



The Whisper (The Ireland Series Book 4)

By Carla Neggers

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Carla Neggers is the New York Times bestselling author of more than 60 novels, including her popular Sharpe & Donovan and Swift River Valley series. Her books have been translated into 24 languages and sold in over 35 countries. A frequent traveler to Ireland, Carla lives with her family in New England. For more information, visit CarlaNeggers.com

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Beara Peninsula, Southwest Ireland—late September

Scoop Wisdom opened his daypack, got out his water bottle and took a drink. He sat on a cold, damp rock inside the remains of the isolated Irish stone cottage where the long summer had started with a beautiful woman, a tale of magic and fairies—and a killer obsessed with his own ideas of good and evil.

The autumn equinox had passed. Summer was over. Scoop told himself it was a new beginning, but he had unfinished business. It'd been gnawing at him ever since he'd regained consciousness in his Boston hospital room a month ago, after a bomb blast had almost killed him.

He was healed. It was time to go home and get back to work. Be a cop again.

He set his water bottle back in his pack and zipped up the outer compartment. A solitary ray of sunshine penetrated the tangle of vines above him where once there'd been a thatched roof. He could hear the rush of the stream just outside the ruin.

And water splashing. Scoop shifted position on the rock, listening, but there was no doubt. Someone—or something—was tramping in the stream that wound down from the rocky, barren hills above Kenmare Bay. He hadn't seen anyone on his walk up from the cottage where he was staying on a quiet country lane.

He stood up. He could hear laughter now.

A woman's laughter.

Irish fairies, maybe? Out here on the southwest Irish coast, on the rugged Beara Peninsula, he could easily believe fairies were hiding in the greenery that grew thick on the banks of the stream.

He stepped over fallen rocks to the opening that had served as the only entrance to what once had been someone's home. He could feel a twinge of pain in his hip where shrapnel had cut deep when the bomb went off at the triple-decker he owned with Bob O'Reilly and Abigail Browning, two other Boston detectives. He had taken most of the blistering shards of metal and wood in the meatier parts of his back, shoulders, arms and legs, but one chunk had lodged in the base of his skull, making everyone nervous for a day or so. A millimeter this way or that, and he'd be dead instead of wondering if fairies were about to arrive at his Irish ruin for a visit.

He heard more water splashing and more female laughter.

"I know, I know." It was a woman, her tone amused, her accent American. "Of *course* I'd run into a big black dog up here in these particular hills."

In his two weeks in Ireland, Scoop had heard whispers about a large, fierce black dog occasionally turning up in the pastures above the small fishing and farming village. He'd seen only sheep and cows himself.

He peered into the gray mist. The morning sun was gone, at least for the moment. He'd learned to expect changeable weather. Brushed by the Gulf Stream, the climate of the Southwest was mild and wet, but he'd noticed on his walks that the flowers of summer were fading and the heather on the hills was turning brown.

"Ah." The woman again, still out of sight around a sharp bend in the stream. "You're coming with me, are you? I must be very close, then. Lead the way, my new friend."

The ruin was easy to miss amid the dense trees and undergrowth on the banks of the stream. If he hadn't known where to look, Scoop would have gone right past it his first time out here.

A woman with wild, dark red hair ducked under the low-hanging branches of a gnarly tree. Ambling next to her in the shallow water was, indeed, a big black dog.

The woman looked straight at Scoop, and even in the gray light, he saw that she had bright blue eyes and freckles—a lot of freckles. She was slim and angular, her hair down to her shoulders, damp and tangled. She continued toward him, the dog staying close to her. She didn't seem particularly taken aback by finding a man standing in the doorway of the remote ruin. Scoop wouldn't blame her if she did. Even before the bomb blast, he had looked, according to friends and enemies alike, ferocious with his thick build, shaved head and general take-no-prisoners demeanor.

For sure, no one would mistake him for a leprechaun or a fairy prince.

Her left foot sank into a soft spot and almost ended up in the water. Mud stains came to the top of her wellies. "I saw footprints back there," she said cheerfully, pointing a slender hand in the direction she'd just come. "Since I've never run into a cow or a sheep that wears size-twelve shoes, I figured someone else was out here. A fine day for a walk, isn't it?"

"It is," Scoop said.

"I don't mind the outbreaks of rain." She tilted her head back, letting the mist collect on her face a moment, then smiled at him. "I don't do well in the sun."

Scoop stepped down from the threshold and nodded to the dog, still panting at her side. "Yours?"

"No, but he's a sweetheart. I suppose he could be aggressive if he or someone he cared about felt threatened."

A warning? Scoop noticed she wore a rain jacket the same shade of blue as her eyes and held an iPhone in one hand, perhaps keeping it available in case she needed to call for help. It would be easy to think it was still 1900 in this part of Ireland, but that would be a mistake. For one thing, the area had decent cell phone coverage.

"Looks as if you two have bonded."

"I think we have, indeed." She slipped the iPhone into a jacket pocket. "You're the detective who saved that girl's life when the bomb went off at your house in Boston last month—Wisdom, right? Detective Cyrus Wisdom?"

He was instantly on alert, but he kept his voice even. "Most people call me Scoop. And you would be?"

"Sophie—Sophie Malone. We have friends in common," she said, easing past him to the ruin. The dog stayed by the stream. "I'm from Boston originally. I'm an archaeologist."

"What kind of archaeologist?"

She smiled. "The barely employed kind. You're in Ireland to recuperate? I heard you were hurt pretty badly."

"I ended up here after attending a friend's wedding in Scotland a few weeks ago."

"Abigail Browning's wedding. She's the detective who was kidnapped when the bomb went off."

"I know who she is."

Sophie Malone seemed unfazed by his response. Abigail was still on her extended honeymoon with Owen Garrison, an international search-and-rescue expert with roots in Boston, Texas and Maine. Will Davenport had offered them his house in the Scottish Highlands for their long-awaited wedding, and they'd accepted, quickly gathering family and friends together in early September. Scoop, just out of the hospital, had had no intention of missing the ceremony.

"Wasn't it too soon for you to fly given your injuries?" Sophie asked.

"I got through it."

She studied him, her expression suggesting a focused, intelligent mind. He had on a sweatshirt and jeans, but she'd be able to see one of his uglier scars, a purple gash that started under his right ear and snaked around the back of his head. Finally she said, "It must be hard not to be in Boston with the various ongoing investigations. You have all the bad guys, though, right? They're either dead or under arrest—"

"I thought you said you were an archaeologist. How do you know all this?"

"I keep up with the news."

That, Scoop decided, wasn't the entire truth. He was very good—one of the best in the Boston Police Department—at detecting lies and deception, and if Sophie Malone wasn't exactly lying, she wasn't exactly telling the truth, either.

She placed her hand on the rough, gray stone of the ruin. "You know Keira Sullivan, don't you?"

Keira was the folklorist and artist who had discovered the ruin three months ago, on the night of the summer solstice. She was also Lieutenant Bob O'Reilly's niece. "I do, yes," Scoop said. "Is Keira one of the friends we have in common?"

"We've never met, actually." Sophie stepped up onto the crumbling threshold of the ruin. "This place has been abandoned for a long time."

"According to local villagers, the original occupants either died or emigrated during the Great Famine of the 1840s."

"That would make sense. This part of Ireland was hit hard by the famine and subsequent mass emigration. That's how my family ended up in the U.S. The Malone side." She glanced back at Scoop, a spark in her blue eyes. "Tell me, Detective Wisdom, do you believe fairies were here that night with Keira?"

Scoop didn't answer. Standing in front of an Irish ruin with a scary black dog and a smart, pretty redhead, he could believe just about anything. He took in his surroundings—the fine mist, the multiple shades of green, the rocks, the rush of the stream. His senses were heightened, as if Irish fairies had put a spell on him.

He had never been so in danger of falling in love at first sight.

He gave himself a mental shake. Was he out of his mind? He grinned at Sophie as she stepped down from the ruin. "You're not a fairy princess yourself, are you?"

She laughed. "That would be Keira. Artist, folklorist and fairy princess." Sophie's expression turned more serious. "She wasn't reckless coming out here alone, you know."

"Any more than you are being reckless now?"

"Or you," she countered, then nodded to the dog, who had flopped in the wet grass. "Besides, I have my new friend here. He doesn't appear to have any quarrel with you. He joined me when I got to the stream. He must be the same dog who helped Keira the night she was trapped here."

"You didn't read that in the papers," Scoop said.

"I live in Ireland," she said vaguely. She seemed more tentative now. "The man who was also here that night...the serial killer. Jay Augustine. He won't ever be in a position to hurt anyone else, will he?"

Scoop didn't answer at once. Just what was he to make of his visitor? Finally he said, "Augustine's in jail awaiting trial for first-degree murder. He has a good lawyer and he's not talking, but he's not going anywhere. He'll stay behind bars for the rest of his life."

Sophie's gaze settled on an uprooted tree off to one side of the ruin. "That's where he smeared the sheep's blood, isn't it?"

Scoop stiffened. "Okay, Sophie Malone. You know a few too many details. Who are you?"

"Sorry." She pushed her hands through her damp hair. "Being here makes what happened feel real and immediate. I didn't expect this intense a reaction. Keira and I both know Colm Dermott, the anthropologist organizing the conference on Irish folklore in April. It's in two parts, one in Cork and one in Boston."

"I know Colm. Is he the one who told you about the black dog?"

She nodded. "I ran into him last week in Cork. I've just completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the university

there. I hadn't paid much attention to what all went on out here and in Boston." She took a breath. "I'm glad Keira wasn't hurt."

"So am I."

Sophie looked up sharply, as if his tone had given away some unexpected, hidden feeling—which for all he knew it had—but she quickly turned back toward the cottage, mist glistening on her rain jacket and deep red hair. "Do you believe Keira really did see the stone angel that night?"

"Doesn't matter what I believe."

"You're very concrete, aren't you?" She didn't wait for an answer. "The story she was researching is so charming—three Irish brothers in a never-ending struggle with fairies over a stone angel. The brothers believe it'll bring them luck. The fairies believe it's one of their own turned to stone. Every three months, on the night of the solstice or the equinox, the angel appears on the hearth of a remote cottage in the hills above Kenmare Bay."

"The old woman who told the story to Keira in Boston—"

"Also told it to Jay Augustine, and he killed her," Sophie said, finishing for him. "Colm says when Keira came out here in search of this place she thought she might encounter a bit of fairy mischief. Maybe she even hoped she would. But a killer? It's too horrible to think about."

Scoop stood back, feeling the isolation of the old ruin. Except for the dog and the sheep up in the pastures above the stream, it was just him and the woman in front of him. How did he even know she was an archaeologist? Why should he believe a word she said?

"As many tombs and ruins as I've crawled through in my work, I'm not much on small spaces." She seemed to shrug off thoughts of blood and violence as she tugged her hood over her hair. "You can imagine contentious Irish brothers and trooping fairies out here, can't you? Keira's story is very special. I love tales of the wee folk."

"Believe in fairies, do you?"

"Some days more than others."

"So, Sophie Malone," Scoop said, "why are you here?"

"Fairies, a black dog and an ancient stone angel aren't reason enough?"

"Maybe, but they're not the whole story."

"Ah. We archaeologists can be very mysterious. We're also curious. I wanted to see the ruin for myself. You're a detective, Scoop. Okay if I call you Scoop?"

"Sure."

"You can understand curiosity, can't you?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

Her sudden, infectious smile reached to her eyes. "Ah. I can see you don't like coincidences. You want to know how we both decided to come here this morning. I didn't follow you, if that helps. I've never been subtle enough to follow people."

"But you weren't surprised to find me here," Scoop said.

"I wasn't, especially not after seeing those size-twelve footprints in the mud." She eased in next to the dog. "I'll be on my way."

"Are you heading straight back to the village?"

"Maybe." She patted the dog as he rose next to her. "I'll have to see where my new friend here leads me. Good to meet you, Detective." She smiled again. "Scoop. Maybe I'll see you in Boston sometime."

Scoop watched her and the big black dog duck back under the gnarly tree. She had a positive, energetic air about her. Nothing suggested she wasn't an archaeologist. Whoever she was, he'd bet she was the type who wouldn't let go once she got the bit in her teeth.

What bit did Sophie Malone have in her teeth? What, exactly, had brought her out here?

He slipped back into the ruin, smelling the damp stone and dirt. He reached for his backpack. This time he didn't notice any pain in his hip. As he slung his pack onto his shoulder, he peered through the gray, dim light at the hearth where Keira claimed to have seen the ancient stone angel as the ruin partially collapsed around her. When she finally climbed out the following morning, the angel was gone. Whatever the case, no one else had ever actually seen it.

Users Review

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