

Mercy's Chase sneak peek
Blessington, Ireland

“She was a witch, a’course.”

Salem’s head snapped up. “Excuse me?”

Pivoting her neck that fast exploded the pain, shooting hot needles down her arm and toward the cell phone she’d been peeking at. Bel had texted her. Her friend’s encouraging words—*pretend like you know what you’re doing! everyone else is faking it, too*—soothed her as she fought the cottony panic of imposter syndrome. That distraction was now shoved aside, the unpleasant thump of Muirinn Molony’s words echoing off the rustic cottage walls.

“A witch. My grandmother.” Mrs. Molony, several times a grandmother herself, smiled, revealing tiny twisted teeth. A kettle bubbled behind her. Its steam perfumed the air with cinnamon and sage.

Salem guessed the woman didn’t receive many visitors on this lonely County Wicklow road. In fact, she’d assumed that’s why Mrs. Molony had called the FBI. *Forced Bedside Interrogations* is what Agent Len Curson, Salem’s partner for the day, labeled these visits. The bootless errands had spread like a virus since the U.N. had advertised its phone threat line in advance of the International Climate Change Summit to be held in London this coming weekend. A radical global environmental accord was on the table, one requiring G20 countries to comply with a complete overhaul of their environmental regulations.

The accord, if signed, would disrupt the global economy like a dropkick to an anthill.

“Many women were considered witches, back then,” Mrs. Molony continued, her smile still in place. “At least that’s what they were called by those who didn’t understand the country

ways. Really, my mamó was a midwife, not that it would have mattered, would it? Nurse, healer, cook. They were all labeled as witches. You sure I can't offer you a spot of tea?"

The woman had spoken as one long word, her accent thick. Salem was still trying to catch up. "Your grandmother was a witch?"

Mrs. Molony exhaled a gentle disgust. *Och*. She stood, her head nearly brushing the low ceiling. "It'll be easier to show you, won't it? Here's a bit for you before we tramp outdoors." She offered Salem, not Agent Curson, a plum-sized sachet of herbs. It was string-tied in a scrap of blue cloth dotted with red flowers. "Protection against evil."

Salem glanced at her partner before tucking the aromatic bundle in her parka pocket. Judging by his sour expression, he was more certain than ever that they were on a snipe hunt. He brushed imaginary dust off his ironed jeans and followed the woman outside her cottage. Salem took up the rear, allowing her initial shock at the mention of witches to pass. Mrs. Molony had been referring to country superstition, not a dark conspiracy.

She stepped outdoors and inhaled deeply of the scent of wet campfire. The weather had changed three times since she'd left the Dublin airport. Most recently, a coy sun had elbowed out the rain. Its light danced with shadows at the edges of her vision, causing her to see movement where there was none, to stare too long into misted thickets and dripping brambles straight out of a fairy tale. She waded through burring and clucking chickens scratching at rain-softened earth, walking gently so as not to disrupt them. Beyond the low stone wall containing the yard grew a vivid field of red poppies that mirrored the tiny blooms on the sachet's fabric, and further still rolled an emerald green Salem had yet to grow accustomed to, the lush hills liquid and timeless.

Agent Curson had driven the forty-seven miles to Mrs. Molony's cottage. When he'd entered the directions into the GPS, Salem had studied the sky rather than swallowing an Ativan,

the latter a habit she'd re-upped since moving to London. Something about Ireland tugged at her gut in the weirdest way, comforting her by making her homesick for a place she'd never been.

As odd as the sensation was, it was better than anxiety, and she was grateful for the reprieve. She'd thought she had her agoraphobia under control when she'd agreed to join the FBI, but then she'd been assigned to London, and suddenly Minneapolis was forever away and the world too large.

Her recruiting supervisor had been insistent. *Your country needs you. The Cipher Bureau needs you. Your cryptanalysis will save lives.*

And so she had gone.

She had joined the top-secret Cipher Bureau, or the Black Chamber as it was tagged by the handful of people who knew of it. The Black Chamber had been dreamed up in 1919, when the U.S. State Department and the Army proposed a peace-time cryptanalysis department. The organization initially disguised itself as a commercial coding company and set up stakes in New York City. The front office produced toll-saving telegram abbreviations for businesses while the back office cracked the diplomatic communications of the most powerful nations in the world.

It'd been shut down in 1929 after Secretary of State Henry Stimson famously declared that "gentlemen do not read each other's mail." Gina Hayes, the first female president of the United States of America, felt no such compunction. Her first unofficial act after taking office in January had been to revive the Black Chamber as a covert branch of the FBI.

Not counting the analysts recruited to join, fewer than a dozen people knew.

The Black Chamber 2.0 was licensed to operate across international boundaries in service of Americans. They were to be the United States' conduit to Five Eyes, the intelligence alliance among the U.S., the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada that allowed the

countries to spy on one another's citizens, sharing relevant SIGINT uncovered during surveillance: impending terrorist attacks, assassination plans, destabilizing movements.

Len Curson and Salem Wiley were the first Black Chamber 2.0 analysts hired; another ten had followed. Apart from Curson, all the agents assigned to the Campus had been speed-trained at Quantico, chosen for the resurrected department based on their linguistic and computer aptitude. The battles that decided the fates of nations were now waged in cyberspace, physical soldiers replaced with computer warriors. Nonetheless, the analysts still needed to know how to defend themselves on solid ground.

During her sixteen weeks at Quantico, Salem had learned the proper use and maintenance of firearms, close space defensive tactics, survival skills, and intelligence gathering. She'd been at turns terrified and exhilarated during the training. Once she graduated, she was allowed a three-day trip home before becoming an active analyst.

Her first, agoraphobia-stoking assignment?

Work with other Five Eyes agents in London to intercept and decode every threat arriving in advance of the climate change summit. The conference was drawing leaders from all over the world, including President Gina Hayes, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, leaders of NGOs and progressive organizations, professors and researchers, and artists and activists from around the globe.

Salem'd been chained to a cubicle since she'd been stationed in London, tasked with sifting through piles of dead-end codes and paper tiger threats interspersed with developing a quantum-based SIGINT intercept program that she never had enough time for. At the end of a full day of coding and cracking, if she had the energy, she'd head to the onsite gym to lift

weights before tromping upstairs to the gray temp barracks and a private room not much bigger or brighter than her cubicle. Then she'd wake up and start all over again.

She loved the work.

She *hated* being so far from home.

She'd also developed an antagonistic relationship with her computer chair. It was an old model designed to wheeze up or down and that was it. No matter how she messed with it, the angle was not right. Her elbows either hung too low or were stretched too high, and the arm rests irritated her after eight hours in the chair.

Hence the Gordian knot swelling in her neck.

When Agent Curson, a twenty-five-year veteran of the FBI and a trained linguist, had requested her on this field job, she'd been almost relieved to escape that Iron Maiden of a computer chair, even though it meant flying in a four-seater plane across the sea to Dublin, a journey that would have been unthinkable this time last year.

Agent Curson had said that a Mrs. Muirinn Molony had called the threat line. She'd received evidence from a relative suggesting that President Gina Hayes would be assassinated at the upcoming summit. She insisted she needed to speak to agents in person, to show them the danger, that lives were at stake. These agents must be able to crack codes, she'd said.

Agent Curson had dedicated the hour-long drive from the airport to Mrs. Molony's Blessington cottage to complaining about what a monumental shitcan time-waster this was, interspersed with travel suggestions should she ever return, including a recommendation that she visit St. Brigid's Cathedral just up the road.

Salem had granted him half her attention. The rest of her was marveling at Ireland's atmosphere, a steely gray sky studded with jagged, wet clouds, the heavens seemingly close enough to whisper a secret in her ear.

"The coded message is just ahead." Mrs. Molony tightened her apron as she walked, raising her voice so Agent Curson and Salem could both hear. "It's after I uncovered it that I had the dream about the shooting of your president. Straight from the mouth of my dead **mamó**."

Agent Curson tossed a glance over his shoulder. *Told you so*, it said. *Snipe hunt*.

Salem stepped past her partner as they crested a small rise, determined to treat the lonely woman with respect. So what if Mrs. Molony had a fanciful imagination? She'd gotten them out of their cubicles and into this green countryside under a sky that felt like an embrace. "You weren't actually informed of a threat, Mrs. Molony? You dreamt it?"

"Aye, at first." She had a humping walk, as if one leg was shorter than the other. She limped through the hedgerow and over a line of stones. "Then the visions came. I see them eyes open or closed now, I do. I wouldn'ta wasted your time otherways. Right around this bend we go."

They stepped into a clearing surrounded by knobby, gnarled trees no taller than Salem. She smelled it before she saw it: fresh-dug dirt, loamy and alive in the middle of the glade. A headstone leaned toward the earth three feet from the hole. The trees cast skeleton shadows over the gravesite.

Mrs. Molony nodded. "Here's where I was talking. The well I was to dig. That's how I uncovered the urgent message that brought you here."

Salem pushed a loose curl from her eye. "You dug a well by your grandmother's grave?"

The woman shrugged. "That's where the water is."

Salem didn't meet Agent Curson's glance. Instead, she smiled encouragingly at Mrs. Molony and began planning the story she'd relay to Bel. Bel, who was in physical therapy and learning to navigate the world without workable legs since she'd taken a bullet to save Gina Hayes, who'd threatened to drug Salem and tattoo "loser" on her forehead if she didn't take the Black Chamber job, who'd joked that it was easier to land dates in a wheelchair because all the women she met wanted to mother her.

Salem was thinking of Bel when the bird swooped at her. "Gah!"

She swung wildly at the air, ignoring Agent Curson's startled bark of laughter. The magpie flapped and squawked before landing in the nearest copse of trees.

Salem straightened her jacket and glanced around, heart thudding with surprise and embarrassment. Mrs. Molony was staring at her, her rheumy eyes suddenly clear, her gaze sharp and deep. Her smile was gone.

Salem's stomach clenched in response.

A ripple passed across Mrs. Molony's lined face. She pointed a bent finger at Salem, and then the bird. "Tip your hat at the magpie, or you're destined for a life of bad luck."

Lady, you don't know the half of it. But Salem made a saluting motion with an imaginary hat.

Agent Curson coughed.

Mrs. Molony's smile returned just as a cloud scudded over the sun. She indicated the pocket Salem had tucked the sachet into. "That's all right, then. You'll want to wear those protection herbs at your belt. That's what the string is about. And now, here's what you come for." She stepped to the fresh-dug hole and indicated that Agent Curson and Salem should do the

same. “When I first laid eyes on the symbol, it put the heart crossways in me. Thought it was a wee set of graves right next to me mamó’s.”

Agent Curson reached the hole first. He grew bedrock still.

Salem stepped beside him, drawing the sachet out of her pocket as she moved.

She followed his gaze. Her breath turned to dust.

There, in a divot of dirt as thick and fresh as arterial blood, someone had first dug and then scraped away an area the size of a manhole cover. In the center of the cleared spot, a diorama jutted like teeth from the ground.

It was an almost perfect replica of Stonehenge.

Created over 4,000 years ago, the original Stonehenge was constructed of enormous rocks; some of them were bluestones transported more than 200 miles. How the stones were moved was shrouded with as much mystery as the purpose of the stone ring. Some archeologists argued that it was a place of annual celebrations, the original outdoor amphitheater. Others, citing the unusual number of deformities and the broad ethnic diversity in the human remains found at the Stonehenge, contended that it had been a place of mystical healing. Still others were sure that it had served as an enormous astronomical calendar.

The real-life Stonehenge was different from the miniature Mrs. Molony had uncovered in only one regard: Mrs. Molony’s featured an extra piece.

And if archeologists could see what Salem was looking at now, they’d have no question what Stonehenge was built for.

But that’s not why Salem’s heart was pounding at the cage of her chest.

No, what had her suddenly feeling like a hunted animal were the five tiny letters carved on that extra piece, their edges dull yet still legible.

mercy

The same plea found on the locket worn by Bel's mother the night she was murdered.

She grabbed Agent Curson's arm for support.

He recoiled beneath that close Irish sky.

Her tongue thick, she pointed a shaking finger toward the ancient code. *Can't you see it?*

Something that all modern archeologists have missed, the truth that their training and education has taught them to overlook: a feminine explanation for Stonehenge!

Her blood had bubbled with the awareness.

But she couldn't speak, not with Agent Curson sneering at like she was a silly girl.

Not with Mrs. Molony cutting her with those sharp-again eyes.

Salem's voice didn't come.

She closed her mouth. She dismissed her kneejerk Stonehenge hypothesis for the fanciful foolishness it was, buried it down deep where she stored all stupid ideas unspoken. It was her mother's fault the crazy thought even entered her rational mind. More specifically, she pinned it on being introduced to the Underground, the organization Vida Wiley led. Salem's mother had wanted to induct Salem into the organization, teach her its history and purpose, had in fact clandestinely trained her to become the Underground's codebreaker, cracking the ancient ciphers rumored to lead to a truth that would right history and restore women's global power.

Salem had zero interest.

She intended to live a life in plain sight, an existence where she knew the expectations. She would crack codes, but she would work for an above-board organization. Conspiracies, ancient organizations, and secret trails that led to even more clandestine histories had driven her anxiety to an unbearable level and cost Bel her ability to walk. Salem planned to remain in the

organized world of mathematics and computers, truth and logic, a place where the rules were clear and incontrovertible.

Nothing would drop her back into the shadowy world her mother had exposed her to.

Nothing.

Especially a crazy emotional leap made graveside.