

The Silent Speak

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PROLOGUE

She read the note again.

Twice in the past three years, similar notes had been splashed all over the newspapers. She knew immediately what it meant, but her brain wouldn't allow her to process it. For several minutes she just stared at it. Her lips formed words that never came. When her brain caught up, it went straight to denial.

This could not be happening.

Things like this did not happen in ordinary families.

Not in families like hers.

She pulled down the door handle. The door was unlocked. That was a good sign, right? She would go into the house and find everything exactly as it had always been. There just had to be some simple explanation for that note. Yes, she nodded to herself, relieved to have come to a decision. She nudged the door open and put one foot on the wooden floor. The house was eerily quiet. No kids running around. No noise from the kitchen.

'Now don't panic,' she muttered to herself. 'Everything will be fine. Just go inside.'

She tried to lift her foot, but her brain wouldn't cooperate. Hands shaking, she pulled out her mobile and dialled 999. She was still frozen in the doorway when the police arrived.

ONE

It took Aoife a few seconds to realise Conor wasn't listening. His eyes were focused on a point behind her head, and his face had taken on that wooden expression, the only expression he had shown her in the first few months of their acquaintance.

'Is something wrong?'

Conor didn't appear to hear. He pushed back his chair and walked away. Aoife glanced behind. She saw a woman hurry towards him. They met in the centre of the room. The woman wore jeans and a rain jacket. She had shoulder-length chocolate-brown hair, pulled back into a tight ponytail. She was a little older than Conor, probably in her mid-thirties. Not stunningly pretty by any means, but good looking. She was gesticulating wildly as she spoke. Conor answered her in a low voice. For the sake of appearances, Aoife picked at her food, but she concentrated hard, trying to catch their words above the noise of the crowd. Conor's voice was a low hum, but she clearly heard the woman say 'not answering my calls' and 'what do I have to do to get...'

Abandoning any pretence at politeness, Aoife turned in her chair and stared. Conor now had his hand on the woman's arm and was leading her towards the exit. She jerked her arm away. Her eyes met Aoife's. She said something which Aoife didn't catch and tried to push past Conor. Conor's hand was on her arm again, but this time his grip was tighter. The woman

tried to yank her arm away but was unable to get free. There was a lull in the conversation as people watched the drama. The restaurant manager approached. He and Conor exchanged a few words. The manager took the woman's other arm and they led her to the door. The woman struggled but couldn't escape. As the manager went to close the door behind her, she turned to face them. Again, her eyes met Aoife's. She was crying.

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The drama over, the other diners resumed their conversations. Conor returned to his seat.

'What was that about?' Aoife asked. 'Who is that woman?'

'Nobody, it's work.'

'Work? Why is she so upset?'

'I'd rather not talk about it, Aoife. It's our last weekend before Blaine arrives. We won't have time alone again for weeks. Why waste it talking about work?'

Aoife felt her stomach sink—its normal reaction to any mention of Blaine's visit. 'Do you want me to come to the airport with you?'

'No, I think it's best I go alone. I'll bring him home. Let him unpack and settle in and then we'll come around to your house. He's looking forward to seeing Amy again.'

Aoife smiled. 'I'm glad those two hit it off. If only—'

Conor put down his glass and leaned closer. 'I've told you, Aoife, Blaine doesn't hate you.'

'How often has he been in my house now, Conor? In all that time the only words he's said to me are "hi", "bye", "please", "thank you", "yes" and "no". That's it.'

'It's not easy for him. He's used to having me entirely to himself.'

'I get that, Conor. I do, really. I understand there's nothing in our relationship for him. That's what makes it harder. I have nothing at all to

offer him.’ She squashed a couple of peas with her fork. Unable to make eye contact, she said, ‘Maybe it would be better if he spent less time in my house.’

When Conor didn’t reply, she looked at him. ‘Spend the week together and come for dinner at the weekend. If Blaine has more time with you, he might be less resentful of me.’

Conor gave her suggestion a moment’s consideration, then shook his head. ‘I don’t think that would be a good idea. You, I and Amy are going to be a family. I don’t want Blaine to feel like an outsider. He needs to spend time with us in order to fit into our new family. Katie says it took him almost a year to accept his stepfather. He just needs time to get used to you.’

‘Wasn’t he six when Katie got married? Fifteen is a whole different ballgame. Don’t damage your relationship with Blaine by trying to force him to like me. You only have him to yourself a few times a year as it is. In three years he’ll be in college and you’ll see him even less. Enjoy the time together and forget about me. When he’s in college it won’t matter as much that you have a life of your own.’

Conor ran his fingers through his hair. The product he’d used that morning was wearing off and it was threatening to turn curly again. ‘It would certainly be easier, and I know he’d enjoy his visits more.’ He picked up his fork but immediately put it down again. ‘The problem is, Aoife, I don’t want to have a life of my own. I want Blaine to be a part of my new life.’

'I know, honey, but I don't think that can happen until he's older. If Blaine lived in Ireland, then obviously we'd have to try, but on his few visits here, why force him to do something he hates?'

Conor sighed. 'How about this? We'll spend the first night in my house and I'll bring him around on Saturday afternoon. After that, we'll have every day together but we'll come to your house for dinner each evening. That way he'll get some time with me and some time with you and Amy. We might even bring Amy on the odd day trip if we're not going too far.' He smiled. 'Actually, Blaine's looking forward to seeing Amy again. Katie helped him pick out a present and he's excited to give it to her.'

'Okay, but Blaine loves you. I think he even loves Amy. If he doesn't want to be around me, what does it matter?'

'It matters to me, but maybe I shouldn't push it.' Conor cut a piece of meat, swallowed, then grinned at her. 'And maybe we should stop worrying about Blaine for a while and enjoy our last weekend together. You, Aoife Walsh, are the love of my life, and the sooner you agree to be my wife—'

Aoife leaned across the table and kissed him. It wasn't something she would normally do in a crowded restaurant, but she was desperate to change the subject. Hell, she would do almost anything to postpone another argument about her refusal to become officially engaged.

TWO

Four days later, on the dot of noon, Aoife was sitting in the basement of Fallon & Byrne. She sipped her coffee as she read her book. Her phone had been buzzing every few minutes for the last two weeks as the members of her book club discussed *The Handmaid's Tale*. Aoife had only opened it that morning. She was midway through page seventy-two when she heard the clicking of heels on the stairs. She knew it was Orla even before the highly polished Christian Louboutin shoes came into view. The hem of her royal blue dress was so sharply cut it could only be the product of a top designer. As more of Orla appeared, Aoife noticed her customary blonde curls had been tamed into a smooth bun. Orla had always dressed for the part. As a teenager, she could have walked straight off the set of *The O.C.* She was a fashionable but casually dressed college student, and now she looked every inch the successful barrister she intended to become. She strode across the tiled floor, almost bumping into a woman heading in the same direction.

Orla gave her a gracious smile. 'Excuse me.'

The woman blushed, turned around and scurried off to a table in the corner of the room. Orla pulled out the chair opposite Aoife and sank into it.

'I'm sorry I'm late, Aoife. I had a nightmare meeting with a client. Honestly, you don't want to know the morning I've had. Anyway, thank God, I'm finished for today. I've taken the entire afternoon off and we can

hit the shops the minute I've had a cup of coffee.' She smiled. 'How was your weekend?'

'Great. Conor brought up the whole engagement thing again, which was a bit awkward, but fortunately he let it drop.'

'You can't keep avoiding the subject forever, Aoife. Conor knows your divorce won't come through for a while. All he's asking for is a commitment.'

'You know I'm committed to Conor. And if Conor doesn't know that by now, I'm not sure what we're doing together. Orla, do we have to talk about this? I'm sick to death of the subject.'

'Okay.' Orla raised her hands in a gesture of defeat. 'I won't mention it again.' She glanced at the book sticking out of Aoife's bag. 'How's that book club of yours?'

'Not great. When Jenny talked me into joining, I was worried they met too often, but lately it feels more like an online book club. The WhatsApp group is very active but we've only met twice since I joined. Ruth seems to have lost interest in organising it, and everyone else is afraid to take on the role in case they upset her.'

'Because of the murder? That must have been a huge shock to all of you. I think the whole country was shocked. It was all over the paper for weeks. That Grogan guy must have been a real nutter. You'd have to be pretty crazy to kill your wife and kids like that. Were Ruth and Fiona close?'

'I don't know. I barely know Ruth. Jenny says she used to be brilliant at organising everybody and she kept the WhatsApp group going but the only sessions she attended regularly were the ones she hosted herself. You really should come at least once, Orla. You'd love it and you'd finally get a chance to meet...'

'What?'

'That woman you almost bumped into; she keeps staring at us.'

'Really!' Orla turned to look. 'She's probably a weirdo. They seem to be crawling out of the woodwork lately. Did I tell you about the woman who came up to me in Brown Thomas last week? She said if I had to flirt with her husband, could I at least have the decency to do it behind her back. Brown Thomas! Can you imagine! If you're not safe from the riff-raff in Brown Thomas, where are you safe?'

'You were flirting with her husband?'

'Of course not. Why on earth would I want to do that?'

'She just decided you were flirting for no reason?'

'Since I have no idea who her husband is, I can't think of any other explanation.'

'So, what happened?'

'I said, "I have no idea what you're talking about, but assuming you are around the same age as your husband, he's old enough to be my father. Do I look like the kind of girl who flirts with middle-aged—"'

'Oh look, she's leaving!' Aoife interrupted. The woman gathered up her belongings and almost ran up the stairs. 'She looks vaguely familiar. Should we know her?'

Orla glanced at the retreating back. 'I don't see how. She must be at least ten years older than us, so she couldn't know us from school, and it's unlikely we were in college together.' She took a small silver compact from her Chanel bag and examined her flawless make-up. 'Just another weirdo if you ask me.' Clicking the compact shut, she said, 'Now, are you sure you want to buy a new outfit, Aoife? Exactly how formal is Conor's function?'

'It's not black tie, but all the women dress up.'

'It's a good thing I spent half of Saturday in Brown Thomas, then. I bought four outfits. One's a bit casual, but any of the others would be perfect and they'd all look stunning on you.'