

## Chapter One

*March 28*

Padraig Collins glanced up when the front door of Pat's Pub opened, sending a gust of the coldest air the Inner Harbor could produce into the bar. It knocked the temperature inside down another degree or three. Mia Curtis made her way to the bar, took off her heavy coat and hung it on the back of her usual stool. He waved and pointed at the tray of drinks in his hand, indicating he'd be with her in just a second.

Of course, it was more than a second, as the older couple at the table wanted to make small talk about the "damn cold weather" and how March had come in like a lion and was going out as one, as well. They were just a few days away from April, but no one could tell that from the frigid wind that seemed to blow nonstop.

After a murmured "I hear you" and "you're so right about that," he returned to the bar, stopping first to check on the other two tables of customers. Business was slower than usual, probably because nobody wanted to risk frostbite just for a draft beer.

He snuck a quick peek at Mia as one of the tables requested their check. She'd moved to Baltimore four months earlier, renting an apartment across the cobblestone street from the pub. She'd only been in the city a few days when she'd ventured over to Pat's Pub for dinner.

As seemed to be the habit of most lonely souls, she'd opted for a spot at the end of the long mahogany bar rather than claiming a table of her own. Padraig was used to making small talk with folks who came in to dine alone, and Mia had been no exception.

Since that first night, she'd come over once or twice a week for dinner and he always enjoyed her company.

Padraig smiled as he walked behind the counter. As he made his way down the bar to her, he poured her a glass of Chardonnay, her usual order. She wasn't looking at him, but instead she was staring at the counter, very deep in thought.

"You're a brave soul."

She jerked at the sound of his voice, and he realized she really *had* to be distracted, not to notice him standing right in front of her.

"What?" she asked.

"I said you're a brave soul. To venture out in this godforsaken March wind. You're one of the few."

She nodded, but didn't reply.

Padraig frowned. It wasn't like her not to hop in on any conversation. He tried again. "Let me guess. There's no food in your house and you're here in search of dinner. Tonight's special is—"

"I don't think I'm eating."

"Oh. Okay. You feeling alright?"

"Yeah."

As far as reassurances went, Padraig was fairly certain that was the worst in history. Something was obviously bothering her, but Padraig didn't feel right prying. It wasn't like they were friends. In truth, apart from the innocuous conversations they had about sports, the weather and his tips on how to survive in Baltimore as she ate her dinner, he didn't know much about Mia.

"Well, tell you what. Why don't you wave me over if you decide you want some food?"

She nodded, but she was already looking away, her eyes distant as whatever was bothering her crept back in.

Padraig tidied up the bar, poured another round for his cousin, Finn, who was indulging in an extended happy hour with some of his friends, and snuck more than a few glances at the hockey game playing on one of several televisions in the bar.

Through it all, Mia sat at the counter without speaking, her wine untouched.

He left her alone for nearly forty-five minutes before he broke. He possessed more than his fair share of Collins blood, which meant it wasn't in his genetic makeup to let anyone be sad in his presence.

Besides, he'd caught several unguarded expressions, and while he didn't know what was wrong, he could tell it was big.

"Only got a couple more weeks until the Stanley Cup playoffs. Caps are going all the way this year." He figured that would jerk her out of her depression. Mia, a Chicago native, was nothing if not loyal to her Blackhawks.

"Cool."

He frowned at her distracted response. He tried again. "Blackhawks don't stand a chance this year. Loaded the bench with too many showboats. Bunch of damn cherry pickers and no defense."

She nodded, and he realized she wasn't listening to him.

He leaned down, resting his elbows on the bar so that his face was level with hers. He waited until she lifted her downcast gaze and met his. Again, he got the sense she was startled to see him there.

"Caps own the ice this year," he said, trying once more to evoke a response.

"Okay." The words were little more than a whisper.

He narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong, Mia?"

For the first time, his words penetrated. Unfortunately, not in a great way. Her green eyes filled with tears that she tried desperately to blink away.

"I shouldn't have come here. I just..."

"What is it?" he prodded, his concern growing. While Mia was essentially a stranger, his protective instincts rose to the forefront.

"I should go." She dug in her purse for her wallet to pay for the wine, but he waved her away.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "You didn't drink it."

"But—"

"You didn't even order it. I'm not taking your money, Mia."

She put her wallet away and stood, shrugging on her heavy coat. Padraig studied her face more closely as she did so. She was pale and there were dark circles under her eyes. Her body was rigid, and he got the sense she was just barely holding herself together.

He tried again. "If you need someone to talk to..."

Mia looked up at him and for a second, he thought she might take him up on the offer. Her mouth opened as if to speak, but then she closed it again, swallowing heavily.

Padraig felt helpless to comfort her, something he didn't experience often. He sort of prided himself on his ability to cheer people up. God knew, as a bartender, he'd had plenty of opportunities to hone that skill over the past ten years. He'd started working at the pub during high school. Unlike his twin brother, Colm, school was not his thing. Over the years, he'd bussed

tables, then waited them, and once he hit twenty-one, his dad, Tris, taught him everything there was to know about mixing drinks.

Dad had always run the pub side of Pat's Pub with Aunt Kiera and Ewan managing Sunday's Side. Pdraig had only been tending bar a couple of years when his father decided the two of them should split the head bartender duties. His dad held the reins during the daylight hours and Pdraig took over at night.

"Thanks again for the drink," Mia said, her voice barely audible.

He nodded, but he was already invisible to her again as she turned and left, letting in a whoosh of the freezing winter air.

Pdraig remained where he was for about a minute before walking out from behind the counter and over to Finn.

"Hey, cuz. Can you do me a favor? Cover the bar for a few minutes? I need to take care of something real quick."

Finn rose without hesitation. "Sure thing." He jerked his head toward the counter. "Come on, guys. Grab your drinks and we'll carry on over there."

Pdraig rushed toward the front door, slightly annoyed when Finn called out to him.

"You're going outside?" Finn asked.

"Yeah."

Finn gestured to his coat, still lying in the booth he'd just vacated. "Wear my coat or you'll freeze your nuts off."

Pdraig grabbed the jacket, pulling it on as he rushed outside. The cold air hit him like a brick to the face, his chest ironically burning from the chill as he breathed.

He thought he'd have to race to catch up with Mia, so he was surprised to discover she was still standing just outside the pub.

"Mia," he said, stepping next to her.

She glanced at him with a dull expression.

"Kind of cold to hang about too long."

It occurred to him that she hadn't even noticed the temperature until he mentioned it.

"It doesn't bother me."

He gave her an incredulous look. "Pretty sure you're the only person in Baltimore who feels that way. Is this Chicago conditioning?"

She shook her head, not offering anything more. Her eyes drifted away from him, and he recalled why he'd chased after her.

"Mia," he said firmly, waiting until she faced him. "What's wrong?"

She pressed her eyes closed tightly, but she was too late to trap in the tears that fell down her cheeks.

Pdraig acted on instinct, reaching out and tugging her toward him for a hug. She accepted his embrace without hesitance, no longer bothering to hide her crying.

He held her, not sure what else to do. He was no stranger to crying. His time at the pub ensured he'd consoled more than his fair share of women—and sometimes even men—who'd consumed too much alcohol and sobbed out their woes.

This time felt different. For one thing, Mia wasn't drunk. And for another, her pain seemed bone-deep, more grief than lost love or job.

"It's okay," he soothed. "It's okay."

She pulled away at the sound of his voice and for the first time since she'd walked into the pub, he felt like she was finally seeing him.

“Padraig?” she shuddered. “I...I’m...” Her words came out in starts and stops as she struggled to catch her breath between barely contained sobs. “S-sorry.”

He started to reach for her again, wishing there was some way he could console her. He didn’t know her well, but he hated seeing her in such intense pain. She took another step away, shaking her head.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeated. “I didn’t mean to...fall apart...” Even as she spoke, the tears continued. She was losing the fight to regain control of her emotions.

“It’s okay, Mia. I’m here. I’d like to help if you’d let me.”

She pressed a gloved hand to her trembling lips. “You can’t. No one...”

“What is it? Please. Tell me what happened.”

Mia looked down, sucking in several deep breaths as she tried once more to stop crying.

“Did someone die? Someone you love?” he asked gently.

He regretted the question the moment she crumpled. Completely.

She fell into his arms and sobbed, her agony almost palpable.

Padraig held her for several minutes, just let all the pain find its way to the surface and out. He rocked her slowly in his arms as he tried to recall what he knew about Mia Curtis.

Precious little, he realized.

She was from Chicago. She’d moved to Baltimore for a job opportunity. She lived alone. Knew no one in the city, and she rooted for the Blackhawks and the Bears.

That was it.

“Is there someone you’d like me to call?” he asked as her crying began to slow and quiet.

She shook her head.

“A friend from work? Family?”

“No,” she whispered. “There’s no one.”

Her answer gutted him almost as much as her crying. He’d grown up with an abundance of family and friends. Hell, half the time he joked he had too many damn relatives.

To consider that she was in so much distress with no one to call for help was upsetting. It bothered him deeply.

While he didn’t know her well, he knew people. And his gut told him she was a genuinely nice person. So why was a nice person living alone with no friends and crying her heart out to a stranger because she had no one else to turn to?

For a moment, he considered calling one of his female cousins, perhaps Yvonne or Sunnie, to talk to Mia. Maybe she couldn’t confide whatever was wrong to him because he was a man.

Before he could make the offer, she seemed to have found her strength at last.

She stood straighter, finally managing to reclaim her voice. “I didn’t mean to fall apart like that. I realize I must look like an insane person.”

“No. You look like someone who needs a friend.”

“It’s why I came to the pub,” she admitted. “I got some...” She paused, and he realized she was struggling to pick her words. “Bad news today. I was almost back to my apartment when I turned and came to the bar instead. I thought maybe it would help to be around people.”

Padraig reached over and rubbed a thumb over the tracks of her tears. He forced a grin and a lighthearted voice, desperate to find some way to make her smile. “Looks like it worked.”

She laughed at his joke. It was just one quick burst of humor before she sobered up again, but it pleased him. Made him determined to produce a longer smile, a louder laugh the next time.

“Yeah. Worked wonders.” She glanced toward the bar. “I didn’t mean to keep you away from the pub so long.” She shivered, the cold finally penetrating. “Or out in this freezing air. I should let you—”

“Want to grab a cup of coffee from the Daily Grind?” he asked, pointing down the block toward the coffee shop.

“What about the bar?”

Padraig reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out his cell. “My cousin is covering for me. I’m sure he won’t mind taking over the rest of the shift.” He was pretty sure Finn *would* mind, but he’d find a way to make it up to him. “Let me just text him and we’ll be on our way.”

She looked across the street at her apartment building. Padraig was afraid she’d insist on going home. He wasn’t comfortable leaving her alone. At least not until he found out what was wrong. Mia was in serious pain, and even if she was used to dealing with things on her own, that wasn’t the Collins way. It simply wasn’t in him to leave her alone and hurting.

He was relieved when she nodded, waiting patiently as he sent his pleading text to Finn.

Padraig didn’t bother to wait for a reply. Instead, he reached out, grasped her hand, and the two of them walked to the coffee shop.

His phone beeped just as they crossed the threshold.

All Finn said was, *You owe me.*

They both ordered tall Americanas, then claimed a small table in a quiet corner. This place—like Pat’s Pub—was nearly empty. Didn’t look like hot drinks were faring any better than alcohol in this weather.

Mia wrapped her hands around her cup, seeking the warmth it provided, and he followed suit.

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“I realize I’m a stranger to you,” he said at last.

Before he could continue, she interrupted. “Not really. I mean, I know we don’t talk a lot, but I’m in the pub enough that I’ve formed a pretty good picture of who you are.”

His curiosity was piqued. “Oh yeah? Like what?”

“You’ve got a good sense of humor. You’re obsessed with sports and probably skirting a line in terms of gambling addiction.”

He laughed. “That vice is pretty common in my family.”

She smiled. “I like your family. Like that so many of you work together in Pat’s Pub. You’re all really nice to each other. I mean, it feels like you actually like each other.”

He tilted his head. “We’re family. Of course we like each other. Actually, we love each other.”

“I like that you don’t have a clue how unique your family is. None of you seem to realize that.”

Her comment gave him his first real insight into her own family situation. “You’re not close to your family?”

“No,” she admitted. “Unlike you, my family tree is a lot smaller. Me and my mom. And we’ve been estranged since I was seventeen.”

Padraig didn’t have a clue how old she was, but he figured it was rude to ask. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. My life got a lot simpler when I stopped trying to make my mother into something she wasn’t.”

“No dad?”

“Sperm donor. Mom got pregnant in high school. Guy basically rejected her...and me. Pretty sure my mom would have had an abortion or given me up for adoption if not for my grandma.”

Mia smiled when she mentioned her grandmother, and Pdraig felt a strange sense of relief. He could tell from her expression that mercifully there'd been at least one person in Mia's past who had wanted her, loved her.

“Mom and I lived with my grandma until I was eleven. Grandma took care of me while my mom finished high school and then went to work. Grandma was the most amazing person I've ever known. She used to call me Tilly Mint.”

“What's that stand for?”

Mia shrugged. “No idea. Just a silly nickname, I guess. But I was always sorry I never asked her.”

“What happened when you were eleven?” He regretted his question. Whatever had been upsetting Mia before seemed to return.

“C-cancer,” she said, stumbling over the word. She looked down at her coffee, her eyes returning to that faraway look that told Pdraig he'd lost her again.

“Mia,” he said, reaching over and giving one of her hands a light squeeze. “That must have been hard on you.”

She nodded. “My mom had basically washed her hands of me after I was born, so without Grandma, she was forced into a parenting position she didn't want. And I didn't help much. I missed Grandma so much and I resented my mom. I mean, she'd never made any secret of her feelings for me, so when she tried to tell me what to do, I got angry, rebellious. We butted heads nonstop until halfway through my senior year, when I moved out. I had a friend whose parents were cool with me sleeping on the couch in their basement until graduation. I worked two jobs to try to pay my own way.”

Pdraig tried to imagine how frightening it must have been to have no support system at such a young age. “You haven't talked to your mom since then?”

“No. I ran into her once when I was twenty. I was working the checkout line at the grocery store and Mom got in my line. I'm sure she wouldn't have if she'd looked up and realized it was me working the register. I rang up the groceries at record speed, she paid, and that was it. As far as I know, she never darkened the door of that store again.”

“She didn't even ask how you were?”

Mia shook her head. “No. But in all fairness, I didn't ask about her, either.”

Pdraig made a mental note to call his mom first thing in the morning to tell her he loved her.

Mia took a sip of her coffee and he followed suit.

“I hope you won't think I'm a stalker, but I like coming into the pub to watch you and your family interact. I had a blast last month, sitting at the bar to watch that *February Stars* competition with everyone. It was fun.”

Pdraig felt guilty for not even realizing she'd been there. Of course, in his defense, the bar had been packed on competition nights. They'd streamed the show live on all the televisions, as family members and patrons placed wagers on who would win the contest. Business had been really terrific that month, which made the sudden slowdown in March all the more brutal. There had been too many nights the past few weeks that he'd been bored out of his mind, certain it would be more exciting to watch paint dry.

"February Stars was a fun contest," he said.

"I was glad when Hunter ultimately won. He was my favorite the whole time."

"Yeah. He was my cousin Ailis's favorite too." Ailis and Hunter had fallen in love during the contest and were in the midst of planning a future together. She was the second of Padraig's pile of cousins to be bitten by the love bug. His oldest cousin, Caitlyn, was currently head over heels with Lucas Whiting, the richest guy in Baltimore.

"Let me guess. You were a Rory fan?"

Padraig grinned. "Not sure there were too many guys who weren't in her camp. My brother is half in love with her, even though he won't admit it. And there's no denying her voice is out of this world."

"Doesn't hurt that she's gorgeous, either," Mia teased.

"She is?" he joked. "I hadn't noticed."

Mia rolled her eyes. "So Ailis and Hunter...they're a thing now?"

Padraig nodded. "Yep. They're a thing." He figured he knew the answer to his next question, but he asked it anyway. "What about you? You have a thing for anybody?"

"No. I haven't dated anyone since moving to Baltimore."

"And in Chicago?"

She shrugged. "I had a couple boyfriends but nothing super serious. You may find this hard to believe, but I have trust issues. Can't begin to understand where those stem from."

He chuckled at her sarcasm. "Me, either," he said, piling on. "I mean, your upbringing was so stellar."

"Right?" she said, eyes wide with feigned agreement. "What about you? Anything serious between you and the woman you asked out over the phone last week?"

He gave her a curious glance, and she flushed a little.

"Sorry," she muttered. "I wasn't really eavesdropping. It's just, when you eat alone, it's hard not to hear the conversations going on around you."

"The woman's name is Brooke and we've gone out a few times. She's really nice."

"Cool."

"You know, I have some single cousins and a bachelor brother if you want me to set you up." As soon as he made the offer, Padraig began trying to decide which relative he'd choose for the blind date. In truth, he suspected all his cousins and Colm would enjoy dating Mia.

She shook her head, the sadness returning to her face. "No. That's okay. I don't think...it's not a good time for..." Her voice grew thicker with each word, until she finally gave up speaking.

"Every time I think I've distracted you, it comes back, doesn't it?"

Mia closed her eyes wearily. "It keeps sneaking up on me, blindsiding me. I forget for a minute or two and then boom. I'm body-slammed back down to the ground."

He hated to press her, to keep questioning. It was obvious she didn't want to talk about whatever it was that was attacking her.

"Want me to keep distracting you?"

She smiled. "I'd like that."

"So tell me about your job."