

IT ONLY TAKES ONCE

CHAPTER ONE

“The Sign”

The urge to contact an old boyfriend should be approached with extreme caution, I always say. Even if you’ve excellent reasons, any impulse with such potential for disaster on a grand scale should be either squashed immediately, or given due consideration: i.e., discussed exhaustively with your friends, whom you have bribed with cheap wine and equally cheap Cadbury’s to listen to you, and for your trouble, will give you their expert counsel.

In case the confab with friends regarding the ex sets off an uncharacteristic impulse to take action—Saturday night’s strategy session with Deirdre and Maggie ended with a rash, midnight phone call to America—you’ll want to be on the lookout for signs and portents that you’re on the right track.

I was saying exactly that to Deirdre six days later, in the back room of her mam’s shop, O’Donnell’s Books & Collectibles. “Though I was sure I’d get a sign before now. Especially here.”

After all, you’d think a shop stuffed with fairy-themed merchandise—that’s *Irish* fairies, mind—in tourist-jammed Temple Bar, smack in the middle of Dublin, Ireland, which is home to spiritual icons galore, would be a magnet for messages from the Other Side, the far corners of the world, or the Infinite.

“Signs,” scoffed Deirdre. As my fellow shop assistant, she *could’ve* been helping me sort through the tatty leftovers from her mam’s parish jumble sale, but she was busy Web surfing. “Maybe you’re meant to watch for the one saying the call was a waste of time.”

“No way,” I said, though I was starting to wonder. While I hardly expected a metaphysical memo to waft in, such as, *Attn.: Aislin Moore, Congrats on the genius phone call*, surely a teensy insight into my next move wasn’t too much to ask? I gazed balefully at yet another overflowing box, perched on a high shelf. “One more box to go. And the dustiest of the lot.”

“Sling it ’til Monday,” Deirdre said, clicking madly. “Mammy’ll never know.”

I sneezed. “I’m for that.” I swiped my hands on my jumper, then made the mistake of glancing at the box again. It seemed to droop toward me reproachfully. “Shag it all,” I muttered. On tiptoe, I grabbed one corner of the box and jerked it forward. “As if this crusty junk is worth anyth—” I yelped as something thumped me on the head and fell to the floor.

“What?” said Deirdre, eyes glued to the screen.

Rubbing the sore spot, I knelt to pick up the offending item, and almost fell over. “Oh, my God, this is it! The sign I’ve been waiting for.”

Deirdre swiveled round. “A book.” She wrinkled her pretty nose. “You can’t wear it or eat it—what’s the use?”

“Don’t you see?” Trembling, I ran my fingers over the title, and lurched to my feet. “My fate is shagging sealed.” Deirdre still looked blank. “It’s a sign! Telling me to ring his mam again.”

“An old book told you that?” Deirdre said, incredulous. “The dust in here has addled your brains.”

“*Little Women* is not just an ‘old book,’” and I hugged it to my chest, “it’s my favorite book of all time.” I’d read my dog-eared paperback a gazillion times, and watched all the film versions over and over. “So, I’ve *got* to keep trying to contact...you know. Him.” Spurred into action, I set the book down and pulled my rucksack from under the desk. “It’s the least I can do for—”

“Aislin, like I said Saturday, you are *so* going to regret this,” Deirdre said darkly.

“Bollocks.” Enjoying the novelty of being decisive, I dug out my mobile. “What’s the harm, to make sure she got my message? Maybe my phone numbers got a bit garbled.”

Deirdre shook her head, her dark, glossy hair swinging round her shoulders. “So what if you meet up with him again, and he turns out to be a loser...or even a gobshite?”

“He’s not the sort,” I said without thinking.

“Well, people change. But have you considered your worst case scenario?”

“Like what?” Staring at my phone, I could feel my grand resolve weaken. I’d tons of reasons for contacting him—I’d even made a list. What was I waiting for?

“Like...our man could still be carrying the torch,” Deirdre said with a melodramatic

air. “And in his undying passion for you, he jumps on the next flight to Dublin.”

“As if.” My stomach tightened at the very thought. “I can guarantee that the last time I saw him, he’d dumped whatever torch he ever had for me.” *If he’d had one at all.*

“Or what if he’s married, and his wife got all prickly about him hearing from an old girlfriend who looks like Nicole Kidman—”

“I so do not look like Nicole Kidman,” I interrupted, secretly pleased.

“Do too—well, okay, a younger Nicole, if she was a foot shorter, and had some body fat. And if she never used some decent product on her hair. Anyway, what if his wife cut him off in the bedroom! He’d be all cross, and there you’d be, starting off on the totally wrong foot.”

“Even if he’s married, it’s not like I’m trying to mess him about or anything. I’ll get his e-mail from his mam like I planned, chat him up online a bit, then throw out a few feelers.” I stared at the phone in my hand. “Easy-peasy,” I added bravely.

For all my show of confidence, dread pooled in my middle. I was ready to postpone the call when *Little Women* caught my eye. Meg March, my favorite character, had, despite her rocky start, turned out to be the perfect mother. What would *she* do? I flipped up the lid of my mobile.

“You’re mad,” said Deirdre. “But if you’re *so* dead keen on doing this, you might as well ring the woman at breakfast, before she goes anywhere.” Deirdre had an amazing facility for time zone calculation. But no head for accounts. Go figure. “But you know, Ash, I don’t think I can watch this.” She gathered up her handbag and coat. “I’ve an errand to do.”

Which was likely a visit to Brown Thomas. Phone in hand, I waved Deirdre off from the backroom doorway, amused despite myself at her circuitous route to the front door. Once outside, and safe from her mam’s detection, she dimpled at a man in a posh coat standing by the shop window. That’s Deirdre for you—she’d flirt with the corpse at a wake. Of course the man smiled back. Wishing that sometimes, my life could be as simple as Deirdre’s, I keyed in the number, glad she wasn’t here to see I knew it by heart. When I glanced back up, my thumb hovering over the keypad, she and the man were gone.

Well, for all I knew, *he* was the errand. But this was no time to dwell on Deirdre’s

romantic adventures. I'd a job to do, though I lacked the Chardonnay-primed courage I'd had last weekend. And any minute now, Polly—indulgent boss and mother she might be—would notice both her shop assistants were AWOL. So, ignoring that sinking feeling, rather like a large stone sitting right behind your navel, I pressed the “on” key...

II “The Stranger”

From the first page of *Little Women*, I'd taken a mad fancy for the poor but happy March clan. What's not to like? With the absent but adoring dad, close-knit sisters, and the mother who was actually there for her kids, they were like, my fantasy family.

A shame my own bore no resemblance to it. To take my mind off my ex, I'd kept the book close by, to sneak read while Polly wasn't looking. But now, back at the counter after Deirdre had decamped, I set it aside to gaze wistfully through the shop's front window. Though it was not quite seven, Temple Bar's narrow stone streets were already pulsing with activity, people heading for parties and pubs. I hadn't much taste for nightlife, but wouldn't any girl of twenty-six want a break from a seriously Stuck in Neutral life?

A man materialized out of the crowd, and stopped at our front door. Mr. Posh Coat again, mobile at his ear. Tall and broad, he was a bit of a standout, since Temple Bar was rampant with not only track-suited tourists, but scruffy artists and eccentrically-dressed oddballs. Since he was hardly our typical customer, maybe he'd returned to get Deirdre's number.

I took a slurp from my third Coke since lunch and took a closer look at him. How...strange. He rather had the look of—My mobile vibrated, setting off a jolt of adrenaline. Heart-thumping, I cautiously pulled the phone out of my pocket. “Hallo?”

“It's me.” Deirdre. Not Annie Carpenter. “Have you heard anything from the mother, back in Minnesota?”

“Not since you rang twenty minutes ago,” I said glumly. When I'd gotten Annie's machine a second time, I started to wonder if her silence was...significant. She'd forgotten who I was? That seemed highly unlikely, given our longtime connection. Then, upon leaving her every possible means of contacting me, a far more demoralizing thought

struck: what if she'd told her son I'd rung and he asked her not to speak to me?

"Oh, shaggit," Deirdre said. "Maybe it's time you took the direct route—check him out online, get his e-mail that way. Else you'll be a wreck all weekend."

"Google stalk him? I don't think so." For now, I wanted to keep him more... theoretical. Looking him up would make him well, *real*. "I'll read *Little Women*, in the bath," I decided. "A nice long one. That'll calm me down." That and about a half dozen chocolate bars.

"Oh, puh-lease. God knows reading it would put me into a coma."

Sure, Deirdre's a walking advert for a bookstore. "I'd drop dead from the shock myself, to see *you* with a book," I teased, "but I wish you'd give this one a try." I got a bit misty-eyed. "When I was twelve, I must've read the part where John Brooke proposes to Meg about a million times."

"Why, is it hot?"

"Get off," I told her. "It was sweet and romantic." To my girlish soul, Meg sitting on John's knee had been incredibly sexy.

"With that boyfriend of yours hardly a great one for romance—or should I say sort of boyfriend—you need all you can get," said Deirdre. "Especially with his eejit hiatus thing—"

"Let's keep Sam out of this," I broke in. In case you're thinking a proper girlfriend would have defended her fella, I'd bigger worries than Sam. Like how late I'd be stuck here. I sneaked another glance at the door. Our man was still outside, still on the phone. "Why'd you ring anyway?"

"To see if Mam ever noticed I left," Deirdre said promptly.

"I doubt it." I finished my Coke in one gulp. "She's been chatting up two ancient ladies from Clare, then she found this old feather duster amongst the jumble. She's been having the time of her life ever since." About twice the size of Deirdre, Polly was whacking the duster round like a Valkyrie going into battle. "Say, before you ring off, there's this guy hanging about outside—I think he's waiting for you."

"Who?"

"Well, you smiled at him when you left earlier. Tall, well-dressed, nice haircut."

"Who?" she asked again. I rolled my eyes. Evidently he *wasn't* her latest conquest.

“Look,” and I glanced at another of Polly’s jumble finds, a cuckoo clock. “It’s nearly seven—got to start closing out the register. See you later.”

I stowed my mobile, giving it a silent pep talk to ring with Annie, not Deirdre on the line. Then I jerked my head up as the bell jangled, and Mr. Posh all but vaulted inside. Giving him a quick sidelong look, I blinked. *He really does resemble—*

Polly breezed over to the counter, winking at me as she whisked her duster over a display of miniature step-dancing shoes. “Wouldn’t you know, just at closing we’d get Himself over there.” She jerked her head in the direction of the stranger, now in the book section.

Trying not to mind I’d be stuck here past seven, I grabbed a pile of receipts. “D’you think we should lower the lights to get him out the door?”

“Let’s give him another minute or two,” Polly said. “Sometimes the fairies bring your biggest sales on Fridays.” Polly believed the fairies had an active hand at the shop—but then, she was away with the fairies a good part of the time. “If he takes much longer, I’ll give him a bit of a sales pitch.” She sashayed off to dust more stock.

Sorting receipts, I sensed a tense aura round him—perhaps the result of my recent mystical contemplation. Then I jumped as my mobile vibrated again. Annie Carpenter, at last?

“It’s me again,” said Deirdre. “I just had a fantastic insight. What if *not* hearing back from his mother was the real sign? That you should drop the idea altogether.”

Don’t say that! “I won’t believe that,” I said stoutly. *Little Women* fell on your bloody head, I reminded myself. If that’s not a sign I don’t know what is. Eager to get home, I glanced at the man to see if we were making any progress, and it struck me forcibly. Holy Jaysus, he was a dead ringer for... *I should really give up Coke—the caffeine’s clearly making me hallucinate.*

“Aislin...?” Deirdre prompted.

“Yeah?” I said vaguely. The man didn’t appear to be actually *shopping*. He’d pick up a book without looking at it, then put it down.

“Ash! Are you there?” Deirdre asked.

“Oh—sorry. We’ve a bit of a problem customer here.”

“Someone hassling you?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “It’s that guy I mentioned. He came inside, but he’s just wandering round. Seems to be hiding one hand too.”

“Maybe he’s a nutter,” Deirdre proposed. “Loaded, but loves the thrill of shoplifting.”

“Shopl—?” I squeaked. Lowering my voice, I said, “He doesn’t look the type.”

“They never do,” Deirdre pointed out. “Maybe you should call the Guards.”

All I needed was a big brouhaha keeping me here even later. “Really, if he tries anything, your mam’ll be sure to chase him out with her feather duster.”

“If you’re sure nothing’s wrong.” Deirdre actually sounded worried.

“Positive,” I said grandly, then jumped as the man grabbed another book and strode to the counter. I looked up and met his eyes. “Oh, Jaysus!” I gasped, and promptly dropped my mobile.

“Ash...” hissed from the speaker. “ASHH-LINNN!”

Hands shaking, chest heaving, I retrieved my phone. “I-I-I’ll ring you later.”

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