

On Dublin Street by Samantha Young

Chapter 1 – from Braden’s POV

Sighing, Braden shrugged his shoulders back and looked up at the sky, squinting against the sunlight. Decked out in a three-piece suit on a hot day like this didn’t ease his growing frustration with his plan to sell La Cour. No one knew he was thinking of selling La Cour except Thomas Prendergast, a fellow restaurateur. A successful one. If any of his business associates knew Braden was selling La Cour they’d think he was nuts. The restaurant had a world-class chef and a stellar reputation. And it made money.

In truth, Braden was just stretched too thin and not interested in La Cour. All his concentration and focus was going into making his nightclub Fire a success, developing properties that turned profits, and of course he still had his father’s estate agency to keep up with, as well as a successful Scottish seasonal restaurant he co-owned with the chef, Frazier Allie, down on the Shore.

La Cour as it stood was a nuisance, a nuisance Braden felt obligated to attend to since his father worked so hard to make it the success it was. But his father had always told him that when business became a nuisance rather than a challenge, and was no longer satisfying, it was time to move on to greener pastures.

Thomas was dragging his feet with an answer.

He glanced back at the restaurant. *Come on, Thomas, make up your mind, man.*

Braden’s phone beeped in his pocket. He pulled it out and glanced at the digital reminder informing him he had a meeting in twenty minutes with one of his managers at Douglas Carmichael & Co, the estate agency his grandfather built up from the ground up to become one of the primary agencies in the Lothians.

Shit. He’d spent longer with Thomas Prendergast than he’d meant to. Scowling, Braden walked toward Bruntsfield Church, his pale blue eyes trained on the road ahead, willing a cab to make an appearance. Only seconds later one turned around the corner and he stepped out onto the curb with his arm raised. To his relief the taxi pulled up to him. He’d make his meeting.

Reaching for the handle on the passenger side, a clean, fruity smell drifted towards him seconds before a warm, small and very feminine hand collided with his.

Braden dipped his head and looked down into the face of a woman, her skin bright from the sunlight, her eyes narrowed to slits as she squinted against the sun behind his head. There

was a surprised disgruntlement in her expression. Clearly she assumed this was her black cab. Braden prepared to disabuse her of the notion but stopped. His father taught him that reading people, and by that he meant all the things they didn't say with their mouths but did with their bodies and eyes, was the key to success in business. Braden read stubbornness in her features he could make out and in the obstinate tension she held in her shoulders. He was in no mood for stubbornness or fighting over a bloody cab after his meeting with Thomas had come to no satisfactory conclusion.

For the sake of expedience Braden asked, "Which way are you headed?"

He heard the words 'Dublin Street' and did what he always did: maneuvered things to his liking. "Good." He pulled the cab door open. "I'm heading in that direction, and since I'm already running late, might I suggest we share the taxi instead of wasting ten minutes deciding who needs it more." He placed a hand on the small of her back and nudged her into the cab.

Relieved she didn't stall them, Braden got in after her and immediately gave the cab driver their first destination. His sister, Ellie, lived on Dublin Street in a flat he'd renovated and then gifted to her. Ellie was his half-sister—they shared the same father. She'd never had it particularly easy from their dad. That was putting it politely. Douglas Carmichael was a negligent bastard and despite the fact that he and Braden had finally become friends of a sort before he died, Braden had never forgiven him for his treatment of Ellie. The guilt Douglas should have felt transferred to Braden, and he'd done everything he could to make sure her life was easier, and that she knew he cared. Giving her the flat meant she could concentrate on that PhD she was studying for. Braden might think the PhD impractical, but it made her happy, and in the end that was all that mattered. He also liked having her close to the estate agency which was on Dundas Street. Anytime he was in the area, which was more often than not, he could drop by to see Els. Braden was lucky to call Ellie not only his sister, but one of his closest friends, and it was nice to escape the stress of his business life at least for ten minutes when he stopped by for a coffee with her.

Braden decided he'd get the cab driver to stop at the top of Dublin Street, burl around and come back toward Dundas Street. It would be easier to drop him off first but it was ingrained in him to never let a woman pay for anything, so he'd drop off the unexpected passenger so he could pay the fare.

"Thanks I guess," the woman answered from his left, the words sardonic. It wasn't the tone that drew his attention. It was the husky, sexy voice and the American accent.

Glancing in interest at her, Braden almost did a double take. She was attractive. Very. So busy checking her out he asked somewhat stupidly, “You’re an American?”

She turned to him and as soon as their eyes met Braden felt his blood heat with the impact. *Jesus fucking Christ.* Intelligent, exotic, feline gray eyes appraised him as she tucked a loose strand of dark-blond hair behind her ear. Her hair was long and pulled back in a pony-tail, giving him an unhindered view of a graceful neck and an arresting face. For some reason he couldn’t look away.

Watching her eyes drop to his body, drinking him in, Braden was intrigued. He was used to women looking at him. He was a big guy and he worked out and he’d had no complaints from women. He wasn’t, however, used to a woman appearing so consternated by the fact that she was checking him out. He raised an eyebrow, curious about her.

“Yeah, I’m American.”

That voice. He shifted in his seat. She really did have the sexiest voice he’d ever heard. He wanted to hear it again. “Just visiting?” Braden murmured.

“Nope.”

“Then you’re a student?”

Whatever she heard in his tone it made her tense. Braden envied her casual, light clothing in this heat and thanked God for throwing her in his path on a day so hot in Scotland it had caused the American to wear those tiny shorts.

True, she wasn’t his usual type. Most of his girlfriends, including his current girlfriend Holly, and his ex-wife Analise, were tall, slender platinum blondes. The American was the opposite of every woman he’d ever dated.

And yet... she was beyond appealing.

She had surprisingly large breasts for such a delicately built woman—big boobs, wee waist, and another surprise were those gorgeous legs of hers. They were shapely and long despite her small stature. Hot blood rushed southwards.

Bloody Nora.

When Braden finally dragged his eyes up to her expressive face he noted the raised eyebrow. He’d been caught eating her up and she did not look impressed. Amused, he grinned at her. Usually this would incur a responding grin. Instead the brat rolled her eyes at him.

“I was a student,” she answered, and Braden’s ears warmed to the purr of her dulcet voice. “I live here. Dual citizenship.”

“You’re part Scottish?”

She gave him a barely-there nod and seemed intent to not look at him. He smiled inwardly, feeling anticipation he hadn't felt in a while, and definitely not over a woman. It was the anticipation of a challenge. Women came quite easily to him and it certainly made life less difficult. Life was stressful enough in business. But he couldn't argue with what this strange, inexplicable feeling toward the American.

He'd never felt instant attraction like it.

Braden eyed her and grew even more dangerously hot at the idea of turning that willful glint in her stunning eyes soft with need as he explored every inch of her.

He shifted in his seat again, disappointment settling over him when he belatedly remembered he was seeing someone else. Since he wasn't the kind of man to ask for another woman's number while he was in a relationship that meant he'd have to ignore whatever was between him and the American.

Bugger.

The timing was fucked.

He couldn't have her. Eyeing her mouth, despite knowing that conversation—or anything—was pointless, he found himself asking, “What do you do now that you've graduated?”

She shot him a look out of the corner of her eyes and it seemed to hold more than a hint of disdain. “What do you do? I mean, when you're not manhandling women into cabs?”

It occurred to Braden that a man knew he was really bored with life when he got a kick out of a woman's condescension. “What do you think I do?”

“I'm thinking lawyer. Answering questions with questions, manhandling...”

“I'm not a lawyer. But you could be. I seemed to recall a question answered with a question. And that,” he gestured to her full mouth, wondering how she'd taste, “That's a definite smirk.” His voice was thick with want and he knew she heard it in the way her eyes flared as their gazes met.

Yeah, she felt the heat too.

The air in the cab was suddenly heavy with sexual tension. An undeniable, incredible electricity that Braden really fucking wanted to explore.

As awful as it was, he was cursing the existence of Holly, his current girlfriend, to hell in that moment. What he had with Holly wasn't special. It was just fun. But it was exclusive.

Shit.

The American not only looked away but seemed to deliberately lean her whole body away from him as she stared out at the passing traffic. As he watched her attempt to create a

distance between them with silence, his eyes caressed the sharp sweep of her jawline and the smoothness of her olive skin. She had great skin. Skin that told of her age, and it suddenly occurred to him that the American was quite young, probably ages with Ellie. He hadn't realized at first because she had seemed attractively self-possessed.

Now she seemed uncomfortable... perhaps inexperienced?

It should have put him off.

It didn't.

Whoever she was, however she was, Braden was intrigued.

He wanted to work her out.

"Are you shy?" He asked trying not to sound like a condescending prick.

She turned to him with a bemused smile. "Excuse me?"

Not shy then. He eyed her carefully. She wasn't as easy to read as he'd first thought. He liked that. "Are you shy?" he repeated to be polite, already knowing the answer to that question was no. She was something, but it wasn't shy.

"Why would you think that?"

He decided to see just how self-possessed she really was. "Most women would be taking advantage of my imprisonment in the taxi with them—chew my ear off, shove their phone number in my face...as well as other things." His eyes instantly lowered to her lush breasts, letting her know he thought they were well worthy of the attention.

Anticipating either a blush or a scowl when he drew his eyes back to her face, Braden was taken aback to find her grinning at him. *Fuck*. Her smile hit him with more of an impact than her sexy body. She had one helluva sweet smile. "Wow, you really think a lot of yourself."

He grinned back. "I'm just speaking from experience."

"Well, I'm not the kind of girl who hands out her number to a guy she just met."

Even though he couldn't ask for her number he was immediately disappointed by her answer. He'd begun building an idea of who she was in his head and prudish girl next door was definitely not it. "Ahh," he looked away. "You're a no-sex-until-the-third-date, marriage-and-babies kind of woman." Not exactly his type.

"No, no, and no," she answered, seeming affronted by the idea. So affronted in fact that he suddenly wondered if the opposite was true. Was he in the presence of that rare creature? A woman afraid of commitment?

"Interesting," he murmured.

"I'm not giving you my number."

Unfortunately Braden couldn't seduce her number out of her. "I didn't ask for it. And even if I wanted it, I wouldn't ask for it." *Fucking lie.* "I have a girlfriend." *Unfortunately, true.* Braden mentally slapped himself across the head for that ungentlemanly thought. Holly was a good girl and deserved better than that.

"Then stop looking at me like that."

"I have a girlfriend, but I'm not blind. Just because I can't do anything doesn't mean I'm not allowed to look." A crying shame if you asked him. He wanted to look. He wanted to look past the cynical eyes and through the sweet smile and find out which one of them was her. Maybe she was both. Maybe she was neither. He didn't know. At all. And he wanted to. *Jesus—*

"Here's good, thanks."

What? His fascination with her mystery was suddenly brought to an abrupt halt by her direction to the driver. They weren't at Dublin Street yet. They still had... Braden looked outside. They were at Queen Street Gardens, only seconds from her destination. And why was he panicking? She was off limits.

The driver pulled up to the curb and she handed him fare and reached for the door.

"Wait," Braden found himself saying.

She turned to him, her expression impatient. "What?"

Braden sensed he had seconds here. He could either tell her to take her money back and offer to pay for the entire cab fare as he intended. Or he could ask her the one thing that had been itching at him since they met.

"Do you have a name?"

She smiled and Braden automatically found himself smiling with her. "Actually, I have two."

What?

She jumped out of the cab and despite the loss of her he found myself chuckling at her cool reply.

It was his own fault. He'd asked a smart woman the wrong question.

Just as abruptly as she'd left him, Braden's amusement fled. He realized he'd probably never see her again. Now that really was a crying shame. His father was right. His intuition was what made him a successful businessman, and his intuition was telling him he'd just let a great opportunity pass him by.

Swallowing his disappointment, Braden directed the cabbie to turnabout and head toward his meeting... in an even worse fucking mood than he'd started out in.

