

Chapter 1

The thief had been hiding in our house for nearly a week before anyone realized he was there. Oh, there'd been small signs, of course, if we'd known what we were looking at. A missing flashlight, food that didn't stretch as far as expected, sweaters and jeans of Mícheál's that disappeared for a day or two before turning up dirty in the wash. Small, careful thefts that looked more like carelessness than what they actually were. That, coupled with the fact that he'd chosen as his hiding place a spot no one but family should have known about, kept him safe from detection much longer than even he probably expected.

It was only because we'd returned home just after midnight that we noticed the light in a window on the top floor. The night was overcast and moonless, and the light shone out of the dark bulk of Aill Tearmann like a dim beacon. Mícheál switched off the headlights and braked the Range Rover to a stop on the crest of the hill, studying the window as the light grew dimmer and brighter by turns.

“Someone's in the house.”

“Are you sure it's not your dad?” I ducked my head a little lower to look at the huge family home. It was five stories, and sat with its back against the steep slope of the cliff behind it. The front of each story was set back ten feet from the one below it, so the whole looked like a stairway for giants. The kitchen occupied a separate,

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small rectangular building to the left, and to the right, attached by walkways at the second, third, and fourth stories, was a round tower, its top floor a full two stories above the top of the house to give its upper room a clear view of the ocean on the other side of the cliff. There were no other lights.

“My father wouldn’t be using a torch,” my husband pointed out. “And I can’t imagine why he would be on the top floor at midnight.”

I glanced at him sidelong. The light from the dashboard played over the strong, masculine lines of his handsome face but revealed little of what he was thinking.

“So what do you intend to do?”

He frowned thoughtfully before shutting off the engine. “First, we have to get down there without letting whoever that is know we’re coming.”

Shifting into neutral, he took his foot off the brake and let us roll down the hill. The pop and crunch of gravel under the tires was loud inside the silent, closed car. The vehicle picked up speed and rolled across the bottom of the bowl-shaped hollow leading up to the house. It lost momentum and rolled to a stop within a hundred yards of the front door.

“We’ll have to walk from here.” He switched off the ignition. The dash light went out, turning my spouse’s solid form into darkness and shadows. Reaching for the

dome light, he switched it to the off position. He opened his door and stepped out onto the gravel, turning back to duck his head and look in at me.

“Are you coming, or would you rather wait here?”

“Are you kidding?” I popped my door open.

“Don’t slam it,” he warned in a hiss, following his own orders by carefully pushing his door shut. I followed suit. A cold breeze off the ocean competed with the knowledge some stranger was sneaking around in our home to send tingles crawling across my skin.

The light in the window had disappeared. Mícheál paused, watching, until it reappeared in the next window over.

“He’s searching the rooms.” He instinctively kept his voice low even though we both knew the intruder couldn’t hear us. “Come on.”

I wasn’t exactly dressed for creeping through the dark. We’d just come back from celebrating our fourth wedding anniversary with dinner and a show, and I was wearing impractical high heels and a tight skirt. I wobbled precariously across the gravel to the grassy verge, stepped out of the shoes, and bent carefully to pick them up. There was no telling what I might step on out here, but it was bound to be less damaging than falling and breaking my ankle.

The grass was cool beneath my feet. Mícheál caught my hand and led me toward an enclosed walkway between the house and the kitchen. The kitchen windows were pitch black—Máire, our housekeeper, had long since gone home for the night.

The air held the chill of an Irish spring. The strong breeze off the Atlantic tugged at my hair and easily found its way under my clothes, making me envious of Mícheál in his wool suit. We entered the walkway through a door close to the house, escaping the wind, then entered the house through the side door, which as far as I knew had never been locked in recent memory.

The air was warmer, and smelled of furniture polish and wood smoke. Mícheál paused, listening, while our eyes adjusted to the denser darkness. Ahead of us was the parlor, curtained and empty, while to our left, along a passage where coats could be hung, was the dining room. There were quiet popping noises from that direction.

Still holding my hand, Mícheál led me up the passage. The dining room was faintly lit by the dim, sullen glow of a dying fire on the ornate hearth. Mícheál gave the room a quick glance before leading me past the heavy oak dining table and chairs, content that there was no one lurking in the shadows.

Double sliding doors, always open, led to the great hall, a cavernous two-story room with a grand staircase and galleries on the upper level. The polished marble floor

gleamed softly. The great hall was comparatively brighter due to the long ranks of tall windows flanking the front doors.

There was no place here an accomplice could easily hide. We mounted the broad staircase at the back of the room, following its right wing up to the gallery and the entrance to the library.

The hearth in the library also held the glowing embers of a fire. I suspected Séamas and Aunt Liz probably had been up until quite recently. We passed silently across the carpeted floor, through the adjoining study, and out into the back hall, which was lit only with a tiny nightlight. I looked back at the study, where one of the house phones sat on the desk.

“We really ought to call the police,” I whispered.

“I’ll get Séamas up.” Mícheál gave my hand a squeeze. “We’ll be all right.”

We climbed the stairs close to the back wall, where the treads were less likely to creak. At the third floor landing, he pointed me toward our bedroom door.

“Wait there,” he whispered, his mouth so close to my ear that his breath caused the small hairs beside it to stir.

Frowning, I did as he instructed. This went against everything I’d ever been taught about dealing with intruders. He crossed the floor, freezing when a

misplaced step caused a board to pop underfoot. After a few seconds he moved forward, opened his father's door, and slid inside.

The air seemed chillier. I hovered indecisively by our door, shoes in hand, and considered changing clothes. Before I could make up my mind, Mícheál was back in the hallway. Séamas followed in hastily donned slacks and sweater, his feet bare. Even without his shoes, my father-in-law was a burly six-foot-four. I would have hated to be the thief who suddenly saw him coming out of the dark. The pair passed me without a word and started up the next flight of steps.

My uneasiness grew. They had no way of knowing if the intruder was armed. Suppose whoever it was decided to shoot first and read about it in tomorrow's paper? We should have called the police and let them handle it.

The broad plank floor of the third story hall stretched away in front of me, warming slowly under my bare feet. A small nightlight in a wall socket provided illumination for midnight bathroom visits. Besides the master bedroom and the bedroom Mícheál and I shared, this floor also contained an upper extension of the library, and a sunroom along the front of the house, which Aunt Liz had converted into her own bedroom.

I considered her door for a moment, thinking about getting her up. She would be seriously peeved if something exciting happened and we let her sleep through it. Besides, I really wasn't all that keen on

waiting alone.

I'd just started across the hall to her room when the shouting began upstairs. There was a thud that shook the floor two stories up, followed by a stampede of footsteps. My stomach knotted, and a chill raced across my skin. No shooting, so far, but that didn't mean there wouldn't be.

Aunt Liz's door opened. A dim blue light spilled into the hallway, telling me she'd been up working on her latest novel. She stepped out into the hall, her black curls tousled and her emerald eyes wide as she belted her robe tightly around her slim waist.

"What on earth?" She threw the ceiling a questioning look.

"Mícheál and I spotted a light upstairs when we got here. He and Séamas went to investigate."

She advanced to the foot of the stairs, looking up them.

"Sounds like they've flushed their quarry." She cocked her head. "Hang on. I think they're coming this way. Get ready."

She stepped to one side of the stairs, blending into the shadows in her dark robe. I scooted back out of the way. I had no intention of blocking someone who was likely bigger and heavier than me and would squash me flat on his way by.

Footsteps pounded across the ceiling above us, reaching the top of the stairs. A dark figure descended them at speed, faster than I would ever have attempted them even with the hall fully lighted. As he reached the bottom, Aunt Liz blithely thrust out a leg, hooked the intruder's ankle, and sent him sprawling across the plank floor.

The air left his lungs in a grunt as he slammed to the wooden planks. It must have been sheer willpower that made him shove himself to his feet. Séamas and Mícheál pounded down the stairs in pursuit. Seeing that his flight had been temporarily halted, they spread out to block access to the stairs, apparently content just to keep him from fleeing. He turned to face them, tense, angry, and apprehensive.

“Patty, turn on the light,” Séamas ordered in his deep brogue.

Clutching my shoes to use as a weapon in case the intruder tried anything stupid, I moved sideways along the paneled wall until I reached the switch. The light overhead came on in a glaring flood, gleaming off the polished wood banisters and adding color and definition to the scene.

The intruder was younger than I'd expected, a slightly built fifteen or sixteen, with dark hair that needed shampooing and blue eyes that glared in rapid glances at each of us in turn. He was wearing a pair of Mícheál's

jeans and, I noticed with amusement, a dark gray sweater that belonged to me. The three males were breathing hard after the chase. Mícheál and Séamas studied the young man curiously, while he stared back at them. From the set of his jaw, he was determined not to go down without a fight. Séamas drew his heavy black eyebrows together in a frown of recognition.

“Miles O’Sullivan.”

The young man started, staring at him.

“That’s your name, isn’t it?” Séamas asked.

“What of it?” he challenged.

“I wouldn’t have expected a son of Gerry O’Sullivan to turn thief.”

“Thief!” Miles spat. “You’re the thief!”

Séamas looked him over with a thoughtful expression. “Well now, that’s a pair of my son’s jeans you’re wearing, and my daughter-in-law’s sweater. And you’ve taken a week’s worth of food from my kitchen, if I’m not mistaken.”

The young man flushed, plucking at the gray garment in angry embarrassment. He was at just the right age to feel mortified at being caught wearing a girl’s sweater.

“I had to eat while I searched for my property. And

you're the thief, or you would have given it to us long ago!"

"Perhaps you'd best explain what it is you think I've stolen from you," Séamas replied, his tone cooling considerably.

"Property promised to my great-great-grandfather that never came to him. You're the head of this house now. You should have made sure our property came to us, as his legal heirs."

"You've had a chance to search my house," my father-in-law remarked after a beat. "Have you seen this property anywhere here?"

Miles thrust out his lower lip, looking his age. "No. But that doesn't mean you don't have it hidden away somewhere."

"Your family's not complained of being cheated before, lad. What proof do you have that property has been withheld?"

The young man studied him, suddenly quiet. "Why should I trust you?"

Mícheál shifted with barely concealed impatience. "We can always get the *Gardaí* out here to settle this."

Miles' eyes flashed angrily, his face darkening. "Is that how the high and mighty O'Donnells do things? Will

you be bringing the rubber hoses as well?”

“Hold on, son,” Séamas said sharply. “You’ve accused my family of non-payment of a debt. Do you have proof of this?”

Miles narrowed his eyes. “How do I know you won’t destroy the evidence?”

“Why should I destroy it? If your family is owed money, there’ll be a record of it somewhere.”

Séamas had infinite patience with his horses, but not with youthful malefactors. When the boy continued to hesitate, he frowned and shifted as if to go downstairs.

“Then perhaps we’d best get the police out here. You can lodge your complaint against us with them, and we’ll tell them all about what you’ve been doing here these last few days.”

“No, wait!” Miles took a step forward as if to physically stop him. There was worry in his face, but oddly, I wasn’t sure it was for himself. “You don’t know what he’ll do if he finds out—”

Séamas turned back, taking in the boy’s expression. “He who, son?”

Miles bit his lip, staring at him indecisively. “All right. I’ll get it for you.” He half-turned, shooting Mícheál an unfriendly look, and walked toward the back wall of the

hall, stopping short when he realized Aunt Liz was standing where he wanted to go.

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

She belted her robe a little tighter and stepped aside, crossing the floor to stand beside Séamas. A slight smile of amusement curved her lips. Miles aimed for a spot between the stairs and the bathroom door, reached up to press the corner of the carved lintel, and stepped without hesitation through the secret door when it opened.

We all stared in open-mouthed surprise. We’d known about the door, of course—it led to a passage through the cliff and a small cave overlooking the beach and the ocean. What surprised us was that he knew about it. The secret passages that riddled Aill Tearmann were not public knowledge, since the original owner, Seán O’Donnell, had used them in his smuggling business.

“Should I go with him?” Mícheál asked, throwing his father a questioning look. Séamas shook his head.

“Unless he’s got climbing equipment in there, he’s got nowhere to go. The beach is a fifty foot drop straight down.”

“Well,” Aunt Liz said. “If nobody minds, I believe I’ll go put on something a little more appropriate for company.”

Séamas watched her shapely backside in idle assessment

as she moved off.

I'd wondered, growing up, why my unmarried aunt had never considered herself an old maid. I hadn't known that she and Séamas, second cousins, had fallen in love and nearly married as teenagers. The death of her father, leaving her with both the care of her invalid mother and ownership of the family's estate in Maine, had kept her from following through on their plans.

By the time her mother died, some ten years later, Séamas had already given in to his parents' urgings and married a local girl named Peggy, with whom he had three children. Mícheál, their youngest, was eight when Peggy died of bacterial pneumonia. Two years after his wife's death, Séamas had quietly begun pursuing Aunt Liz again. After twenty years, the two were as settled as an old married couple, even though Aunt Liz consistently refused his offers of marriage. She'd insisted all along on maintaining her own bedroom here, and her own property in Maine.

Miles returned a moment later. He'd brought with him a narrow blue book, leather-bound and quite old. The edge of an envelope poked out of it. The boy hesitated, looking at Séamas with a resentful frown, then held the book out to him.

"It's all in there. The letter, and the entry."

Séamas took the book, considered it for a moment, and crossed the hall to knock on Aunt Liz's door.

“We’ll be in the library.”

“All right,” came her muffled reply.

He turned toward the library, Miles hovering close behind him as if to snatch the book away in case Séamas tried to throw it in the fireplace.

The third-story extension of the library was a cozy, though not entirely closed, square. Most of the books Aunt Liz had collected here in Ireland to research her novels were stored in the tall shelves that lined three of the walls. A grouping of four comfortable tan leather armchairs faced the empty hearth in a rough arc. The fourth side of the room consisted mostly of a broad rock column that housed the fireplaces for the main library and the study downstairs, as well as the smaller fireplace here. Brass and wood railings filled the open space between the right side of the column and the wall, while a tight spiral staircase on the left led down to the main library. The far wall held the door that led from this level to the round tower outside.

The wall switch controlled only the lights in the extension. Miles looked over the railing into the darkness below, while Séamas sat in the farthest chair in the arc. I settled into the chair two down from him, leaving the one between us open for my aunt. Mícheál, his fair hair taking on a deep gold tone in the overhead lighting, stayed near the door, blocking the way out.

Séamas studied the young man in curiosity. “May I ask how you knew about that hidden doorway?”

Miles turned from the railing, shrugging. “I know where all the secret doors are. My great-great-grandfather designed this house. He kept a set of plans for every place he designed.”

Mícheál raised an eyebrow at his father. “He didn’t mark the hidden doors on the set of plans he gave to Seán.”

“Seán knew where they were,” Séamas returned. “I’d like to see those plans sometime.”

He opened the book to withdraw the envelope.

“Don’t lose that spot,” Miles said. “That’s the entry the letter refers to.”

Séamas glanced up at him, pulled the letter from the envelope, and unfolded it.

“Aill Tearmann, May, 1839,” he read. “Dear Peadar: This is to inform you that the items you ordered as part payment for services rendered will be picked up in Venice in early June, and will arrive here aboard the *Grace O’Malley* after she delivers her cargo in Dublin, God willing. When the shipment arrives, I will check it against the items in the blue ledger to be certain they are the correct quality and quantity. I’ll notify you when the *Grace O’Malley* arrives. Seán O’Donnell.”

Séamas glanced up again at Miles.

“Now read the entry,” the boy said.

Aunt Liz entered the room, dressed now in gray wool slacks and a cream sweater. She sat in the chair next to Séamas, giving him a curious look. He handed her the letter before turning to the blue book. His eyebrows drew down slightly as he read.

“Silverware and blue-and-white Chinese porcelain.” He looked up at Miles again. “Son, why would you risk going to jail to search my house for silverware and Chinese porcelain?”

Miles looked back at him in disbelief. “They’re one hundred sixty years old! There are bound to be collectors who would pay quite a bit for them, if they’re in good shape.”

Aunt Liz leaned over the arm of her chair to get a look at the ledger. She reached over to tap something in the margin.

“Séamas, this ship sank.”

The boy stiffened, his eyes widening. “Where does it say that?”

Séamas nodded, studying the page. “Did you see the wavy line in the margin, with the arrow beneath it pointing down?” He looked up at him again, to see if the

boy had noticed it. “That was Seán’s notation for a ship that sank.”

Miles’ expression went dead. He turned away, shoving his hands in his pockets and aiming little kicks at the base of the fireplace. His cheeks turned pink.

“May I see?” I reached a hand out. Séamas handed the book to Aunt Liz, who passed it to me.

“Seán would have gotten replacements for what was lost,” she pointed out, looking at Miles. “Are you sure your family never got the silverware and porcelain?”

“If we had, it would still be in the family somewhere. It’s not.”

The wavy line, which did look something like a sketch of waves on the ocean, was drawn in black ink in the margin of the yellowed paper. A heavy black arrow beneath it illustrated graphically the fate of the *Grace O’Malley*.

Seán O’Donnell had been a meticulous record keeper. Besides the silverware and porcelain next to Peadar O’Sullivan’s name, there were items of carved jade, gold jewelry, gemstones, and other valuables listed, although not in amounts that would fill a sailing ship.

“Wasn’t it common practice to salvage sunken ships?” Mícheál asked, his arms folded across his chest. Miles cocked his head, listening, but didn’t look at him.

“There should be a record of it if it had been.” Séamas pushed himself up from the chair and padded across the room to the spiral stairs.

I stuck my finger in the book to mark my place and closed it, looking at the cover and the binding. In my early role as Séamas’ secretary, I’d had the task of organizing both his training records and the historical records from the family’s centuries-old shipping company. This book hadn’t been among them.

The light downstairs came on. Miles turned from the fireplace to look at us.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

“The office.”

I looked up at him quickly. “This didn’t come from our office.”

“Not *your* office,” he corrected scornfully, with a teenager’s disdain for anyone older than himself. “The one in the cliff.”

I glanced questioningly at Mícheál, who shrugged.

“We don’t know anything about an office in the cliff,” my spouse told him.

Miles’ brows drew together. There was doubt in his face

for the first time. He shifted uncomfortably.

“Well, it’s there. I’ll show you, later.”

“Miles,” Aunt Liz said, her contralto voice gentle, “can you tell us why you need the silverware and the porcelain?”

“I just do, that’s all.” His gaze moved to the vicinity of my knees, moved away, and came back again. I glanced down and found that my skirt was displaying a bit more thigh than I’d thought. I tugged the hemline lower. Miles realized I’d caught him looking and glanced away, turning red.

The sound of bare feet on the metal stairs preceded Séamas’ return. He reclaimed his seat, easing his tall frame onto the soft leather, before setting the large gray book he’d brought with him on his knees and opening it.

“If there was any kind of salvage effort made, it should be recorded here,” he remarked, turning the pages.

Mícheál’s suit coat suddenly landed across my legs. I jumped, breathing in sharply. Apparently I wasn’t the only one who had noticed where Miles had been looking.

“Here it is.” Séamas smoothed a page flat with a large hand. “8 June, 1839. The *Grace O’Malley* sank in a storm off the coast of Italy. All but five of her officers and crew were lost. She was carrying fruit when she sank.” His brow creased in a frown. “Because of the

nature of her cargo, there was no effort made to salvage her. And the cargo manifest doesn't even show the things listed in that ledger.”

“I'll bet if you checked every entry in that ledger against the cargo manifests, you wouldn't find any of those items listed,” Aunt Liz said. “The ledger is probably a record of cargoes he smuggled into Ireland.”

Miles eyed them hopefully. “Do you know exactly where the ship went down? Is there any chance I might be able to bring up my property?”

Séamas shook his head. “I don't see how, unless you're a skilled diver. And have you considered how you'd get there? Italy is a long way from here.” He leaned back, looking at the boy. “Does your mother know where you are?”

Miles dropped his gaze. “No.”

“Maybe you'd better call her. Even if it is after midnight, she'll probably sleep better for knowing you're all right.”

“Can't. No phone.” The boy wouldn't meet his gaze.

Séamas lowered heavy black eyebrows. “I know your father had a phone installed on your farm. It took him months. He finally had to string the line himself before they would hook him up.”

Miles shifted, studying his sneakers. “My mother remarried after my father died. My stepfather had the phone take out a few years ago. Said we didn’t need it.” He looked up at Séamas from under a lock of dirty dark hair, his eyes startlingly blue and his face twisted with some inner misery. “He doesn’t treat her very well. He comes home drunk and beats her, and then he’s always so sorry about it the next morning and swears he’ll never do it again, but the next time he comes home drunk he does it all over again. She’d leave him, but she’s worried she’s got no way to support her and me if she did. That’s why I’ve got to have that money. She could leave him if we had it.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as we all digested his words. Aunt Liz was the first to break it.

“It sounds to me like she really needs your support. Shouldn’t you go home to her in the morning, while we sort things out about the money from here?”

“My stepfather told me not to bother coming back if I ever ran away,” the boy said.

The second silence was even heavier. Miles watched Séamas, who looked back at him expressionlessly. After a moment, Séamas shifted his gaze to his son.

“Take him upstairs and let him pick out a room. And find some linens and blankets for the bed. It’s too late at night to try to settle all this.”

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Mícheál unfolded his arms from across his chest, nodding. He half turned to go back into the hall, but hesitated when Miles made no move to follow. The boy frowned at Séamas, unwilling to let the matter of the money go.

“Get some sleep, lad,” Séamas told him. “We’ll get nothing more done tonight, and in case you haven’t noticed while you’ve been here, we get up early to tend to the horses. We need our sleep.”

Even Miles had to see the sense in that. He nodded, started to turn, and hesitated, looking back at Séamas.

“Thank you,” he said, before following my husband’s lithe, muscular form into the hall.

As they started up the stairs, Mícheál said, “Since you’ve already had a chance to look the rooms over, do you have an idea which one you’d like?”

Séamas stared into the empty fireplace for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Aunt Liz reached out to set a hand on his arm, squeezing it.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I know his stepfather. Keenan Flynn. He just doesn’t seem like the type to treat a woman like that.”

Aunt Liz considered for a few seconds, choosing her words carefully. “Séamas, you can spend your whole life

around someone and never know what they're like when you're not there. And beating your wife is not the type of thing you brag about to your buddies at the local pub."

He looked at her, his green eyes troubled. "Gerry O'Sullivan was my friend. If Shauna really is being hurt, then I owe it to Gerry to do what I can to help her. But—" He closed his eyes, reaching up to cover Aunt Liz's hand with his own. "It's hard to believe."

"I'll tell you what," she said. "In the morning, I'll go to their house while Keenan is likely to be at work and tell her Miles is all right and staying with us. I may be able to tell something from talking with her."

He opened his eyes again. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"If Keenan is beating her, he'd be less likely to feel threatened by a woman visiting her than he would if a man came to visit. In fact, a man visiting her would likely make things worse. And if Patty will come with me, then we'll have the advantage of safety in numbers." She looked him straight in the eye. "Trust me. We'll be fine."

He looked back at her silently for a moment before shifting his gaze to me. "You'll go with her?"

"Yes."

He let his breath out slowly. "Okay. But if you're not

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back within an hour, I swear I'll break the door down looking for you.”

She smiled at him. “I don't doubt you would.”

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