

## Chapter One

His survival rested on the outcome of this meeting. On polite words and social niceties. For Alexi Dugas, that was definitely a problem. He was a warrior, not a politician. A reputation the council delegate across from him obviously knew about given the uneasy looks he cast around the coffee shop. It told Alexi the man would rather be anywhere else. With *anyone* else.

In short? Alexi was screwed before he even walked in the damn door.

Clamping down on his temper, he sat back in his chair. His gaze swept across the room, barely taking in the wooden chairs and tables, or the new paint on the walls made to look old and faded. Instead, he searched the crowd, ever on the lookout, always braced for battle. With his back to the wall and the mirrors around them, he had an uninterrupted view of the place.

When would Shane O'Maley would get to the point? Alexi deliberately showed his annoyance by drumming his fingers on the tabletop. His temper threatened to boil over again when the Irishman still made no overtures. He leaned forward. "Out with it."

O'Maley's first attempt at speech came out sounding more like a squeak. He cleared his throat. "M-my lord."

"The name's Alexi." Why he took perverse satisfaction in watching the unobtrusive little man squirm, he couldn't say.

Tugging at his bow tie, O'Maley returned his attention to the papers in front of him. "First, I must convey the council's greetings. Of course they realize the honor ye bestow upon them, and they did give yer request careful considera..."

"Eight months worth."

The Irishman's gaze lifted. He pushed his round glasses higher up on his nose. "The council likes to analyze all matters."

Alexi snorted and looked away. After sending a dozen urgent emails, two weeks ago, they'd finally relented and told him to expect Shane O'Maley. He assumed they'd send someone who understood the live or die realities of the world he lived in. Instead, he got some bookworm who probably never had to fend for himself a day in his life.

Terrific.

O'Maley consulted his notes. "And so..."

"Request denied."

"Aye, but..."

Alexi sliced his hand through the air. "No means no, O'Maley. Spare me the details." His jaw worked, and he resisted the urge to pound the table in frustration. He should have known. They'd never forgive, let alone forget, all the wrongs he'd done.

"The council does invite ye to try again."

The man's pity grated. "So they can fucking turn me down again? No thanks."

The Irishman gave him a disbelieving look. "Surely, ye understand the clan's misgivings? Trusting ye is a risk they can't afford."

Alexi's gut contracted. Shame settled its full weight on his conscience. Of course they couldn't afford to trust him. Who could blame them? But damn it, over time, he'd made amends. He'd lived by their rules and upheld their code. Now, unless the council intervened, his small band was doomed.

Coached to be a leader from the age of ten, the possibility of not coming through for his men pissed Alexi off. In his world, picking up a weapon and fighting solved problems. But this... He couldn't fight this. He could only accept defeat, something he didn't know how to do. His hands clenched.

The bell above the door jingled. When two brutish men walked in, the bitter draft swooping into the room had nothing to do with the cold rage surging through him. Using the mirrors, Alexi watched as the duo settled at the front counter. It wasn't the black leather that drew his attention; he wore it himself. No. It was the gleam in their eyes, a gleam he

knew well. It spoke of a black soul.

It spoke of death.

O'Maley followed his stare. "What's wrong?"

"Bulls."

"What! Where?" Anticipating his reaction, Alexi grabbed the Irishman just as he was about to twist around.

"Do you want to die?"

O'Maley shook his head.

Alexi loosened his grip on the man's jacket. "Are you a known member?"

"I'm a scholar, not a warrior."

"Like that isn't freakin' obvious." He released him. "Just keep your damn head down and, with any luck, they won't notice us."

Protocol required any outside clan ask permission before entering another's territory. Alexi didn't expect the Bull clan to comply. They took advantage of the fact his group wasn't associated with any official clan. Plus they enjoyed the added pleasure of nettling a former comrade. Their increasing encroachments into the city, into *his* territory, could only lead to all-out war. War meant casualties. Most of them the innocent kind.

"Are ye not going to engage them?" O'Maley asked.

Although he enjoyed a good fight, any nitwit who wanted to survive in their world knew private agendas weren't settled in public arenas. Alexi drew his hand to his side, touching the knife sheathed at his waist. His senses honed in on the two Bulls.

"Your council would have plenty to say about that, don't you think?"

So far, they hadn't noticed him or O'Maley. New members, no doubt. Alexi didn't recognize them. They regularly glanced at their watches. They were waiting for something...or someone.

"When they leave," he added with lethal intent, "I'll follow. I think they need to be reminded this is *my* turf."

Thirty minutes later, Alexi stood as the two Bulls made their way outside. He dropped a ten-dollar bill on the table and shrugged into his leather slicker. "I'll be polite," he said, sounding anything but, "and not say this was a waste of time."

O'Maley pushed to his feet and reached for the grungy, brown coat draped on the back of his chair. "Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

Right. Maybe the Irishman could bore them to death by quoting council regulations. Alexi didn't bother with an answer. He turned and walked away.

Outside, the wind howled and a whirlwind of thick snowflakes fell from the night sky. Despite the snow, the street was crowded. He wasn't surprised. It would take more than sub-zero weather to empty Saint-Catherine Street. In the midst of the worst snowstorms, countless souls could be found trudging up and down what was commonly called *the Cat*.

He glanced to his right and spotted the two Bulls heading east. Hands in his pockets, head bowed, he followed. He didn't pay attention to the blue or green-haired people who crossed his path, to the beggar huddled in a corner, or the dog that growled as it sensed Alexi was no ordinary man. Nor did he acknowledge the buxom blonde who winked as he walked by. He did, however, become aware of the boots crunching in the snow behind him. He whipped around.

"Oomph." O'Maley collided into him. He raised his head. Snow crusted the lenses of his glasses and weighed heavy in his curly hair. He gulped. "'Tis not what ye think."

"Too bad. I thought you were headed back to your hotel room."

"Indeed. That's precisely it! I was heading back to the hotel."

"Which hotel?"

"The Delta."

"The Delta." Alexi glanced over his shoulder. The sign shone in all its green neon glory at the top a high-rise building at the end of the block. "How convenient."

"Aye, isn't it?"

He favored O'Maley with a grudging half-smile. "In that case," he said, sweeping out his

hand toward the cross street, "I suggest you head up there."

Rid of the undesired company, Alexi followed the two Bulls as they passed the Eaton Center shopping mall then crossed DeMaisonneuve Street. They turned right and headed for a building's underground parking lot.

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Sunscreen? Check. First-class ticket to the Bahamas? Check. Sarah Hennessy dropped her wallet inside her tote bag and shot the office one last look. She'd transferred the phones to the answering service. Her email account was set-up with an *out of the office* notice. Her clients would survive ten days without H&L Marketing while she took her first real vacation in two years. She couldn't wait to step foot in Nassau. She especially couldn't wait to walk on the resort's private beach. One souvenir she didn't intend to bring back—tan lines.

It seemed odd after twenty-four months of eighteen-hour days to have two full weeks to herself. She wondered how she'd survive without her Blackberry and her laptop. They were her lifelines, her connections to the world she lived in. More importantly, they allowed her to be in control. But, she'd promised her girlfriends, so her laptop lay dutifully on her desk, whereas her phone was safely locked away in her desk drawer.

She was about to walk out the door when, with her hand still on the doorknob, she noticed the box she'd set on the corner of her desk. She rolled her eyes and quickly scooped it up. This was definitely coming home with her.

She should be used to receiving the boxes by now. For the past three years, her ex-boyfriend Charles St-Pierre, worked steadily to transform her spare bedroom into his own private museum.

A photographer with the *National Geographic Society*, Charles never stayed in one place long enough to call home. Sarah was the only person he trusted to care for his little treasures, as he liked to call them.

Packages arrived sporadically, the postage stamps the only indication of where they were sent from. On occasion, Charles penned a short letter outlining his recent experiences. The rest of the time, she had to wait months to read about it in the magazine. The boxes usually contained small works of art. Sometimes there were books and photographs or, sometimes, the occasional piece of pottery Charles liked to call an artifact.

This time, the package was unusual. The postage stamp was from Ireland, but the box contained a book of poems by the British poet, Byron. Sarah also found an odd Celtic cross between the middle pages. The metal itself, white gold she was certain, was breathtaking.

She reread the dedication: *Dearest Sarah, May this book provide you with the answers you seek and this cross protect you from harm. Love always, Charles.*

How odd. It wasn't that the contents were meant for her. Charles did that on occasion. It was the cross. Charles was an atheist. And like her, he had no interest in poetry. Shrugging, Sarah stuffed the box inside her bag and headed for the door. She switched the lights off.

She was fishing deep inside her tote bag for her car keys as she stepped off the elevator and into the second level of the underground garage. As she rounded the corner, the darkness gave her pause. Her gaze settled on her forest-green Miata. It was parked in the middle of the almost deserted lot.

An odd sensation rippled through her, a foreboding making her stomach clench tight. Frowning, she looked up and spotted the smashed lights. A security camera dangled from the ceiling.

A boot scraped the pavement and Sarah whirled around. A man dressed in black leather stepped out of the shadows.

"Sarah Hennessy?" he inquired in a scratchy voice.

The hairs at the nape of her neck stood on end. Her heart began to pound. Why was he asking for her? "Sorry, no." She turned only to come face to face with another leather-clad fellow. He didn't look as fierce as his accomplice, but there was a hard glint to his eyes.

Glancing from one to the other, she backed away. "W-what do you want?"

"We want the disk," the first one said. "We know he sent it to you."

"Disk?" Sarah clutched her tote bag. He stood between her and the elevator. The other blocked the path to her car. The only cover was the occasional cement pillar interspersing the open space.

"Hold on," she said as she stuffed her hand inside her bag. They wanted a disk? Well they'd get a disk. "I've got it right here." She produced a vinyl pouch containing blank CDs. "Is this what you want?"

Both men stepped closer.

"Then go get it!" She threw it away and dashed across the lot.

A fraction of a second later, one of the men grabbed her from behind. One large gloved hand clamped over her mouth and an arm wrapped around her waist in a vise-like hold, pinning her arms to her sides. Her car keys fell from her fingers to clank on the cement.

Kicking and scratching, Sarah struggled for any flesh she could dig into. She worked her jaw hoping to bite his hand so she could scream.

The grip on her arms fell away when the other man appeared in front of her. He seized her by the neck and lifted her up onto the tips of her toes. Her tote bag dangled from her arm.

"Quit the games, bitch."

She clawed at his hands.

"I want the disk. *Now.*"

Black spots danced behind her eyes. Sarah nodded and the man released her. She gulped in a big breath of air. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

He hit her; a backhand right across her cheek that sent her to her knees on the cold, unforgiving floor. The black spots returned. They turned a brilliant white when he caught her by the hair and jerked her head back. She yelped.

He settled the sharp edge of a knife against her throat and pressed it enough to make her skin burn. "*Where is it?*"

Her vision blurred. She had no clue what disk they wanted. There were hundreds of them upstairs in her office. Most contained artwork her customers supplied for printing purposes.

"I don't know which one you want." The knife dug deeper into her flesh. "P-please! Just tell me which one it is. I'll give it to you."

"Screw this," the other man said. "Kill her. We'll go upstairs. Search her office."

Sarah was about to plead, to tell them she'd give them anything, when the sound of footsteps froze everyone. A man appeared in a whirling flash of black and silver. He vaulted over her car using one hand, somersaulted once in mid air and landed in front them, feet splayed, brandishing a sword.

*Sword?* Sarah blinked. Knees bent, he held the weapon in one hand with the other positioned to fend off attack. His long, black hair and the flaps of his leather slicker settled around him as if in slow motion. With his mouth twisted in a snarl, he turned his feral gaze on the two men.

Sarah resisted the urge to cross herself. If there was a devil, this one fit the part. He stood well over six feet five and his broad shoulders strained against the snug fit of his coat. The two tree trunks that were his legs, were also covered in black leather. His massive chest heaved.

She didn't realize her assailant released her until she saw him produce his own sword. He raised it high above his head. Blades clashed, sparks flew, feet shuffled in a blur.

A sword clattered to the ground followed a gurgling sound. An instant later, Sarah watched transfixed as her rescuer swung his sword down in an arc. Blood splattered her cheeks. When a severed head landed at her side, she screeched and inched away on her hands and knees. Then she shot to her feet and backed up until a cement pillar prevented further retreat.

Her rescuer engaged the second attacker. Blades clashed once again, though her attacker hailed more curses than blows. He was no match for the black-haired devil. Sarah's hand flew to her mouth when his blade pierced the other man's body and he lifted him off

the ground, feet dangling in the air like bait on the end of a fishing pole. He assailant crumpled to the floor.

Her rescuer turned. He hadn't come out of the battle unsaced. A red rivulet ran down his left sleeve where the leather was sliced open, exposing quite a bit of red, angry flesh. His right thigh was slashed in two different places. His hands were bloody, although Sarah couldn't tell if it was his.

He stared. Behind sooty lashes, pale blue eyes rounded, then narrowed. A muscle on his jaw ticked.

She pressed herself against the pillar as he drew closer, his sword pointed to the ground. The blade was stained red. Bile rose in her throat. Sweat broke out on her brow and upper lip and she felt both hot and cold. Oh God, she was going to hurl!

"Who are you?"

His harsh tone jarred her. "I..." Her teeth began to chatter. "My name... Look out!"

The surviving attacker climbed to his feet and advanced. He didn't get far. Someone came up behind him and, with a single stroke, severed yet another head from another body. It bounced twice, rolled across the concrete and came to a halt at the toes of Sarah's boots. The eyes stared up at her, hollow, but accusing, as if this was somehow her fault.

Everything went black.

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"Damn it, man," Alexi snarled. "I wanted to question that one."

Resheathing his sword, Shane O'Maley mirrored Alexi's scowl. "Aye. A fine interrogator ye'd have made lacking yer head."

"This is *my* problem."

"Next time, remind me not to save yer bloody arse, ye daft American."

Alexi snorted. Turning to face the unconscious woman, hands on hips, he shook his head. "Terrific."

"Can ye blame the lass?" O'Maley cast him a disapproving look as he came to kneel by her side. He caught a limp hand. "Appeared like a madman, ye did, sending limbs and heads flying. We'll be fortunate if the wee lamb can remember her name when she comes to."

Frowning, Alexi opened his mouth, then snapped it shut, stopping short of asking if she would be all right. "Revive her."

O'Maley glared over his shoulder. "'Tis not a simple matter of snapping me fingers, ye know." He turned back to the woman, patted her cheek. "Perhaps 'twould help if yer ugly gob isn't the first thing she sees."

Alexi grunted and retreated into the shadows. He took the opportunity to shrug out of his coat and shirt, then use his shirt to wipe his face and hands. Hissing as he dabbed at the slash on his arm, which was already healing, he watched as the Irishman cooed and clucked over the girl.

When she sat up, pushed her thick, brown hair out of her face and lifted her tawny eyes, Alexi gritted his teeth. Looking at her was like looking into the past, and he didn't like it.

O'Maley introduced himself and Alexi, assured her it was over and she was safe. Then he proceeded to bombard her with a series of questions to which she nodded or shook her head.

"Are ye certain ye've never seen those men before, lass?" O'Maley asked again, her trembling hands clasped in his.

"Never." She frowned. "They kept asking about a disk."

"Disk?" He glanced back at Alexi who, as he finished redressing, raised his brows and shrugged. "Did they say what sort o' disk? What it contained?"

She ran an unsteady hand through her hair. "Look. I just want to go home."

Alexi stepped out of the gloom. "That won't be possible."

Her head shot up. Their gazes instantly locked. "What? Why?"

"Because." He set his jaw, widened his stance. "You're coming with me."