

# Crossing Lives

ELAINE NOLAN

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ISBN-10: **1546635572**

ISBN-13: **978-1546635574**

A *40 From Now* Publication

They say great stories only happen to those who can tell them, and the telling is sublime.

What makes this a can't-put-it-down, must-read story, is the way Nolan handles the subject matter. Few of the evil deeds done in the world are more evil than those depicted – all while a tantalizing web of suspense is expertly woven for the reader. And when even some of the "good guys" become suspect, a reader is hooked until the end.

In short, this was great read.

Tom Smith  
The Merry Jaynz  
[www.themerryjaynz.com](http://www.themerryjaynz.com)

Crossing Lives is a fun read. Once the storyline started to unfold I looked forward to continuing to read it more and more. Elaine does a great job of describing the characters and this story has all the elements of a great crime drama: Love, murder, suspense, and so on. It's literally like a movie trapped inside a book

Jon Ross  
[www.jonrossmusician.com](http://www.jonrossmusician.com)

Just when the story came to a natural end the third act began.  
Then right about as it was going to get bad, it got worse.  
Then came the twist. Then the other twist.  
That's my kind of book.

Carlos Castillo  
Captain Schwilly  
[www.schwillyfamilymusicians.com](http://www.schwillyfamilymusicians.com)

Revenge is a confession of pain.

- Latin Proverb -

No trait is more justified  
than revenge in the right time and place.

- Meir Kahane -

# Chapter I

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Jackson Logue found the place where he died. Not a gruesome death, not this time. Just a good old-fashioned shoot out by that point, but the circumstances leading up to it would prove harrowing, especially considering what he was now running away from.

He skimmed through the rest of the script. It wasn't often he accepted a part without first reading it, or at the very least getting a detailed outline of the story, but Alex's enthusiasm for this project won him over, and the story itself sounded intriguing.

"Why do I always get the characters who die?" he asked Alex, a long-time friend. They'd worked together on film projects before, creating a strong friendship and bond that had lasted the test of time in such a fickle industry, despite their diverse backgrounds.

"But you do it so well," Alex shot back, a tongue-in-cheek reply Jackson expected.

"I'm starting to feel stereotyped," he said.

"Look at it this way; you get to escape early if it turns bad."

"That is true," Jackson answered, giving his trademark and award-winning smile that sent most women into a screaming swoon. Not just the women, it had to be said.

Both men sat back as the producer, Adam Lambert, called everyone to order, focusing everyone's attention for the first read through, but at least no dramatics were required for this. Jackson didn't think he had it in him to make any effort greater than the reading required. Jet lag hit Jackson and he stifled back a yawn at the early start, well, early for him.

Back-to-back flights, a Trans-American followed by a Trans-Atlantic, left him tired and ill prepared for this pre-production meeting. Still, as he skimmed the pages, speed-reading his way through it, it solidified his instincts this project would be a worthy distraction, and he needed the diversion right now. It would take his mind off the tragedy he left behind in California, and give him space to deal with it in his own time. Ireland, Alex promised, would take his mind off anything but until Jackson got a decent night's sleep he didn't think he'd appreciate the particular charms this place had to offer.

Adam kicked off the read-through, racing through the script to give everyone a sense of the film before jumping into individual scenes and deconstructing them. He gave them his own observations on how he and the director saw the film being shot, but again, both Jackson and Alex worked with Adam before and knew his style, his methods, and more importantly, knew what was expected of them as actors. While Jackson's methodology and approach to acting differed greatly from Alex's,

they both worked well together, when the giddy-bug stayed away. Unfortunately, once a case of the giddies hit the pair, they were the bane of any director's life, uncontrollable little boys running loose and wreaking havoc among the rest of the cast. Even in the American's exhausted state, Adam saw the starting of light-hearted mischief-making bubbling in Jackson as he and Alex had little aside conversations between themselves. Adam now wondered at the wisdom of reuniting the pair.

"I think that's enough on the production side," Adam brought the morning session to a close. It was only a few hours in, but he knew energy levels would sag, and interest would wane, and wander, with the wandering being the most dangerous bit of all. That led to the dark side and all sorts of opportunities for devising and engineering pranks. "We'll take a short break for lunch, but when we come back Garda Inspector Brendan Barnes of An Garda Siochána will go through the technical aspects of the roles," he added, indicating the burly man seated at the end of the room and behind Jackson and Alex, startling both actors. They hadn't heard the man entering, nor had Adam acknowledged his presence in the room at any time during the morning session. It was yet another sign to Jackson that he needed decent rest; his uncanny ability to sense others in the room failed to warn him of this new arrival. He leaned closer to Alex.

"What's a Garda?" he asked.

“Cop,” came the answer, and Jackson knew Alex claimed to have a brush with the law in his youth. It was only a claim, with good stories told by Alex of a misspent youth that Jackson had trouble believing. Not that he doubted Alex and the possibility of him getting into trouble, but Jackson reckoned a lot of the tales were heavily embellished for a more dramatic regaling and retelling in order to boost his street cred and the hard image he traded on for his career in this industry. And in this game, it was all about the image and the drama.

In comparison, Jackson was deeply grateful most of his illicit transgressions occurred in his youth, and his juvie record forgotten. Otherwise, travelling to such exotic locations as this remote town in Co Clare, Ireland, would have been out of his reach.

The inclusion of the cop didn't surprise or even perturb Jackson. His role in this film would require some technical knowledge, and Jackson was always one to immerse himself fully in whatever role he took on. Beside him, Alex shifted about uneasily, but Jackson knew it was for show, although he reportedly did have a minor brush with the British constabulary only a few months back, again if the tabloids were to be believed. Something about being thrown out of a high class, A-listers club in Soho for bad behaviour. Knowing Alex that could be anything.

The gossip columns alleged it was drunk and disorderly,



or possibly another drug fuelled night of high jinks. Jackson ignored the gossip. He never read those papers, and believed even less when it came to anything where the sentence started with 'allegedly', or ended with, 'or so I heard'. He'd been on the receiving end of such rumour mongering to have learned that particular lesson. Besides, while Alex did have a problem with substance abuse, that was in the past. His last bout of rehab occurred years before, and he'd stayed with Jackson for a few weeks when he left the clinic, clean and sober.

With Jackson, the sobriety continued, where a healthy diet and clean living were the order of the day. If Alex thought the clinic was tough, keeping up with Jackson's meticulous and demanding routine put it to shame, but the payoff for Jackson was a physique worthy of a Greek god, and the adoration of fans worldwide. Not only did he work his body to superhuman limits, but when not engaged in film or philanthropic work he educated himself and read voraciously. His interests were diverse, delving into such disparate topics as philosophy, technology, or the historical origin of society, and expanded the boundaries of his mind as much as his physique challenged the tensile strength of the designer tee shirts he squeezed himself into.

Alex loved him like a brother, and hated him for his self-control, his focus, his drive, and still, they could turn into being little mischievous boys whenever the mood struck. The only

problem was their penchant for trouble struck a lot when they were together, and Jackson taught Alex the value of having good, clean fun, without the need to resort to any chemical help. While the American was the younger of the pair, he seemed to have his life sorted, and his razor-sharp wit and quick mind were capable of coming up with the most outrageous of antics. It made for an interesting friendship and rewarding too.

Jackson was always gracious and charming, to whoever he spoke to, but while he was a 'what you see is what you get' kind of guy, Alex discovered there was a greater depth to the man few ever learned of, and even less given access to. Alex counted himself fortunate to be privy to Jackson's innermost sanctum. Here was a man who'd immersed himself in Zen philosophies, and practised it avidly, but never preached. Again, Alex's time in Jackson's home was a challenging education, but also a positive life altering experience, and possibly the only reason Alex managed to conquer his demons, inspired by his best friend conquering his.

And such demons to overcome. Alex knew if he ever revealed such intimate details, he could kiss his friendship with Jackson goodbye; their bromance would come to an abrupt end. While no heated words would be exchanged, that wasn't Jackson's style, Alex knew he'd be shut out, polite superficial conversation would be the best he would hope for.

Still, while Alex remained ignorant of the details of the recent trauma in Jackson's life, he knew this project would be good for him, would get him out of himself for a little while, and had egged Adam into getting Jackson for the part opposite him. Maybe a little mischief making added into the mix would also help Jackson deal with it. Alex could only hope. He'd never seen the man like this before. Defeat to Jackson was only another lesson along the journey in life, but this was different, this cut him to his soul, and nothing but time was going to heal it.

## Chapter 2

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Jackson, somewhat revived from one of those ridiculously healthy, all natural, American inspired diets that were part of his list of dietary requirements, penned questions he had for the cops, along the margins of his script while he waited for the afternoon session to kick off and for the rest of the cast to saunter back in.

Garda Inspector Barnes wasn't alone when Jackson returned to the function room of the quaint little hotel that would serve as the base of operations while they shot the film in the area, and he guessed the other solid looking man to be another cop. The intense scrutinising stare from both men only strengthened Jackson's assessment. The new guy came forward.

"You're Jackson Logue." It sounded more of a statement than a question.

"Yeah," he confirmed.

"Ray Cunningham, Detective Garda. The wife's a huge fan," he said, extending a hand and giving the actor a powerful handshake, somewhat surprised to find the American had a matching strength.

"Ah, thank you," he answered, giving his trademark head tilt. "I'm humbled when anyone takes my work seriously. Does she have a favourite movie?"

"Oh, the historical one you did here, a few years back,"

Cunningham answered, seeing the grim smile on the actor, knowing he'd been savagely slated by the critics at the time of the film's release for his cringe-worthy attempt at an Irish accent. Personally, Cunningham had no time for this kind of carry on. It was no way to make a decent living, and more disconcertingly, his wife turned into a teen-esque quivering wreck at the mere mention of Logue's name and was now pestering him for a contrived introduction. Failing that, a personalised autograph was going to be the pre-requisite for any semblance of marital harmony in the coming months.

“A challenging role,” Jackson conceded.

“Didn't watch it myself, but you died in that one as well, if I'm not mistaken,” Cunningham said, clearly getting pleasure from causing discomfort to his perceived rival.

“Yeah, stabbed by a ceremonial dagger, in that one.” Such jibes were not new to Jackson, and another hard-learned lesson in this industry; develop a thick skin. That, and the one about not being able to please everyone. He knew where this stemmed from and understood it for what it was, masculine posturing, an attempt to gain the upper hand by negating a potential threat, especially at the mention of a wife. Jealous husbands were always difficult to deal with, but as far as he was concerned, marital difficulties were not his problem, only theirs. So he flashed that disarming smile again, with a calming breath to centre himself in

this subtle confrontation.

“You're one of the consultants on this movie?” he asked, redirecting the conversation.

“Yes, I think Lambert wants me to coach you on immigration policies and procedures.”

Jackson flashed another handsome smile, covering up his displeasure at this arrangement, but he planned to have a quiet word with Adam Lambert later to straighten this out, or get another cop to work with.

The man in question re-convened the afternoon session. It gave the cops the chance to give overviews of the work they did, outlining cases they'd been involved in, heavily editing their stories. They began with the more affable Garda Inspector Barnes, who gave a description of his work in dealing with human trafficking, veering towards his own experiences dealing with child and sex trafficking. He delivered his talk with the dispassion of a man disconnected from the inhumanity of what he dealt with on a daily basis, and Jackson began to second-guess his decision to do this part. He risked a glance at Alex and saw the same question written across his friend's face.

The door to the function room opened, and unlike in the earlier part of the day, this interloper's arrival was announced loudly as the door slammed against its stoppers, the wood bouncing off the objects at the furthest swing of its possible arc.

She stopped short, clearly not expecting the door to swing as freely as it did, and it startled her as much as everyone else in the room.

“Ah, you don't need me to talk about the ins and outs when you can get it from the horse's mouth,” Barnes told them. Adam moved towards the new arrival, embracing her in a loose hug that clearly made her uncomfortable. She pushed her shades up, turning them into an impromptu hairband and keeping her long dark tresses back from her gaunt, angular face. To Jackson, she looked as exhausted as he felt. Adam guided her towards the assembled group.

“Folks, let me introduce the author of the book this project is based on, penned under the name D'Coda North,” he told them. Jackson recognised the name; he'd started reading the book on the flights as preparation for this part. He still hadn't finished it, but it definitely captured his imagination and he found it hard to tear himself away from it.

She was of medium height, just about coming up to Jackson's shoulder, but she'd be almost eye-to-eye with Alex. A slender build, she moved with a grace Jackson recognised as that of someone who knew how to hold their own in a fight, and someone who brooked no nonsense. He leaned back towards Alex.

“Ah man, I hate it when the writers turn up. They're

always like 'no, you're not dying right' or 'that's the wrong accent'."

"To be fair," Alex answered, "your accents are brutal." His north side Dublin accent accentuated and stressed the last word, making it sound 'bah-rue-el', apparently the proper way to pronounce it, according to Alex. "But how can you die wrong? I mean, you're dying... dramatically."

"I know, right? And I die pretty good, don't I?"

"Yeah, well, you do get a lot of practice at it, to be fair."

Jackson stifled a snort of laughter at the jibe.

Ms North, writer of the book that sparked off this film, reached the two cops, and in comparison to her reaction to Adam, she accepted their greetings with the blistering heat of the sun.

"But otherwise known to her friends and colleagues," Garda Inspector Barnes made the proper introduction, "as Detective Garda Claire Ravenwood, Immigration Officer, and undercover investigator with the Garda National Immigration Bureau."

Alex gave Jackson a pained, panicked look, that Jackson recognised and interpreted without difficulty; the hottie writer, dressed in her tight jeans and fitted shirt, clothing that showed her attributes to full and alluring effect, with kick-ass rock-chick heeled boots added into the mix, was also a cop. She sat down beside Detective Garda Cunningham, and he shared a joke with



her, but either it wasn't funny or she was as tired as she looked. Jackson watched the pair, recognising Cunningham's body language for what it was; he had the hots for this woman cop. The duplicitous and contradictory nature of the man annoyed Jackson; to act in a hostile manner towards him because his wife liked him, but to behave in such a fashion with one of his colleagues. She however, seemed not to share the same feelings towards him.

“You hung-over?” he heard Cunningham say as he leaned in to her.

“Not yet,” she answered, but shifted away from him. The body language couldn't be clearer, but the cop either failed to recognise it or, as Jackson suspected, completely ignored it, and edged closer again. Oh, you had to love double standards, he mused.

“Now, when you say not yet?” he persisted.

“I'm sorry Garda, this is pertinent to your inquiries, eh, how?” she shot back, and Jackson bit his bottom lip to keep from laughing, but she caught him, and he found her stare inscrutable. He sighed, once again questioning the wisdom of taking this gig. Even the option of getting her to coach him instead of Cunningham didn't appeal to him.

# Chapter 3

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He sat in the bar lounge late that evening, sipping on his coffee as he reviewed his notes from a session with Garda Inspector Barnes. Adam had been most understanding and sympathetic and the other cop was more than open to the suggestion, and more pleasant to deal with. The evening session, a one-on-one, proved both educational and a little terrifying, with Barnes probably revealing a little more than he should, but it was all helping Jackson build a picture of the character he would soon become. Adam also revealed the effort and trouble it took to get the Gardaí on board with this, for them to provide advice on what the Garda National Immigration Bureau did. That part Jackson found fascinating, and all part of the research into a new part, fleshing out the character and getting into their psyche, striving to understand what motivated them, drove them to the actions they carried out. While it was true most of the parts he took on died in some tragic way, he always willingly took on those roles for that very reason. He was attracted to the tragedy, to the hidden depths of the soul the character plunged to. They were difficult parts to play, but the challenge drove him, enticed him, teased him.

The writer cop entered the bar, and he got a sense she'd taken in everything about the lounge in the single sweeping glance, briefly lingering on him then on Barnes seated at the other

end of the room, before she herself headed to the bar. She picked an empty spot away from other patrons, but it still didn't deter others from approaching her and Jackson marvelled at the stupidity of people and their complete inability to read others. Ravenwood wanted to be left alone. She couldn't have made it more obvious if she'd added a sign to that effect, with flashing neon, or perhaps it was the allure of having strangers, all attached to this exotic and exciting activity. It wasn't every day a film crew stopped by.

Ravenwood ordered a drink, a Guinness, he overheard from his seat, and the bar woman placed the large glass, only three quarters full of swirling muddy looking liquid on the counter. He himself knew nothing of drinking, not anymore, but he was sure any drink should be filled to the top, and certainly shouldn't be acting in such a kaleidoscopic way. Ravenwood did her best however to ignore the man now standing beside her, towering over her.

"Are you here with this film crew?" he asked her, and she deliberately hesitated before glancing at him.

"I am," she answered, her soft tone surprising Jackson. He'd expected a gruffer voice from her. Yet again, it only proved to him that in spite of hours spent people-watching, studying them, trying to understand what made them do things the way they did, people still continued to surprise him, as did the

unwelcome and ill-fated would-be suitor who continued to attempt his advance.

“Would you be one of the actresses?” he asked.

“No.”

“One of the camera people?”

“No.”

“So what do you do then?”

“I’m a consultant.”

“Oh, a consultant. I’d be one of them meself,” he said, daring to press his luck even further and moved closer to her. Jackson saw her shoulders tense, saw her reflection in the mirror behind the bar, and knew from her expression she was keeping a tight rein on her temper. The man dared to put a hand on her shoulder. “A little thing like yourself wouldn’t know these parts; I’d be a bit of a guide.”

“So what you’re telling me, is you’re a consultant tour guide,” she answered, taking a step back from him, and deftly extricating herself from his touch.

“Yeah, you could say that.” He closed the gap again, and Jackson watched with avid and open fascination. “Can I interest you in a private tour of the area?” he asked, placing his hand at the small of her back.

“Not interested,” she answered, still keeping a soft, calm tone the guy obviously mistook for meekness on her part, and a

shyness he could easily encroach upon. It was like watching a bad b-movie, a train wreck waiting to happen, and it unfolded before Jackson's eyes.

“And please remove your hand,” she added.

“Ah, I'm not doing any harm. You don't mind really, do you?”

“Actually, it's unwanted and considered assault, and if you don't remove your hand now, I will remove it for you, and have you arrested.” While she never raised her voice, Jackson heard a hardness in it, and so engrossed in this saga he failed to notice Alex beside him, also watching with interest.

“Ah, what would you want to go and do that for? I'm not doing any harm, and I'm only having a bit of craic with you.” To emphasize the point, his hand slid further along her back. She took another step back, but caught hold of his hand, using a simple wristlock to subdue him and bring him to his knees, her grip firm enough to bring tears to his eyes without dislocating his wrist.

The bar woman placed the now full and dark glass of Guinness on the bar counter in front of Ravenwood.

“Your pint, Garda,” she said for the stricken man's benefit, only adding to the horror of his situation, and the small gathered audience broke into laughter at this turn of events. She let him go with a push, momentarily adding to his pain. He scampered away, not even daring to glare back at her, but left with the sound

of laughter and chuckles ringing in his ears.

"She's all yours," Alex said to Jackson, and she gave the pair another inscrutable stare before turning back to the bar woman and fishing cash from her pocket.

"On the house," the woman told her, but Ravenwood shook her head. "Consider it in lieu of pest control," the woman added and Ravenwood chuckled, graciously accepting the drink. She sat beside Barnes.

"I see the anger management sessions are working," he commented, and she laughed. "I'd heard you were suspended."

"Not quite and not yet. I'm on leave," she answered, taking a long draught from her pint.

"What is going on with you then?"

"I figured you'd know more than I did."

"All I heard was possible disciplinary action pending an investigation."

She nodded.

"For what?" he asked. "Because you wrote that book?"

"Not the writing of it, it's the publishing that's causing the problem."

"That's bollocks, after what you went through. I know you wrote it as a form of therapy, but you didn't put in any explicit case details."

"That doesn't matter, it's a thriller on immigration, and I'm

an immigration officer."

"With such a way with words, you could always switch to becoming a barrister."

"It's one option," she answered with a dry laugh, catching the American continuing to watch her. Barnes noticed as well.

"I think you've got yourself a fan," Barnes teased.

"Two in one night, I'm on a roll," she shot back.

"And there's a case in point, you put an FBI agent in it. We didn't have one of those on the real operation."

"Characters and details were changed to protect the guilty."

"Allegedly guilty," he corrected her.

"I stand corrected."

"At least Logue doesn't have to attempt an Irish accent again," he said, and she laughed again, catching the American once more glancing in her direction.

"Definitely a fan," Barnes told her.

"Yeah, well, he is kind of hot," she answered.

"And here I thought you only had eyes for me."

"What would your wife have to say about that?"

"Oh, believe me, she has plenty to say. Couldn't even mention you'd be here."

"You know I'm not your marriage councillor," she said.

"Yeah, but you're young, smart and ambitious, and we

work together, no wife wants to hear about that.”

“As I’ve told you many times before, officer, that’s your issue, not mine.”

“Maybe you can hook up with that American. He’s about your age, seems smart enough, and it’s time you started to get back out there. It’s time to let go of what happened with Michael.”

“Yes, dad,” she answered smartly. “How’d you know his age?”

“Ah, the daughter’s mad into him. Had to get an autograph for her, but he was nice enough about it.”

“Yeah, that seems to be the general consensus about him, and he’s still hot.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you next time we’re talking.”

“Don’t you dare,” she answered, embarrassed, and Barnes chuckled to himself at seeing the little girly side slipping out. It had been a long time since she’d let her defences down, even a little. No, he mused to himself, he’d like to see her have a bit of fun for a change, and maybe the Yank could be the best thing for her.



## Chapter 4

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"Hi, I'm FBI Special Agent Cole Sanders, mind if I join you?" Jackson asked, knocking her from her reverie. It took her a moment to register who it really was and what he'd said.

"Sure," she answered, moving her papers and the remains of her lunch to the side. "Is this part of this thing you do, this method acting?" she asked, and his solemn expression softened before breaking into a smile that made her catch her breath. For a distraction, she picked at the remains of the carrot cake in a dish, and to her surprise, instead of sitting across from her, he scooted in beside her on the bench.

"Yeah, I like to get into the character's head, become the character, live, walk, and breathe them. If I can become them, it'll be more convincing on screen."

"I've done profiles on people like you, but it wasn't for acting," she shot back. He laughed, showing off a stunning set of perfect dental work, and he loosened his tie, having donned a well cut suit to dress like an FBI agent.

"You're a profiler as well?" he asked.

"Comes with the territory," she answered.

"The undercover stuff?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she guessed Barnes had already begun his campaign of interference to get her love life back on

track.

“Yeah, well, you don't stay undercover, or even alive for long if you can't figure shit out pretty quickly,” she told him. He smiled, liking her forthrightness, something Barnes warned him about, along with the razor sharp sarcasm she'd elevated to an art form.

“I finished the book last night,” he said and leaned closer. “Barnes said it was based on a real case that went bad.” She backed away from him, and he saw her stiffen, her expression growing guarded.

“If you're going to play the part properly, you're missing the word 'allegedly' in that statement, Special Agent.”

Undaunted, he pushed further, something Barnes commented on after the man had bombarded him with a thousand and one questions about the role.

“There was a lot more detail in the book, especially about my character. I'd like to know more about him.”

“Everything you need to know, you've already read.”

“Were you two close?”

“You're a persistent bollocks, aren't you?”

“You're missing the word allegedly,” he shot back, but when she didn't share his humour he let it drop. “You were watching the shoot this morning, how'd we do?”

“Yeah, you were all right. Alex needs to get to grips better

with the terminology," she said and he nodded, but she was unsure if it was an affectation or if he was really agreeing with her. "You've played law enforcement before; you seem to have a decent grasp of the jargon, and how to use it properly."

"All part of preparing for the role. Going undercover can't be much different," he said. She thought about it.

"No, I guess not."

"What were you involved in, why were you undercover? Was it trafficking, like in the book?"

"There really is no 'allegedly' required for to call you a persistent bollocks," she answered back. He gently elbowed her.

"Go on, you can tell me. They made me sign your Official Secrets Act, it's okay to talk to me."

"Sure, when you can produce a signed, sworn statement to that effect."

"You really are one hardass."

"Am I putting you off your lunch?"

"Not in the least." To prove the point, he took a forkful of some fancy salad, and she knew he was one of those faddy, finicky eaters, one of those people who would only put 'natural' and 'organic' foods in his body. His diet and food-style was well documented on all the entertainment sites after a dramatic and severe weight loss for a role. Some people really did suffer for their art, and dangerously so, but it only proved to her how

seriously he took his work. That dedication won him a significant number of accolades, deservedly so, but she wasn't in a position to criticise his methods. Not when she'd applied similar approaches in her own career, when it was called for.

"We'll talk over dinner, this evening," he said.

"Dinner? What, two leaves of lettuce, and a slice of cucumber? Not my idea of fine dining."

"Oh, I'd add in some courgettes and aubergines, go all out, just for you."

"It's a bit more extravagant than I'd be used to."

"Hey, carpe diem, that's my motto."

"Mine is carpe scrotum," she shot back. "Still want to do dinner?"

"Absolutely, I'll just wear a sports cup."

"That's cheating."

"Not if you're going to play dirty."

"According to 'Entertainment Nightly', it's how you like to play it."

"Allegedly, Detective Garda Ravenwood, only allegedly."

He left her on that note, runners looking for him for the next scene lined up, but he was soon replaced by Barnes, also sidling up to her.

"Well?" he asked.

“Well what?” she countered.

“Logue. How'd it go?”

“Gee dad, our first date was... like... awesome.” She affected an American accent, on a par with the real thing, and one of the skills that made her good at her job, but quickly reverted to her natural one. “What the fuck are you playing at?”

“What? He's a smart bloke, well able for you, and not afraid to answer you back. Time to get back on the horse, I'd say.”

# Chapter 5

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Dinner was postponed, and she wasn't disappointed. Not much anyway. The shoot ran over schedule and she grew tired of hanging around and returned to the hotel. Despite not participating much, just on hand to give guidance on techniques and dialogue, she was exhausted. She could only imagine what the cast were feeling, especially when sometimes a scene required a number of retakes. If only life worked that way as well, some things she'd like to reset, some scenes she wished she could scrub from her mind.

While she didn't know how this filming lark worked, the structure seemed illogical. They didn't start at the beginning, or record the scenes in sequential order, but rather jumped about. It was disorientating seeing the sequence of events taken out of context and out of the order in which they'd occurred.

The Department's HR probably had a good case against her. This was a minor breach of the Code of Standards, but as Barnes pointed out, most of the details were changed. They had to be. But the story still had to be written, if for no other reason but to release it, and try to find absolution in the words on the page. Her absolution never came, not when she finished writing it, not when it was published, and certainly not now.

They started with the most harrowing scene, and now she

understood Logue's obsession with getting it right. He was so accurate it frightened her, and as she watched them act it out, she experienced flashbacks to the actual event. Even more harrowing for her, one take was not enough. Heuy Horton, the renowned and celebrated director, was a perfectionist. His myriad of accolades and awards were justified, going by his level of focus and dedication to this film. It almost made Logue's efforts pale in comparison, but it made him a demanding director, expecting the same effort from everyone as he himself gave. It was another reason Logue agreed to the project, but Claire was harder to impress with the director's drive and intensity.

At their initial meeting, she found him overbearing, but his attitude changed upon learning the truth and the history to the tale, and her role as author. He treated her with respect and deference. She was, after all, the expert, the story was hers, all of it, the light-hearted moments with Michael, and the god awful nightmarish events that ended his life, and almost ended hers.

The story behind its release into the world was also a strange one, an epic in its own right, and it still continued to be a saga, with the action threatened by the HR section only the latest twist in this sordid tale.

As with any conclusion to a case, especially where it ended disastrously and tragically, all officers were required to attend counselling, something she'd resisted ardently. She didn't need

anyone, and talking about it was the last thing she wanted to do. Besides, every time she started, she choked up, the words wouldn't come out, but the Chief Medical Officer refused to sign her off as fit for work until she convinced the head shrink she was fine, when she clearly wasn't. Claire always prided herself on being strong, on being able to face anything that came at her, but she couldn't face this, and wouldn't admit to it. It felt like a double defeat.

The counsellor came up with a solution, and a notebook. The answer was simple. If she couldn't talk about it, she could write it. A ridiculous idea Claire dismissed outright, but there was no option, not really. If she wanted to return to duty, she had to either talk about it, or write. Writing was stupid, something she had to do when submitting reports, a chore. Flashbacks to her school days, of domineering and power wielding teachers denigrating her efforts at writing essays, and she had harboured a loathing for the task ever since.

The words came slowly at first, both her aversion to the assignment, and the fear of what it could unleash. It was why she couldn't talk about it, afraid it would break her, and she'd never fit the pieces back together again. She was afraid if she broke, her colleagues, superiors, and the counsellor would think her weak and incapable of doing her job. She was afraid they'd see her as a liability, and no longer of any use. If that were the case then she'd



wish the gunshot wound had done the job properly and ended her life instead of only seriously and life-threateningly wounding her. If she opened up, she'd have to face up to the deaths of those she was unable to save, and admit how broken-hearted she really was.

Michael, Logue's character, wasn't a figment of her imagination, but an immortalisation of her heartache, the man she'd cared deeply for, but never told him, could never find the courage to say it, despite their tryst, and the pair of them thinking they were meeting in secret, when everyone else in the unit knew what was going on.

They were the youngest of the group to be assigned to this prestigious post. She and Michael sat together at the back of the initial briefing session, the introduction to the role of Immigration Officer. Her ability to fit in, do accents, and dare she now say it, to play a role, soon got her assigned to the undercover section, the unit responsible for infiltrating the more serious immigration crimes such as sex and child trafficking.

There she met Detective Garda Brendan Barnes, a no nonsense man with a wicked sense of humour, when he let it loose. She could give back as good as he gave, and it strengthened the bond between them, a prerequisite to working together, especially when he was her back-up when she went under. The arrangement worked well until that ill-fated operation.

That was where she started, in the notebook, tackling it like a report to be written, but the blank pages stared back at her, taunting her, memories flashing in her mind, but her hand refused to make the pen move, to let the ink flow. The more she tried to write, the more it taunted her. It mocked her and to quieten the voices in her head, to dull the pain and torment it inflicted, she resorted to a drink. She promised herself she'd stop at one, but the voices and the pain only grew. In desperation, extremely drunk one night, she snatched the damned notebook from her desk, curled up in a corner of her bedroom and began to write. She finished the second and last bottle of wine in the fridge, before resorting to harder stuff, never opened and unwanted gifts at the time, but now a necessary and welcome lubricant.

She needed the catharsis, although she could've done without the ensuing and debilitating hangover that followed some days later. She hadn't eaten or slept, only drank and wrote, and once started, the words refused to stop flowing until she reached the end. Not the end of the notebook; that she filled in a day before she went in search of other sheets of paper, even resorting to calling Barnes to get her another one, or three, as it turned out. Sorting the story out took almost as long as it took to dry out, but the end justified the means; she'd opened up, she'd released it all, crying all over again as she reread them, fixing details here and there.

She allowed the counsellor to read them, her ability to return to work depended on it, and her fears of how others would react never materialised. Her words would remain confidential, but a friend visiting, checking up on her, picked up the notebooks and read them, enthralled and gripped by the terrifying saga.

An odd throwaway comment pushed this tale in another direction. Change the characters, someone told her, alter the details just enough that the amazing story contained within the pages would remain. Michael's memory would be honoured, and her otherwise unreleased emotions would be acknowledged, and the sacrifices she'd made to keep others safe would be recognised.

A friend of a friend knew a friend who was a publisher, or an editor, or something along those lines. The details got a little hazy after the second connection, a little like that first night of writing, after the second bottle of wine. A publishing contract was quick in coming, most likely to push her into signing the manuscript over before another publishing house offered a better deal. That said, the initial offer was most generous, and Claire just went along with it, while another friend, an experienced solicitor in contract law, took care of the details. To Claire, the effort of writing it exhausted her, and as she did with any case at its conclusion, she mentally filed it away and moved on. This was no different, and she left the publishing thing to those who knew best. She'd no notion of the full extent of what they planned, or

the direction it would go in, or indeed, how big it was going to get.

No one could've predicted how big it was destined to become, and having it promoted as 'a real and gritty portrayal of Irish Immigration' propelled it into mainstream media. That it was penned by an actual immigration 'authority' added to its credibility, and she was advised to come up with a pseudonym. That was when D'Coda North was born, 'd.c. al a coda' picked from the sheet music strewn about in her sister's music school, and meaning 'to return to the start'. That's what she wanted, to restart her life, a do-over.

Now, it was becoming a film, growing beyond all expectations, and causing her a completely different set of problems.

Damned counsellor and her fucking notebook.

## Chapter 6

---

Jackson pressed the phone against his ear, something he never did at home, in his own space, when he had no one around who could overhear. Then, he'd put the caller on speaker to better hear and make out the nuances of the conversation. He didn't need to make out any nuances of this one; it was all too familiar, peppered with hysterical sobs, and accusations of not being there, of abandoning those who needed him the most, at a time when they needed him the most.

He leaned against the cold granite window ledge outside the bar, grateful for a raw food diet. At least the dish he'd left on the table wouldn't go cold, and congeal. He caught glimpses of Claire through the glass, again fending off Cunningham's insidious and subtle advances, but Jackson remembered how she'd reacted to some of the scenes earlier in the day. Remembering that helped to tune out this conversation, having now turned angry and aggressive, and more accusatory.

He let it run its course, something he'd learned to do a long time ago. To interrupt, to argue back only prolonged the agony, and he really wanted to keep this as brief as possible. His chivalrous nature was kicking in at seeing Claire dealing with Cunningham, but damn, Barnes stepped in to save the day and Jackson sighed. The man had also stepped in earlier, had talked to

Claire during one of the takes, the one where he died. It was harrowing for him to play, and if, as Barnes had suggested, it was based on fact, Jackson could only imagine how difficult it was for her to watch it, to relive it.

It was the perfect scene for him right now, he had his own troubles and angst to use as emotional fodder, but as always, it left him drained, emotionally wrung out, and in no way fit to deal with this conversation. And when had he started calling her Claire, not referring to her as Ravenwood, he wondered, his mind taking another detour from the call.

It ended, finally, with the usual promises made to call whenever he had a chance, and that he'd get back home as soon as he could. Not that he'd stick strictly to those promises, not at the moment, and he disconnected to the starting of teary sobs again. He pocketed his phone and dry washed his face with his hands, trying to rub the weariness from his eyes, and caught Claire watching him through the window. She was the one who came to his rescue, stepping outside to find him, but he knew she'd also used him as an escape. So, in a roundabout way, his chivalry remained intact.

"You okay?" she asked, and he nodded. "Girlfriend giving you a hard time?" she added.

"It's not quite like that," he answered, not wanting to go into it, not here in the open. "And how can you be so concerned

about my girlfriend, when you openly flirt with two married men?"

She laughed.

"You need to hone your people-watching skills a hell of a lot more if you've somehow mistaken any of that as flirting. You're a hot celeb, and with me as your consultant, seen hanging around you, there's a risk I'm going to be photographed with you. How am I to know if your girlfriend is going to show up and go all bunny boiler on my arse?"

"You think I'm hot?" he asked, surprised, but it only served to validate the widely regarded misconception about actors and others in the public eye, that they constantly craved such attention.

"You've been burning my ear off over your part," she shot back. She was putting on a brave face for it, but he saw through the cracks in the mask.

"I reckon you could handle yourself in that situation."

"I'd really rather not. It gets messy when there's a Garda involved, and I can't be arsed dealing with all the paperwork."

His phone rang again, and he pulled it from his pocket, sighing when he checked the screen, and silenced the ring, without rejecting the call.

"You're a popular man," she commented. "I'll leave you to it."

“Don't, please. It's not what you think, and it's not a girlfriend, or even an ex. It's... a family thing, and we're dealing with some shit at the moment.”

“We?” she asked and he smirked, guessing she was one wily cop.

“Family,” he answered.

“Tragic?” she asked, and it startled him. Wily cop wasn't even coming close. “Is this part of your profiling?”

She made a face, one he interpreted as 'yeah, possibly', and he folded his arms across his body, making his biceps bulge and strain against his shirt sleeves, giving her the stern expression he'd carried all day on set. If she hadn't known better, she'd have guessed he was the agent he played. That ability to become anyone he chose to be was probably what made him a sought after actor.

“Okay, you work it out; let's see how good you are.”

“And if I'm right?”

“I won't deny anything. Just... not here.” She nodded in agreement, more than happy to get away from the crew, her colleagues, everyone for a while and escape into the wilds.

“Walk or drive?” she asked.

“Walk,” he answered, wanting to stretch his legs after the day he'd had, and she nodded, stepping alongside him, but he stopped again.



“Actually, one condition,” he said. She tensed, her eyes narrowing as though already guessing what was coming. “You have to tell me more about yours.”

She struggled with it, seemed on the verge of renegeing on the whole thing and he gently took hold of her arm, knowing she could easily break his hand, if she wanted to. But he wasn't without few moves himself, and the gym wasn't his only means of keeping fit.

“I've already played him, and shot that harrowing death scene.” While it seemed a standard shoot-out on paper, it was far from it. The actual scene itself was more emotionally traumatic than anything he'd ever played previously. “Nothing you tell me will go any further, nor will anything else that might happen.”

She was sure there was a double meaning, but none of her instincts said he was lying, or attempting to use her, and she finally nodded consent to the arrangement.

They walked in silence, following the pathway to one of the local scenic attractions, a small lake. More like a large pond, she thought, having already taken an early morning jog around the area. It was safer and less intrusive than going to the leisure centre adjacent to, and part of the hotel complex. Despite the late hour of the evening, with the sun low in the sky, the pathway lit up, illuminated by solar powered novelty lamps.

“Okay, give it your best shot,” he challenged her as they

reached the seating area by the lake, and he sat down.

“You're here because you're running away from something, or someone. I'm guessing it involves the person you didn't want to talk to. Your body language while you were standing outside the window said you were uncomfortable with the conversation, but it was also a familiar one, and with someone you know, someone you're close to, and who you wouldn't or couldn't hang up on. When I said it was something tragic, your jawline hardened. You have a telltale sign when you're nervous, but it gets more intense when you're stressed, and that call had you stressed, more so when I called it tragic.” He crossed his arms across his chest again, a classic defensive move when it came to reading people, and he gave her that intense and intimidating stare that worked well on screen, but not on her. She'd already stared down the barrel of a gun, and survived the ensuing shot, so she failed to find Jackson intimidating now.

“I don't have a nervous sign,” he defended himself, and she chuckled.

“You rub your thumb against your middle and index fingers. When you're under pressure, you tap them together instead. Strangely though, you don't do it when the camera's rolling, which means you completely forget what's troubling you and totally become the character.” She rarely told anyone how she read them, or their tells she used against them, but he wasn't a

target or the subject of an investigation.

He turned his gaze out over the lake, a frown creasing his otherwise smooth brow, and she idly wondered if he Botox'd to keep his youthful looks. For a man of her own age he was annoyingly and disgustingly fresher looking.

"I'll have to watch out for that in future," he said, more to himself.

"It's not your only one, just the most noticeable," she teased. "The intensity you put into that scene this afternoon was also telling. You put a lot of feeling and emotion into it, but withdrew back from everyone and back into yourself when it was over. You've invested a lot of yourself into the character, and you're using it to purge your own... problems, losses." He glared at her again. "A loss," she concluded. "Someone very close to you and the person who keeps calling you is also close... a death in the family?" She knew she'd guessed correctly when his shoulders slumped and he returned to staring out across the water. The strong, powerful image he portrayed to the world wilted, and he no longer seemed formidable. He sat forward, his thumb rubbing against his fingers rapidly before he caught himself doing it.

"I have a baby sister, half-sister, well, not such a baby anymore, twenty-two years old."

That was news to her, and not something she'd ever read in all the online blogs and encyclopaedic forums about him.

“Someone once accused her of being my daughter, because of the age difference between us, but my mom had me very young, and her much later in life.”

“You took care of her the most though,” she commented, and he gave her a quizzical look. “Your voice just softened and dropped about an octave talking about her, you care for her very deeply, there’s almost a parental quality to it.”

“I did.”

She caught the past tense.

“She’s the one who died,” she concluded and he nodded, looking away again, and she remained quiet, knowing how he felt and the need for silence.

“As per our agreement, I’ve told you everything. Your turn.”

“That’s nowhere near everything, but it’s a start. Someone that young, it’s either an accident, or an illness,” she listed off, watching carefully for some of his other giveaway signs. “Or suicide,” she finished, and knew she’d hit the mark. “You seem a close family, so I’d guess it’s your mum who keeps calling. You’ve run away from it and left her behind to deal with her grief, on her own.”

“We’ve talked enough about it.” He wanted to end the conversation now, and she waited him out. He looked at her, not pleading, he knew that wouldn’t work on her. “Please?” She sat

back, releasing him from this torment, understanding how it felt, the pressure of someone pushing you to talk about something you didn't want to deal with.

"Your turn," he said again.

"What do you want to know?"

"What was his name?"

She exhaled with deliberate care.

"Michael," she answered.

"Boyfriend? Lover? Colleague?"

"Colleagues first."

"Then lovers, but because of the job neither of you wanted to make it more permanent." It was her turn to be surprised at his accurate assessment. "He was another Immigration cop?"

"Yeah. He was a year ahead of me at Templemore?"

"Where?"

"It's the Garda Training Centre. We both got Detective at the same time."

"You really are a smart arse."

She smirked.

"Is that how he died?" he asked, softening his voice, making it sound soothing, comforting. "Was it that gruesome?"

"Pretty much. In the end, the shot to his head was the kindest thing they did to him."

"You witnessed it?"

“Yep.”

She shut down just as he had at his own grief, but he surprised her as he held his hand out towards her. She took it and he pulled her towards him, pulled her close, and embracing her.

“What do you think you're doing?” she asked, but there was no anger or fear in her voice, only curiosity.

“I don't know about you, but I could do with a hug right about now.”

She didn't answer, but gave in to his embrace, finding it comforting and needed, more than she'd admit to. He kissed her, but she pulled away.

“I'm not Michael,” he whispered, intertwining his fingers in her hair. “And everyone dies, sooner or later.”

“I know that... but...”

He didn't give her a chance to finish it.

## Chapter 7

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“You are with the film crew?” the young waitress asked her, refilling her cup of coffee at breakfast, her accent clearly not from these parts. Eastern European, or further, if Claire had to guess.

“Just a consultant,” Claire answered.

“You are... GNIB?” the girl asked. She sounded wary, but not of the immigration officer she served, more of someone overhearing her. Claire, however, never openly admitted who or what she was. She only made it obvious when she was in full uniform, and she hadn't worn that in a while. Even then, people only ever saw the uniform, never her. Anonymity was assured.

“Why do you ask?” she countered. The good old Garda trademark of answering a question with a question, without giving anything away, came to the fore. It was a habit she couldn't break, nor had any inclination to do so. The kid leaned in.

“My boss here, I overhear, said you and the others are bad for his business. But if you GNIB, you can help?”

“Help? How?”

“He takes my passport, my work permit, my GNIB card.”

Claire schooled her features to a neutral expression, but the mention of a work permit meant she was from somewhere outside of the EU.

“Did he say why he took them?”

“He say for my protection, so I don’t leave him. He does the same to all the others.”

“Others? Here in the hotel?”

The kid shook her head.

“We are all over, we do different job, go where we are told, do what we are told, even if it’s...”

“What?” Her instincts were kicking into overdrive.

“I sometimes have to do things I don’t like, with... men he brings me to.”

Claire took a breath, and a sip of coffee, risking a quick glance around and gave the kid a warm smile. To anyone watching, this would be a chat about the coffee.

“Is there a safe place where we can talk? Later today? And smile, like I just said something funny.”

The kid did as she was told.

“You are GNIB?”

“Yeah, I am. Tell me when and where to meet you.”

“I take a break mid-morning, and I walk to the lake and back.”

“I’ll be waiting there.”

The kid’s smile was warmer, one of relief as she moved to the next table to refill their coffee, while Claire risked another glance about, but not seeing anything out of the ordinary, except



the Irish actor Alex Price stealing glances in her direction.

She smirked to herself at him, at his hard man poses and fanciful tales of his troublesome youth. A quick check into his background revealed a past at odds with this public persona and carefully scripted history. It was as fictitious as the characters he played, coming not from the hard inner-city Dublin streets, but from one of the most affluent suburbs, with as posh an education as one could get, attending the prestigious Belvedere College. Even his inner city accent was an affectation and he used it to his advantage, further enhancing his career and image.

If she needed to prove the point further, she'd made a sudden move towards Alex the previous day, in between scenes, on a dare from Barnes, and the guy jumped, startled and frightened. If he'd had the background he claimed, he would've been ready for a fight, not cowering. The three of them had a good laugh amongst themselves about it after, and Alex had given her a wide berth since. Jackson did ask her about scaring his friend, but she refused to divulge any information, citing it was Garda business, not pretend Garda business.

She waited by the lake. With no exact time for this kid to arrive she brought a book, giving more credence to her claim to be taking time out from the shoots. She'd discovered a long time ago that having something intellectual and philosophical scared away

the lesser highbrow among society from wanting to ask if it was a good read. It was surprising how often it happened, when she sat on her own, in a public place, killing time, only to be approached by some random guy using the book as an opening line. If it was too intellectual, the guys fecked off, not prepared to take on a woman who could think for herself, even worse, could answer back.

Of course, there was the odd exception, the nerdy types who'd read that particular book, and who were feeling brave enough to strike up a conversation. Those she didn't mind, it made for interesting conversation without any expectations their newfound friendship would require further consummation.

This time, it really was to kill time. The book she carried was the latest by her favourite horror writer, so no thinking required, just disengage the brain and suspend belief for a little while, something she found difficult to do. She saw the young girl approaching, and rechecked the recording app on her mobile phone. While the recording wouldn't be accepted in any court as evidence, especially if the person being recorded didn't know anything about it, Claire always recorded conversations and made case notes afterwards; an accurate account of events, should the case go to trial, and a lot of them did. Barnes had been tough on her about it at the start, that meticulous note taking. Cases were thrown out for not having followed correct procedures or

gathered statements and information properly. And with being undercover, taking out a notebook and writing what was happening was one sure fire way to get yourself discovered, and killed.

As the girl approached, she began the recording, the mic on the phone headset not looking out of place as the earbuds dangled from around her neck. The closer the young girl got, the more nervous she seemed, glancing about behind her.

“There’s no one else around,” Claire assured her. “You have a name?”

“Nadiya,” she answered, and Claire waited her out.

“Meduar,” she gave her surname.

“How old are you? If you’ve a work permit you have to be over eighteen.”

“I’m twenty,” she answered, and Claire nodded again, though the girl looked much younger.

“From where?”

“Moldova. He promised a good life here, if we work hard.”

“You said he took your passport and permit. Does he hold onto anything else, anything official?”

“I have no other papers; he keeps everything, including monies for working, monies he gets from...”

“Other services he gets you to do?” Claire asked and

Nadiya nodded. "Sex?" The girl nodded again.

"Yes, I thought it would only happen one time, but his friends, he say they like me, they ask for me, and he brings me."

"You said 'we'. There are others? Here, like you?"

Nadiya began to fidget nervously, and Claire recognised the signs of the girl second guessing her actions. The more information she could get out of her now would negate the need to meet with the girl again. Nadiya looked around again, and Claire knew she was scared, a trait she saw all too often in these situations.

"Can you tell me his name?"

"I only know his name here."

"And what is it?" Claire pushed.

"Senid Majnaric. But there is another man, Senid is afraid of him and he tells Senid what to do."

"Do you know his name?" Claire asked, but Nadiya shook her head. "Ok, and when these other things happen, is it here or are you taken somewhere else?"

"They take me somewhere else."

"Can you tell me where?"

"There is an old farm, but not a farm now. We sleep and eat there, when we don't work here. I see others, other men on the farm, but not near us."

"And how many of you are there?"

“Now, there are only seven of us. Some girls he takes away, but some new girls he brings. We move where he brings us.” She started to cry and Claire put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“You’re doing great,” she said in a soothing tone. “Is there anything else you can tell me, like where to find this old farm?” She kept her composure as the girl shook her head. “He took my little sister away yesterday. She is only sixteen, too young for what he wants her to do.”

“And her name?”

“Dunya.”

“Did she travel with you?”

Nadiya nodded.

“He... the other man, he brought her with him, on a holiday visa.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Three years.”

“Dunya as well?”

Nadiya nodded again, and Claire frowned. It made the child only thirteen when she was brought here.

“Please, you have to understand,” Nadiya began to plead her case, yet another stage in this process of getting help, to try justifying their actions, trying to explain how they got themselves into such a bad and often dangerous situation. Yet, this was

exactly what these unscrupulous people used against them in the first place, to manipulate and control the vulnerable. "It was a bad place, where we lived. Soldiers came and took everything, and what they couldn't take, they destroy. Senid, he offers a way to be safe. After soldiers take my mother and father away, I wanted only to protect Danya."

Claire nodded, this was all too familiar for her, a story she'd heard many times, by so many people, and mostly women with children to protect, or young girls like Nadiya.

"Would you be prepared to make a statement?" Claire asked.

"What is... statement?"

"It's where we write down everything you've told me."

"Will he find out? Will the other man find out?"

"We'll do everything we can to protect you."

"We?"

"There are other GNIB Gardaí here, and they will want to talk with you. Are you okay with that?"

Nadiya thought on it, visibly shaking.

"You can find my sister, you can save her?"

"We'll do everything we can," Claire answered, keeping the doubt out of her voice.

"I will talk with them."

"Good girl. Now, you should probably get back before

you're missed, but I will talk with you soon, I promise."

Nadiya nodded and left, and Claire fished her phone from her pocket, halting the recording, checking the mic had picked up everything, and it had.

She sat back and took a breath. She was on administrative leave, she wasn't on active duty, but she couldn't sit back and do nothing. She needed to talk to Barnes, play the recording, and take it from there.

She headed back towards the hotel; her long strides meant she caught up enough to see Nadiya ahead of her, Jackson and Alex walking with her. They must've returned from shooting early and their paths crossed, she surmised, but as Claire was coming to realise, when those two got together, mayhem ensued.

Alex noticed her following and must've said it to Jackson, for he glanced around, flashing her a quick smile before returning to chatting up the waitress. It was a good thing Claire wasn't the jealous type, she smirked, allowing herself to think back on what had happened after his first kiss. She didn't linger on it, well, not much. As she watched the trio returning to the hotel, she saw Nadiya stiffen, then scurry away inside, and Claire looked about to see what had frightened the girl, finding the source, two men deep in conversation. She herself stopped short and stared at the men, oblivious to Jackson watching her, then to the men in question.

Of the men, one was unknown to her, but she'd seen him around the hotel, acting like a manager, and had wondered if he was Senid Majnaric, but the second man was unmistakable, and she recognised him. It was hard to forget when it was the face behind the gun that almost killed her.

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