer, a loud honk shattered the intensity between us and I jerked my head up to see Ewan approaching in his old Punto. Reality came crashing back down around me, and for some reason I felt a weird sense of loss when I looked back at Cole. “I live in Glasgow,” I told him regretfully. I gestured to the car. “My boyfriend’s here to pick me up.”

Disappointment flashed in Cole’s eyes. “Boyfriend?” His gaze flew toward the car and I watched his face fall.

My heart sank in my chest. “Sorry,” I whispered, not really sure what I was apologizing for.

“Me too,” he murmured.

Ewan honked the horn again and I blanched, moving down the steps, my eyes still on Cole. We held each other’s gaze as I walked over to the car and slowly, reluctantly, got into it.

“Hey, baby,” Ewan said, finally causing me to break my connection with Cole.

I gave my boyfriend a tremulous smile. “Hi.”

He leaned over and kissed me before settling back into his seat to drive away.

Panicked, I turned back to my window to find Cole, but the stoop where he’d stood was now empty. A heavy feeling settled over me.

“Who was that?” Ewan asked.

“Who?”

“The guy on the stairs.”

“I don’t know.” *But I hope I get to find out.*

Ewan started chattering on about the band, not bothering to ask me how my night had been or how Gran had seemed even though I’d told him I was worried about her. As the old car took me away from Scotland Street amid his incessant chatter, I felt like fate had just handed me two cups and I’d stupidly drunk from the wrong one.

CHAPTER 1

Edinburgh

Nine years later

INKARNATE.

I stared up at the sign above the tattoo studio on Leith Walk, worrying my lip between my teeth. There was nothing for it. I had to open the doors and step inside.

I blew out a deep breath until my lips formed a disgruntled pout. The sign for INKarnate was painted in bold font across a long panel of glass above its door. The two large panels of glass on either side of the glossy black door were covered in pictures of tattooed limbs, artwork, and bold red-and-purple signs that screamed

TATTOOS, PIERCINGS, TATTOO REMOVALS at the passing public. In the center of the panel farthest away from me were two large white signs that proclaimed proudly SCOTLAND'S #1 TATTOO STUDIO and MULTI-AWARD WINNER.

Even I, who had no tattoos to speak of, had heard of INKarnate.

Okay, true, I'd dated quite a few blokes with tattoos, but that wasn't the reason I'd heard of Stu Motherwell's tattoo studio. I'd heard of it because his signs didn't lie and he'd even been on television a few times over the past few years. Stu had owned INKarnate for about thirty years now. He was an extremely talented and ambitious artist and was purported to only hire fantastic artists to work alongside him.

You'd think I'd be absolutely over-the-moon to get an interview for the admin assistant/reception position they needed to fill. However, INKarnate embodied everything I was running from at the moment. Everything that was bad for me.

I'd only applied for the job because admin jobs were scarce.

Ironical that this should be the only application that had produced a response.

What could I do, though? I crossed my arms over my chest, my eyes glued to the sign TATTOOS. I'd had to get away from Glasgow, and I had nowhere to go—Edinburgh was the only place I knew well enough to feel comfortable moving to, and it was expensive as heck. The hotel I was staying in was really a hostel and I couldn't afford to stay even there that much longer. Although I had enough in my savings for two months' rent on a really crappy flat, I wouldn't get a lease until I found a job.

I needed to eat and I needed a roof over my head.

As Gran used to say, beggars can't be choosers.

Letting my hands fall to my sides (defensive posture wasn't really a good way to start an interview), I waited for a woman with her pram to pass by the studio before striding up to the door and pushing inside. An old-fashioned bell at odds with the rest of the decor jingled above the door as I entered.

My low-heeled boots sounded loud on the expensive-looking white-tiled flooring. It was shot through with chips of silver mosaic pieces and was more elegant than I would have expected for a tattoo studio.

For a few moments I eyed the rest of the interior. It was like a typical tattoo studio but less . . . grungy. The main room was large and spacious. A small curved black marble counter sat to my left, and on it was a shiny iMac I would have given my eyeteeth for. Behind the counter was a massive closet I couldn't miss because its door was open, revealing a chaotic mass of files on the shelves inside. Opposite the counter on the other side of the room was a huge, well-worn black leather L-shaped sofa that looked really comfy. A glass coffee table was positioned in front of it, with a scatter of magazines on it and what looked like a bowl of shiny-wrapped toffees. Directly ahead of me was a mini gallery of sorts. The walls were white and nearly every inch of them was covered in tattoo concepts. The only walls that had been left bare were the partition walls placed here and there throughout the space. On them were television screens where indie and rock music played softly as a sound track to snapshots and video footage of the artists' portfolios.

It was all about art here.

But where were the artists?

I stared around at the emptiness, my eyes eventually coming to a stop on a door near the back left-hand

corner. I could hear the buzz of a tattoo needle. The workshops must be back there.

Should I venture in?

I hesitated only to be shuffled forward by someone attempting to open the entrance door. Moving out of the way, I gave the young man an apologetic smile.

“All right?” He nodded at me in greeting before swaggering over to the counter. He hit an old-fashioned bell a few times.

Oh. Okay.

A few seconds later a figure appeared in the doorway at the back. A huge, hulking beast of a figure. I stared openmouthed as he moved toward us, and slowly recognition hit me.

The graying beard and long wiry hair, the jolly grin and crinkles around the blue eyes. No, not Santa Claus.

Stu Motherwell.

He approached the counter in slow, measured steps and I noted that the black motorcycle boots he was wearing had definitely seen their best day a long, long time ago. The buzz of a tattoo needle continued from the room beyond, so I guessed there was at least one other tattooist back there.

“Hi, son,” he greeted the young man. “How can I help?”

“I’ve got an appointment for a tattoo removal in ten minutes.”

“Name?”

“Darren Drysdale.”

Stu bent over to look at the computer screen, clicking the mouse a few times. “Drysdale. Take a wee seat. Rae will be ready for you in a bit. I’d offer you a coffee, but my last assistant bought that fucking contraption and none of us know how to use it.”

The customer snorted. “No bother, mate.” He nodded at him and turned around, wandering over to the sofa to wait.

I then found myself under the scrutiny of Stu’s bright blue eyes. He seemed to take stock of me for a moment and then he gave me a massive grin. “And what can I do for you, wee fairy?”

Wee fairy? That was new. If he wasn’t my interviewer, I might reply that this “wee fairy” would ram her wee but effectual foot up his arse if he “wee fairied” me again.

It was possible I was a little angry these days.

But also desperate . . . so . . . “I’m Shannon MacLeod.” I stepped forward and held out my hand. “I’m here for the interview for the admin position.”

“Thank fuck,” Stu pronounced jovially, striding around the counter to enfold my hand in his huge one. He shook it, shaking my whole body with the motion. “At least you look normal. The last one looked like she hadn’t seen a human being in forty years.”

“Oh?” How was I supposed to reply to a comment like that?

“Aye. She didn’t even know what an apadravya or an ampallang was.”

I winced just at the thought of those genital piercings. A brave man, was all I’d say, a brave man indeed who sucked it up and got either one of those. “You do those here?”

“Simon is our piercings guy. He does it all.” Stu grinned. “I take it from that wee flinch you know what they are.”

I nodded, not really comfortable discussing penis piercings with my possible boss—although I guessed if I got the job, that might very well become normal conversation between us. “Surely, you don’t get a lot of requests for those, though, right?”

“I’m sure women the world over would prefer more than we do get.” Stu chuckled at his own joke and started walking toward the back room, gesturing for me to follow him. “My office is through here. Let’s chat.”

We passed through the back door, entering a long narrow hallway where light from three doors streamed through. The buzzing noise was coming from the middle room. Stu pointed at them. “Three workrooms.” He pointed to the one nearest us. “I share that one with my manager. He’s our main tattooist and our finest artist, so he usually does the big projects, unless I take a particular interest. Fridays are his day off, so unfortunately you won’t meet him today. The middle room is Rae’s. She’s finishing up a small tattoo at the moment. She does our tattoo removals as well. The last one is Simon’s. He’s a tattooist, but you’ll find most of his appointments are for piercings.” Stu nodded toward the closed door at the end of the hall. “My office.”

We passed by the workrooms and I sneaked a peek inside the middle one. I saw the back of a skinny, purple-haired woman I guessed was Rae. She was tattooing what looked like a butterfly on the lower back of the curvy girl braced over a chair.

I peeked inside the last door, meeting the eyes of a nice-looking, tattooed bald guy. He had a customer, but he gave me a little wave as I passed. I returned it, thinking he had kind eyes.

“In we go, wee fairy,” Stu boomed heartily as he opened his office and swept an arm in a gesture for me to enter before him. He frowned as I moved past him. “What did I say?”

I realized I must not have been able to keep my irritation off my face. Oh well, he’d caught me, so I might as well be honest. “Wee fairy? Not really sure how to take that.”

“Well, I don’t mean anything bad by it, lass.” Stu strode into the room, passing me to take the big leather seat behind his cluttered desk. He waved a hand at the chair in front of me, so I quickly took it. “It’s just with that hair and those eyes and the fact that you are in fact ‘wee,’ you remind me of a wee fairy.”

Despite myself, I found I was fighting a smile. This big bruiser of a man seemed perturbed and worried that he might have upset me. “It’s okay. I’m just a bit nervous about the interview.”

“Och, don’t be nervous.” He shook his head. “We’re just going to go over your work experience and then I’ll introduce you to Rae and Simon. If you get the job you’ll be working mostly with them, so I like to get their feel for a person.”

From there we chatted for about fifteen minutes or so about my previous work in the administrative world. He was mostly interested in my experience as a receptionist for a tattoo studio in Glasgow. I’d worked there

until I was twenty. I'd been dating a local biker at the time who was almost ten years my senior (yeah, my family had loved him), and his best mate owned a studio. The job lasted as long as the relationship, which was roughly eighteen months. It was charming really—he cheated on me with a skanky biker babe and I was the one that got fired. “Downsizing,” my boss had called it. Yeah, more like his mate found it too awkward to have me around after I walked in on him screwing another woman.

I'd soon discover that was just one of the many joys of dating an honest-to-goodness bad boy.

“That all sounds great.” Stu gave me a huge endearing grin that made me smile despite myself. He'd really made me feel at ease during the interview, and I'd begun to think that working at INKarnate might not be such a bad thing after all. “Let's go meet Rae and Simon.”

Simon's room was empty, but we found him hovering in the doorway of Rae's, watching her work as she talked with the young man who was there for what appeared to be his first session for a tattoo removal. The young guy blinked up at the doorway in alarm when Stu and I appeared.

Rae frowned at his abrupt change in demeanor before following his gaze. She smirked. “Don't worry. They're not all here to watch. Right, Stu?”

Rae's purple-and-black hair was cut choppy and short around her long, narrow face. She had a sharp nose and a thin mouth. A tiny jet stud sparkled on her nose, and a small silver hoop pierced the left side of her lower lip. Huge dark eyes and enviously long black lashes saved her face from being too severe. The more I gazed at her, the more I realized she was striking even without the hair and the piercings and the sleeve of black rose tattoos down her right arm. A skinny Harley-Davidson tank top and black jeans showcased her long-limbed figure.

“Who's Red?” She nodded her chin at me.

“This is Shannon. Shannon, these are my artists, Rae and Simon.” Stu gestured to the tall, bald artist.

Simon grinned at me and I felt my warning flag start to fly. He had dimples, very, very charming dimples, glittering hazel eyes, and nicely developed muscles underneath his gray Biffy Clyro shirt. Tattoos covered every inch of both his arms. Black tunnels pierced his ears.

He was a problem.

Perhaps a job at INKarnate wasn't going to work out after all.

“You should hire her,” Simon said to Stu without taking those pretty eyes off me. “She's hot. She'll attract interest.”

Nope. Definitely not going to work out.

A snort erupted from Rae as she perceptively read the expression on my face. “Don't worry, Red. He prefers dicks. Like, actual dicks.”

I blinked in surprise not just at her crassness, and in front of a customer no less, but at the implication. Simon was gay? He caught my look of surprise and laughed. “Yes, I'm gay.”

I hated to admit it to myself, but the revelation made me relax instantly, the disappointment I'd felt only moments before disappearing. I grinned at Simon now. “If you're single I'll pass out with disbelief.”

He laughed at that, seeming pleased. "I'm not. My boyfriend is called Tony. He's Italian."

"Oh, don't get him started on Tony," Rae groaned, rolling her eyes. "I love the guy, but if I have to hear one more tale of Tony's talented mouth and generous heart I'm going to vomit all over myself."

My eyes betrayed my shock and Simon patted my shoulder. "Don't worry. It's just Rae's way. She loves me really."

She harrumphed at that and turned purposefully back to her client, who'd been watching us with something akin to boredom on his face. "Hire her, Stu. You know I love shocking the fuck out of people, and Red here looks like she'll make that fun for me."

"I take that as a challenge," I said, feeling indignant at the accusation that I was somehow thin-skinned. "I've been around and heard a lot worse, I promise you."

Her mouth quirked up at the corner. "I'll take *that* as a challenge."

"You've done it now." Simon sighed.

"You're hired," Stu announced.

I looked up at him, feeling an overwhelming rush of relief. "Seriously?"

He smiled. "Aye, I like you."

That didn't sound very professional. "You're hiring me because you like me?"

"People have no idea how important that is to a successfully run business. If everyone gets along, if the atmosphere in here is great, people will recommend us."

"Oh yes, because my affable fucking nature, *not* my immense ability with a tattoo needle, is what brings in all the recommendations," Rae drawled.

Stu grunted. "It's not your affable fucking nature or your ability with a tattoo needle that brings in the recommendations. It's—"

"Cole," she finished for him, throwing him a grin. "But I'm not bad either."

Stu couldn't help smiling at that. "Aye, you're not bad either."

"Right." Simon turned toward us and shooed us with his hands. "Let Rae work." He smiled at me as we walked out into the hallway. "So, are you accepting?"

I thought about it as I wandered after Stu into the main room. A customer waited at the counter and Simon hurried over to greet him while Stu stared at me expectantly.

So Rae had a mouth on her and I was guessing no filter between said mouth and her brain, but underneath the prickly demeanor I sensed a real affection for her employer and her colleague. Stu was loud and blunt but easygoing and laid-back. And Simon seemed just as easygoing and nice.

It couldn't be the worst place to work.

Who was I kidding? They could be horrible and I'd still be accepting this job. I stuck out my hand. "Thank you. I'd be pleased to accept."

Stu beamed, shaking my hand and with it my whole body again. "Brilliant. How does Monday sound?"

"Brilliant," I echoed, smiling hugely for the first time in days, weeks even. I was relieved to finally be moving forward with my life.

Stu looked over his shoulder at Simon. "She said aye!"

Simon laughed. "Good news. Cole will love her."

"Oh, aye." Stu chuckled in a way that made me feel suddenly nervous. Who was Cole? Stu's eyes twinkled. "I'm actually semiretired. I'm not around a lot, so I leave the running of the place to my manager, Cole. He'll go over everything you need to know on Monday."

I smiled weakly in response.

I suddenly had a very bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

* * *

The room was cold and narrow, but at least it was a place to rest my head for now. Although that didn't make the surroundings any less depressing. Not to mention I hated having to share the communal bathroom with the five other guests who were staying at the "hotel."

I'd finished filling out the employee details form Stu had given me before leaving INKarnate. On the one hand I felt incredibly lucky to have secured a job so quickly, and on the other I was absolutely dreading meeting my new manager. I had to hope that he was just like Stu or even Simon. Not a bad boy.

Grumbling under my breath about the miscommunication that had landed me in this situation, I pushed away the form and picked up my phone. No messages. As if I really expected there to be any—I hadn't been entirely visible back in Glasgow to my family, but at least I'd existed. Now it was like I'd been wiped from all recollection.

Ignoring the burn of anger in my gut, I got up and crossed the small room to where I'd piled my suitcases and five boxes with my belongings. I'd thrown most of my stuff out before moving. I thought it might help to purge myself of those memories in order to start over.

Searching through the boxes, I found the one I was looking for. The one box I'd kept from high school was the one with all my old sketch pads and art materials. Sketching always relaxed me—it took me out of myself for a little while. I seemed to need that a lot lately.

When I was packing up, I hadn't had enough time to go through all my old drawings, but tonight I had nothing but time and four grim walls. I needed something to take my mind off my family problems, and I didn't have money to buy any new books.

Hauling the box over to the bed, I wiped away the dust that had collected on the top of the sketch pads with an old T-shirt and curled up on the bed to look through them. Some of the older drawings made me smile. Drawing wasn't something that had come particularly easy to me at first. I'd loved to do it but was never able to make a sketch come alive. Until a boy in my first-year class (one I happened to have a massive crush on) in high school showed me how to hold a sketch pencil correctly and how to stroke against the paper, not

draw in hard, unbending lines.

From there I caught on quickly and I was hooked.

The art lasted. The first crush didn't.

A sheet of paper fell out from the third sketch pad I'd picked up and suddenly I was reminded of another boy. A year ago I would have been able to look at the sketch and feel nothing but a prickle of pain—a ghostly reminder rather than the real thing.

Now, however, looking down at the drawing of my ex-boyfriend Nick, I felt bitterness well up in me. That bitterness was becoming a familiar part of me and I hated it. I just didn't know how to fight it.

But I leaned against my pillow, my fingers crinkling the sketch of the gorgeous Nick Briar. I'd gone out with Nick nine months after my first boyfriend, Ewan, had dumped me out of the blue. For a time Nick soothed the hurt Ewan had left me with. In my immaturity, I actually felt like I had won something over Ewan when I began dating Nick. He was nineteen and gorgeous and the lead singer in a rival rock band.

Nick had been the first of my bad boys . . .

* * *

The small club was dingy and smoky and much too hot. But I was filled with giddy excitement as I watched Nick sing onstage with his band, Allied Criminals. I thought their name was stupid and I wasn't a huge fan of their music, but I loved Nick's voice and his passion and how excited people were by them. I felt proud standing in the crowd as his girlfriend, and I promised myself I would always support him, no matter what.

Nick played up his brooding persona onstage, but in reality he was such a sweet guy. The night before, when I told him I wouldn't be able to make it to this performance because of a family thing, he'd been really cool about it. He was disappointed, but he didn't make a big deal about it like Ewan would have. And he made me feel special in a way that Ewan never had. Nick was always telling me how beautiful I was, how funny and interesting. I'd felt ordinary until I met him. I was completely falling for him, which was probably why I'd had sex for the first time with him a few weeks ago.

My friends were acting all immature about it and jealous, which was ridiculous. They thought it was a mistake for me to give it up to him and were really being unsupportive and ignorant about the whole thing. Lucky I had Nick in my life so I didn't have to put up with their silly naïveté all the time.

After Nick was so cool the night before, whispering sweet nothings in my ear while he made love to me, I decided I'd get out of my aunt's birthday party to come and see him play. I couldn't wait to see the look of surprise on Nick's face.

The band finished up and I hurried toward the door that would lead to backstage. A bouncer tried to push me back, but after I explained who I was he disappeared backstage and returned with the band's "manager." In reality he was Nick's older cousin, Justin, and I wasn't really sure what it was that qualified him to be their manager. I didn't really care just then. Justin recognized me and got me backstage only to disappear before I could ask which way I was going. I wandered in the opposite direction and came upon the band sitting around a randomly placed and barren pool table. They were drinking beer and talking loudly among each other with a couple of guys and girls I didn't recognize.

Nick was nowhere to be seen.

Alan, the lead guitarist, glanced up and stiffened when he saw me, his eyes flickering beyond me nervously before they snapped back to me. "Shannon." He stood up abruptly and the guys all looked at me in much the same way. "I didn't think you were coming tonight."

I smiled back, but my lips trembled. The tension my appearance had caused had alarm bells ringing in my head. "I wanted to surprise Nick. Where is he?"

"Uh, I don't know." Digby, the drummer, shrugged, looking at the other guys with a faked nonchalance that they returned.

Not Alan, though. His lips pinched together as he watched them, and when his eyes swung back to mine I stared into them stubbornly. My directness made him flinch. Alan and I got on pretty well. In fact, I sometimes got the impression he liked me. He flirted with me all the time and was always so considerate of me. I'd always brushed it off because I was mad about Nick and no one else could come close to how I felt about him.

"Where is he, Alan?"

Alan's eyes softened with regret. "He's in the cloakroom, Shannon." He nodded in the direction behind me as the others shifted uneasily.

Feeling my heart bang away in my chest, I turned on my low-booted heels and strode with more confidence than I was feeling down a narrow, dark walkway. I came to a stop in front of a black-painted door with the word CLOAKROOM in peeling white paint across it.

I heard the gasps and grunts coming from inside and I knew what I was going to find, but I just had to see it for myself.

With a shaking hand I turned the door handle and threw it open.

In the small, dimly lit room that was no bigger than a large closet, I saw Nick with his jeans down around his ankles, thrusting into the blonde he had pinned against the wall.

Nausea and pain like I'd never felt before welled up in me as they both jerked their heads around in surprise at the intrusion. Nick's eyes widened when he saw me and suddenly the blonde was forgotten as he called out my name in horror and let her go. She stumbled to the floor when Nick bent down to pick up his jeans.

I ran out of there, ignoring Alan and Nick shouting my name as they chased after me. I lost them in the crowds of the dirty bar and I hurried all the way to the bus stop. I didn't go home. Instead I found myself knocking on my friend Caro's house. She let me in and I sobbed all over her, apologizing for assuming she was naive, when in the end I was the only one who could be faulted for that . . .

** * **

Nick was an important lesson. Yet somehow it took another man cheating on me before I learned from it. Eventually I got wise to his type. However, I later got caught up in a different kind of bad boy: the kind who didn't cheat but still found a way to wreck my life.

But no more.

I tore up the sketch of Nick into a hundred little pieces.

Never again.

CHAPTER 2

I'd found it hard to sleep the night before I started my new job, butterflies fluttering around like wild things in my belly as I worried about the next day. When I managed to drift to sleep, it was with the hope that my manager would be very much a younger version of Stu. I could deal with a Stu.

So it was with more than the usual amount of first-day jitters that I stepped into INKarnate on Monday, which was probably why I almost tripped over my own feet at the sight before me.

Simon was standing in front of the marble reception desk talking quietly to a very tall guy who had his back to me. I got a brief glimpse of strong, broad shoulders and long legs before he turned and my eyes collided with his bright green ones.

Holy . . .

My stomach plummeted.

Dread filled me.

Please, no, no, no. Be a customer. Please be a customer.

Those eyes crinkled attractively at the corners as their gorgeous owner threw me a friendly, boyish smile that penetrated my anti-bad-boy force field. The eyes and smile would have brought me low on their own, but unfortunately those eyes and that smile were enhanced by sexy scruff on the stranger's jaw, and the messy, unkempt strawberry blond hair that framed his attractive face. If that wasn't enough to affect a woman, the tall, handsome stranger had a fit body. A very fit body by the look of things. His navy T-shirt did nothing to hide the perfect V of his torso or his lean, muscular arms. And those arms were covered in elaborate, hot tattoos.

"Shannon," Simon greeted me, yanking my gaze away from the stunning disaster in front of me. "This is Cole, our manager."

Was fate really this heartless?

Cole grinned at me again, and familiarity punched me in the chest along with dismay as he took a few steps toward me and held out his hand. "Cole Walker. It's nice to meet you, Shannon."

I reluctantly stepped forward and took his hand in mine.

I instantly regretted it.

His strong, slightly callused hand with the chunky silver ring on its middle finger felt really nice. It engulfed my small one and I felt surrounded by him.

Dammit!

I ripped my hand away, unable to meet my new manager's gaze. My eyes dropped to the loosely laced black engineer boots his dark jeans were tucked into.

“Shannon?” Cole said my name like a question and I had to unglue my eyes from his feet to meet his gaze. Up close the familiarity I’d felt moments ago only strengthened in feeling as he narrowed his eyes on me. He took in my hair for a few long seconds.

Recognition slammed through me.

No.

No way.

“So, are you a hero, Cole Walker?”

“What is a hero, really?”

Months, even years, after our meeting outside my gran’s house all those years ago, I’d often thought of the good-looking boy I’d connected with after only a few minutes of conversation.

Cole Walker.

Cole freaking Walker.

All grown-up.

And he was my new manager.

I was so screwed. I’d be less screwed, though, if he didn’t remember me, which I was pretty sure he wouldn’t. A guy like him—he was bound to have flirty conversations with women every day. No way would he remember a random conversation with a short, pale redhead nine years ago.

“I know you.” Cole stepped back, tilting his head as he scrutinized me with a small smile on his lips. He looked charmed by me, which immediately sent my force field back up at full power. “Shannon.” Unbelievably, recognition lit up his beautiful eyes. “We’ve met.” He grinned back at a smiling Simon before returning his attention to me. His eyes were filled with pleased surprise. “On Scotland Street. Years ago.”

He waited for me to respond.

I could tell him I remembered him, but surely that would only encourage the flirtiness I saw glittering in his gaze. I remembered he liked my hair and my eyes. Who was to say he didn’t *still* like my hair and my eyes, and moreover would like a chance to see said hair spilled across his pillow as he screwed me? A screwing that he would most likely promptly follow up with screwing me *over*.

Keeping my face perfectly blank, I shook my head. “Sorry. I don’t remember.”

Disappointment caused his smile to wilt. “Really? We talked about bands and zombies and stuff. Your boyfriend picked you up. You’re from Glasgow.”

Christ, did he have a photographic memory?

I only just managed to stop myself from wrinkling my nose in annoyance. “I am from Glasgow,” I answered calmly, not unfriendly but not friendly either. “And my gran lived on Scotland Street, but I don’t remember you. Sorry.”

Simon tried to muffle a snort of laughter behind Cole.

Cole shot him a displeased look over his shoulder and Simon turned around with an innocent whistle and casually walked into the back.

Sighing, my new manager turned to me with a frown puckering his brow. “You really don’t remember me?”

“Sorry.” I shrugged apathetically, which only caused his frown to deepen.

“Long time ago, I suppose.” He continued to stare at me in an assessing way and I began to squirm uncomfortably. The more he stared, the more I stared, and the more I stared, the more I noticed how deliciously lickable he was.

The tattoos only made him more so.

I blamed the artist in me for my weakness for a man with great tattoos. There was what looked like initials worked into a tribal design tattooed on the left side of his neck. On his left arm was a sleeve tattoo in black ink of a wolf standing on a rocky precipice. It sketched upward into his biceps, and the upper body of a woman in profile appeared to transform out of the top of the wolf’s head—her face was upturned; her hair billowed in the wind and disappeared under the fabric of his T-shirt. On his right arm in a reddish brown and black ink was a flying eagle, the tips of its wings disappearing under his T-shirt too. Dangling from the eagle’s talons was an old-fashioned pocket watch, but I couldn’t make out what time was set on it.

“You like what you see?”

I blinked at the innuendo in Cole’s voice, dragging my eyes from his tattoos to his face. He was wearing this sexy little smirk that would have worked like a charm on me a few months ago.

But a lot had happened since then. I raised an eyebrow. “Do you flirt with all your new employees?” I said, unamused and pretending to be unimpressed.

Cole’s smirk turned into a grin as his eyes roamed over my hair. “I’ve never had one like you before,” he murmured.

“Efficient, smart, responsible, reliable?” I said through gritted teeth.

Laughter danced in his eyes. “Well, I hope you’re all those things too.” Clearly pleased with himself, he chuckled and turned around to head toward the reception desk. “Good hair, by the way,” he shot over his shoulder.

For the first time in years I cursed my bloody hair.

“I’m thinking about dyeing it pink,” I lied as I followed him behind the desk.

Clicking the mouse on the computer, Cole muttered, “And I’m really a tattooist by day and a time-traveling immortal highlander by night.”

Before I could respond, he threw me a wry smile and gestured to the computer with a nod of his head.

“Desktop.” The mouse moved over the screen as he showed me the digital appointment book, the spreadsheet on which they kept their supplies updated, a list of their suppliers’ contact details, and a folder with information on regular clients.

“Now.” He sighed and threw me an apologetic look. “We have an issue with filing.” He turned around, his arm brushing mine as he did so, and unfortunately I couldn’t stop my body from reacting to the touch. The hairs on my arms stood on end, and the blood heated in my cheeks. Cole didn’t seem to notice as he waved an arm at the huge closet in front of us—the one with the masses of paper files. “Our last assistant was completely inept—”

“And a fucking homophobe,” Simon’s voice snarled in my ear, and I jumped in fright to discover he was standing at my shoulder.

“Which was why our last assistant was canned,” Cole informed me. When I looked back at him he was studying me warily. “You’re not a homophobe, are you, Shannon?”

I barely registered the question. He had a lovely accent—it was refined and lilting and it did gorgeous things to the sound of my name.

Realizing they were both now tensely waiting on an answer, I hurried to assure Simon, “Definitely not. Love’s just love, right?”

Simon relaxed and smiled at me. “Love’s just love, sweetheart,” he agreed.

I smiled back at him, but when my gaze returned to Cole, my smile wilted. He had been staring at me with this disarming look in his eyes, a soft look that made me feel things I had no right feeling. At the sudden change in my demeanor, Cole frowned, clearly confused by my reaction to him.

“So, the files . . . ?” I urged.

Cole blinked. “Files? Oh, right, files.” He cleared his throat and gestured back to the closet. “These are Stu’s files before he went digital. We don’t need them—they date back to when the studio first opened—but Stu wants to keep them. Our boss can be a bit stubborn sometimes.” He said it with such affection I knew Stu’s stubbornness didn’t bother Cole in the least. “The files were moved when a pipe burst in Stu’s office, but the assistant who moved them turned them into a disorganized mess. Accounting files have been mixed up with art files and they’re all out of chronological order. I’d like you to reorganize it whenever you’re not needed on reception.”

I took a step toward the mess. “Why don’t I digitize them instead? It’ll free up the space in here. The mess doesn’t exactly give the greatest impression to your customers.”

Cole seemed to consider it. “It’ll take you longer . . .”

I shrugged. “I like to keep busy.”

His eyes moved over the top of my head to Simon. “Can it be? We finally hired a receptionist who knows what she’s doing and actually wants to work?”

“Bigger miracles have occurred,” Simon said, a smile in his voice.

Feeling immediately flustered, I pretended otherwise by turning to the reception desk. “Where’s the printer?”

“It’s in Stu’s office. I’ll get it and bring it here for you.” Cole strode toward the back rooms and disappeared down the corridor. My eyes followed him against my will.

“Don’t worry,” Simon said.

“Worry about what?”

He gave a huff of laughter. “About getting your knickers in a twist over Cole. He has a tendency to have that affect on people. Believe me, I’ve never wished harder for someone to miraculously wake up gay one morning.”

Despite being annoyed that Simon had somehow guessed my immediate attraction to our boss, I couldn’t help giggling. “What about Tony?”

Simon waved my question off. “We both have fantasy lists of people we’re allowed to fuck if they ever turned gay. Channing Tatum is on his. Cole’s on mine.”

“Does Cole know you fancy him?”

“He’s seen my whole list. Tony printed them for evidence of our pact in case fantasy ever becomes reality.”

I was still stuck on the fact that Cole knew Simon fancied him and yet seemed perfectly at ease with him. “Doesn’t it bother Cole that you fancy him?”

Simon grunted. “Why would it?”

“Some men, particularly men like Cole, are weird about that stuff. The idiots think it threatens their manhood.”

“Speaking from experience, are you?”

I made a face at the thought of my ex. “I once knew a guy who beat the shit out of a bloke who came on to him in a bar. It was one of the ugliest things I’ve ever seen.” Blinking away the memories, I discovered Simon staring at me with an arrested look on his face. It was as though he sensed it wasn’t the only ugly thing I’d ever seen, and wanted to know why. The thought of anyone in my new life knowing what I’d been through caused a wall to shoot up inside me; its impenetrableness must have been reflected in my suddenly blank expression.

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