

Prologue

Thursday, 10.30 p.m.

The sea wind cut through her coat as she hurried along in the icy darkness. She pulled the shiny black fabric around her, trying to shut out the cold. The pavement was narrow, uneven, and as she drew level with the little harbour, the wind whipped her pale hair into her face. She was exposed here; there was no protection.

Her stomach felt hollow, churning with fear. He'd texted her directions, telling her where to get off the DART; to walk down into the village and take the second right, to keep going to the park. It would be too late for walkers by the time she got there. When she was inside the entrance she needed to turn right and follow the path to the end, to the narrow overgrown track that curled around the headland.

They could meet there, where they wouldn't be seen from the road.

Shivering, she ran the instructions through her head as she hurried on, wishing she'd worn jeans instead of a skirt. Wishing that she'd never opened the first email on Monday; wishing none of this had ever happened. She'd thought she could fix it, that she wouldn't have to tell him, but as she'd lain tossing and



turning in bed unable to sleep, she'd realised she had to. She had no choice.

Lauren pulled at her fringe, at the place where it parted, smoothing it, tucking the stray strands of heavily highlighted hair behind her frozen ear; her hand went to her button earring, twisting it. The image of her trying on the new underwear was imprinted on her memory like one of those horror films that stayed with you, no matter how much you tried to forget. How had they got a camera into her room? How much more film of her was there? Her stomach contracted like she was going to vomit. She'd ordered the black lace bra and thong online, remembered her delight as she'd opened the plain brown cardboard box in her room, thrilled it had arrived in time for their next meeting. She'd pulled the curtains and slipped off her sweater and jeans to try everything on. Lace and mesh and leather. She'd known immediately how much he'd like it, how the bra and pants showed off her narrow waist and full breasts. And she'd crashed out on the narrow single bed laughing, imagining his face when she pulled off her sweater. She'd leaned over to hit the playlist on her phone, filling her tiny room with seductive music.

And it had all been captured on camera like the worst amateur porn.

He'd told her never to call, just to text their special number, but she'd been desperate. When he'd finally called back he'd been quite short with her, told he loved her but to calm down, like she was overreacting. But then he'd texted her back arranging to meet – and she'd known that he really did care; he must have been just as shocked as she was. She'd been sick with anxiety for days. Someone had been watching her and



now they wanted money, wanted her to pay to stop them from putting the images online.

Lauren felt her stomach drop. How long had they been filming her? Whoever it was had sent her stills of her after a shower, getting dressed. Was he on video somewhere too? He'd only been to her room once but she knew that must be what he was thinking. That was what made this problem even more catastrophic. Tugging at her fringe, smoothing it flat, tucking it anxiously behind her ear, she increased her pace, tried to focus on the huge ships anchored out at sea in the blackness that was Dublin Bay. One looked like it was about eight storeys high, lights gleaming from the back like a tower block. What dramas did they have on board? She bet it was nothing close to what went on here, on shore. Out at sea the mist was even thicker than inland; it sat heavy and cold, far colder than she'd expected, much colder than in the centre of town.

Her head down, she kept walking. He'd said it was only about fifteen minutes but it felt longer. Thank goodness it was a Thursday night. The village had been quiet, and now that she was leaving it behind her there was nobody about, only the odd passing car, headlights picking her out like a target in the darkness. The houses were huge here, lights glowing warm behind solid walls and gates. She was relieved he'd told her to come to meet him; it showed he understood how important this was. Part of her had been dreading him saying that he'd come out to see her. How many times had he let her down, saying he'd call over but never arriving? How many nights had she sat and waited for him, make-up and hair perfect, and he hadn't even texted to explain?

She couldn't risk that now.



She needed help with this, needed him to sort it out for her. There was no time.

Whoever had the video had said they would post it to Facebook in seven days unless she found €1000. She was a college student, she didn't even have a job, where was she going to get that sort of money? Maybe that proved that they did know about him, knew that he had easy access to that amount of cash. Lauren couldn't take the risk of the tapes being broadcast to the Internet. She shrivelled inside at the thought. She knew he loved her, that if things were different they could be together, but his family . . . She couldn't let his reputation be damaged, couldn't let the press tear him apart, she loved him too much. But she couldn't become the laughing stock of college either – if it got into the papers her parents would find out. She felt bile burn the back of her throat. Life was different in Longford on the farm, they'd never understand. It was all so complicated. She didn't understand why someone would want to ruin her life like this – ruin everything.

The vodka she'd had before she'd left had been to calm her nerves, but now it was churning in her stomach as she walked quickly on through the darkness. The street lamps became fewer and fewer as she got further out of the village. She couldn't run in case someone saw her, she needed to be invisible.

He'd sort it out, she knew he'd help her, she just knew he would.

The car passed again, slowing as it neared her, but Lauren was too preoccupied to notice.



Chapter 1

Friday, 8.15 a.m.

‘Have you seen this?’

Detective Garda Cathy Connolly slammed the letter onto Detective Inspector Dawson O’Rourke’s desk. Behind her his office door ricocheted off the wall and slammed closed with the force of her arrival. She didn’t notice; she was too busy glaring at him, her blue eyes blazing. Still wearing his heavy navy wool coat, he turned and looked speculatively at the dent that the handle had made in the cream wall.

‘Has anyone ever pointed out that you’re supposed to knock when you enter a superior officer’s office?’ His soft border accent was calming in most circumstances. But not this morning.

Her dark curls a riot of temper, Cathy pulled an unruly strand away from her face, hardly pausing for breath. Her hair was still damp from her shower after the gym where she’d beaten her roundhouse kick personal best. She’d been feeling good. Then she’d come in to the station to be met by Thirsty, who had presented her, wordlessly, with the printout that she’d just thumped onto O’Rourke’s desk.

‘Did you know? And not tell me?’

He shouldered off his coat and hung it on the back of the door before sitting down. Picking up the printout, he scanned it quickly. She put her hands on the edge of the desk and leaned over it, lips pursed. He opened his mouth to answer but she didn't let him.

'How could you? How could you not tell me? Really?'

Standing up straight and crossing her arms, Cathy turned her back on him and looked out of the window that filled almost the entire end wall of his office, trying to control her fury. She knew she wasn't doing a great job of that, but at least she hadn't hit anybody. Yet. It had been just as well that it had been Thirsty who had handed the news to her. Dun Laoghaire's Scenes of Crimes Officer had more years in the job than she did on the planet; his nickname was an ironic twist on his renouncement of alcohol. His vice was cigarettes, and as Cathy kept telling him, they'd be the death of him; she could hear it in his chest every time he spoke. They'd come a long way together and she knew he looked out for her. And she'd known something was wrong from the moment he'd met her at the top of the stairs and she'd seen the tension in his face.

Uncrossing her arms, she shoved her hands into the pockets of her camouflage combats and focused on her breathing, on trying to keep calm.

She didn't know if she was more angry or upset. *After everything she and O'Rourke had been through, how could he? He must have known; how could he not tell her?*

She'd thought they had a thing – she didn't know what it was, but they had a special relationship. She'd taken a bullet for him back in the day, and he'd been there for her the previous year, after the bomb blast that had almost claimed her life. He'd

pulled out all the stops when her best friend Sarah Jane had gone missing a few months before. They had history and he hadn't told her. Hadn't given one iota of a hint.

Did he not care at all? Cathy didn't know which was worse. The news, or him not telling her. His voice cut through her thoughts.

'I didn't know.' Dawson O'Rourke cleared his throat. 'I only found out about ten minutes ago when I walked in the front door.'

She turned to look at him, disbelief written all over her face. 'Really? And Niamh? She didn't know either?'

'Come on, Cat, she might be your sister-in-law but she's the Assistant Commissioner too. She's been working night and day trying to negotiate a pay deal and prevent an all-out strike – the Garda Representative Association might call it blue flu, but we all know the score. The entire country having no police force even for ten minutes is a bit more catastrophic than you not getting your promotion.'

Cathy narrowed her eyes. 'That depends on your point of view really, doesn't it?'

'Sit down will you, you're making me nervous standing up.'

Arching her eyebrows, she pulled the guest chair out from in front of his desk like a belligerent teenager. And like a belligerent teenager, she sat and immediately leaned back until it tipped precariously on its back legs. O'Rourke looked at her witheringly.

'If that chair falls over, Cat Connolly, and you injure your wrist trying to break your fall, you're going to have a lot of explaining to do to McIntyre. When's that fight?'

'Middle of April.' Cathy abruptly set the chair straight.

He was right. The Boss, Niall McIntyre, her friend and coach, would kill her if she injured herself. As a result of the explosion



she'd been off the kick-boxing competition circuit for a year. Now she was fit again and they were putting everything they had into getting her ready for the next National Championships. She was going to win back her title and she was going to wipe the floor with her rival, Jordan Paige.

'That's better. Now let's look at the promotion list properly, shall we?'

O'Rourke flipped open his laptop and pulled up the members' portal on the Garda website, running his eye down the list to 'Forensic Profiler'. It was a new position, listed last after other roles and ranks: Sergeant Sub-Aqua, Warrant Officer, Dog Handler, Community Liaison. It was the first time An Garda Síochána had created the position, mainly through lobbying from Cathy and her report on their last case. Uncovering a trans-European criminal empire had been an added bonus to finding her best friend alive, despite getting shot at twice during the process.

And everyone reckoned that the job was made for Cat Connolly. Very few applicants had her specific training in forensic psychology, her experience. She'd got a first in every single assessment she'd handed in for her Master's. The final piece, due in May, would give her the formal certificate in Forensic Psychology, but her tutors were confident it was a foregone conclusion, had written her a glowing recommendation. She'd ploughed through ahead of most of her classmates, knowing her time wouldn't be her own when she was back in the unit and fully operational.

'So who got it? Who's the wonder boy?' Cathy didn't even try to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, pulled her necklace from the neck of her black sweater, running the Tiffany dog tag



along its silver bead chain as she waited for him to answer. She couldn't look at him.

O'Rourke stared at the name on the list for a long moment. Running his hand over his chin, smoothly shaven today, he took his time replying.

'Well?' Cathy stared at him suspiciously. At times like this his broken nose and military buzz cut made him look seriously shifty, but he couldn't hide anything from her; after all these years she could read him too well. 'What are you not telling me? One of the lads said he was from Donegal. Why have I never heard of him if he's gone and got my fecking job? Has he trained with the Met or something?'

'You've done that.'

'I know, but . . . What?' She could tell from O'Rourke's face that something was wrong.

'He's a sergeant. He was stationed on the border.'

'So he's got a rank on me.' She looked at him; she could almost feel her mouth turning down at the corners. Glum, that was the word.

O'Rourke glanced at her. 'He's in his thirties.'

'So he's got a Master's or a PhD, has he?'

O'Rourke shrugged. 'Maybe.' He hesitated. 'He's the Taoiseach's nephew.'

'What?' Cathy's reaction was explosive. 'Holy fecking God, what sort of state do we live in? Are you *serious*?' She pursed her lips. Niamh, her sister-in-law, was one of the most vehement and public voices against 'jobs for the boys', so this decision must have been made at a higher level, deliberately keeping her out. At least that meant that she hadn't been keeping it from Cathy. And



Cathy knew Niamh would be as furious as she was. 'I hope he's going to be fecking good at his job . . .' She trailed off, scowling.

'Or he'll have you to deal with?' As if he'd read her thoughts, O'Rourke continued, 'He'll have me and Niamh breathing down his neck too, so let's hope he does know what he's doing, shall we?'

'Jesus, what do you have to do to get on in this country? How many times do you have to put your life on the line before someone notices you?'

'I don't think almost getting killed is exactly something I'd shout about. What's that Oscar Wilde line about losing handbags?'

'It's parents, and it's careless to lose two.'

A knock on O'Rourke's office door interrupted her before she could say more, and Jamie Fanning stuck his blond head around the door, his fringe flopping into his eyes.

'Alpha Foxtrot One's here for you.'

Cathy turned to O'Rourke in question. His face was grim. 'Hit-and-run in Ulverton Road this morning, opposite Our Lady's Manor. Starsky and Hutch attended. Traffic reckon there are skid marks that indicate that it wasn't an accident. I need you to accompany Starsky to talk to the family. I have to go into the Park for a meeting but Frank will get the incident room set up.'

'At least I'm useful for something.' Cathy slid her chair back abruptly. 'While you're up at the Phoenix Park, *at headquarters*, you might enquire about the promotion procedure for decorated members?' She glared at him, then turned to Fanning. 'Starsky downstairs?'

'I'll let him know you're on the way,' Fanning said, looking at Cathy for another second as if he was about to say something, and



then vanishing as quickly as he'd appeared. He had the best intentions, Cathy was sure, but he'd been at the sharp end of her tongue more than once and she could tell from the look on his face that she wasn't hiding her feelings well. No doubt news of the promotions list had circulated around the entire station by now.

O'Rourke pursed his lips before continuing, 'The hit-and-run victim is Tom Quinn, father owns that radio station, Life Talk . . .'

Cathy interrupted, frowning, 'And his mother owns a portfolio of companies, one of which is one of the biggest recruitment companies in Europe. She's well known for being a ruthless businesswoman, has won loads of awards.'

He didn't rise to her bait. 'Quite right. And the press will be all over this one when they find out who it is, so make sure you cross all the t's. Traffic have closed the road, they're waiting for the collision investigators to start the forensic analysis and to survey the location.'

'Of course.' Cathy didn't know why he thought she'd treat this one any differently from any other case, be any less than thorough, but he was obviously tense about something more than the promotions list. 'The CCTV at the petrol station should have picked him up on his way home if he was in one of the pubs in Dalkey – if we're lucky that'll give us a time frame. It might have picked up the vehicle involved too.'

'I'll get Frank on to it while you're out. We'll get the tapes from any buses that went down Ulverton Road too, their on-board cameras pick up everything outside as well. They're like mobile CCTV units.'

'I think there's another camera at the other end of the road, in Sandycove, at the Spar?'

O'Rourke nodded curtly, his mind obviously on the next problem. Cathy stood up and headed for the door. As she reached it, she turned to him.

'Make the most of me while you can. The minute I get back I'm putting in an application for the Emergency Response Unit. Reckon the Taoiseach's got any nephews who can cut it out in the wild?'

She only caught a flash of O'Rourke's face as she let the door fall closed behind her. He thought she was joking.