

Heritage of Blood

Act 1

Prologue

As a child, Sarah O'Neil would gather close to her grandmother by the fireside, her eyes wide with wonder and heart thrumming in anticipation whenever the old woman began her tales. "Listen closely, love, for I will tell you of the Chalice of Danann," her grandmother's voice would start, rich with the lilt of Ireland and steeped in mystery.

Sarah could picture it vividly: a chalice crafted long ago by skilled artisans, glistening with ancient runes and pulsating with the energy of untold stories. "It was a vessel of great power," her grandmother explained, her eyes sparkling like the stars above. It could bridge the worlds—the mortal realm and the Otherworld, home to spirits and fae. Those who held it could commune with the forgotten, but only if their intentions were pure." Each tale was intricately woven with the threads of their family's past, connecting Sarah to her roots. Her grandmother spoke of Sinead O'Neil, the Seer of the Shores, who could read the tides and draw wisdom from the stars. "But beware, little one," she would caution, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. "The fragments of the chalice must not fall into the wrong hands; many have suffered when power was sought without respect for its origin."

As a child, Sarah loved her grandmother's stories. The old stories of hope and warning melded together, enchanting Sarah with their rhythms and mysteries. She would beg for "just one more tale" each night, curling her small fingers around her grandmother's weathered hand, desperate to hold onto that magical connection for as long as possible. Sometimes, in the flickering firelight, Sarah swore she could almost see the chalice itself, glimmering at the edges of her vision.

Years later, as she stood on the gray shores of Dublin, the air thick with salt and promise, those tales echoed in her mind like an heirloom passed down through generations—a connection to something greater, a legacy that was stirring, ready to awaken. The wind tugged at her hair, reminiscent of her grandmother's gentle fingers, and Sarah couldn't help but wonder if the stories that had shaped her childhood might hold more truth than she'd ever dared believe.

Chapter 1

Rain tapped against the windows of Dublin's Central Garda Station, creating a steady rhythm that matched Chief Inspector Sarah O'Malley's fingers drumming on her desk. The soft sound of raindrops was a calming backdrop, cutting through the usual hustle and bustle of the station. Recently promoted to Chief Inspector, Sarah lifted her second cup of strong coffee for the morning, enjoying the rich aroma that filled the air. A moment of warmth in the cool, damp weather outside. Her colleagues liked to joke that her giant caffeine habit kept the local café busy. The familiar taste reminded her of childhood mornings in Chicago, watching her father prepare for his shifts at the precinct.

"Oi, Chief! Fancy a proper cuppa instead of that tar you're drinking?" Detective John Murphy called out, his Irish brogue contrasting with Sarah's Chicago American twang. Sarah smirked, raising her mug in a mock toast. "Not a chance, Murphy. Some habits die hard." She couldn't help but think how her brothers would get a kick out of her defending American coffee in Dublin.

At thirty-eight, Sarah had become one of the most respected members of An Garda Síochána, Ireland's national police service. Her journey back to her ancestral home had been an unconventional one. Born in Dublin but raised in Chicago, she had returned to the Emerald Isle nearly two decades ago with her then-husband, Aiden, drawn by a desire to reconnect with her heritage and an opportunity to make a difference in the place her parents had once called home. The transition hadn't always been smooth, but her determination had earned her the respect of her peers.

The harsh ring of her office phone cut through her thoughts. "Chief Inspector O'Malley."

"Sarah." The warm, familiar voice of Chief Superintendent Tom Bradley filled the line. Despite his rapid rise through the ranks – helped by being male and related to half the command staff – Tom had proven himself an extraordinary officer and a fair boss.

"Chief Superintendent Bradley," she replied formally, but a small smile tugged at her lips. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

"I've been told it's polite to contact your host the day after dinner to express gratitude," he said, his tone playful. So, thank you for a wonderful evening."

Sarah experienced a subtle flush across her face. If such a term applied, their connection had been teetering on the brink of something more profound for the previous twelve months. No specific regulations prohibited it, but leadership would certainly question the perpetual balancing act of two senior officials attempting to carve out space for romantic involvement.

"You're welcome," she replied, watching the rain trace patterns down her window. "Though next time, maybe we skip the burnt garlic bread?"

His warm chuckle made something flutter in her chest. "So, what do you have on today?"

"Just paperwork," she replied with a hint of sarcasm, leaning back in her chair and letting out a mock sigh of exasperation. "I have this pain-in-the-ass boss who keeps pestering me about deadlines. Quite annoying, if you ask me." Tom laughed lightly, filling the air with warmth. "The only blemish on what is otherwise an impressive service record, but you did promise me you'd get that submitted."

With a playful roll of her eyes, Sarah reached over to her computer, clicking a few keys briskly before hitting send. "Check your inbox," she grinned.

A few seconds passed in silence. "Well, surprise, surprise! Now you have three more reports to finish today," he said with a teasing tone. Sarah groaned in response.

"You wanted to be a Chief; welcome to the job," he added playfully.

Before Sarah could reply, a forceful knock echoed against the door. Murphy appeared at the entrance, his usually bright demeanor overshadowed by a seriousness that instantly thickened the atmosphere in her office.

"Chief," he said, his voice steady but urgent, "we have a situation. A body has washed up on the beach at North Bull Island."

"On my way."

Rain tapped against the windows as she reached her car, the soft sound matching the rhythm of her quickening pulse. This was Dublin in autumn—perpetually damp, the air heavy with salt, and the promise of stronger storms to come.

* * *

The wind howled off the Irish Sea as Sarah's Volvo approached North Bull Island, carrying the sharp scent of salt and decaying seaweed. Through the windshield, she could see that the local Gardaí had already established a perimeter; their blue lights pulsed eerily against the gray morning sky. Crime scene tape fluttered in the fierce coastal wind like yellow ribbons.

As she parked, the forensic van arrived. Lynn Robertson and her team came to life, setting up their equipment with practiced efficiency. Sarah stepped out, slipped into her wellies, and deeply breathed the bracing sea air. "What have we got?" Sarah called out, boots crunching across the wet sand toward Sergeant Shawn Masterson. He stood like a sentinel over a dark shape lying on the beach, his usual ruddy complexion pale against the granite sky.

"Young woman, early twenties. Dog walkers found her this morning—poor bastards probably thought they were just getting exercise." He paused, glancing toward Detective Riley Brennan, her tablet already in hand.

"Detective Brennan says her name is Jazzy Halls."

"She knows her?" Sarah asked, eyebrows raising. "How?"

"She's apparently some sort of internet celebrity," Masterson replied, his tone suggesting he found the whole concept ridiculous. "Makes travel videos and posts them online. Brennan recognized her immediately."

"Brilliant," Sarah muttered, crouching beside the body. "Because what this case needed was a social media angle."

The victim's blue hair—electric even when matted with sand and seawater—seemed to mock the dreary morning. Death hadn't entirely managed to strip away what must have been a magnetic presence in life; Sarah could see why a camera would have loved her. But there was something vulnerable about her, too, lying here abandoned on the cold sand, far from home.

"Riley," Sarah called out. "A word, please."

Sarah watched as Riley Brennan jogged over, her steps quick and efficient across the wet sand. At twenty-four, Riley was the youngest member of the team. Still, she'd proven invaluable in cases involving technology—a skill set that made Sarah feel increasingly out of touch with each passing year. Riley's dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail that somehow remained unmoved by the coastal winds. Her tablet's screen glowed brightly against the gray morning as she approached.

"How sure are you about this identification?" Sarah asked, feeling the familiar weight of a new case settling onto her shoulders.

Riley's fingers danced across her tablet with confident precision. "I'm 99% sure, Chief. Her real name is Jessica Shaw. She's got over 2 million followers across her platforms. Here, this was taken just a few days ago."

Riley turned the screen toward Sarah, who squinted at the bright display against the gray morning light. The video showed the victim, very much alive, winking at the camera with Dublin Airport in the background.

"Okay, fam, we made it! Here we are in Dublin!" Jazzy's charismatic personality radiated through the screen, that special something that drew millions to follow her adventures. Sarah couldn't help but think of her own daughter's social media obsession.

Riley's fingers again flew across the tablet screen, pulling up another video. "Okay, guys, I just have to show this," the girl said, panning the camera around a beautifully decorated hotel room with the practiced ease of someone used to performing for an audience. "And the view!" The camera then showed a stunning view of Dublin Bay, the same body of water that would later claim her life.

Sarah glanced toward the Bay and then turned in the opposite direction. "The Skyline Hotel," both Sarah and Riley said in unison.

"Good catch," Sarah nodded. "Okay, Riley, you do your digital thing—social media, recent interactions, location data. Find out where she was headed or who she was meeting."

Lynn Robertson appeared at her elbow, already dressed in scene wear, and started photographing the scene. Sarah knelt closer, scanning every inch of the body before her, careful not to touch anything. "No obvious cause of death... No visible trauma, no blood." Her trained eyes searched for any telltale signs—bruising, marks around the neck, defensive wounds—but found none. A deep sadness tugged at Sarah's heart as she studied the youthful face, still carrying traces of innocence despite the circumstances. What could this young woman have done that was so bad that it ended like this? Having teenagers of her own made cases like this hit particularly close to home.

"Could it have been suicide?" Shawn ventured.

"I don't know, why would you come to Ireland to kill yourself?" Sarah said, shaking her head. "The girl I saw in those videos wasn't ready to die today."

Robertson stood up. "I'm not seeing anything obvious, but I don't think suicide either. Dr. Kelly from the ME's office is on her way—she'll give us a time of death once she's had a proper look."

Sarah frowned, studying the scene. The body's position seemed almost peaceful, as if the victim had simply lain down for a rest. But young, healthy social media stars didn't typically decide to nap on deserted beaches in the middle of the night.

"Alright," Sarah straightened, her knees protesting the movement. "Robertson, I want this entire area processed. We need to preserve everything before the tide comes in. Shawn, get the dive team out here—check the water up to half a kilometer out—and coordinate with the CCTV team."

Sarah pulled out her phone and saw three missed texts from her daughter. Aoife's art show was tonight—the one she'd talked about for weeks. Sarah's stomach sank as she typed: "I will try my best to make it, but I might be late. Love you x."

The reply came quickly: "It's fine, Mum. Love you too."

Sarah pocketed the phone, trying to ignore the guilt. Those three words—"It's fine, Mum"—had become a familiar refrain over the years, Aoife's resigned acceptance of her mother's demanding job. Unlike her younger brother Liam, who wore his disappointment openly, Aoife had learned to hide hers behind understanding, which somehow made it worse.

"Chief?" Robertson called out. "Got something."

Sarah turned and saw one of Robertson's team members carefully photographing and bagging a dark backpack, partially buried in the sand about twenty meters from the body.

"Found it just behind that dune," Robertson said, pointing with a gloved hand. "High-end travel gear. Two action cameras inside. "And this." She held up an evidence bag containing a leather wallet.

Sarah peered through the plastic. A UK driver's license showed Jessica Shaw's face—minus the blue hair—smiling back at them. "Good. This is the confirmation of the ID. Is there anything else?"

"Hotel check-in slip," Robertson said, holding another evidence bag. "Dublin Skyline Hotel checked in three days ago." She paused. "But no cell phone."

"Right," Sarah said, straightening up. "Riley, coordinate with tech services on these cameras—priority. If she were filming, those videos might be our best lead. Keep digging into her social media presence to see if there are any mentions of specific locations she planned to visit."

She turned to Masterson. "Sergeant, you're with me. We're heading to the Skyline." Sarah knew Masterson's old-school detective work would complement her style—he had a keen eye for the details people tried to hide.

"Riley," Sarah continued, "you have the scene. I want everything documented before the tide comes in. Do a full grid search of the beach and bag anything that looks even slightly out of place."

The wind whipped harder, carrying a fresh spray of sea mist. Sarah took one last look at the scene—the protected stretch of beach, the lonely figure under the tarp, and the scattered evidence markers dotting the sand like yellow flowers. Something about this felt wrong. Travel vloggers didn't typically end up dead on isolated beaches, especially not ones who were supposedly visiting Ireland for the first time.

As they walked back to the car, Sarah's phone buzzed again. Hoping it might be Aoife, she checked it quickly. Instead, it was a text from Chief Superintendent Tom Bradley: "Keep me posted about the Bull Island death." She replied with a quick "Will do" before sliding into the driver's seat of her silver Volvo. As she started the engine, her mind was already mapping out the investigation—the hotel, the victim's social media presence, and potential witnesses. But beneath it all ran a current of unease. Jessica Shaw's bright smile in those videos haunted her. A story here had ended badly on a cold Dublin beach.

"Morning traffic will be brutal, but I know a shortcut," Sarah said, already calculating the fastest route in her head.

"What is it with you Americans and shortcuts?" Shawn muttered as Sarah pulled away from the cordoned area. She quickly turned onto a narrow side street that barely qualified as two lanes. His knuckles whitened slightly on the dashboard.

"Blame Chicago," she shot back with a slight smile. "We learned to drive like we're being chased. I grew up dodging potholes and taxi cabs on Lake Shore Drive, Dublin traffic is practically a vacation." The Volvo's engine hummed as she accelerated confidently.

"Just remember I'm due for retirement, I'd like to live to see it," he said with sarcasm, gripping the door handle as Sarah weaved through the alley between two brick buildings, missing a stack of empty produce crates by inches. "I've survived thirty years on the force only to die in your bloody shortcut."

Jazzy Halls had come to Ireland with an agenda, and somewhere between her sunny social media posts and her death on a lonely beach, that agenda had led to her murder. Sarah felt it in her bones, the way she always could when a case was going to be complicated.

The windshield wipers beat a steady rhythm against the persistent drizzle as she navigated the coastal road back toward the city, where the first threads of this mystery waited to be unraveled.

Chapter 2

The Dublin Skyline Hotel stood tall against the morning skyline, its modern glass facade reflecting the steel-gray clouds overhead. Sarah guided her Volvo into the visitor parking, noting the hotel's prime location—convenient for tourists wanting easy access to both the city center and the airport—a smart choice for a travel vlogger building content.

"Remember," Sarah said to Masterson as they approached the entrance, "we're not telling anyone she's been murdered until we know it's murder."

Masterson nodded, his weathered face settling into professional neutrality. Shawn Masterson had perfected the art of appearing simultaneously approachable and intimidating—a combination that extracted confessions with remarkable efficiency.

The lobby breathed quiet luxury—understated enough to feel welcoming but polished enough to justify the room rates. According to her bright name tag, Amy looked up from the reception desk as they approached. Sarah noticed the young woman's professional smile faltered slightly when they introduced themselves as Garda.

"Yes, of course," Amy said, her fingers moving across her keyboard. "Jazzy Halls. She checked in three days ago."

"Was she alone?" Sarah asked.

"No, she was with a young man," Amy replied, glancing at her screen. "Billy Danes, American. They're in room 412."

"Has either of them come through the lobby today?"

Amy tilted her head, considering. "I saw Mr. Danes at breakfast around 9:30. Miss Halls, I'm not sure. I only started my shift at 9."

"Is there anything you can tell us about them? Any visitors? Any problems?" Masterson asked.

"Mr. Danes was at reception yesterday, asking about local historical tours. I directed him to the tourism brochures." Amy hesitated. "They seemed nice enough. The girl—Jazzy—took photos of everything. Said she loved the 'authentic Irish charm' of the place." A small smile crossed her lips. "We're a chain hotel, but I didn't have the heart to tell her."

"Would you like me to call up to the room?" Amy picked up the phone.

"No need," Sarah replied. "We'll go up ourselves."

As they headed toward the elevators, Masterson checked his notebook. "Three days. That lines up with the hotel slip we found in her backpack."

"Hardly enough time to make enemies, you'd think," Sarah mused, pressing the elevator call button.

"Unless she brought her troubles with her," Masterson replied, his tone somber.

Sarah knocked firmly on the door of room 412, the sound echoing in the quiet corridor. After a moment, they heard movement inside—shuffling footsteps, the rustle of fabric. The door opened to reveal a young man, his blond hair disheveled in what Sarah immediately recognized as a calculated way. His eyes were reddened, and his plain white T-shirt wrinkled just enough to suggest distress without looking truly unkempt.

"Billy Danes?" Sarah asked, studying his reaction.

"Yeah, that's me." His voice was appropriately hoarse. His gaze darted between them, anxiety bleeding through his performance. "Are you the police? Have you found Jazzy? Is she okay?"

Sarah caught Masterson's subtle glance.

"Mr. Danes, I'm Chief Inspector O'Malley, and this is Sergeant Masterson. May we come in?"

Billy stepped back, revealing a suite that bore unmistakable evidence of Jazzy's presence—an open suitcase spilling colorful clothes, a high-end camera on the desk, and a laptop plastered with travel stickers from around the world. The room itself was a study in contrasts: Jazzy's side was filled with vibrant personal items, while Billy's area was sparse and almost impersonal.

"Mr. Danes," Sarah began, keeping her tone even, "I'm afraid we have some bad news. We found Jazzy's body this morning on the beach at North Bull Island."

Billy's face crumpled as he sank onto the bed, shaking his head. "No, no, no... This can't be happening." His fingers clawed through his hair, pulling at the roots in what appeared to be genuine distress. But Sarah noticed how his eyes kept darting to her.

"We're very sorry for your loss," Sarah said, watching him carefully. She waited a calculated moment before continuing. "I'm curious—why were you expecting the police?"

Billy looked up, confusion momentarily replacing grief. "What?"

"You asked if we'd found Jazzy. That suggests you knew she was missing." Sarah maintained eye contact, watching for the telltale signs of a hastily constructed lie.

"I was sleeping late, still worn out from the time change," Billy said, his voice muffled as he stared at his hands.

"When I woke up, Jazzy wasn't here. I tried texting her, but she didn't answer. She hadn't been here all night..."

He looked up, his face pale. "I looked around the hotel, but none of the staff had seen her. I don't know Dublin; I've never been here before, so I called the police."

Sarah's eyebrows rose slightly. "You filed a missing person report?"

"Yeah. Some cop came, told me not to worry, and said she'd only been gone a little while and would probably show up. Then he left." Billy's tone shifted subtly, a hint of indignation creeping in.

Sarah and Masterson exchanged a glance of confusion. "Did you get his name?"

"No, I don't remember it. I was too worried about Jazzy."

"What time did you make this call, Mr. Danes?" Sarah asked, noting the inconsistency with what Amy had told them about seeing him at breakfast.

Billy furrowed his brow, putting on a show of trying to recall. "Around 2 PM, I think? Yeah, because I remember looking at the clock and thinking it was too late for lunch but too early for dinner."

Sarah kept her expression neutral, knowing no such report had crossed her desk. "And the Garda who responded—can you describe him?"

"Male, Irish accent, uniform, badge..." Billy shrugged, his shoulders slumping with practiced dejection. "It's all a blur now. I keep thinking about Jazzy..."

Sarah noticed tears that didn't quite reach his eyes as he trailed off. She glanced around the room, taking in details that told their story. There were no signs of a struggle. Two half-empty water glasses were on the nightstand. Jazzy's phone charger was plugged in, and no phone was attached.

"We'll need access to Jazzy's laptop," Sarah said, redirecting her attention to Billy. "And her phone?"

"It's with her. She never goes anywhere without her phone," Billy said firmly. "Never."

"Tell us about your relationship with Jazzy," Sarah pressed. "How did you meet? And why Dublin?"

Fresh tears welled in Billy's eyes. "We've been dating for about two years. I met her while traveling in Southeast Asia, and we just hit it off. I'm from a small town in Wisconsin; I'd never met anyone like her.

I help with her videos sometimes—filming, editing, that kind of thing." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "This Dublin trip was a huge deal for her—she had exclusive filming access arranged at some historical sites. She was so excited..."

"What historical sites?" Sarah asked.

Billy reached for a paper on the desk and handed it to her. "St. Patrick's Cathedral, EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum, and Kilmainham Gaol." The paper included contact information for each location. Sarah passed it to Masterson, who tucked it into his notebook.

"What about yesterday?" Sarah continued. "When did you last see her?"

"She said she was meeting a friend, a historian, who would show her around Ireland and would take her to places she wanted to film. I offered to go with her, but she wanted to go alone." Billy's voice caught perfectly. "I didn't like it, but Jazzy..."

"Did she mention who this historian was?" Sarah asked, the fine hairs on the back of her neck rising.

"No, she kept it vague. I thought she was just being dramatic for the vlog, you know? Building suspense." He shifted on the bed, and Sarah noticed his gaze flickered to the desk where Jazzy's laptop sat.

Something was off. His grief seemed performed rather than felt, his story too neat, too rehearsed. Whatever had happened to Jazzy Halls, Sarah was sure Billy Danes knew more than he was saying.

"We'll need you to remain in Dublin for now, Mr. Danes," Sarah said, rising from her seat. "Is there anyone we can call for you?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Like I said, I don't know anyone here."

"We can send a liaison officer; they can help you while you're here," Sarah offered, watching his reaction closely.

"That'd be fine." Billy seemed lost in thought again, staring at the floor.

"We'll contact you if we have more questions," Sarah said, nodding to Masterson to indicate they were done for now.

In the hallway, Sarah pulled Masterson aside, lowering her voice. "What do you think?"

"He seems upset; could be genuine," Masterson said thoughtfully, "but something's not adding up."

"Why would you let your girlfriend go off with some guy she'd been talking to online? And not even know his name?" Sarah shook her head. "Check the missing person report. Get Murphy on it. I very much doubt he'll find anything."

Masterson nodded, already reaching for his phone.

"And get the hotel's security footage," Sarah added. "I want to see Billy's movements and whether we can spot this supposed Garda. One more thing—check with Immigration. Let's verify when they entered the country."

As they walked toward the elevators, Sarah's phone rang—a traditional Irish jig her daughter had set as a joke, claiming it would help her "embrace her roots." Seeing Aoife's name flash across the screen, Sarah felt a fresh wave of guilt about missing her art show. Another promise was broken because of the job.

Her phone buzzed, jolting her from her thoughts, and she answered, "Hey, sweetheart, I'm sorry, but I might be—"

"Mum, is it true about Jazzy?" Aoife's voice was breathless and upset. "Please tell me it's not true! It can't be true."

Sarah's stomach dropped. "Aoife, what are you talking about?"

"It's all over Instagram! Billy, Jazzy's boyfriend, posted about it. He says she's dead, that she was murdered. Mum, please tell me it's not real!"

Sarah's knuckles whitened on the phone. Billy had been on social media minutes after they'd left. She pulled the phone away from her ear and mouthed a silent "Fuck!" before composing herself.

"Aoife, listen carefully," Sarah said, steadying her voice. "There are details in the post that I don't even know yet. Do not comment or share anything. Can you do that for me?"

"Y-yeah, okay," Aoife's voice shook, revealing her distress. "But Mum, was it true? Was Jazzy...?"

Sarah felt tears welling up like a weight had crashed down her chest. "Yes, sweetheart. I'm afraid she died. But I need you to keep this to yourself for now, okay? It's an ongoing investigation."

"Why can't you just tell people? Why do you have to keep things so secret?" Aoife's voice was laced with hurt.

Sarah's heart ached. "Because you know I need facts to find out what happened, there are going to be so many things that just aren't true, and I don't want you to get hurt by the nasty things people might say online. I promise, I'm doing everything I can. I love you more than you know."

"You promised me you'd be at my show," Aoife's voice trembled, and Sarah could hear the tears pooling behind her words.

The pain of her daughter's response cut deep. "I know, Aoife. And I'm so sorry. I wanted to be there... I'm proud of you. I just got pulled into the job again, and I hate that it feels like I'm letting you down. But, please know that you are the most important thing to me."

"Then how come you always miss the big things?" Aoife whispered, and for a moment, it felt like Sarah was standing face to face with her daughter, seeing the hurt in her eyes.

The pain in her daughter's voice made Sarah's chest ache.

"I'm so sorry, love, I promise, we will get through this together, and I'll make it up to you. Just stay away from social media for now, okay?" She said, wishing she could reach her by phone and hold her. "We're doing everything we can."

"Okay," Aoife replied quietly, though the trust had slightly cracked.

After ending the call, Sarah turned to Masterson, her expression grim. "Get Riley on the phone. Now."

When Riley Brennan answered, Sarah's voice tightened with controlled anger. "Billy Danes is posting about Jazzy's death on social media. I need you to monitor and archive everything he posts and the responses. Contact the platforms and see if we can slow this down."

"On it, Chief," Riley replied, sounding as surprised as they were by Billy's social media announcement.

Sarah made a sharp turn toward the stairs, bypassing the elevators entirely. "We need to have another chat with Mr. Danes," she said to Masterson, her pace quickening. Her mind was racing. Why would Billy post about Jazzy's death so quickly after their visit? Grief-stricken impulse or calculated move?

Her phone buzzed with a text from Riley: "Billy's post already has 50K likes and 10K comments. He's calling it murder and saying he'll find who did this if the police can't."

When they reached Room 412 again, Sarah noticed the "Do Not Disturb" sign that hadn't been there during their first visit. Her knock was met with silence at first, then hurried movement inside.

A transformed Billy Danes answered the door. Gone was the disheveled, grief-stricken man they'd left earlier.

Now, he stood before them, freshly clean-shaven and dressed in what appeared to be clothes for filming.

Though still red-rimmed, his eyes held a determined glint that set Sarah's instincts on edge.

The room, too, had transformed. The previous chaos of personal items had been tidied, and a camera stood ready on a tripod in the corner.

"Mr. Danes," Sarah began, keeping her tone even, "we've become aware that you've been posting about Jazzy's death on social media. We need to discuss that."

Billy nodded, with an almost feverish energy about him. "Yes, I had to let her fans know. They deserve to know the truth. I was just about to go live with a video."

Masterson moved subtly in front of the camera setup as Sarah continued, "And what truth would that be, Mr. Danes?"

"That Jazzy was murdered, of course," Billy replied, his voice rising with emotion. "And that I'm going to find out who did it. Her followers can help. We can solve this together!"

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "Mr. Danes, how exactly do you know it was murder?"

The question seemed to catch Billy off guard. He blinked, his confident demeanor faltering. "I... Well, it had to be. Jazzy would never... She wouldn't just die. Someone must have killed her."

"We haven't released any details about the cause of death, Mr. Danes," Sarah pressed. "So I'll ask again: why are you so certain it was murder?"

The transformation from grieving boyfriend to social media campaigner, his certainty about it being murder, his eagerness to involve Jazzy's followers—it painted a troubling picture.

"I... I didn't know for sure," Billy admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "I just couldn't believe she'd die accidentally. Jazzy was always so careful, so prepared for everything."

"Mr. Danes, I understand you're grieving, but your actions seriously jeopardize our investigation," Sarah said, her voice firm. "We need you to immediately cease all social media activity related to Jazzy's death."

Billy slumped onto the bed, the manic energy dissipating. "I just wanted to do something. I felt so helpless."

"We understand," Masterson said patiently, taking on the role of the good cop, resting a hand on Billy's shoulder. His voice softened to an almost paternal tone. "But right now, the best thing you can do is cooperate with us and stay offline. Those followers will still be there when this is all over. Stirring them up only makes our job harder, and I don't think that's what Jazzy would have wanted." He leaned in slightly, his expression earnest. "Now, if you have anything that would help us in our investigation, anything at all—even something that might seem insignificant—it is time to tell us. We need facts, not speculation."

Billy just stared at the floor, his shoulders slumping in defeat. His fingers twitched slightly, as if already missing the keyboard that had connected him to his online world. The fight seemed to drain out of him under the detective's paternal guidance, leaving behind a young man who suddenly looked much smaller than he had moments ago.

"Mr. Danes, the liaison officer, is on the way, so please stay offline," Sarah said. "You're not under arrest, but we must ensure you don't further compromise the investigation."

As Billy nodded, Sarah noticed something she'd missed earlier—a brochure for "Hidden Dublin Tours" peeking out from under the laptop. She made a mental note to check it out later.

In the lobby, they met with a young Garda, whom Sarah promptly briefed on keeping watch over Billy. As they walked to the car, the rain had intensified, drumming against the hotel's glass entrance.

"Let's just hope he doesn't start charging people for the 'exclusive' livestream from his grief tour. What do you make of him?" Masterson asked as they hurried toward the Volvo.

"He's lying about the missing person report, the historian, maybe, and probably when he last saw Jazzy alive."

Sarah slid into the driver's seat, water dripping from her coat. "But why post about her death on social media? Is he trying to control the narrative? Create an alibi? Or is there something else going on?"

"His behavior changed completely between our visits," Masterson observed as he buckled his seatbelt.

Sarah started the engine, her fingers drumming on the steering wheel in rhythm to John Mellencamp playing softly on the radio—a habit that surfaced whenever she was deep in thought. The case was growing more complex by the minute.

"Shawn," she said as they pulled out of the parking lot, "I think we need more resources on this one. Riley and Murphy are already swamped with the digital and background checks."

"What about your nephew, Colin O'Neil?" Masterson suggested. "I heard he's in Dublin for that exchange program. Supposed to be quite sharp."

Sarah's eyebrows shot up. "Colin's here? In Dublin?"

"Aye. He's Top of his class, from what I hear."

Sarah fell silent, memories flooding back. Colin was the son of her older brother, and thus continued the family tradition in law enforcement, at least on Sarah's father's side. Sarah's older brothers Frank and James had both followed their father into law enforcement. Sarah's other older brother, Matt, stayed in Chicago and attended law school. Her mother's side of the family had taken a somewhat different path through Irish history, leading to interesting family dynamics.

She'd last seen Colin at her brother Frank's promotion ceremony in Belfast. He'd been fresh out of training then, full of sharp edges and eager enthusiasm, reminding her so much of herself at that age that it was almost painful to recall. But that had been three years ago. She should have known if he was here in Dublin now.

"You alright, Chief?" Shawn asked, noticing her prolonged silence.

Sarah nodded, pushing away thoughts of her complicated family history. Yeah, that's fine. Call Colin and brief him on the case."

As Shawn made the call, Sarah couldn't help but reflect on the irony of her situation. Here she was, a respected Chief Inspector with a family tree that branched into both sides of the law. Her father had been a homicide detective in Chicago; his family had been officers in Ireland and the U.K. for generations, serving with distinction. However, her mother's side had a distinct reputation in Dublin, with deep ties to organized crime that dated back decades.

One of the primary reasons her parents fled to America years ago was to seek a fresh start away from the weight of family expectations on both sides. And now, here she was, back in Dublin.

The rain intensified as they pulled into the station parking lot. Shawn finished his call with Colin just as Sarah turned off the engine.

"He'll meet us inside," Shawn reported. "Sounds keen. I'll give him a complete briefing and start him on making calls to the historical sites on Jazzy's list."

Sarah's mind worked even faster, piecing together what they knew. A social media star with millions of followers was found dead on a Dublin beach. A boyfriend who seemed more interested in likes and comments than finding the truth, and somewhere, a killer who thought they'd gotten away with it.

What had Jazzy Halls discovered in Dublin that was worth killing for?

* * *

Chapter 3

Sarah sat at her desk, the blue glow of her computer screen illuminating her focused expression as she scrolled through Jazzy's social media accounts. Her noise-canceling headphones filled her head with Tom Petty's mellow voice, creating a private bubble in the bustling station. The case files were spread across her desk in organized chaos, each document a potential piece of the puzzle.

The social media influencer had built quite a following—over a million followers on her public Instagram and maxed out the 5,000-friend limit on her personal Facebook page. The sheer number of connections made Sarah's investigative instincts tingle. Anyone in that digital crowd could be a potential witness or suspect.

The irony wasn't lost on her. Here she was, investigating someone's social media presence while maintaining strict oversight of her own children's online activities. In their house, full access to social media was a non-negotiable condition. Her daughter Aoife had accepted the terms without hesitation, shrugging as she handed over her passwords. "I have nothing to hide," she'd said, her teenage confidence unwavering.

Liam, her son, had been a different story entirely. The battle had been epic, and his teenage indignation had reached new heights. "You just want to spy on me!" he'd accused, his face flushed with anger.

Sarah hadn't bothered to sugar-coat it. "Yes, I do," she'd replied, her tone carrying all the weight of her maternal and professional authority.

"I could just do it without telling you," Liam had shot back, arms crossed defiantly.

Aoife, who'd been lounging on the sofa nearby, had burst out laughing. "Good luck with that," she'd told her brother, rolling her eyes. "Do you really think she couldn't find it? She's literally a detective, Liam."

A reminder of Sarah's investigative skills had only frustrated Liam further. He'd stormed out of the room, slamming doors in his wake. It had taken weeks, but he eventually came around, realizing that having his mother's oversight wasn't the end of the world he'd imagined it to be.

As Sarah studied Jazzy's social media presence, she found herself drawn to the influencer's recent posts about Ireland. The page was a carefully curated collection of stunning landscapes and beaming fans' faces, but Jazzy's second-day posts caught Sarah's attention. One location stood out among the various city snapshots and fan selfies: Trinity College Library. The caption beneath the elegant photo of the Long Room read, "Doing a little research."

What had Jazzy been researching in one of the world's most famous libraries?

Sarah removed her headphones and reached for her phone to call Riley when she caught movement in her peripheral vision. A young man with dark, neatly cropped hair and a fresh-pressed uniform stood in her doorway—Colin O'Neil, her nephew. He had his father's build and her mother's eyes, an O'Neil through and through.

"Aunt Sarah," he said with a smile that didn't quite mask his nervousness.

Sarah stood, momentarily surprised by how much he'd matured since she'd last seen him. The gangly trainee was now a proper Garda, standing tall and confident. "Colin," she replied, stepping around her desk to hug him.

"You should have called me when you got to Dublin."

"I was going to," he said, flushing slightly. "But then the exchange program got intense, and I heard you were up for promotion..."

"Excuses, excuses," she said, but her smile took any sting from the words. "Sergeant Masterson briefed you?"

"Yes, Aunt Sarah. I mean, yes, ma'am," he hesitated, running a hand through his dark hair—the same O'Neil trait that ran through her side of the family. His eyes darted briefly to the stack of files on her desk before returning to meet her gaze.

"Chief or Sarah, while we're working," she corrected gently. "And none of that 'ma'am' shit either."

"Got it," he said, relaxing slightly. "Sergeant Masterson said you wanted me to look into the historical sites Jazzy planned to visit?"

"Yes, but I've just found something else. It looks like Jazzy visited Trinity College Library." Sarah turned her monitor so Colin could see the Instagram post. "I think we should head there now and see what she was researching."

"Right now?" Colin looked surprised.

"The first forty-eight hours are critical in a murder investigation, and we're already more than twelve hours in," Sarah said, grabbing her jacket. "I'll fill you in on the way."

On their way out, Sarah saw Riley at her desk. "Where's Shawn?" she called out. "He was off rushing the forensic report," Riley replied without looking up from her computer screen.

"Okay, Colin and I are heading to Trinity College," Sarah announced.

Riley acknowledged with a quick thumbs-up, still focused on her task.

In the car, Sarah glanced at him, a small smile playing on her lips. "I reviewed your file. You're at the top of your class and doing well, oh, and also, while you're working with me, you can lose the uniform."

"Cool," Colin said, straightening slightly in his seat. He tugged at his stiff collar, clearly relieved. "I wasn't sure if that would be allowed on this assignment. Uncle James always insisted on protocol."

Sarah nodded, navigating through a busy intersection. "James is by-the-book, always has been. I prefer practicality over formality. Plain clothes make it easier when interviewing civilians—people tend to clam up when they see the uniform."

"So, what's your plan after the exchange program?" Sarah asked, navigating through Dublin's midday traffic. "Go back to Belfast and work with your dad?"

Colin shifted in his seat, looking nervous and excited. "Well, I wanted to talk to you about that," he began. "My girlfriend is moving to Dublin to study at Trinity and plans to stay after. I want to move here, too."

"Following a girl to another city is a big step, isn't it?" she probed, her tone carefully neutral.

"Not just any girl," Colin replied, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small velvet box. The sight of it made Sarah's heart skip a beat. "I'm going to ask her to marry me."

Sarah felt warmth spread through her chest. Her nephew had grown up, ready to take on life's biggest adventures. Without hesitation, she decided immediately: "Well, congratulations!"

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "So you are asking me for a job too?"

"Well, yeah," he admitted, a slight blush coloring his cheeks. "I could learn a lot from you."

With a knowing grin, Sarah added, "You're hired."

The Library of Trinity College Dublin is a testament to centuries of learning. Its weathered stone walls house countless treasures of literature and history. The Old Library, the most ancient of its buildings, draws visitors worldwide. Its reputation precedes it like whispered legends through scholarly halls.

As they approached the entrance, Sarah noticed the queue of tourists waiting to view the Book of Kells and the Long Room. "Let's try another entrance," she said, leading Colin around to a side door where she flashed her badge to a security guard.

Inside, they were directed to the reference section, hoping to find someone who might remember assisting Jazzy. The Long Room itself was a breathtaking sight—a 213-foot chamber stretching endlessly into the distance. It cradled over 200,000 of the library's oldest and most precious volumes on oak shelves that reached toward the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Marble busts of great philosophers and writers stood sentinel along the room's length, their stern faces watching over centuries of accumulated knowledge.

"This place is massive," Colin whispered, his voice carrying despite his best efforts. His neck craned back as he tried to take in the full scope of the towering bookshelves, and he nearly stumbled as he walked. The air held that distinctive library smell—old leather, aged paper, and wood polish, mingling in a perfume that spoke of countless stories waiting to be discovered.

They wandered through the labyrinthine layout, footsteps echoing softly on the worn wooden floors, before finally locating the librarian's desk tucked away in a quiet corner. The workspace looked like it had been carved out of the history surrounding it, a modern computer incongruous among the antique furnishings.

Behind the desk sat a woman with silver-streaked hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Her cardigan was a soft blue shade that seemed to belong among the ancient tomes. Her eyes sparkled with warmth as she looked up from her computer screen. "How may I help you?" she asked, her voice carrying that particular librarian's blend of authority and helpfulness.

"I'm Chief Inspector O'Malley. This is Detective O'Neil." Sarah kept her voice low. She withdrew a photograph from her coat pocket, sliding it across the polished surface of the desk. "I'm trying to find out if this woman was here a couple of days ago."

The librarian's face lit up with recognition, her professional demeanor momentarily giving way to enthusiasm.

"Oh yes, Jazzy was here! My granddaughter is a big fan. She was beside herself when I told her about meeting her." She adjusted her glasses, leaning forward slightly. "Such a lovely young woman, very focused on her research."

"I'd like to know who was here helping her with that research," Sarah said, trying to keep the urgency out of her voice.

The woman's brow furrowed in thought, her fingers absently straightening a stack of papers on her desk. "I think that was Liz. She isn't here right now but should return in a few minutes. I'll text her and let her know you're waiting."

"Thank you, that would be great," Sarah replied, exchanging a meaningful look with Colin.

"That's easy, right?" Colin muttered, keeping his voice low enough that only Sarah could hear. His earlier enthusiasm had been tempered.

Sarah shook her head, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Which means, knowing my luck, something will go wrong." She glanced around, eyeing the book-laden shelves as if they might hold their secrets.

Liz arrived about fifteen minutes later, looking nothing like any librarian Sarah had ever seen. She had a striking presence—dark, intelligent eyes and glossy brown hair that fell in perfect waves past her shoulders. Her tailored blazer and pencil skirt projected an air of sophistication that seemed more suited to a fashion magazine than a library's reference desk. Sarah heard her nephew's sharp breath intake beside her. "Oh my," he whispered, clearly impressed. Sarah nudged him gently with her elbow, keeping her voice low and stern. "Let's be

professional now." Colin straightened his posture immediately, tugging at his collar as he cleared his throat.

"Yes, Chief," he replied, though she could still see the admiration lingering in his eyes.

"Hi, I'm Liz. How can I help you?" The young woman's warm smile lit up her already striking features.

"I understand you met with someone a few days ago, Jazzy Halls," Sarah said, keeping her tone professionally neutral.

"Oh yes, she was interested in learning about her family history in Ireland. My hobby is genealogy," Liz replied, leaning forward with evident enthusiasm. "It's fascinating how our past shapes who we are."

"Genealogy is a great hobby. What do you do professionally?" Sarah asked, noting how her eyes brightened at the question.

"I'm a geneticist working on my master's degree here at Trinity. However, I've always been interested in genealogy," Liz explained, straightening in her chair. "The science and the history complement each other beautifully. It's like solving puzzles across centuries."

"Take your last name," Liz suggested, looking at Sarah with genuine interest. "O'Malley. I'm sure you know about the origins of your clan—the seafaring O'Malleys from County Mayo?"

"I know it, but O'Malley is my married name, so it doesn't apply to me," Sarah added with a slight smile, pushing away thoughts of her divorce.

"We're O'Neils," Colin volunteered, trying to keep the conversation flowing.

Liz flashed her brown eyes at Colin, a spark of enthusiasm lighting them. "Oh, that's another interesting last name—descendants of High King Niall of the Nine Hostages, if the histories are right. The stories say he led raids into Roman Britain in the fourth century."

"Yes," Sarah said, steering the conversation back on topic before Colin could get too carried away. "Was that the only thing Jazzy was interested in, her family history?"

"She was also curious about Irish mythology and folklore," Liz replied, her expression growing thoughtful. "She seemed particularly drawn to stories about ancient sites along the coast—caves, stone circles, places with a history of rituals."

"Why are you so interested in Jazzy's visit?" Liz continued, her academic curiosity evident in her tone as she fiddled with her pen.

Sarah's expression grew grave. "I'm afraid Jazzy was found dead early this morning."

"Oh no, that's horrible!" Liz's face drained of color, her hand flying to her Celtic knot pendant. "What happened to her?"

"We're still trying to figure that out. I'm currently tracing her movements," Sarah explained, watching Liz's reaction carefully for any signs of deception. "Did she tell you anything about her visit to Ireland? Maybe what she planned on doing or seeing while she was here?"

"Well, her family was originally from Howth," Liz said, her voice shaky. "I think she was planning on going there. She was particularly interested in old ruins near the cliff walk and ancient caves. She seemed excited about exploring them."

Sarah felt her pulse quicken. Caves? "Did she mention going there with anyone?" Sarah pressed gently, noting how Liz's hands trembled.

"No," Liz shook her head, gathering her thoughts. "She said something about a boyfriend, but didn't sound too keen on him. It's kind of like the relationship had run its course. She seemed more interested in doing things on her own."

"Was she here at the library by herself?" Sarah asked, sensing they were nearing something important.

Liz paused thoughtfully. "At first, I thought she was here alone. We were together for maybe two hours, and then, a little later, I saw her talking to an older gentleman. They looked like they knew each other—comfortable, you know? Like it wasn't their first conversation."

"Can you describe this man?" Sarah leaned forward slightly, watching Liz's expression carefully.

"Oh, maybe in his 50s, white, looked as if he could have been a professor here," she replied, her brow furrowing as she tried to recall details. "Distinguished looking, if you know what I mean. The academic type."

"Could he have been?" Sarah pressed gently. "A professor here, I mean?"

Liz shook her head slowly. "If he was, I didn't know him. And I've been working in this department for five years now."

"Okay, thank you for your time," Sarah said as she stood up, subtly signaling to Colin to wrap things up. Here is my card. If you think of anything else, please call."

"Sure," said Liz, still visibly shaken. "That's really sad about Jazzy. She had so much energy and was full of life when I saw her." Her voice cracked slightly at the last words, and Sarah could see how deeply affected she was by the news.

On the way out, Sarah texted Riley, "Get CCTV for the Old Library and see if you can get a list of university professors who might match our mystery man."

As Colin and Sarah made their way across the quad, a cheerful female voice rang out, "Colin! Colin!" They both turned to see a young woman striding toward them, her energy infectious. Colin wasted no time; he dashed over

and kissed her lips quickly. Sarah couldn't help but notice that her nephew had a type. The young woman had captivating dark eyes and long brown hair that caught the sunlight just right. After greeting, they returned to Sarah, and Colin made the introductions. "Samantha, this is my Aunt Sarah and my new boss," he said proudly as if he were introducing a celebrity.

"You can just call me Sam; everyone does. It's nice to finally meet you; Colin talks about you all the time," she said, her smile warm and genuine.

"Well, it's nice to meet you too," Sarah replied, extending her hand to shake hers, feeling the strength in Sam's grip.

"Can you grab some coffee, or are you working?" Sam inquired, her tone inviting.

"We're here on business," Colin interjected, glancing at Sarah as if seeking her approval.

"If you want, you can go ahead, Colin. I have to get back to the office," Sarah said, noting the time ticking away.

"Are you sure?" he asked, a hint of reluctance in his voice.

"We'll be meeting at 1 for a briefing. Don't be late," Sarah reminded him, her tone firm yet affectionate. She turned to Sam, adding, "It's nice to meet you, Sam. We can talk more later."

"That would be great," she responded, her enthusiasm palpable as Colin hesitated momentarily before deciding. As Sarah settled into her car, the familiar buzz of her phone interrupted her thoughts. It was Jenn, her best friend and sister-in-law. Their bond had formed long ago when Sarah was just eight and Jenn was eleven.

Sarah still vividly remembered that day in the Chicago schoolyard when she'd seen Jenn cornered by bullies. Even at that tender age, Sarah hadn't hesitated to step in and defend her, confronting the bullies head-on and sending them fleeing.

"Hey, you!" Jenn's cheerful voice came through the phone, immediately brightening Sarah's mood. "Lunch today?"

"Oh, I wish I could," Sarah replied, genuinely regretful. "But I've just started this new case, and it's looking complicated."

"The girl on the beach? It's all over the news," Jenn said, her tone shifting to concern.

"That's the one," Sarah confirmed, the weight of the case settling in her chest.

"Okay, then take care of yourself. I know how you can get; don't work yourself to death," Jenn cautioned, her worry palpable even through the phone.

"I will. I'll try to call you later," Sarah assured her, grateful for her friendship and support during the job's chaos. As she drove back to the station, Sarah's mind was piecing together the new information. Jazzy had been researching her family history, specifically focused on Howth and its ancient caves. Now, a mysterious older man, possibly an academic, had met Jazzy at the library.

Was he the historian Billy had mentioned? And if so, what had he been helping Jazzy discover that was worth killing for?

The pieces were starting to align, but the picture they formed was still incomplete—and growing more dangerous by the hour. Sarah pressed down on the accelerator, the growing certainty that there was far more to Jazzy Hall's death than anyone had initially suspected.

Chapter 4

Sergeant Sloan Zachry was at his workspace in the conference room when Sarah arrived, surrounded by a chaotic mix of laptops and scattered papers. The digital forensics specialist looked up as she entered, his expression a blend of excitement and concern that immediately piqued Sarah's interest. Sloan had an eccentric personality and an exceptional talent for solving puzzles, often identifying patterns that others overlooked. His office space reflected his mind—at first glance, it appeared disorganized, but Sarah knew there was a system to his chaos.

"Chief," Sloan said, gesturing to the chairs. Several screens around him displayed fragments of data—financial records, social media timelines, and what appeared to be encrypted communications.

Sarah sat next to Shawn, who had returned from the forensics lab and was reviewing his notes. Sloan began to pull up documents on the main screen, his fingers moving rapidly across the keyboard.

"Jazzy's books are cleaner than my search history," Sloan said, pulling up spreadsheets on the main screen. "Girl paid bills like clockwork, zero debt, credit score that'd make a banker weep. Made serious bank from those videos too."

"How serious?" Sarah leaned forward.

"Six figures annually. Sponsorships, affiliate marketing, paid gigs—the whole influencer goldmine." Sloan cracked his knuckles. "Took me three Red Bulls to track all her revenue streams."

He continued, scrolling through more documents. "No criminal record. She was born in Dublin, but her mother moved to England when Jazzy was an infant. She grew up in southern England. On the surface, she appeared to be a good kid."

"And Billy?" Sarah asked.

Sloan's caffeine-fueled enthusiasm died. "Different beast entirely. William Danes, American citizen, and here's where it gets interesting..." He pulled up offshore banking records. "Guy's got more hidden accounts than a cartel."

"Brilliant," Colin muttered. "Young lad from Wisconsin with Swiss bank accounts. That's not suspicious at all."

"Money like that doesn't come from helping with videos," Shawn observed dryly. "Thirty years on the job, I can smell dirty money from across the room."

Sarah leaned forward, her interest thoroughly piqued. "That's a lot of money. Could it be an inheritance, trust fund?"

"Very unlikely," Sloan replied. "The deposits are irregular, varying amounts, and routed through multiple offshore accounts to obscure their origin. Classic money laundering."

"Go on," Sarah said, feeling the case expanding beneath her feet.

"That's not all," Sloan continued, pulling up another screen with practiced efficiency. "I found some encrypted communications on dark web forums. I traced them to an IP address. Danes has been in contact with Heritage Acquisition Limited."

"Where have I heard that name before?" Sarah asked, a nagging familiarity tugging at her memory.

"They're involved in antiquities trading," Sloan explained, his voice dropping slightly. "According to Interpol chatter, they're a front for art theft and smuggling. They've been on watchlists for years but are slippery."

Shawn and Sarah exchanged meaningful glances, the implications hanging heavy in the stale office air. Sarah stood and began pacing the room, her heels clicking against the floor as she processed this new information. What had started as a straightforward case had just veered into much murkier waters.

"Do you think this is related to Jazzy's death?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"I can't say for certain," Sloan admitted, rubbing his tired eyes, "but it's suspicious. Communications intensified in the weeks leading up to their Dublin trip. Daily contact."

"What about Jazzy's computer? Did you find anything on it?" Sarah pressed, hoping for something concrete.

"Not yet, someone attempted to delete some files, and there are also password-protected directories we are still working on cracking it."

"Still no cell phone?" Sarah asked, knowing it could be crucial evidence.

"Nope, hasn't been found yet," Riley said, entering the conference room with a stack of printouts. "Trinity's CCTV is a maze, but I'm picking apart the footage. Nothing screaming 'murder clue' yet."

"Shit," Sarah muttered, running a hand through her hair in frustration.

"The missing person report?" Sarah tried again, grasping for something positive.

"Nope, nothing," Murphy replied, shaking his head. "I checked with every precinct in Dublin. No report was filed about a missing tourist in the last three days."

"Maybe we should bring him in," Colin suggested as he entered, slightly out of breath from rushing back from his coffee with Samantha.

"No, we still have a Garda watching him at the hotel; let's see what he does," Sarah decided, wondering if Danes would lead them somewhere useful. "Sometimes people get careless when they think they're not being watched too closely."

"Alright," she said finally, her voice firm and resolved. Sloan, I want every bit of information you can find on Heritage Acquisition Limited and the individuals Danes has been communicating with. Shawn, talk to your contacts in Antiquities. See if they know anything about items being stolen or smuggled out of Dublin recently."

"Also, Riley," she continued, turning to the young detective, "I need everything you can find on professors or academics specializing in Irish history and archaeology, particularly anyone with connections to Heritage Acquisitions. According to Liz, at the library, Jazzy was meeting with someone who matched that description." "On it, Boss," Riley replied, already typing notes on her tablet.

"Colin, keep working on Jazzy's itinerary for her stay. She was planning to visit historical sites. I wanted to know if she ever got to any of them, and see if Billy made any calls to tour companies or historical sites."

"You think the historical sites and the thefts are connected?" Shawn asked.

"I think it's too coincidental that a social media star with no previous interest in archaeology suddenly comes to Dublin, starts researching ancient caves, meets with a mysterious academic, and ends up dead—all while her boyfriend is receiving large sums of money from a company involved in antiquities theft."

Sarah turned to the evidence board, where photos of Jazzy alive and dead were pinned alongside maps of North Bull Island and timeline notes. "We need to establish a clear timeline for Jazzy and Billy from the moment they arrived in Dublin."

"Okay," she said, checking her watch. "Let's wrap up for today and come at it fresh tomorrow morning. Riley, before you go, send what you have on the CCTV to my email. Sloan, keep working on those encrypted files. Good night, everyone. Go home and get some rest. Tomorrow might be a long day."

The team began to disperse, but Sarah remained, her eyes fixed on the evidence board. Something was nagging at her, a connection just beyond her grasp. She pulled up Jazzy's Instagram posts on her phone and scrolled through the carefully curated images of Dublin. The girl's bright smile and vibrant blue hair seemed to mock the grim circumstances of her death.

One photo in particular caught Sarah's attention—Jazzy standing outside the entrance to EPIC, The Irish Emigration Museum, with the caption: "Tracing my roots and uncovering some family secrets!"

Family secrets. Hidden history. The same themes kept emerging.

Sarah sat at her desk, her trusted noise-canceling headphones creating a cocoon of focus around her. The forensic report from North Bull Island Beach lay open before her, frustratingly inconclusive, offering nothing to move the investigation forward. Sarah found herself drawn back to Jazzy's videos for what felt like the hundredth time, studying her cheerful face as she bounced from location to location.

Sarah's eyes burned from staring at screens all day, but she couldn't stop scrolling through Jazzy's social media presence. There she was in the Mediterranean and along Spain's Costa del Sol, posing with that practiced influencer smile in front of the Eiffel Tower, her hair catching the Parisian sunlight. She'd been quite the traveler.

Suddenly, Sarah stopped scrolling. She returned to a post from six months ago—Jazzy in Barcelona, standing in front of the Sagrada Familia. The caption read: "Amazing architecture and even more amazing history! Thanks to my special guide for showing me the hidden treasures of this beautiful city!"

Sarah zoomed in on the image. A man's arm was visible at the edge of the frame—someone who had been cropped out of the photo but not completely erased. She could make out an expensive watch and the sleeve of what appeared to be a tweed jacket.

Looking more carefully now, she quickly searched for other posts from European cities. Athens, three months ago: "Ancient mysteries and modern discoveries! So grateful for expert guidance! "

Rome, four months ago: "Some treasures aren't on the tourist maps! "

Jazzy visited major historical sites and museums in each location. Her captions hinted at special access, hidden knowledge, and secret places in each location. In several photos, there was that same partial presence—a cropped figure, a hand, a shadow—someone deliberately kept out of frame.

Sarah checked the dates of these trips against the large deposits into Billy's account. There was a pattern. Each deposit came shortly after one of Jazzy's European trips.

The pieces were starting to fit together, forming a picture that made Sarah's blood run cold. Jazzy hadn't simply stumbled onto a smuggling operation; she had been an unwitting part of it. Her popular travel vlogs provided the perfect cover for scouting locations, making connections, and possibly even moving items across borders without suspicion.

However, something had changed when they arrived in Ireland. Maybe Jazzy had figured out what was really happening. Maybe she had decided to investigate on her own. And that decision had cost her her life.

Suddenly, Sarah glanced at the clock and realized it was already past 9 PM.

When she checked her phone, she saw a missed call from Aoife. With a pang of guilt, she realized she had completely missed her daughter's art show.

Gathering her things, Sarah switched off the lights in her office. The case was complex, with tendrils reaching into unexpected places—social media fame, stolen artifacts, smuggling rings, and a death that was looking less accidental by the hour. But for now, it would have to wait.

She had an apology to make to her daughter, and then she needed rest. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, including exploring the caves with her grandfather. Whatever revelations awaited them there, Sarah knew they would face them better with clear minds and rested bodies.

Chapter 5

The cool Dublin night air hit Sarah's face as she stepped outside the station, a gentle reminder that sometimes, the best thing you could do for a case was step away and come back stronger. The streets were quiet now, most commuters long gone, leaving behind only the occasional late-night worker and pub-goers seeking respite from their daily lives.

As she drove home, Sarah's thoughts drifted back to Sloan's earlier comment: "On the surface, she appeared to be a good kid." They were all good kids until trouble found them. She had heard that line too often in her career and seen it play out in ways that still haunted her dreams.

"Just a good kid." A troubling thought crept into her mind—the dark worries she had locked away, the ones that surfaced every time she worked cases involving young victims. Aoife's face floated into her thoughts; her bright smile and quick wit starkly contrasted with Jazzy's fate. Sarah pressed her index finger to her forehead, sealing that door tightly. Being both a mother and a cop meant maintaining walls between certain thoughts, keeping the horrors of one world from bleeding into the other. It was a dance she had tried to perfect over the years, but in some cases, those walls felt thinner than others.

Sarah pulled up to her house, fatigue weighing heavily on her shoulders. As she approached the entrance, she noticed every light in the house blazing. "What the fuck?" Sarah whispered to herself, a mixture of confusion and concern washing over her. She barely had time to turn her key in the lock before the door swung open. Suddenly, she found herself engulfed in a whirlwind of activity. Sarah's son Liam was a jumbled mess of excitement and worry. The family dog, Finn, was barking and jumping, feeding off the chaotic energy. And there, amidst it all, stood Moira—her ex-mother-in-law, who had somewhat unexpectedly remained a part of their lives after the divorce. Sarah often joked that, next to her kids, Moira was the best thing she'd gotten out of the failed marriage.

Sarah raised her hands, trying to calm the frenzy. "Alright, alright! Liam, please. Finn, down, boy!" Her voice carried just enough authority to cut through the chaos, though the exhaustion threading through it was unmistakable.

As the noise level dropped, Sarah took a deep breath, the scent of Moira's cooking finally registering through the fog of her fatigue. She looked at her son's eager faces, saw Moira's concern etched in the fine lines around her eyes, and realized that something significant had happened while she was immersed in her investigation. The weight of her absence from their lives today hung heavily in the room. She hugged her son, feeling his lanky frame against hers, "I love you, but can I answer all your questions tomorrow? It's been a hell of a day."

Liam pulled back slightly, studying her face with that perceptive gaze that always reminded her of his father before things went sour. He nodded in agreement, his dark hair falling across his forehead. "Are you ok, Mum?" Liam asked, his voice carrying that slight crack of adolescence.

"I'm fine, sweetheart," Sarah said as she gave him another hug, breathing in the familiar scent of his shampoo and that hint of grass from football practice. Her arms tightened around him momentarily, drawing strength from the contact.

Moira stepped forward, her practical nature taking charge as always. "Okay, then off to bed with you, leave your mother be." Her Irish brogue brooked no argument.

Sarah felt relief wash over her as Liam nodded in understanding, reluctantly pulling away. The genuine concern and love in his eyes made her heart ache—sometimes, she forgot how grown-up he was becoming, how much he noticed despite her attempts to shield him from the darker aspects of her work.

"Thanks, love," she said, giving him one more quick squeeze before letting go, her fingers lingering on his shoulder for a moment longer than necessary.

As he headed upstairs, his sock-clad feet padding softly on the wooden steps, Sarah caught Moira's expression—a mixture of sympathy and something unspoken. The house suddenly felt too quiet. "Where's Aoife?" Sarah asked, glancing toward the darkened stairwell.

"Upstairs, she is quite upset," Moira said, crossing her arms over her chest. She shut herself in and wouldn't even come downstairs to eat." Sarah felt remorse swell within her chest, expanding like a dark blot: one more absence.

"You look done in," Moira said, her usual sharp tone softened with genuine concern as she studied Sarah's face in the harsh kitchen light. "Have you eaten anything today? And don't lie to me—I've known you too long." Sarah tried to remember through the blur of interviews, crime scenes, and endless cups of station coffee. Had she eaten? There'd been coffee, lots of coffee, and maybe... "Breakfast, maybe," she said, running a hand through her disheveled hair.

"That's what I thought," Moira clicked her tongue disapprovingly, already moving toward the refrigerator with the efficiency of someone who had fed reluctant eaters for decades. "Sit. I'll heat the shepherd's pie I made for the kids. Eat and get your head straight before you talk to her. That girl needs her mother, not the Chief Inspector right now."

"Moira, you don't have to," Sarah protested weakly, even as she sank into the nearest kitchen chair, her body suddenly acknowledging how exhausted she truly was.

"Sarah Jane O'Malley, I didn't spend forty years married to a police officer without learning a thing or two about days like this. Sit down before you fall down." Moira's tone brooked no argument. She handed Sarah a glass of fine Irish whiskey. "Oh, bless you, Moira." Sarah sank into a kitchen chair, absently patting Finn, who'd followed her faithfully. Despite their complicated relationship, Moira had always understood the demands of police work. Her late husband, Michael, had been the same—missing dinners, working late, chasing cases. After Michael passed away a few years ago, Moira devoted herself to her grandkids. Even though Sarah would never admit it aloud, she was deeply grateful for Moira's presence in their lives.

As Moira bustled around the kitchen, Sarah could hear the muffled sounds of her children's footsteps above. The familiar creaks of the floorboards, Finn's contented sighs, and the clink of plates as Moira worked—it all felt suddenly, intensely ordinary—a sharp contrast to the bizarre twists the case had taken today.

"Here, love," Moira set a plate before her. "Eat. Then sleep. Whatever monsters you're chasing will still be there in the morning."

Sarah looked up at her former mother-in-law, feeling a rush of gratitude. "Thanks, Moira. For everything." Moira waved her off, already gathering her things. "I'm just doing what grandmothers do. I'll see myself out. And Sarah?" She paused at the kitchen door. "Be careful with this one. I've seen that look in your eyes before—when a case gets under your skin. Remember, you've got two children who need their mother in one piece."

With that, she was gone, leaving Sarah alone with her thoughts and a plate of perfectly warmed shepherd's pie. Above her, the house settled into its nighttime quiet, broken only by the occasional creak of floorboards and Finn's gentle snoring. Sarah took a big sip of the whiskey; Moira was right. This case was getting under her skin; a young girl just starting life had ended up dead on a beach, and that made Sarah unbelievably angry. She finished her meal and whiskey, her mind still churning with details of the case even as the comfort food settled warmly in her stomach. A soft noise from the doorway made her look up, pulling her from the mental web of evidence and suspects.

"You promised you'd be at my art show," Aoife said quietly, standing in the kitchen entrance with her arms wrapped around herself protectively. Her eyes remained fixed on the tiled floor, shoulders slightly hunched. "You didn't just miss it, Mum. You missed me winning first place. They called my name, and I looked for you in the crowd, but you weren't there."

"I'm so sorry, love, the case—" Sarah started, her voice catching as the full weight of her daughter's disappointment crashed over her. The whiskey glass felt suddenly heavy in her hand.

"There's always a case." Aoife's voice was steady but firm, a maturity beyond her seventeen years evident in her measured tone. She finally looked up, her eyes reflecting hurt rather than anger. "Liam made excuses for you. Said you were saving lives and that what you do matters. He tried so hard to make it okay. But what about our lives? When do we get to be important enough for Chief Inspector Sarah O'Malley to show up?"

"You are important," Sarah said, pushing back from the table and taking a step toward her daughter. "You and Liam are the most important things in my world."

"I don't feel like it, Mum," Aoife said, a slight tremor finally breaking through her composed facade. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture so reminiscent of her younger self that it made Sarah's heart ache.

"Sometimes I think dead bodies get more attention from you than your children do."

Sarah wrapped her arms around her daughter, pulling Aoife into a tight embrace that conveyed all the words she couldn't seem to find. The familiar scent of her daughter brought back memories of simpler times, before cases and criminals had consumed so much of her life.

"I'm so sorry, I know I've let you down, but I love you more than anything. I don't have any excuses," Sarah whispered, her voice thick with emotion. Her hands trembled slightly as she stroked her daughter's hair, the way she used to when Aoife was small and the world's problems could be solved with a mother's touch. The weight of her failures pressed down on her shoulders, heavier than any investigation she'd ever carried.

Aoife hesitated momentarily before melting into the embrace, her initial stiffness giving way to the comfort of her mother's arms. She rested her head against Sarah's shoulder, a gesture that made her seem younger than her seventeen years.

"I know you love us, Mum; I just wish you would show it," she said softly, her words muffled against Sarah's sweater. She pulled back, eyes glistening with unshed tears, a perfect mirror of her mother's emotional struggle. "Actions speak louder than words, you taught me that." She sighed, running her fingers through her dark hair before turning away. "Maybe someday your actions will match what you say matters to you."

With that, Aoife stepped out of her mother's embrace, and the loss of contact left Sarah suddenly cold. Her daughter offered a sad smile before returning upstairs, each footstep on the wooden staircase echoing in the silence between them.

Sarah returned to the kitchen counter, her footsteps heavy on the tiled floor. The emptiness of the room seemed to amplify around her now that Aoife had gone. With trembling fingers, she reached for her tumbler, the amber liquid catching the overhead light as she tilted it back. The whiskey burned a familiar path down her throat, a momentary distraction from the ache in her chest. Without hesitation, she reached for the bottle again and

poured herself another generous measure, the liquid sloshing dangerously close to the rim. She stared into the fresh pour, seeing not the whiskey but the reflection of her failures as a mother, wondering how many drinks it would take to blur those painful edges tonight.

Chapter 6

The dream started as it always did - Sarah standing in a dark, oppressive hallway, a single-lighted room beckoning at the far end. Her heart raced as she fought against the urge to move forward. She didn't want to walk there, knowing all too well what awaited her, but an unseen force pushed relentlessly from behind. The more she tried to resist, digging her heels into the floor, the harder the force pushed. It was like wading through molasses, each step a battle against her own body and the inexorable pull of destiny.

Finally, Sarah reached the threshold. The bright, sterile room assaulted her senses with its harsh fluorescent lighting and the sharp tang of disinfectant. In the center stood a gurney, a sheet-draped body lying still upon it. Sarah's breath caught in her throat as she approached, her hand trembling as it reached for the edge of the sheet. Then came the scream - a sound Sarah had heard before, unfortunately, too many times in her line of work. It was the heart-wrenching wail a mother makes when told her child is dead, a primal howl of grief and despair that seemed to echo through the very fabric of reality. But this time, to her horror, Sarah realized the scream was coming from her own throat.

The world began to shake, the sterile room dissolving around her as consciousness slowly returned. "Mum! Mum, wake up!" a voice called urgently, cutting through the fog of her nightmare.

Sarah's eyes flew open, her chest heaving as she gasped for air. For a terrifying moment, she couldn't breathe, her lungs refusing to cooperate as the remnants of the dream clung to her like a shroud.

"Mum, take a breath; you were dreaming," a concerned face swam into view above her. It was Aoife, her daughter, looking down with worry etched across her features. Sarah blinked rapidly, trying to orient herself as the familiar surroundings of her living room came into focus. She was on the sofa, where she must have fallen asleep last night.

"Oh fuck," Sarah muttered, her voice hoarse as she rubbed her face with trembling hands. She could feel cold sweat plastering her shirt to her back, her heart still pounding a frantic rhythm against her ribs.

Aoife's gentle hand was on her shoulder, steadying her. "You're okay now, Mum," she soothed, her voice a comforting reminder of where and when Sarah truly was. "It was just a dream."

Sarah nodded weakly, focusing on her breathing as she tried to shake off the lingering tendrils of the nightmare.

Aoife spoke again after a few minutes of tense silence broken only by Sarah's ragged breaths.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked, her tone gentle but practical. "Might help chase away those shadows."

Sarah considered for a moment and then nodded gratefully. As Aoife moved to the kitchen, Sarah sat up on the sofa, running her fingers through her sweat-dampened hair. The nightmare might be over, but she knew its effects would linger—they always did. Aoife knew better than to ask about the dream; it wasn't the first time she had shaken her awake from it. Something Sarah would never talk about.

Sarah took a long sip of coffee, which Aoife made exactly as she liked: strong with just a splash of milk.

Sometimes, her daughter's thoughtfulness caught her off guard. She was waiting for that complicated teenage angst to come, but so far, Sarah knocked on the wooden coffee table. She noticed her daughter's questioning look.

"Listen, honey, about last night, I'm sorry—" Sarah began.

"It's okay, Mum, it's a new day," Aoife interrupted as she smiled at Sarah. "I get it. Really. But..." she hesitated, fiddling with her mug. "Just... be careful, okay? Some of the stuff people are saying online about Jazzy's death... It's pretty scary."

"Yeah, I know, but don't worry, please, everything will be fine," Sarah said.

"Was it murder?" Aoife asked.

Sarah looked at her daughter. She had always been honest with her children, in stark contrast to her mother, who kept everything to herself and felt children should be seen but never heard.

"I don't know yet. We have to wait for M.E., and we'll see what she has to say. It would help if you took a break from the internet for a while. This case will bring out some real crazies."

"I'll think about it," Aoife said slowly.

Sarah got up and kissed her forehead. "Okay, I need to get cleaned up. Could you please check on your brother?"

Sarah quickly changed into fresh clothes. Her heart sank as she returned to the kitchen and saw Aoife and Liam at the counter, their faces illuminated by the laptop's glow. Sarah took a deep breath and changed tactics.

Liam quickly closed the laptop as his mother entered the room.

"Alright, Liam, show me what you're reading. I need to know what's being said out there." Sarah said.

Liam looked surprised at the sudden shift but quickly reopened his laptop. "Well, there are loads of different stories. The Journal has the basic facts about finding her on the beach. But the online stuff is wild - especially the comments on Billy's posts."

Sarah pulled up a chair beside her son. "Show me these comments."

"See," Liam scrolled through the responses to Billy's grief-stricken post. "People are saying all sorts of things. Some think Jazzy was onto some big story about Dublin's underground. Others are talking about her last TikTok, where she teased about showing the real Ireland. Then there are the really sick ones..."

"Just go past those ones," Sarah interrupted.

Aoife joined them, peering over their shoulders. "Her fans are playing detective, Mum. They're analyzing every post she made since arriving in Dublin. Look at this thread..."

Sarah watched Aoife pull up a Twitter thread breaking down Jazzy's final days. The amateur sleuths had already mapped her movements, compiled screenshots of her last social media updates, and were developing theories about her death. Sarah knew that most of this was nonsense, full of amateur detectives and conspiracy theories. Welcome to Modern policing, O'Malley. Where every jackass with a phone thinks they're Sherlock Holmes, but she knew occasionally you will find helpful information.

"This is actually useful," Sarah murmured, more to herself than the kids. She paused, fixing both kids with a stern look. "But this stays between us. No sharing, no commenting, no engaging with any of these posts. Understood?"

"Yes, Mum," they replied in unison.

Sarah checked her watch. "Right, finish getting ready for school. I need to make some calls."

Sarah pulled out her phone to text Brennan as her children hurried off. She said, "I think we need to dive into Jazzy's follower discussions. They might have something useful. Please get someone to go over it."

The media circus around Jazzy's death was unavoidable now, but maybe they could use it to their advantage. Sarah just hoped they could separate the valuable information from the wild speculation before further damage was done to the investigation.

Sarah looked up from her laptop screen to see Shawn standing awkwardly in her kitchen doorway. Moira breezed past him and went straight to the stove.

"Found your sergeant looking lost on the doorstep," Moira announced, pulling eggs from the fridge. "Thought I'd save him from ringing the bell and waking the whole neighborhood. Breakfast, Sergeant?"

"No, thank you... yes, please, Mrs. O'Malley." Shawn quickly changed his answer at Moira's raised eyebrow. Sarah hid a smile—everyone knew better than to refuse Moira's cooking.

"Chief," Masterson turned to Sarah, lowering his voice. "Dr. Kelly's ready with the preliminary findings. Said we should come by this morning."

Sarah nodded, closing Liam's laptop. "Kids!" she called out. "Breakfast, then school!"

"The M.E. can wait ten minutes while you eat something proper," Moira declared, cracking eggs into a pan.

"God knows what time you'll remember to eat otherwise."

Aoife and Liam tumbled back into the kitchen, their eyes widening at the sight of Sergeant Masterson sitting uncomfortably at their breakfast table.

"Morning, Sergeant Masterson," Aoife said politely, while Liam just nodded, trying to look cool and detached despite his obvious curiosity.

"Right then," Moira announced, placing plates of eggs and toast in front of everyone. "Eat up, all of you. Including you, Sergeant. Can't solve crimes on an empty stomach."

Sarah watched as Moira efficiently managed the breakfast scene, keeping the kids from asking too many questions and getting Shawn to relax enough to eat his breakfast. It was a reminder of why, despite everything, Moira stayed in their lives after the divorce.

Moira refilled her coffee and looked at her knowingly. "Now, who needs lifts, and where? I can take the children to school if you two need to head straight out."

"Alright," Sarah said, standing. "Moira, thank you. Kids behave. Remember what we discussed. Shawn, let's go."

Chapter 7

On the drive to the M.E.'s office, Shawn filled her in on Colin's progress. "The lad's done good work," he said. "Found out Jazzy – or Jessica Shaw – has an aunt living in Blackrock. Maeve Shaw. Colin tracked her down last night."

"He's got good instincts," Sarah nodded approvingly at how quickly Colin had tracked down Jazzy's aunt. "He takes after his Auntie and will join our team permanently. He's planning to move to Dublin." A note of pride crept into her voice.

"Really?" Masterson's eyebrows shot up in surprise as he navigated through morning traffic.

"Yup, he wants to get married to his girlfriend," Sarah explained, watching the familiar streets pass by. "They're pretty serious about it."

"Have you met her yet?" Shawn asked, glancing over at her.

"Yeah, briefly yesterday, she seems nice; he wants to do a proper family dinner to introduce her to everyone else," she said, imagining the chaos that would ensue.

"Oh, you told the lad what a bad idea that is, didn't you?" Masterson chuckled. "Meeting your clan at once will send her running for the hills."

"Oh, I did warn him," Sarah said, shaking my head with a rueful smile. "But apparently, she's excited about it. Says she can't wait to meet everyone."

With silver hair pulled back in its usual bun, Dr. Catherine Kelly was waiting at the entrance. "Finally. Your nephew beat you here—punctuality must skip generations. Ms. Shaw's waiting."

Sarah had known Doctor Kelly for over fifteen years, and the woman had never once wasted time with pleasantries. "Ms. Shaw confirmed the identification?" Sarah asked as they walked through the sterile corridors.

"Indeed," Dr. Kelly replied, her heels clicking against the floor.

They found Colin in Dr. Kelly's office with a woman in her early fifties who had Jessica's striking blue eyes, now red from crying.

"Ms. Shaw," Sarah said gently. "I'm Chief Inspector O'Malley. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. I saw her, you know," Maeve's voice was barely above a whisper. "I saw her just days ago, you know." Maeve's voice cracked. "Full of life, asking about old family stories. Now she's..."

"I will need to talk to you about Jazzy, but could you please wait until I finish with the Doctor?" Sarah said, keeping her voice gentle but professional.

"Oh, Chief Inspector, I want to do what I can to help you find out what happened." Ms. Shaw said, dabbing at her eyes with a crumpled tissue. She straightened her shoulders slightly, as though trying to compose herself through sheer force of will.

"Ryan," Dr. Kelly called to one of her assistants. "Please escort Ms. Shaw to the conference room and make sure she has tea."

Once the door closed behind them, Dr. Kelly's professional demeanor became even more serious. She moved to her desk and pulled up several photos on her computer screen.

"Cause of death was drowning," she began, "the water in her lungs is a mixture of freshwater and salt, with traces of minerals typically found in underground springs."

"Underground springs?" Masterson repeated.

"Exactly," Kelly nodded grimly. "More peculiar still, her body shows no signs of being in the water for any length of time."

"Any signs of struggle?" Sarah asked.

"No defensive wounds, no bruising or trauma consistent with a fight, no sign of sexual assault. But we found traces of a sedative in her system. Nothing illegal – similar to over-the-counter sleep medication, but the concentration was unusually high."

"So someone drugged her?" Colin asked.

"Most likely," Kelly confirmed.

Dr. Kelly continued her briefing, "The sand on her body is inconsistent with North Bull Island; it's a different mineral composition. I've sent samples for analysis."

"What about the time of death?" Sarah asked.

"The best guess is 12 to 16 hours before she was found."

Sarah studied the photos carefully, the pieces slowly shifting into place. Jazzy hadn't died where she was found. Someone had moved her body, but why?

"What is this?" Sarah asked, pointing to Jazzy's shoulder.

"A tattoo of some kind," Kelly replied. Sarah had seen it before, but where?

"Right," Sarah straightened up. "Let's go talk to Ms. Shaw."

They found Maeve Shaw in the conference room, hands wrapped around an untouched cup of tea. The nurse's uniform, visible beneath her coat, suggested she had been headed to work.

"Ms. Shaw," Sarah said, sitting across from her. "I understand you're a nurse... St. Vincent's?"

Maeve nodded.

"I need to ask you a few questions about Jessica's visit."

Maeve finally took a sip of tea. "I was on my break at the coffee shop near the hospital. She met me there; I almost didn't recognize her at first – the last time I saw her, she was just a little girl, all blonde curls and dimples. Her mother, my sister Kate, moved them to Southampton after Jessica's father passed away. She was just a baby then."

"And her mother?" Sarah prompted.

"Kate's not well," Maeve said softly. She hasn't been for years. There's no way she could travel to Dublin, even for..." her voice cracked. "this."

Sarah waited as Maeve collected herself. "Tell me about your conversation at the coffee shop."

"She was so excited, full of energy. She talked about how coming to Ireland would take her vlogging in a new direction. I don't understand it, but she was so happy." Maeve managed a sad smile. "She started asking about my Mam and Gran. About the stories she used to tell us, children."

"What kind of stories?" Sarah asked

"Oh, the old folklore stories my Gran used to tell. King Lir, the Giant's Causeway, all the old mythology stories, you probably heard them yourself, Chief Inspector."

Sarah had heard them all; her grandmother had come to stay in America for a time, with a new bedtime story for Sarah and her siblings.

Sarah's grandmother's stories about the old ways of Ireland had always carried a warning beneath their whimsy. Some doors, once opened, couldn't be easily closed, and some knowledge, once sought, demanded a price.

"My family was from Howth on the eastern coast," Maeve continued. "Gran used to tell us about the Celts, who used the caves for their rituals. Said they knew secrets about crossing between worlds." Maeve shook her head.

"Children's stories. My Gran used to tell us kids that she was a witch; it was just her trick to ensure we behaved."

"Jessica and I had been emailing back and forth for a while. She had suddenly become so interested in the stories and their origins. The caves that my Gran used to say had the ghosts of the Celts. There are all kinds of stories about those caves. I guess she wanted to do videos about them. She talked about being in contact with a historian who said he could help with her research."

"A historian?" Sarah pressed.

"Yes, she said, someone who knew about Ireland's history had reached out about her videos. Said he could help her understand the history." Maeve's hands tightened around her cup. "I warned her to be careful. There have been stories about people disappearing in those caves for generations. I tried to tell her some things are better left in the past."

"Did she mention this person's name?"

"No, but..." Maeve hesitated. "She showed me a picture on her phone—an old photograph, yellowed with age. It showed a ceremony in one of the caves. She said she found it while doing her research."

Sarah glanced at Shawn briefly. "Would you recognize this photograph if you saw it again?"

"Oh yes, it scared me how similar it looked to the ones we have of my grandmother. The same caves, the same strange markings on the walls." Maeve looked up at Sarah. Jessica promised to show me more when she came back. She said she was meeting her historian friend and wanted him to take her to those caves."

Sarah leaned forward. "Ms. Shaw, these caves – do you know where they are?"

"Oh, I haven't been up there since childhood."

"Just a few more questions," Sarah said. "You mentioned your grandmother in photos near the caves. Do you still have these photographs?"

"Yes, at home. In an old album." Maeve checked her watch. "I need to get to my shift, but I can bring them by the station afterward."

One more thing crossed Sarah's mind. "Did she mention anything about her boyfriend, Billy Danes?"

"She did mention she was here with him, but she didn't seem too willing to talk about him," Ms. Shaw said, fidgeting. Sarah leaned forward, "Why?" asked Sarah, watching Maeve's expression carefully. The slight furrow in her brow caught Sarah's attention. "Did she say anything specific about him? Even something that might have seemed unimportant at the time?"

Maeve shifted in her seat, considering her words. "Well, you know how it is when you're young and in love: You just want to tell everyone about your relationship, share all the little details." She paused, wringing her hands slightly. "But it wasn't like that when she talked about him. There was something... off about it. I got the impression that she wasn't sure she could trust him. How she'd hesitate before mentioning his name and change the subject quickly - little things that make you wonder."

Sarah nodded, standing. "Thank you, Ms. Shaw. We'll have someone drive you to the hospital."

As Colin led Maeve out, Sarah turned to Shawn and said, "I think we need those photos, and we need to find those caves."

Sarah couldn't help wondering if the pieces were starting to come together or if she was being led down a rabbit hole of ancient caves and Celtic rituals. Something about this case kept nagging at her. The mysterious

historian's involvement and Jazzy's apparent distrust of Billy were setting off warning bells; in twenty years of police work, she had learned to trust those instincts. The way Maeve had described Jazzy's behavior around Billy reminded her of cases she had worked on before, where victims sensed something was wrong but couldn't quite grasp what it was. She had seen too many instances where those subtle warnings had been missed, and she wasn't about to let that happen again.

Chapter 8

As Sarah and Shawn strode into the station, their footsteps echoed against the polished floors. A young Garda named Ryan, stationed at the front desk, abruptly halted them. "Your 11 o'clock appointment is here, Chief," she announced, her voice steady as she glanced at the screen before her. "He's waiting in your office."

Confusion washed over Sarah's face. "I don't have an appointment with anyone," She replied, furrowing her brow. Ryan pivoted the computer screen towards her, revealing an unfamiliar name. "Mr. Smith from the German police."

"He's in my office now?" Sarah asked, a sense of urgency creeping into her voice.

Without wasting a moment, Sarah dashed toward her office while Murphy strolled in from the break room, cradling a cup of tea in his hands.

"Was someone in my office?" Sarah inquired, breathless from both the run and the unexpected turn of events.

"Aye," Murphy responded, glancing around the room. "He was just here."

"You left him in my office?" she questioned, a hint of incredulity creeping into her tone.

"They said you were expecting him," Murphy replied, shrugging.

"Okay, find him now," She ordered, her voice firm and unwavering.

As the team fanned out to locate the mysterious visitor, Sarah saw a man she didn't recognize sprinting toward the emergency stairs. "Stop!" she shouted, adrenaline surging through her. She quickly turned back to Colin.

"He's here," Sarah said, determination etched on her face.

Colin and she raced to the stairs, the urgency heavy in the air. "Up or down?" they wondered, the sound of a door slamming above them giving their answer.

"Guess it's up," Sarah said to Colin, her heart racing as they ascended. They made it to the roof just in time to witness the man leap five feet from the rooftop down to the parking garage below. Without a second thought, Sarah stripped off her jacket, adrenaline coursing through her veins, and sprinted for the edge. She pushed off with all her might, landing hard on the garage floor. Sarah rolled to absorb the impact, quickly regaining her feet as she continued the chase.

Colin, momentarily stunned, turned back to the stairs, where Chief Superintendent Tom Bradley and Shawn stood in disbelief, their eyes wide.

"Did she jump over that edge?" Tom asked incredulously, still processing what he had just witnessed.

Colin nodded, urgency flooding his voice as he replied, "They went over to the garage," before sprinting down the stairs. Meanwhile, Shawn was already on the radio, calling for backup units to head to the garage.

Sarah arrived just in time to see the man seize a woman from her car, forcefully dragging her from the driver's seat. Tom, Colin, and Shawn emerged from the stairs at the opposite end of the garage, their expressions a mix of determination and shock. In a flash, the man reversed the car, barreling straight toward them, forcing them to take cover. He then shifted the car into drive and sped directly at Sarah. Sarah barely managed to leap out of the way in time.

Without hesitating, she sprinted toward a car that a young Garda had just exited. Colin dove into the passenger seat as Sarah slid behind the wheel, the engine roaring to life beneath her hands. Sarah slammed on the gas, hurtling toward the exit of the garage. Just as they neared the exit, the man abruptly abandoned his car, blocking their path. Sarah had no time to react; the impact was sudden and jarring as she crashed into the back of it, the airbags exploding violently in her face, momentarily disorienting her.

Sarah opened the car door and slid out, landing hard on the ground. Dizziness and disorientation swirled around her like a storm, and she tried to stand, but her legs betrayed her, sending her toppling against the car. Tom rushed over, catching her just before she hit the pavement again. "Call an ambulance!" he shouted, his voice laced with urgency.

"I don't need an ambulance," Sarah asserted, trying to shake off the fog.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he demanded, his brow furrowed in concern.

"How's Colin?" Sarah asked, focus shifting as worry crept in.

"Little better than you, I think," he replied, glancing over his shoulder. Colin was standing, albeit unsteadily, shaking out the cobwebs of confusion.

Later, Sarah found herself lying in a hospital bed, an ice pack pressed to the side of her face. The sterile smell of antiseptic hung in the air as Jenn, her best friend and Doctor, entered, her presence a comforting balm amidst the chaos. The fluorescent lights overhead seemed to pulse with the dull throb of her headache.

"Okay, your CT scan is clear, and nothing is broken," Jenn said, lifting the ice pack with a teasing smile. "But you are going to have a shiner." Her expression shifted to one of seriousness. "Now, are you going to tell me why you were jumping off roofs? I thought we left those superhero fantasies behind in our teens."

"To be fair, I jumped from one roof to the other," Sarah replied, trying to inject some levity into the situation. She winced as she attempted to sit up straighter against the pillows. "Is Colin okay? He took quite a tumble, too."

"Yes, he's fine," Jenn confirmed, though her gaze remained scrutinizing. She made a note on Sarah's chart, the pen scratching against paper in the quiet room. "A few bruises and a wounded pride, but nothing serious. Your nephew seems to have inherited the O'Neil hard head."

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Tom stepped in. "Okay," Jenn said, turning back to Sarah and giving a wink. "I'll give you some time. I'll go get your discharge papers."

Sarah felt her cheeks warm slightly.

When the door closed behind her, Tom was at her side, enveloping her in a tight hug. "You scared the shit out of me. What were you thinking, going after him like that?" he said, his voice trembling with emotion.

"I was thinking about catching him. I'm fine. Besides, my record for long jumping is 6 feet, 4 inches..." she began, but he cut her off.

"I don't care if it's 20 feet. Please don't ever do that again," he insisted, his tone firm.

"Okay, no more long jumps," Sarah replied, a smile tugging at her lips.

"You sure you're alright?" he asked, his concern palpable.

"Just a little headache, that's all," Sarah answered, trying to reassure him.

"Alright, I need to get back. I need to find out how the hell this guy bypassed our security," he said, moving toward the door.

Sarah started to get up, but he stopped her, holding up a hand. "Oh no, no. Jenn is going to take you home, and you are going to rest. And before you say anything else, I'm still your boss at work and giving you an order."

She leaned back with a groan. "If you say so."

"Tomorrow, you can fill me in on what you have on this Hall's murder," he added. "You also need to look at the personnel files I sent you. Shawn is retiring next month, and Riley will take her sergeant exam. Colin is good—very bright—but he's inexperienced. You need a seasoned inspector on your team. The files I sent you are some solid candidates."

"Okay, I'll get to it," She said, mentally jotting down my to-do list.

"What if, for right now, I transfer James over? He's good, and he can be a big help. I think I will have to take a different approach to this case," Sarah suggested, hoping he would see its merit.

"You'd be good working with your brother. Have the two of you worked on a case together before?" Tom asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, no, but it will be fine. I can trust him to get things done," Sarah assured him, her confidence bolstering her resolve.

"Okay, see you tomorrow then," he said. She nodded, feeling the day's weight begin to lift, even just a little.

Chapter 9

"Are you sure you're good?" Jenn asked as she stopped in front of Sarah's house, concern etched on her face. "Yes," she replied, glancing at the darkened windows. "It looks like I'll have a quiet house for a while, so I plan on enjoying it," Sarah said.

As Sarah inserted her key into the lock, the click echoed through the empty space, a sharp sound that seemed to slice through the stillness. Finn, her loyal German Shepherd, was waiting, his tail wagging, his nails clicking against the hardwood floors as he approached. "Hey ya," Sarah said as she petted his head, scratching behind his ears the way he loved. "Did they go off and forget to feed you?" His eager eyes and gentle whine told her everything she needed to know. Dropping her work bag by the door, Sarah felt a mix of relief and solitude wash over her. It was just her now—a rare moment of peace in the chaos of her life.

She pulled out her phone and found two messages waiting. The first was from Aoife: "Out with Emma, getting dinner and going shopping. Be home soon, x." Liam's message was shorter: "With Dad. Love ya."

Sarah's thumb hovered over Liam's message. There was no mention of Lydia—not that she expected one. Neither of her children had warmed to their father's twenty-eight-year-old girlfriend, but they expressed their disapproval differently. Liam, at twelve, opted for stony silence and pointed omissions. Aoife wielded her disdain like a weapon.

A memory surfaced unbidden: Aoife's voice on the phone that day, five years ago. "Mum, you need to come home. Now." The slight tremor in her usually confident daughter's voice had made Sarah's stomach clench. She left work immediately, her mind racing with worst-case scenarios. None had prepared her for finding her ten-year-old daughter sitting rigidly at the kitchen table while Aiden stammered explanations about the woman who had hastily fled through the back door.

Aoife had come home early from school, only to find her father with someone who wasn't her mother. The betrayal was evident on her young face, aging her beyond her years. In the aftermath, Aiden had tried everything—expensive gifts, tearful apologies, promises of family counseling. But Aoife had inherited her mother's steel spine; no amount of bribery could erase what she had seen or buy her silence.

The questions came later as Sarah explained concepts that a mother did not want to discuss with her ten-year-old.

During the divorce proceedings, Aiden tried to portray Sarah as the villain, claiming she had turned their daughter against him. This strategy spectacularly backfired when Aoife, with remarkable composure for a teenager, detailed exactly what she had witnessed to their mediator. The memory of Aiden's face falling as his daughter recounted his infidelity still brought Sarah a guilty satisfaction.

Five years later, Sarah stood in her quiet house, reading her children's messages. Liam was trying to maintain a relationship with his father, walking the delicate tightrope between loyalty to his mother and love for his dad. Aoife had made her choice with characteristic decisiveness—she hadn't spent a night at her father's new house. Sarah slipped her phone back into her pocket and headed toward the kitchen. She fed Finn, opened the fridge, changed her mind, and reached for a bottle of whiskey instead.

Sarah pushed history out of her head and forced herself to focus on the present. Sarah had a murder to solve, a mystery visitor to find, and was it connected to art thefts? The questions swirled through her mind, refusing to settle, each one tumbling over the next like clothes in a dryer. The case was devolving into something bigger than a murder case - something that made her cop instincts itch. A big question that nagged at her relentlessly: How did 20-year-old kids get tangled up in art theft? This wasn't petty crime like lifting wallets or shoplifting from the mall; it was organized, professional work requiring connections, planning, and experience. It was the kind of operation that usually took years to build, not something college-aged kids typically stumbled into between classes.

The thought made her pause mid-sip. Maybe her grandfather would know something useful. While Paddy claimed he'd left his criminal past behind, she knew he still kept his ear to the ground. He'd helped her with cases before, sharing bits of wisdom when she needed it. Perhaps it was time for another chat with her grandfather. He might also have information on Heritage Acquisitions; if they are a big Criminal organization, he would definitely have known about them.

Paddy O'Neil was once a notorious crime boss in Ireland, wielding considerable influence in the criminal underworld. His eldest son, Matty, had gained a reputation that mirrored his father's. In contrast, Paddy's other children had left Ireland to escape his tumultuous lifestyle. However, Paddy passionately claims he's turned a new leaf after serving time in prison. Sarah genuinely hopes this is true, as the thought of eventually having to arrest her grandfather weighs on her. Meanwhile, her Uncle Matty remains a constant presence in her mind. With a deep sip of her drink, she leaned back and closed her eyes, reflecting on what had been a long but hopeful day ahead.

Sarah jolted awake to Aoife's persistent nudging. "Mum, Mum," her voice cut through the fog in her mind, pulling her back to reality.

"I'm up, what?" Sarah mumbled, struggling to focus her bleary eyes on Aoife.

"You were out cold!" Aoife exclaimed, holding up the nearly empty whiskey bottle with wide eyes. "Did you really drink all this?"

Sarah squinted at the bottle, her vision blurred, and the remnants of the night swirling in her head. "Oh, definitely," she replied with a chuckle. As she tried to sit up, Aoife's gaze landed on the bruise blooming on Sarah's cheek. "What happened to you?" Aoife asked, her concern washing over her.

"Oh, it's nothing, just an airbag," Sarah said casually, brushing it off with a smile.

"You were in a car accident? Are you alright?" Aoife's tone transformed from playful to genuinely worried.

"Just a tiny bump, but I'm all good!" Sarah reassured her, a spark of optimism shining through. Sarah sipped her whiskey, the liquid warmth comforting her as she recounted the chaotic encounter with the uninvited visitor in the parking garage.

"Oh, please tell me there's CCTV of you jumping off the roof," Aoife said with a big grin.

Sarah started, "I didn't jump off the roof; it was only five feet..."

Aoife cut her off, laughing. "Oh, no, not the, I set the record for the long jump in school again," she teased. How old were you then? 18?" she continued, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"What's your point?" Sarah asked, trying to sound annoyed but failing miserably.

"The point is you are old now," Aoife said, laughter spilling forth as Sarah rolled her eyes.

"You're a little shit," Sarah replied, taking another swig of her drink, the corners of her mouth betraying a smile.

Aoife's laughter filled the room, a sweet melody that lightened the heavy atmosphere. "Did you eat anything?"

Do you want me to fix you something?" she offered, her tone shifting back to that caring daughter.

"No, no," Sarah waved her off weakly.

"So, how's the murder case going?" Aoife asked, her voice laced with genuine concern.

Sarah opened her eyes, feeling the room spin around her like a dizzying carnival ride.

"Oh, this is another hard one," Sarah slurred. On one hand, I have a nice, sweet girl just making travel videos, living her life, and making a fuckin' lot of money doing it." Sarah pointed an unsteady finger at Aoife. Don't get any ideas." She smiled knowingly, her expression a mix of amusement and caution. And on the other hand, I have... nothing, just a shitload of questions I have no answers for."

"You'll get there, Mum, you always do. You're a good detective; just don't go jumping off any more roofs,"

Aoife said, her voice mixing that unique blend of teenage wisdom and daughterly concern that always made Sarah's heart ache a little.

"Yeah," Sarah said, not entirely convinced but appreciating her daughter's unwavering faith.

"Yeah, they say everyone has at least one thing they're good at," Aoife added, watching with those keen eyes she'd inherited from her grandmother.

"Oh yeah, well, you forget, sweet child," Sarah drawled, tilting the bottle and pouring the last amber drops into her glass with perhaps less precision than she intended, "I'm good at one other thing."

"Drinking," Aoife finished, her tone hinting at disapproval. She sounded so much like her grandmother that it was almost comical.

"Sláinte," Sarah said as she downed the whiskey swiftly, feeling the familiar burn trace its way down her throat.

It was a sensation she had grown perhaps too comfortable with over the years.

"Mum!" Aoife exclaimed, half-scandalized, half-amused, in that particular way only teenagers can manage when dealing with their parents' questionable decisions.

They both dissolved into laughter, the kind that only came from exhaustion and too much alcohol, the kind that wrapped around them like a warm blanket.

"OK, now help your old mum up," Sarah said, struggling to find her footing.

With gentle hands, Aoife helped Sarah to her feet, steadying her as they made their way up the stairs. Aoife guided her to bed, shaking her head with a mixture of exasperation and affection that made Sarah feel both grateful and slightly guilty.

Chapter 10

"Morning, everyone," Sarah announced as she stepped into the conference room, her voice cutting through the low hum of conversation. The room fell silent, and the investigative team's usual mix of energy and tension settled over them like a familiar blanket. Fluorescent lights bounced off the whiteboard, illuminating faces that had grown haggard from long hours.

"You okay, Chief?" Riley asked, concern etched on her face as she sat at the conference table, her posture blending familiarity and caution. Her fingers hovered over her keyboard, ready to document whatever came next.

"Yup, fine," Sarah replied briskly, brushing off the question with practiced ease. "Now, what did we get on our visitor from yesterday?"

Riley straightened in her chair, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Well, first, he hacked your computer. It looks like he was in a hurry and did a complete dump..."

"What, everything?" Sarah's brow furrowed, deep lines forming between her eyebrows. The thought of her private files being exposed sent a chill down her spine. Case notes, personal emails, family photos—all potentially compromised.

"Yes," Riley confirmed gravely, her expression mirroring Sarah's concern. "So we probably won't be able to tell what he was specifically looking for. I went ahead and put alerts on all your accounts, too, just in case." She paused before adding, "Someone hacked into the main system. They just put the appointment note in, but it's highly encrypted. It's going to be hard to trace."

"The tech team has checked everything," Riley continued, scrolling through notes on her tablet. "No spyware found. They did a complete virus check, so they believe everything is secure now. But they're monitoring for any unusual activity."

"Okay, well, did we get a good look at this guy?" Sarah pressed, her investigative instincts kicking in, pushing personal concerns aside.

"Yup, and here he is." Riley tapped her tablet, and a photo appeared on the overhead screen—a strikingly handsome white male, likely in his thirties, with a well-built physique that suggested regular physical training. His eyes held a calculating intelligence that made Sarah's cop instincts flare.

"Alright, distribute this image," Sarah instructed, shifting into command mode. "Add him to the CCTV searches, especially anywhere near Jazzy or Billy." Her tone conveyed urgency as she focused on the task, fingers drumming against her coffee mug. "Anything else on this?"

"Just this," Riley replied, pulling up the CCTV footage from the roof with a few quick taps.

The screen flickered to life in HD, showing their mysterious visitor emerging from the stairwell with practiced ease. Sarah leaned forward, watching him calculate the distance between buildings before executing a disturbingly graceful leap across the gap. Her jaw tightened as the footage continued, showing her own jump moments later—a move that still made her muscles ache with every step she took today. Every frame confirmed her growing suspicion that this was no ordinary break-in; this man had professional training.

Shawn, Colin, and Sloan held up papers marked with nines, their impromptu scoring system temporarily breaking the tension.

"Nines?" Sarah echoed, one eyebrow raised in challenge. "That was a perfect landing. Olympic-level stuff."

"You only get nines because you didn't catch him, and you totaled two cars," Colin teased with a grin, momentarily lightening the mood. His eyes sparkled with the same mischief she often saw in his father Frank's eyes. Sarah rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress a small smile.

Sarah straightened in her chair, wincing slightly at the protest from her overexerted muscles. "Okay, yesterday's events threw us off a bit, so let's get back on track," she announced, scanning her team with a determined gaze.

"I'm changing things up. Shawn, you and Murphy focus on finding this guy, and since you've already established the connection, keep digging into any recent art thefts. Colin, you're with me—we'll continue investigating the Halls murder." She turned to Sloan and Riley. "Keep pursuing that lead on Heritage Acquisition Limited. We need concrete evidence linking them to this murder, and there's still all this CCTV and tech material to analyze."

She paused briefly, taking a sip of her now-lukewarm coffee. "My brother James will be joining the team this afternoon, so I need him brought up to speed immediately." Sarah drummed her fingers on the table, a habit from long strategy sessions that had become almost meditative. "If anyone needs additional resources, just ask. I can get whatever you need, but keep me informed. Any questions?" Her gaze moved deliberately from one team member to another, assessing their readiness. Finding no confusion, she turned to Shawn. "You'll be going with me to talk to Paddy this afternoon." She noticed a flicker of apprehension cross his face at the mention of her grandfather.

"Now, here's what we learned from the M.E.," Sarah continued, flipping open a manila folder. "Jazzy was not killed on the beach. Dr. Kelly says she had salt and fresh water in her lungs."

"Where was she killed, then?" Riley asked, leaning forward, her brow furrowing in concentration.

"That's a key question," Sarah replied, tapping her pen against the report. "One of the things I'm hoping Paddy can help me with. I'll know more later." She consulted her notes. "Dr. Kelly estimates she was killed about 12 to 16 hours before her body was found. Also, there were signs she was drugged." Sarah looked up, her gaze sweeping across the room. "What about her missing phone?"

"No luck," Brennen added, shaking her head. "The killer might have just thrown it in the bay. We've got divers checking the areas near where she was found, but the currents make it a long shot."

"Yeah, I figured." Sarah's frustration was evident in the tight set of her shoulders.

"Is there anything new on her computer? What about the deleted files?" Sarah asked, pressing her fingers against her temples. The familiar tension headache was starting to build, pulsing behind her eyes like a warning. "Looks like the files were deleted the day before she was killed," Riley replied, her fingers drumming absently on her tablet. The soft tapping sound was oddly hypnotic in the quiet office. "They still haven't gotten into the password-protected ones yet, but whoever set up those encryptions knew what they were doing. It could take a few days, maybe longer if they used military-grade protection." Sarah sighed heavily and sat back, closing her eyes against the harsh fluorescent lighting overhead, wondering what secrets those files might hold.

"OK, if there is nothing else?" She paused and looked around the room, her gaze sweeping over each tired face. "Alright, let's go."

"Oh," Riley made a pained moan, her eyes widening at her tablet screen. "It's Billy. He just did another video," Riley interjected, urgently holding up her tablet. "He's talking about going to find her killer himself! This is going to complicate everything."

Sarah's stomach clenched like a fist. "What? When did this happen? We just had him under surveillance."

"About an hour ago," Riley said, swiping through notifications. "He's gone completely viral. Everyone's talking about it. Over twenty thousand shares already and climbing by the minute."

Sarah leaned forward to look at the tablet, her chest tightening as she watched Billy Danes, his eyes determined, speaking directly to the camera: "The police aren't moving fast enough. Jazzy deserves justice, and I will find whoever did this to her. I have information that could lead me to the killer, and I'm following that lead tonight. For Jazzy. I won't rest until I find the truth."

"Did he say where he was going?" Sarah asked, the tension headache now pounding in earnest behind her temples.

"No, but he mentioned something about Jazzy's 'true heritage' and 'ancient secrets,'" Riley replied, scrolling through comments. "He's talking about some caves? The comments section is full of people encouraging him and offering to help. This is turning into a social media circus."

"What about the Garda who was supposed to be watching him?" Sarah demanded, already dreading the answer.

"Let me check," Riley said. Sarah could hear her typing rapidly, fingers flying across the keyboard with practiced precision. "Garda Doyle reported about twenty minutes ago. Billy said he was in his room, watching television. He claimed he was too exhausted to go anywhere."

"Well, he's not there now. Have Doyle confirm," Sarah ordered, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Will do." Riley nodded, reaching for her phone and stepping away to make the call.

She returned moments later, her expression grim. "Garda Doyle confirms Billy's gone. The room is completely empty. His rental car is missing from the hotel garage, and the front desk says he left in a hurry about ninety minutes ago."

Sarah sighed heavily; Billy was clearly making a play for public sympathy, positioning himself as the grieving boyfriend determined to find justice. But why? Was it genuine grief driving him to reckless action, or was it all for show—a calculated move to distract from his own involvement? Either way, he was now a loose cannon with an audience of thousands cheering him on.

"Okay, get Billy's photo out to all patrol units. Let's find him before he gets into trouble," Sarah said, reaching for her jacket. "And monitor those social media channels—I want to know immediately if he posts his location."

Chapter 11

The afternoon sun cast a golden hue over Dublin as Chief Inspector Sarah O'Malley sipped her coffee at her cluttered desk in Central Garda Station. She scanned the latest reports, still reeling from the events of the past days. The murder of Jazzy Halls was grabbing more attention than any case she had worked in years, both in the media and on social media, and it made her uneasy. The public's morbid fascination with the young woman's death had turned what should have been a methodical investigation into a circus.

The buzz of her phone jolted her from her thoughts. It was a call from Jazzy's aunt, Maeve, who had been one of the few family members willing to speak to the police since the tragedy. Sarah answered, her heart already racing anxiously. "Maeve, is everything okay?"

"Oh, thank God, Inspector! I—I don't know how to explain this," Maeve's voice trembled on the other end, and Sarah felt the urgency radiating through the line. The woman's typical composure had clearly crumbled.

"Take a breath, Maeve. Start from the beginning," Sarah encouraged, setting her mug down with a slight clatter. She reached for her notepad, mentally cataloging what resources she might need to mobilize.

"I've had someone lurking around my house for the past few nights since the news broke! At first, I thought it was nothing—just some kids messing around. But just now, I saw him, and he was filming! He was talking to himself about Jazzy, saying he needed to find the truth about her death!" Maeve gasped, her fear palpable even through the phone. "He had this light on his camera, peering right through my living room window!"

"Stay where you are, Maeve. I'm coming over now," Sarah instructed, her heart racing at the prospect of a potential intruder. She grabbed her jacket and car keys in one swift motion, already mentally mapping the quickest route to Maeve's neighborhood.

After a quick briefing to Riley, Sarah called Colin as she raced to her car, her keys jingling between her fingers.

"Colin, meet me at Maeve Shaw's. She may have an intruder—some guy with a camera."

"On my way, Chief," Colin responded without hesitation, the sound of movement already evident in the background. "Should I call for backup?"

"Not yet," Sarah replied, sliding into the driver's seat. "Let's assess the situation first. But stay alert—we don't know what we're walking into." She ended the call, her mind racing as fast as the car she was about to drive.

The thought of a stalker in the loose underbelly of her city, even as it was basked in sunlight, crept along her spine. As she drove through the bustling streets of Dublin, she mentally prepared herself for what awaited her at Maeve's home.

As Sarah arrived at the two-story cottage, Maeve stood outside near the road, wringing her hands, her face drawn and tight with fear.

"Maeve, did you see him again?" Sarah asked, lowering her voice as she approached to avoid further alarming the older woman.

"No!" Maeve shook her head vehemently, her eyes wide. "But I heard noises. I swear, Inspector, I think he's been watching me. I don't feel safe here anymore."

"I'll look around, stay here near the car, when Colin gets here, tell me I'm in the back garden," Sarah said, her instincts kicking in as she moved toward the side of the house, checking the perimeter. Her hand instinctively brushed against her holster.

As she moved, Sarah scanned the yard for signs of tampering or footprints. Everything seemed calm, but fear was like an uninvited guest—persistent and impossible to ignore. The late afternoon shadows stretched across Maeve's well-kept garden, creating perfect hiding spots for anyone watching.

A movement caught Sarah's eye—something shifting behind the fence separating Maeve's yard from the neighbor's. She turned slowly and crept closer, her footsteps deliberately silent against the damp grass.

As Sarah rounded the corner, she nearly collided with a young man crouched behind the fence. He was holding a cell phone and muttering to himself. In his other hand, he clutched a makeshift sign that read **"Justice for Jazzy!"** The cardboard was worn at the edges, suggesting he'd been carrying it for some time.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Sarah exclaimed, her voice firm as she shined her flashlight at him, revealing his wide-eyed panic. The beam illuminated his face—pale, sweaty, with the unmistakable fervor of obsession in his eyes.

"Uh—uh, I'm just—" the man stammered, backing away. His shaggy hair, disheveled appearance, and nervous demeanor screamed the kind of obsessive fandom that had gone awry. His clothes—a faded t-shirt with what looked like Jazzy's face printed on it—hung loosely on his thin frame.

"Step away from the fence! Turn around slowly!" Sarah ordered, her grip tightening around her weapon as the man froze. The air between them crackled with tension.

"I'm just trying to help! Jazzy was a star! I'm a follower... a fan! I need to get the truth out!" he pleaded, his gaze darting nervously between Sarah and the sign. His voice cracked with emotion that bordered on hysteria.

"Help? You call this help? You think lurking around her aunt's house is helping?" Sarah snapped, stepping forward to close the space between them. She could smell the stale sweat on him, the desperation.

The intruder's hands trembled visibly. "I just wanted to find out what happened," he repeated, desperation evident in his tone. "Everyone is saying different things, and her boyfriend is lying! I've got to show them the truth!" His eyes darted around wildly, as if searching for escape routes.

Colin, having heard the commotion, rushed to Sarah's side. "What's going on, Chief?" he said, concern etching his features. His hand hovered near his weapon, ready to draw if necessary.

"Cuff him, Colin!" Sarah ordered, keeping her eyes on the young man. The weight of her service weapon was reassuring in her palm.

"No, wait! You have to listen!" he shouted, the wild intensity in his gaze shifting to fear as he realized they were onto him. "This is all for Jazzy! She deserves better! I'm doing this for her!" Spittle flew from his mouth as he grew more agitated.

"Calling it 'honor' for someone you don't even know makes you an intruder," Sarah shot back, leveling her weapon at him as Colin stepped in. "Put your phone down and step back away from the fence." Her voice carried the authority, leaving no room for argument.

His breath quickened as he slowly complied. "I didn't mean to frighten anyone! I just... I just wanted to know! I thought..." His words trailed off as Colin moved in with handcuffs.

"I don't give a damn what you thought. You crossed a line," Sarah replied, keeping her voice steady, trying to maintain control. "You're coming with us." The familiar click of handcuffs punctuated her statement.

As more backup arrived, Gardia took the man into custody, his protests growing softer as he was led away.

Sarah shook her head as she turned back to Maeve, who was still reeling from the encounter. The older woman's hands clutched her cardigan, knuckles white with tension.

"Are you okay, Chief?" Colin asked, his brow furrowed with concern, as he pocketed the man's phone as evidence.

"Yeah, come on," Sarah said, exhaling slowly to release the adrenaline still coursing through her veins.

"Thank you, Inspector," Maeve stammered, her face pale. "I didn't think it was like this. I thought it was just a kid messing around. The internet has changed everything." Her voice quavered with the realization of her vulnerability.

Sarah nodded, pondering the unsettling truth of her words. She couldn't deny the dangers Billy's impulsive online posts posed, inciting a frenzy among followers who felt personally connected to Jazzy. Social media has created a dangerous intimacy that has blurred boundaries between celebrities and their fans.

As she headed back to her car, Maeve's trembling voice stopped her. "What if more of them come?" The fear in her eyes was palpable, a reminder of the real human cost behind the sensationalized headlines.

"We will sort it out," Sarah said, her tone firm and confident despite the gnawing fear curdling in her stomach.

"I'm here to protect you, no matter what. Now, let me talk to the Gardia to secure your home. I'll have someone patrol the area regularly until we figure this out." She squeezed Maeve's shoulder reassuringly.

The weight of responsibility bore down on Sarah even as she reassured Maeve. The case was widening, growing more complex and dangerous by the hour. The fallout from social media had unearthed unexpected, unsettling consequences, and she now faced a fight beyond solving Jazzy's murder—it was about controlling the chaos that followed.

As she drove away, Sarah couldn't shake the feeling that the confrontation was just a glimpse of what lay ahead. The digital age held people far too tightly, and in the world of fame, danger crept just a few clicks away. The investigation had taken a dark turn, and Sarah was only beginning to grasp the implications of a world where the line between celebrity and obsession blurred daily. She tapped her fingers against the steering wheel, already formulating her next steps in a case that seemed to grow more tangled with each passing hour.

* * *

Inside the observation room, Tom looked at Sarah, concern etched deeply on his face. His eyes darted between her and the monitor showing the suspect.

"You confronted that man by yourself? He looks like he has some serious mental issues," Tom remarked, glancing at the man pacing frantically around the interview room and talking animatedly to himself, hands gesturing at invisible companions.

"I called Colin for backup, but Maeve called in a panic, and I had to go," Sarah explained, crossing her arms defensively across her chest. She'd made the best decision she could in the moment and wasn't about to apologize for it.

"Tom, do you want to have this argument right now?" Sarah asked, her tone carrying a warning edge. The last thing she needed was a lecture when they had a potentially unstable suspect waiting.

"I don't want to have it at all; I just want you to start acting like a Chief Inspector," he said, striving to keep his tone calm, though the tightness around his eyes betrayed his frustration.

She smiled at him, but it didn't reach her eyes. "If I were a male Chief Inspector, would you be saying that?" The question hung between them, loaded with implications.

"That's a low blow," Tom replied, hurt flickering across his features. " Yes, I would, but I'm also saying this because I care about you." His voice softened on the last words, the professional concern mixing with something more personal.

She reached for his hand, her fingers tentatively brushing against his. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice softening as she met his gaze. "Thank you for caring about me, Tom. I mean that. But if someone is in trouble, I will do what I can to help them. That's who I am." There was resolution in her tone, the same determination that had carried her through the ranks of An Garda Síochána despite her obstacles.

Chapter 12

Fluorescent light buzzed overhead, cutting sharp shadows across the scarred metal table in Central Garda Station's interrogation room. Gray walls absorbed what little illumination reached them, leaving corners shrouded. The young man's handcuffs clinked softly against the tabletop as his fingers twitched, his gaze bouncing from wall to wall, never settling. Droplets of perspiration slid down his temples despite the goosebumps visible on his arms. Sarah studied him from across the table, noting how he swallowed repeatedly. Behind her, Tom's shoulder blades pressed against the wall, his crossed arms creating a barrier between himself and the proceedings, his face a mask. To the side, a solicitor's pen scratched across paper, documenting every word, every gesture.

"Your name is Caleb, right?" Sarah began, her tone professional yet firm. She eyed the young man, trying to discern the truth hidden under layers of fear and obsession. The fluorescent light caught the perspiration on his brow, making his skin appear waxy and pale.

"Yeah," he muttered, his voice trembling slightly. "I, uh, didn't mean any harm. I just wanted to help Jazzy." His fingers twisted together nervously, knuckles whitening with each movement.

"Help her how?" Sarah pressed, leaning forward slightly to emphasize her inquiry. She could feel Tom's presence behind her, a silent reinforcement. "By lurking outside her aunt's home? You've got to understand that doesn't look good, Caleb. Most people call the Garda instead of trespassing on private property."

Caleb swallowed hard, his fingers twitching as he fiddled with the cuff on his wrist. The metal made a soft scraping sound against the table that echoed in the sparse room. "I—everyone is talking about what happened to her. The news is all over the place, and social media too. I just wanted to investigate! I could find something to help prove that Billy did it, or that she was taken by someone else. I've watched many true crime shows—I know how these things work."

"Why did you feel it was your responsibility to do that?" Sarah asked, noting his defensive stance. His shoulders were hunched forward, a classic self-protective posture she'd seen countless times across this same interrogation table.

"Because I'm a fan! I followed her on social media, watched her videos, and I—I felt like I knew her," he said, his voice gaining strength with every word. His eyes lit up with an unsettling intensity. "When they said she was dead, it shattered me! I just wanted to get to the bottom of it! Someone had to do something."

Sarah remained patient, allowing him to speak and giving subtle nods of understanding while watching his body language closely. She'd interviewed enough obsessive types to recognize the pattern—the personal connection they imagined, the self-appointed mission.

"And you thought the best way to find answers was to trespass and film outside her aunt's house?" she asked, keeping her tone neutral despite the absurdity. "Did you consider how your actions might impact a grieving family?"

Caleb's eyes fell to the table, as he seemed to shrink in on himself. "I know it sounds crazy, but her fans are supposed to stick together. We have to know the truth. Jazzy deserves that! I might see something... maybe even get a lead."

"Did you see anything?" Sarah interjected. "Something that made you think there was more to her death? Or someone else involved?"

He shook his head, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. "No! I didn't see anything! That's what makes this all so infuriating! I just... I wanted to start somewhere. I thought the Garda would be slow or wouldn't care enough to dig deep. The real story needs to come out."

"Why didn't you just contact us instead of going to her family's home uninvited?" Sarah asked, keeping her voice steady but insistent.

"Because I was afraid," Caleb admitted, his voice quaking. "I didn't know what to do. Everything is confusing, and there are so many secrets out there. I didn't want to be dismissed as crazy."

"What you did was more than just going in as a fan," Sarah clarified, her voice sharp. "You crossed a line, Caleb. You invaded someone's personal space at a time of tragedy. Did you think about how this might affect Jazzy's family, especially after they lost her?"

Caleb flinched at her words, pain etched across his features. "I didn't mean to scare anyone. I thought I was helping. I'm a nobody; I just thought maybe I could find something—maybe I could be someone who made a difference."

"Caleb, wanting to make a difference is not the problem. But there are safer, more respectful ways to support someone, especially in their time of mourning," Sarah said, her tone softening slightly. "You need to understand that your actions have consequences."

He looked up at her, tears pooling in his eyes. "I didn't want to be seen as a creep—a stalker. I just wanted to show support! Jazzy was special to me..." he trailed off, the weight of his intensity ebbing into vulnerability.

Caleb put his head down on the table, sobbing, his shoulders heaving with each ragged breath.

Tom whispered to Sarah, his lips barely moving, "I think we need to get a psych evaluation before we go any further. This level of attachment isn't normal." Sarah nodded her head slightly, her instincts telling her a

different approach was needed. "Caleb, are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?" she asked, her tone deliberately gentle, maternal almost.

Caleb just nodded, not lifting his head, a strand of hair sticking to his wet cheek.

This case was growing more intricate than she had anticipated, and with every revelation, she understood just how deep the roots of obsession could go. The digital age had morphed grief into a public spectacle, transforming strangers into self-appointed detectives and mourners. Social media had created a false sense of intimacy with people who were, in reality, strangers. And now it was her duty to navigate this chaos of virtual connections and real emotions to find the truth of Jazzy's tragic fate. Sarah couldn't help but wonder what her daughter Aoife's digital footprint looked like and who might be watching from the shadows.

Chapter 13

The weathered facade of O'Neil's pub stood defiant against the steady Dublin rain, its windows glowing with warm amber light. Sarah paused before the entrance as she studied the building. Three generations of O'Neils had run this establishment, and despite the neighborhood's gentrification, the pub remained steadfastly old-world—a place where handshakes still sealed deals and a person's word carried weight.

"You sure about this, Chief?" Shawn asked, his breath clouding in the damp air.

Sarah understood his hesitation. Her family history wasn't exactly a secret in the department. "This man knows more about Ireland's history than any academic you'll find," she replied. "After twenty years inside, he had plenty of time to study. And if you want to know about crime in Dublin, he is the one to ask."

She pushed open the heavy oak door, releasing a wave of warmth scented with whiskey, tobacco, and wood polish. The conversation briefly stuttered as they entered—Garda rarely a welcome guest here. A few old-timers glanced up from their pints, then quickly returned to their drinks. They knew better than to stare.

The young man who stepped into their path didn't. With dark hair gelled back, too many rings on his fingers, and the unmistakable outline of a shoulder holster beneath his leather jacket, his posture screamed street enforcer—his chest puffed out, his chin jutting forward.

"No Garda served here," he said, puffing up like a bantam rooster, though his voice cracked slightly.

Sarah heard the familiar thump of a cane before she saw her grandfather emerge from behind the bar. Paddy O'Neil moved with the careful precision of a man managing chronic pain without showing weakness. Now in his seventies, his hair had turned silver. Still, his eyes remained sharp and calculating—the eyes of a man who had seen the worst of humanity and occasionally contributed to it.

"Sean Nolan," Paddy's voice cut through the quiet pub like a blade. "You're about to make the biggest mistake of your short career."

The young man turned, confusion evident on his face. "Mr. O'Neil, she's a Garda—"

"That's my granddaughter you're trying to intimidate, you stupid pup," Paddy interrupted, his Dublin accent thickening with anger. "If you don't want your arse kicked out onto the street, you'll back off."

The color drained from Sean's face as he looked between Sarah and Paddy. Everyone in certain circles knew the story of Paddy O'Neil's daughter, who married a Garda and fled to America. Just as they knew about his supposed redemption after prison, though few would dare mention either to his face.

"I... I'm sorry, Mr. O'Neil. Inspector O'Malley," Sean stumbled over his words, backing away. "I didn't know—"

"Obviously," Paddy cut him off. "Now, make yourself scarce before I remember what I would've done to someone threatening my family in the old days."

Sean practically ran for the door.

"Granddad," Sarah stepped forward, accepting a warm hug from the old man. His frame felt thinner than she remembered, but the strength in his arms hadn't diminished. He smelled of whiskey and aftershave.

"Still terrorizing the youngsters, I see," she said, pulling back to study his face.

Paddy chuckled, the sound like gravel. "Someone's got to teach them manners. These young punks think a gun and an attitude make them men." His eyes narrowed as he noticed the bruise on her cheek. "What's this?"

"Nothing, just an airbag that decked me during a pursuit. I'm okay."

He nodded, not believing her but knowing better than to press. His gaze shifted to Shawn. "Sergeant."

"Mr. O'Neil," Shawn replied respectfully.

"Come to the back," Paddy said, leading them through the pub. The regulars nodded to him with deference as he passed, some touching their foreheads almost ceremonially. "I know that look in your eye, Sarah. You're here about more than a family visit."

The private office behind the bar was pleasantly homey—more library than criminal headquarters. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined the walls, filled with volumes on Irish history, mythology, and, surprisingly, marine navigation. A large oak desk dominated the center of the room, its surface covered with maps and leather-bound ledgers.

"The dead girl they found on the beach," Paddy said as he settled into a well-worn chair. "The one with the blue hair. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "News travels fast."

"I saw it on the news, silly girl," Paddy laughed, then leaned forward, his expression growing serious. "But that's not why you're here. You want to know about the caves."

Sarah shouldn't have been surprised. Her grandfather always seemed to know more than he should. "That part wasn't on the news. What do you know about them, Granddad?"

Paddy's weathered fingers traced a pattern on his desk, following some invisible map. "Those caves have a dark history, Sarah. From the ancient Celts to the IRA to now. It's not a place for tourists or the faint-hearted." He paused, studying her face. "That girl was asking questions about them, wasn't she?"

"How did you—"

"Old men hear things," Paddy said. "An English fellow came by last week. Too educated for his good. Knew exactly who to ask about the caves." He shrugged. "Sent him packing." His lips twisted in a bitter smile. "I don't help Englishmen find out about old Irish secrets."

Sarah leaned forward. "When was this exactly?"

"A week or so ago. Early morning, before we opened." Paddy's eyes narrowed. "I didn't like the feel of him. Too polished, too practiced. Asked very specific questions about access points and tidal patterns."

"Did Jazzy come here too?" Sarah asked.

"No, I first heard of her on the news." He shook his head. "But when the Englishman left, a young punk awaited him outside. American, I think. Seemed upset when his friend came out empty-handed."

"Billy Danes," Sarah said, exchanging a glance with Shawn. "Jazzy's boyfriend."

Paddy reached for a bottle of whiskey on a side table, pouring three glasses without asking. "So the boyfriend was involved in whatever got her killed?" He pushed a glass toward Sarah.

She took the drink and sipped it. "We're still figuring that out. Can you show us where these caves are? The girl had both salt and fresh water in her lungs. She could have been killed there."

Paddy stared at his whiskey, swirling it gently. "It's Possible; look, I'll take you there myself, but don't tell your grandmother; she'd never want you messing around there." He glanced toward the window; the rain had stopped, and the setting sun shone through the clouds. "But Sarah, be careful what you go looking for. Some of the old stories... they have teeth."

He pulled open a drawer and spread a weathered map across his desk. The paper was yellowed with age, its corners frayed, but the markings were still clear—a detailed chart of the coastline north of Dublin.

"These caves," he said, tapping a specific spot with a gnarled finger, "were perfect for our operations back in the day. Deep enough to hide entire shipments, with multiple exits, and most importantly, the locals stayed away because of the old stories."

Sarah studied the map, noting the complex network of tunnels sprawled beneath the headland. "These markings," she pointed to several symbols drawn in faded ink, "are they the same as the ones on the cave walls?"

"Some of them," Paddy confirmed. "Navigation marks, mostly. The older ones, the dangerous ones, are deeper in."

"What kind of legends kept people away?" Shawn asked, his interest clearly piqued.

Paddy's expression darkened. "People going missing, strange lights, voices in the darkness. Some of it was us, mind you—we had to keep people away somehow. But..." He paused, his fingers tracing one of the symbols on the map. "Some of it wasn't our doing. Things happened in those caves that none of us could explain."

He pulled out an old photograph from his desk drawer, the edges worn smooth from handling. "Here—this was taken in '79. That's me there, with some of the lads." He pointed to a younger version of himself, standing near a cave entrance with a group of hard-faced men. Sarah noticed strange markings visible on the rock face behind them—spirals and interconnected lines that seemed to shimmer even in the still image.

"Those symbols," she said, "did you ever learn what they meant?"

"Not properly. They were there long before us. The old timers said they were protection marks, to keep something in rather than keep people out." He shrugged. "We just knew they made good navigation points in the dark. Three turns past the spiral mark, left at the crossed lines, that sort of thing."

"And the smuggling routes?" Shawn asked. "Are they still active?"

Paddy gave him a measured look. "Officially, I know nothing about current operations. Been clean for twenty years." He turned back to Sarah, his expression grave. "But off the record, there's been talk. New players, foreign money, and interest in artifacts rather than the usual goods. It's not just guns and drugs anymore—they're after different kinds of merchandise."

"What can you tell me about Heritage Acquisitions?" Sarah asked, carefully watching her grandfather's reaction. Paddy's eyes flickered with recognition. "They're a major operation. Thievery and smuggling with connections to some serious crime families across Europe. They'll get you whatever you want if you have the money."

"But be careful. They're very protective of their operations and won't hesitate to kill to maintain secrecy."

Paddy said

"In fact," he added, lowering his voice, "if anything, someone is using these myths and legends as cover, just like we did. Many collectors will pay fortunes for ancient artifacts, especially those with supposed mystical properties. That kind of money always leads to crime."

"Have you started looking into them?" he asked, his concern evident.

"Yes." Sarah hesitated, then she continued. "Yesterday, someone managed to breach security at the station. They accessed my computer and downloaded my files. Could they work for Heritage Acquisitions?"

"That would be a safe bet," Paddy said grimly, his weathered face creasing with worry. "They'd want to know what you have on them. Look, Sarah, you need to be careful with these people. They've been in business long and will do anything to stay that way."

Sarah nodded, absorbing his warning. "So, these caves might be where they're temporarily storing artifacts—and possibly where Jazzy was killed."

"And if Billy is hiding, that's where he'd go," Shawn added.

Paddy studied them both, his expression troubled. "I'll take you there tomorrow, first light. The tide will be right then." He drained his whiskey. "And Sarah, bring proper gear. Those caves don't forgive mistakes."

As they left Paddy's office, Sarah noticed Sean watching them from the far end of the bar. His earlier hostility had been replaced by curious respect. The young man quickly looked away when she caught his eye.

"Chief, are you sure about involving your grandfather?" Shawn asked as they reached the Volvo. "Given his... history?"

Sarah understood her sergeant's concern. The relationship between the Garda and Paddy O'Neil was complicated at best. "He knows these caves better than anyone alive, Shawn. And whatever he might have been before, he's done his time, and I trust him with our lives down there. He's not going to screw us over or leave us for dead." Shawn nodded, though his expression remained doubtful. "It's just... you know how the brass feels about using informants with family connections."

"He's not an informant; he's a consultant," Sarah replied with a slight smile. "And unless you want to request a team of spelunkers and get approval from up top, which will take days, we don't have—he's our best option."

As Sarah drove back toward the station, her mind swirled with the new information. Jazzy had somehow stumbled onto something big—museum thefts, ancient artifacts, possibly even an international smuggling operation. But was it an accident, or had she been looking for it specifically?

If Billy were hiding in those caves, he might not be there too long. If Heritage Acquisition realized Jazzy had discovered their operation, they might already be moving their merchandise—and eliminating anyone else who knew too much.

She stepped out of the car and looked up at the station. Somewhere in the tangle of caves, ancient symbols, art thefts, and social media posts lies the truth about Jazzy Hall's death. Sarah was determined to find it, even if it meant navigating the dangerous waters between her family's complicated past and her sworn duty as a Garda.

Chapter 14

Upon returning to her office, Sloan met Sarah. "I did check with immigration. Billy's lies are piling up. He arrived in the country a week before Jazzy did," Sloan said.

Sarah glanced at Shawn and remarked, "Paddy's upset, young punk."

Sloan continued, "I've been digging deeper into Billy's financial activities. Those offshore accounts I mentioned? They can definitely be traced back to Heritage Acquisitions Limited, its headquarters in Germany. On paper, they deal in rare artifacts and antiquities."

Leaning forward, Sarah asked, "Is there any link to Dublin?"

"Yes. In the past three months, they have made several large transfers to accounts associated with a local 'tour guide agency' called The Hidden Dublin, which specializes in Dublin's history and offers guided tours," Sloan explained.

"Wait. There was a brochure for that place in Bill's hotel room. That's probably their front company here in Ireland," Sarah noted.

"Interestingly, one of those transfers matches an IP address that was communicating with Billy," Sloan added.

"That is interesting," Sarah said.

Sarah turns to Riley. "Any joy on tracking, Billy?"

"Sorry, Boss, he went dark just after he posted," she said.

"Shit," Sarah whispered.

As Sarah turned, she spotted her brother James entering. A wave of relief washed over her; he was a familiar face in the midst of the chaos that engulfed her. She gestured for him to enter her office and swiftly shut the door behind him, creating a bubble of privacy amid the bustling precinct outside. In their childhood, she and James had shared an unbreakable bond that often felt like a lifeline. Her older brother Frank, six years her senior, had always been too preoccupied with his own interests to let her tag along. Meanwhile, Matt had exuded an effortless coolness that made him seem unreachable. But James had always been different—he was her ally, the one who welcomed her into his world and the first person she turned to whenever she needed support.

"Heard you needed bailing out again," James said, settling against her desk like he owned it. "What kind of trouble are we talking this time?"

"You don't know the half of it," she replied, her frustration bubbling to the surface. "I'm just not making any headway on this case, and every time I think I have it figured out, something else bites me in the ass." The weight of her words hung in the air, a testament to the mounting pressure she felt as a lead investigator.

"Yeah, Jenn filled me in on your little stuntwoman move on the roof," he laughed, the sound rich with nostalgia.

"Not your first time, is it?" He was clearly recalling a childhood memory that had been etched into their minds over the years. When Sarah was just seven, her brother Matt had discovered some old dirt mattresses in a nearby alley, and James had eagerly dragged them home with a gleam in his eye, convinced that they could perform stunts on the roof of their house. But first, of course, they needed Sarah to test it out.

"Yeah, but I didn't jump; you threw me off the roof," Sarah countered, a playful smile creeping onto her face despite the moment's frustration.

"We gave you a helmet," he chuckled, the warmth of the memory softening the tension in the air.

"A cheap Walmart football helmet, and you missed the mattress," she retorted, crossing her arms as she feigned indignation.

"Yeah, but you weren't knocked out for long!" he said, still laughing. His eyes sparkled with mirth as they both momentarily escaped the weight of their current troubles, embraced by the shared history that had shaped them.

"Okay, then, where do we start?" James asked, his voice hinting at uncertainty as he glanced around the cluttered office.

"How about here?" Sarah replied, gesturing towards her chair with a firm but inviting motion. "You start going over everything we've got so far. I'll give you some quiet time; maybe your fresh eyes can make something of it and help me make some sense of it all. The only thing that's not here is that I went to see Paddy today."

"Oh, you didn't," James said, shaking his head in disbelief, his expression a mix of concern and exasperation.

"Okay, I know what you're going to say, but he has helped me in the past and has some good insight, especially when it comes to crime here in Dublin," Sarah explained, her tone defensive yet understanding of her brother's apprehension.

"You always did have a soft spot for that old man. Was he helpful?" James asked, raising an eyebrow, a teasing smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Yes, I think he was, but read first. Then we can talk about Paddy," Sarah insisted, a hint of determination lacing her words, knowing that the weight of their investigation rested on both their shoulders.

"I need to go see Tom; he has been bugging me about an update," Sarah said as she left him at her desk.

Chapter 15

Going upstairs to Tom's office felt like stepping into a different world. The lower levels were always cold, regardless of the time of year. Something was always broken or in disrepair; the other day, a spider the size of a golf ball dropped from the ceiling, scaring the daylights out of her. The dim lighting cast eerie shadows, and the smell of old paperwork and dust permeated the air.

In contrast, the upper level maintained a comfortable temperature, with a modern heating system that kept the chill at bay. Everything was clean and polished, from the gleaming floors to the spotless windows that let in the soft Irish sunlight. Everyone wore neatly ironed uniforms, and the atmosphere was one of quiet efficiency rather than the chaotic buzz of the lower levels. No creepy crawlies lurked in the corners, just the hum of well-maintained machinery and the occasional murmur of professional conversation. The transition was always jarring, but it served as a reminder of the hierarchy and the different faces of the department.

"Well, about time," Tom said as she walked in and shut the door with a soft click. Tom's office was large and spacious, with a small conference table in one corner and a cozy sofa in another, reflecting the understated elegance of the upper floors. He gestured for her to sit on the well-worn leather sofa, which had hosted countless difficult conversations over the years. "How are you feeling?" he asked, his eyes scanning her face with the practiced concern of a veteran supervisor.

"Fine," she replied with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Okay, let's discuss the Halls case," he said, getting down to business and settling into his familiar role. Sarah shared the highlights of what her team had uncovered, watching Tom's expression as she detailed each surprising twist in the investigation. His brow furrowed deeper with every revelation, creating familiar creases in his face.

"And now the boyfriend, Billy, has disappeared." She added that frustration was evident in her tone.

"What the hell? How old was this girl?" His voice was concerned, mirroring her initial reaction. His hand absently adjusted his tie.

"Twenty," she replied, the word hanging heavy in the air.

"A twenty-year-old girl who has never been in trouble with the law suddenly gets involved with Heritage Acquisitions Limited? That's no fly-by-night operation. Are you telling me all this is connected?"

Sarah hesitated, feeling the weight of the case pressing down on her shoulders like a physical burden. Her mind raced through the evidence, trying to piece together connections that seemed just out of reach. "Well, I don't know. I know it sounds crazy, but... I don't know," she sighed, running her hand through her hair in a gesture of frustration that had become all too familiar lately. "I have James downstairs looking at everything," Sarah said, her exhaustion more pronounced.

"I didn't mean it that way; it sounds like you are just looking at it the wrong way," he interjected quickly, leaning back into the creaking leather sofa. "What you do have seems plausible, but I think you just need to keep an open mind. Maybe she just ran into the wrong kind of fan." His voice turned thoughtful as he added, "Is that possible?" The question hung in the air between them, adding another layer to the already complex puzzle she was trying to solve.

Sarah shifted in her seat, contemplating the connections, her mind racing through the evidence. "But there's Paddy and his Englishman, Billy, and Jazzy meeting with someone similar. How would that fit?" she asked, trying to piece together the puzzle. "And now we have this guy hacking into my computer," she added, the memory of the breach still unsettling.

"Could we have separate crimes at play here, just all happening at the same time?" he asked, his tone carrying a note of careful consideration that made her pause. His years of experience were evident in the measured way he posed the question.

"A coincidence?" Sarah shook her head, feeling uneasy at the very thought. Her years of experience had taught her that coincidences in murder cases were as rare as snow in July. "Her boyfriend is involved in art theft, and she just happens to cross paths with a serial killer?" The words felt bitter in her mouth as she voiced this unlikely scenario, her frustration growing.

He smiled gently, his eyes crinkling at the corners like well-worn paper. "Maybe not exactly like that. Just keep an open mind. Something to think about."

"Well, that doesn't make me feel any better," she replied.

"But I know that Billy was definitely involved," Sarah asserted firmly, tapping her case file for emphasis, the sound sharp in the quiet office. "To what extent, I don't know, but he's connected to this somehow. My gut tells me he's more than just a grieving boyfriend."

"I have an idea. Do you want to make a stop on the way out?" Tom said with a sense of mystery, already reaching for his coat.

Chapter 16

Sarah and Tom made their way to The Hidden Dublin Tours, where an older little man with wire-rimmed glasses emerged from behind a cluttered desk. "Welcome, welcome! My name is Robert. How may I help?" Sarah instinctively reached for her credentials, but Tom's hand on her arm stopped her.

"I hope so. My wife is an American," Tom said smoothly. Sarah glanced at him and smiled, playing along. "She has never really seen the sights yet. Maybe you can give us some ideas?"

"Oh yes, welcome to Ireland! How long have you been here?" Robert turned to Sarah, his eyes twinkling with rehearsed enthusiasm.

"A while. Work has been keeping me busy, but now my husband wants to show me around," she replied in her Chicago accent.

"Well, yes, I can give you some wonderful ideas," the little man said eagerly, shuffling through stacks of colorful brochures. As Tom masterfully occupied Robert with questions about various tours, Sarah conducted her own silent investigation of the office: tourist posters in gilded frames, rows of neatly arranged brochures, and an impressive array of security cameras—she counted five in this room alone. The Alarm panel on the wall was top-of-the-line, overkill for a little tourist shop.

"Well, how did you hear about us?" Robert's question pulled her attention back.

Sarah turned, carefully casual. "My nephew was in here a few weeks ago and said you were very helpful. He's American too, in his twenties, with spiked hair - he might have been in with his girlfriend. She does some internet thing. Don't really get it myself."

The little man's cheerful demeanor noticeably dimmed. "No, no, I don't remember."

"Oh well, I have a photo." Sarah pulled out her phone and displayed Billy's picture. "Sorry, we get a lot of people in here; my memory is not what it was," Robert stammered, but his face had drained of color.

His entire manner abruptly transformed. "Well, it's almost tea time. My wife gets testy if I'm late." He began herding them toward the exit with surprising urgency. "Thank you for coming by," he said. Before they could respond, they found themselves on the sidewalk, the door clicking shut behind them. They exchanged knowing looks and burst into laughter, both aware they'd struck a nerve.

Tom and Sarah settled at the kitchen table with a Chinese takeaway, still laughing about Robert's reaction. The containers of sweet and sour chicken and beef with black bean sauce, steaming between them, filled my cozy kitchen with their aromatic scents.

"I thought he was going to shit right there when I showed him a picture of Billy," Sarah said, picking up a chopsticks. "His face turned about three different shades of pale."

"So, I guess that answers one question: Billy is involved with Heritage Acquisitions," Tom said, stealing a piece of chicken from her container.

"Yeah, but how? He is a kid from Wisconsin." She looked at Tom, studying his face. "You came up with that 'My wife' stuff pretty quickly." She smiled at him, feeling a flutter in her stomach as their eyes met.

"I did undercover work in my early days and was good at making stuff up on the fly." He leaned in closer, his cologne subtly mixing with the food aromas. "It does bring up something I've wanted to discuss."

"Ok," Sarah said, heart beginning to race.

"For a while, I've kind of felt we have been starring in our American sitcom, Will they, Won't they kind of thing." He looked at her intently, his eyes warm. "I was thinking I might want to try the will-they part." Sarah felt the tension that had been building between them for months reach its breaking point. Leaning in, she kissed him, savoring the moment, imagining for so long. "Why don't we finish this discussion upstairs?" She suggested, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah, he said slowly, "Race ya," and with that, he was off for the stairs, with Sarah taking off after him.

Sarah woke to golden sunlight streaming through the gauzy curtains, feeling wonderfully content. As her eyes fluttered open, she found Tom already awake beside her, propped up on one elbow, watching her with a tender expression that made her heart skip. His hair caught the morning light, and those warm brown eyes held such affection it nearly took her breath away.

"Good morning," he murmured, leaning over to brush his lips against hers in a gentle kiss that promised more. His familiar scent enveloped her. "I guess we definitely answered the 'will they' part of that equation," he added with a playful smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"I heard a lot of rushing around earlier downstairs - footsteps thundering up and down the hallway, doors opening and closing," Tom said.

"Probably just the kids," Sarah said drowsily. Then, her eyes shot open as realization dawned. Oh!" The comfortable fog of sleep instantly evaporated as she remembered the kids.

He looked at Her with that mixture of amusement and tenderness that quickened her pulse. "Want me to crawl out the window?" he asked, only half-joking.

She looked at him, taking in his disheveled appearance, and couldn't help but smile. "Could ya?" She laughed.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"8," he said, glancing at his watch on the nightstand.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, breathing in his warmth and pulling him closer. "Or we could just wait till they leave for school," Sarah suggested with a mischievous grin, knowing her teenagers would rush out the door for their morning classes any minute.

Chapter 17

As Sarah was driving into the office, she received a call from James. "Hey, meet me at the Skyline," he said.

"OK, you are going to tell me why?" Sarah asked, already changing lanes to head in that direction.

"When you get here," he replied cryptically.

When she pulled up to the hotel, James was waiting out front, his hands tucked into his coat pockets to protect him from the morning chill.

"What have you got?" Sarah asked, falling into step beside him.

"I looked at some of the CCTV from the hotel. I was interested in other people Billy or Jazzy was interacting with, and I found your friend from the other day hanging around here. We could check it out - he may be a guest here."

"Well, alright. Something may finally go right." Sarah said

Sarah noticed the pretty young girl behind the desk as they entered the lobby. She stopped James with a touch on his arm. "How's your charm?" She asked.

"I can be very charming. Why?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'll hang back. You might get further without me around," Sarah said, nodding toward the receptionist.

Sarah sat in front of the crackling fireplace and watched James work his magic. It was like watching a well-rehearsed play.

James approached the desk and flashed his winning smile at the receptionist.

"I'm Inspector O'Neil. What's your name?"

"Amy," she said, smiling back at him, already falling for the O'Neil charm.

"Amy, could you help me? I'm looking to see if this man..." he showed her a photo.

"Oh, that jerk, Mr. Smith - I think it's a fake name if you ask me," Amy said with obvious distaste.

"Not a good guest? What's his first name?" James pressed gently.

"John, and no, he's not. He's never happy, always has something to complain about," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Is he in trouble? I would love to see him dragged out in cuffs," she added with a mischievous smile.

"What room is he in?" James asked

"213. I haven't seen him today, though. Usually, he's down here moaning about something by now."

Amy did some quick tapping at her keyboard and produced a key card.

"Since you're the Garda, you could check if he's there," she offered helpfully.

"Thank you, Amy." He smiled and winked at her.

James turned and gestured for Sarah to meet him at the elevator.

"Well, you're good, and you got a key," She said, impressed with his handiwork.

At room 213, James put his ear to the door.

"Quiet," he whispered as he knocked.

He looked at Sarah, shaking his head. "Nothing."

They both drew their weapons and entered the quiet, dark room. Sarah turned on the lights, but no one was there. Looking around the room, she spotted one suitcase, some empty food containers, and a thumb drive on the table. Sarah grins, picks it up, and shows it to James. Just then, Mr. Smith opens the door, carrying a full ice bucket, which he immediately throws at Sarah before bolting.

The man ran up the stairs, with James and Sarah taking off after him. This time, he went down and out to the parking lot. By the time they got there, he was gone. "Who the fuck is this guy, Usain Bolt?" Sarah panted, frustrated at losing him again.

As James called for backup units to search the area, Sarah returned to room 213. Stepping inside, she took in the surroundings, noting how little it seemed to have been used. There was no passport, wallet, or cell phone—just a palpable sense of emptiness. The clothes in the suitcase were simple and practical, clearly chosen for function rather than style. Curiosity tugged at her, so she crouched and peered under the bed. To her surprise, she discovered a black duffel bag tucked away, filled with cold-weather clothes, hiking boots, flashlights, and climbing gear. Amidst it all, she spotted a lifeless cell phone, its battery completely drained.

As Sarah walked into the office, she tossed the thumb drive and the dead cell phone to Sloan.

"Let's see what's on the thumb drive first, then see if you can do anything with the phone," she said, unable to suppress the grin that crept onto her face. Curiosity bubbled within her.

"Okay," Sloan replied, his fingers deftly inserting the drive into his computer.

The overhead screen flickered to life, illuminating the dimly lit room, and Sarah leaned in closer, her heart racing at the prospect of what they might uncover.

"Well, here are the files that were on your computer," he began, scanning the screen. "But there are some other files as well."

Sarah leaned in further, intrigued. "What do you see?"

"It looks like we have one on Billy, Jazzy, and someone called Professor Andrew Scott, who could be our Englishman. There's also a file on your grandfather and one on you." He paused, his expression growing serious.

"Including where you live, what car you drive, and where your kids go to school."

At the mention of her children, an icy knot formed in Sarah's stomach. She quickly dialed Liam's number, her heart pounding as she waited for him to pick up. He answered on the first ring.

"Mum, I can't talk now," he said, his voice hurried.

"Where are you at now?" She demanded, her mind racing.

"I'm getting ready for football practice," he replied, and she felt relieved.

"Okay, listen, you stay there. I'm going to pick you up," Sarah instructed, but before he could object, she cut him off. "Just do it." Sarah hung up and tried to call Aoife, but it went straight to voicemail. "Shit," She muttered, trying again, only to be met with the same frustrating outcome.

Sarah made her way toward the door, urgency propelling her forward.

"Colin, Liam is at football practice; go there now, please," Sarah said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"You got it," Colin replied, his tone serious.

James rushed after her and snatched the keys from her hand. "Better let me drive," he said, concern etched on his face.

Sarah tried calling Aoife's phone again, but it went to voicemail again. "Shit," She cursed under her breath, fighting to keep her imagination from spiraling into dark places.

"Look, maybe she's in class; she can't just pick up the phone in there. I'm sure there's no phone use, at least during exams," James reassured her, attempting to calm Sarah's rising anxiety.

As they arrived at the school, Sarah spotted a young Garda stationed at the gate. During school hours, there was always Gardai presence, a comforting thought in unsettling times.

"John," She called out, urgency lacing her voice.

"Chief, what's up?" he asked, his brow furrowing at her tone.

"Have you seen Aoife?" Sarah asked, her breath quickening.

"Early this morning," he replied, his expression shifting to concern.

"I need you and your partner to look for her. You have my number. Call me if you see her," Sarah urged him before taking off into a full sprint toward the north end of the campus. Most of Aoife's classes were in the buildings over there, and every second felt like an eternity.

As she rounded the bend, Sarah spotted her sitting under a tree near the pond, accompanied by a male student. Relief washed over her, but a surge of panic quickly overtook it. "What the fuck?" That was all Sarah could manage to say as she dropped to one knee, still trying to catch her breath; she felt as if a weight had landed on her chest, and she started to wonder if this was what a panic attack felt like.

"Mum, what's wrong?" Aoife asked, concerned, etching her features as she rushed to her side.

James caught up, his breathing heavier. "Your mum was just worried when you didn't answer your phone," he explained, and she could see the tension starting to ease in Aoife's demeanor.

Aoife glanced at her phone, her expression apologetic. "I'm sorry, I forgot to unmute it after class."

Sarah stood up and wrapped her arms around Aoife, feeling her warmth. "I'm sorry, baby. I just panicked a little, that's all," Sarah said, her voice softening as she fought to regain composure. "Look, I need you to come home now."

"Mum, I have two more classes, and they are important. I can't miss them," Aoife replied, her tone both firm and apologetic.

Sarah opened my mouth to say something, but James held up a hand, stopping her. "Aoife, give us a second," he said, his voice steady as he tried to maintain the calm they all desperately needed.

"Okay, look, Sarah," he continued, "you can't lock her away. We have no reason to think she is in real danger. Just let me handle it."

"Alright, Aoife," James said, "Go to your classes, but when you're done, there will be a Garda here to drive you home. Once your mum has calmed down, she'll explain everything. Just don't leave campus. I don't think you're in danger, but I want you to be careful. This will help your mum feel better."

James glanced back at Sarah, then returned his gaze to Aoife. "Is that good?" he asked, seeking her approval in this tense moment.

"No, wait, who's this?" Sarah interrupted, noticing the young man who had been lingering on the sidelines, watching them with curiosity.

"Cillian Ryan," he introduced himself, his voice steady. "You know my mum, Nora Ryan. She works with the K9 unit," he added, a hint of pride in his voice.

Sarah nodded, recognition sparking. "Yeah, I know her."

Cillian continued, "We have the same classes, so I'll be here too."

"Even better," James said, a hint of relief in his expression as he glanced between Cillian and Aoife.

Sarah sat in the car, watching James finish his conversation with the Gardai at the school. The sunlight filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows on the pavement, but she couldn't focus on anything outside. She was still trying to calm herself down; it wasn't working. Her heart felt like it was racing against her ribcage, a relentless drumbeat that echoed in her ears. Sarah pressed a finger to her closed eyes, hoping to ease the tension, and inhaled deeply through her nose, exhaling slowly out of her mouth.

Just then, her phone buzzed. A text from Colin flashed on the screen, reassuring her that he was at football practice and everything was fine. He promised to bring Liam home afterward, which should have eased her mind, but it only added to her weight.

James slid into the car beside her, his expression a mix of concern and determination. "Okay, they've put out Smith's picture. John will take Aoife home when she's done with classes, and there will be someone outside the house tonight," he said, glancing at her with that brotherly concern she knew all too well. "Are you okay?" Sarah shook my head, frustration bubbling up within me. "No, I just don't know what's happening to me. This case is driving me nuts." Her voice wavered, betraying the exhaustion she felt.

James hesitated for a moment before speaking again. "Well, I have a thought. If you want to hear it, " he said, paused, and gauged her reaction. Maybe you need to take some time off," he suggested gently, but she could feel her instinct to protest rising.

Before she could voice her objection, he held up a hand. "You forget I'm married to your best friend. I hear everything. Since the divorce, you have thrown your whole self into your work, always stressing yourself out. And now you have a case that is hitting too close to home. In five years, you haven't taken a vacation or any time off at all." His words hung in the air, a reminder that even the strongest among us sometimes needed to step back and breathe.

Sarah winced, knowing James was right. Ever since Aiden had left her for his twenty-something girlfriend, she'd buried herself in casework, using the long hours as both distraction and punishment. The promotion to Chief Inspector had only given her more excuses to avoid dealing with her personal life.

"Jenn worries about you," James continued, his voice softening. "We all do. You can't keep running yourself into the ground like this. Even Dad knew when to come home and shut off the detective part of his brain."

The mention of their father made Sarah's chest tighten. She'd followed in his footsteps, but somehow missed inheriting his ability to separate work from life.

Sarah took a deep breath, feeling the world's weight pressing down on her shoulders like a physical burden. The exhaustion had seeped into her bones over the past months, but acknowledging it felt like admitting defeat.

"It has been a while since I had a break," she admitted reluctantly, running a hand through her hair. "But I'm not stopping on this case. I am going to see it through." Her voice was steady, but inside, she felt the familiar swirl of determination and anxiety that had been her constant companions since Aiden's betrayal. The case files scattered across her desk represented more than work—they were her anchor.

"Fair enough, but let me help you," James replied, a grin spreading across his face that momentarily lightened the mood. The expression reminded her of their childhood, when he'd use the same look to coax her out of stubborn moods. "I didn't become an inspector on my good looks alone." His playful banter cut through the tension, offering a glimpse of the sibling dynamic that had sustained them.

Chapter 18

Sarah walked into the quiet house, the familiar scent of home wrapping around her like a comforting embrace, though it felt different today. Her shoulders sagged with the weight of the day's events as she made her way to the kitchen, where she found her children, Liam and Aoife, sitting at the table. Their eyes were wide and expectant, staring at her intently. Sarah knew she couldn't avoid the conversation they deserved.

"Okay, look, I'm sorry about today," Sarah began, trying to keep her tone light despite the heaviness she felt.

"Things just got a little crazy, and I let it get to me."

"A little?" Liam started hesitantly, but Aoife cut him off, her voice sharp with concern.

"What happened today that upset you so much?" Aoife asked, her unwavering gaze seeming to pierce through Sarah's carefully constructed façade.

Sarah moved toward the counter, her hand instinctively reaching for the whiskey bottle, seeking a moment's solace. Aoife was quicker, though, her fingers wrapping around the bottle with a determined grip.

"No drinking until you talk first," she insisted, her maturity shining through in that moment. Sarah couldn't help but feel a surge of pride mixed with guilt.

Sarah sat at the table with a resigned sigh, feeling the weight of her children's concerned stares. "James and I found the man who had hacked my computer. He was staying at a hotel," she explained, keeping her voice steady despite her frustration. "When we confronted him, he ran and got away again."

She paused, gathering her thoughts before continuing. "I also found the thumb drive he used to hack my computer. He had files on me, including where we live and where the two of you go to school." Sarah met their eyes directly. "So yes, I panicked a little." The admission hung in the air as she watched shock register on their faces, a silent understanding of how serious the situation had become.

Liam's expression softened. He stood up and walked over to wrap his arms around her warmly. "Hey, we're okay, Mum. We'll be careful. It's all going to be fine," he reassured her, his voice filled with a comforting sincerity that eased some of the tension in her chest.

"Thank you, baby," Sarah replied, feeling grateful for his kindness in this chaotic moment.

When Sarah turned her gaze to Aoife, she noticed her daughter's thoughtful demeanor. Aoife handed the whiskey bottle back, silently acknowledging the weight of the situation. Then, with a determined nod, she moved to get a glass, her maturity evident as she took charge before wrapping her arm around Sarah's shoulders. "How dangerous is this man, Mum?" Aoife asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Sarah took a deep breath, trying to find the right words amidst her own uncertainty. "I really don't know, honey. I can't say for sure if he's dangerous at all," she replied honestly, her heart heavy with responsibility. "What matters most to me right now is knowing that both of you are safe. That's the only thing that's important to me." Sarah looked into her daughter's eyes, hoping to convey the depth of her love and protectiveness, even as doubts clouded her mind.

Sarah picked up her glass and whiskey bottle and entered the living room. She sank onto the sofa and took a large sip of her drink, and her children followed her.

"Mum, you've been doing this job for a while, but you've never been this worried before," Liam observed, settling beside her.

"Well, I've just been better at hiding it before," Sarah admitted with a weary smile.

"Look, I've been thinking that we should take a vacation, after this case is over," Sarah said, swirling the amber liquid in her glass thoughtfully. The weight of the investigation seemed to press down on her shoulders, making the idea of escape all the more appealing.

"A real vacation?" Liam said, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "The last time we all went on a vacation together, you and Dad almost killed each other. Remember that disaster in Barcelona? You threw his phone into the ocean when you caught him texting his office."

"He's not coming this time," Sarah clarified, taking another sip of whiskey to wash away the bitter memories of holidays ruined by Aiden's constant work calls and eventual infidelity. The divorce might be years behind them, but some wounds still smarted when prodded.

"Where would we go?" Aoife asked, leaning forward with sudden interest. Her earlier worry was momentarily forgotten as she considered the possibilities. Her eyes lit up with the first genuine excitement Sarah had seen all evening.

"Well, you two think about it, and we'll see if we can come up with something," Sarah said, a slight smile tugging her lips. Seeing them distracted from the darkness that had followed her home was good. "Somewhere with no extradition treaties might be nice," she added with a dry chuckle.

"Hawaii," they both said together, exchanging glances before breaking into identical grins.

"Really?" Sarah asked, genuinely surprised by their immediate consensus. "Of all the places in the world, that's what you both want?"

"Mum, no rain and beaches," Aoife said, gesturing toward the window where typical Irish drizzle tapped against the glass. "Plus, it's literally on the other side of the world from your work. You couldn't possibly get called in for an emergency."

"And besides, the chances of you taking another vacation may never come, so we'll just go for the biggest one now," Liam added pragmatically, his tone suggesting he'd been thinking about this for some time. "We might as well make it count while we have the chance to drag you away from the station."

Suddenly, she bolted upright as the doorbell rang. Liam started toward the door.

"Wait, Liam!" Sarah called out, instantly alert.

"Mum, it's just Cillian," Aoife reassured her. "He went to get dinner for us."

A moment later, Cillian appeared carrying two large pizza boxes. "Hey, everyone!" he said cheerfully as Liam walked into the kitchen with him.

Sarah turned to Aoife with a puzzled expression. "Who is that?" she asked quietly.

"Mum, you met him earlier today when you freaked out at school," Aoife explained, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

As Sarah began to stand up, Aoife added quickly, "Mum, please be nice."

"I'm always nice," Sarah responded defensively.

"No, you're not," Aoife countered firmly. "I like him, so be nice."

Cillian, who had overheard their exchange, approached with a friendly smile. "Aoife told me where to get the pizza you like," he said to Sarah, glancing at Aoife, whose grin made it clear she was glad to see him. "Sausage and onions, right? The Pizzeria on Fourth Street—Aoife said they've been your favorite since you moved back."

"Yeah, thanks," Sarah said, her tone softening slightly despite herself. She noticed the way Aoife's eyes sparkled around Cillian and felt a reluctant wave of approval mixed with protectiveness as they interacted. It reminded her of her teenage years, though she'd never admit it. The boy seemed genuinely thoughtful, remembering her pizza preference when most teenagers could barely remember their schedules.

Chapter 19

As Sarah pulled up to the agreed meeting point, the sky was beginning to lighten, streaks of pale gold breaking through the heavy clouds. The small parking area overlooking the Irish Sea sat empty except for her grandfather's mud-splattered Land Rover. She could make out three silhouettes inside—Paddy in the passenger seat, Sean behind the wheel, and Shawn's broad shoulders in the back.

Sarah had dressed practically: waterproof hiking boots, thermal layers beneath a well-worn Garda jacket, and her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She'd foregone makeup entirely, knowing the damp caves would render it pointless. In her backpack were extra flashlights, batteries, her service weapon, and a first aid kit. She'd learned long ago to prepare for the worst while hoping for the best.

"Morning," she greeted as she approached the Land Rover. The window rolled down, revealing Paddy's weathered face.

"You look like shite," he observed bluntly.

"Good morning to you too, Granddad," Sarah replied, summoning a smile she didn't feel.

"Did you sleep at all?" Shawn asked as he climbed out to join her.

"Enough," Sarah lied. She turned to Sean, noting his presence with mild surprise. "Didn't expect to see you here."

Sean straightened slightly under her gaze. "Mr. O'Neil thought an extra pair of hands might be useful."

"And someone who knows the caves almost as well as I do," Paddy added, thumping his cane against the door panel. "Sean's been helping me map the newer tunnels."

Sarah raised an eyebrow but didn't question it further. If they were heading into potentially dangerous territory, another set of eyes would be welcome, especially those familiar with the terrain.

"Any news on Billy Danes?" Shawn asked as they gathered their equipment.

"Last location ping from his phone was near Howth village around midnight," Sarah replied. "Then nothing. Either his battery died, or he turned it off intentionally."

"Or someone turned it off for him," Paddy muttered.

Sarah checked her watch—at 6:15 AM. "The tide?"

"Going out," Sean confirmed. "We've got about five hours before it starts coming back in."

Paddy unfolded a map on the hood of the Land Rover, the paper crackling in the morning breeze. "There are three main entrances to the cave system," he explained, pointing to marked spots on the coastline. "The one most tourists know about is here, but it only goes back about thirty meters before dead-ending. The two we're interested in are here and here—one above the high-tide line, one below."

"Which one would Billy most likely use?" Sarah asked.

"If he did any research, the upper entrance," Paddy replied. "It's more accessible, especially for someone who doesn't know what they're doing. But if someone uses the caves for smuggling or storage, they'd be more likely to use the lower entrance—harder to find, more dangerous, and more direct access to the deeper chambers."

"We should split up, then," Sarah suggested.

Paddy shook his head firmly. "Not a chance. These caves are a maze, and the tide waits for no one. We go in together through the upper entrance. If we need to check the lower one, we can reach it from inside."

Sarah wanted to argue but recognized the wisdom in his words. Getting lost or trapped in unfamiliar caves was not a risk worth taking.

"Fine," she conceded. "Lead the way."

The hike to the upper cave entrance took nearly forty-five minutes—a winding path alternating between dense gorse thickets and exposed cliff edges. Sean led the way, moving with the ease of someone who had traveled this route many times before. Paddy followed, his cane finding sure footing despite the uneven terrain. His pace was slower than in his younger years, but Sarah noted the determined set of his shoulders—he would not be left behind.

They paused at the top of a steep decline, catching their breath as they surveyed the landscape below. The coast stretched out in a rugged panorama of rocky outcroppings and thundering waves. In the distance, fishing boats headed out for the day's catch, tiny specks against the vast gray-blue of the Irish Sea.

"There," Paddy pointed to a dark slash in the cliff face, partially obscured by overgrown vegetation. "That's our entrance."

As they approached, Sarah noticed how cunningly hidden it was—visible only from certain angles, easily missed if you didn't know exactly what you were looking for. Sean moved ahead, pulling out a machete to clear the brambles that had grown across the opening.

"This has all been cut recently," he observed, tugging on a branch to reveal fresh, clean cuts beneath the tangled exterior. "Someone's been here within the last day or two."

"Billy?" Shawn suggested.

Sarah frowned. "Or whoever he was meeting. Stay alert."

They donned headlamps and jackets, the morning air growing cooler as they approached the cave mouth. A distinctive smell emanated from the entrance—damp earth, salt, and something older, more primal.

"I'll take point," Sean said, switching on his powerful flashlight. "Mr. O'Neil next, then you, Chief Inspector, and Sergeant Masterson at the rear."

Sarah nodded, impressed by the young man's natural authority. Perhaps there was a Garda in him despite his family connections. Sarah wondered.

The narrow entrance required them to duck their heads as they passed through the first few meters. Then, it widened abruptly into a chamber tall enough to stand in comfortably. The temperature dropped immediately, their breath visible in the beam of their flashlights.

"Watch your footing," Paddy warned. "The ground slopes down here."

Their lights revealed a cathedral-like space, the walls glittering with mineral deposits that caught and reflected their beams in dazzling patterns. Water dripped steadily from unseen sources above, creating a constant, rhythmic percussion that echoed through the chamber.

"It's beautiful," Sarah murmured, momentarily forgetting the grim purpose of their expedition.

"The ancient Celts considered these caves sacred," Paddy said, his voice hushed with a respect that transcended time. "They believed they were pathways to the Otherworld—places where the veil between worlds grew thin." Sarah moved her light across the walls, noticing carvings etched into the stone—spirals, interconnected circles, and more complex symbols she didn't recognize.

"These are old," she said, running her fingers lightly over a deeply carved spiral. "Very old."

"Older than Christianity in Ireland," Paddy confirmed. "The druids used these caves for rituals and initiations.

Later, when St. Patrick and his ilk came, the old believers moved deeper in, hiding their practices from Christian eyes."

"And more recently, they served other kinds of secrecy," Shawn added, his tone pragmatic.

Paddy chuckled darkly. "Aye, guns instead of gods, but the principle remained the same, the caves keep their secrets."

They moved deeper, following Sean's sure guidance through increasingly narrow passages. The main tunnel branched repeatedly, creating a labyrinthine network that would be easy to get lost in without a guide. Sarah noted how Sean navigated using the ancient symbols as landmarks, just as Paddy had mentioned.

"Three turns past the spiral mark, left at the crossed lines," she murmured to herself, remembering her grandfather's words.

After about twenty minutes of steady descent, the narrow passage opened into another large chamber. This one was different—clearly modified by human hands in more recent times. Wooden supports braced sections of the ceiling, and the floor had been partially leveled. Empty crates were stacked against one wall, and the remnants of a campfire sat in the center of the space.

"Someone's been using this recently," Shawn observed, kneeling to examine the ashes. "Within the last day or so."

Sarah approached the crates, shining her light inside them. "Empty," she reported. "But there are markings." She traced her finger over a logo stamped on the wood—a stylized tree with branches reaching upward and roots extending downward, forming a circle. Beneath it was the text "Heritage Acquisition Ltd."

"Well, there's your connection," Paddy said grimly.

Sarah took photos with her phone, documenting the crates and their surroundings. "We need to keep moving," she said. "If Billy came down here, he would have gone deeper."

Sean nodded, leading them toward a passage at the chamber's far end. This tunnel sloped more steeply downward, and the air grew notably cooler and damper as they descended. The walls were slick with moisture, and the ground beneath their feet began to squish with mud and standing water.

"We're getting close to sea level," Paddy explained. "These lower tunnels flood completely during high tide."

"How much farther to the main chamber you mentioned?" Sarah asked.

"Not far now," Sean replied. "Maybe another five minutes."

As they continued their descent, Sarah became aware of a subtle change in the atmosphere—not just the increased moisture, but something else, a heaviness that seemed to press against her skin. The acoustics shifted, too, their footsteps echoing differently, suggesting they were approaching a larger space.

They rounded a bend in the tunnel, and their lights spilled into vastness—a chamber so large that their beams couldn't reach the far walls or ceiling. The floor sloped down to a perfectly still pool of water that reflected their lights like a black mirror. The air was noticeably warmer here, suggesting some connection to thermal sources deep below.

"This is it," Paddy said softly. "The heart of the cave system."

Sarah swept her light across the chamber, trying to get a sense of its dimensions. The walls were covered with carvings—more elaborate than those near the entrance, depicting human figures, animals, and complex geometric patterns that seemed to shimmer and move in the dancing beams of their flashlights.

"Look there," Shawn pointed to the far side of the pool, where a flat area of rock formed a natural platform above the water. "Something's there."

Sarah directed her beam where Shawn indicated, and her heart sank. A dark shape lay crumpled on the stone platform, unmoving.

"Shit," she muttered, already moving forward along the narrow path that circled the pool.

As they drew closer, the shape resolved into a human form. Sarah quickened her pace, nearly slipping on the slick stone in her haste. When she reached the platform, she knelt beside the still figure, already knowing what she would find.

Billy Danes lay face down on the cold stone, his arms outstretched as if reaching for something. Sarah carefully rolled him onto his back, checking for a pulse she knew wouldn't be there. His skin was cool to the touch, his eyes staring sightlessly at the unseen ceiling high above.

"He's been dead for hours," she said, examining him with her flashlight. There was a small, neat hole in the center of his forehead—the unmistakable mark of a professional execution.

"Single gunshot, close range," Shawn observed, crouching beside her. "No defensive wounds that I can see."

"He knew his killer," Sarah concluded. "Or at least, he wasn't afraid of them."

"Look at this," Sean called from a few meters away. He was shining his light on something partially hidden behind a rock outcropping—another body.

Sarah moved quickly to join him, her stomach clenching at the sight of a second victim. This man was older, perhaps in his fifties, with gray-streaked hair and the build of someone who spent more time with books than physical activity. He, too, had been shot once in the head, the execution identical to Billy's.

"The professor, I'm guessing," Sarah said, noting the tweed jacket and leather elbow patches that matched Liz's description.

"Andrew Scott," Shawn confirmed, finding a wallet in the man's jacket pocket. "British passport, university ID from Oxford. Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies."

Sarah looked around the chamber, her light catching on something near the water's edge—a leather satchel, its contents spilled across the stone. She moved carefully toward it, mindful of preserving any evidence. Inside were papers, a notebook filled with handwritten notes in what appeared to be some code, and several small artifacts—ceramic fragments, metal objects with intricate designs, and what looked like ancient coins.

"He was collecting samples," she murmured, photographing everything before touching it.

"Or stealing them," Paddy suggested, joining her by the water. "Not all treasure comes in chests of gold, Sarah. Some of the most valuable antiquities are small enough to fit in your pocket."

Sarah picked up the notebook, carefully turning its pages. The writing was dense, interspersed with drawings of the cave symbols and what appeared to be translations or interpretations. She couldn't make sense of most of it, but certain phrases jumped out—"pre-Celtic origins," "ritual vessel," "protection sigils," and repeatedly, "the chalice."

"What's that?" Paddy asked, peering at the notebook.

Before Sarah could answer, a sound echoed through the chamber—footsteps coming from the tunnel they had just traversed. Everyone froze, instantly alert.

Sean reacted first, dousing his light and swiftly moving to a position where he could see the tunnel entrance without being seen. Sarah and Shawn drew their weapons and took cover behind a rock formation. Paddy melted into the shadows near the wall with surprising agility for his age.

The footsteps grew louder, accompanied by the dancing beam of a flashlight. A silhouette appeared at the tunnel mouth, pausing to survey the chamber.

"Garda! Don't move!" Sarah called out, her voice reverberating through the vast space as she trained her weapon on the figure.

The silhouette stepped forward into the light, revealing a man of medium height in perfectly tailored clothes who wore an expression of mild surprise rather than fear. In one hand, he held a flashlight, and in the other, he held a gun pointed casually at the ground.

"Chief Inspector O'Malley," he said, his accent precisely neutral. "I was wondering when our paths would cross again."

Sarah recognized him immediately—the man who had broken into her office, the one she had chased across the rooftops.

"Mr. Smith, I presume," she replied, keeping her weapon steady. "Or whatever your real name is."

The man smiled thinly. "Names are such transitory things, wouldn't you agree? Especially in our line of work."

"And what line of work would that be?" Sarah asked, keeping him talking while trying to assess if he was alone.

"Art theft? Murder? Or just general mayhem?"

"I want to end the mayhem, Chief Inspector." His eyes flickered to the bodies, then back to Sarah. "Though I'll admit, things have become messier than I'd prefer."

"Drop your weapon and put your hands up," Shawn ordered from his position to Sarah's right.

Smith glanced in Shawn's direction, seemingly unperturbed by the additional threat. "I'm afraid I can't do that just yet. We have unfinished business."

"The only business you have is with the inside of a cell," Sarah replied. "Drop the gun. Now."

Smith's smile widened fractionally. "Always so direct, Chief Inspector. You are truly most refreshing, and your dedication is a quality in short supply. But before we conclude our professional relationship, I should mention that I'm not alone."

As if on cue, another figure emerged from the shadows behind them—a position that should have been impossible to reach without them noticing. With a chill, Sarah realized there must be another entrance to the chamber, one they hadn't seen.

The second man moved with military precision, his weapon already drawn and pointed at Shawn. "Nobody move," he commanded in a clipped Eastern European accent.

Sarah's mind raced, calculating angles, distances, and probabilities: two armed men, four of them—two with weapons, two without. The odds weren't good.

"What do you want?" she asked, addressing Smith while keeping the second man in her peripheral vision.

"The same thing your unfortunate friends here wanted," Smith replied, nodding toward the bodies. "The chalice. Professor Scott spent years tracking it down, following legends and fragments of ancient texts. He came to these caves, only to discover he wasn't the only one looking for it." He sighed theatrically. "

"You killed them for an old cup?" Sarah asked incredulously, her voice echoing off the ancient stone walls of the chamber, disgust evident in every syllable.

Smith's eyes gleamed with a fervent light that Sarah recognized all too well from other zealots. "Not just any cup, Chief Inspector. A pre-Celtic ritual vessel of immense power. The Chalice of Danann. They believed it could bridge worlds and allow communication with the Otherworld." His voice took on a reverent quality, fingers twitching slightly against his weapon as he spoke of the artifact.

"And Jazzy? Why kill her?"

Smith's expression hardened, the momentary reverence replaced by cold calculation. "Miss Shaw was, unfortunately, inquisitive. She began to suspect what her boyfriend was involved in and started her own investigation. When she confronted the professor with her suspicions, he made the mistake of confirming them." He shook his head with a look of genuine disappointment. "You see, he had grown a conscience after years of having none. Quite inconvenient timing."

"So you killed them all," Sarah said, her voice tight with anger, "Young lives snuffed out by greed and delusion." Her finger tensed slightly on the trigger. "For what?"

"For the power," Smith replied without hesitation, his eyes darting briefly to the second gunman, who maintained his position. "You don't understand what The Chalice is, what it represents. What it can do in the right hands." The conviction in his voice was absolute, unwavering.

"Nothing personal," he added with a slight shrug, as if this explained everything.

"It's personal to me," Sarah shot back, her voice thick with emotion.

Smith studied her for a moment, then nodded as if coming to a decision. "I actually believe you. Your reputation precedes you, Chief Inspector. Tenacious. Incorruptible. A credit to the force." He gestured with his gun.

"Which is why I'm truly sorry about this."

Everything happened at once. The second man fired at Shawn, the shot echoing deafeningly in the chamber. Shawn dove for cover, returning fire as he moved. Sarah rolled sideways, seeking the protection of a stone outcropping as she lined up her shot on Smith.

Before she could fire, a blur of movement launched from the shadows—Sean throwing himself at the second gunman with reckless courage. They collided hard, grappling for control of the weapon as they crashed to the ground.

Smith used the distraction to fire at Sarah, the bullet striking stone inches from her head, sending fragments flying. She felt a sharp sting as one caught her cheek but ignored it, returning fire with practiced precision. Smith moved with surprising agility, ducking her shots as he retreated toward what Sarah now realized was indeed a second tunnel entrance, partially concealed behind a rock formation. She pursued, keeping low, aware of the dangerous lack of cover in the open chamber.

Behind her, she heard the continued struggle between Sean and the second gunman, punctuated by grunts of effort and the alarming crack of what might have been bone-breaking. Shawn was shouting something, but the acoustics of the cave distorted his words into unintelligible echoes.

Smith reached the hidden tunnel entrance and paused, turning to fire three rapid shots that forced Sarah to take cover once more. When she looked again, he was gone, the sound of his footsteps receding rapidly.

Sarah hesitated, torn between pursuing Smith and helping her companions. The decision was made for her when Shawn called out, "Chief! Help!"

She turned to see Shawn kneeling beside Sean, who lay motionless on the stone floor. The second gunman was also down, unmoving, a dark pool spreading beneath him.

"Go after him!" Paddy shouted, emerging from his hiding place. "I'll help with the boy. Go!"

Sarah nodded and sprinted toward the tunnel where Smith had disappeared. The passage was narrower than the one they had used to enter, sloping upward instead of down. She moved as quickly as she dared, her flashlight

beam bouncing wildly ahead of her. Smith's footsteps echoed back to her, growing fainter as he increased his lead.

The tunnel twisted and turned, branching occasionally. Sarah followed the freshest footprints in the damp earth, her breath coming in controlled bursts as she pushed herself to maintain speed without sacrificing caution. A wrong turn in these caves could be fatal.

Gradually, the air began to change, growing fresher. A faint grayish light appeared ahead—daylight filtering in from an exit. Sarah quickened her pace, determined not to let Smith escape again.

She burst out of the cave mouth into the blinding morning sunlight, momentarily disoriented by the sudden change. She stood on a narrow ledge halfway up the cliff face, the sea crashing against rocks thirty meters below. The ledge continued around the cliff, forming a precarious natural path.

Smith was already twenty meters ahead, moving with confident speed along the ledge. He glanced back once, saw her, and redoubled his pace.

"Stop!" Sarah shouted, knowing it was futile.

As expected, Smith ignored her, continuing his flight along the cliff edge. Sarah pursued her focus, narrowing to the treacherous path beneath her feet and the diminishing figure ahead. One misstep would mean a lethal fall onto the rocks below. *She thought like him to run rather than face consequences, but I didn't chase him through that entire cave system to watch him escape now.*

The ledge widened slightly as it curved around a headland, revealing a small cove below where a sleek motorboat was anchored—Smith's escape route. A rope ladder hung from the ledge to the beach below, explaining how his partner had entered the caves from behind them.

Smith reached the ladder and began his descent, moving with practiced efficiency. Sarah pushed herself harder, closing the distance, but she knew she wouldn't get him before he reached the boat.

When she reached the ladder, Smith was already halfway down the beach, running toward the waiting vessel. Sarah holstered her weapon without hesitation and descended, the rope ladder swinging beneath her weight. By the time her feet hit the sand, Smith had reached the motorboat and was working to start the engine. Sarah ran, her boots sinking slightly in the wet sand, slowing her progress. She drew her weapon again, but the distance and movement made a clean shot impossible without risking hitting the fuel tanks.

As Sarah reached the water's edge, the boat's engine roared to life. Smith looked back at her, their eyes meeting for a brief moment. He offered a small, almost respectful nod, then opened the throttle.

The boat surged forward, cutting through the waves with powerful speed. Within moments, it was beyond effective pistol range, and minutes later, it disappeared around the far headland.

Sarah stood on the beach, the waves lapping at her boots. Her breath came in deep, controlled measures as she fought down the frustration of another missed opportunity. She holstered her weapon and pulled out her phone, relieved to find she had a signal.

"This is Chief Inspector O'Malley," she said when the emergency dispatcher answered. "I need immediate medical assistance at the Howth Sea caves, upper entrance. There's an officer down and multiple fatalities at the scene. And I need the Coast Guard. Suspect fleeing by motorboat, heading east from the small cove on the north side of Howth Head."

After ending the call, Sarah began climbing back up the ladder, her muscles protesting the exertion as the adrenaline of the chase faded. Her mind was already shifting to Sean's condition, the evidence they'd found, and the next steps in the investigation.

Smith—or whatever his real name was—had escaped again, but he'd left something valuable behind: confirmation of the motive, the connection between the murders, and enough forensic evidence to build a case. Most importantly, he'd left behind his partner, who might still be alive to question.

The chalice he'd mentioned remained a mystery. Had he found it? Was it already gone, or still hidden somewhere in the caves? Those questions would have to wait. For now, Sarah needed to get back to her team and ensure Sean received the medical attention he needed.

As she reached the top of the ladder, Sarah looked out over the Irish Sea, its surface glittering in the morning sunlight. Somewhere out there, a killer was escaping with ancient treasures and modern blood on his hands. She would find him. Today was not the end—merely another chapter in a story that had become deeply personal.

Chapter 20

By the time Sarah returned to the main chamber, the cave had transformed into a hive of activity. Emergency lights cast harsh shadows across the ancient walls, forensic technicians in white suits moved methodically around the scene, and the echoing cavern amplified every sound into a cacophony of voices, equipment, and footsteps.

She found Shawn sitting on a rock near the entrance, a medic cleaning a graze on his arm. When he saw her, his face brightened with relief.

"Smith?" he asked, already knowing the answer from her expression.

"Got away by boat," Sarah replied, frustration evident in her voice. "Coast Guard's after him, but he had a good head start." She surveyed the busy chamber. "Sean?"

"Alive," Shawn said, nodding toward where paramedics worked over a stretcher. "Took a nasty blow to the head and has a broken collarbone, but the medics think he'll be okay. They're preparing to move him now."

Sarah felt a wave of relief wash over her. The young man had shown remarkable courage, throwing himself at an armed killer to protect them. She made a mental note to visit him in the hospital later.

"And our second shooter?"

"Dead," Shawn confirmed. "Sean managed to turn the gun on him during the struggle. It was self-defense, clear as day."

Sarah nodded, unsurprised. "Any ID?"

"Nothing yet. He had no wallet, no phone, and no identifying marks except a tattoo on his wrist—some geometric pattern. Riley's running his prints now."

Sarah turned to look for her grandfather and spotted him sitting apart from the chaos, his cane between his knees, watching the proceedings with an inscrutable expression. She approached him, suddenly aware of her own exhaustion.

"You okay?" she asked, settling beside him on the flat stone.

Paddy nodded, his eyes not leaving the scene before them. "Been a while since I've seen this much excitement in these caves." A ghost of a smile crossed his lips. "Though back in my day, we tried to avoid involving the Gardaí."

"Thank you," Sarah said quietly. "For coming with us today. Your knowledge of the caves probably saved our lives."

Paddy turned to her then, something unfathomable in his aged eyes. "Family takes care of family, Sarah. Some things even prison doesn't change."

Before she could respond, Chief Superintendent Tom Bradley appeared at the chamber entrance, his tall frame silhouetted by the emergency lights. His face was tight and concerned as he scanned the cavern, relaxing slightly when he spotted Sarah.

"Sarah," he called, making his way toward her. "Are you alright?"

"Just a few scrapes," she replied, rising to meet him. "Nothing serious."

Tom's eyes took in her appearance—the cut on her cheek, the mud and water staining her clothes, the exhaustion evident in her posture. His professional demeanor slipped briefly, and genuine worry showed on his face. Then he noticed Paddy, and his expression returned to neutral.

"Mr. O'Neil," he acknowledged with a curt nod.

"Chief Superintendent," Paddy replied, matching his tone perfectly.

Sarah could feel the tension between them, representing the two worlds she straddled: law enforcement and family legacy. "Tom, this is an official consultation. Granddad's knowledge of the caves was critical to our investigation."

Tom raised an eyebrow but didn't challenge her. Instead, he turned his attention back to the crime scene. "Two bodies, I understand?"

"Billy Danes and Professor Andrew Scott," Sarah confirmed. "Both executed, same method. And we've identified our killer—the same man who broke into my office. He calls himself Smith and works for Heritage Acquisitions."

"And he admitted to these murders?" Tom asked, his tone sharpening with professional interest.

"And Jazzy's," Sarah added. "It's all connected to an ancient artifact they were searching for—a ritual chalice with significant historical and monetary value."

Tom processed this information quickly. "Did he find it?"

"He didn't say. We were interrupted by gunfire before I could get that detail." Sarah gestured toward the second gunman's body, now being photographed by the forensics team. "But I'd guess not, based on his continued interest in these caves."

"We need to clear this scene and organize a proper search," Tom decided. "If this chalice is still here, we must find it before anyone else."

Sarah nodded in agreement, but Paddy let out a soft, skeptical sound. "You won't find it," he said, his voice carrying a certainty that made both officers look at him.

"And why's that, Mr. O'Neil?" Tom asked, unable to keep a trace of suspicion from his voice.

"Because it's not here," Paddy replied. "The chalice hasn't been in these caves for nearly a century."

Sarah stared at her grandfather, a chill running through her that had nothing to do with the cave's dampness.

"You know about the chalice?"

Paddy's weathered face revealed nothing. "I know the stories, like anyone who grew up in these parts. The Chalice of Danann was removed from these caves during the Civil War—too many people knew about it, too many interested parties. The old families decided it wasn't safe here anymore."

"And where did they take it?" Tom pressed.

"That," Paddy said with a thin smile, "is a piece of history that wasn't written down. But I'll tell you this much—your man Smith is chasing ghosts in these caves. Whatever he's looking for, it's long gone."

Sarah studied her grandfather, trying to decipher the truth behind his words. Paddy O'Neil had spent a lifetime keeping secrets; reading him was nearly impossible, even for her.

"If the chalice isn't here, why did Billy and the professor come to these caves? And why did Smith kill them here?" she asked.

"People chase legends, Sarah," Paddy replied. "Always have, always will. The professor probably had some theory, some scrap of ancient text that convinced him the chalice was still hidden here. Smith followed, doing his job as a collector, eliminating competition." He shrugged. "That's the problem with treasure hunters—they're usually wrong, and sometimes they're dead wrong."

Tom cleared his throat. "Regardless, we'll need a complete statement from you, Mr. O'Neil. And we'll still search these caves thoroughly."

Paddy nodded amiably. "Of course. I'm always happy to assist the Gardaí." The irony in his voice was subtle but unmistakable, making Tom's jaw tighten slightly.

"I need to check on Sean before they transport him," Sarah said, breaking the tension. "And I want to see what else the forensics team has found."

As she walked away, she heard Tom ask Paddy something in a low voice and her grandfather's rumbling laugh in response. She thought two worlds collided, and somehow, she was always caught in the middle.

Sean was conscious when Sarah reached him; his face was pale, but his eyes were alert. The paramedics had him stabilized on a stretcher, an IV in his arm, and his shoulder immobilized.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, crouching beside him.

"I'm ok," he managed, a weak smile crossing his face. "I'll live."

"That was either the bravest or the stupidest thing I've ever seen," Sarah told him. "Probably both."

"Couldn't let him shoot you," Sean replied simply. "Mr. O'Neil would've killed me."

Sarah smiled, touched by his loyalty despite the circumstances. "Well, thank you. You probably saved all of us."

She squeezed his uninjured hand gently. "I'll come to see you at the hospital later, okay?"

The paramedics indicated they were ready to move him, and Sarah stepped back, watching as they carefully maneuvered the stretcher through the narrow passage toward the exit. Another life changed forever by this case, she thought. At least this one still had a future.

Lynn Robertson approached, tablet in hand, her forensic suit unzipped to the waist in the cave's surprising warmth. "Chief, you'll want to see this," she said.

Sarah followed her to where Billy's body lay, now carefully photographed and examined. Robertson knelt, pointing to something clutched in Billy's hand that had been hidden beneath his body.

"He was holding this when he died," she explained, carefully extracting a small leather pouch from the stiffened fingers.

Sarah watched as Robertson opened the pouch, revealing a small, intricately carved piece of amber set in tarnished silver. It seemed to glow with an inner fire even in the harsh emergency lighting.

"Part of the chalice?" Sarah asked, her voice hushed.

"A fragment, I'd guess," Robertson replied. "Based on the curve, it would have been part of a larger vessel. The carving is incredible—pre-Christian Celtic design, possibly even older."

"So they did find it," Sarah murmured. "Or at least part of it."

"Found what?" Tom asked, joining them.

Sarah nodded toward the amber fragment. "Piece of the chalice, Lynn thinks. Billy had it clutched in his hand when he died."

Tom studied the artifact with narrowed eyes. "So our killer didn't get what he came for after all."

"Not all of it, at least," Sarah agreed. "Which means he'll keep looking."

"And we'll be ready when he does," Tom said firmly. "I've already notified Interpol and circulated his description to all ports and airports. Smith won't get far."

Sarah wasn't so sure. A man with his resources and connections likely had multiple escape routes planned. But she kept that thought to herself as Robertson carefully bagged the amber fragment as evidence.

"There's something else," Robertson said, leading them to where the professor's body lay. "We found this in his jacket pocket." She held up a small leather-bound notebook, its pages water-stained but largely intact. "It's some

journal, but much is in code or shorthand. What we can read mentions the chalice repeatedly and specific coordinates within the cave system."

"He was mapping it," Sarah realized. "Systematically searching for the chalice based on historical records."

"And this," Robertson continued, showing them a folded paper that had been tucked into the notebook.

"Appears to be a letter, though the signature is smudged beyond recognition."

Sarah took the paper carefully, unfolding it to reveal elegant handwriting in faded blue ink:

My dear Andrew,

Your research has yielded more than either of us anticipated. The fragments you obtained in Barcelona and Athens confirm the chalice's provenance beyond doubt. I have arranged for additional funding to continue your search in Dublin, where the final piece surely awaits.

Remember our agreement—the chalice belongs to history, not private collectors. Its power should never be concentrated in a single individual's hands. The fragments must remain separated until proper academic study can be conducted.

Be wary of H.A. They have shown increased interest in your movements. Trust no one you haven't personally vetted.

With admiration and concern, [signature illegible]

"H.A.—Heritage Acquisitions," Sarah said, handing the letter to Tom. "The professor wasn't working for them; he was working against them, trying to secure the chalice for academic purposes."

"And Jazzy?" Tom asked.

"Must have discovered what Billy was involved in and sided with the professor," Sarah theorized. "She was using her platform and resources to help document the search while keeping it from the black market."

"Which made her a liability," Tom concluded grimly.

Sarah nodded, the pieces fitting together with terrible clarity. Jazzy hadn't been just an innocent bystander or unwitting accomplice; she had made a moral choice, standing against theft and exploitation despite the danger. It made her death even more tragic—and Smith's actions even more contemptible.

"We need to find the rest of the chalice before Smith does," Sarah said. "The letter mentions fragments found in Barcelona and Athens. Those must be connected to Jazzy's earlier trips."

"I'll contact the authorities in those cities," Tom promised. "And put out an international alert for any artifacts matching the description."

Tom took a deep breath and took Sarah by the arm, walking toward a more private part of the cave. His professional demeanor melted away, replaced by genuine concern, "Are you alright? You have this habit of running off chasing killers by yourself." He gently touched the cut on her face, his fingers lingering a moment longer than necessary.

"I'm fine, sorry, I'm a little impulsive," she smiled, trying to downplay the danger she'd put herself in. The familiar warmth of his touch made her momentarily forget the throbbing pain from her injury.

"A little?" Tom said, raising an eyebrow with a mixture of exasperation and relief. The worry lines around his eyes betrayed how much her safety meant to him.

"Shut up, yes, a little," Sarah said with a defensive laugh, nudging his shoulder playfully. She was grateful for his concern but unwilling to admit how reckless she'd been, chasing Smith without backup.

A technician approached, interrupting their conversation. "Chief Inspector, we've completed the initial survey of the second gunman. There was no identification, but we found this." He held up an evidence bag containing a simple black phone. "It was in a waterproof case in his pocket."

Sarah took the bag and studied the device. "Standard burner phone, probably. But it might give us something." She handed it back. "Get this to Sloan immediately. If there's anything to find, he'll find it."

As the cave investigation continued around them, Sarah was drawn back to the pool at the center of the chamber. Its black surface was perfectly still, reflecting the emergency lights like stars in a midnight sky. She crouched at its edge, struck by its sense of age and permanence. How many generations have come to this place seeking enlightenment, protection, or treasure? And how many had left disappointed or worse?

"Penny, for your thoughts," Tom said quietly, joining her by the water.

"Just thinking about Jazzy," Sarah replied. "About choices and consequences."

"You can't save everyone," he reminded her gently.

"I know. But I can make sure she didn't die for nothing." Sarah stood, renewed determination flowing through her tired body. "Smith's still out there. So is the rest of the chalice. This isn't over."

"No," Tom agreed, "but the immediate danger has passed. You've been going non-stop for days. Take some time, get some rest, be with your kids."

Sarah glanced at her watch, surprised to find it was only mid-afternoon. It felt like days had passed since they'd entered the caves that morning.

"A few hours," she conceded. "To check on Sean at the hospital and see the kids. Then I'm back on the case." Tom knew better than to argue. "I'll handle things here. We'll continue processing the scene and transport the bodies to Dr. Kelly for autopsy."

Sarah nodded, suddenly aware of just how exhausted she truly was. The adrenaline that had sustained her through the confrontation and chase had long since faded, leaving her muscles aching and her mind foggy with fatigue.

"Sarah," Tom added as she turned to leave. "You did a good job today. Two killers were neutralized, evidence secured, and no innocent casualties. That's a win."

She offered him a tired smile. "Tell that to Sean's collarbone."

"He made his choice," Tom pointed out. "A brave one. Your grandfather must be proud."

The mention of Paddy reminded Sarah that she hadn't seen him in a while. "Where is he, anyway?"

Tom gestured toward the exit. "One of the officers is helping him back to the surface. Cave's no place for a man his age, especially not with all this commotion."

Sarah felt a pang of guilt for not checking on him sooner. "I'll catch up with him outside, then."

As she carefully navigated the passage leading to the exit, Sarah realized she was leaving with more questions than answers. They knew who had killed Jazzy and why, but Smith remained at large. The chalice—or at least pieces of it—existed, but its complete form and location remained a mystery. As usual, her grandfather clearly knew more than he was telling.

Sarah took a deep breath of salt-tanged air, letting it clear the cave's mustiness from her lungs. Then she began the trek back to her car, already planning her next moves in the ongoing hunt for a killer, a chalice, and the truth that connected them all.

Chapter 21

The St. Vincent's bustled with the controlled chaos typical of a weekday afternoon. Sarah navigated the gleaming corridors.

She found Sean's room easily enough, guided by a helpful nurse who recognized her from the stream of Gardaí who had already visited. Sean lay propped up in bed, his left shoulder and collarbone immobilized, a bandage wrapped around his head. Despite his injuries, his face brightened when she entered.

"Chief Inspector," he greeted, attempting to sit up straighter before wincing at the movement.

"Stay still, you idiot," Sarah said fondly, settling into the chair beside his bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I picked a fight with the wrong man," Sean admitted with a rueful smile. "Doctor says I've got a concussion, broken collarbone."

"Could have been much worse," Sarah said, remembering how the gunman had nearly gotten a shot off at Shawn before Sean tackled him. "The Doctor says how long they're keeping you?"

"Overnight for observation. Should be out tomorrow if the scans look good." He fidgeted with his blanket, looking suddenly younger and uncharacteristically hesitant. "Have you... has Mr. O'Neil been by?"

Sarah shook her head. "Not yet, but I'm sure he will be. He was concerned about you at the scene." She studied Sean's face, noting the anxious look in his eyes. "He's proud of you, you know. We all are."

Sean looked down, embarrassed by the praise. "Just did what needed doing."

"That's exactly what makes a good Garda; you would be a good one, I mean it," Sarah said quietly.

A comfortable silence fell between them. Sarah could see the Dublin skyline through the window, the late afternoon sun glinting off glass towers and church spires alike.

"Did you mean it?" Sean finally asked. "About me becoming a Garda?"

"I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it," Sarah replied. "You've got good instincts, Sean. And more courage than sense, which isn't always bad in our line of work."

Sean grinned, then grew serious again. "Mr. O'Neil might not approve."

"My grandfather has spent his life doing what he believed was right, regardless of what others thought," Sarah said. "He'd be a hypocrite to deny you the same choice." She leaned forward. "Besides, the old man's bark is worse than his bite these days."

"If you say so," Sean said, clearly unconvinced.

Sarah smiled, remembering her own nervousness around Paddy when she was younger. "The application process for the Garda College takes time. Once you've recovered, we can talk about it properly. No pressure, just options."

Sean nodded. "I'll think about it, promise." His eyes were already growing heavy, and the medication was clearly taking effect.

"Get some rest," Sarah said, rising from the chair. "I'll check on you tomorrow."

* * *

As Sarah got into her car, she knew one more stop at Paddy's was needed. *God, I can't believe I'm chasing fairy tales at this point in my career.* As a child, she remembers her grandmother telling old stories. *Those warm evenings by the fire, her Gran's voice rising and falling with each tale.* One story was about the chalice. *Could it be connected to all this?* She started the car and headed to Paddy's pub.

Paddy was behind the bar, telling old war stories to a small group of regulars who hung on his every word. His weathered face lit up with animation as he gestured dramatically, not showing a hint of exhaustion despite having spent all morning walking through treacherous caves and dodging bullets. Here in his natural habitat—surrounded by polished wood, amber bottles, and the comforting scent of whiskey and history—Paddy seemed invigorated rather than tired, casually sipping from a glass of fine Irish whiskey as if it were just another ordinary day.

"Hello, Granddaughter," he called out warmly when he spotted Sarah, immediately reaching for a clean glass and pouring a generous measure of whiskey for her. His eyes crinkled with concern as he slid the drink across the bar. "You should go home and sleep, I think," Paddy said, studying the fatigue etched across her face.

"You've had quite the morning by the looks of it."

Sarah smiled wearily, accepting the drink with a grateful nod. "Yeah, so should you, but here you are," she countered, gesturing to his seemingly boundless energy. "Most men your age would be in bed after what we went through today."

"What can I do for you?" he asked, leaning forward on his elbows. His voice dropped slightly as he sensed she hadn't come for casual conversation. The other patrons had drifted away, giving them a moment of privacy in the otherwise bustling pub.

"I want to know more about the Chalice," Sarah said, rotating her glass slowly between her palms. "Gran told a story about a chalice when I was little, but I can't remember how it went. Just fragments—something about

power and responsibility." She took a small sip, the whiskey warming her throat. "With everything happening, I think it might be important."

"Probably the same story," Paddy nodded thoughtfully, his expression growing more serious. "Your Gran is a believer, through and through. Unlike some of us who needed convincing." He refilled his glass, his movements deliberate. "Her stories are always a warning, you know. She never told them just for entertainment—always had a purpose, that woman."

"The last time all eight fragments were assembled was 1847," Paddy said, his weathered hands trembling slightly as he poured himself another whiskey. "During the worst year of the Famine. My great-great-grandfather Seamus was there—he wrote about it in his journal before he went mad."

Sarah leaned forward, noting how her grandfather's usual commanding presence seemed diminished by the weight of this particular memory. "What happened?"

"The O'Neils weren't the only family starving that winter. Half of County Mayo was burying its children. Desperate people do desperate things, Sarah." Paddy's voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "Seven families—the original guardians—they came together in those same Howth caves. Brought all eight fragments for the first time in three centuries."

"They were trying to save people," Sarah said, understanding flooding through her.

"Aye. They thought if they could speak to the Otherworld, plead with the spirits of their ancestors, maybe bring back the souls of the children who'd already died..." Paddy shook his head. "Seamus wrote that the chalice glowed like a star when they assembled it. The cave walls became transparent—he could see through them to green fields, flowing rivers, a land where no one starved."

Sarah heard the familiar creak of the kitchen door opening. She glanced over to see her grandmother, Fran O'Neil, her usually composed face etched with concern.

"Paddy O'Neil," Fran said sharply, her accent thickening with disapproval as always when upset. "I told you to leave the chalice in the past."

Paddy looked up, guilt flickering across his features. "Fran, I was just—"

"Just telling her stories that should stay buried," Fran interrupted, settling into the chair beside Sarah with the careful movements of her seventy-eight years. Her dark eyes—so like Sarah's own—fixed on her husband with a mixture of love and exasperation. "Sarah, love, you have no business messing around with the power of that chalice. None of us do."

"Gran, it's just history," Sarah protested, though she found herself genuinely curious about the story Paddy had been telling. "I'm investigating a murder case, not practicing ancient rituals."

"Is it just history?" Fran pulled a small, worn photograph from her purse, sliding it across the table. "This was taken in Dublin in 1923. That's your great-grandfather there, the one Paddy's been telling you about."

Sarah studied the black and white image. It showed a group of hollow-eyed people standing in what appeared to be an old stone building. The man Fran had pointed to bore a strong resemblance to Paddy, but his face held a haunted quality that made Sarah's skin crawl.

"He looks..." Sarah paused, searching for the right word.

"Broken," Fran finished. "Because he was. After what happened with the chalice fragments, he never spoke another coherent word. Spent the last thirty years of his life in an asylum in Cork, drawing the same symbols over and over again on the walls of his cell."

Paddy shifted uncomfortably. "Fran, there's no need to—"

"No need?" Fran's voice rose, causing several patrons to glance in their direction. "Our granddaughter just nearly died chasing after these cursed things, and you think there's no need to tell her the truth?"

Sarah looked between her grandparents, sensing decades of unspoken tension about this subject. "What truth?"

Fran reached into her purse again, this time pulling out a small, leather-bound journal. "This was his. The parts he wrote before his mind broke." She opened it carefully, the pages yellowed with age. "Listen to this, Sarah."

"The doorway opened at the stroke of midnight, and we called to our lost ones. Mary Fitzgerald's voice came first, sweet as we remembered, calling from beyond the veil. Then came little Patrick O'Sullivan, barely five when the hunger took him."

Despite herself, Sarah found herself leaning closer, her investigative instincts engaged by the detailed account.

Fran continued reading: "But when they stepped through... they were not our children. They wore our children's faces, spoke with our children's voices, but their eyes held the hunger of ages. And behind them came others—things with no names, drawn by the scent of our world like wolves to carrion."

"That's impossible," Sarah said, though her voice lacked conviction. The rational part of her mind rejected such claims, but something about the specific details, the pain evident in the faded ink, made her skepticism waver.

"Is it?" Fran turned another page. "The blight in the potatoes wasn't God's will or nature's cruelty. It came through with them, a corruption that spread from every field where the returned ones walked. The more we welcomed these false children back, the more the land itself sickened."

Paddy cleared his throat. "The records show the blight spread in ways that didn't follow normal agricultural patterns," he said quietly. "It jumped over healthy fields, struck randomly across counties with no connection."

"Because it wasn't natural," Fran said firmly. "Here—" Margaret Byrne refused to believe her returned son was not truly hers, even when he began killing the neighbors' livestock by touch alone. She kept him hidden in her cellar for three months. When we finally found them, Margaret had aged thirty years in a single season, and everything within a mile of her farm was dead—crops, animals, even the earthworms in the soil."

Sarah stared at the journal, her mind racing. "Even if I accepted this account as accurate—which I'm not saying I do—what does it have to do with my investigation? The fragments are separated now."

"Are they?" Fran asked pointedly. "All of them?"

Sarah glanced at Paddy, who was suddenly very interested in his whiskey glass.

"Paddy still has one," Sarah admitted. "But he's not using it for rituals."

"It doesn't matter," Fran said urgently. "The very fact that you've touched the keystone fragment, been in close proximity to multiple pieces..." She reached across the table and took Sarah's hands in her own. "Love, it can affect you."

Sarah pulled her hands free, her frustration mounting. "So what are you both saying? That I should just ignore evidence? Stop investigating crimes because ancient artifacts might be involved?"

"I'm saying," Fran replied firmly, "that some knowledge comes at too high a price. The entities that came through in 1847 had to be hunted down and destroyed, including the ones wearing familiar faces. Seamus wrote about having to burn his own nephew alive because the thing inside Patrick's body was slowly killing everything in the village."

"And you believe this literally happened?" Sarah challenged.

"I believe," Fran said slowly, "that the million people who died in the Famine weren't all victims of hunger alone. Seamus estimated that at least a third of the deaths in the affected counties came from what he called 'the gray sickness'—a spiritual corruption that spread wherever the returned ones walked."

Sarah absorbed this, the implications staggering even if she maintained her skepticism. "And Smith wanted to recreate this?"

"Smith wants to control it, but he's a fool," Paddy said. "Seamus was a learned man—he spoke four languages, studied with the druids of Iona. If anyone could have controlled it, it would have been him. And even he wrote, just before his mind broke: 'We opened a door that was meant to stay closed. Some hungers are too vast for our world to contain.'"

"This is all fascinating folklore," Sarah said, standing up from the Bar, "but I deal in evidence, not ghost stories."

"Even if those ghost stories explain why three people died pursuing these artifacts?" Fran asked pointedly.

Sarah paused, her hand on the back of her chair. The connection between Jazzy's murder and the chalice fragments was undeniable, even if she rejected the supernatural explanations.

"The killer believed in the chalice's power," she admitted. "That's what makes him dangerous."

Fran and Paddy exchanged a look that carried decades of shared knowledge and worry.

Sarah studied her grandparents' faces—Paddy's mixture of pride and concern, Fran's barely contained fear. Whether or not she believed their supernatural explanations, their terror was real. Their accounts, however embellished, provided a compelling motive for Smith's actions and a clear warning about the consequences of reassembling the fragments.

"I'm going home," Sarah said, though she made no immediate move to leave. "Thank you for the... historical context."

"Sarah," Fran called as she finally turned toward the door. "Promise me something. Remember what happened to your great-grandfather if you ever feel drawn to touch another of those fragments. Some family legacies are burdens, not gifts."

Sarah nodded, though she wasn't entirely sure what she was agreeing to. As she left the pub, she found herself thinking not about the supernatural claims her grandparents had made but about the very real fear in their eyes—fear born from family stories passed down through generations, whether those stories were literal truth or elaborate metaphors for trauma too large to otherwise comprehend.

Either way, the fragments had already cost three lives in her investigation. She had no intention of adding to that count.

Chapter 22

When Sarah arrived home, the night shadows were lengthening across her front garden. The house was unusually quiet as she entered; there were no television sounds, music, or bickering teenagers. For a moment, a spike of parental panic shot through her before she spotted the note on the kitchen counter in Aoife's neat handwriting:

"Mum - At Emma's for a study group. Staying over. Liam's at football practice. There's lasagna from Moira in the fridge. Love, A."

Sarah smiled at her daughter's thoughtfulness, set her keys aside, and headed straight for the refrigerator. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until the smell of Moira's homemade lasagna hit her. As she waited for it to heat in the microwave, she poured herself a small whiskey, savoring the quiet moment alone.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Riley: *"Second shooter identified through Interpol. Dragomir Kostic, a Serbian national, is a known associate of multiple smuggling operations. Extensive criminal record across Eastern Europe. Will send the full file to your email."*

Sarah nodded. One more piece of the puzzle was falling into place. She typed back a quick acknowledgment just as the microwave beeped.

She was halfway through her meal when the doorbell rang. Curious and slightly wary—she wasn't expecting anyone—Sarah checked the security camera on her phone before opening the door.

"Tom," she said, surprised to find the Chief Superintendent on her doorstep. "Everything alright at the scene?"

"All wrapped up," he confirmed as she stepped aside to let him in. Bodies are en route to Dr. Kelly, evidence has been secured, and witnesses have been interviewed. I thought I'd stop by to see how you're doing." He kissed her on the cheek and smiled.

Sarah led him to the kitchen, where her half-eaten dinner sat. "Hungry? Moira's lasagna could feed a small army."

"I wouldn't say no," Tom admitted. "It's been a long day."

As Sarah prepared a plate for him, Tom settled at the kitchen counter, loosening his tie with a weary sigh. The easy familiarity that was developing between them and their professional respect deepened into something more personal.

"How's Sean?" Tom asked as she set his food in front of him.

"Concussed, broken collarbone, but in good spirits," Sarah replied, returning to her own meal. "He'll make a full recovery."

"Good," Tom nodded. "He showed remarkable courage today."

"He shows interest in being a Garda," Sarah said with a slight smile. "I told him I'd help and talk to him when he recovers."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "From Paddy O'Neil's crew to An Garda Síochána? That would be quite the transition."

"People can change," Sarah replied, her tone sharpening slightly. "My grandfather did."

"To a point," Tom conceded. "Speaking of Paddy, he had some interesting insights during his formal statement."

Sarah set down her fork, her full attention on Tom now. "Oh?"

"He claims the chalice has a complicated history. According to him, it was broken into pieces centuries ago to prevent its power from being misused. The fragments were scattered across Europe, guarded by certain families."

"I stopped by the pub, my Gran had an interesting story about the chalice. Did you believe him?" Sarah asked, genuinely curious about Tom's assessment.

Tom considered the question carefully. "I believe he knows more than he's telling us, which is typical of Paddy O'Neil. But his account aligns with what we found—fragments in different locations, the professor's letter mentioning pieces in Barcelona and Athens."

"The power Paddy is talking about?" Sarah asked, skepticism evident in her voice. "It's an ancient cup, not a magic wand."

"Apparently, in certain Celtic and pre-Celtic rituals, it was believed to allow communication with the Otherworld," Tom explained. "Opening doorways between realms, speaking with the dead, that sort of thing."

"That's what Gran said, too." She said, shaking her head.

"People still believe it." Sarah couldn't keep the incredulity from her tone.

"Enough to kill for it, apparently," Tom replied grimly. "Whether it's the supposed mystical properties or just the historical value, Heritage Acquisitions is willing to go to extreme lengths to acquire it."

Sarah fell silent as she processed this information. The rational part of her mind dismissed tales of magical chalices and otherworldly portals, but she couldn't dismiss the real deaths connected to the artifact.

"There's something else," Tom continued, his voice lowering slightly. "Your grandfather mentioned that one of the families entrusted with guarding a fragment was the Shaw family."

Sarah's head snapped up. "Jazzy's family?"

Tom nodded. "According to Paddy, Maeve Shaw's grandmother was one of the guardians. Which means—"

"Jazzy might have had a piece of the chalice all along," Sarah finished the thought. "Could be why she came to Ireland—not just to research her family history, but to return the fragment."

"It would explain why Heritage Acquisitions took such an interest in her," Tom agreed.

Sarah's mind raced. "We need to talk to Maeve Shaw again and see those family photographs she mentioned."

"Already arranged," Tom said. "She's coming to the station tomorrow morning."

Sarah nodded in appreciation. "Sometimes, it's nice having the Chief Superintendent do the legwork on my cases."

Tom's mouth quirked in a half-smile. "Don't get used to it. I'm only this hands-on because three people are dead, and international art thieves are operating in my jurisdiction."

As they finished their meal, a comfortable silence fell between them. Through the window, Sarah could see the last light fading from the sky, night settling over Dublin like a soft blanket.

"Whiskey to finish?" she offered, rising to clear their plates.

"Just one," Tom agreed. "I'm driving."

As Sarah poured their drinks, she became acutely aware of the domesticity of the moment—sharing dinner in her kitchen, the easy conversation, the simple comfort of the company after a harrowing day. It had been long since she'd allowed anyone this close, especially someone from work. The amber liquid caught the light as it filled the glasses, reminding her how much had changed since Aiden's betrayal. "Maybe you don't have to drive," she said, surprising herself with the boldness.

They moved to the living room, settling on the sofa with their drinks. Finn padded in from wherever he'd been napping and flopped at their feet with a contented sigh, his tail thumping lazily against the hardwood floor.

As they settled back into the comfort of Sarah's living room, Tom noticed the shadow of uncertainty that flickered across Sarah's face. The weight of her past, particularly her divorce, loomed larger than the warm glow of the dimmed lights. "I'm still figuring things out, Tom," she began, her voice a bare whisper. "There are days when I feel like I'm just managing the chaos, and then"—she paused, swallowing the lump in her throat—"I worry that letting someone in again could bring it all crashing down."

Tom leaned closer, the distance between them evaporating as he took her hand. "You don't have to bear that past alone, Sarah. I know it isn't very easy, and I respect that. But I want you to know I'm here for you—no matter how messy it might get." His thumb brushed against her knuckles, a gentle gesture that sent warmth rushing through her, simultaneously grounding and lifting her spirits.

In that moment, a wave of vulnerability washed over Sarah. She leaned into Tom's touch, seeking solace in his presence. "You see me for who I am," she confessed, her voice trembling slightly, "not just as a Chief Inspector, a mother, or a victim of my circumstances. I carry so much, and I'm scared that you'll walk away if I let you see all of it."

Tom's gaze softened, sincerity reflected in his deep blue eyes. "I won't walk away, Sarah. Not now, not ever. We all have our scars, and the willingness to share them strengthens connections. I see the strong person you are, but I also see the woman who deserves to be loved with all her complexities. Let me be a part of that, even the messy parts."

Sarah looked down at their hands, then back up at Tom. The professional line they had carefully maintained was blurring—it had been blurring for months. At this moment, with the case hanging in a temporary lull and the house quiet around them, it was tempting to let it blur further. The tension between them was palpable, electric. The sound of the front door opening broke the moment. They separated smoothly, Sarah rising to greet Liam as he trudged in, still in his football kit, mud-spattered and exhausted, his cleats leaving small clumps of dirt on the entryway mat.

"Hey, Mum," he called, then stopped short when he saw Tom. "Oh, uh, hello, sir."

"Chief Superintendent Bradley was just updating me on the case," Sarah explained, noting how her son's eyes darted between them, missing nothing. Liam had always been observant, too observant sometimes.

"Right," Liam said, clearly unconvinced. "I'm gonna shower, then grab some food."

"There's lasagna in the fridge," Sarah told him. "From Moira."

Liam's face brightened at that, his teenage hunger overriding any awkwardness. "Sweet. Nice to see you, sir," he added to Tom before disappearing upstairs, his footsteps heavy on the wooden steps.

Tom set his empty glass down, taking the interruption as his cue to leave. "I should be going."

Sarah stopped him, took him by the hand, and led him upstairs.

* * *

Sarah woke with a start, momentarily disoriented in the darkness of her bedroom. The digital clock read 3:17 AM. Tom was sleeping soundly next to her. She lay still, trying to identify what had pulled her from sleep. It was not the nightmare—she hadn't dreamt at all, exhaustion granting her a rare night of dreamless rest.

Then she heard it—a soft creaking from downstairs. Familiar enough to be mundane yet out of place in the night's silence. It could be Finn moving around or just the house settling. But Sarah's instincts, honed through years of police work, were suddenly alert.

Silently, she woke Tom. "There's someone downstairs," she whispered, her voice barely audible. She slipped from the bed, retrieving a weapon from the locked drawer on her nightstand. The cool metal in her hand was reassuring as she moved soundlessly to her bedroom door, listening intently. Tom followed, fully awake now despite the hour. "Are you sure?" he murmured.

Another creak, followed by the almost imperceptible sound of a footstep trying not to be a footstep. Someone was in her house. "Ok. I heard that," he said, his posture shifting instantly to alert mode.

Sarah's first thought was for her children. Keeping close to the wall, she moved to Liam's room first, opening the door just enough to see him sleeping soundly, headphones still on, oblivious to any disturbance. Next, she checked Aoife's room—empty, the bed still made. Her daughter was sleeping over at Emma's tonight, Sarah remembered with relief.

Confident that Liam was safe for the moment, Sarah began her careful descent down the stairs, Tom watching a few steps behind her. She avoided the third step, which always creaked. Her house was familiar territory, an advantage in the darkness. She reached the bottom landing and paused, listening again.

A shadow moved in her kitchen, briefly illuminated by the dim light of the refrigerator being opened. Sarah moved swiftly but silently, using the layout of her home to circle through the dining room and approach the kitchen from the side entrance. Tom came from the other side, his movements equally measured and precise. With her weapon raised, she came around the corner, and Tom flipped on the light switch. "Garda! Don't move!" she commanded, her voice sharp and authoritative in the sudden brightness.

The shadowy figure spun around, hands raising immediately, revealing not the home invader Sarah had expected but Aoife. Her face was a picture of shock and guilt, a carton of milk clutched in one hand.

"Jesus Christ, Mum!" Aoife gasped, her voice a strangled whisper. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

Sarah lowered her weapon immediately, relief and confusion washing over her in equal measure. "Aoife? What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at Emma's."

"The sleepover got canceled," Aoife explained, looking at Tom and then back at her Mother with a grin, wide-eyed from the encounter. Her gaze darted between them, taking in Tom's rumpled appearance and her mother's obvious discomfort.

"I'll head back upstairs," Tom said as he backed out of the room, clearly sensing the need for mother-daughter privacy.

"I texted you I was coming home, but I guess you were busy." Aoife pulled out her phone and showed Sarah the message that she had not seen. Her tone hints at knowing amusement, which made Sarah flush slightly.

Sarah exhaled slowly, adrenaline still coursing through her system. "I never got your text."

"Obviously," Aoife replied, giving way to a hint of amusement. Her eyes sparkled with the discovery she'd made.

Sarah turned and started up the stairs. "Good night," she said, hoping to postpone the inevitable conversation.

"Mum, you and Chief Superintendent Bradley," Aoife said, walking after her, unwilling to let the moment pass. There was a teasing lilt to her voice that made Sarah cringe internally.

"We will talk about it later," Sarah said firmly, continuing toward the stairs.

"Mum, please wait," Aoife called out, catching up and hugging Sarah spontaneously. "It's okay if you like him, you know. It's been five years since the divorce. I think it's great; you shouldn't be alone."

Sarah felt embarrassed and amused at being so transparent to her teenage daughter. She hadn't expected to have this conversation tonight—or ever, really. "It's complicated," she said finally, sounding hollow even to her ears.

"Adults always say that," Aoife countered with surprising wisdom. "But sometimes it's not as complicated as you make it." Her eyes, so like Sarah's mother's, held no judgment—only understanding.

"Thank you, but we'll talk later," Sarah said, briefly returning the hug before continuing upstairs. Her mind was already racing about explaining this development to her perceptive daughter. What could she say when she barely understood it herself? Tom Bradley had been her boss for years, and now... well, that was exactly what made it complicated.

Chapter 23

The morning brought a soft, persistent rain to Dublin that seemed to seep into every corner of the city. Sarah stood at her office window, watching water trace patterns down the glass as she sipped her third coffee of the day. The station hummed with energy behind her—phones ringing, keyboards clicking, voices conferring in low, serious tones. The case had expanded overnight, with international agencies now involved and media interest growing by the hour.

A knock at her door drew her attention. Riley stood in the doorway, tablet in hand, her usual composed demeanor tinged with excitement.

"Chief, struck gold with Kostic's burner." Riley bounced into the office, tablet already firing up. "Serbian texts—I had them translated—plus a contact list that reads like Interpol's most wanted."

Sarah set down her coffee. "Show me."

"Most of it's standard criminal coordination—times, places, Bitcoin transfers." Riley's fingers danced across the screen. "But check this conversation from three days ago. It's basically their shopping list."

Riley pulled up the translated messages. "They're confirming fragment authenticity, coordinating with someone called 'S'—probably Smith—and setting up the cave meeting."

"Sloppy communication for professionals," Shawn observed, reading over Sarah's shoulder.

"Criminals always think they're smarter than they are," Riley replied. "Lucky for us, encryption can't fix stupid."

"Might explain why Billy was in the caves," Sarah mused. "He wasn't just hiding; he was searching for the final piece to complete his betrayal."

"There's more," Riley continued, swiping to another screen. "I found this in the deleted photos."

The photograph showed a small object resting on dark cloth—an intricately carved piece of amber set in tarnished silver, almost identical to the fragment they'd found in Billy's hand at the cave.

"Another piece of the chalice," Sarah confirmed.

"Exactly," Riley agreed. "Based on the metadata, this photo was taken at a warehouse in Dublin's docklands."

She pulled up a map on her tablet, highlighting a location near the River Liffey. "A shell company linked to Heritage Acquisitions."

Sarah studied the map, her mind racing. "Good work, Riley. This could be where they're staging their operation. Get me everything you can on this warehouse—blueprints, security systems, activity patterns. And let Tom know—we'll need warrants and tactical support if we're going to move on this location."

As Riley left to make the arrangements, another knock came at Sarah's door. Shawn stood there with Maeve Shaw, who looked tired but composed, clutching a large manila envelope to her chest.

"Ms. Shaw is here to see you," Shawn announced. "And she's brought those photographs she mentioned."

"Ms. Shaw, thank you for coming in," Sarah greeted, gesturing to the chair across from her desk. "I know this has been an incredibly difficult time for you."

Maeve nodded, taking her seat. "Anything I can do to help find whoever killed Jessica?" She placed the envelope on the desk. "These are the photographs I mentioned—my grandmother near the caves in Howth. Some of them go back to the 1950s."

Sarah opened the envelope carefully, spreading the black-and-white photographs across her desk. Most showed an elegant woman with dark hair and striking eyes that seemed to pierce through time—Maeve's grandmother in her youth, standing near cave entrances or on the cliffs of Howth. In several, she wore a pendant that caught Sarah's attention—a small piece that appeared to be amber set in silver.

"This pendant," Sarah said, pointing to one of the clearer images. "Did your grandmother always wear it?"

"Yes," Maeve confirmed. "It was her most treasured possession. She called it her 'heritage piece' and said it had been in our family for generations."

"Do you still have it?" Sarah asked, trying to keep her tone casual despite the potential significance.

Maeve shook her head regretfully. "No. It disappeared after she died. We always assumed it was stolen."

Sarah glanced at Shawn. "Ms. Shaw, I need to ask you about something your grandmother might have mentioned—a chalice, possibly referred to as the Chalice of Danann."

Maeve's eyes widened slightly. "How did you know about that? It was just a family story, a fairy tale my grandmother told us children before bed."

"What exactly did she tell you about it?" Sarah pressed gently.

Maeve hesitated, her fingers tracing the edge of one of the photographs. "She said our family was chosen centuries ago to be guardians of a sacred vessel—a chalice used by ancient druids to commune with the Otherworld. But it was too powerful to remain whole, so it was broken into pieces, each given to a different family for safekeeping."

"And your grandmother's pendant?" Sarah prompted.

"She claimed it was one of those pieces," Maeve admitted. "I always thought it was just a romantic story she invented to make an old family heirloom seem more special." She looked up at Sarah with new understanding.

"But it wasn't just a story, was it?"

"We think the pendant may have been a fragment of the actual chalice," Sarah confirmed. "And we believe someone killed your niece to obtain it or information about it."

Maeve's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh, God. Jessica came asking about Gran's stories. I thought she was just interested in her heritage, in making videos about local legends."

"Did Jessica know the pendant had disappeared?" Shawn asked.

"Yes," Maeve nodded. "I told her the whole story when she asked about family heirlooms. She seemed disappointed but not devastated. She said she'd still like to visit the caves Gran used to discuss."

Sarah picked up another photograph, one showing Maeve's grandmother standing with a group of people near a cave entrance. Unlike the other photos, this one had writing on the back: "The Circle, Midsummer 1967." Sarah studied the photo carefully, her trained eye scanning each face. A young man standing tall immediately caught her attention. There was something eerily familiar about his features, the confident tilt of his chin, and the way he positioned himself slightly apart from the others.

"Who are these people with your grandmother?" Sarah asked, showing Maeve the photo.

Maeve studied it carefully. "Gran never named them, just her mother, the girl here. She called them 'The Circle.' They were friends who shared their interest in old Celtic traditions. They would gather at certain times of the year, particularly at the solstices and equinoxes."

Sarah looked more closely at the group. Ten people stood in a semicircle at the cave entrance. A distinguished-looking man in scholarly attire stood at the center, slightly apart from the others.

"Do you know who this man is?" she asked, pointing to the central figure.

Maeve squinted at the image. "I'm not sure. Gran mentioned a professor who documented their traditions and helped preserve the old knowledge, but I don't recall his name."

Sarah turned the photo over, studying the faded handwriting more carefully. Below "The Circle, Midsummer 1967" was a list of initials: *A.S., M.S., P.O., C.D., E.B., R.M., L.K., E.S., F.D.*

"M.S. would be Margaret Shaw, your grandmother, and E.S., her mother," Sarah reasoned aloud. "But these other initials..."

"P.O.," Shawn said quietly, catching Sarah's eye. "Paddy O'Neil?"

Sarah nodded, feeling a chill run through her that had nothing to do with the room's temperature. Her grandfather would have been a young man in 1967, already involved in various activities that skirted the edge of the law. Had he also been part of this "Circle" connected to the chalice?

"Ms. Shaw," Sarah said carefully, "did your grandmother ever mention a P.O. or anyone named O'Neil among her associates?"

Maeve frowned in concentration. "I can't recall specifically, but she spoke of a young firebrand who joined their group—a man passionate about Irish independence and ancient traditions. She said he had a poet's heart but a fighter's spirit."

Sarah thought that sounded like a description of her grandfather from his younger days. The coincidence was too strong to ignore.

"There's something else," Maeve added hesitantly. "When Jessica visited me, she mentioned doing research on The Circle. She said she'd found academic papers written by someone in that group—detailed studies of Celtic artifacts and their significance."

"A.S.," Sarah murmured. "The professor."

"Yes," Maeve nodded. "I think the name she mentioned was Scott or Scotts."

Sarah and Shawn exchanged significant looks—a relative of Andrew Scott—the professor killed in the caves alongside Billy. The connection was now undeniable; it must be his grandfather.

"Ms. Shaw, I need to ask you something that may seem unusual," Sarah said, choosing her words carefully.

"Did your grandmother ever indicate that the chalice—or its fragments—had any actual... power?"

Maeve shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "You mean the stories about communicating with the Otherworld? Gran certainly believed it. She claimed that when The Circle gathered with all the fragments present, they could... see things. Visions of the past, glimpses of other places." She shook her head. "As a child, I thought it was wonderful. As an adult, I assumed she'd embellished folk traditions into something more mystical."

"But Jessica believed it?" Shawn asked.

"I'm not sure," Maeve replied. "She was fascinated, certainly. But Jessica was modern and practical. She approached it all from a historical and cultural perspective, at least initially." She paused, reconsidering.

"Though, when she showed me the photograph she'd found of people in the caves, she did seem... affected by it. Like she'd seen something that challenged her understanding."

"Ms. Shaw, would you be willing to look at some evidence we've recovered?" Sarah asked. "It might help us understand what Jessica was pursuing."

When Maeve agreed, Sarah retrieved the evidence box containing the amber fragment found in Billy's hand. She carefully placed it on her desk and opened the container to reveal the piece.

Maeve gasped, her hand instinctively reaching toward it before stopping short. "That's... that looks exactly like Gran's pendant."

"We believe it's another fragment of the chalice," Sarah explained. "We found it at the scene where both Billy Danes and Professor Andrew Scott were killed."

"There were more pieces?" Maeve asked, her voice hushed.

"We think there were several," Sarah confirmed. "Based on what we've learned, fragments were also found in Barcelona and Athens. It seems the professor was trying to locate all the pieces."

"And someone killed him for them," Maeve said softly, the reality of the situation finally settling in fully.

"Killed my Jessica for them too."

"I'm afraid so," Sarah said gently. "We're doing everything we can to find the person responsible, but we need to understand exactly what they're after. If there are more fragments out there..."

"There's one more thing," Maeve said, reaching into her purse. "I didn't think it was important, but now..." She pulled out a small, worn, leather-bound book. "This was my grandmother's; it was her mother's journal. Jessica borrowed it during her visit and must have returned it to my mailbox before she died. I found it yesterday when I checked my mail."

Sarah accepted the journal carefully. "May I?"

Maeve nodded, and Sarah opened the delicate volume. The pages were filled with elegant handwriting from 1930 to 1936. Scanning, she saw references to meetings of The Circle, detailed descriptions of rituals performed at solstices and equinoxes, and repeated mentions of "the fragments" and their safekeeping.

"This could be extremely helpful," Sarah said, looking up at Maeve. Please allow us to keep it temporarily for the investigation.

"Of course," Maeve agreed. "Anything that helps find justice for Jessica."

As they concluded the interview, arranging for Maeve to give a formal statement, Sarah's phone buzzed with a text from Riley: *"Warrant approved for warehouse. Tactical team briefing in 30 minutes."*

Sarah showed Shawn the message as they walked Maeve out.

"You think Smith might still be there?" Shawn asked skeptically.

"Doubtful," Sarah admitted. "But we might find evidence of where he's gone—and more importantly, whether he's assembled more fragments of the chalice."

After saying goodbye to Maeve, Sarah turned to Shawn and said, "I need to speak with my grandfather before the raid."

Shawn raised an eyebrow. "You think he'll tell you anything?"

"Maybe not," Sarah conceded. "But he was in that photograph with Maeve's grandmother in 1967. He was part of The Circle. He knows more than he's telling us, and I'm tired of half-truths and legends when people are dying."

"Want me to come with you?" Shawn offered.

Sarah shook her head. "No, this needs to be a family conversation. You focus on the warehouse briefing. I'll meet you there."

Chapter 24

As Sarah gathered her things, the rain outside intensified, drumming against the windows with renewed vigor. This was appropriate weather, she thought, for confronting both family secrets and the dark forces that had already claimed three lives.

For generations, the chalice and its fragments had been objects of fascination, protection, and deadly pursuit. Now, that bloody legacy had touched her own life through Jazzy's murder and the subsequent investigation. Whatever her grandfather knew about The Circle and their mysterious rituals, it was time for him to share that knowledge before more lives were lost to an ancient power that Sarah still struggled to understand or believe in. O'Neil's pub was quiet when Sarah arrived, too early for the regular crowd filling it later in the day. The main room was empty except for a young bartender wiping down tables, who nodded in recognition when she entered.

"He's in the back," the young man said, gesturing toward Paddy's office.

Sarah found her grandfather at his desk, surrounded by old ledgers and a laptop that looked incongruously modern against the antique furniture. He glanced up as she entered, his expression shifting from surprise to resigned understanding when he saw what she carried—Maeve Shaw's photographs and her journal.

"You were part of it," Sarah said, slapping the 1967 photograph on his desk. "The Circle. You, Margaret Shaw, the whole mystical artifact protection society."

Paddy glanced at the photo, then reached for his whiskey. "Ah, Christ. Wondered when you'd piece that together." He took a slow sip. "Look at us—young and stupid enough to think we knew what we were messing with."

"People are dying over these fragments, Granddad. Jazzy, the professor, Billy—"

"Aye, and it'll get worse before it gets better." Paddy's voice turned grim. "That's what happens when greedy bastards get their hands on things that should stay buried."

"So tell me something useful instead of speaking in riddles."

"Useful?" Paddy laughed bitterly. "Here's useful—Smith's not just collecting pretty stones. He believes in what they can do. True believers are the most dangerous kind of mad."

"The chalice, rituals, the bullshit about communicating with the Otherworld?" Sarah prompted.

A hint of amusement touched Paddy's eyes. "Always the skeptic, my Sarah. So much like your mother in that way."

"Were they real?" Sarah pressed, undeterred.

Paddy leaned back in his chair, studying her for a long moment. "What is 'real,' granddaughter? Did we gather at the solstices and equinoxes, bringing together the fragments? Yes. Did we experience things that defied explanation? Also, yes." He shrugged. "Whether that was the power of the chalice, the power of belief, or just the power of suggestion—who can say for certain?"

"I need more than philosophical musings, Granddad."

Paddy's expression sobered, the lines in his weathered face deepening. "This was why The Circle broke apart and scattered the fragments to prevent the power from being concentrated, to keep it from those who would misuse it." His fingers tapped nervously against the arm of his chair. "We feared something like this might happen someday."

"I don't care about Otherworlds or ancient ceremonies; what matters is that three people are dead," Sarah said, leaning forward with intensity burning in her eyes. "Did you know who Scott was when he came to see you? Did you have any inkling of what he was involved in?"

"I had my suspicions," Paddy replied, looking away momentarily. "He was careful, that one. Asked questions that seemed innocent enough. After he left, I pieced it together—realized what he was after." A shadow of regret passed across his face.

"And you didn't tell me? I could have saved his life, Paddy," Sarah said, her voice rising with frustration and hurt. The professional detective in her was furious at withholding crucial information, but the granddaughter in her felt the deeper betrayal.

"What happened in 1967?" Sarah asked, noticing the specific end date.

A shadow passed over Paddy's face. "Something went wrong during a ritual. The fragments were brought together, as they had been many times before, but on that occasion..." He hesitated, seemingly searching for words. "Something came through that shouldn't have. Edward Stevens was never quite right afterward. Something happened to his mind. That's when we realized the danger was too great."

Despite her skepticism, Sarah felt a chill when her grandfather spoke. His conviction was absolute, as if he were recounting a historical fact rather than a supernatural experience.

"And your fragment?" she asked. "What happened to it?"

Paddy's gaze slid away from hers for the first time in the conversation. "It's safe," he said. "Beyond the reach of Heritage Acquisitions or anyone else who might misuse it."

"Safe where?" Sarah pressed.

"You don't need to know that," Paddy replied firmly. "But I can tell you this—Smith will never have it."

Sarah studied her grandfather, recognizing the stubborn set of his jaw. He wouldn't reveal more about his fragment, at least not today, so she changed tactics.

"How many pieces are there in total?"

"Eight," Paddy answered without hesitation. "Eight members of The Circle took one. The chalice was broken centuries ago when its power was both a gift and a threat. Each guardian swore to protect their fragment with their life."

"And if all eight were reassembled?" Sarah leaned forward, her detective's instinct sensing the gravity behind her grandfather's words.

Paddy's expression grew grave. "Then whoever controlled it would influence imagining—not just over this world, but the spaces between worlds."

"You believe that," Sarah said, not quite a question.

"I've seen enough to believe it possible," Paddy replied carefully. "And that possibility alone makes it too dangerous to risk."

Sarah sighed, frustrated by the mix of concrete information and mystical claims. Her detective's mind craved solid facts, not legends about magical artifacts.

"Smith already has at least four fragments—one from Billy and potentially another from Jazzy. Two more that were in Barcelona and Athens, that leaves yours and the one we have at the station, two left." Sarah counted them off on her fingers, trying to impose order on the chaos. Her detective's mind was already mapping connections and calculating probabilities, just as she would in any high-stakes case. "If he thinks the chalice is as powerful as you say, we need to locate those remaining pieces before he does. No telling what he might do to get his hands on them." Magical legends were far beyond her usual jurisdiction, but the methodical approach remained the same—gather evidence, protect assets, anticipate your opponent's next move.

We found evidence suggesting he may be operating out of a warehouse in the Docklands. We're moving on it this afternoon."

"Be careful," Paddy warned, his voice carrying genuine concern. "Smith is more dangerous than you realize. He's not just a mercenary; he's a believer."

"A believer in what?"

"In the chalice's power," Paddy said grimly. "In the doors, it can open. Some seek it for money or prestige, but the true zealots seek it for what lies beyond the veil." Paddy leaned forward, his eyes boring into hers. "Promise me something, Sarah. If you find any fragments, don't bring them together. Keep them separated at all costs." Sarah wanted to dismiss his warning as superstition, but the urgency in his voice gave her pause. "I'll ensure they're secured properly as evidence," she said diplomatically.

Paddy seemed to understand the compromise in her words. "That'll have to do, I suppose." He gestured to the journal. "The writings will tell you more about The Circle. Maggie's mother was the writer among us, always writing everything."

"Thank you for talking to me," Sarah said, gathering the materials. "And for being honest, at least about some things."

A smile touched Paddy's lips. "I've always been as honest with you as circumstances allowed, granddaughter. Even when you didn't want to hear it."

As Sarah turned to leave, a thought struck her. "Sean is doing well, by the way. He should be released from the hospital today. The doctors say he's recovering faster than expected."

"Good lad," Paddy nodded, his weathered face softening slightly. "Brave, too. He didn't have an easy life." He paused, gazing past her at something only he could see. "Never complained though, not even as a boy."

As she left the pub, stepping back into the persistent rain, Sarah felt she'd gained important pieces of a puzzle while still missing its overall shape. The historical connections were becoming clearer—The Circle, the fragments, the generations of guardians—but the true nature of the chalice and its supposed powers remained as elusive as ever.

Whether the artifact was truly mystical or merely the focus of centuries of belief and tradition, one thing was sure: it had inspired devotion and deadly obsession across generations. Now, that deadly pursuit had brought it squarely into Sarah's investigation.

As she drove toward the tactical briefing, her mind shifted gears, focusing on the imminent warehouse raid. Whatever secrets the chalice held, whatever powers it might or might not possess, her immediate concern was stopping Smith before he claimed more lives in his quest to possess it.

The mystical questions could wait. Justice for Jazzy, Billy, and Professor Scott could not.

Chapter 25

The tactical team assembled in the pre-dawn darkness, their breath forming clouds in the cold air as they gathered around Sarah and Tom. Twenty officers in full gear, faces grim with determination, awaited final instructions while a light drizzle fell around them, and puddles reflected the dim street lights. They had parked several blocks from the target—a nondescript warehouse in Dublin's Docklands that linked Heritage Acquisitions to the murders of Jazzy Halls, Billy Danes, and Professor Scott.

"Remember, we're looking for evidence connecting Smith to the killings and any artifacts related to the chalice fragments," Sarah said, her voice low but carrying to the assembled team. "Intel suggests the building is likely empty, but stay alert. These people have already been killed three times that we know of."

Tom stepped forward. "We have search warrants for the entire premises. Documentation is our priority—financial records, shipping manifests, communications, anything that might lead us to Smith's current location."

Sarah checked her watch—5:17 AM. "Move in two minutes. There will be radio silence until we secure the perimeter."

As the officers dispersed to their assigned positions, James approached Sarah, adjusting his tactical vest. "You look like shit," he observed with brotherly candor.

"Thanks. I can always count on you for a confidence boost," Sarah replied, but there was no heat in her words. She hadn't slept well, her mind spinning with chalice fragments, ancient rituals, and her grandfather's warnings. "Something bothering you about this raid?" James asked, his voice dropping so only she could hear.

Sarah hesitated. "Just the usual jitters," she lied, unwilling to share how deeply Paddy's conviction about the chalice's power had unsettled her. She was rational, not someone who believed in mystical artifacts that could open doorways to other realms. Yet something in her grandfather's eyes had given her pause.

"Bullshit," James said affectionately. "But you can tell me later. It's showtime."

The raid itself was anticlimactic—there were no guards, no resistance, no Smith. The warehouse stood empty of people but certainly not of content. As flashlight beams cut through the dusty air, they illuminated what could only be described as a staging area for a high-end auction.

"What the hell?" Murphy whispered as they moved through the space.

Display pedestals were arranged throughout the main floor, each with a printed description card but currently empty of items. Black velvet cloths draped over metal frames created elegant backdrops where artifacts would presumably be showcased. A section had been set up with rows of chairs facing a small podium equipped with a microphone and digital presentation screen.

"They were planning an auction," Sarah said, moving toward the podium. "Heritage Acquisitions isn't just stealing artifacts; they're selling them to the highest bidder."

She picked up a tablet that had been left on the podium, its screen dark. "Riley," she called, "See what you can do with this."

As Riley worked to access the tablet, Sarah and James moved methodically through the warehouse. In a side room, they discovered what appeared to be a photography studio, with professional lighting equipment surrounding a small turntable where items could be photographed from all angles.

"For the catalog," James suggested. "High-end auctions always have elaborate catalogs for potential buyers."

Sarah nodded, then stopped short as she noticed something on the wall. Photos had been pinned to a large corkboard—professional shots of various artifacts. She approached slowly, her flashlight beam playing across the images.

"James," she called quietly. "Look at this."

Among the photographs of Greek statuary, medieval manuscripts, and ornate jewelry were several images that made Sarah's pulse quicken. A small amber fragment set in tarnished silver—identical to the one they'd found in Billy's hand. Next to it is another similar piece, slightly larger. Below these was a larger photograph showing how the pieces might fit together.

"The chalice fragments," James confirmed, studying the images. "They're documenting what they have and what they still need."

"They show how the pieces fit and what the chalice would look like together," Sarah noted.

"Chief!" Riley called from across the warehouse. "I've got something."

Sarah and James hurried back to the main floor, where Riley had managed to access the tablet. "It's their auction catalog," she explained, swiping through digital pages. The event was scheduled for tomorrow night. It was an invitation-only event, and the location was kept undisclosed until the last minute.

"Any guest list?" Sarah asked.

"Not on this device, but there's something else—detailed descriptions of every item up for sale." Riley scrolled to a specific page and handed the tablet to Sarah. "Including this."

The screen displayed an amber and silver chalice, partially assembled from several fragments, with spaces indicating where missing pieces would fit. The description read:

"Lot 37: The Chalice of Danann (incomplete). Pre-Celtic ritual vessel dating to approximately 500 BCE. Amber and silver construction with unique spiral motifs. Associated with druidic rituals for communing with the Otherworld. Currently, consisting of six of the eight known fragments. The remaining pieces are being actively sourced and may be included by auction time. Starting bid: €5,000,000."

Sarah read the description twice, her skepticism warring with the evidence before her eyes.

"Chief!" Shawn called from across the warehouse. "Office in the back. Looks like they left in a hurry."

The small office at the rear of the warehouse showed signs of recent occupation and hasty departure. Papers were scattered across a desk, a coffee cup still half-full but cold. A computer had been left behind, its hard drive hastily removed but otherwise intact.

"They knew we were coming," Sarah said, examining the desk. "Someone tipped them off."

"There's a mole in the department?" James asked, his expression darkening.

"Maybe. Or they have someone monitoring police communications," Sarah replied. She picked up a leather-bound book that had been left open on the desk. Unlike the scattered papers, this one seemed deliberately placed, almost as if it had been left for them to find.

The book was handwritten in what appeared to be a Latin script, with detailed illustrations of rituals conducted around an ornate chalice. The pages were yellowed with age, the ink faded to a rusty brown.

"What is it?" James asked, peering over her shoulder.

"Some kind of ritual book," Sarah replied, carefully turning a page to reveal an illustration of robed figures standing in a circle, the assembled chalice at their center. Above them, a swirling portal seemed to open in the sky, drawn with remarkable detail for something so fantastical.

"Looks like New Age nonsense," Sarah said dismissively, though something about the meticulous illustrations made her uneasy. "But it might tell us more about why Heritage Acquisitions wants these fragments so badly."

James snorted. "Five million euros starting bid is reason enough."

"That's just the opening," Riley pointed out. "In an exclusive auction like this, with the right buyers, it could go for ten times that amount."

As they continued searching, Sarah found a locked metal cabinet bolted to the floor in the corner of the office. "I need bolt cutters," she called.

Once the lock was severed, Sarah pulled open the cabinet doors to reveal rows of neatly labeled file folders.

"Client records," she said, flipping through them quickly. "Names, contact information, purchase history."

"We've hit the jackpot," James said, already taking photos of the files with his phone. "Interpol will have a field day with this."

"Wait," Sarah said, pulling out a particular file labeled simply "8." Inside was a single sheet of paper with a list of names, dates, and locations.

"It's a list of the fragments and their guardians," Sarah said, a chill running through her. Her grandfather's name was on the list. "They're hunting down the members of The Circle or their descendants."

"Paddy's on their target list," James said, his voice tight with concern.

Sarah was already pulling out her phone. "We need to warn him." But before she could dial.

"Chief! You need to see this!" Riley called to her. Riley was still studying the information on the tablet. On display was what appeared to be a map of Dublin with several locations marked. One of the markers was pulsing softly.

"It's a real-time tracking system," Riley explained. "I think they're monitoring the fragments."

"Or the people carrying them," Sarah said grimly. The pulsing marker was directly over O'Neil's pub. "They're watching my grandfather."

"There's more," Riley said, swiping to another screen. "A shipping manifest for specialized equipment was delivered yesterday to this address." She pointed to a location on the docks, not far from their current position.

"What kind of equipment?" James asked.

Riley's expression was troubled. "Ground-penetrating radar, ultrasonic cutting tools, and components that match explosive devices."

Sarah felt her chest tighten. "They're going after something buried or hidden. Something they need specialized equipment to access."

"The final fragments," James suggested.

"Or something else entirely," Sarah replied, thinking of her grandfather's warnings about the chalice's power.

"We need to see what's at that address. Now."

* * *

The second warehouse was smaller than the first, tucked away between larger buildings in a less-trafficked area of the docks. No lights showed from within, and a preliminary perimeter sweep detected no obvious security systems.

"Too easy," Sarah muttered as they approached the main entrance. "Riley, are you sure this is the correct delivery address?" Sarah asked.

"Positive," Riley confirmed. "Delivered and signed for yesterday at 14:37."

The tactical team took positions around the building while Sarah, James, Shawn, and Riley prepared to enter through the main door.

"Careful," Sarah warned as Shawn worked on the lock. "If they were expecting intruders, they might have left surprises."

The lock clicked open suspiciously easily, and Sarah exchanged a wary glance with James. "I'll take the point," she said quietly.

The warehouse interior was pitch black and eerily silent. Sarah's flashlight beam cut through the darkness, revealing a space save for a single metal crate in the center of the floor. The concrete around it had been recently cut, leaving a perfect circle about ten feet in diameter.

"Ground-penetrating radar," Riley whispered. "They found something beneath the floor."

Sarah moved closer, examining the cut. It was precise and clean, clearly made with professional equipment. The circular concrete section had been lifted and set aside, revealing what appeared to be an ancient stone chamber beneath.

"It's some kind of underground structure," Sarah said, crouching at the edge of the opening. Her flashlight revealed stone steps descending into darkness. "Predates the warehouse by centuries, at least."

"Chief, wait for the structural engineer," Shawn advised. "That could be unstable."

Sarah was about to agree when her radio crackled. "O'Malley, this is Murphy. We've got movement outside the east entrance. Two vehicles just pulled up."

"How many?" Sarah asked tersely.

"Four individuals, armed. Moving with purpose. They'll breach in approximately thirty seconds."

"Everyone find cover," Sarah ordered. "Riley, stay with Shawn behind those support columns. James, with me."

Sarah and James positioned themselves behind the metal crate, weapons drawn. Sarah could see flashlight beams approaching from the east side through the warehouse's dusty windows.

"Police! Drop your weapons!" she shouted as the east door burst open.

Instead of compliance, they were met with a hail of gunfire. Bullets pinged off the metal crate, forcing Sarah and James to duck lower.

"So much for the element of surprise," James muttered, returning fire carefully.

The intruders spread out, using stacked pallets and support columns for cover. Their movements were disciplined and coordinated—they were professional mercenaries, not common criminals.

"Murphy, we need backup," Sarah called into her radio. "Four armed hostiles inside the warehouse."

"Copy that," Murphy replied. "Tactical team moving in. ETA twenty seconds."

The firefight intensified, bullets ricocheting off metal and concrete. Sarah caught glimpses of the intruders as they moved—tactical gear, night-vision equipment, and military-grade weapons. Whoever they were, they came prepared for a significant confrontation.

One of the intruders tossed something across the floor—a small cylindrical object that rolled to a stop near the circular opening.

"Grenade!" James shouted, pulling Sarah lower behind the crate.

But instead of an explosion, the device emitted a blinding flash and a thick cloud of smoke. Sarah saw the intruders converging on the underground entrance through watering eyes.

"They're going for whatever's down there," she coughed, trying to clear her vision. "We can't let them take it."

Without waiting for backup, Sarah broke cover and sprinted toward the opening. She heard James curse behind her, then the sound of him following. Through the smoke, she could see two intruders descending the stone steps.

"Police! Stop!" Sarah shouted, firing a warning shot that echoed deafeningly in the enclosed space.

One of the remaining intruders turned and fired in her direction. Sarah felt the bullet whiz past her ear as she dove for cover behind a stack of empty pallets. From his position, James returned fire, forcing the shooter to retreat.

The tactical team burst through the east entrance, immediately engaging the intruders. In the chaos of gunfire and shouted commands, Sarah saw her opportunity. She darted toward the underground entrance and plunged down the stone steps, following the two intruders who had descended earlier.

The ancient passage was narrow, forcing Sarah to duck as she moved. Her flashlight revealed stone walls carved with spiraling symbols that looked disturbingly similar to those in the caves at Howth. The air was cool and damp, with the unmistakable scent of earth that hadn't been disturbed in centuries.

The passage opened into a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter. Stone pillars carved with more spirals supported a domed ceiling. In the center stood a raised altar of sorts, and upon it...

Sarah's flashlight illuminated a small, intricately carved box made of what appeared to be oak and bound with silver bands. The two intruders stood before it, one holding the box while the other covered the entrance with his weapon.

"Put it down," Sarah commanded, her gun trained on the man holding the box. "Now!"

The armed man fired without hesitation. Sarah dove to the side, feeling stone fragments sting her cheek as the bullet struck the wall beside her. She rolled and came up firing, catching the gunman in the shoulder. He staggered back, weapon clattering to the stone floor.

The man holding the box made a break for a second passage on the far side of the chamber. Sarah surged forward to intercept him, but the wounded gunman grabbed her ankle as she passed. She went down hard, her flashlight spinning away across the stone floor.

In the chaotic shadows, Sarah grappled with her attacker, finally subduing him with a sharp elbow to his already wounded shoulder. When she regained her feet, the second man had disappeared into the far passage with the box.

Sarah retrieved her flashlight and approached the wounded intruder. "Who are you working for?" she demanded. "What's in that box?"

The man smirked through his pain. "You have no idea what you're dealing with, Inspector."

"Try me," Sarah challenged.

"The auction is just the beginning," the man said, his accent having a vaguely Eastern European tone. "Mr. Smith has buyers who understand the true value of the chalice. You can't stop what's coming."

"Watch me," Sarah replied, cuffing him quickly before keying her radio. "I have one in custody in the underground chamber. Another escaped through a secondary passage with what appears to be an artifact."

Static answered her. The thick stone walls must be blocking the signal. Sarah cautiously approached the second passage, leaving the wounded man secured to one of the stone pillars. Unlike the entrance she had used, this one was barely four feet high, forcing her to crouch uncomfortably as she proceeded.

The passage curved sharply, then began to ascend. After about thirty meters, Sarah saw a faint light ahead. The tunnel emerged in what appeared to be the basement of an adjacent building. A door at the far end stood open, letting in faint light from beyond.

Sarah moved quickly to the door, finding herself in a narrow alley behind the warehouses. The second intruder was nowhere to be seen, but she could hear sirens approaching in the distance. Backup was finally arriving in force.

She keyed her radio again, relieved to find it working now that she was above ground. "O'Malley to dispatch. I need all units to establish a perimeter around the docks. The suspect was on foot with a stolen artifact and was likely heading for a vehicle. Male, approximately six feet, tactical gear, carrying a wooden box about the size of a small briefcase."

"Copy that," came the response. "All available units responding."

Sarah hurried back through the tunnel to the ancient chamber, where the wounded intruder still sat cuffed to the stone pillar. His smirk had faded, replaced by a grimace of pain.

"Your friend won't get far," Sarah told him. "This place is about to be swarming with Gardaí."

"It doesn't matter," the man replied. "The box is just a vessel. The fragment is what matters, and Mr. Smith already has most of them."

Sarah was about to press for more information when James's voice echoed down the passage. "Sarah? Are you down there?"

"In here," she called back. "I've got a prisoner."

James appeared in the chamber entrance, his weapon lowered but ready. "Situation's under control upstairs. Two were in custody, one wounded. The fourth must be your runner."

"He took something—a wooden box that might contain another fragment of the chalice," Sarah explained. "I've called for a perimeter, but he had a head start."

James nodded, then paused to take in the ancient chamber. "What is this place?"

"Some kind of ritual space, I'm guessing," Sarah replied. "Predates the warehouse by centuries. The symbols match those in the Howth caves."

Sarah's flashlight played across the walls, illuminating more of the spiral carvings and what appeared to be scenes of robed figures gathered around a central chalice. One particular carving caught her attention—depicting the chalice with light or energy emanating from it, creating what looked like a doorway or portal.

"More of the same nonsense from the book," Sarah said dismissively, though she couldn't entirely suppress a shiver.

James wasn't listening. He had moved to the center of the chamber where the wooden box had stood. "Look at this," he said, pointing to the raised altar.

What Sarah had taken for a simple stone platform was actually more elaborate. A circular depression in its center was surrounded by eight smaller indentations, each carved with a different variation of the spiral motif. "Eight depressions," Sarah noted. "Eight fragments."

"You think this is where the chalice was supposed to be assembled?" James asked.

"According to the mythology, yes," Sarah replied. "Once all eight fragments were placed properly, the assembled chalice would rest in the center." She shook her head. "It's all elaborate ritual and superstition, but Heritage Acquisitions clearly believes it's worth killing for."

James studied the altar more closely. "There's something else here." He pointed to what appeared to be a small metal plate embedded in the stone floor directly in front of the altar. "Looks out of place. Too modern." Sarah leaned in to examine it. The plate was about six inches square and made of brushed steel, which stood out starkly against the ancient stone. "You're right; it doesn't belong."

"Could be a trigger mechanism of some kind," James suggested. "The intruders were carrying specialized equipment, including components for explosives."

Sarah frowned. "Why would they set explosives in a chamber they were trying to access?"

"Maybe they weren't the ones who placed it," James said grimly. "Maybe Smith left it as insurance in case anyone tried interfering with his plans."

Sarah keyed her radio. "This is O'Malley. I need the bomb disposal unit at my location immediately. Possible explosive device in the underground chamber."

"Copy that," came the response. "Bomb disposal en route. ETA fifteen minutes."

"We should evacuate," James said, already moving toward the prisoner to help him up.

Sarah stepped back from the altar, but her foot caught on an uneven stone. She stumbled slightly, her boot coming down squarely on the metal plate.

There was a soft click.

Sarah froze, her blood turning to ice. "James," she said, her voice unnaturally calm. "I think I just armed it."

James set the prisoner back down and moved carefully toward her. "Don't move," he said unnecessarily. "Let me see."

He crouched beside her, examining the plate without touching it. "Pressure trigger," he confirmed, his voice professional despite the tension evident in his shoulders. It was old-school but effective. It's armed now, and if you step off..."

"It detonates," Sarah finished, keeping perfectly still. Sweat beaded on her forehead despite the chamber's cool air. "How much time do we have before the bomb squad arrives?"

"Fifteen minutes," James said, glancing at his watch. "Maybe less now."

"Get the prisoner out," Sarah ordered. "Clear the warehouse. No sense risking more lives."

"I'm not leaving you," James replied firmly.

"Don't be stupid," Sarah snapped. "There's nothing you can do except get yourself killed."

James ignored her, moving to examine the altar more closely. "There might be a way to disarm it or at least buy more time."

"Unless you've suddenly developed bomb disposal skills I don't know about, I'd rather you focused on evacuation," Sarah said, trying to keep her voice steady.

The wounded prisoner laughed quietly. "You're both dead," he said in accented English. "Mr. Smith doesn't leave loose ends."

"Shut up," James told him before returning his attention to Sarah. "The triggering mechanism looks simple. Pressure plate connected to what's likely a detonator embedded in the altar."

"James," Sarah said, her patience wearing thin. "Get out of here. That's an order."

"You may be a superior officer," James reminded her with a flash of the O'Neil stubbornness they both shared, "but you're my sister first, and I'm not leaving my sister standing on a bomb."

Before Sarah could argue further, Shawn's voice called down from the passage. "Chief? Bomb disposal is delayed. There's been an accident on the bridge. New ETA is thirty minutes."

Sarah closed her eyes briefly. Thirty minutes was an eternity to stand perfectly still on a pressure plate. Her leg was already starting to cramp.

"Acknowledged," James called back. "We need tools down here: a basic electronics kit, if you have one, and anything that might help distribute weight evenly."

"On it," Shawn replied, his footsteps retreating up the passage.

"This is insane," Sarah muttered. "You're not trained for this."

"No, but I did spend three years in engineering before I switched to law enforcement," James replied, carefully examining the altar and the floor around it. "And I had a demolitions expert in my unit during military service. Picked up a few things."

"Like how to disarm a pressure-triggered explosive device in an ancient underground chamber?" Sarah asked skeptically.

"The principles are basic," James said with a confidence Sarah wasn't sure she believed. "Pressure goes on, circuit closes, bomb arms. Pressure comes off, the circuit breaks, and the bomb detonates. We need to keep the circuit closed while you step off."

"Simple," Sarah said dryly, feeling a bead of sweat trickle down her spine.

Shawn returned with a small toolkit and what appeared to be a metal clipboard. "It's the Best I could find," he said, handing them to James.

"It'll work," James assured him. "Now, evacuate the area. That's not negotiable."

Shawn hesitated, clearly torn between his duty to his superior officer and the order to leave. "Chief?" he asked, looking at Sarah.

"Go," Sarah said firmly. "Clear everyone to a safe distance. That's an order."

After Shawn had taken the still-smirking prisoner with him, Sarah looked down at James, who was now on his hands and knees examining the underside of the altar.

"If you get yourself killed trying to save me, I'm going to be really pissed off," she told him.

James glanced up with a strained smile. "Noted. But I'd rather face your anger than tell your kids their mother died because I followed protocol and left her standing on a bomb."

Sarah thought of Aoife and Liam, and her resolve strengthened. "What's the plan?"

"The pressure plate is connected to wires that run under the altar," James explained, opening the toolkit. "I can't disarm the device itself without seeing it, but I might be able to bypass the trigger mechanism."

"Might?" Sarah repeated.

"Would you prefer 'definitely'?" James asked, selecting a small screwdriver from the kit. "Because I can lie if it makes you feel better."

"Just tell me what you need me to do," Sarah said, ignoring his attempt at humor.

"Stand absolutely still," James replied, his focus returning to the task at hand. "And talk to me. Keep my mind occupied while I work."

"What should I talk about?" Sarah asked, trying to ignore the growing discomfort in her leg.

"Tell me about the chalice," James suggested, carefully inserting the screwdriver into a narrow gap between the floor stones. "What does Smith want it for, besides money?"

Sarah hesitated, reluctant to share the more fantastical aspects of what Paddy had told her. "According to the myths, it can open doorways to the Otherworld," she finally said. "It can allow communication with beings or forces beyond our realm."

"You believe that?" James asked, his tone carefully neutral as he worked.

"Of course not," Sarah replied quickly. "It's just ancient superstition, just like any other religion. But Smith might believe it, and that makes him unpredictable."

"Paddy seemed convinced," James noted, now using the screwdriver to trace the path of a wire beneath the stones.

Sarah sighed. "Granddad was part of a group called The Circle back in the 1960s. They performed rituals with the chalice fragments at the solstices and the equinoxes. Something happened during one of these rituals in 1967 that scared them enough to disband and scatter the fragments."

"What happened?" James asked, genuinely curious even as he continued his delicate work.

"According to Paddy, the veil between worlds thinned too much, and something came through that shouldn't have," Sarah said, feeling slightly foolish even repeating it. "Edward Stevens was never the same afterward; it drove him insane."

James raised an eyebrow but didn't comment directly. "Interesting that a group including Paddy O'Neil—not exactly known for his spiritual nature—would take this so seriously."

"People believe all sorts of things," Sarah said dismissively. "Especially in Ireland, where legend and history are so intertwined that sometimes it's hard to separate them."

"True enough," James agreed, sitting back on his heels. "Okay, I've traced the wiring. Fortunately, it's a simple circuit. Not particularly sophisticated."

"Can you disarm it?" Sarah asked, hoping to creep into her voice.

"Not exactly," James admitted. "But I can create a bypass to keep the circuit closed when you step off the plate." He held up the metal clipboard. "This should provide enough weight and conductivity to do the job."

Sarah digested this. "So the plan is to slide that under my foot while standing on the plate, then carefully step off?"

"That's the general idea," James confirmed. "It's not elegant, but it should work."

"And if it doesn't?" Sarah asked quietly.

James met her eyes. "Then I didn't keep my promise to your kids."

The gravity of the situation settled over them like a physical weight. Sarah thought of Aoife and Liam, of Tom, of all the people waiting for her to come home safely. The absurdity of potentially dying in an ancient chamber beneath a Dublin warehouse while standing on a bomb placed by art thieves who believed in mystical chalices was not lost on her.

"Let's do it," she said with more confidence than she felt.

James nodded, positioning the clipboard at the edge of the pressure plate. "When I tell you, I want you to slowly shift your weight to your other foot. I'll slide this under the foot that's on the plate. Once it's in position, you can carefully step off."

"Understood," Sarah said, focusing on controlling her breathing.

James wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Ready?"

"Ready," Sarah confirmed.

"Shifting now," James said, beginning to slide the clipboard under the edge of the pressure plate.

Sarah gradually transferred her weight to her left foot, feeling the pressure plate begin to rise slightly beneath her right boot. James worked with painstaking precision, easing the metal clipboard into position millimeter by millimeter.

"Almost there," he murmured. "Keep steady."

The clipboard was now about halfway under Sarah's boot. James paused, adjusting his grip for the final push to position it completely under the pressure plate.

"Now, the tricky part," he said, his voice tight with concentration. "When I count to three, I'll push this the rest of the way under, and you lift your foot straight up. Don't step away yet, lift vertically."

Sarah nodded, too focused to speak.

"One," James began, his hands perfectly steady. "Two..."

A drop of sweat ran into Sarah's eye, making her blink reflexively. Her balance shifted slightly, her weight pressing harder on the pressure plate for just an instant.

There was a soft click, different from the first—higher pitched, more final.

"Down!" James shouted, launching himself upward to tackle Sarah away from the pressure plate.

They hit the stone floor hard, James covering Sarah's body with his own as the world erupted into noise, heat, and darkness.

Chapter 26

Sarah's first sensation was pain—a dull, throbbing ache that radiated through her entire body like electricity through water. The second was weight—something heavy pinning her to the cold, unyielding stone floor, pressing the air from her lungs. The third was a sound—a high-pitched ringing that drowned out everything else as if the world had been replaced by a single piercing note.

She tried to open her eyes, but darkness surrounded her, absolute and smothering. For a terrifying moment, she wondered if the explosion had blinded her, another casualty of her relentless pursuit. Then she realized the chamber's lights had been extinguished, plunging the ancient space into absolute darkness that felt almost alive in its intensity.

"James?" she croaked, her voice barely audible even to her own ears over the persistent ringing. The weight on top of her shifted slightly, bringing another wave of pain.

"Don't move," her brother's voice came, strained but unmistakably alive. "Checking for secondary devices. They often plant more than one."

Relief flooded through her like a warm tide. James was alive. Which meant she was, too, despite the pressure-plate bomb that should have killed them both instantly. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Sarah could make out faint shapes—the outline of the altar, now partially collapsed, and the silhouette of her brother as he carefully rose to a crouching position, his movements deliberate and practiced.

"How?" she managed, her throat raw from dust and smoke that clung to every surface.

"Directional charge," James replied, his voice clearer now as the ringing in her ears began to subside. "Designed to focus the blast toward the altar, not outward. Smart design for close-quarters work. Professional." The beam of his flashlight cut through the darkness like a knife, revealing the extent of the damage. "The altar took most of the impact. We got lucky."

Sarah struggled to sit up, wincing as pain shot through her right side like fire. Her hand came away wet and sticky when she pressed it against her ribs. Blood, but not enough to indicate a severe wound—at least, she hoped.

"You're injured," James observed, directing his light toward her side, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Probably shrapnel. How bad?"

"I'll live," Sarah replied, conducting a mental inventory of her body. Everything hurt, but nothing felt broken or catastrophically damaged. The familiar ache of bruises forming was almost comforting in its normalcy. "What about you?"

"I'm ok, be still, let me look," James said, his police training evident in his methodical assessment.

With James's help, Sarah managed to get to her feet, swaying slightly as a wave of dizziness washed over her like an incoming tide. The chamber was filled with dust and smoke, making it difficult to breathe without coughing. Chunks of stone from the altar and ceiling lay scattered across the floor like the aftermath of an earthquake.

"We need to get out of here," Sarah said, coughing as she inhaled a lungful of debris that scratched at her lungs.

"The structural integrity of this whole chamber is probably compromised. One more collapse, and we're buried."

"Agreed," James said, already guiding her toward the passage that led back to the warehouse, his arm steady around her waist. "Hey, look at this first."

He directed his flashlight toward the ancient altar's remains. The explosion had obliterated most of the central structure, revealing a small cavity beneath where it had stood. Another amber fragment was inside, glinting in James's light like a forgotten treasure.

"Another piece of the chalice," Sarah said, moving carefully toward it, ignoring the protest of her injured side.

"Smith missed one."

"Left behind as bait, more likely," James suggested, his voice grim. "To draw in whoever was following their trail. We walked right into it."

Sarah carefully picked up the fragment, feeling its surprising warmth against her fingertips. Unlike the others they'd found, this one was larger—almost a quarter of what would have been the complete chalice. The amber seemed to glow from within, even in the dim light of the chamber, pulsing with an almost hypnotic rhythm.

"We need to secure this," she said, pocketing the fragment with reverence. "It's evidence, and it might lead us to Smith."

They made their way slowly through the passage, James supporting Sarah. Every step sent jolts of pain through Sarah's side, but the knowledge that they had survived what should have been a fatal blast kept her moving forward, one painful step after another.

As they emerged into the warehouse, they were met by a scene of controlled chaos. Emergency lights cast harsh shadows across the space while paramedics attended to the wounded intruders. Tactical team members secured the scene, weapons at the ready, and in the distance, Sarah could hear the wail of approaching sirens growing louder.

Tom was the first to spot them, his face transforming from grim concern to profound relief as he rushed forward, shouldering past officers in his path. "Sarah!" he called, reaching her just as her legs gave way beneath her.

"We heard the explosion. When you didn't respond to radio calls... I thought—"

"We're okay," Sarah assured him, though the pain in her side suggested otherwise. "The blast was contained, mostly. Directional charge. Someone wanted us alive enough to see what we'd found."

Tom's eyes moved to the blood seeping through her jacket. "You need medical attention," he said, his tone making it clear this wasn't a suggestion. "Both of you."

"In a minute," Sarah replied, reaching into her pocket for the amber fragment. "We found another piece of the chalice. Hidden beneath the altar."

Tom examined the fragment carefully, turning it over in his palm, his brow furrowed with concentration. "That makes three fragments accounted for—the one from Billy, this one, and the one Smith's man escaped within the wooden box."

"Four," Sarah corrected, wincing as a paramedic approached to examine her wound. She gritted her teeth against the sharp pain as gentle fingers probed the injury. "There was one in Jazzy's possession, likely taken by Smith before or after killing her."

"And two more still out there," James added, his face tight with concern as he watched the paramedic work on his sister. "Including the one Paddy has."

Sarah felt a chill that had nothing to do with her injuries. The realization hit her like another explosion. "Paddy's fragment," she said, suddenly alert despite the pain radiating through her side. "If Smith has the locations of all the guardians..."

She fumbled for her phone but found it shattered, likely from the explosion's impact. The screen was a spiderweb of cracks, completely useless. "I need a phone," she demanded, holding out her hand to Tom, ignoring the paramedic's protests as she shifted position. "Now."

Tom handed over his phone without question, understanding the urgency in her voice. Sarah dialed her grandfather's number with trembling fingers, counting each ring with mounting anxiety. One, two, three...

"O'Neil," Paddy's gruff voice finally answered, familiar and reassuring.

"Granddad," she said, relief evident in her tone. "Where are you?"

"At the pub, where else would I be at this hour?" Paddy replied, confusion coloring his voice. "What's happened? You sound terrible."

"Smith might be coming for your fragment," Sarah said, dispensing with explanations. "Heritage Acquisitions has a list of all the guardians, including you. The pub isn't safe."

There was a brief silence on the line. "I see," Paddy said finally, his voice devoid of its usual brusque humor.

"Well, he won't find what he's looking for here."

"Granddad, this isn't the time for cryptic responses," Sarah said, frustration mounting as the paramedic pressed a temporary bandage against her wound. "These people have already been killed three times. They just tried to kill James and me with an explosive device. You need to get somewhere safe. Now."

"I'm not leaving the pub; I'm not alone here," Paddy replied firmly, his stubborn O'Neil streak evident. "And Smith knows better than to come here directly. Too many eyes, ears, and people with guns who owe me favors." There was a pause, the sound of glasses clinking in the background. "I'll take precautions. Sean is here, and plenty of my men. We'll be fine."

Sarah wanted to argue further, but she knew her grandfather well enough to recognize when his mind was made up. "I'm sending officers to watch the place in case Smith does show up," she said.

"See to your wounds," Paddy instructed, his tone softening with genuine concern. "I've survived two wars and thirty years running a pub in the roughest part of Dublin. I didn't make it this far by being careless." Another pause, and Sarah could almost picture him running a weathered hand through his silver hair, a gesture she'd seen countless times when he was worried but trying not to show it. "Your grandmother would never forgive me if I let anything happen to you while you're chasing after my troubles."

After extracting a promise from Paddy to call immediately if anything suspicious occurred, Sarah ended the call and handed the phone back to Tom. "We need to put surveillance on O'Neil's pub," she told him, her professional instincts kicking in despite the pain. "Plain clothes, discreet but vigilant."

"Already done," Tom replied, surprising her with a gentle squeeze of her uninjured hand. "I sent two officers when we found that list with his name on it. Your grandfather won't be alone."

Sarah nodded gratefully, then finally allowed the paramedics to properly examine her wounds. The shrapnel had cut deeply into her side, tearing through muscle, and an ambulance was waiting for transport to the hospital. The medication they'd administered was beginning to take effect, making the edges of her vision blur slightly.

"I'll meet you there," Tom promised as the paramedics prepared to close the ambulance doors, his worried eyes never leaving hers.

The intensity in his eyes made Sarah's breath catch despite the pain medication beginning to dull her senses.

Chapter 27

St. Vincent's Hospital was becoming unnervingly familiar territory for Sarah. This was her second visit in as many days. She lay on a hospital bed, freshly stitched and bandaged, waiting for Jenn to return. Twenty-seven stitches, a mild concussion, and extensive bruising—remarkably light injuries considering the circumstances. A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Tom entered, followed by Riley, both looking exhausted but determined. Riley carried her ever-present tablet while Tom held a tray with four coffee cups. Dark circles shadowed their eyes, evidence of the sleepless night they'd all endured.

"Thought you might need this," Tom said, distributing the coffee. "Hospital cafeteria's finest. Which isn't saying much, but it's caffeine." His concerned gaze lingered on Sarah's bandaged head a moment longer than necessary.

"Bless you," Sarah said, accepting the cup gratefully. "Please tell me you've got news on Smith or the runner who escaped with the wooden box." She winced slightly as she shifted to a more upright position.

"Smith's still in the wind," Tom said, settling beside Sarah's hospital bed. "But we ID'd his runner—Aleksander Petrović. Ex-Serbian military turned smuggler. Guy's resume reads like a war crimes tribunal."

"And the mystery box?" Sarah asked, squinting against the fluorescent lights.

"Gone," Riley said, tablet already out. "But I've been digging through their digital breadcrumbs. Found the new auction location."

"How'd you manage that?" Colin asked, impressed.

"Criminal hackers always leave traces. It's like following a trail of digital breadcrumbs." Riley pulled up satellite images. "Devereux Estate House, outside Galway. Very exclusive, very private, very perfect for selling stolen artifacts."

"Naturally, it's a bloody castle," Shawn muttered. "Can't just be a warehouse in the docks, has to be some toff's mansion."

"At least it's not underwater caves this time," James said dryly. "Though knowing our luck, it probably has a dungeon."

"Smith still plans to sell the fragments he has," Sarah said thoughtfully. "Even without all eight pieces." She tapped her fingers against the paper cup.

"About that," Riley said, swiping to a new image on her tablet. "According to the auction catalog, Smith currently has five fragment."

"The sixth fragment was in the box Petrović escaped with," Tom added. "Based on the manifest we found, it was retrieved from a private collection in Florence just last week. It belonged to someone named L. Kearney. Local authorities confirmed a break-in at the residence, but the theft wasn't reported."

"That matches the list," Sarah noted. "L. Kearney one of the original Circle members' descendants. Smith is methodically working through all the descendants."

"Which leaves Paddy's fragment and one other," James concluded, stopping his pacing to study the information on Riley's tablet.

"Which he'll go after next," James said grimly. "It's the logical move."

"Not necessarily," Riley interjected, setting her tablet on the bed for everyone to see. "Smith only sells individual fragments, not the complete chalice. The descriptions note that collectors can bid on one or more fragments, with a starting price of one million euros."

"He's not trying to reassemble it?" Sarah asked, surprised.

"That's what's strange," Riley said. "In the catalog are extensive notes on the chalice's history and supposed powers, but it emphasizes that the fragments should remain separated to 'maintain the integrity of their individual energies,' whatever that means."

"It means Smith believes the legends," Sarah realized. "He's not just treating this as a valuable artifact; he believes in its power."

"Which aligns with what your grandfather warned about," Tom noted. "That the fragments were separated intentionally because together they were dangerous."

Sarah regarded the amber fragment they'd recovered, now sealed in an evidence bag on her bedside table. In the hospital's harsh fluorescent lighting, it looked almost ordinary—just an ancient piece of craftsmanship, beautiful but ultimately just an object. How could anyone believe this could open doorways to other realms?

"What about Paddy?" Tom asked quietly.

"We should still send someone to watch. If Smith shows up, he'll be walking into the vipers' dens, and Paddy's men will not let anything happen to him," Sarah replied.

"But if Smith is focused on the auction, he might not make a move on Paddy's fragment immediately. That gives us a window of opportunity."

"What's our next move?" James asked, breaking the thoughtful silence that had fallen over the room.

"The auction," Sarah said decisively. "Smith will be there, along with the fragments he's collected. It's our best chance to catch him and recover the artifacts."

Colin reminded them, "The auction is tomorrow night. That's not much time to prepare for an operation."

"Then we'd better get started," Sarah said, shifting to stand when the door swung open abruptly.

"What is going on here?" Jenn demanded as she strode into the room. She marched directly to Sarah's bedside, her Doctor's authority radiating from every inch of her five-foot-four frame. "Everyone out now, and you," she said, pointing a finger at Sarah, "back in bed, and no stimulants." She confiscated the coffee cup from Sarah's hand in one swift motion.

"You said I could go," Sarah protested, reaching futilely for her coffee.

"No, I said I'll go find you a room; you just heard what you wanted," Jenn corrected, setting the cup well out of reach. "I'm not spending another minute in this hospital while Smith is out there planning his next move."

"Maybe you should stay here," Tom suggested, his concerned gaze taking in the bruises still visible on Sarah's face.

"No, I'm discharging myself," Sarah replied, her tone making it clear that further objection would be pointless. "I've got a killer to catch and a family member to protect. Everything else can wait," she said, reaching for her folded clothes on the nearby chair.

James grinned. "There's the O'Neil stubbornness. Good to see the explosion didn't knock it out of you."

"No, you are not," Jenn insisted, blocking Sarah's path. "Your children are in the waiting room waiting to see you, and you need to rest."

Sarah paused mid-reach for her shirt. "Aoife and Liam are here?" she asked, a different kind of pain crossing her features. "How much do they know?"

"Only that there was an incident during a raid, and you were injured," Tom replied, his voice softening. "Moria wanted to prepare them in case... well, in case things had gone differently."

Sarah closed her eyes briefly, imagining what her children must be feeling—the same fear and uncertainty she'd experienced when she couldn't reach them after discovering Smith had information about them, the same cold dread that had gripped her when she'd stood on that pressure plate, thinking she might never see them again.

Sarah turned and hugged Jenn, surprising her sister-in-law. "I've got to finish this; I'll be fine," Sarah said, her voice low but determined. "Tell Riley and James what we need for the auction operation," she instructed Tom.

"I need a few minutes with my kids."

Tom nodded, understanding the shift in priorities. "Take your time."

As Tom, Riley, and James left to discuss strategy, Sarah carefully dressed, mindful of her bandaged side. The hospital gown had hidden the worst of the damage from her children, but the cuts and bruises on her face and the stiffness in her movements would not be so easily disguised. She would be honest with them—they were old enough to see through attempts to minimize what had happened.

There was a soft knock at the door. Aoife and Liam entered together, and when they saw Sarah, they rushed toward her, their faces a complex mixture of relief and fear.

"Mum!" Liam cried, rushing forward but stopping short of embracing her, suddenly uncertain if it would hurt her.

Sarah opened her arms. "It's okay," she assured him. "I could use a hug. Careful on the right side, but otherwise, I'm just bruised."

Liam hugged her gingerly, then more firmly when she didn't wince. Aoife approached more cautiously, her eyes cataloging every visible injury with a scrutiny that reminded Sarah painfully of herself.

"You promised you wouldn't put yourself in danger," Aoife said quietly, her voice tight with emotion.

"I know," Sarah acknowledged, meeting her daughter's penetrating gaze. "And I try to keep that promise. But sometimes the job doesn't give me a choice."

"What happened?" Liam asked, still clinging to her left side.

Sarah guided them back to the edge of the bed, sitting between them with an arm around each. "We were investigating a warehouse where some stolen artifacts were being kept," she explained, simplifying the story without lying. "There was a hidden chamber underneath, and someone had left an explosive device as a trap. Uncle James and I were caught in the blast, but we're both okay."

"Uncle James got hurt, too?" Liam asked, his brown eyes wide with concern, looking toward the treatment area.

"Just some bruises," Sarah confirmed, smoothing his hair. "He'll be fine. I'll need some time to heal, too, but nothing's broken or permanently damaged."

"You could have died," Aoife said, the words hanging in the air between them like shards of glass.

"Yes," Sarah acknowledged, seeing no point in denying it. "But I didn't. Your uncle saved my life."

"Is it over now?" Liam asked hopefully. "Did you catch the bad guys?"

Sarah hesitated, torn between offering reassurance and being honest. "Not yet," she finally said. "But we're close. Very close."

"Don't go back," Aoife said suddenly, her voice breaking. "Let someone else finish it. You've done enough."

Sarah turned to look at her daughter, seeing the fear behind the teenage bravado. "I wish I could step away," she said gently. "But that's not how this works. People have died, Aoife. I owe it to them and their families to see this through."

"You owe us, too," Aoife said, tears filling her eyes. "You owe us a mother who comes home at night."

The words hit Sarah like a physical blow, harder than any injury from the explosion. She pulled Aoife closer, momentarily feeling her daughter's resistance before she relented and leaned into the embrace.

"You're right," Sarah whispered, her throat tight. "I do owe you that. And I promise I'll be careful. But I need to finish this case."

"Why?" Liam asked his innocent question, cutting to the core. "Why does it have to be you?"

"Because I'm good at what I do," Sarah answered honestly. "Because this case has become personal—not just because of the danger to me, but because it involves our family history in ways I'm still trying to understand."

"Granddad?" Aoife guessed, her intuition as sharp as ever.

Sarah nodded. "Among others. I don't have time to explain everything right now, but I promise I'll tell you everything when this is over. You two know I don't keep secrets."

Liam and Aoife exchanged a look, having one of those silent sibling conversations that Sarah had never quite learned to interpret. Finally, Liam spoke for both of them.

"Just come home, okay? Whatever happens, whatever you must do, make sure you come home." Liam said, his voice cracking slightly with an emotion he was clearly trying to control. His eyes, so much like his father's, held a maturity beyond his fifteen years.

"I will," Sarah promised, tightening her arms around both children despite the sharp, persistent pain in her side.

"That's one promise I intend to keep. No matter what this case throws at me, I'm coming back to you two.

Always."

They sat together in silence for a few moments, the murmur of medical staff creating a bubble of fragile peace around them. Then James appeared in the doorway, his expression urgent.

"Sarah," he called. "Riley's found something."

Sarah nodded, giving her children one final squeeze before standing. "I have to go," she told them. "Moria will take you home, and Gardia will be watching the house."

"When will you be back?" Liam asked, hand still clutching hers.

"Soon," Sarah promised. "After we've made some arrests and secured some evidence."

"Be careful," Aoife said, the words somewhere between a request and a command.

"Always," Sarah replied, offering a smile.

As she walked away with James, leaving her children behind, Sarah felt the weight of their expectations—and her promises—settle on her shoulders. The case had escalated far beyond what anyone could have anticipated when Jazzy's body was discovered on that beach. Now, it involved ancient artifacts, international smugglers, explosive devices, and family secrets spanning generations.

But as complicated as it had become, the core remained simple: Three people had been murdered, and Sarah was duty-bound to deliver justice for them. If that meant confronting Smith at his auction, infiltrating a gathering of wealthy collectors with questionable ethics, or protecting a mystical chalice that she wasn't entirely convinced held any power beyond its monetary value, then so be it. The path forward might be treacherous, but the destination was clear—and Sarah had never been one to take the easy road when the right one lay before her.

* * *

Back at the station, Riley's tablet displayed a satellite image of an estate on the outskirts of Galway. "Devereux estate House," she explained, zooming in on the sprawling stone mansion nestled among manicured gardens.

"Lawrence Devereux, a British businessman with ties to several European auction houses, owns it. He's been investigated for trafficking in illicit antiquities before, but charges were never filed due to a lack of evidence—or perhaps an abundance of well-placed bribes."

"Perfect setup for Smith's auction," Tom noted, leaning closer to examine the details.

"Security?" Sarah asked, studying the image and noting the long driveway and limited access points.

"Extensive," Riley admitted, swiping to show additional angles. "Perimeter fencing, electronic surveillance, private security personnel, all former military. Devereux values his privacy almost as much as his collection."

"And his guest list," James added, scrolling through information on his phone. "According to what we've recovered, the auction will host approximately thirty collectors from around the world, many with diplomatic immunity or powerful political connections—the kind of people who don't appreciate police interruptions during their shopping sprees."

Sarah absorbed this information and was already formulating a plan, mentally calculating risks and contingencies. "We can't just raid the place," she said. There are too many variables, too many potential hostages or collateral damage, not to mention the risk of the artifacts being destroyed in the chaos. Smith strikes me as the type who'd rather destroy evidence than let it be seized."

"Undercover, then?" Tom suggested, crossing his arms. "Can we get someone inside to identify Smith and the artifacts before we move?"

"Not someone," Sarah said firmly, meeting his gaze. "Me. I need to be there."

"Absolutely not," Tom replied, his tone making it clear this wasn't open for discussion. His eyes flickered briefly to her bandaged side. "You've just survived an explosion. You have twenty-seven stitches in your side.

You're in no condition for fieldwork or a high-risk undercover operation. I'm not sending you into that place while you can barely stand upright."

"I'm the only one who knows exactly what we're looking for," Sarah countered, straightening despite the pain it caused. "I've seen the chalice fragments. I've talked to Paddy about their significance. I know Smith's face. And I can identify him without alerting him. This is our one shot."

"She's right," James reluctantly admitted, apologetically glancing at Tom. "Smith's never seen Sarah in a social context. He wouldn't expect her at an auction like this. He'd be looking for cops in tactical gear, not mingling with the guests."

"It's too dangerous," Tom insisted, concern evident in his expression as he stepped closer to Sarah. "We can find another way. There's always another approach."

"There isn't time," Sarah said, softening her voice but not her resolve. "The auction is tomorrow night. We need to move quickly before Smith disappears. Once he's gone, we may never pick up his trail again."

A tense silence fell over the room as Tom and Sarah locked eyes, neither willing to back down. The air between them crackled with professional disagreement and something more personal. Finally, Riley cleared her throat.

"What if she had backup?" Riley suggested, tapping her pen against the tablet. "Someone inside with her, someone Smith definitely wouldn't recognize."

"Who did you have in mind?" Tom asked skeptically, still not breaking eye contact with Sarah.

Riley smiled. "Well, what about you?" Riley told Tom, "You spent most of your career doing undercover, and you can keep an eye on the chief. Your file says you were among the best before taking the superintendent position."

"It could work," James said thoughtfully, warming to the idea. "Two people inside, we maintain surveillance from outside. A tactical team ready to move at your signal."

Tom still looked unconvinced, running a hand through his hair. "And how do you propose to get invitations to this extremely exclusive event? I doubt they're selling tickets at the corner shop."

Riley's smile widened as she pulled up another image on her tablet—an email containing two digital invitations to the Devereux Estate House Exclusive Antiquities Auction, complete with ornate letterhead and QR verification codes.

"I may have already taken the liberty of... acquiring these," she said, a hint of mischief in her voice, her fingers dancing across the screen. "For Mr. Adam Blackwood and his wife Eve, who are private collectors from London with a particular interest in Celtic artifacts. Their credentials are impeccable—if anyone bothers to check the references I've created."

Sarah couldn't help but laugh, even though it made her side ache. "Riley Brennan, I had no idea you could have such creative problem-solving. Adam and Eve? Really? Subtle."

"I have hidden depths," Riley replied with a modest shrug, though her eyes sparkled with pride. "The invitations will scan properly at the door—I ensured that. And I've already started building digital footprints for both identities, in case anyone checks. Bank accounts, social media, and even a small but impressive collection history. By tomorrow, you'll both have existed for years."

"This is incredibly dangerous," Tom said, though Sarah could tell his resolve was weakening. "If Smith recognizes you..."

"He won't expect me," Sarah countered. "As far as he knows, I was nearly killed in an explosion earlier today. The last place he'd expect to see me is at his auction tomorrow night."

Tom ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in the gesture. His blue eyes darkened with concern as he paced the small conference room. "And if I forbid this operation?"

"Then I'll take vacation days and attend as a private citizen," Sarah replied, holding his gaze steadily. She kept her voice level and professional, though the throbbing pain in her side reminded her why Tom's concerns weren't unfounded.

For a moment, Sarah thought Tom might continue to argue. Then, his shoulders slumped slightly in resignation.

"Okay, this is Observe only. We'll need a wire, a panic button, a complete extraction plan, and a full tactical team on standby. They will handle arrests," he said, emphasizing each requirement with a finger tap on the table.

"And if anything seems off—anything at all—we pull out immediately. No heroics."

"Agreed," Sarah said before he could change his mind, trying not to show her relief too openly.

"And you'll need to look the part," Riley added, already typing rapidly on her tablet. "Private collectors at these events dress to impress. I'll arrange appropriate attire for both of you." She glanced up with a mischievous smile.

"Nothing says 'wealthy collector' like the right accessories and a touch of arrogance."

Riley coordinated with the technical team to prepare surveillance equipment, while James arranged for a secure communication channel that Devereux's security measures would not detect. Sarah caught her brother's concerned glances but appreciated that he kept his objections to himself. Still clearly unhappy with the operation but unwilling to stop it, Tom focused on positioning the tactical team for rapid response if needed, marking entry points on the building schematics with precise, deliberate movements.

Tomorrow night, Sarah would walk into a gathering of wealthy criminals and international smugglers, hunting a killer who had already tried to end her life once today. She would be surrounded by people who believed in the power of ancient artifacts to open doorways between worlds while remaining the skeptical center in a swirl of superstition and mythology.

It was, without question, one of the most dangerous operations she had ever planned. But as Sarah settled at her desk to review the files on Devereux Estate House and Lawrence Devereux, she felt a strange sense of calm.

This case had been building toward this confrontation from the moment Jazzy's body washed up on that beach.

Now, finally, they had a chance to end it.

Smith would be at the auction, and the chalice fragments would be there. Whatever powers the chalice might or might not possess, it had already cost three lives. Sarah was determined it wouldn't cost any more, even if that meant putting herself directly in harm's way to protect others.

Chapter 28

"Stop playing with your ear, darling," Tom murmured, his posh accent perfectly calibrated for their wealthy collector cover. "You're making the waitstaff nervous."

Sarah dropped her hand and grabbed champagne instead. "Easy for you to say—you look like you were born in a tuxedo."

"Years of practice," Tom replied smoothly, then added quietly, "You're doing fine. Just remember, we're pretentious art snobs, not nervous cops."

Tom looked around and then leaned down to whisper in her ear. "By the way, you look fabulous in that dress," he winked at her, his cologne mingling with the scent of expensive champagne.

"I can hear you both," Riley's voice crackled through their earpieces, amusement evident. "And for the record, you're nailing the pretentious part."

"Helpful as always, Riley," Sarah whispered, adjusting her evening gown.

"That's what they pay me for. Well, that and preventing you from getting shot at fancy parties."

Devereux House loomed around them, its centuries-old architecture a stunning backdrop for the evening's illicit proceedings. The manor's grand ballroom had been transformed into an auction space, with discreet display pedestals showcasing artifacts that should, by all rights, be in museums or national collections. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the gathering of wealthy collectors, each one potentially connected to the theft they were investigating. Private security personnel in tailored suits maintained a watchful presence along the perimeter, their earpieces less discreet than Sarah's own.

"The chalice fragments should be in the secure viewing room," Tom said, nodding toward a doorway guarded by two particularly imposing men. "According to the catalog, premium items are available for private inspection before bidding."

"Then that's where we need to be," Sarah decided, subtly scanning the room for any familiar faces who might compromise their cover. "You lead the way," she said to Tom, adjusting her posture to minimize the pain in her side as they prepared to navigate through the crowd of Ireland's elite criminal collectors.

They made their way across the ballroom, Sarah adopting the entitled air of wealth that she'd observed in legitimate auction houses during past investigations. Tom looked the part of a confident billionaire with remarkable ease. He had the mannerisms down perfectly, spoke nonchalantly to people with just the right balance of interest and dismissal, and even convinced a couple in Armani evening wear that they had met before at a gallery opening in Geneva—a complete fabrication that they eagerly accepted.

"Invitation, please." The guard's voice was flat and professional. Tom produced Riley's digital QR code with practiced casualness, allowing the guard to scan it with a tablet. His eyes flickered to Tom's face, then back to the screen, his expression betraying nothing.

"Mr. Blackwood," he acknowledged with a slight nod. "We weren't certain you would attend, given the venue change at such short notice."

"I never miss an opportunity to expand my collection," Tom replied smoothly, placing his hand on the small of Sarah's back. "Especially when the offerings are so unique, and my wife wants to do some shopping."

The guard's expression remained impassive as his gaze shifted to Sarah, assessing her with clinical detachment.

"Mrs. Blackwood."

After a moment of consideration that felt longer than it was, the guard stepped aside and said, "You may proceed. Bidding begins in thirty minutes."

The secure viewing room was smaller than the ballroom but no less opulent. Its dark wood paneling and subdued lighting highlighted the artifacts displayed in glass cases throughout the space. Crystal chandeliers hung low, casting a warm glow that made gold and jewels shimmer enticingly. Approximately a dozen potential buyers circulated through the space, examining the offerings with the discerning eyes of seasoned collectors—people who recognized value and didn't question provenance.

"There," Sarah whispered, inclining her head toward the far corner where a separate display stood isolated from the others, commanding its own space like a shrine to antiquity.

Sarah's pulse quickened as they approached, her years of training barely containing her excitement at finally seeing the artifacts they'd been hunting. Inside a specially designed case, five amber fragments lay arranged in a pattern that suggested their original configuration. Each piece glowed warmly under precisely aimed spotlights, the intricate carvings casting complex shadows against the velvet backdrop, telling stories of ancient Celtic rituals that had been lost to time.

"The Chalice of Danann fragments, there are only five." Tom read from the description card. "Ritual vessel dating to approximately 500 BCE. Starting bid: five million euros per fragment. They're selling them individually."

"Per collector preference," a smooth voice interjected from behind them.

Sarah turned, maintaining her composure despite the shock of recognition. Smith stood before them, impeccably dressed in evening attire. Up close, he appeared older than he had during their brief encounters—lines of

exhaustion etched around his eyes, silver threading through his dark hair at the temples. He gazed at Sarah and smiled.

"Some buyers prefer single fragments for their private collections," Smith continued, offering a practiced smile.

"Others may wish to acquire multiple pieces or even the complete set, should their resources allow."

"And the reserve?" Sarah asked, adopting the tone of a serious buyer, her heart pounding beneath her calm exterior.

"Confidential, of course," Smith replied smoothly. "But I can assure you the artifacts will sell tonight. Our collector has decided it's time for these pieces to find new"

He paused, studying them intently. "guardians." Tom leaned closer to the display, his curiosity entirely genuine. "The craftsmanship is extraordinary," Tom observed. The patterns appear to be pre-Celtic, possibly influenced by earlier Neolithic design traditions."

Smith's attention shifted to Tom, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You have a good eye, Mr...?"

"Blackwood," Tom supplied smoothly. "I have a passion for ancient Celtic pieces."

"You are connected with the college, I believe," Smith said. "Trinity?" Smith added, a flicker of something—recognition? Concern?—crossing his features before his professional mask returned. "You must be familiar with Professor Scott's work, then."

"He was a good friend of mine," Tom said carefully, maintaining his cover as Blackwood. "His loss is deeply felt in academic circles. His research on Celtic metallurgical techniques was groundbreaking."

Sarah watched the exchange with outward calm while her mind raced. Was Smith testing them, probing for weaknesses, or was he playing along? The mention of Professor Scott was deliberate—a subtle way of determining how much they knew about the connection between the murdered professor and the chalice fragments. She kept her expression neutral, though her fingers tightened imperceptibly around her clutch.

"Indeed," Smith agreed, his tone clipped. "A tragic accident in the Howth caves, as I understand it. Nature can be unforgiving to those who venture into her hidden places without proper preparation." His eyes lingered on Tom's face, searching for a reaction.

The thinly veiled reference to the cave murders spilled Sarah's spine. Smith wasn't just testing them; he was sending a warning. Somehow, he recognized her. Her pulse quickened as the tension in the room escalated. She fought the urge to touch the concealed weapon beneath her evening gown.

Before Sarah could respond, a soft chime sounded throughout the room. "Ladies and gentlemen," a voice announced over hidden speakers, "please proceed to the main ballroom. The auction will commence in five minutes."

"Perhaps we'll continue our discussion after the event," Smith said, offering another empty smile that didn't reach his eyes. He reached for Sarah's hand and kissed it. "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Blackwood. I'm sure we'll meet again, if you'll excuse me, duty calls." He straightened up and adjusted his cufflinks.

As he moved away to speak with the security staff, Sarah released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"He knows it's me," she whispered to Tom, her voice trembling slightly.

"Just relax. This is all part of the game," Tom said, taking her hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "There is always that fear in the back of your mind that your cover is blown, but you have to keep it in check." He guided them toward the ballroom, his calm demeanor soothing her frayed nerves. "But he's cautious. He's not certain—otherwise, we'd already be in trouble."

"What do we do now?" Sarah asked, struggling to maintain her composure as they joined the flow of well-dressed attendees moving toward the ballroom.

"Proceed as planned," Tom decided, his voice low and resolute. "We attend the auction, identify other buyers, and gather evidence. The tactical team is standing by. Remember, we need enough to make the connection."

As they rejoined the main gathering, Sarah discreetly activated her concealed communicator, pretending to adjust her earring. "Smith is here. He's running the auction personally. There is no sign of the missing fragment yet."

"Acknowledged," Riley's voice came through her earpiece, slightly distorted but clear enough. "Keep visual contact if possible. Teams are in position around the perimeter. All exits are covered."

The auction began with lesser items—ancient coins and jewelry displayed on velvet trays as the auctioneer's rapid patter filled the room. Sarah forced herself to focus, scanning the crowd for potential threats or anyone behaving suspiciously. She noted several faces she recognized from surveillance photos—wealthy collectors with questionable ethics and murky connections.

Throughout the proceedings, Sarah kept Smith in her peripheral vision. He moved throughout the room, speaking quietly with various attendees and occasionally making notations on a tablet. His demeanor was professional, but she detected an underlying tension in his movements—a hypervigilance that matched hers. Twice, he glanced in their direction, his expression unreadable.

"Lot thirty-four," Devereux announced, his accent precisely balanced between British aristocracy and continental sophistication. "The first of our premier offerings this evening."

The room dimmed as spotlights illuminated a pedestal rising from the center of the stage. Atop it sat one of the amber fragments they had viewed earlier, now rotating slowly on a velvet cushion to display its intricate carvings. Under the spotlights, the amber seemed to glow with an inner light.

"The first fragment of the Chalice of Danann," Devereux continued. "Dating to the pre-Celtic era, approximately 500 BCE. This particular piece formed part of the rim of the original vessel, inscribed with protective sigils associated with ancient Otherworld rituals. We open the bidding at five million euros."

The auction proceeded at a dizzying pace, with bids called out from various corners of the room. Sarah and Tom maintained their cover, with Tom occasionally whispering observations about the artifacts that Sarah pretended to consider before declining to bid. Meanwhile, Sarah continued scanning the room, noting which bidders were interested in the chalice fragments.

By the time the fifth fragment was presented, a pattern had emerged. While most lots had multiple bidders competing vigorously, the chalice fragments each went to different buyers with minimal competition, almost as if the purchases had been arranged in advance. Each winning bidder would nod subtly to Smith before exiting the room with their acquisition.

"Something's not right," Sarah murmured to Tom. "This doesn't feel like a genuine auction. The bids are too controlled."

Tom nodded subtly. "It's theater. The real transactions have already been negotiated. They're dispersing the fragments deliberately."

As the final fragment was about to be presented, Sarah noticed Smith checking his watch more frequently. His earlier poise had given way to barely concealed impatience. Whatever his ultimate plan, it was clearly time-sensitive. He whispered something to a security guard, who immediately left the room.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," Devereux announced, "our final premium offering of the evening. The keystone fragment of the Chalice of Danann."

The pedestal rose again, but Sarah immediately noticed the difference this time. This fragment was more significant than the others; its amber was more profound in color, and the silver setting was more intricate. Even from a distance, something about it seemed to capture and reflect the light in a way that created an illusion of internal movement within the stone. Sarah felt drawn to it in a way she couldn't explain.

"Unlike the previous fragments, which primarily served structural and aesthetic functions in the original vessel, the keystone piece contains the central binding sigil," Devereux explained. "According to ancient texts, this fragment was essential to the chalice's ritual purpose, enabling communion between realms during ceremonial observances."

A ripple of interest moved through the assembled buyers, more genuine than anything Sarah had witnessed during the previous bidding. Whatever game was being played, this piece was clearly the prize. Several attendees leaned forward in their seats, auction paddles at the ready.

"The starting bid for this exceptional artifact is ten million euros," Devereux announced.

Before anyone could respond, the lights throughout the mansion flickered momentarily. In the brief darkness, Sarah felt a change in the atmosphere—a tension that hadn't been present before. When the lights stabilized seconds later, Smith was on stage beside Devereux, speaking urgently into his ear. Smith's hand was inside his jacket, likely gripping a concealed weapon.

Devereux's expression tightened. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, his practiced charm strained, "we appear to be experiencing some technical difficulties. Please enjoy refreshments in the adjacent gallery while our staff resolves the issue."

Sarah touched her earpiece as the crowd began to murmur and move toward the indicated doors. "Riley, something's happening. It's a possible security breach. Do you have eyes on the exterior?"

But there was only interference. "Riley, can you hear me?" Sarah said, discreetly adjusting the device. Her anxiety mounted as static filled her ear.

"We need to move," Tom replied, tension evident in his voice. "We don't want to get caught up in the crossfire. Someone else is making a play. Our comms are being jammed."

Sarah scanned the room, her instincts screaming. Smith had vanished from the stage, and security personnel were moving with newfound urgency, hands hovering near concealed weapons. The crowd, oblivious to the danger, filed slowly toward the refreshment area.

"We need to find Smith," she told Tom. "He'll head for the keystone fragment. That's what this is all about."

They slipped away from the crowd, moving against the flow toward a service door near the stage. Sarah winced as someone jostled her injured side, but adrenaline was already dulling the pain as she pushed through the door into a staff corridor beyond.

The passage was dimly lit and empty, running parallel to the ballroom. Sarah moved quietly, listening for any indication of where Smith might have gone. At the corridor's end, a security guard lay unconscious, his earpiece removed and weapon missing.

"Not Smith's work," Sarah observed, quickly checking that the man was alive. "Our unknown third party, most likely." She pressed two fingers against his neck, feeling a steady pulse beneath her fingertips.

"Look," Tom whispered, pointing to a trail of droplets on the polished floor. "Blood." The crimson trail glistened under the low lighting, still fresh enough to be tracking whoever had left it. They followed the trail to another door, which led to what appeared to be Devereux's private study. Inside, chaos reigned. Furniture had been overturned, and books were scattered across expensive carpeting. The wall safe stood open and empty, its heavy door hanging askew on its hinges.

"Shit," Sarah muttered, carefully stepping around shattered glass. "The auction was a cover. The real prize was never meant to be sold." She scanned the room, noting the specific targets of the search—only certain drawers had been emptied, and certain shelves cleared.

A crash from somewhere above them suggested the confrontation was still ongoing. Sarah drew her weapon, grateful that Riley had insisted on modifying the evening gown to accommodate it. The Glock felt reassuringly solid in her hand, starkly contrasting with the evening's pretense of civility.

"Stay here," she instructed Tom. "Call Riley. Tell her we need tactical inside now. Follow the full breach protocol."

"You are not going alone," Tom protested, gripping her arm. "You're injured, and whoever's up there took out armed security. That wound in your side needs medical attention, not more action."

"I'm not engaging," Sarah promised, meeting his concerned gaze. "Just locating Smith and the fragment. The team can handle the takedown. We need eyes on the situation before tactical storms in blind."

Before Tom could argue further, Sarah slipped from the study and found the nearest staircase. The sounds of conflict grew louder as she ascended to the mansion's upper floor: shouting, breaking glass, and a single gunshot echoed through the old building, making her flinch instinctively.

Sarah moved carefully along the upstairs corridor, passing elaborate bedrooms and sitting areas until she reached a set of double doors at the far end. One door hung awkwardly from a single hinge, and the sounds of struggle emanated from within. She steadied her breathing, ignoring the throbbing pain in her side. Peering carefully around the damaged door, Sarah looked into a private museum of sorts. Display cases lined the walls, filled with artifacts that put the auction offerings to shame—ancient manuscripts, ceremonial daggers, and what appeared to be religious relics from half a dozen cultures. In the center of the room, Smith grappled with a figure in black tactical gear. Both men were bloodied but still fighting fiercely.

The keystone fragment lay on the floor between them, having apparently been dropped. It was a jagged piece of stone with markings that seemed to shift in the dim light.

As Sarah watched, Smith delivered a vicious blow to his opponent's face, creating enough separation to lunge for the fragment. He grabbed it triumphantly, only to cry out as the other man tackled him from behind, sending them both crashing into a display case. Glass shattered around them as they fell to the floor, still struggling for control, their grunts and curses filling the room.

Sarah keyed her communicator. "Tom, upper floor, east wing. Smith is engaged with an unknown assailant. The keystone fragment is in play. Where's tactical?"

"Ninety seconds out, I'm on my way," Tom replied, his voice crackling through the earpiece. "Devereux triggered a security lockdown. They're bypassing it now. Don't do anything stupid, Sarah."

"We don't have ninety seconds," Sarah said, watching Smith finally gain the upper hand. He pinned his attacker with a knee to the chest and reached again for the fragment, his fingers stretching toward the ancient stone. Making a split-second decision, Sarah stepped into the doorway, weapon raised. "Police! Don't move!" Her voice echoed off the high ceiling, commanding and steady despite her racing heart.

Smith froze momentarily, recognition dawning as he looked up. "Chief Inspector O'Malley," he said, his voice strained but controlled. "You continue to surprise me with your persistence." A thin smile crossed his face, never reaching his cold eyes.

The man beneath him took advantage of Smith's distraction, bucking upward with desperate strength. Smith staggered sideways, and his opponent scrambled toward the fragment, leaving a smear of blood on the polished floor.

"Stop!" Sarah commanded, adjusting her aim to cover both men. "Hands where I can see them! Now!" She widened her stance, compensating for the pain in her side.

Neither man complied. Instead, the unknown assailant snatched up the fragment while Smith drew a concealed pistol from his jacket. Sarah faced an impossible choice—both moving and potentially deadly targets, with no backup in sight.

She fired a warning shot that shattered an already damaged display case. "Next one won't miss! Drop your weapons!" Glass rained down, tinkling against the floor like deadly wind chimes.

The assailant hesitated, clutching the fragment while glancing between Smith and Sarah. Smith kept his weapon trained on the other man, apparently calculating odds and angles, his breathing controlled despite the blood staining his once-immaculate suit.

"You don't understand what's at stake," Smith told Sarah, blood trickling from a cut above his eye. "This isn't about money or artifacts. It's about power beyond imagination. It's about fixing all that's wrong with our world." His voice dropped to an almost reverent whisper. "The keystone is merely the beginning."

"I understand your murder," Sarah replied, keeping her weapon steady despite the pain flaring in her side. Blood seeped through her fingers, where she pressed against the wound. "And I'm taking you in for those crimes, whether you understand what's at stake or not."

The standoff might have continued indefinitely without the sudden wail of alarms throughout the mansion. The piercing sound reverberated off marble floors and vaulted ceilings, adding to the chaos. Suddenly, a heavy metal door with a hydraulic hiss closed both entrances to the room, sealing them inside. Sarah turned toward the nearest door, momentarily distracted. She could hear Tom on the other side calling for her, his voice muffled but urgent, pounding against the reinforced barrier.

A gunshot rang out—the deafening noise echoing off the walls like thunderclaps. Sarah spun back, adrenaline surging. Smith had shot the assailant point-blank, the man's body crumpling to the floor in a lifeless heap. Smith now clutched the fragment in his left hand, its surface catching the light in an unnatural way.

He turned the gun on Sarah, his eyes gleaming with triumph. "Do you want to see what this can do?" he said, voice eerily calm as he held up the artifact. "The keystone fragment contains power beyond your comprehension."

"We're both trapped in here," she countered, trying to buy time. "They'll break through soon. There's no way out now."

He smiled—not a friendly gesture but something predatory and knowing. To Sarah's astonishment, Smith stepped behind a huge display case and disappeared from view. Sarah rushed over, weapon still drawn, and looked down to discover an entrance to the stairs hidden beneath the floor. Smith's voice echoed up from the darkness: "Come on, Sarah. I'll show you what we've been fighting for all along."

"Shit," Sarah whispered, weighing her options as Tom's voice grew more desperate behind the sealed door.

Sarah activated her comms. "Tom, if you can hear me, Smith is getting away; there's a set of stairs following," she said. Sarah holstered her weapon and climbed down the steps, wincing at the movement. On a small ledge just inside the passage, there was a flashlight—left deliberately, she suspected, as an invitation to follow.

Chapter 29

Sarah crept down the ancient stone steps, her weapon drawn and flashlight beam cutting through the darkness ahead. The air grew increasingly damp and cold as she descended deeper beneath Devereux House, each breath visible in the chilled atmosphere. Her earpiece crackled softly.

"Sarah, tactical on its way," Tom's voice came through her earpiece, tight with concern. "Wait for backup."

"He's got the Keystone," she whispered back. "I can't let him get away, not after everything. I'm just maintaining visual contact."

She reached the bottom of the stairs and paused, sweeping her light across the space. Ancient wine racks stood empty along the walls, and at the far end, a weathered door hung open, a faint light emanating from beyond it. She realized that Smith had left it open deliberately. He wanted her to follow.

"There's an old wine cellar beneath the east wing. There's a tunnel—I think it might lead to the grounds behind the house," she murmured into her communications,

"Please wait, Sarah," Tom urged. Still, she was already moving forward, drawn by professional determination and something else—a strange pull she couldn't quite articulate.

The tunnel beyond the door stretched into darkness, with simple utility lights strung intermittently along its length. It sloped gently downward, and the floor was damp and slick. She moved carefully, listening for any sound ahead.

Smith's voice echoed back to her, distorted by the tunnel's acoustics. "Come on, Sarah. We don't have much time."

She quickened her pace, keeping close to the wall. The tunnel wasn't part of the original mansion—it was too modern, likely constructed during the mid-20th century. Given Devereux's connections, perhaps it was a Cold War shelter or something more nefarious.

Up ahead of her, she spotted a growing brightness—the tunnel exit. Sarah paused, assessing the situation. "I'm approaching what appears to be the tunnel exit," she whispered into her comms. It is approximately 200 meters northeast of the main house."

Static answered her. The thick stone walls had finally blocked the signal.

"Perfect," she muttered, steeling herself as she approached the exit.

Emerging cautiously, Sarah found herself on a wooded hillside. Through the trees, she could see the pulsing blue lights of emergency vehicles at the mansion, the response to their interrupted auction operation. A light mist had begun to form, drifting between the twisted trunks of ancient oaks.

Movement caught her eye—Smith, his figure barely visible through the trees, beckoning her forward before disappearing deeper into the woods, heading to the cliffs.

The realization sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with the night air. The ritual cave was somewhere below them, accessible through various entrances in the cliffs. Was that Smith's destination?

Sarah followed, keeping to cover where possible, her senses hyper-alert. As she approached the cliff edge, the trees thinned, revealing a narrow path winding along the precipice. Below, nearly three hundred feet down, the ocean crashed against jagged rocks, each wave sending spray high into the air.

Smith stood at a flat outcropping that jutted precariously over the void, the Keystone fragment clutched in his hand. The amber caught what little moonlight penetrated the clouds, giving it an unnatural glow.

"That's far enough," Sarah called, training her weapon on him. "It's over, Smith. Tactical teams have secured the estate. There's nowhere to go."

He turned, revealing a face transformed by anticipation rather than fear. "Chief Inspector O'Malley," he said, his cultured voice carrying easily despite the wind. "Right on time."

"Put the fragment down and step away from the edge," Sarah ordered, moving closer with measured steps.

"I knew you'd follow," Smith continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Not just because you're a dedicated officer, but because you felt it too—the connection. The pull." He held up the Keystone, which seemed to pulse with internal light. "It recognizes you, Sarah. As it recognized your grandfather and his father before him."

"What are you talking about?" Sarah demanded, fearing the answer.

"Your family's legacy," Smith replied. "Why do you think Paddy O'Neil was part of The Circle? The guardians aren't chosen randomly, Sarah. They're selected by the fragments, drawn from bloodlines that have interacted with them for centuries."

Sarah maintained her aim, steady despite the wind that had begun to pick up around them. "Whatever fairy tale you're spinning, it won't change the fact that you killed three people for those fragments."

"Necessary sacrifices," Smith said dismissively.

To Sarah's surprise, Smith tossed his gun over the cliff edge, the weapon disappearing silently into the darkness below. "I want to show you something, Sarah. Something your grandfather never told you about."

Smith stood at the cliff's edge, the Keystone fragment catching light as he gazed at the dark ocean. "Do you know what I did before all this, Sarah?"

"Enlighten me," Sarah replied, weapon steady despite the wind.

"Twenty-three years coordinating refugee camps, famine relief, peace negotiations. I believed in human progress. I thought we were building something better." His voice carried deep weariness. "Rwanda, Somalia, Syria, Myanmar - I watched the same patterns repeat. The powerful prey on the weak. The corrupt steal from the starving. The greedy start wars for profit."

He turned to face her, and Sarah was struck by the profound sadness in his eyes.

"I've seen children die because politicians diverted medical supplies to buy weapons. I've watched warlords execute aid workers while the UN debated resolutions. I've sat across from world leaders who spoke of peace while planning genocide." Smith's grip tightened on the fragment. "After Syria, I finally understood - humanity isn't evolving. We're a failed species."

"So you decided to become a murderer?"

"I decided to find a solution." The fragment pulsed brighter in his hand. "These artifacts aren't just relics, Sarah. They're keys to forces that existed before human civilization. Before greed. Before corruption. Before the endless cycle of suffering we call progress."

Smith stepped closer to the edge. "Jazzy Shaw was young, idealistic. She reminded me of myself at that age. But she couldn't see the bigger picture. She wanted to preserve this broken world."

"And Billy? The Professor?"

"Billy embodied everything wrong with humanity - willing to sell anything for money. The Professor was trapped in academic thinking, too timid to embrace necessary change." Smith's voice grew fervent. "They were symptoms of the disease. The very corruption I'm trying to cure."

He held the fragment above his head, and the air around them seemed to shimmer. "The complete chalice doesn't just open doorways to other realms - it opens doorways to other possibilities. Clean slates. Fresh starts. Entities that understand justice without compromise, order without corruption."

Sarah felt a chill that had nothing to do with the ocean wind. "You're talking about destroying civilization."

"I'm talking about replacing it!" Smith's eyes blazed with messianic fervor. "Look around you, Sarah. Climate change is ignored for profit. Children are starving while billionaires race to space. Wars are fought over resources while we poison the planet. This isn't civilization - it's an elaborate suicide pact."

"And you think ancient entities will do better?"

"I know they will. I've touched the fragments, seen glimpses of what they offer. Perfect order. No greed, no lies, no corruption. Just pure, efficient existence." Smith smiled with terrifying serenity. "It may seem harsh, but sometimes a fever must run its course to cure the infection."

"That's not your choice to make."

"Isn't it?" Smith stepped closer to the precipice. "I've watched humanity choose selfishness over survival, cruelty over compassion. Democracy, capitalism, socialism - every system corrupted by the same fundamental flaw: human nature itself."

He raised the fragment higher, and Sarah swore she could see something stirring in the clouds above. "The entities beyond the veil don't share our weaknesses, Sarah. They can create the perfect world we've proven incapable of building ourselves."

He placed the Keystone ceremoniously on the flat stone surface before him, his movements precise and reverential. For a moment, nothing happened. The fragment sat there, ordinary despite its amber glow.

"That's it?" Sarah asked, unable to hide the relief in her voice. "It's just a stone, Smith."

Smith's eyes remained fixed on the Keystone. "Wait," he commanded softly. "Feel it."

The wind intensified, swirling around them in an unnatural and directed way. Above, the heavy cloud cover began to part, revealing a night sky impossibly crowded with stars. The nearly full moon emerged from behind the clouds, casting a silvery light over the landscape.

Under this celestial illumination, the Keystone's glow intensified, pulsing with a rhythm that matched the waves crashing below—or perhaps, Sarah realized with an unsettling jolt, with her heartbeat.

"The alignment is perfect," Smith said, his voice hushed with awe. "Moon, tides, stars—all as they were when the fragments first came to this world." He extended his hand toward her, palm up, inviting. "Join me, Sarah. With your bloodline and my knowledge, we could control it completely. Open doorways that have been sealed for millennia. Think of what we could learn, what we could become."

Sarah felt a strange double pull—the professional urge to apprehend a murderer conflicting with an inexplicable desire to touch the glowing fragment. Was this what her Grandmother had warned about? The chalice's power to influence, to tempt, to distort judgment?

"Step away from the stone, Smith," she ordered, her voice steadier than she felt. "Now."

His expression hardened. "You still don't understand what's at stake. This isn't about individual crimes or justice. This is about power beyond human comprehension. Power your family has helped guard for generations."

In the distance, Sarah heard voices calling her name—Tom and the tactical team, finally catching up. The sound broke through her momentary fascination with the glowing stone.

"It's over," she repeated, taking a decisive step forward. "The only doorway you're going through leads to a prison cell."

Smith's face contorted with sudden rage. "If I can't have it, no one will!" He lunged for the Keystone, snatching it from the stone surface.

Sarah moved to intercept him, grabbing his arm. The Keystone was caught between them, pressed between their struggling hands. The moment her skin made contact with the amber fragment, a jolt of energy surged through her body—not painful, but overwhelming, like being submerged in an electrical current.

The Keystone's glow intensified blindingly, and with it came a flood of impressions—ancient rituals performed in stone circles, robed figures chanting around a completed chalice, doorways opening to landscapes that couldn't possibly exist on Earth. She saw The Circle as it had been originally formed, recognizing her grandfather as a young man among them, his expression solemn as he accepted his fragment.

Smith felt it, too; she could see it in his widened eyes and parted lips. But where Sarah experienced these visions with cautious wonder, Smith's face reflected naked hunger, a desperate need to possess and control.

"You see?" he gasped. "You see what it offers us?"

Before Sarah could respond, the sky directly above them split with a blinding flash. Lightning—on a night that had shown no signs of a thunderstorm—struck the Keystone with unerring precision. The impact knocked both of them backward, Sarah's fingers still locked around Smith's wrist.

They teetered at the cliff's edge, the force of the lightning strike still reverberating through their bodies. Smith, his eyes wild with the power he'd momentarily touched, twisted violently in a final attempt to wrest the Keystone away.

The sudden movement was too much. The rain-slicked edge of the cliff crumbled beneath their combined weight, and they began to fall.

Chapter 30

Tom reached the edge of the cliff, heart pounding as he peered into the darkness below. The beam of his flashlight caught a glimpse of color against the dark stone—Sarah, lying motionless on a narrow ledge about thirty feet down. Smith was nowhere to be seen.

"I found her!" Tom shouted to the tactical team members rushing up behind him. "She's on a ledge! Get rescue here immediately!"

James broke through the gathering officers, his face ashen when he saw where Tom was pointing. Without hesitation, he began checking the cliff edge for a way down.

"James, wait for the rescue team," Tom ordered, his voice sharp with authority.

"That's my sister. I'm not waiting," James replied, already lowering himself over the edge. "Every minute counts with head injuries."

Tom couldn't argue with that. Instead, he grabbed his radio. "This is Chief Superintendent Bradley, an officer down at the west cliff face. We need air rescue and medical assistance immediately. An officer has fallen approximately thirty feet onto a ledge, unconscious with visible injuries."

"Copy that, Chief Superintendent," came the response. "Air rescue dispatched. ETA twelve minutes."

Twelve minutes. Tom watched as James carefully descended, using natural handholds in the rock face, sending small cascades of loose stone into the darkness below. Sweat beaded on Tom's forehead despite the chill night air. He'd only recently acknowledged his feelings for Sarah, and now he might lose her.

"Careful on that section," Tom called out, directing his flashlight beam to illuminate a particularly treacherous stretch. "The rock looks unstable."

Shawn arrived with two tactical officers, all out of breath from the run from the main house. "Ambulance is on standby at the road access point," he reported. "And I've got the medical kit."

"Pass it down to James once he reaches her," Tom instructed his gaze to never leave the precarious descent.

After what seemed like an eternity, James finally reached the ledge, dropping the last few feet to land in a crouch beside Sarah's still form.

"I'm with her," James called up, his voice echoing against the cliff face. "She's unconscious. Head wound, bleeding heavily. Pulse is weak and rapid." His hands moved professionally over Sarah's body, checking for additional injuries. "Possible fractured ribs and left shoulder dislocation."

"Medical kit coming down," Shawn called, securing the emergency pack to a rope and carefully lowering it to the ledge.

James caught it and immediately tore it open, extracting gauze pads and a pressure bandage. "Get me a backboard and neck brace," he shouted as he worked to stem the bleeding from Sarah's head wound. "We need to immobilize her before moving her."

"Any sign of Smith?" Tom asked, scanning the darkness below the ledge with his flashlight.

James carefully leaned over the edge, directing his own light downward. "Nothing visible from here. If he kept falling, he'd be at the bottom—another two hundred feet down onto the rocks. No way to survive that."

Tom nodded grimly. Despite Smith being a murderer, the thought of such a death was sobering. But his concern right now was entirely for Sarah.

As James worked to stabilize her, Tom noticed something gleaming in Sarah's hand—the Keystone fragment. Its amber surface caught the flashlight beam with an unnatural brilliance.

"She's still holding the Keystone," Tom called down. "Is it secured?"

James glanced at Sarah's hand, which was indeed clutched around the artifact. He gently tried to release her fingers, surprised at how tightly they were locked despite her unconscious state.

"It's like her hand is fused to it," he reported, frowning. "I can't separate them without risking injury."

Tom and Shawn exchanged concerned looks. The fragments had shown strange properties throughout this case, but this was particularly unsettling.

Suddenly, Sarah's body jerked, a gasp escaping her lips as her eyes flew open. They weren't focused—instead, they seemed to be looking at something none of the rest of them could see. Her lips moved, forming words without sound.

"Sarah?" James leaned closer. "Can you hear me?"

Her eyes locked onto his for a brief moment, clarity returning. "James," she whispered. Then her body went limp again, the Keystone finally slipping from her grasp to land with a dull thud on the stone ledge.

James immediately checked her vitals again. "Pulse is stronger," he reported, relief evident in his voice. "But she needs a hospital, now."

The distant thumping of helicopter rotors reached them and grew steadily louder until the aircraft appeared around the headland, its powerful searchlight sweeping the cliff face.

"Down here!" James waved his flashlight in wide arcs, signaling their position.

The helicopter hovered expertly despite the tricky wind conditions around the headland. A rescue paramedic rappelled down to the ledge with practiced efficiency, bringing a specialized stretcher designed for cliff evacuations.

"I'm Conor," the paramedic introduced himself as he knelt beside Sarah. Let's stabilize her for transport." James worked alongside Conor, helping to secure Sarah to the stretcher with neck and head immobilization. "We are flying her to Dublin," Conor replied as he checked Sarah's pupils with a penlight. As they prepared Sarah for evacuation, James spotted the Keystone lying where it had fallen from Sarah's grasp. He hesitated briefly before picking it up, expecting to feel something extraordinary after seeing how it affected Sarah. Instead, it felt like nothing more than a piece of ancient amber, though he noticed it retained an unnatural warmth despite the cool night air.

"What about this?" he asked, holding it up so Tom could see from above. "Secure it as evidence," Tom called down. "We'll sort it out later."

James slipped the Keystone into his pocket, feeling its weight against his thigh. With Sarah secured, Conor signaled to the helicopter crew, and the stretcher was carefully hoisted upward. James climbed alongside to keep it stabilized against the cliff face.

When they finally reached the top, Tom was immediately at Sarah's side, his professional demeanor slipping just enough to reveal his personal concern as he grasped her hand briefly.

"She's in good hands now," Conor assured them as Sarah was loaded into the helicopter. "St. Vincent's has been notified and will have trauma specialists standing by."

"I'm going with her," James stated, already climbing into the helicopter.

Tom nodded, knowing there was no stopping him. "Shawn and I will secure the scene and organize a recovery team for Smith. We'll meet you at the hospital."

As the helicopter lifted off, carrying Sarah and James into the night sky, Tom turned his attention back to the cliff edge. The beam of his flashlight caught something unusual on the rocks where Sarah had been found—a faint, shimmering residue that seemed to evaporate even as he watched, like morning dew under a hot sun. He pulled out his radio again. "This is Bradley. I need Coast Guard search and recovery at the base of West Cliffs as soon as possible. Suspect John Smith is believed to have fallen to full height. Also, forensics is needed to document the ledge where Chief Inspector O'Malley was found."

"Copy that, Chief Superintendent," came the reply. "Coast Guard is already mobilizing. Be advised that sea conditions are deteriorating. Recovery operation may be delayed until morning."

"Let's secure the area for the night," Tom instructed the tactical team. "We need a Full perimeter and floodlights on the cliff face. I want everything documented exactly as we found it."

As the officers moved to carry out his orders, Tom took a moment to collect himself, the events of the past hour catching up to him. Sarah had nearly died tonight. The thought sent a cold fear through him, unlike anything he'd experienced in his career.

Shawn approached, offering a coffee from a thermos. "She's tough," he said quietly. "Toughest I've ever worked with. She'll pull through."

Tom accepted the coffee with a grateful nod. "I know," he said, though the words sounded more hopeful than sure. "But this case has been different from the start. These artifacts, whatever they are..." He trailed off, unsure how to articulate his concerns without sounding irrational.

"We should head to the hospital," Tom said finally. "I want to be there when she wakes up."

Shawn asked carefully, "If she remembers what happened, what should we tell her about Smith?"

Tom considered this. "The truth. He appears to have fallen to his death, and recovery operations are underway. The rest—about the artifacts, the ritual, all of it—that can wait until she's stronger."

As they walked back toward their vehicles, Whatever had happened on that cliff edge was more than a simple struggle and fall.

The Keystone fragment had done something to her, shown her something. And Tom couldn't help but wonder if, even with Smith gone and the fragments separated once more, they were truly safe from whatever power had been awakened.

His phone buzzed with a text from James: *"I'm at the hospital, taking her into surgery. She's stable."*

Chapter 31

In the following days, Sarah found herself lost in a haze, surrounded by a fog of drug-induced delirium. Her dreams were filled with Celtic rituals, robed figures, amber light, and distant voices. Faces drifted in and out of her awareness; some were familiar, while others were mere shadows of strangers. Each face appeared slightly blurred as if suspended between reality and a dream. Among them, one stood out—a man who strikingly resembled Idris Elba; although he was dressed in the stark white attire of a Doctor, his presence was somehow both comforting and mysterious in her fragmented consciousness.

Sarah slowly opened her eyes, squinting against the dimness of the room. The window revealed an inky blackness outside, the last remnants of a hazy blur having dissipated, an unsettling quiet in the air that felt almost tangible. Turning slightly, she noticed Aoife sitting quietly beside her bed, her gaze fixed intently on her phone, fingers dancing across the screen with the practiced ease of her generation. Tom was on the other side, head tilted to the side, dozing, his usually alert features softened by exhaustion.

Barely able to muster the strength, Sarah whispered the word "water." The sound was barely a breath, like autumn leaves rustling against the pavement, but it caught Aoife's attention immediately. "Mum," Aoife put her head on Sarah's shoulder, the weight of her relief palpable. Tom took her hand, his fingers warm against her cool skin. "About time," he said, his voice thick with emotion, he was clearly trying to contain.

Aoife deftly scooped a small piece of ice and brought it to Sarah's lips. As the coolness melted in her mouth, Sarah felt a gentle wash of relief, as though the parched desert within her was finally giving way to life, each drop a tiny miracle against her tongue.

Sarah's thoughts drifted to Liam, her heart aching with maternal worry that cut through the medication fog.

"What about Liam?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, fragile as spun glass. "Don't worry, Mum," Aoife gently reassured her, squeezing her hand. "It was hard on him at first, but Aunt Jenn talked to him. She has a way of explaining things that makes even the scariest stuff seem manageable."

The Doctor and Jenn appeared; although the Doctor was good-looking, with his chiseled jawline and kind eyes, he was not Idris Elba, shattering the last remnants of her morphine-induced fantasy. "You're awake, good," Doctor Williams said, his professional demeanor softened by genuine warmth.

Then Jenn turned to Sarah, her familiar presence a comfort among the sterile surroundings. "We've taken you off the morphine, you have three herniated discs in your lower back, and the swelling around your spinal cord has gone down significantly." She pulled back the blankets with practiced efficiency and asked Sarah to move her toes and feet, watching intently as Sarah complied with effort.

"Good. We'll help you get on your feet and walk a little tomorrow. We'll start physical therapy to build up the muscles in your back, and maybe Dr. Williams here won't have to do surgery," Jenn explained, her medical knowledge evident in the confident way she spoke.

"Dr. Williams continued, "and your head injury will take time, too. You may experience headaches, confusion, blurry vision, and ringing in your ears. It may take a while for the symptoms to clear up," he said as he shone a light in Sarah's eyes, the beam momentarily blinding and uncomfortable as he checked her pupillary response.

"Any questions?" Jenn asked, clipboard poised, ready to address any concerns.

Sarah just shook her head, too overwhelmed by information and fatigue to formulate coherent questions.

"OK, I'll see you in the morning," said Dr. Williams, gently patting her blanket-covered foot before heading toward the door.

"Aoife, could you give us a minute?" Jenn asked, her tone suggesting this wasn't really a request.

"Sure, I'll go call Liam's Mum, let him know you're awake," Aoife said, casting a knowing glance between the adults before slipping out of the room.

As soon as Aoife stepped out, Jenn turned to Sarah; "How ya feeling? Meds still working?" Sarah nodded, sensing the coming storm. "Yup," Sarah replied, noticing the look in Jenn's eye—that familiar fire that preceded her rare but memorable outbursts. Jenn said to her, "Good," her eyes blazing like blue flames. "Are you fuckin' crazy?" she started, her voice rising with each word, Chicago accent thickening with emotion. "I swear if you weren't already in a hospital bed, I'd put you in one myself." Sarah opened her mouth to respond, but Jenn raised her hand, cutting her off. "Oh no, I'm not done yet. First, you go jumping off roofs. Then you choose to run off with Paddy O'Neil, which is a bad idea at any time, and on your own, go off chasing a killer, and then you nearly get yourself blown up. Did you learn your lesson? No, you go off already wounded and almost wind up at the bottom of a cliff half dead." Jenn paused, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her expression a tumultuous blend of frustration and concern, her medical training clearly at war with her personal feelings.

Sarah turned to Tom, hoping for some support or intervention. "Don't look at me; I'm with her on this one," he said, his normally gentle eyes uncharacteristically stern. When Sarah thought Jenn might unleash another wave of reprimands, she surprised her by bending down and wrapping her arms around Sarah in a fierce hug. The warmth of her embrace enveloped her, and Sarah could feel the weight of her worry pressing against her, almost suffocating in its intensity yet somehow comforting in its familiarity. "Don't you ever do anything like this again, do you hear me?" Jenn said, her voice steady but laced with emotion that made her heartache.

Aoife poked her head around the door, her curious face peeking in, eyes wide with a mixture of concern and the slightest hint of amusement. "Are you done yelling at her, Aunt Jenn?"

"Just give me one more minute, hon," Jenn replied, her tone softer now, the edge of her voice gone. Sarah watched as Aoife closed the door, leaving them in a cocoon of tension that hung in the air like static electricity.

"That's another thing you need to consider," Jenn continued, her voice rising with concern, gesturing toward the door where Aoife had just been. "She was so worried sick about you that she refused to leave. I had to watch the poor child sitting there, crying when she thought I wasn't looking. And your son, I had to practically force food into him. The boy has barely eaten or slept in days. You like to think these kids of yours are all grown up, but they're not. They feel everything, and you need to remember that. Every decision you make affects them in ways you can't always see."

"Ok, the message was heard. I'll talk to them," Sarah said, rubbing her temples. She knew Jenn was right—her kids had been through enough trauma without adding more worry to their plates.

"I need to make some calls—your Parent, for one," Tom said as he gently kissed her forehead. His lips lingered there momentarily, warm and reassuring against her skin. "I will be back," he said, squeezing her hand before stepping away. The door closed softly behind him, leaving Sarah alone with her thoughts and the uncomfortable weight of knowing how deeply her children had suffered during her absence.

Chapter 32

Sarah hugged both of her kids tightly, her voice a little weak. "Come here, both of you," she murmured, her hand trembling slightly as she pulled them close, wincing almost imperceptibly at the pressure against her injuries.

"Is it going to hurt?" Liam asked, gently patting her arm. His young face creased with concern beyond his years. "No, just... I need you both with me," Sarah replied, feeling the comforting warmth of her children against her bruised body. The hospital room felt less sterile, less foreign with them beside her.

"Are you okay, Mum?" Liam asked, resting his head on her shoulder. His voice was small against the backdrop of distant hospital sounds.

"I'll be fine; it just takes a little time to heal," Sarah said, a soft glow from the bedside lamp illuminating the worry in her eyes that she had tried so hard to mask. "I'm sorry for making you worry. You two are my everything, you know that? Always have been, always will be."

They nodded, their faces pressed against her. Sarah breathed in the familiar scent of her children's hair, drawing strength from their presence that no painkiller could provide, no Doctor could prescribe.

"The news was saying you should get an award for solving those crimes and that many artifacts would be returned to Ireland," Aoife mentioned, her voice quiet but carrying that observant tone that reminded Sarah so much of herself at seventeen.

"I don't need any of that, and besides, it wasn't just me, I had a ton of help," Sarah said, her gaze softening as she looked at her children, brushing a strand of hair from Aoife's face. "I do this job because it's how I can help, to fight for those who can't fight for themselves. That's reward enough."

"We're proud of you, Mum," Liam said, squeezing her hand with surprising strength.

"Yeah, we are," Aoife added, her mature eyes holding Sarah's gaze steadily. "Even when it scares us half to death."

"Thanks, you two. That's all the award I need," Sarah whispered, her eyelids growing heavy as exhaustion overtook her. The day's events and medications had finally taken their toll.

The three of them gradually drifted to sleep, still holding each other. The rhythmic beeping of the hospital monitors played a gentle lullaby in the background, a mother and her children finding refuge in each other's presence amid the chaos that had brought them there.

Later, Tom walked into Sarah's room to find Jenn standing at the foot of the bed, her phone pointed at the sleeping trio. Sarah, Liam, and Aoife were nestled together, breathing softly and evenly. Their faces were peaceful in repose, starkly contrasting with the day's chaos.

"The next time she risks her life, going at it alone again, I'm showing her this," Jenn said, her voice tight with emotion. "She needs to see how much she has to lose."

"Good idea," Tom nodded, his gaze lingering on Sarah's bruised face. He'd always admired Sarah's dedication, but he knew Jenn was right; Sarah needed to understand the stakes. The job demanded sacrifices, but not at any cost.

Jenn lowered her phone and turned to Tom. "You know, we have known each other since we were kids; she is the closest thing I have to a little sister. We know everything about each other." She smiled faintly, remembering their shared history that stretched back to their days in the Chicago school.

Tom nodded, understanding the depth of their friendship. The bond between them was evident in Jenn's protective stance, even now.

"When Aiden broke her heart, I never thought she would let anyone in again until you," Jenn continued, studying his face carefully. "You make her very happy."

Tom smiled, his eyes returning to Sarah's sleeping form. The steady rise and fall of her chest reassured him.

"She makes me happy, too," he said softly, the simple words carrying the weight of deeper feelings.

"I'll take the kids home," Jenn offered, her expression softening as she looked at the sleeping children. "They need proper rest."

"I'll stay with her," Tom said, settling into the chair beside Sarah's bed. He was prepared to watch over Sarah through the night. He reached for Sarah's hand, his thumb gently brushing across her hand.

Chapter 33

Three weeks later, Sarah stood in her kitchen, the morning light streaming through the windows as she carefully prepared breakfast. Her movements were still measured and cautious—a reminder of healing injuries. The doctors had assured her the pain would eventually fade, though they couldn't pinpoint precisely when the dull ache in her ribs would finally disappear altogether.

Tom entered, carrying a manila folder, and watched her with undisguised concern. "You know I can do that," he offered, reaching for the spatula. "Here, you can have this instead," Tom said, his voice gentle but firm.

"What is it?" Sarah replied, taking the folder while reluctantly surrendering cooking duties. She winced slightly as she shifted her weight to lean against the counter.

"It's the final report; I thought you'd want to look it over," he said, seamlessly taking over the breakfast preparation with practiced ease.

The Coast Guard recovered Smith's body two weeks after the fall. DNA confirmed it was him, ending any lingering doubts about his fate. Seven of the eight chalice fragments have been secured and transferred to the National Museum for safekeeping. They're keeping them separated, as recommended by the archaeological team. The seventh is with Paddy, and he will not give it up—the official ending to a case that had been anything but official.

"Something smells good," Aoife said, entering the kitchen with Liam close behind. The kids had barely left Sarah's side since she'd returned home, their usual teenage independence temporarily set aside in favor of family closeness. Aoife's watchful eyes constantly assessed her mother's condition, though she tried to be subtle about it.

After breakfast, as Tom did the dishes, Sarah sat on the back porch, nursing a cup of tea and watching birds flit between the trees. Aoife joined her, settling into the adjacent chair. "How are you feeling today?" she asked, tucking her legs beneath her.

"Better," Sarah replied, appreciating her daughter's concern without wanting to dwell on her injuries.

"Mum, you told us about what happened on the cliffs, but never said what you think about it. Do you believe in the mystical stuff?" Aoife asked, her curiosity evident in her intense gaze.

The visions that had flooded her mind when she touched the Keystone—ancient rituals, her ancestors, doors opening between worlds—had faded like a half-remembered dream in the weeks since. She'd dismissed them as hallucinations brought on by trauma and adrenaline, yet something lingered, a certainty that defied her rational mind. Sometimes, the images would return startlingly at night, only to dissolve with the morning light.

"I guess I'm still skeptical; there are some things in this world that I can't explain, but I believe there is an explanation for them," Sarah said, choosing her words carefully. "What about you? What do you believe?"

Sarah asked, genuinely curious about her daughter's perspective.

"I think there are mysteries out there, and just because we don't understand them doesn't make them not real," she said with a wisdom that sometimes surprised Sarah, reminding her that Aoife was no longer a child.

"Well, then, you and Paddy have a lot to talk about; he has enough tales to keep you wondering for a lifetime," Sarah said with a smile, reaching out to squeeze her daughter's hand.

Later that evening, Sarah's house buzzed with conversation and laughter. The warm kitchen filled with delicious aromas as Moria and Sarah's Grandma moved in, practicing harmony while putting the finishing touches on a traditional family dinner. Paddy sat in the worn leather corner armchair, holding court like the family patriarch he was, regaling everyone with colorful stories of his youth that Sarah suspected were only partially exaggerated. However, she'd never challenge him directly on the details. Aoife sat cross-legged on the floor near him, completely captivated by tales of ancient Celtic mysteries and local legends. Sean had somehow transitioned to an official family member, helping set the table and joining in the good-natured teasing as if he'd been part of their gatherings for years. Amid it all, Colin and Samantha had announced their upcoming marriage, prompting celebratory toasts and a fresh round of stories about young love from the older generation. Tom came up behind Sarah and wrapped his arms around her waist, his warmth comforting against the evening chill that had settled in the kitchen.

"I could get used to this," he murmured against her ear, his voice carrying a note of genuine wonder.

"I hope so," Sarah replied, leaning back into his embrace. "Have you never had proper family dinners?"

"My family dinners were TV dinners in front of the television while my Da fell asleep on the sofa," he admitted with a slight shrug. "Not exactly the heartwarming scene you've got going here."

"Well, you have a lot to get used to," she said, turning slightly to meet his eyes. "Just wait until we start playing cards and my brothers get into a fight. Frank still accuses James of cheating at poker from a Christmas match fifteen years ago."

"Sounds wonderful," Tom said with a smile that reached his eyes, and Sarah could tell he meant it.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges, cases, and mysteries to solve. The criminal underworld of Dublin wouldn't pause for her happiness. But tonight, at this moment, Sarah O'Malley was precisely where she belonged—surrounded by the beautiful chaos of family, with the promise of something new blossoming beside her.

