

Chapter 1

The day I discovered I was pregnant was the day my husband Mícheál decided I wasn't going with him to watch him race. There was no discussion, just a sudden edict pronounced the next morning in the pre-dawn darkness of our private stables. I love my husband dearly, but there are times when his rural Irish upbringing rears up and bites me on the backside.

We'd gotten up early as usual to care for our own horses before heading out to the training stables, and as my horses finished their morning oats, I'd gone to the tack room to retrieve my gelding's gear. Mícheál followed me, but instead of getting his own horse's things, he reached up to close long fingers around my hand as I lifted the gelding's bridle down from its hook.

"You're not riding," he said in his rich tenor brogue, slipping the bridle from my fingers before I had a chance to tighten my grip. I frowned at him in startled surprise.

"Why?"

Glancing at me, he hung the headgear back on its hook. There was a hint of reproach in his handsome face.

"You shouldn't have to ask that."

Annoyance and disbelief rose up in me.

"What, because I'm pregnant? You can't be serious. The

doctor said I could ride until my center of gravity changed too much.”

“The doctor isn’t married to you, and the doctor doesn’t know your horses. You can drive the Range Rover.” He pulled down his own horse’s gear, bridle, saddle, and saddle pad, and turned to carry them out into the aisle. “It’s only nine months, Patty. It won’t kill you not to ride for nine months.”

I followed his lean form out of the tack room. Mícheál was an amateur steeplechase jockey who rode mostly for his father, racing half-ton horses over fences and ditches at high speed on most weekends during the winter months. I knew from the way he resented taking time off for the occasional winter illness that he wouldn’t be so thrilled about it if someone had told him that he wouldn’t be riding for three quarters of a year.

“I’ll be sure to remind you of that the first time you break something major during a race and have to wait months for it to heal.”

He gave me a sideways glance as he set the saddle on the top of a stall door. His eyes, like his short blond hair, were a light gold-brown, and looked amber in the artificial lighting.

“That’s another thing,” he said. “I don’t want you coming to the races with me.”

“What? Mícheál—”

“It’s no place for pregnant women. You can use the time deciding how to decorate the nursery.”

“*What?*”

The fury in my voice made him pause. He looked at me consideringly for a moment. I was five-foot-eight and he was five-nine, which meant it was very easy for me to look him in the eye.

“I know they do things differently in the States, but you haven’t seen the things I’ve seen. I’ve seen other jockeys’ wives sitting for hours in the stands, cold and miserable and pregnant, and I’ve thought they were stupid for making them do that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Maybe they weren’t *making* them do it. Maybe they *wanted* to be there.”

“I’ve also seen other jockeys get badly injured in races,” he continued sharply, “and I’ve seen their pregnant wives in shock and close to fainting while they watched them being taken off in the backs of ambulances. I don’t want that for you.”

I glared at him silently, reluctant to admit that he might have a point.

“Patty, if I’m having to wonder how you’re reacting to the things that go on in a race, I won’t be able to do my job. And the stress of worrying that something might

happen out there can't be good for the baby."

"What about the stress of not knowing? I'll have no way of knowing if you're all right, and I can't see how that's any different from the stress of being there."

"I'll call you."

"Mícheál—"

"You're not going," he said. "I want you here. It's better for you and the baby."

I let my breath out in a quick, angry burst. "Fine. Whatever." I turned and stalked up the aisle, headed for the exit. "I obviously don't get a say in it."

"Patty," he began, exasperated. I raised my arm and flipped a hand at him, making it plain that I didn't particularly want to talk to him at that moment.

The sun was barely lightening the eastern sky as I stepped out into the brisk chill of a mid-November morning. I pulled my jacket more tightly around me, watching my breath drift away in white puffs. The air was scented with the ocean, a smell I'd grown accustomed to in the four and a half years since I'd married Mícheál and moved from my family's ranch in Arizona to live along the coast of County Kerry, Ireland. It had been quite a change from my birthplace in the arid American southwest.

The frost-covered grass stretched away across the yard, ending abruptly at the graveled circle drive in front of the house. ‘House,’ though, was something of a misnomer. Aill Tearmann, or ‘Cliff Haven’ in English, had been designed with multiple generations in mind, along with rooming for the staff. Built of white granite blocks, it stood out against the dark woods around it. Its original owner’s eccentricities were plain in its ‘stair-step’ design, each succeeding level of its five stories offset toward the back about ten feet to take advantage of the support of the receding cliff behind it. It contained a great hall, a ballroom, a huge dining room, a two-story library, and three floors of bedrooms, though two of those floors were not currently in use. A tall tower with a conical roof rose to the right of the house, its top black against the soft glow in the east. Only Mícheál, myself, and my father-in-law, Séamas, lived at Aill Tearmann permanently, though my Aunt Liz was a frequent guest. Our housekeeper, Máire, lived in her own cottage closer to town.

I was in enough of a snit that I seriously considered skipping work that morning, but my father-in-law had other ideas. As I crossed the lawn, I noticed the dark outline of the Range Rover beneath the portico, and Séamas’ tall, burly form leaning against it. He was well wrapped against the cold and had his arms folded across his chest, looking as if he’d been prepared to wait for quite a while. Resentment boiled up inside me.

“He’s not even going to let me *drive*?” I asked bitterly.

Séamas studied me for a few seconds before leisurely shifting to toss me the keys. They jingled in flight and stung my palm as I caught them.

“I see he didn’t broach the subject very well,” he remarked, his deep voice calm.

“You knew he was going to do this?”

“Patty, you have to understand that a man’s whole world can change when he finds out he’s going to be a father.”

I snorted, moving past him to the driver’s door.

“He’s treating me like he thinks I’m going to break. I didn’t suddenly turn to porcelain, and I don’t need to be put on a glass shelf for nine months.”

There was an amused rumble from Séamas. I jerked my door open and climbed in, while he got in on the passenger side. The dome light glinted off the gray strands in his short, curly black hair.

“Give him time,” he said. “Once he gets used to the idea, he’ll stop being so over-protective.”

I started the engine and drove away from the house, following the driveway up out of the shallow ‘bowl’ where the house and outbuildings sat. A bridge spanned a thirty-foot chasm separating the grounds from the majority of Séamas’ property. We crossed it, and followed the winding lane for another mile and a half to

the exercise grounds and Séamas' training stables. As I drove, I paid little attention to the surroundings, my thoughts elsewhere.

Mícheál knew from experience that I was not particularly a fragile person. Within the last six months, I'd had to fend off an abusive neighbor bent on kidnapping and extortion, and had survived a murder attempt by pirates off the coast of Italy, all the while keeping my head and not falling to pieces. Besides, I'd been watching him ride since before we were married. The idea that I was suddenly going to be unable to handle it just because I was pregnant was so ludicrous that I could only assume he was reacting to old stereotypes rather than really thinking about it.

I pulled off the lane into a parking spot next to the stables and shut the engine off, leaving the key in the ignition.

"Give him time, Patty," Séamas repeated, giving me a smile. He opened his door, climbed out, and slammed it shut, shrugging deeper into his jacket as he headed for the arched opening into the stable yard.

I sat for a long moment in silence, watching him until he passed through the entrance. Séamas normally rode his own horse to the stables in the morning, unless the weather warranted otherwise. It was likely he'd ridden over with me this morning because he'd known both that Mícheál would botch things, and that I wouldn't take it very well.

I popped my door open, sliding out onto the frosty grass. At least Mícheál hadn't tried banning me from the stables yet. I'd give him a fight on that one. There was no way I was going to sit around the house doing nothing but gestate for nine months.

The stables were unusually large, a stone quadrangle that held stall space for fifty horses. We'd lost one of our owners and his three horses at the end of last season due to a training injury one of the horses had sustained, which the owner had ultimately blamed Séamas for. It hadn't made much of a difference, since several other owners had taken the available spaces. There were forty-nine horses on hand this season. Twenty-five would go out in the first string, which Séamas would take out, and the remaining twenty-four I'd take out in the second string, after the lads had a break for breakfast.

I got a number of raised eyebrows as I entered the yard. Apparently some of the lads had thought I'd want to stay at the house now that I was pregnant. Didn't matter. I'd long known that most of the local population in the small town of Tír Dheireadh thought Mícheál was crazy for marrying a stubborn, opinionated American woman, rather than picking a good Irish girl from what had admittedly been a long list of hopefuls. They'd simply shrug and chalk it up to my being from the States.

The string was nearly ready by the time hoofbeats outside the stables heralded Mícheál's arrival. I watched him out of the corner of my eye as he rode through the

arch into the stable yard. I'd first met him a little more than four and a half years ago, when my twin sister and I had come to Ireland to visit the ancestral stomping grounds. Lithe, athletic, and handsome, he'd caught my attention from the start, though it had taken my sister pointing out that his being our third cousin made him fair game and perfectly legal as a mate before I seriously considered that possibility. It hadn't taken me long to decide that I wanted this strong, competent man with his quiet sense of humor in my life on a permanent basis, and as he'd felt similarly about me, we'd married shortly afterward. It was only at times like these that I wished we'd spent a little longer in our courtship working out the details of our future life together.

He dismounted and handed his horse's reins to Séamas before cautiously approaching me. Since he'd arrived late, I was in the process of readying the horse he was to ride in the first string. As I finished tugging the girth straps into place, he stopped a little way behind me.

"Patty," he said quietly, "I only want what's best for you and the baby."

"Mícheál, I'm your father's assistant trainer. There are times when I *have* to be at the track."

"He got along fine for years without you. He'll make it through this season without you as well." He moved closer, reaching past me to take over preparing the horse. "Here, let me—"

I shoved violently backward, pushing him away. A couple of the lads who were closest to us gave us startled looks. I spun to face my husband, who was looking at me in angry bewilderment.

“Mícheál, I am not an invalid. I am not ill, and I am not a broodmare, to be put out to pasture until she has her baby. And since you’re so certain that I’m not needed here, you can take the second string out yourself.”

I shoved past him and crossed the stable yard, ignoring the fact that just about everyone watched me leave. Footsteps followed me out. I wheeled about, ready to give Mícheál another piece of my mind, and discovered it was Séamas who had come out behind me.

He was trying very hard to look serious; I had to give him that.

“I’ll talk to him,” he said. “You just need to give him some time.”

“And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

A smile creased his weathered face. He ignored the question.

“I’ll expect you back here tomorrow morning, to take both strings out. Drive the Rover home. I’ll find another way back.”

* * *

We might have hashed things out that night, except

Séamas had four horses running that weekend at tracks in England, so he and Mícheál and the horses' lads packed their own things, as well as the horses and their gear, and left late that morning, leaving me to my own devices for the next few days.

I hung around while Mícheál packed for the trip. At first, neither of us said much—I was still ticked, and he wore a puzzled frown, giving me the occasional glance with his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth drawn down. As he folded a pair of jeans to stack in his suitcase with his shirts, he took in a deep breath.

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset.”

“If you had bothered to discuss this with me rather than deciding for me, I probably wouldn’t be.”

“I’m your husband.”

“And that makes you an expert on the needs of pregnant women?”

He looked up at me, studying me with those gold-brown eyes. “It gives me the right to say no if I think something’s a bad idea.” He turned away, going back to the dresser to retrieve socks and underwear.

“Do you know how long it’s going to be before the baby is big enough to interfere with me doing my job? Months. More than half a year. Do you know what I’m going to be like if I have to sit around the house doing

nothing for *months* when I'm physically able to get out and do things? And do you honestly think that a few minutes of worrying at the track is worse than hours of worrying at home?"

"You're not going to the track." There was finality in his tone. I decided I was going to have to let that one pass for the moment.

"Don't try to take my job away from me."

He turned back, setting the clothes in the suitcase. His frown had become thoughtful.

"I'd thought you would want the time off to prepare for the baby."

"Maybe when I'm too big to get around easily, but not now. I don't need it right now. And it's not going to take nine months to decorate the baby's room."

He studied me for a long moment in silence. "All right." He closed the suitcase, then came around the bed to take my arm and gently tug me into his embrace. "Come here. I hate arguing with you."

I settled against him, putting my arms around his lean waist. "Me, too."

"We'll talk about this some more when I get back." He tilted his head and kissed me for a long moment before letting go again to pick up the suitcase. "Séamas is

waiting. I have to go.”

“I know.”

I followed him downstairs and watched him and Séamas climb into Séamas’ green Jaguar sedan. I waved goodbye as they drove away to join the horse van waiting at the stables. It was the first time since we were married that I’d missed going to the track with Mícheál for anything short of the flu. It was going to be a long, lonely weekend, and I wasn’t looking forward to it.

* * *

In any case, that was how I happened to be home alone that night when Collin came for a visit.

Collin was a member of the Donegal branch of the O’Donnell clan, and was both our fifth cousin and *persona non grata* in our house. A love of horses ran strongly in our family—in our branch it showed itself in a love of horse racing, and for Collin it showed in a love of fixing horse races in order to make money off their outcome. The last time he’d come for a visit, Séamas had shown him the door with the barrel of a shotgun.

The night was cold, and the big house had no central heating, so I’d parked myself in a chair in front of the library fireplace, soaking up the heat while entertaining myself by reading one of Aunt Liz’s mystery novels. She tended to base her main characters on family members, and I’d chosen to spend the evening immersed in a story featuring characters based on my brother Adrian and my cousin Eddie.

Collin entered the library without so much as a by-your-leave, heading straight for the fireplace. I heard him come in, in a distant sort of way, and felt the chill as he blocked the heat from the fire, but paid no attention, assuming it was our housekeeper, Máire, coming to check the state of the blaze. It wasn't until the scent of aftershave reached my nose that I realized I was wrong. My head jerked up. All I could see of him was an unfamiliar male back, dressed in dark gray tweeds. I gasped, stiffening.

He acknowledged the sound with a slight turn of his dark head.

“Nasty night out,” he remarked calmly, as if there were nothing unusual about his being there. With the sound of his voice came the knowledge of his identity.

I narrowed my eyes, annoyed both that he was here and that he'd managed to startle me.

“You shouldn't be here,” I pointed out, just in case that had somehow escaped his notice. There was a deliberate chill to my tone, an invitation for him to explain himself.

He gave an amused snort, his back still toward me. “I wouldn't be, if Séamas and Mícheál were here. In any case, they aren't who I came to see.” He set his weight on one heel and turned to look at me, his hands in his pockets.

There was no family resemblance; he and his sister, Siobhan, had both taken after their mother, rather than the O'Donnell side of the family. His dark brown hair was cut short. His eyes, a deep, chocolate brown, took me in from head to foot without apology. He was not what I considered handsome, but he wasn't ugly, either. In the gray tweeds and a heavy black wool sweater, he was dressed warmly against the chilly November night.

His gaze came up to meet mine. His expression had a heat all its own, reminding me with a jolt that because he was in love with a fictional character Aunt Liz had based on me, he believed he was in love with me as well.

"I'm here," he said, "because I need your help."

Granted, I could have been more diplomatic. On the other hand, he was giving me the creeps, and I wanted him gone.

"You should leave. Now."

"Patty," he began, sliding his hands from his pockets as he took a step toward me. I was on my feet in an instant, prepared to use my self-defense training to stop him if he came any closer. He stopped abruptly, startled, apparently aware that the warning look I was giving him wasn't just a threat.

One corner of his mouth quirked. "You're not even going to hear me out first?"

I hesitated, and cursed my ingrained tendency to respond when people asked for help. It had gotten me in trouble before.

“You need my help. Unless you’re after Máire’s recipe for *Chicken Surprise* or her secret for perfect rock cakes, there’s not much I can do for you.”

His mouth quirked again. “No,” he said dryly. “I didn’t come after culinary advice. What I need is more along *your* line of expertise.”

“Horse racing?”

“Yes.”

I let out a snort of disbelief and barely suppressed anger. “Come on, Collin. I’m not stupid. I can’t do that, and you know it. Go. Find your help elsewhere.”

“Ah.” He lowered his gaze, a secretive half-smile playing across his lips. “I see. Well, then.” He strolled toward the door, his steps slow and measured. The carpet barely muffled the thud of his heels on the floor. “I suppose there’s no hope of getting you to reconsider?”

“Collin, I could be banned from training for life for giving a known race-fixer the benefit of my ‘expertise.’”

“And we wouldn’t want that.” He reached the doorway and paused. “Maybe I’m not going to ask what you think I’m going to ask.”

“Whatever it is, you have to have known before you came here that I wouldn’t be able to help you. You had to have known coming here was pointless.”

He reached under his jacket, scratching his side. “Not pointless,” he corrected. “And I really wasn’t expecting you to say yes.”

He pulled a slender black gun from under his jacket and looked down its barrel at me, the movements so casual and out of place in the ordered reality of the library that he’d fired before I had time to fully realize what he was doing. There was a pop-hiss, a quick, sharp stab of a dart into my shoulder.

“I’d sit down if I were you.” He lowered the gun, tucking it away once more.

My mouth opened. I looked down. The dart clung to my shoulder like some strange stinging insect. Incredulous, I caught it between thumb and forefinger and jerked it out. It was small and light, and it was empty. My gut twisted.

“What was in this?”

“A sedative.” He remained by the door, content to wait until it took effect. Fear squeezed my insides. Whatever he was planning, I wasn’t going to be able to stop him.

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded.

“We need your help. Since you won’t cooperate, I’ll simply have to borrow you for a while.”

“We?” The drug hit my bloodstream and reached my brain within seconds. A wave of dizziness threw me off balance. I tried to sit, but mostly missed the seat cushion and slid off to land hard on the floor. The dart slipped from my fingers, bouncing once before the needle lodged in the carpet.

Borrow, he’d said. He was going to borrow me. I fought against the growing numbness in my mind, but couldn’t imagine what he’d meant beyond the thought that when I came out from under the drug, I wasn’t going to be *here*.

“Mícheál is going to kill you.” The words sounded odd to me, slightly slurred.

“Some day, perhaps.” He abandoned his position by the door, crossing the room to lean over me. “For now, though, he’ll have to wonder where you are.”

The last thing I saw before the drug put me under was him reaching for my arm, his mouth quirked in a satisfied smile.

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