

Chapter 1

Sara Pierson was bone tired; they all were. They had been on the go since the call came in some nineteen hours earlier. Melting into her chair, grateful for the soft cushioning, her eyes traveled the room. The eighteen FBI agents of the Washington D.C. kidnapping task force sat ready. Their bodies sunk deep into chairs and their clothes wrinkled, everyone carried a weariness that was visible. Each was trying hard not to let their eyes close for fear that they would actually fall asleep. Coffee cups were abundant, but curiously full.

She regarded the stack of papers on the table in front of her. The statement she had taken from the nanny at the hospital had been duly transcribed, copied, collated, and stapled. Sara winced reflexively as she viewed the photo of the damage that had been done to the young caregiver's face and upper body. The attack had been brutal, and Sara thought it was due to more than just the fact that the woman had fought back, trying to protect her young charge.

A throat cleared loudly and she looked up. Her boss had come into the room and she hadn't even heard him. *You're slipping. Focus, Pierson*, she thought. All eyes were on Harry Coarsen. Still in his black FBI windbreaker, he took the chair at the head of the table. His eyes locked on hers, and he nodded in his subtle way. She blinked once and silently started handing out the statement.

"Okay, now that we're all here, I'll fill you in on what's been going on. First off, we just got the go-ahead from the British to run this investigation without any interference, for the time being." He stressed the last four words. "Second, with our supervision, local PD and state troopers are manning the road blocks out to a seventy-five mile radius. Third, the van that witnesses reported has been found. The lab boys are poring over it as we speak." Coarsen paused to take a sip from his coffee cup.

"Fourth, the British Embassy has sent over a list of the groups and/or individuals they feel are most likely responsible for the events of yesterday afternoon. Pierson, Connor, Gordon, and Zubaryev, your teams will be responsible for chasing down any leads concerning these groups. Mrs. Anders will have the lists for you on her desk; you can pick them up after we break up here." He sipped again. "Pierson has passed out the nanny's statement; read it. These boys are heavy hitters. And before you ask, there has still been no contact from them. No ransom note, either. Forensics went over the house with their fine-toothed combs. We do have some trace evidence, but nothing very solid. I know you're all tired, but keep in mind that we have a seven-year-old boy out there. Any questions?"

David White, Sara's partner, asked, "Sir, have the parents come up with anything more?"

The image of the parents' faces jumped into Sara's mind. The mother, pale and tearful, trying hard to keep from falling apart; the father, jaw clenched tight against the anger and helplessness, sitting quietly. His arm around his wife's shoulders was comforting and protective at the same time.

"I've got another interview with them in about ten minutes, actually. Pierson, I want you in on that with me. If they come up with anything they've forgotten or missed, I'll get it out to the rest of you. Just remember, the British have managed to piss off a lot of people around the world. Our guys could be anyone. Based on the damage inflicted on the nanny, go with the armed and dangerous protocol. The sooner we catch these people, the sooner we get some sleep. That's it, folks," he finished with a frown on his stubble-covered face.

Sara kept her seat as the room cleared quietly; her mind was already processing, moving forward. David nodded to her as he passed. She knew he would pick up their list. From the first day they'd been tossed together, they'd had some odd manner of silent communication. She waited until Coarsen got out of his chair, then followed. His brain was churning. She could tell that by the way he chewed on his lip. It was a dead giveaway.

Mrs. Anders had provided the parents with tea. Sara had no idea where she'd dug it up. English tea was not a standard beverage in the office cupboards; the mainstays were coffee and more coffee. The parents looked more composed today, she noted, though the bags under puffy eyes told her that sleep had been elusive for them, as well. Her sympathy went out to them; she

knew how she would feel if anyone abducted her niece or nephews. Her musing was cut short as Coarsen began the interview.

"I know this is difficult, Mr. and Mrs. Jeffries, but I need you to tell me about yesterday again, everything that you can recall, no matter how small or insignificant a detail might seem." His voice was soft and coaxing, yet authoritative.

Mrs. Jeffries closed her eyes and started. "We woke up around 5:30, had a bit of breakfast near to 6:00. Anna arrived at around 6:15. I was due to take the desk at the Animal Rescue at 7:00, so I left straight away." Her accent gave away her London upbringing. She definitely had not been raised on the back streets of the city. "The only motorcars on the street belonged to our neighbors. I don't recall seeing anything out of the ordinary, and I do look, believe me."

"Why is that, ma'am?" Sara asked.

"William has been posted in many dangerous parts of the world. On occasion, I've been allowed to go with him. We are well informed on terrorist tactics and what to keep our eyes open for." Her voice held no malice, only weariness.

"Mr. Jeffries, if it's all right with you, I'd like a list of the places you've been posted. Perhaps it could help us narrow our search." Coarsen scribbled a note to himself on the pad of paper pressed against his lap.

"I should be glad to, though I'll only be able to give you the general areas. Some of my posts are still considered Classified by the Crown."

The clipped tones reminded Sara of all the World War II movies her brothers had forced her to watch as a child. The clipped, well-cultured tones always belonged to the officers, while the more common Cockney sounds belonged to the enlisted men that normally got killed off by the end of the film.

"As for my activities that morning, they were the same as Margaret's until Anna arrived. I worked in our home office for an hour or so, then I took a taxi to the consulate and was in my office the entire time until your people called."

"You have no idea who might have taken your son?"

"I have been posted to several hot spots the world over, Mr. Coarsen, from Lebanon to Northern Ireland. The Crown is most unpopular in a great number of places in the world. It could be anyone," Jeffries explained patiently.

"But you haven't received any threats?" Sara pressed.

The cynical half smile appeared unconsciously on his face. "My dear, I have been receiving threats throughout the majority of my career. I take them as they have been intended, with a grain of salt."

"Can you explain that, please. I'm not sure I understand."

"Most of the threats have been made by groups or individuals whom I have brought to the Crown's justice. For the most part, they are ineffectual and blustering."

He couldn't keep the arrogance out of his voice, and it did not go unnoticed by both FBI agents. Coarsen nodded without comment. He chose, instead, to bring the Jeffries up to date on the progress of the investigation as Sara kept an eye on the couple, noting their body language and expressions. The interview concluded a short time later with the Jeffries' announced intention of visiting their nanny in the hospital and then returning to the British Consulate, where they would be staying until their residence was no longer needed as evidence.

"So, Agent Pierson, what's your take on the parents?" Coarsen asked after they had gone.

"Definitely British," she muttered. "Stiff upper lip and showing a strong front in the face of adversity. That aside, there's something they aren't telling us."

"Fact or belief?" he asked curiously.

"Just a gut feeling. Taking threats 'with a grain of salt', as he said – it just doesn't ring true. Mrs. Jeffries bit her lip on that, by the way. I mean physically bit her lip." Sara caught the surprised look on her boss' face.

"I didn't see that one. So, do you think one or both of them could have arranged the abduction?"

She didn't even have to think about her answer. Their grief and shock were evident on their faces and in the way they held themselves. "No. But I do think they know more than they are telling us." She paused to think. "I've noticed that the bio we got on Mr. Jeffries from the British authorities is a little on the light side. He mentioned Northern Ireland, but his bio didn't. It could

be one of those 'classified' postings, or it could be something else." Finished, she sat back in the chair.

"You've been watching old black and white g-men movies again, haven't you?" Coarsen teased, and chuckled when she prickled with irritation.

"Keep that up, Harry, and I'll tell your wife about you sneaking out to the parking lot for a cigarette," she fired back. He laughed softly, in an almost panicked sort of way, and he stopped teasing her instantly.

Blackmail's a bitch, but it works every time, her brain muttered. The thought almost made her smile.

"All right, put your observations down on paper for me, then get with White and do an action plan for your part of the list. Your team has the Irish Catholic factions, by the way. Once your action plan is done, get out of here and get some rest." When she began to protest, he held up a hand. "None of us will be worth a damn if we collapse from exhaustion. Second team will handle it for the next twelve hours or so. Get some rest, and come back ready to work."

She nodded, picking up her coffee and notes. She closed his door and made her way to her office. She was not surprised to find David sitting in her chair, going over the list he'd picked up from Mrs. Anders' desk. The coffee in his cup looked like tar.

"Dave, you know how I feel about my chair," she started.

"Yeah, that's why I sit in it. I gotta give you grief sometime," he shot back, not lifting his head from the file. "In case you don't know, we have the Irish Catholics."

Sara did not miss the disdain in his voice. "Yeah, Harry told me." She pushed him out of her chair and sat down. "You always move my settings. I hate that."

"You have it too far forward," he reasoned.

"You could sit in the other chair."

"Nah, too hard, makes my butt hurt."

She shot him a withering look. "Wanna tell me why you sound like you don't want to talk to the Catholic faction?"

He shook his head. "Nope. So what's next?" he deflected.

Sara considered his answer for a moment and decided to let it go for the time being. She was too tired to deal with it. "Harry wants an action plan on his desk yesterday, and then we go get some sleep, come back rested, and tackle the list."

"Okay, then, let's get started."

They worked out the details and submitted the report to Mrs. Anders, who let them know in no uncertain terms that they were to report back at 6:00 a.m., ready to go. They knew better than to say a word. The office rumor was that Mrs. Anders had taught the Gestapo everything they knew.

Chapter 2

Sara waited in the car, leaving the engine running. She hoped Dave wasn't in the mood for frou-frou coffee; she was too tired to try and wrestle with the flavor of the day. She glanced in the rearview mirror, and for a moment didn't recognize her reflection. The hazel eyes, the dark blonde hair, and the laugh lines were all hers, but she felt like she was looking at a stranger. She looked down at the list of people and places they were to visit, sighing inside her head.

It was 9:30 a.m., and they had already visited three addresses on the list. One was a bad address or the target had moved. The second, a mechanic working for the city fleet, had nothing much he could say except that the mistakes of his past were just that, the past. He couldn't give them the name of one major player in the IRA that might have a reason to take the son of a British diplomat. The third on the list had answered the knock on her door with a baby on her hip. She suggested they try a pub on 56th, but that's all she could do. Even with Dave's intimidating size, she either could not, or would not give any more information.

Dave opened the passenger door and slipped into the car, making it look easier than it was, considering his six-foot frame, two cups of coffee, and a bag of goodies. He handed over her cup of coffee and an apple Danish.

"No cheese today. Some office breakfast cleaned 'em out," he supplied before she could ask.

"Okay, I guess I'll live." She shot a sidelong glance at her partner. His red hair fell just over the top of his ears, and his pale blue eyes were inspecting his own Danish looking for the spot with the most apples. *He's such a creature of habit.* She tore the lid off her coffee and took a tentative sip, finding only the flavor of real black coffee. She did not miss the smile that reached his lips. "Thanks, Dave."

"Don't thank me. I did it for entirely selfish reasons," he answered. "I'm too tired to debate the merits of black coffee versus flavored."

They ate the rest of their morning snack in silence, enjoying the only quiet time they would probably have for a while. The morning update had revealed nothing new on the case. The kidnappers seemed to have disappeared without a trace, not a terribly difficult thing to do in a city the size of Washington. There were too many roads to cover, too many places they could hide.

With a wishful thought for eight full hours of sleep, Sara pulled out of the parking lot and bullied her way into morning traffic. Their next destination took them beyond the urban sprawl, homeless people clamoring for change, and the constant noise, close to the outskirts of the city – green fields and low rolling hills that would lead into Virginia. The two-story buildings that housed the Meadow Hill Retirement Community were brightly painted and surrounded by manicured landscaping, but Sara knew from experience that such places were typically very depressing inside. At the reception desk, they presented their credentials to the nurse on duty. She hardly blinked at them, or at the request to speak to James Patrick Flannon.

"He's not in his room right now. If you go through the double doors at the end of this hall and down the path, you'll find him at the pond. He loves to feed the birds after breakfast." She looked at Sara. "Don't give him any slack; he's an incurable flirt. If he thinks you're encouraging him, we'll have to deal with him all day." There was an amused smile on her face.

Sara nodded and let Dave take the lead through the hall. Her gram had spent her last years in a place like this because Sara's parents had not wanted to care for the old woman. Sara struggled to keep the memories at bay, but they flooded over her, and she was almost surprised when she found herself facing a seventy-year-old man who was tossing crumbs to a mottled flock of birds. She watched him for a moment, listening to him scold the larger birds for pushing the smaller aside for the food. His hair was thin and straight under his workman's cap, and his face was lined with years of wrinkles. With a slight nod to Dave, she took the lead.

"Mr. Flannon?" She removed her credentials from her jacket pocket. His head lifted and he stared at the two curiously. "I'm Agent Pierson, this is Agent White; we're from the FBI. We'd like a word or two with you, if we may."

"FBI is it?" His voice held the lilt of the Irish Republic, not the harsh, hard accent of the North. "Now what would the Feds be wanting with me, broken down old man that I am?"

Sara had to smile at that. "Broken down, huh? Didn't you walk in the St. Patrick's Day parade in New York this year, with the Official IRA delegation?"

"Delegation? Good Lord, lass, what a nice word for what was just a gaggle of thugs trying to relive the old days," he shot back with supreme glee. "Ah, too true though, that was me. Is it a crime these days to march?"

"No, sir. But according to our file on you, you were, shall we say, well connected with the leadership of the official IRA."

"You could say that. My dear sister was married to Timmy O'Bannion, one of the Brigade Staff. Bloody fool that man was," he offered, shaking his white covered head. "Now what is it you be wanting to know?"

"We have reason to believe that there may be an IRA connection to a recent kidnapping, and we thought you might be the man to tell us where we could get confirmation," she answered tactfully.

"Thinking I might do a bit of informing, are ya?" He chuckled. "The Brits took me into custody back in '54, didn't tell them anything. What makes you think I'd turn informer now in me addled old age?"

"We could just pull you in, and let your old friends think you've done just that," Dave answered before Sara could open her mouth. There was a venom in his tone that she'd never heard before.

"You best learn to respect your elders, young man." The teasing glint in Flannon's eyes left quickly, the hard edge to his voice inched in. "You came to me, not the other way 'round. None of the old mates would believe you FBI could turn me. There's nothing you could do to me that the Brits haven't." There was no bitterness in his voice, only reflective sadness. He turned to Sara. "Tell me, are you married, lass?"

The question caught Sara off guard, and it took a moment for it to sink in. "No, sir, I'm not."

"Do you by chance prefer older men?" The teasing tone was back.

"Actually, sir, you aren't my type," she deflected gently.

"'Tis a pity, that is." He jumped back to the subject at hand. "Now, are you thinking it to be the Provos or the official IRA who did this kidnapping?"

"The general thought is the Provos, sir," she said.

"In that case, you'll be wanting to go 'round to Hanlon's pub on 56th. They serve a good pint of Guinness there, and the rumors say they've more than one connection to 'them that wear the mask'," he offered as he tossed more crumbs to the birds.

"Thought you didn't inform," Dave said as he wrote the pub name in his small notebook.

"I didn't. Just offered a thought about where you might get a fine pint." The edge was back in the old man's voice.

Sara got the idea that Flannon didn't like her partner. Right then, she wasn't sure she did, either. With a toss of her head, she motioned for Dave to get the car. He stood in place for a moment, glaring at her, then walked away.

"I would apologize for my partner—"

"Don't bother. He sees an old terrorist, killing and bombing. He's right not to like me; I've been a righteous bastard in me day. Killed four Brit soldiers that they know about. I'll not admit the rest to an officer of the law." His smile was not warm. "If it's the Provos, you'd best watch your back. Crazy lot of bastards, they are."

"Why do you say that?"

"Violent Catholics always are a touched lot. Come back sometime, lass. I'll tell ya stories that'll give ya nightmares."

"Not sure I'd want nightmares, Mr. Flannon," she admitted warily.

"Well then, when this case is solved, how 'bout coming back to tell me who did it? An old man like me, I don't get many visitors. I'll only chase ya for a little while." This time there was warmth in his smile. "And for God's sake, call me James. This whole 'mister' business makes me feel old."

She smiled with a nod and left him to his birds, wondering how this man could calmly feed birds and yet live with the violence he casually admitted. She shelved the thoughts and made her way to the car after stopping at the reception desk to let the nurse know that she and the others were relatively safe from Flannon, for the day at least. She found Dave behind the wheel, a sheepish look on his face. She decided not to ream him, for the time being. They decided to forgo the next address on the list in favor of the pub, since it had been mentioned twice. They drove in relative silence with the radio turned down low, each lost in thought.

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On the outside, Hanlon's pub looked like any other corner Irish pub Sara had seen and not gone into. She wasn't much of a drinker. Inside, it was what she might envision one to be with few patrons in residence: lights turned low enough to give one a sense of privacy, while bright enough to ensure someone didn't trip into one of the many tables and booths. While most American bars sported pool tables, this place had an entire wall that was dedicated to darts.

The tri-color flag of the Irish Republic hung from one of the rafters, high enough so that no one could touch it. On the wall beside the far edge of the bar, photos of Irish heroes hung in bright silver frames, with small bits of black lace covering the corners of a few. She recognized the likeness of Bobby Sands, the photo taken well before his death from starvation.

They moved to the bartender and identified themselves. He blinked only once, looking them over with a cautious, untrusting expression on his face. His arms crossed over his chest out of habit. Sara took it as a bad sign.

"What do you want here?" he asked, his voice thick with the brogue of Northern Ireland and Boston.

"The owner," Dave muttered, his hostile tone back in place.

"Well, you're looking at him. Now what do you want? I'm guessing it's not a pint or whiskey."

"I want any information on the kidnapping of a seven-year-old British boy," Dave answered, taking the lead.

Hanlon didn't flinch. "I run a legal operation here. I don't know about any kidnapping."

"Legal, huh? How about I put an agent in here to check out your customers? If we find one wanted IRA type, I'll have to toss you in jail for decidedly non legal activities."

Dave had made threats in the past, but rarely did the threats ring so hard in Sara's ears. She knew there was something going on in his head, but he wouldn't talk about it. Later she would have to push to get it out of him.

"On that note, Agent, you can take your arse out of here," Hanlon directed as he turned to walk away.

Dave suddenly reached across and violently thrust Hanlon's face down against the surface of the bar. Sara winced as she heard his cheekbone connect with the wood.

Dave kept the pressure on the back of Hanlon's neck. "Listen up, I have a kidnapped boy that I want to find and you are wasting my time. Now, I'm gonna ask you again if you know anyone who might have a reason to kidnap him. His name is Alexander Jeffries. I know for a fact that you IRA scum have threatened his father in the past."

Hanlon's face went pale, and it wasn't from the pressure on his neck. "William Jeffries?" he managed to croak out.

"That's the father," Dave confirmed. "You know him?"

"I know of him," Hanlon rasped. "His hands are as bloody as the 'RA's."

"If I don't get a name in the next five seconds, I will snap your neck."

There was something in his voice that let the Irishman on the bar know he was not kidding. "Talk to Nora de Burgh," he answered on the mental count of four.

Dave removed his weight from Hanlon's body, letting him up. "Where is she?"

Hanlon stood; his cheek was beginning to swell and blood slipped from his lip. "She's in one of your bloody prisons. Now get the fuck out of my place."

Dave smiled hard. "Nice doing business with you."

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Sara caught up with her partner at the car. He remained silent, but she could see the pulse point in his neck pounding. "What in the hell was that?" she demanded as she buckled up.

"I don't want to talk about it," he muttered, starting the engine.

"You have used up your quota of that response, David. You will be talking about it when we get back to the office. Now I suggest you get us there without trying to kill anyone else," she ordered.

He thought about protesting against her anger, but gave it up. Instead, he pulled into traffic and drove toward the FBI building. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel the entire trip, a nervous habit he'd never been able to break. Instead of Sara's usual out loud thinking and brainstorming, he dealt with her silence.

As they walked past Mrs. Anders' desk, she stopped them. "He wants to see you in his office, now." She pressed a button on her phone. The door to Harry's office quickly opened.

"White, get your ass in here yesterday. Pierson, you wait until I'm done with him," he ordered, his face red with anger. Dave moved as quickly as he could without actually running. Harry speared Sara to her spot with a withering look before following David into his office.

They were most likely in deep shit, and she knew it. She felt no relief when his door closed. She sat in one of the waiting chairs, feeling a lot like she did when called in to see the principal. *I should have gone to dental school*, popped into her head, and she sighed.