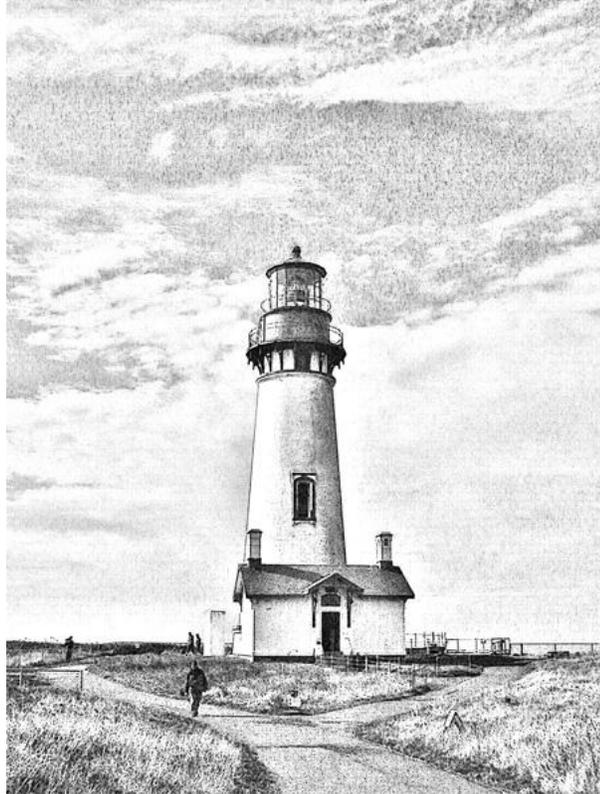


O'Connor's Honor
A novel
by
Janet Kay Jensen



Prologue

"Help! Over here! Please!"

The man in the tweed coat and cap stopped and looked around in the snowy darkness, but could not find the source of the urgent plea.

"I'm up here! Above you, on the fire escape!"

A woman was dangling from the lowest stair of a dimly lit fire escape, about fifteen feet from the ground. "Bloody hell!" he muttered. In a few quick strides he stood below her. Planting his feet firmly in the snow, he called to her, "I think I can catch you! Can you let go?"

"I don't have a choice!" The woman took a deep breath, closed her eyes, released her grip on the stair and fell heavily into the man's outstretched arms. Though he had braced himself, he couldn't maintain his balance, and they both tumbled into the snow-covered bushes.

"Oof!" He grunted as her elbow caught him under the rib cage. Regaining his breath in a few gasps, he scrambled to his feet and offered his hand to the woman, who was struggling to sit up. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "I thought I could catch you."

She gave him her hand. It was ice cold. With his other hand, he grasped her forearm and in one quick, smooth motion pulled her from the shrubs. "You broke my fall," she said, her voice shaking. "Thank you."

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine, thank you," she said, brushing snow off her clothes and hair.

The man followed suit, quickly ridding himself of the snow that dusted him. He found his snow-filled cap in the bushes, slapped it against his thigh, and put it on again over his long, curly hair, giving the brim a firm tug. In the dim light of the old stone building's carriage lamps he regarded the woman curiously. She was tall and slender and casually dressed. She was also without a coat, though the night was cold and snow swirled softly around them in light, airy flakes that lodged in their eyelashes and melted like tears on their cheeks.

"If it's not too presumptuous," he said with a charming grin, and suddenly she recognized the unmistakable lilt of Ireland in his voice, "might I be asking who I've just had the pleasure of holding in my arms?"

"Angie. Angie Hoover." She extended her hand.

"Angie? That would be short for Angela?" His large warm hand held hers captive.

"Yes, but my friends call me—"

"Angela Hoover," he shook her hand firmly, "It's a pleasure to meet you. That's a fitting name for an angel, too, as you seemed to fall straight from heaven."

"I don't believe I've been compared to angel since I was in the cradle," she informed him, a hint of amusement in her voice. "And you are—"

"Ian. Ian O'Connor. But my friends call me—"

"Let me guess. They call you Ian." Her smile was lovely, even in the semi-darkness. Well, Mr. O'Connor, thank you again. And I'm sorry about that elbow to your diaphragm."

"No harm done. You're sure, now, that nothing's amiss?"

"I'm fine. You broke my fall, but you took a tumble, too."

"Loveliest tumble I've taken in a donkey's years." he said. "But if you don't mind my asking. . ."

"Yes?"

He paused. "Why did you need a bit of rescuing?"

"It's a long story." She gave a sudden, involuntary shiver.

"You're freezing; and you've no coat." He quickly removed his own and put it around her shoulders.

"Thank you." She slipped her arms in the sleeves, closed her eyes for a moment as his comforting warmth enveloped her, and inhaled the clean, masculine scent of his coat. The sleeves covered her hands. Irish tweed, famous for its quality.

"You'll catch your death out here," Ian said. "Won't you come inside?"

Angela seemed hesitant. "I suppose I should," she finally said.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it, Miss Hoover? I don’t imagine it’s every day one climbs out a window and down a fire escape in the dead of winter, without even taking time to put on a coat. You must’ve been in a wee bit of a hurry.”

She looked around warily.

“Not meaning to pry into your affairs, Miss, but is there anything I can do to help?”

She searched his face for a long moment and then made an impulsive decision. “This is going to sound very odd, Ian, but since you offered...would you consider being my fiancé?”

Ian took a stumbling step backward, bumped into the trunk of a large pine tree, and was promptly covered with a shower of snow. There was a long silence as he struggled to regain his powers of speech while cold, melting snow slid down the back of his neck. Then he whipped off his cap and held it over his heart.

“Miss Hoover,” he gasped, “Miss Hoover—Angela, *darlin’!* This is all so—so sudden, so unexpected! I mean, we’ve just met, and yet somehow I feel as if I’ve known you all my life. I— simply don’t know what to say!”

“Say yes. Please, just for the evening, would you pretend to be my fiancé? I don’t want anyone to think I’m here alone. I’ll explain it when we’re inside. That is, if you—”

“Come along, sweetheart, it’s time you were back indoors with a cup of hot tea,” Ian offered his arm. She took it gratefully and he steered her around the snow-covered shrubs and up the front stairs of Cooper’s Inn.

*