

Chapter 1

“You have arrived at your destination,” announced the deep, monotone voice of Chelsea Porter’s GPS.

She slowed her car, frowning as she looked up at the sign that loomed above the private bridge to her right: McKinnel’s Distillery—Oregon’s Best Whiskey since 1977.

Definitely not a place of residence. Perhaps she’d misread the name and address on the client form. Before continuing, she grabbed her cell out of her purse, pulled up her email and checked the details that one Miss Bailey Sawyer had supplied.

Mr. Callum McKinnel, and then what she’d assumed was a residential address in well-to-do Jewell Rock but appeared to be the home of the renowned McKinnel’s Whiskey. She didn’t drink herself but her grandfather had sworn McKinnel’s was the best whiskey in the

world. And, like most other members of her family, he'd drunk enough of the stuff to know.

You couldn't live in these parts without having heard of the McKinnel family. Rumor had it the great-great-grandfather of the current McKinnels—and there were a lot of them—had once been a bootlegger. It was his face on the bottle's famous label. Criminal or not, he'd been a handsome devil and, from what she'd heard, his descendants had inherited his good looks.

Now that she was here, staring across the bridge, she couldn't believe she hadn't recognized the name. There'd been an obituary in the newspaper a month or so ago for Conall McKinnel—he'd been the big boss at the distillery for almost forty years until his recent death thanks to a sudden heart attack. Then there was Lachlan McKinnel—a chef who had won numerous awards, he occasionally appeared on local television and blogged his unique recipes online, all while single-handedly raising his disabled son. Callum—whom she guessed to be one of Lachlan's brothers—was probably as close to a celebrity as she'd ever get and her stomach clenched with uncharacteristic and ridiculous nerves.

A horn sounded and she realized she'd stalled in the middle of the road. She waved a hand in apology at the car behind her, turned right and then started over the bridge toward the cluster of rustic-looking buildings in the distance. The lake on either side of her sparkled and she shivered, imagining that at this time of the year it would be icy cold. As she emerged on the other side, the sight before her took her breath away. The building sprawled almost the length of the lake and the word *quaint* came to mind when she looked at it.

Although the exterior was brown, there were so many windows that it didn't look dark. The pine trees in the back and the immaculate, stone-bordered garden beds at the front reminded her of a postcard of a holiday resort. When the snow came in a month or so, this place would be magic.

Such a pity she wouldn't have reason to return.

She'd never imagined a place that produced whiskey to be as beautiful and classy as the grounds and buildings that she admired now as she followed the signs to the parking lot around the side. Nope, she associated alcohol with shouting matches, slurred words, bad breath and prayers her parents wouldn't kill each other.

Instead of white lines, the parking lot was marked out with old barrels, which made her smile as she turned off her ignition. Someone, or more likely a whole family of someones, had put in a lot of TLC to ensure this old building continued to sparkle.

Breathing in the crisp cool air that carried a hint of liquor as she climbed out of her car, Chelsea almost forgot to grab the chocolate bouquet off her backseat. Determined not to be distracted by her surroundings, she held her head high as she strode toward the main building, which obviously housed a café if the folks sitting at tables out the front were anything to go by. It wouldn't be long before it would too cold for outdoor dining. She had to sidestep a couple of obvious tourists taking selfies to get inside and contemplated asking if they'd like her to take a photo for them, but reconsidered when she remembered why she was here.

Not to tour or dine or admire the scenery but to be the bearer of bad news to one of the illustrious McKinnels.

That thought made her feel as if she'd swallowed a brick. *Why?* This wasn't the first time she'd done this. Even before she'd started her business, doing what she was about to do had been a gift. She was determined to get in and get out, because no matter how lovely this place was, it also made her uncomfortable. Chelsea strode the few more steps to the massive, glass-front doors and pushed one open.

If the outside of McKinnel's took her breath away, the inside filled her with warmth as if someone had just wrapped her in a heated blanket. In addition to a number of fall decorations—gourds and pumpkins and whatnot—the walls hung with hundreds of whiskey bottles, black-and-white family photos and old prints related to whiskey drinking. And as she'd predicted, a massive fireplace roared away on one wall. It felt more like she'd stepped inside a cheerful family home than a business. She loosened her scarf and undid the buttons on her coat as she started toward the counter.

As she queued alongside the people waiting to buy or taste whiskey, she looked at the wall behind the counter and smiled as she read some of the many quotes scrawled on a massive chalkboard.

What whiskey will not cure, there is no cure for.

I'd rather be someone's shot of whiskey than everyone's cup of tea.

Too much of anything is bad, but too much of good whiskey is barely enough. —Mark Twain

She might not agree with any of the sentiments but she liked the way all the quotes were in different handwriting as if lots of different people had scribbled their thoughts.

“Hello? Can I help you?”

At the deep voice, Chelsea spun round, tightening her grip on the bouquet as she came face-to-chest with someone. Then she looked up into the face of possibly the best-looking human she’d ever laid eyes on. And not in a clichéd way. Tall, dark and handsome didn’t begin to describe him. He was all those things and then some, with an element of something else she couldn’t quite put her finger on. And his sea-green eyes just happened to be her favorite color. Although he wore charcoal business pants and a lighter gray shirt with the distillery logo on the breast, his strong, muscular physique and the scar just above his right eyebrow told her he didn’t spend all his time behind a desk.

“Are you after a gift or...” His voice trailed off and she realized she’d been openly gaping at him.

Ignoring the strange dizziness that came over her—maybe she’d spun around too fast—she straightened, held her head high and addressed him in her most professional voice. “Hi. I’m looking for Callum McKinnel.”

He couldn’t be the man standing in front of her because no woman in her right mind would dump someone who looked like *that*. Not even her.

“Then look no more. You’ve found me.” The man’s illegally sexy smile didn’t falter as he offered her his hand. “And how may I help you?”

He *was* Callum? *Oh, shoot*. Heat rushed to Chelsea’s cheeks and she shuffled the chocolate bouquet she held

in her right hand into her left, then slipped her hand into his, reminding herself she was here as a professional, not to ogle the produce.

“Can we go somewhere a little more private?” she asked, hoping her voice didn’t sound as strained as it felt.

Callum raised a deliciously dark eyebrow and a hint of amusement crossed his lips. “Do we have an appointment?”

She shook her head, trying not to stare at his lips, which were perhaps even more delicious than his eyebrows. Very kissable indeed. “No appointment, but I need to talk to you. I have a message from Bailey, and you might prefer to be alone when you hear it.”

At the mention of the other woman, recognition flashed across Callum’s face, his smile faded and his eyebrows knitted together. “You’d better come this way.”

Before she could ask which way he meant, she felt his large hand across her back and she bit down on her lip to stop from whimpering. What the heck was wrong with her? There were a number of layers between her skin and his; she could only imagine how her body might react if there were not. As Callum led her across the slate-tiled floor, she took a few deep breaths in and out, trying to regain her equilibrium. She told herself this weirdness must be due to where they were, but feared this wasn’t actually the case.

“We can talk alone in here,” he said as he pushed open a door with a gold sign on it that read Director—Callum McKinnel. The sign looked shiny and new as if

it hadn't been in place very long and, when she stepped inside, the office didn't seem at all to Callum's taste.

And how would you know that?

"Take a seat," Callum said, gesturing to a shiny, dark leather armchair as he shut the door behind them.

"It's fine, I'll stand." She rushed her words. "But you might want to sit down."

"That bad, hey?" She couldn't quite interpret Callum's tone, but was glad when he walked around the massive desk and sat in a luxurious leather office chair on the other side. His elbows perched on the desk, he folded his hands and he looked up to her expectantly.

She took a quick breath before launching into her speech. "I come on behalf of Bailey Sawyer." She cleared her throat and continued, forcing herself to look at Callum, despite the fact that looking at him put her all off-kilter. "Bailey acknowledges that you have been in a relationship for five years and that you have both invested a lot of time and energy into each other. She's had a fabulous time with you, but I regret to inform you that she would no longer like the honor of being your fiancée. You're more like a brother or a best friend, and although you had a lot of fun together in other aspects of life, when it comes to sex, the attraction has faded for her."

His eyes widened and Chelsea couldn't meet his gaze, heat flaring in her cheeks. The whole sex thing came up frequently in her line of work—not being physically compatible was one of the top reasons for dumping someone and she prided herself on delivering this news with the utmost tact. She wasn't a prude by any means, but just saying the *S* word in front of Callum

McKinnel made her feel like a teenage girl who'd just discovered *The Joy of Sex* in her parents' bedroom.

Jeez, it was hot in here. She mentally gave herself a cold shower as she tried to remember the next part of her spiel. Bailey Sawyer hadn't paid good money for Chelsea to make a mess of breaking up with her long-time boyfriend.

Oh, that's right. She focused. "You are a great guy but Bailey has realized you're just not her type. She doesn't think you want the same things she does and wishes you the best in the future. She thinks one day you could make some woman a very wonderful husband, but she is no longer prepared to come second to your work."

Her heart racing now, Chelsea stepped forward and thrust a bouquet made only of the finest Belgian chocolates across the desk. "These are from Bailey. Your favorite, apparently."

He glared at the chocolates like they were soggy roadkill. "Not anymore, I don't think." He blinked and then ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. "I'm sorry...is this some kind of joke?"

Callum stared at the woman across his desk, waiting for her to say "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera*" or whatever the hell the latest incarnation of that ridiculous show was. She was almost as tall as he was, which was rare in a woman, but she was definitely all woman. Despite the fact she'd just delivered him the news his engagement was over and she was wearing a heavy winter coat, he couldn't help but notice the way her body curved in all the right places. She'd tied her caramel-

blond hair back in a high, professional-looking knot, but he could easily imagine what it would look like if she let it all hang loose. Had she even told him her name?

It felt like hours but was probably less than a minute before she replied, “No, I’m sorry, but it’s not.”

He raised his eyebrows, kinda stunned by this whole bizarre situation and, if he were honest, more than a little annoyed. “What exactly does my relationship with Miss Sawyer have to do with you?”

She cleared her throat again and then glanced back at the door as if contemplating her escape, but he didn’t plan on letting her leave until she’d given him a reasonable explanation. “I am a breakup expert,” she announced as if this wasn’t an alien profession to him.

“A what?” He couldn’t help his scoffing tone. Maybe this really was a joke. Bailey liked to think herself a bit of a comedian; then again, he doubted she’d interrupt his work for a laugh. She knew how important the distillery was to him, even more so now that his father had died and he was running the show.

“I’m a breakup expert,” she said again. “I handle the difficult task of ending relationships for people who don’t feel up to the job themselves.”

“You mean gutless people who like an easy cop-out?” He shook his head before she could reply. “I can’t believe what the world is coming to. What kind of person does that?”

“Someone who cares deeply about their partner and feels they may end up staying in an unsatisfactory relationship because they don’t want to hurt the other person. Bailey had your best interests at heart when she hired my services.”

“I meant, what kind of person does *this* for a job?”

“Oh.” Color bloomed in her cheeks and she dropped her chin to her chest, staring at the floor a few seconds before looking up again and crossing her arms. “My reasons for my career choice are no concern of yours, Mr. McKinnel. And now I’m afraid I have another appointment. Good day.”

She’d turned and fled the room before he could call her bluff on another appointment. Did she actually get enough of these gigs to earn a living? He stood and hurried after her, weaving through the customers milling in the shop area—the time leading up to midday was a busy one, loads of tourists looking for a place to lunch—but she was fast and he saw no sign of her. Cursing under his breath, he emerged outside just in time to see a little red car reversing out of the lot.

“Dammit.” He patted his trouser pocket to check for his keys, then without another thought jogged around the back to his own parked car. Wondering what had come over him but unable to stop himself, Callum started his SUV and screeched after her, narrowly missing a whiskey barrel in his haste. He caught up just as she was turning onto the road in the direction of Bend, the nearest city to Jewell Rock.

As he drove focused on the car in front, he called his sister on speaker phone.

“Good afternoon, McKinnel’s Distillery, Sophie speaking. How may I help you?”

“It’s me,” he barked. “Look, I’ve had to go out. Can you handle my calls for the next hour or so?”

“Out?” Sophie’s disbelief came across loud and clear. “Out where?”

“Never mind. Something’s come up. Call me if there’s an emergency.”

“I may be young and I may be a woman, but I’m more than capable of holding the fort for a couple of hours. Enjoy your mystery rendezvous.”

He snorted. Hah! If only she knew what he was really up to. “Thanks, Soph. I owe you one,” he said as the traffic lights in front turned amber. Breakup girl zoomed through and, determined not to lose her, Callum pushed down on the accelerator and just scraped through the intersection before the light went red. He checked the rearview mirror in case there were cops, then let out a puff of breath. He could just imagine the look on a police officer’s face while they asked him why he’d gone through a red light. Admitting to stalking the car in front could get him into all kinds of trouble and his father would turn in his grave if he garnered any bad publicity that could sully the McKinnel name.

As they drove past the boundaries of town and headed onto the highway toward Bend, Callum glanced at his fuel gauge, hoping he had enough gas to get to wherever she was going. Thankfully it was near full. He supposed he should call Bailey, if only to clarify that the woman he was currently trailing wasn’t some kind of lunatic. She’d seemed legitimate but one couldn’t be too careful these days.

Bailey *always* answered her phone but today the number went straight to voice mail. “Hi there, you’ve reached Bailey Sawyer, event planner extraordinaire—leave a message and I’ll get back to you soon. Bye.”

“Bailey, what the hell is going on? Call me.”

He’d been acting on some sort of adrenaline until

now, but as he followed the little red car, navigating the country roads between Jewell Rock and Bend, realization dawned on him. What would he tell his mother if his relationship with Bailey had actually ended? She'd been so pleased when he and her best friend's daughter had announced their engagement...and annoyed that they'd taken years to get to the stage of almost tying the knot. This, so soon after the loss of her husband, would devastate her. Anger surged inside him at Bailey and he almost missed the moment when breakup girl turned down a street on the outskirts of Bend.

He slammed on the brakes and swerved to follow. He'd been a teenager with a brand-new license the last time he'd driven this recklessly and he was out of practice. About three minutes later, she swung into the driveway of a little house that looked in dire need of renovation.

Callum parked on the street out the front. Should he confront her now or wait until she was done with the next lucky recipient of her "work"? He waited and watched a moment, but when he saw her unlock the front door and go straight inside instead, he realized she must live here.

In that case... He climbed out of his SUV and beeped it locked, all psyched up to confront her, to demand more of an explanation. And, if he were honest, to tell her what he really thought of her career choice. But his bluster cooled the moment he stepped into her doorway. Either her housekeeping skills were dismal, or while she'd been delivering him the breakup speech, some scumbag had broken into her house. The smashed glass panes on her door indicated the latter.

Standing in the middle of the disarray, she bent down, grabbed some kind of vase off the floor and then spun around and held it as if she were about to hurl it at him. “Stay right there!”

He froze and held his hands up in surrender.

Recognition dawned in her eyes. “You! What are you doing here?”

“I...um...” For once in his life he was lost for words. Now didn’t seem the time to pay out on her.

“Never mind.” She shook her head, threw the vase onto the couch and headed down a hallway, wailing “Muffin, Muffin!” as she went.

Frowning, Callum stepped inside and surveyed the mess. Whoever had done this had left no stone unturned. What a violation. He dug his cell out of his pocket, about to call the police when she returned.

“Muffin’s gone.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“What?”

“My dog,” she sobbed, rushing past him back outside. “Muffin! Muffin!” She continued shouting that one word as she frantically searched her front yard.

He stepped onto the porch. What kind of mess had he gotten himself into? If he were sensible, he’d head back to the SUV, climb inside and phone this in to the police on his way back to the distillery. But what kind of guy would leave a woman alone in a situation like this?

“Hey!” he called, still having no clue of her name. “What’s Muffin look like? I’ll help you look.”

She froze a moment, looking at him as if she couldn’t tell if he meant it or not, then said, “He’s a golden cocker spaniel. About this high—” she gestured to just above

her knee “—he’s wearing a red collar with a gold heart ID tag on it and he has a lot of fur.”

“Okay. Got it.” He shoved his phone back into his pocket. “I’ll have a quick drive around, why don’t you go check if any of the neighbors have seen him?” She appeared more worried about the dog than the house and the culprit was probably long gone, so he decided to focus on the mutt first, as well.

“Thank you.” Her voice was choked as she rushed over to the house on her right.

Callum jogged back to his SUV, climbed in and, shaking his head, turned the key in the ignition. When he’d woken up that morning he’d been engaged and planning a wedding, now it appeared he was single and looking for a stranger’s dog. What crazy thing could happen next?