

SEVERED RELATIONS

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*Bless you and yours
As well as the cottage you live in.
May the roof overhead be well-thatched
And those inside be well matched.*
Irish Blessing

*All happy families resemble one another,
Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*
Leo Tolstoy

Chapter 1

It was late – or early – depending on one's point of view. Neither Mort, the short redheaded guy, nor the man so unremarkable that Mort had christened him Medium Man, cared about the hour. For them it was just time to go to work.

While they drove, they shot the shit about cars and chicks, the gates, the guard, the price of shoes and booze, and getting into the house. Mort laughed hard and quick and said they would have to quit the business the day they couldn't get in a house. When Medium Man laughed, he huffed and puffed and wiggled like he had to hit the john. Even when he wasn't laughing, Medium Man itched and twitched. But he was reliable and good at his job so Mort didn't mind so much.

They drove the length of Wilshire Boulevard, deserted this time of night, found the side street that would take them to another side street and yet another that would eventually get them where they were going. Mort said getting to this place was like driving through a damn crop circle in the middle of L.A. Medium Man didn't know what that was, and Mort didn't feel like explaining, so they stopped talking until Mort finally pulled over. He parked the car at the curb between two houses. Anyone who looked at it would assume the car belonged to a kid home from college, a maid, or was just the fourth-car-out in the land of three car garages.

Mort and Medium Man walked the wide streets, admiring the houses. Mort put his hands in his pocket and kicked at a pebble. Medium Man yawned. They acted as if they belonged, but if anyone bought that then Mort had a bridge for them. Finally, Mort put his arm out. Medium Man stopped, wiped the back of his hand across his nose, and asked:

"This it?"

"Yep," Mort said and took stock of the property.

One light burned in the back of the impressive Tudor with its peaked roof and leaded windows. In front, the outdoor fixtures were strategically placed for beauty, not safety. The flowerbeds pooled with a soft light that didn't reach the ridiculous sweep of lawn on which they stood. The front door was illuminated but brick arches shadowed the entrance. The houses on either side were set back on lots that were just as big as this one. Between them, beautiful old trees and flowering foliage created a natural sound barrier and screen.

Wordlessly they walked up the driveway, Medium Man cutting off to the side of the house and Mort to the shadows of the entry arches. When Medium Man came around again, Mort tended to the door.

A jab. A touch. A flick. A click and it was done.

Inside, they got the lay of the land. Mort had seen better but not by much. Medium Man, though, stood in the foyer with his mouth hanging open. He looked at the sweep of the grand staircase, the shiny marble floor in the entry, and the hardwood floors beyond that. He looked at the entry table and all the silver-framed pictures on top of it. Tears welled in his eyes when he saw the picture of a woman caught in a moment of happy surprise. She was so beautiful.

Medium Man wished he had a picture of someone like that to put in a frame. He was picking it up, thinking to take it with him, when Mort hissed:

"Don't touch nothin'."

Medium Man wiped the frame clean with his shirt, put it down, and circled back to Mort like a dog returning to the place where the scent was strong. They went up the stairs, Mort first. There wasn't a creak and that impressed Mort. The place was quality all the way.

Upstairs, there were five doors as expected. Three were closed; two ajar. Two standing open gave Mort a bit of a pause. People forgot stuff like closing doors and turning off lights, though, so he didn't think it was a big deal. He nodded to Medium Man who reached into his pocket for the gun. It was heavier than the knife he preferred, but Mort said they were there to do a job and not make a statement. Medium Man didn't quite understand that since he never said anything at work. Still, he never argued with Mort so he held the gun and waited for the signal.

When he got it, Medium Man went into the first room and bee-lined for the brass studio bed. A couch by day, the frilly cover was now folded neatly at the foot of the mattress. The woman in it made little sighing sounds while she dreamed. At first Medium Man's heart sank. She looked pretty and he hated hurting pretty things. When he got a little closer, though, he saw that she wasn't all that pretty so it was okay.

His footfall wasn't even a whisper on the plush carpet, yet as he raised the gun the woman threw back the covers and bolted out of bed. Shorter and stockier than he had imagined her to be, Medium Man was shocked as she lunged for her phone on the night table. He let out a yelp, threw out his arm, and knocked her back. She tumbled to the floor only to roll and push off again. This time, she lowered her head and ran straight for Medium Man. Her skull caught him hard under the ribs.

He doubled over with a grunt, the breath pushed out of him, and went down clutching at his stomach. The gun dropped out of his hand and fell with a thud to the floor. He could feel it against his knee but had no time to grab it up because the woman was everywhere: hands and teeth, arms and knees, hair flying, fighting silently like she was mute, fighting hard like she was an animal. She reached for his face and her nails grazed his cheek. Those nails were short so she didn't draw blood. Her nightdress was long and she tangled in it as she tried to scramble over him. He was mad that she was causing such trouble; he was repulsed by her big breasts, her plump butt, and her woman smell. Still, he was determined not to let her get the best of him so he kept pulling at her. Her foot caught his thigh and she tried to use it for leverage, but she got no traction. In fact, she got nowhere at all because Mort was there.

Yes, there he was, in the room filled with muffled grunts and desperate breathing. He grabbed the woman's arms and twisted her wrists one over the other, flipping her onto her back. Medium Man scampered up at the same time, swiping up the gun just as Mort knelt down hard on the woman's crossed arms.

"I coulda—" Medium Man began, but Mort shot him a look so he shut up.

The woman was gurgling like she was trying to say something, but her lips weren't working. Medium Man watched Mort, the master, as he looked into the woman's wild, terrified eyes. He put one hand on top of her head, and said:

"Hush now."

The woman trembled. She stopped struggling, and that's when Medium Man swooped down. He put the muzzle against her temple and pulled the trigger just as Mort moved his hand. The small caliber bullet made a clean exit on the other side of her skull. It brought with it bits of her brain and some bone and a spray of blood.

Mort brushed at the blood spray on his shirt, but it was only a reflex. He knew that you never got all the blood out of anything so it was stupid to think he could wipe it away. That was too bad since he was especially partial to this shirt. All in all, though, the job went okay. He would have preferred it went perfect, but he blamed himself for not anticipating this woman's reaction and preparing for it.

She was trained to listen for the slightest noise: a call, a moan, a cry in the night. It was her job to protect and she had tried as hard as she could to do it well. Mort admired that in the same way he admired Medium Man for doing his. He would tell that to Medium Man when they were in the car. It wasn't easy to do the kind of work they did. Now they were finished. It was time to go. Yet when he looked over at his *compadre* he saw that something was amiss. Medium Man was looking past him, so Mort turned his head to see what had caught the guy's attention. All he saw was a flash of yellow and what he thought was the heel of a foot.

Before he could do anything, Medium Man was out the door, his beloved knife in hand. Mort hung his head for a second and then picked up the gun his partner had dropped. He pocketed the piece and took a second look at the dead woman. If she were alive he would have apologized. He would have told her this wasn't part of the plan. He would have explained that there was no stopping Medium Man once he got the fever.

That was a pity.

Not a crying shame.

Just a pity.

Chapter 2

Murder behind the gates of Fremont Place was unheard of. A triple homicide, two of the victims children, in the home of a wealthy, young attorney was downright bizarre, and it was Finn O'Brien's bad luck that it was his first call since reporting to Wilshire Division. It was the kind of call that would put his heart crossways, as his mother would say. He would have agreed with her except his Irish heart had been crossways for years already – ever since Alexander died – and he had learned to live with it. He doubted what he found in Fremont Place could do more damage.

Finn made a right off Wilshire Boulevard, drove a hundred feet to the guardhouse and stopped at the waste-of-money fancy iron gates stuck into the high stone walls. Inside the shack, a kid barely out of his teens slumped over the desk. He was dressed in an ill-fitting, puke-beige, polyester shirt with an official looking patch on the shoulder.

When the kid realized someone was waiting on him, he swung his head and eyed the dark car and the man with the leather jacket and aviator sunglasses. It took a minute, but eventually he figured out who Finn was, dragged himself off his chair. He stood in the doorway of the faux house, arms hanging, his face so long he would have asphalt burns on his chin by the time his shift ended. Finn showed his badge knowing that the boy probably didn't register it. Finn started the conversation while he slipped it back in his pocket.

"Been here long, have you?"

"Since midnight."

"Nobody told you to go on home?"

He shook his head. "I didn't know what to do, so I figured I had to stay. My replacement should be here soon."

"Good boy to hang in." Finn swung his head in sympathy. "Tough times. I know how it is. Very rough for you, don't let anyone tell you different."

A little sympathy was all it took for the kid's mouth to run away with him. He stepped down, lowered his voice, and grabbed onto Finn's open window.

"The only people that came through belonged here. I logged every single car and called up to the houses to confirm visitors. I swear I did. Every. Single. Car. Nobody walked through. I would have done something if somebody tried to walk through. I have a good sense for stuff. If somebody tried to come in who shouldn't have been here, I would have known. If they had tried to talk their way in, I wouldn't have let them. I would have called someone. . . I. . ."

Finn winced as the boy talked. He had made those same declarations to anyone who would listen after his brother's death. If he had only known, Finn swore, he would have done heroic things. But he hadn't known because Finn had been seventeen and full of *hissself* as his mother told anyone who would listen. That day he was behind the bleachers, so lost in the deep wet kisses of a cheerleader that he forgot to pick the little boy up from school. The next time

Finn saw Alexander he was in a coffin, dressed in a stiff shirt and dark suit bought especially for the occasion of his burial. Still, if he had known what was going to happen, Finn swore that he would have been brave and he would have saved Alexander - or died trying. Finn's father had nodded as if he knew that to be true, his mother had held her oldest son to her and said she believed the same. It was bull but people were kind all those years ago, so Finn was kind now.

"There's no stopping the devil from his rounds. There's nothing you could have done," he said. "And if there had been, I know you would have done it. I can tell you're a brave sort by looking at you."

With that, the young man actually focused on Finn and the detective saw that he had eyes the color of caramel and a heart that was just as soft. He wouldn't have known a liar if he saw one. Finn lifted the edge of his lips and gave him the slightest nod. The boy's chest caved with relief. His relief proved Finn right; the boy didn't know a liar when he saw one.

"We're going to be needing to talk to you, so don't go upsetting yourself when someone calls. It will probably be me; might be my partner. Can't give you a name on that yet, but they'll identify themselves as working with Detective O'Brien. You being in law enforcement yourself, you know how an investigation goes. We'll want to be thorough. You understand?"

The kid nodded, and licked his lips, and nodded some more. He looked like a bobble-head doll.

"Rest up when you get home," Finn said. "Calm yourself. Don't think too hard about what happened last night. Sometimes you remember more things when you don't think too hard."

"Yeah, okay. Okay." The young man swallowed hard. Color was coming back to his cheeks, but it wasn't the right color for a healthy person. He straightened up. His voice was more measured when he said:

"The last car came in at one-thirteen. By the book."

"Good man." Finn handed him a card. "Hang on to that log of yours and give it over to your supervisor, not your replacement. If you think of anything call me. If you just find yourself needing someone to talk to, I can manage some time for that too."

If the boy answered, Finn didn't hear him. The detective's eyes were on the gate. The boy with the caramel eyes now knew what was what and they both had to get on with this terrible day. The kid stepped back, punched whatever button raised the gate, and by the time the arm lowered again he was slumped back in his chair. This time he was holding tight to the card with the words Finn O'Brien, Detective printed neatly under the logo of the LAPD.

As Finn drove on, he took note of his surroundings in the same way a boyo at the pub might admire a beautiful girl who was out of his league. Freemont Place was an impressive enclave: wide streets, big, beautiful houses, set backs the size of small parks, and garages bigger than most people's apartments. These stately homes were built of brick and stucco, leaded windows faced tree-lined streets, and inside the walls were crafted of real lathe and plaster. New money owned them, but old money had built them in the twenties. There were two elite schools and a tennis club within the boundaries.

Just beyond the gates that surrounded Freemont Place, the real world was a mash-up. Wilshire high rises, bustling during the day, were deserted after seven. A few blocks over were neighborhoods that had no names, and people of color owned houses with bars on the windows. A little further to the east was downtown Los Angeles. Hollywood spread north into the hills. Koreatown, Little Tokyo, and Chinatown were all within spitting distance. Fremont Place was a suburb held hostage in the heart of a big, ugly city and it just got a reminder of that in spades.

When he arrived at his destination, Finn parked his car behind a black and white and two panel vans. There were two more black and whites parked a half a block down. A uniformed officer watched the perimeter of the house while one stood on the porch, eyes forward.

Finn took note of the time and of the well-kept women huddled together in the street. They swayed like tall grass every time a whispered speculation or murmur of disbelief passed from one to the other. When Alexander was killed the women came to Finn's mother, too. They had casseroles and arms to wrap around her while the men lamented the horrible crime over their whiskey. These women would not bring casseroles to whoever was inside and there was no doubt someone was by the looks of the Jaguar in the driveway. The car was bronze-colored, top-of-the-line, and new. The trunk yawned. There was a suitcase still inside and two on the ground. One had burst open, and the contents had spilled over the concrete and brick. A wrought-iron gate stood open in front of the car and past that, deep into the property and hardly visible from where Finn stood, was a large garage. The folks of Freemont Place seemed to be fond of fancy, useless gates.

When Finn got out of his car, it was a lady with red hair who saw him first. She did a double take, touched the woman next to her, and said something. That woman looked at Finn and then another and another. It had been that way since he was thirteen and puberty ambushed his childhood. Overnight he had become a strapping man with a swagger. Of course, that was God's doing and not his. Kicking a soccer ball half his life had made him quick and graceful on the run but the swagger left no doubt he was not meant to fly. He did not regret that he looked like a tough – it was good for the job – but Finn regretted that sometimes the good people feared him because of it.

He went past the gaggle of neighbor ladies, acknowledged no one but looked for anyone who didn't seem overly curious, stunned, or horrified. That would be the person to talk to. Finn saw no one who fit the bill, so he didn't break his stride. When a news van pulled up Finn O'Brien gave it the evil eye for good measure, picked up the pace, and was past the cop on the porch before the van doors opened and the fools with microphones saw him.

Chapter 3

The heels of Finn's black boots made a hollow sound on the veined marble floor of the entryway only to muffle when he hit the intricately woven oriental runner on the staircase. The carpet was delicately colored in shades of ginger, melon, and okra and it was fastened to each riser by polished brass fittings. It did not escape his notice that there was a time when Irish maids polished those fittings. Now it was probably a Spanish-speaking woman who did the same. In fifty years another woman who had not quite melted into America's pot would be polishing the brass in this fine house. On it would go, the women disappearing but the brass always gleaming.

The bottom half of the wall on his right was wainscoted and painted in a whisper of beige. Above the wainscoting, wallpaper with a crosshatch bamboo pattern covered half a football field of stairwell wall. To his left were formal rooms and to Finn's right less formal ones. The house was immaculately kept. Nothing appeared out of place, but Finn jumped to no conclusions about what had gone on here. He looked at the stairs again, keeping his eyes down as he took them one at a time. He paused before stepping around the plastic tent that marked a spot of dried blood on the fourth riser. His eyes flicked further up and he noted two more yellow tents with numbers on them.

When the blood was scraped and the evidence collected, the markers would be gone but stains would remain. He would wager that the lady of the house wouldn't notice those little spots for a very long while. Finn, though, took a long look as he passed each one. They were not the result of an attack on the stairs because the drops were perfectly round as if dropped from a weapon or a wound held parallel to the ground. There was no spatter on the walls or the bannister. Above him, Finn heard the muted sounds of an investigation in full swing and when he looked up he saw that one cop had stopped to watch his progress. The guy was in decent shape, middle aged, and looked none too friendly. Finn put two fingers to his brow.

"Officer Mallard. Good to see you."

"Can't say the same, O'Brien."

Finn tucked his tongue into his cheek, taking a minute before making his way up the stairs to the landing. Once there, he stood beside the man, touched one finger to his shoulder, and inclined his head as if he were about to suggest meeting up for a pint when this dirty business was done. Instead he said:

"There are dead children in this house. Perhaps we could be civil so our bickering won't be the last thing their wee little souls hear before they go to heaven."

Mallard answered:

"Stuff the Irish crap."

Finn's smile faded as he stepped in front of the man. He wanted no mistaking what he was about to say.

"Here's the thing, Officer Mallard, my day has not started well. You see, my wife who had decided we needed time apart during the awful time that had befallen us, came to my apartment

last night. We made love. I was a happy man, Mallard. This morning my wife tells me that she hadn't intended to make love to me. Instead, she wants a divorce. Do you know why? Because my fellow officers have made our lives hell during the last many months. Ostracized us. Belittled us. Threatened us. She simply can't take it anymore so she is leaving.

"Now I have this horrible thing to attend to here, and that has just made the day a whole lot worse. In fact, all this has made me angry. I find it hard to do my job when I am angry. Since I am in charge, I suggest we make a pact in order to keep me from becoming raging. You will do your job and I will keep my temper. Is that understood?"

"You son o—"

Finn stopped the man with a look. His expression hadn't changed, but the light in his blue, blue eyes became hard and sharp so Mallard shut his mouth. O'Brien had a reputation and he didn't want to be the one to test it – at least not all by himself.

"Fine, then. I'm glad we understand one another." Finn gave the man a pat on the back.
"Now, where are the parents?"

Mallard indicated the double doors behind him. "In their bedroom."

"How long have they been in there?"

"About forty-five minutes. It took us awhile to get the wife to stay inside. She wanted to come out and . . ." Mallard seemed to find his vocabulary lacking. "She wanted to make sure, you know."

"That, I do," Finn muttered.

He reached into his pocket for his notebook but had to search for his pen. A mention of the victims' mother hit his heart. It was hard to see anyone in pain, but a woman who had lost her children was an unsettling thing. Finn knew exactly what had happened as they tried to herd the woman to neutral ground. She would have insisted that it was someone else's children dead in her house. Hysteria. Shock. Denial. Rich people were supposed to be masters of the universe, but they shattered like crystal when the world turned on them. Finn's mother was of a different sort. Her heart broke like pottery. It was picked up, patched together, and put back to use despite the chips and ill-fitting pieces. Finn didn't know which was the right way; he only knew that a woman's sorrow diminished a man's place in the world and Officer Mallard was no exception.

"And the husband?" Finn pulled his pen from the pocket of his jeans.

"He's in bad shape."

"And you?" Finn asked.

"That's rich, O'Brien," Officer Mallard snorted. He was feeling his oats again.
"Considering the source, if you take my meaning."

The man started for the bedroom and then thought again. This time it was his finger on the detective's shoulder. This time Mallard leaned in like he was going to suggest having a pint together. Instead, he said:

"You know, O'Brien, I would like to apologize." Finn turned, words of thanks on his lips. Those words were never spoken because Mallard came a little closer and said: "Leave your wife's number on the wall in the john when you get back to the office, and I'll call her."

Officer Mallard left Finn O'Brien staring at an empty space. A second later the detective turned his head to watch the man go only to find himself making eye contact with the technician who was dusting the front window. The tech was young and homely. Finn gave him a small smile. He smiled back. Finn appreciated the encouragement even though it probably wasn't that at all. It was just the secret handshake of the brotherhood of the shunned.

Chapter 4

Finn was back on the landing outside the bedrooms ten minutes later. He clutched his notes in both hands like a prayer book. His usually precise drawings had little shivers of squiggles at intervals too consistent to be a slip of the hand. Alone on the landing, he breathed deeply trying to find his hard core once more, the one that everyone was so sure was impenetrable. Raising his head, settling himself, Finn took some comfort that others in the house were busy doing the things that would ensure a conviction once Finn found the bastard who did this unspeakable thing. But these folks were cops and technicians and that worried him. He had expected a secondary detective on site and there was none. Not only would Finn welcome the assist, selfishly he wanted a witness to everything he did.

Reaching into his jacket, he stashed the notebook in favor of his phone. Before he could punch in the number for Wilshire Division, the door behind him opened. Finn glanced over his shoulder, put his phone away and turned full-face to look into the most beautiful room he had ever seen.

It was cavernous but the furnishings and the light flooding in through the leaded glass windows made it warm and inviting. There was a sitting area with a chaise covered in silk, a brick fireplace tall enough for a boy to stand in, and a king size bed, its four carved posters rising nearly to the ceiling. On the gleaming wood floors were big, deep rugs, the colors of which echoed the one he was standing on. Those rugs were laid at the side of the bed so a bare foot would never touch a cold floor and at the end of the bed so that a body could lie in front of the fire cushioned by the deep pile.

On the bed lay a woman. She was weeping, sobbing in such agony that it was hard to believe she was able to lie still. She clutched a large pillow in both arms as if it were the only thing that kept her from drowning in the waves of the yellow brocade duvet. There were more pillows mounded behind her in shades of yellow and gold, blue and crimson. Her knees were pulled up; her feet were shoeless. Judging by the length of her spine and the rise of her hip, she was slim and tall. Her long black hair was splayed out like an oil spill in that ocean of yellow. Even without seeing her face Finn knew she was beautiful, but he noted this dispassionately as a man in his position should. His objectivity was short lived, ending when the woman fell silent. That sudden silence caught him like a bullet in the gut. The man who came out of the room looked like the same bullet had hit him. Since it also appeared as if this man still had some wits about him, Finn took an educated guess and said:

"Doctor?"

"Yes." The man's voice was as flat as the look in his eyes.

"How are they?" Finn asked.

"You're joking, right? You find your kids hacked up like a side of beef? How would you be? Why don't you answer me that? If you can do that, then you know how in the hell they are."

The doctor exhaled through pursed lips. He had exhausted himself with his tirade. He ran his hands through his hair as he mumbled 'I'm sorry' and 'good Lord' over and over again. Calling on the lord didn't stop the shaking in his voice or put the tears of sadness and horror back behind his eyes. He swiped those away without embarrassment.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life. I mean, blood in an operating room is one thing. . . but this! I'm a plastic surgeon. A plastic surgeon, for God's sake." He held out his hands as though Finn could understand how little that meant in the face of such a tragedy. "Elizabeth called. She said 'the girls are hurt'. That's what she said. Holy mother. Elizabeth said, 'please come, the girls are hurt'. She said please. Can you imagine? Please."

He fell back against the wall; that pretty wall with the crosshatched pearl-colored paper. He fell so hard that the framed pictures of little girls growing up were knocked askew. The man plucked at the zipper of his sweatshirt that had seen better days and then pushed himself upright again. He pointed down the stairs like he was calling the last play of the big game and knew his team would lose.

"I come rushing over. I run upstairs. Elizabeth grabs me and drags me into that room. 'Put her back together, Donald', she says. 'Alexis. Put her back together.' I couldn't even look at the little one. I wanted to puke, but Elizabeth's got a grip on me like a vice. I never knew a woman could be that strong. She's usually such a gentle soul. She just kept telling me to put Alexis back together while Sam's running around like a crazy man, pumping on their dead little chests, yelling at them to wake up."

The doctor chuckled miserably. Tears rolled down his cheeks freely now. He sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"And the nanny. Can you believe something like this happened here? It's a mess, I tell you. It's a mess. I'm not cut out for this. What will I tell my wife? I tried to help, but good grief."

Finn touched the doctor in an effort to stop the incessant movement of the man's hands: hair, wall, zipper, pockets, hair again. If the doctor didn't stop he would be bald or naked before he left the house.

"You came. You stayed," Finn said. "Most wouldn't have done that."

"You do this all the time, do you?" He was oblivious to everything but where his own thoughts were leading. "Let me tell you, no one should have to deal with this. You should quit."

"The suggestion has been made before," Finn said and left it at that.

The doctor pulled in his lower lip and hung his head, probably taking stock of his fine life. It was a sure bet that he and the Barnetts would not be having drinks at the club again in this lifetime, but steering clear of these tragic people wouldn't change anything. The doctor would tell the story of this day for the rest of his life; he would tell it to anyone who would listen. The man might sell his house and move away. He would get religion, or get more if he already had it. In the end, though, the good doctor would be left with a big hole inside him that he would carry to the grave. He took another deep breath.

"Can I go home now? My wife is afraid." Finn nodded. So did the doctor. He was a man and men had to face up to the bad stuff. It was in the rulebook. They both knew that.

"I'll be needing to talk to the parents now," Finn said. The man shrugged.

"You can try, but I don't think you'll get much out of them. I wish they would let me call someone. A minister. A relative. Sam said no. Maybe when they're thinking a little straighter." The doctor was already half way down the stairs when he added: "If they ever do."

Finn barely heard him because the master bedroom door opened again. There was no mistaking who the man coming out of the bedroom was: the husband, the father, the lawyer, Sam

Barnett. He moved like a blind man familiar with his surroundings but when he reached for the banister Finn stepped forward and took his hand.

"Don't touch the railing. Not just yet," Finn cautioned.

Before Finn could let go, Sam Barnett's other hand clamped over the detective's wrist. Instinctively, Finn's muscles went tight and his feet repositioned for leverage. He looked the man in the eye, but when a look wasn't enough to back him off, Finn took one of Sam Barnett's fingers and bent it back. That should have broken his grip but Barnett was unfazed. He fought Finn as if they were playing some awful game. Instead of pulling backward, Finn stepped in until they were chest to chest.

"Let go, Mr. Barnett." He spoke as if he were talking to a puppy with a slipper. "Let go, man. Deep breath. From the gut."

Sam Barnett quaked and a second later he started to relax: neck, shoulders, arm. When it was time, Finn eased his hands away until they were separated. He stayed close to catch Barnett if he should collapse. He didn't. He put one foot in front of the other, hands hanging by his side, feet landing heavily on each step. He had the sense to navigate around the plastic markers. The doctor plastered himself against the wall to give his neighbor room. Finn moved to the bannister and looked over to make sure Barnett would have an escort. He motioned to Mallard who took him in hand and led him toward the formal living room that had already been cleared. As Mallard took the man's arm, Finn found himself distracted by a big haired, round-bootied blond who was standing aside to watch the two men go by. When the blond turned, the first thing Finn saw was her impressive, gravity-defying, breasts. He took time to admire them as any man with blood in his veins would. After that he took note of the shit-eating grin on her heart-shaped face and the helmet of big hair that was curled and teased from crown to shoulders.

"Hey, O'Brien." She greeted him with a honeyed voice that should have been singing at the Grand Ole Opry.

"Good day to you, Cori."

Chapter 5

"Not a week at Wilshire Division, Finn, and you're already drawing attention to yourself. You think you would have learned your lesson."

Cori drawled like a southern belle asking for a refill on her Julep as she came slowly up the stairs. But that wasn't what she was. Her drawl, like her hair, was a remnant of her teenage, Texas, badass days and she drank whatever anyone was pouring when time and circumstances allowed.

"I'm a bit of a slow learner, don't you know." Finn met her halfway and then Cori went up one more step to put them on even footing.

"Could have fooled me." Cori took hold of the zipper clasp on his jacket and gave it a little tug. "You can't catch a break. All this drama is getting kind of tiresome, if you ask me."

"You're preaching to the choir, woman." Any hint of a smile was gone. "This is an ugly one, Cori."

"They're all ugly, my friend." Cori let go of the zipper fob and gave that old leather jacket a pat just where it covered his heart.

"You speak the truth, but this falls on the far side of hell."

"Duly noted." She gave him the once over. Then gave it to him again as she said: "You look good. I like the shaved head. Makes you look like that movie star guy, Vin something. Turn." She put a finger against his jaw and turned his face just in case he had forgotten how to do it. "Man, those doctors did a good job. You can hardly see the scars."

"I can feel them. Always will, truth be told," he answered.

"Yeah? Well, shit happens. Get over it."

Finn chuckled when she let him go.

"It feels like forever and a Sunday since I've seen you."

"I've been crying in my beer, too," Cori answered, but Finn was not fooled. Her smile had softened and the pat she gave the scar that ran from his ear to his chin was gentle. She had missed him, he was sure of it. Had he asked outright, she never would have admitted it though.

Cori had stayed away from Finn for the last six months as much for her own sake as his and Bev's. The last thing she needed was the kind of trouble Finn had brought down on his head. Her job was just too important. The really last thing she needed was to get involved with a married man, especially one she worked so well with. Partners were a lot harder to come by than lovers. Not that Finn ever once gave any indication he felt that way about her. All she ever heard about was the beautiful Beverly. Cori couldn't blame him; his wife was a looker. Still, when he took her arm and stood her aside as the coroner's attendants went upstairs with their gurneys, there was that thrill. When Finn let go of her arm, they walked down the rest of the way in sync as they always had.

"Just passing through, Cori, or checking to make sure your old partner hasn't been tied to a stone and thrown in the river?" Finn asked.

"Silly you. We're in a drought. There's no water in the river. Besides, they wouldn't go to all that trouble. If they were going to do it, they would have just toss you off a building and be done with it." Their shoes hit the marble floor at the same time. She pointed left. "Let's talk in here."

Cori opened the dining room's double doors with both hands and went inside. Finn followed in her wake. He should have known it wasn't going to be smooth sailing, but by the time he figured out she was leading him into a storm it was too late.

Bob Fowler was waiting.

"You should have told me the captain was here, Cori. Or maybe the captain could have just said hello to me himself when he came in."

Finn planted himself near a sideboard that ran half the length of the room. His legs were splayed, and his hands were fisted in his jacket pockets. Bob Fowler had staked out the bay window overlooking the front yard at the foot of the impressive dining room table, and Cori took a neutral position at the head of it. She and Finn exchanged a glance: his was one of reproach and hers one that said 'bite me'. She didn't feel bad for agreeing to this. It wasn't an ambush, just an under-the-radar get together because the higher ups were nervous. Bottom line, Fowler was going to have this meeting with or without her. It was better with her.

"Three news crews. Two reporters from the Times. TMZ, of course. Harvey Levin himself is out there. It's a media zoo. Have you talked to them yet, O'Brien?"

Fowler unclasped his hands, squared his shoulders, and pivoted so that he could speak to them directly. Finn thought him very Kennedy-esque with his tousled hair and fine suit and photogenic face. He didn't know the captain well enough to dislike him, but he disliked his implication that he, Finn, was a fool.

"I talk when I have something to say, and even then I don't like it much."

"Best you get to like it a little more when it comes to talking to me. You will report directly to me and not hold anything back. I will control the info stream to the media on this one."

"Getting down to their level is an art, if you ask me. I'll be happy to learn it from you, captain."

Finn's lips twitched. The cut was instantly distasteful and he wished he could take it back. Fowler may not have been welcoming, but he had been fair when Finn arrived at the division. Above that, he was right about the situation and right, in the next instant, to call Finn out.

"You aren't the only one who is licking your wounds, detective. When you killed a cop, every cop in the country took it on the chin so don't get defensive."

"That officer was beating a defenseless man. He beat me. He would have beaten us both to death if he could."

"And it's over and done. You were acquitted."

"I never should have been charg—"

"That's enough," Fowler ordered.

Fowler might have been waiting for Finn to squirm but he realized soon enough that wasn't going to happen. He also knew that O'Brien had a right to his anger but this wasn't the time or place to relive recent history.

"I'm not minimizing the impact of what happened to you. What happened to the other officers involved was bad, too. None of it should have happened but it did, and now is not the time to argue vice or virtue. There are, however, a few things I would like to say.

"A week isn't long enough to know a man, and I don't pretend to know you. Therefore let me tell you something about me, and how I'm feeling about you catching this call. As a private citizen, I'm happy you'll be handling this. You've got something to prove, and that will make you work harder."

He put his hands flat on top of the gleaming table, and held Finn's gaze.

"Speaking as a cop, I'd like to see you screw up and get the hell out of my life."

His chest rose and fell with one deep breath and he righted himself again.

"Speaking as your captain, I want to assure you all the city's resources are at your disposal. Two little girls getting killed in their beds and a nanny executed is worse than our worst nightmare. I want this wrapped up fast, correctly, and professionally. I'm going to do everything I can to help you make that happen."

"Understood, but why bring Detective Anderson here to tell me that?"

Fowler's honesty had left Finn both admiring of the man and unnerved. Honesty wasn't something he often expected and now, this morning, he'd had two big doses of it – first from Bev, his wife, and now from this man.

"West L.A. agreed to a temporary transfer," Fowler answered. "She's going to partner with you on this one."

Bob Fowler looked her way and so did Finn. She was toying with her mother necklace: a gold chain with a pink glass bead for her daughter and a blue one for her grandson. Finn had never seen Cori without it, and he had never seen her anxious without touching it. She had good reason to be anxious because she knew it was an even bet whether Finn would blow up when he heard this news or let it slide and accept it. She wouldn't blame him if he blew up, but she would be grateful if he didn't. Cori was all about minimizing unnecessary grief.

"I thought you were working on the councilman, Cori? The assault with intent. That's a big one. Could put you on the fast track," Finn said.

"Cooper's going to wrap it up. It's not that big a deal." She dropped the necklace, put one hand behind her back and took hold of her purse strap with the other. The only thing she didn't do was make eye contact with Finn.

"Bull," Finn snorted. He turned to Fowler. "Schumacher is next up on the rotation."

"Schumacher won't work with you. None of them will," Fowler said.

"So Cori is my test case? If she comes out of this alive everybody will stand down for the Irishman? Is that what you're telling me?" Finn asked, his brogue hanging under his questions like a safety net.

"Don't go there," Cori snapped. "There's no coercion. I do what I want."

It didn't matter how she objected, neither man was listening to her. Fowler moved quickly, going the length of the table and stopping only when he and Finn were eye to eye. It was clear he hadn't been born in a suit; there was still a lot of street cop in him.

"Any other time I'd bust you for a comment like that," he growled. "It is disrespectful to everyone, not the least of whom is Detective Anderson. You will offer her an apology when we are done here. Further down the road, when you've had time to reconsider, I will expect you to apologize to me for implying that I would knowingly put any of my people at risk."

Fowler pivoted and went toward the window. He turned once more and came back. He turned again, talking as he paced.

"The press, your fellow officers, maybe even the victims' parents will be wondering if you're the right man for the job. You will be under a microscope, O'Brien, and that means Wilshire Division will be, too. I will give you every chance to prove yourself including seeing that you partner up right. Anderson has a track record with you and it has not escaped my notice that it's an excellent one."

Fowler paused and clasped his hands behind his back.

"You know one another, you bring complimentary sensibilities to this investigation. Anderson is a gift that I suggest you accept graciously. If you aren't up to it, let me know now. I want this investigation above-board."

"I appreciate Detective Anderson's willingness to assist, but I respectfully request reassignment myself." Finn said.

"Impossible." Fowler wagged his head as if testing how much room there was between a rock and a hard place. "There was a stringer at the station when this came in. He knew you were on the call. If I pulled you, the press would make it look like a departmental vendetta. There are a lot of people who think you're a hero for what you did out on the street. If you'd been killed, they probably would have petitioned the pope and made you a saint."

Fowler pulled out an upholstered dining room chair and sat down. Cori moved toward Finn. When she was so close that he could smell the scent of her hairspray, he inclined his head and she lowered her voice:

"We don't need anyone else. We never have."

"We're wasting too much time." Fowler rapped his knuckles on the table. "I'm not going to beg for your cooperation or explain myself further, O'Brien. Give the word and you walk, no questions asked. There's nothing I can do to get rid of you unless you screw up or voluntarily take a hike. I hope you don't do the former because I want this investigation clean. I doubt you'll do the latter because then you're out of options with the LAPD. Now, are you going to work with Anderson or what?"

Cori's elbow met Finn's. If she said it was good, then it was. He returned the pressure just before he said:

"Let's do it."

They walked out of the room together. Fowler went outside to meet the press; Cori and Finn went to commune with the dead.

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