

ELITE GUARDIANS [4]

# CHASING SECRETS

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Dedicated to my family.  
I love you more than you'll ever know.

## PROLOGUE

### ROCK MORAN CASTLE

### COUNTY MAYO, IRELAND, 1991

Five-year-old Aileen Burke crouched in the small hidden room in the big castle she called home. Terror caused her little heart to beat in her chest like the wings of a hummingbird. More gunshots rang out and Aileen ducked her head and covered her ears. She pressed back into the warm body behind her. “Mam,” she whispered. “I want me mam.”

“Shh, child, yer mam canna be here. I’ll keep ye safe. Just don’ say a word.”

Aileen shuddered and clamped her lips shut. She’d seen the big red stain that grew on the front of her dad’s chest after the man with the gun had yelled at him. It had scared her, so she’d run to her favorite hiding place. The place where Nanny Iona had found her and crawled inside with her.

“Da’s hurt, Nanny, that bad man shot him. He’s bleeding.” She kept her voice low, barely above a whisper, as the screams and shouts and loud noises echoed around them. “Make it stop, please.”

“Shh, say no more.”

Aileen fell silent. Tears leaked from her eyes, and someplace deep inside her, she knew she would never see her dad again.

A loud thud just outside the small door made her jump. More screams raked across her ears and she shuddered. Nanny's arms tightened around her and she felt the woman's lips touch the edge of her forehead. "May the God of peace bring peace to this house," she whispered.

The siege seemed to go on forever as the castle, her home, shook with violence. She must have fallen asleep, her ear next to Nanny's heartbeat, because the next thing she knew Nanny was shaking her, whispering that they needed to go. "Close yer eyes, *leanbh*. I'm goin' to carry you out of here. Promise me. Promise ye won't look."

Aileen didn't answer and Nanny opened the small door that was barely big enough for the woman. If she'd been any bigger, Aileen figured she'd have gotten stuck just like her dog Henry did when he tried to come in the doggy door. Her mam had had to open the door and pull him out, then her da had made the door bigger for Henry. But no one had been able to convince Henry to use the doggy door after that.

She yawned. She wanted to go back to sleep, but mostly she wanted her mam and da. But Da was hurt . . .

Aileen swallowed the lump in her throat and grimaced at the gritty feeling. She tried to be brave. She wished she'd gone to school today. She was supposed to have gone on a field trip to the zoo with all of her friends, but Nanny had kept her home because she had a little fever and a sore throat. Aileen had been very upset about missing the trip, but when Nanny had brought her chicken broth and let her watch her favorite cartoon with a promise to take her to the zoo as soon as she was well, Aileen had cheered up and then fallen asleep.

And then the loud bangs had awakened her and scared her.

She'd heard running footsteps, mean shouts, and lots of bad words. So she'd hidden.

Nanny slipped past her and out the door. She turned and held out her hands. Aileen let Nanny help her out of the hiding place and pick her up. "Close your eyes, love."

Aileen obeyed. Her nose twitched. Her home smelled funny. Bad. Like the time her dad had killed a deer and let her watch him dress it. She hadn't liked it then and she didn't like it now. But she kept her eyes shut.

Nanny moved quickly, her steps sure and steady. "Are yer eyes closed?" she whispered.

"They're closed, Nanny, they are."

Nanny walked and Aileen bounced against her shoulder. The woman pressed a hand against the back of her head and shoved Aileen's nose into her neck. Too hard. She couldn't breathe. "Can I open them now?"

"Not yet." Nanny's voice sounded thick, like she had something in her throat and was trying to talk around it. "Not yet." Nanny's chest heaved and Aileen heard her snuffle. She struggled against Nanny's hold and broke free. She leaned back to look at Nanny in spite of Nanny telling her to keep her eyes closed and was shocked to see her face wet with tears. "Nanny, I want me mam."

Nanny renewed her grip on the back of her head and pushed her back into her shoulder, trying to keep her from seeing. "Don't look. Don't look."

But Aileen struggled free of the hold and looked. She saw her da on the floor, the stain on his chest still a bright red, his eyes empty yet staring at the ceiling. "Da! Da!" She reached for him, but Nanny was moving her farther and farther away.

"*Leanbh*, don't look, don't look."

"Daddyyyyy—!"

# [ 1 ]

**PRESENT-DAY IRELAND**  
**ROCK MORAN CASTLE, COUNTY MAYO**  
**SEPTEMBER**

The knock on the door jerked ninety-year-old Ian Burke out of his afternoon nap. He sat up and blinked at the shadow moving toward the foot of his bed. It took him a moment to realize it was Hugh McCort, his faithful assistant. They didn't call themselves servants these days. "What is it?"

"How is your headache?"

Ian pressed a hand to his temple. "It's eased a bit. Is that why you woke me?"

"Of course not. There's a visitor here to see you."

Ian frowned. "I don't do visitors, Hugh, you know that."

"I do know that, but I'm making a judgment call on this. He's a member of the Gardaí."

"The Gardaí?" The Irish police. "What does he want with me?" Ian slid out of bed and pulled on the robe Hugh held out to him. He might be ninety years old, but he still commanded respect, with his straight shoulders and razor-sharp mind.

"I believe it has something to do with your granddaughter."

Ian froze. "Aileen?" he whispered.

"Indeed."

“What kind of news does he have?”

“I don’t know, he wouldn’t tell me. He said he would only speak to you. I allowed him to wait in your office. I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course.” Curiosity and old grief ate at him. Ian threw off the robe that covered the lounge pants and T-shirt that he found himself wearing more often than not. “I need to dress.”

Fifteen minutes later, Ian stepped out of his bedroom, dressed in his favorite pair of khakis and a crisp collared shirt, to walk down the stone-lined hallway to the other end of the house. He stopped at the entrance to his office to whisper a prayer. *Please let this be good news.* He breathed in, then out, and entered his office.

A young man dressed in full Gardaí uniform set down his tea and stood from his perch on the love seat. He pulled his cap from his head and gave a slight bow. “Thank you for seeing me.”

Ian motioned for the man to sit. “I hear you have news of my granddaughter?”

“I think so.”

“She’s been dead for twenty-five years. What kind of news could you possibly have?”

“Let me start with an introduction. My name is Duncan O’Brien. I work in the cold case department and I’ve come across something that I thought you might find interesting.”

“So my dear Aileen is a cold case.” He sniffed. Of course she was. Her murderer had never been found.

O’Brien cleared his throat. “And I asked for this case in particular because I’ve had an interest in it since I was very young.”

“Why is that, lad?”

“Because I was supposed to be on the bus for that field trip.”

Ian felt himself pale but stood statue still.

The young officer cleared his throat. “The flu had been going around me class. I’d fallen ill with it the night before the trip



and Mam kept me home. I remember Aileen clearly. She was my friend.”

Ian fell silent for a moment as he felt the emotions of that long-ago day wash over him. It had been twenty-five years since the bus carrying his granddaughter and her nanny had exploded and killed all twenty-seven people on board. Twenty-one five-year-olds and six adults. Yet right now, it felt as though it had happened yesterday. Like he was reliving the news of that horrific moment all over again. He drew in a deep breath and tried to ignore the renewed pounding in his head. “I see.”

“My sergeant honored my request to work the cold cases. ’Tis the one I’m most interested in. The one I’m most desperate to solve.”

Ian made his way over to the wingback chair next to his desk and seated himself. “What do you have on the people who killed Aileen?”

O’Brien reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag that contained a picture. He passed it to Ian. Ian pulled his glasses from the desk and set them on his nose for a closer look.

He frowned. “What’s this?”

“It was taken the day of the bombing.”

“Who took it?” Ian asked.

“A mother whose wee one was on the bus. She brought her daughter and took the picture, and then got in her car and drove off to head to work. She heard the explosion moments later, but didn’t stop.”

Aghast, Ian started. “Why not?”

“There was some construction going on across the street from the school. According to the report, when the Gardaí interviewed her, she said she thought the loud noise came from there. It was only when they showed up at her workplace that she learned the explosion was the bus her child was on.”

Ian shuddered. “Poor woman.” He knew exactly what she’d felt at that very moment. He shut his mind to the memory and focused on the innocent faces in the picture. He remembered quite a few of them. They’d been at the castle for Aileen’s fifth birthday only a few weeks before they’d died.

“Do you notice anything interesting about the photo?”

Ian slowly realized what O’Brien was getting at. He removed his glasses with suddenly shaky fingers. “My Aileen’s not in there. She’s not in the photo.”

“And neither is the nanny. If you’ll turn the photo over, the mother had listed all of the names of the children. Then below, it says, ‘Blessed to have escaped’ and lists the four children who weren’t there. Meself, Liam O’Reilly, Bailey Parker, and Aileen Burke.”

Dizziness hit Ian and he leaned back to shut his eyes for a brief moment.

“Are you all right?” O’Brien asked.

“I’m fine. Fine,” Ian said. He turned his focus back on the officer.

O’Brien nodded. “I know ’tis a bit of a shock for you, but I think you’re probably wondering the same thing I am.”

Ian looked down at the picture once again. “Where were Aileen and her nanny?”

“Because it was impossible to identify every person, due to the fact that the bus and everyone on it was practically incinerated, it was assumed that Aileen and the nanny were there—especially when they were never seen again.”

Ian nodded. “A reasonable assumption.”

“But all indications point to the fact that they weren’t there because they’re not in the picture. So how did they manage to escape the explosion?”

Ian refused to allow himself to feel the hope that wanted to

spring alive. He shook his head. "There has to be an explanation. Maybe they were late, maybe—"

"Sorry to interrupt, but they weren't late."

"All right. Can you possibly start at the beginning?"

O'Brien ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. I'm not doing a very good job with this."

"You're fine. Just keep going. How did you get the picture?"

"The woman who took the picture had another daughter named Megan, who was ten at the time of the bus explosion. Fifteen years ago, the woman committed suicide."

"Suicide?"

He nodded. "Megan said her mam had been battling depression since the explosion—"

"Understandable," Ian muttered. He'd battled it himself. Some days he wasn't sure he'd won.

"Anyway, she left a note that said, 'I'm so sorry. I can't fight anymore. Please forgive me.'"

"Awful. So much pain, so much grief."

"To be sure. Megan's father died last month, and when she started cleaning out his house, she came across some pictures. The date on the back said they were developed about three weeks prior to her mother's death. Megan said something nagged at her. She thought Aileen had died in the bus explosion, so she wasn't sure why she wasn't in the picture, but thought it significant enough to bring it to me."

"As well she should."

"Megan feels like the pictures brought back all of the grief and her mother simply couldn't fight it anymore—as she stated in her note. Now as you can imagine, the picture immediately caught her attention, it being her sister who was killed."

Ian drew in another breath. It seemed terribly hard for him to get the air he needed at the moment. Finally, he pulled a

handkerchief from his pocket and swiped it across his eyes. He only just realized tears were leaking down his cheeks.

Hugh, who had been standing silently to the side, stepped forward. "Ian, let me—"

Ian waved him away and the man stopped, then stepped back. Ian turned his attention to the officer. "So they might not have been on the bus."

"I don't believe they were."

"You do realize that the day the bus exploded, most of my family members were killed in what I believe was a Mafia-related hit? My son and daughter-in-law, Aileen's two-year-old brother . . . all of them," he whispered. "All gone. Slaughtered like they were worthless." His heart thudded. "A two-year-old!"

The young officer swallowed and blinked. "I know. And I believe the two incidents are related."

Ian snorted. "We all believe that. The problem has been finding the people responsible." After all these years . . . "Wait a minute. Wouldn't the woman have heard about the attack on the castle and, as soon as she noted that Aileen wasn't in the photo, brought it to someone's attention?"

"You would think so. I asked the daughter that very question. She said she wasn't sure that her mother ever heard anything about the attack. She was too lost in her grief and too sedated to even be aware of her surroundings for a long time. And she never had the photos developed until shortly before her death. The headlines had long faded by then." He shook his head. "If she hadn't decided to develop that roll of film and then compare it against a class picture, we never would have known."

Ian swallowed and paused, gathering his thoughts and his strength. "I should have been here, you know."

"Why weren't you?"

"My wife was having chest pains. We'd left around four in

the morning to drive to the hospital. It's the only reason we were spared."

He glanced at Hugh. "You drove yourself?"

"I did. Hugh wasn't living here at the time and I didn't want to wake anyone." He ran a shaky hand across his eyes. How he wished he'd awakened someone. He drew in a deep breath. "All right, young man, if they weren't on the bus, then where were they?"

"That's what I was hoping to figure out."

Ian leaned back in his chair. "It's been so long. If she were still alive, don't you think she would have found a way to let me know?"

"I don't know, but she wasn't on that bus that day and neither was her nanny. Somehow she escaped the bus and I want to know if my friend is still alive."

"I want to know that too." He leaned forward and drew in a deep breath. "I've been hiding, so I have."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I've been a hermit for the past twenty-five years. I don't go out and I have more security than the president of Ireland. I work from my office."

"I'd heard you'd yet to retire."

He huffed. "Retire? And do what? Twiddle my thumbs all day? No, working keeps me on my toes and makes the days not seem quite as long."

"I understand." Duncan paused. "The people who tried to kill you and yer family were never caught. You think they're still out there?"

"I don't know about that, but there's no doubt in my mind we were all supposed to die that day."

Duncan nodded. "Every last one o' you."

"Every last one."