



FOREIGN RELATIONS

By

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Foreign Relations
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For Ante Fistonich
The Real Finn O'Brien

"All of life is a foreign country."
Jack Kerouac

CHAPTER 1

5:42 p.m.

Freeway Overpass, Los Angeles

"Dang if I ain't gonna be shittin' your house, Taylor. I swear, you put your stash up close and it's just tickin' me off. That ain't no way to behave! Taylor!"

Number Four, as he preferred to be called, waved a long-fingered hand at the man who was getting under his skin. Taylor paid him no mind and that didn't set well with Number Four, this being his bridge and all. Folks on his bridge had to respect the space. 'Course it could be difficult stayin' respectable. He understood that.

His own nails were dirty and his white beard unkempt, but his space was laid out proper and there were laces in his shoes and his shirt was clean. In fact, his shirt was new, plucked out of the dumpster behind the sorority house on Hellman Way with the tags still hanging off it. Number Four liked the way those tags dangled under his arm, so folks could see he was no slouch 'cause his shirt cost twenty-four ninety-five. The shirt had red cherries embroidered on the blue cotton. It was a might small because it was made for a lady, so he left the buttons open across the chest. That was A-OK 'cause it showed off the scar he got in Nam, the one that Madam Sage liked so much. She hadn't been to the bridge for a good week or so, but no matter. She would show up one of these days. When she did, Number Four was determined that Madam Sage would be his. 'Course he wasn't quite sure what he'd do with her once he got her 'cause he surely hadn't been with a woman in a very long while. Truth be told, Number Four wasn't even sure Madam Sage was a woman. That was fine with him, too. He liked a little surprise now and again. What he didn't like was all the goddamn mess around his house. He also didn't like gettin' worked up and that's what was going on.

Number Four was gettin' itchy with upsettedness and thinking he might have to take action, so to speak. Once he broke a man's head clean open and that was a mess, so now he was cautious with his upsettedness as best he could be. Instead of ripping Taylor's head off his shoulders or tossing his stuff off the bridge, Number Four called out again.

"Taylor! Move this mess of junk over to that space there. Over there. Give me room to breath. Hear me, Taylor?"

"I hear you, old man," Taylor said back but he didn't move a muscle.

He lay still, hands crossed over his chest, his narrow head stuck inside the towel-draped pizza stand he had found behind Tony's on Third. During the day that contraption protected him from the L.A. sun as good as a cabana at the Ritz; at night Taylor believed he was disappeared if nobody could see his face. Yep, Taylor was smart making up the pizza stand shade but that didn't make the situation no better, so number Four picked up the edge of Taylor's towel and leaned right over him.

"Let me break it down for you Barney style, boy," Number Four growled. "Your stuff's in my way. If it stays there I'm gonna return the favor and shit in that cart of yours. You don't want that 'cause we all know it's hard to come by carts. Come on now. Come on and you move your skinny ass away."

Taylor took the towel out of Number Four's dirty fingers and put it over his pizza stand again. His voice was kind of muffled when he said:

"Nuts to butts tonight. Suck it up."

Number Four sniffed and snuffled and scooted himself back to his tent, a fine domicile he was prideful of. He had been working the off-ramp on Temple where the stoplight was long and folks couldn't help but notice his *will-work-for-food-god-fearing-veteran* sign when a lady in a fancy SUV got caught at the red. She fell all over herself apologizing that she had no money, thanking him for his service and then, holy crackers, that broad threw a box at him. She took off like a jackrabbit as soon as the light turned green.

The box was all wrapped in pretty paper. The card on it said 'Happy Birthday, Billy'. Inside the box was a little tent. Number Four lugged that tent to this overpass. Ever since that day this had been his place from dusk to dawn.

Now he sat in front of his child-size tent, his long legs crossed lotus style, his scarred chest warmed by the late afternoon sun. He didn't really feel like mixing it up anymore, so Number Four surveyed his territory. He hardly recognized the place these days. There were fourteen tents and three box houses, two bicycles - one without tires - twenty-two trash bags and two shopping carts. All of it was pushed up tight as a whore's hot pants on the narrow sidewalks that framed the two traffic lanes on the bridge. The cops wouldn't give 'em no trouble long as they followed the rules: don't obstruct traffic, bed down no earlier than five in the p.m. and clear out by seven in the a.m.

Middle class guilt.

Political correctness.

It was all good for a boy like Number Four.

As the sun set though his upsettedness kept itchin' so he didn't feel all that good. He looked over his shoulder and through the iron bar railing that sat atop the short concrete wall. He gazed at the freeway and the buildings and the sky. In the buildings poor people were leaving their work; the sky was as it always was, blue and clear; down below the cars were moving at a good clip.

"You go!" Number Four screamed at the cars and then he leaned his back up against the little wall, put his head against the metal railing and whispered: "You go, you bastards."

Number Four closed his eyes and let his head loll to one side. He listened to the sounds of traffic, and the woman without a name who read aloud from her bible, and the crazy guy, Cliff, who came along each night with a gaggle of imaginary friends he was always fighting with. Number Four opened his eyes and was about to tell Taylor he appreciated him being somewhat normal when he saw something that made him sit up straight.

A man and a woman were coming his way. They were moving kind of slow, the woman wobbling and the man holding her up against him. Drunk as a skunk or high as a kite, Number Four deduced. Either way, it was unbecoming of the fairer sex to be in such a condition. Her long hair was all over her face and the man had a hat on, so Number Four couldn't get a bead on him. He hated it when you couldn't see a man's face and he doubly hated that it seemed like they were looking for a place to set themselves down. Number Four got to his knees and squinted into the late afternoon glare. The upsettedness was a living, breathing, toadie thing inside him now.

When the woman stumbled and the man moved her over to the railing and leaned her up there, Number Four had no choice but to take action. He was on his feet, running through the tents and boxes, pushing aside carts and throwing around bags. He gave out a roar. He did not want those two on his bridge and hoped they would be afeared of his fierceness. When he rushed

them, the man turned to look. Number Four was blind with rage and the man was backlit by the setting sun so he still couldn't see the sucker's face when he got closer, but it was no matter.

Number Four went for him.

For them.

He did not want these people on his bridge.

No siree, he did not.

Private Estate, Mulholland Drive

Sharon Stover poured herself two fingers of scotch, caught up the phone and went out onto the deck. She was tall and buff and, by Hollywood standards, old at thirty-five. Sharon thought it was a bitch when her star dimmed and she was put out to pasture, but that was the way things happened in the business. Not to mention women with her particular attributes weren't exactly in demand.

Still, by anyone's standards, her pasture was pretty damn green. She had reaped the benefits of her hard work, good fortune and, at times, intelligent and strategic avarice. She was unapologetic for the latter, grateful for the good fortune and proud of the work she had done when she was on her game.

Right now, though, fortune wasn't smiling on her and she was ticked. Actually, she was not so much ticked as she was worried. When Sharon Stover worried she sounded ticked and acted like a bitch on wheels, a behavior that most people put down to the poor hand life had dealt her. If they were holding the same cards, they all agreed, they would be none too pleasant either. What happened to Sharon, though, was actually a blessing in disguise. It had given her life renewed purpose and she bit into her cause like a pit bull taking hold of the jugular. Right now someone was trying to pry her jaws open and she wasn't happy about that. All this work was for nothing if she didn't have the last piece of the puzzle that was promised to her.

Since there was no one around to bitch to, Sharon lowered her blood pressure the only way she knew how: she stood on the deck, looked at the view, breathed deep and drank. When she was done with the ritual Sharon rested her glass on that rail, let her eyes roam over the incredible vista and welcomed the calm that came over her. This had been her go-to place for peace since the first time she'd seen it.

Her late husband, Frederick, had spent two million back in ninety-two to suspend an infinity pool over his slice of Mulholland Canyon in the Hollywood Hills. Frederick had been warned that building the pool would end disastrously when the big one hit. Since the architect and contractor had been the best money could buy, Frederick had every confidence that he would be lounging in the pool, cocktail in hand, as L.A. crumbled in the distance. In the off chance that the naysayers were right, Frederick was happy that he would at least go out in style. If there was one thing Frederick had it was style.

A year after the pool was finished he spent another hundred thousand to extend the teak deck. W Magazine featured the pool and the deck on the cover. It was unheard of for a fashion magazine not to have couture on that prime spot and the editor took a lot of flack for her decision. Frederick Stover's deck and pool, the besieged editor argued, set design precedence. He had taken a risk, produced what others said was impossible, raised the lifestyle bar and that, after all, was what W was all about - celebrating the impossible and the impossibly chic.

Sharon, usually hard to impress, was so taken by the picture that she drove herself up to the house, got over the tall gate - which wouldn't have kept a cat out much less someone as

talented as she was - and made her way to the deck just to see what it felt like to stand on it. Security was alerted to an intruder but they weren't needed. Frederick Stover had already found Sharon taking a dip in the pool, naked and unapologetic.

Frederick knew a lot of women in Hollywood like her - beautiful and bold - so he was prepared to entertain her until he was no longer entertained by her. But when she got out of the pool and he saw her leg, Frederick was gob-smacked. Poor guy had a thing for flawed beauty and Sharon's flaw put the beat back in his heart. He married her six months later and had the decency to die three years after that leaving her the caretaker of everything he had created in life: his house, his fortune and his kid. Right at the moment, given the gamble she had taken with that legacy, Sharon's life felt like a house of cards standing in the path of a tornado

She picked up the phone, dialed again and then listened to a phone ringing while she focused on the ribbon of freeway running through downtown and thought about how much she had to lose if that phone wasn't answered soon.

110 Freeway North, Approaching Downtown L.A.

"The captain hates us with a hatred deeper than the deep blue sea, Cori."

Finn O'Brien, detective new to the Wilshire Division, drove and grouched, complaining as he had complained since finding out that he and Cori had drawn twice the community relations assignments than anyone else.

"Oh Lordy, stop squattin' on your spurs," Cori chortled. "We're the new hands on the ranch so we get to clean out the stalls. Simple as that. Besides, we don't have anything on the books that can't be set aside for a few hours."

Cori Anderson adjusted her visor against the late afternoon glare, but she couldn't find the sweet spot to block that low hanging ball of fire. Only time and physics would solve the problem of the sun; Finn's whining she could do something about.

"Maybe Fowler sends us out more often because we're the best looking of the bunch."

"That I'll grant you." Finn raised his chin, took one hand off the wheel and ran it over his shaved head. Cori snorted, amazed as always at how simple it was to get a peacock to spread his tail feathers - even one named Finn O'Brien.

"There are worse things than being sent out to talk to a bunch of kids about police work," she reminded him. "Not to mention we're good at it. We had them eating out of our hands."

"Sure, look it," Finn said back.

Cori smiled. She liked the way the Irish popped out of her partner now and again to oil the gears of their daily grind. Fifteen when he immigrated, his heritage was too ingrained by the time 'his teenage self' got to this country for him to lose the brogue completely. Not to mention his huge family was as thick as thieves, so the culture had moved across The Pond with them and flourished in the California desert that was L.A. Cori wondered if she would find Finn as fascinating if he sounded like all the other rodeo clowns who were chasing her tail. That, of course, was a moot point since Finn O'Brien had no interest in her tail. If he had, there would be no need for him to chase it. Yet after four years as partners - save for the six months of his troubles - the eye he cast on her wasn't lusty. It was one filled with respect and friendship. Cori was smart enough to take what she could get and be grateful for it.

"Some day I want you to tell me what 'sure, look it' means," Cori sighed.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you." Finn turned his head just enough to cast a smile her way; the one that hooked her heart every time he floated that lure.

"You'd be in for a fight," she drawled and tossed aside her romantic nonsense.

Finn O'Brien did not fit into the grand scheme of her life because the baggage he brought was unwieldy and heavy: a soon to be ex-wife, the distrust of his peers, and always the memory of Alexander, his long-dead brother. Truth be told she was no catch either, saddled as she was with an eighteen year-old kid who had a two year-old of her own.

Never one to waste time wishing for what couldn't be, and a firm believer that life was neither fair nor neat, Cori turned her head and eyed the graffiti spilling across the retaining walls of the freeway. She saw nothing new, just the tags of the usual suspects. Cori was neither outraged at the vandalism nor admiring of the artists' talents. The graffiti was just something more interesting to look at than cars.

"The one with the tats was really hearing you," she said. "How can you complain about that?"

"It's not the kids I'm complaining about, Cori. I like them. Yes, indeed, I like them."

Finn's voice dropped a note and Cori knew exactly what he was thinking. Those kids - those high school boys - reminded him of his brother. If Finn hadn't been a self-important, self-indulgent, cocky seventeen-year-old who couldn't tear himself away from the charms of a cheerleader, he would have remembered to pick Alexander up from grammar school. Instead, Alexander was abducted and killed. In all these years, Finn still believed he could have saved the boy but for his own selfishness. Cori on the other hand believed that it was Alexander's time and for some reason Fate wanted Finn to bear the burden of something that was preordained.

"You know, Cori," Finn ventured when the silence had stretched too thin for his liking. "Maybe the captain is still trying to keep us from joining the rank and file. Maybe that's why he keeps us on the run. I'm thinking he should put us in the bullpen and give the rest of them a chance to forgive and forget."

"It's going to take a lot of time for everyone to forget that you killed a cop," Cori reminded him. "I vote we don't push it."

"That officer was beating a man to death. He almost beat me to death."

Finn's hand went to the scars on his neck and at his jaw. Cori didn't think he was aware of what he was doing or how often he did it. She wanted to take his hand away from them and hold it in hers. Instead she said:

"Knowing that doesn't make the next guy in a uniform feel better when he turns his back on you. Fowler knows what he's doing. He'll move us when the time is right." She crossed her arms, closed her eyes, put her head back on the seat and settled in. "Besides, you're with me. That should enough for any man."

Finn glanced at his partner and smiled. She had stood by him, stood up for him, transferred from the Westside to partner with him at Wilshire Division when no one else would. He didn't deserve such goodness and she deserved so much more than him.

Her blonde hair - big, bold, sweeping with the tease and curl that a Texas girl thought of as the height of fashion - was spread out across the back of the seat and glittered gold in the sunshine. Under the corner of her sunglasses he could just see a hint of crow's feet at the edge of her eyes and a sparkle of blue shadow. Her lipstick had worn off and her lips were soft, peach colored and full. She was a strong woman, a truly beautiful woman, a . . .

"Look at me like that a minute longer and I'll file a complaint," she muttered.

Finn laughed. He took the steering wheel with both hands, checked his mirror and merged into the fast lane.

"You are a frightening woman, you are."

Cori opened her eyes and raised her head.

"Yeah, and you're a — "

Cori never finished her thought. She bolted upright, pointed and screamed, "Finn."

"Holy mother of God!"

Finn hit the brakes just as he saw what Cori was seeing: a body hurtling off the bridge ahead of them.

CHAPTER 2

5:42:10 p.m.
110 Freeway

Finn threw his body right and then left as he worked the brakes in split seconds: pumping, pausing, pumping again as he tried to control the spin. He clipped the tail of the Mercedes in front of him. The impact pinged the Crown Vic into the median, sending the heavy car tipping on two wheels so that the chassis grated against the concrete. When they slammed back down onto the asphalt they were still behind the Mercedes.

Ahead and behind, cars crashed into one another in a sickening, uncontrolled chain reaction that compromised cars in the next lane and the lane next to that. Cori and Finn heard the grind and crunch of metal, the despairing, impotent blare of horns, the screech of tires. Only the two far right lanes flowed on, the drivers slowing in horror before speeding ahead to beat the shutdown they knew was coming. An accident - big or small - proved what all Angelenos knew: Samaritans were seldom good when it came to people who found themselves in need on the freeway.

Beside Finn, Cori had been thrown forward. A second later she was slammed back against the seat. Her neck snapped, her brain scrambled and the breath was knocked out of her as the seat belt caught. Their car bucked one last time before Finn brought it to a stop sideways across two lanes of the freeway. The driver side door was dented and the front end of the Crown Vic was rippled.

"Hang on, woman. One more coming."

With his eyes glued on the rearview mirror, he took Cori's hand in anticipation of the coming impact. The car behind them hit hard, pushing them up against the Mercedes so that they came to rest at an angle. On two wheels once more, they were at least balanced.

"I'm good." Cori was out of her seat belt, sliding toward the door as she ordered Finn to 'hold me'.

She turned as far as she could and put her back into him. Finn's arms came around her. His breath was hot on her neck and his hands were clasped under her breasts. Cori grunted and wiggled and maneuvered until her knees were up.

"I need more room."

Finn pulled himself up and back, taking her with him and giving her the room she needed to raise her legs. She put her feet against the door. Once, twice, three times she kicked. When the door swung open, gravity pulled her out of Finn's grasp and she tumbled out of the car. Finn scrambled out after her. Directly behind them the cars were piled upon one another and behind that the traffic was backing up. The line would stretch for miles and shut down the Santa Monica, Harbor and Hollywood freeways for hours.

"Ten, maybe twelve vehicles involved," Finn said before being distracted by the cars cutting into the free lanes, putting themselves and others in danger as the drivers tried to get away. "Asses. They're going to cause more trouble."

He ran toward the mess, throwing himself in front of one car and then the next one, arms out, palms up as if to push the cars back. One got by him. He made sure the next car would have

to stop or take him out. Before the driver could decide whether vehicular manslaughter was worth getting to his meeting on time, Cori was there.

"I got this, O'Brien!"

She had one flare already lit and others cradled in her arms. Cori tossed the first one onto the ground, lit another and pointed it at the drivers, crisscrossing the lanes until they understood they were going nowhere. Engines shut down, hundreds of people reached for their phones. They called the cops and radio stations to report what was happening; they called their agents to cancel that life-changing audition. One helicopter was already overhead. Paramedics, fire trucks and black and whites were on the way. On the other side of the freeway, southbound traffic had slowed so everyone could take a gander at the mess on the northbound.

Finn left Cori to her work and ran back to the tangle of cars. He counted eight behind his own vehicle. The drivers at the far end were out, surveying the damage to their cars. The two closest to the Crown Vic were in bad shape: a woman and children were in one and three teenagers in the other. Finn was about to assist when he saw a motorcycle officer weaving through the mess. He flagged him, identified himself and left the officer to deal with what was behind while he went to tackle what was up ahead. The Mercedes was his first stop.

"Police," Finn called and then gave a thumbs-up when the man behind the wheel looked his way. "Okay? Okay?"

The driver nodded and that sent Finn on to the next car and the next as he conducted a cop's triage: a fast look, a quick assessment, a sharp, cold eye that determined who needed help and who only needed comfort. Two people were out of their cars and bleeding. The driver of one was still behind the wheel, slumped over, unconscious. Finn left the driver where he was and got the other two on the ground. The response vehicles were on scene. Help would arrive just in time for these folks, but it might be too late for whoever was in the lead car. That one was crumpled into the overpass pilings, its front end split like a hair lip. Black smoke billowed from under the hood, and as Finn got closer he saw a lick of flames and the woman torpedoed through the windshield of that car.

The jumper from the bridge was splayed across the hood of the lead car. One leg was in the fire. One arm was outside the window. A white bone had punctured her skin above the elbow and was sticking upward, her other arm was beneath her. Her head and shoulders were inside the vehicle resting on the steering wheel that had been pushed forward, pinning the driver.

The woman behind the wheel was so bloodied she appeared to be melting. Her mouth was open to scream but Finn could hear nothing. The smell of burning flesh mixed with that of oil and gas. Knowing there wasn't much time, Finn grabbed hold of the door handle and pulled. It didn't budge. He called through the crack in the window.

"Unlock! Unlock!"

Finn pointed and pounded but the driver couldn't tear her eyes away from the woman who was only inches from her. Finn called again, his voice loud but tempered in the hopes that his calm would be contagious. "Unlock there, missus. The door. Come on now." Having no choice when she didn't respond, he raised his voice. "Push the damn button, woman!"

The driver turned her head, her mouth still agape, the green of her eyes set off by the red of her own blood. She blinked. A spasm shook her and then Finn heard the click of the lock. He depressed the handle. The door was stuck so he stepped back, put one booted foot against the body of the car and yanked until it opened with a banshee screech of metal-on-metal. When it would go no further, Finn wedged himself into the small space he had cleared.

"She just came through the window. Out of nowhere. I couldn't stop."

The driver's words fought for space in a mouth trying to gulp air through the smoke that was filling the car. She coughed. She sputtered. She touched the blood on her face and then looked away from Finn to the jumper.

"I killed her," she wailed.

"She's not dead," Finn said, knowing God would forgive him if that were a lie. He put out his hand. "I can't help her until you are away. Do you understand? Can you do your belt?"

Her chin rose, but he didn't wait for it to fall in agreement.

"Do it now," he ordered.

She hesitated.

"Do it!" he shouted.

Finn heard the click. The belt retracted.

"Pull out your arm."

"I can't move. The wheel. . ."

She breathed in but not out. She screamed as the fire flared, engulfing the jumper's leg. Finn ignored the flames. People in distress survived by looking at what was in front of them: one horror in a given minute, one blow against despair, one opportunity for salvation. The jumper wanted to die so she would be last; this one did not and that was why she would be first.

"On your left," Finn directed. "Take hold of the seat control and push it back. Take hold and push back. Back. Back. Not forward. Back."

The woman tried desperately to follow his instructions but in her fear she was moving the electric seat forward, pushing the steering wheel tighter against her body. Finn threw himself across her and she screamed in pain. He stretched but found he couldn't reach the levers that controlled the forward and backward movement of the seat so he pushed the levers he could reach. The seat jolted and fell backward into a steep recline. Having no choice, he pushed the jumper's head aside and thought he heard her moan. The heat inside the car was becoming unbearable. Underneath him, the bloodied driver screamed again.

"We're going to burn; we're going to die."

"No one is going to die," Finn muttered as he scrambled backward, shoving her seat belt aside.

He squeezed through the door, dragged the woman out after him, and threw his arm around her shoulders. Together they ran for the now empty northbound lanes. At the perimeter he twirled her onto the ground.

"Stay put," he ordered but by the time he turned back to the car she was crawling away, sure that there was safer ground to be had.

Finn squeezed into the car once more. Coughing, swiping at his tearing eyes, he knelt on the seat, put one big hand on the jumper's shoulder, the other on the crown of her head and pushed. Her clothes ripped, the skin on her shoulder shredded as he worked her out through the shattered window.

When that was done, Finn scrambled out of the car and reached for her legs intending to swing her toward him only to find his hand stuck to her melted nylon stocking. When the flames surged, he roared against the pain and tightened his grip, hauled her down the sizzling metal, caught her by the waist, and pulled her close. Her exposed bone punched into his ribs and her useless arm felt liquid against his body. Finn tried to run, but he was hobbled by the woman's weight. They didn't get far before he heard the rumble of the greedy flames as they met accelerant.

Knowing time had run out, Finn threw the woman onto the ground and flung himself on

top of her, covering her face and burying his own in the crook of her neck. A microsecond later the car blew. Shrapnel and cinders rained down on them and a ball of heat rolled over Finn O'Brien's back. He pushed himself tighter into the woman beneath him: protecting her, shielding her, saving her even though she didn't want to be saved.

When it was over, when behind him the car burned out and the fuel was spent, Finn rolled away. He was near deaf and could not hear the pounding of the firemen's feet as they rushed toward him. He was in shock and could not feel the burn that had blackened his hand. He coughed but he was too weak to pull the air back into his lungs. Through his smoke ravaged eyes, he stared at the bright blue sky. As his vision cleared, Finn found himself looking into the face of a white bearded man high above him and thought that, perhaps, he had died and gone to heaven. Surely, though, it was not God he was looking at. God, the good nuns in his village had assured him when he was a boy, was merciful and kind. God was love, they said. The face of this white-bearded old man was angry and hateful. Finn turned his head and looked into what should have been the dark eyes of the woman next to him. He wanted reassurance that the sisters had not been wrong. He wanted to see that God was merciful and the woman was saved.

She was not.

Those eyes were already faded in death. It was too soon for that, Finn thought. She had jumped no more than fifteen minutes earlier and those lifeless eyes confused him. Yet, if by some miracle her soul had not departed and she could still see, Finn did not want her taking the sight of that angry old man and this hell to her rest.

He put his blackened fingertips on her eyes and closed them.

The Presidential Suite, The Ritz Carlton

Rada checked the time, raised the remote control and turned off the television. He had been watching the news as he often did in the places his work took him. Everywhere in the world had many problems and when he saw news of them he was consoled that his country was no different. People suffered everywhere.

He stood up and took his jacket off the chair where he had hung it so as not to wrinkle the cloth. This chair was covered in white satin and placed at the head of a gleaming glass table. There were eleven more equally beautiful chairs around the table, awaiting twelve guests who would never come. Only one man was expected. That he had not arrived was a problem.

Rada went to the long mirror in the hall where he put his jacket on, buttoned it, and rotated his shoulders until it was comfortable. He tugged at the coat so that it properly covered the holster he wore under one arm. When he was done, Rada looked at his reflection to make sure that everything was as it should be: black suit, white shirt, black tie and polished black shoes. His skin was the color of tar. His hair was cut short, his features were broad and coarse. He did not look like many of his countrymen but that was why he had been chosen for his job. The man in the next room preferred his servants ugly and those who amused him, beautiful. If Rada ever wondered which he was, all he need do was to look in the mirror.

With one last tug on his jacket, Rada nodded to his image. In this way he gave himself courage. Even after all this time, even though Rada was huge and the man he served small, Rada was afraid. When he was ready he turned precisely, walked across the exquisite living room and paused at the door to the bedroom suite. He knocked. When he did not hear the customary 'come' his heart beat a little faster. Rada knocked again. When there was still no answer, he turned the knob and slipped into the bedroom. He did not do this shyly but with caution, ready for whatever

he might find.

He found nothing.

The large bed was made, the food on the table was eaten and the man he served was sitting at the desk reading papers, his big satchel next to him on the floor. The man's brow was creased as he concentrated on his important work. Rada waited to be noticed and while he waited, he considered the man.

His suit was very expensive but it did not look well on him. He was too short and round for the length of the jacket; his light brown skin was no compliment to the green fabric, fine as it was. His graying goatee was handsome but his small black eyes glittered in a way that Rada did not like. Rada was careful not to dwell on these thoughts because he believed the man at the desk could read his mind. He was sure of it when the round-faced man looked up and seemed to consider how to reprimand Rada for thinking ill of his suit. The moment passed and he smiled in a manner that seemed friendly but was not. He smiled as if it were sad that Rada was not a better man. Then the man he served looked back at his papers and said:

"Oliver should have been here by now. It is not like him to be late."

"No, sir. Perhaps he has found the thing you are looking for."

"He would have called." The man licked one finger and turned a page. He glanced up. "Perhaps he doesn't know where to look, although he said he did. Where would you hide something so precious, Rada?"

The man he served licked his finger again and turned one more page. This time, though, he peered through half lowered lids at Rada. He looked like a snake.

"I would not know."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't," the man chuckled. Then he sighed and began to stack the papers. "And Oliver. He is quiet, is he not, Rada?"

"Quiet?"

"About important things. There is a word. I don't know it. He never quite tells you the whole truth of a thing does he, Rada?" The man continued to call Rada's name as if he were truly speaking to him, which he was not. He was speaking to himself, considering whether or not Oliver pleased him and whether the man was trustworthy enough. "And Oliver would expect his bag of silver, would he not? If he had found it, Oliver would not be quiet then. He would be loudly saying 'give me my silver, I have done as you wanted'."

The man finished stacking his papers and then sat back in his chair. He tipped his head. This time he did talk to Rada. He asked a question he often asked, a question that had no true and right answer.

"And you, Rada, would you want a bag of silver if I asked a favor?"

"No, I would not."

"And why would you not? You have a wife and she is to have a child. Would you not like money to buy them things?"

"I serve you for the good of our people."

"Yes. Yes, you do." The man sounded disappointed by Rada's answer. He should know better than anyone that Rada had no choice in anything, not even his words.

"Is the car ready?" the man asked as he gathered up his papers and put them into the large satchel by his chair.

"It is waiting," Rada said. Before he could cross the room to retrieve the satchel, he felt a slap on his back and heard the most hated voice of Oliver.

"That car may be waiting, mate, but you're not going anywhere."

The Australian swung into the room like a child playing a game. He wasn't as tall as Rada but he was more powerfully built. Oliver was as fair as Rada was dark, as free as Rada was slave and he took Rada's big arm in both his hands and gave him a little shake. His grin was bright and cruel.

"Been workin' out there, Rada? Nice and hard, aren't you? Bet the missus loves it when you finally get home and give her a good roll."

Rada did not flinch, he did not smile, nor did he hit the man for his disrespect because that was what Oliver wanted. As always, the Australian quickly tired of goading the big man, let go of Rada's arm and sauntered toward the desk where the short, round man sat. The man they both served had taken his seat again. He smiled when Oliver perched upon the edge of the desk as if he were a son or the son of a son to this man. Rada hated him more each time he saw Oliver because he was false. This man, this Aussie, was a friend to no one. He was the son of a dog and served only those who could pay his price. Rada's country had been paying his price for a very long time.

Oliver's suit jacket was slung over his shoulder, held there with the crook of one finger. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled back exposing tattoos that started at the man's wrists and journeyed up his arms in swirls of red and black and blue. Rada knew this man's entire upper body was covered in ink, permanent pictures of bloody wars and bloody Christs - the bloody Aussie.

"Where have you been?" The man they served asked.

"Earning my keep." Oliver grinned charmingly, looking more like a university lad than the mercenary he was. He pushed aside a shock of white/blond hair. "Been a rough day."

"Then you have it?"

Oliver shook his head. "Just been doing some digging, friend, but the lady I was making inquiries of is stubborn. Give the word to put on the pressure, and I'll get you that embarrassing little item a whole lot quicker, mate."

"I do not want to draw attention unless there is no other way, Oliver."

"I'm smoother than that. I'd make no trouble that would be noticed. Cross my heart."

Oliver crossed his heart but sneered at the promise he was making. To him everything was a joke and trouble always came with him.

"I only want the thing in my hand. You said it would be easy," the man snapped and Rada was pleased that the Australian had incurred this man's displeasure. Oliver, though, did not seem to notice, or, if he did, he enjoyed ignoring it. That would be a dangerous thing for anyone but Oliver.

"Nothing is ever that easy. But I'm telling you, I've been busy. I have it all laid out and tonight we're going to turn the screws just a little bit. I won't expect payment until your satisfied, so there's nothing to worry about on that score."

"It's not about money. Time, Oliver," the man with the goatee said. "We have little time if the information we have is correct."

"Oh, it's correct alright. No doubt about that."

"That does not ease my worry." The little man stood. He picked up his case and held it out to Rada. "We are expected. Come, come. Let us talk in the car."

"Not right now, mate. I have a few calls to make and I need a shower. Besides, nobody's going anywhere fast." Oliver pushed off the desk and tossed his jacket on a chair. He sauntered over to the bank of windows and held back the sheers. "Seems there's been a little mishap."

Rada and the man he served moved to the window. Rada kept a respectful distance but he

could see the freeway far below. Southbound traffic was stopped. Four lanes on the freeway itself and two on a sweeping transition roadway were backed up for miles. In the middle of the mess, a semi truck had collided with a small car. Rada knew those in the small car were more than likely dead because it was folded in on itself. If the people were not dead, they would be soon because the rescue vehicles were blocked a mile back. On the other side, the northbound lanes were empty. It was an eerie sight. The freeway that had seemed like a living thing was now quiet, dead.

"It's a bloody mess down there, mate. A bloody, bloody disaster."

Oliver and the man they served chuckled and then they laughed. Only Rada stayed silent as he wondered why suffering was the one thing that made these men happy.

USC Parking Garage

She walked with her eyes forward, her shoulders back, arms swinging despite the heavy backpack she carried that was stuffed with books on microbiology, physical examination and health assessment and radiology. She walked that way because walking it made her look strong and empowered, and carrying her key's like brass knuckles made her believe she could take down anyone who tried to mess with her in this deserted garage - which actually wasn't deserted at all.

There was something going on in the old red car parked three spaces down from where her own was parked. At first the girl thought it was someone having a quickie because she saw the clothes coming off: a hat, a jacket. She was about to look away, hurry past and get to her car without making a big deal of it until she realized there was only one person in that red car and that one person was acting really strange. Not to mention the driver door was open and the trunk popped. When he started throwing his arms around and banging his head on the steering wheel the hairs on the back of her neck went up.

In self-defense class they said trust your gut so when the guy in that car looked like he was going to get out of the car, she turned around and got the hell away. She didn't run but she walked really fast and bee-lined for the security kiosk on the second level. There she reported what she'd seen, brought the security guy with her to the first level and I.D.'d the car for him. She stayed back while he went to check it out.

"Whoever it was is gone," he said when he returned. "The car's locked, but you never know. Sometimes I find those people who live on the bridge in here, trolling around, finding an unlocked car to sack out in. If that's what it was, the guy is gone, but I'll wait until you get into your car."

She thanked him, got in her car and drove away. Behind her the security guard took down the license plate number of the red car. If it was still there tomorrow, the morning guy could decide whether or not to have it towed.

CHAPTER 3

On Wednesday, the day after a homeless woman jumped off a bridge and caused an epic pileup on the 110 Freeway, it was eighty-eight degrees at nine a.m. and everyone was hot under the collar.

That morning, the Los Angeles Times ran an impressive story about the city's dire homeless situation. The newspaper railed against the injustice of it all citing the lack of resources, lack of community assistance, and lack of housing for the growing number of the disenfranchised. The newspaper published a call from one local politician who wanted to raise taxes to pay for a four hundred million dollar outreach. The politician had not formulated a plan as yet, but he was sure four hundred million dollars would do the trick. He was also positive that the taxpayers' pockets would prove to be as deep as their empathy.

The paper ran a sidebar about the young unidentified woman who, in the depths of despair, had jumped to her death. This was interesting since the reporter could not know if the woman was in the depths of despair. It was, after all, impossible to interview the dead and no one who knew her had come forward to attest to her state of mind. The intrepid reporter had even managed to slip into editorial mode noting that the traffic in L.A. was to blame and global warming, of course, was more than likely a factor in her unsubstantiated despair.

None of the articles mentioned the strain on city services that both the homeless and the accident caused, the heroism of those who responded to the emergency, the lack of safety measures on the overpasses or the fact that nine regular working stiff had been hurt badly enough to land them in the hospital, two in critical condition. The article was accompanied by a picture of the mayhem: a burning car, the woman's covered body, first responders working the jaws of life, homeless folk hanging over the railing looking at the bloodied people in suits and ties. All of this took place under the ethereal golden glow of the setting sun. That night, the freeway reopened at ten-fourteen. Since this was right up there with parting the Red Sea, every media outlet carried the story as breaking news.

On Thursday, it was ninety-two degrees at eleven in the morning. The suicide, subsequent collision, and the homeless had been knocked off the front page by a tear-jerker of an article about a family of illegals who were barely able to feed themselves on food stamps after their gangbanger son's drug income dried up when he was incarcerated. There was also a piece on militant actors rebelling against the lack of diversity on the silver screen, and, finally, the requisite story of evil businesses fleeing the tax burdens of California. In a stunning statement, the governor swore the Golden State would have its revenge by boycotting said businesses. The state would no longer buy dog food or bike accessories from the traitors who had turned their corporate backs on California. It was a move that was sure to wreak no havoc on either the state or the corporations, but it made for a wonderful quote of outrage from the governor's people.

Finn O'Brien did his part and showed his disgust of big business by tossing the L.A. Times in the trash. The only thing he wanted to know was not on those pages; he wanted to know who the dead woman was.

Now it was Thursday afternoon and Finn was sorry for leaving his leather jacket in the car

because the room in which he stood with Paul, the Los Angeles County Coroner, was as cold as the body on the table. Paul, always one to enjoy a little chitchat before getting down to business, was bent from the waist, his glasses raised as he took a good look at the bandage on Finn's left hand.

"That's a fine job. Lovely wrapping. Top of the line."

"County had me patched up in no time," Finn answered.

"You're darn lucky it wasn't appendicitis that brought you in. Those guys get all flummoxed if you aren't shot or beaten or stabbed," Paul said as he righted himself.

"If it's ever my appendix that needs removing, I'll call you," Finn assured him. "I'd venture to guess that you've seen more of them than any doctor in the city."

"Ah, yes, but none of my patients ever go home. Something to think about, isn't it?" Paul waggled a finger and smiled. The man had a tough road, dealing with the dead as he did, so Finn chuckled at all his jokes no matter how small.

"I'll not be putting you on speed dial," Finn assured him.

"Wise man." Paul patted himself down and finally found what he was looking for, the glasses atop his head. He grinned at Finn and said: "So, shall we take a look at her?"

Since that was a rhetorical question, Finn said nothing as they moved closer to the table and took up their respective positions: Paul standing on one side, Finn on the other and the body between them. It was covered to the clavicle with a pristine white sheet. The jumper, Finn's Jane Doe, looked peaceful in death. She was young and pretty, a light-skinned black woman with features that tipped the scales toward a European pedigree rather than African. Yet even that didn't really set right in Finn's mind. Perhaps there was more a mix of the Middle East in her.

Her face was heart shaped and rounded at the cheekbones. Her brow was broad and framed with black hair that had a hint of red to it. Her eyes were not particularly deep set but they were large and almond shaped. Her lashes were long and lush, her lips generous and wide under a long, narrow nose.

Her shoulders were broad but her bones were delicate. There was something about her that suggested she would be graceful and purposeful when she moved. But she wouldn't move. The nameless woman was lying on a cold metal table and not long ago she had been on a bridge seemingly convinced that her life was no longer worth living. Finn offered a small benediction because old habits died hard.

"What did you say?" Paul asked.

"Did I speak, aloud, then?" Finn shook his head and offered the doctor a sheepish grin. "Sorry. Nothing really. It was an Irish blessing: May you see God's light on the path ahead when the road you walk is dark."

"Seems appropriate," Paul said. "This lady's road must have been very dark indeed."

"I remember nothing about her, Paul," Finn admitted. "I carried her in my arms, looked at her face and yet this morning I couldn't have told you if she was young or old, tall or short."

"It's amazing you remember your own name, considering."

"That's good of you to say, but I was with her when she breathed her last. I should have remembered the sound of her breath. Something. That's what I'm trained to do."

"You did what you could and you did exactly what you were trained to do."

"It appears I did some damage also."

Finn nodded at the tears and cuts that crosshatched one of her cheeks and ran down her long, slender neck and across one of her bare shoulders. There was bruising on the right side of her face and at her jaw and lip.

"You weren't the only one, and that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I think you may want to investigate this, Finn."

"I would have to have a good reason, Paul," he answered. "Captain Fowler isn't feeling particularly sympathetic to this situation at the moment. I have totaled my car and at least one person is looking to sue Cori and me for keeping them from going on their way."

"America the litigious. Lovely," Paul smirked. "Be that as it may, I do think this is a matter for the police. Of course I can only recommend, but it's my duty to point out that this lady was dead - or near to it - when she toppled off that bridge. I'm not sure she could have jumped even if she wanted to."

"Fell then, did she?" Finn asked. "That comes as no surprise. The city shouldn't be letting people live up there in the first place much less before they secure the bridge."

Paul backed away from the table and leaned against a counter bearing the tools of his trade. He crossed his arms.

"You should run for mayor. Between the brogue and all that righteous anger you would have every woman in the city voting for you."

"I've enough problems without that," Finn snorted. "I'm frustrated is all. This is a beautiful woman who wouldn't be here if she had even one person to care about her, or if the city had done its job. The system is *banjaxed*, man, and people like her are paying for it."

"You're assuming I have a clue as to what *banjaxed* means, you know."

"Broken. Broken beyond fixing." Finn pulled his bandaged hand into his chest and cradled it with his good one to stop the throbbing that came when his blood boiled. "So what was it? Drugs? Alcohol? Exposure?"

"None of the above," he answered. "Someone hit her on and about the head with an object that was quite solid. One blow, the one under the chin, split her jawbone and snapped her head back. It was hard enough that it cracked a vertebra in her spine."

"She was assaulted on the bridge?" Finn asked, knowing this would make for sensitive news in a city already divided about how to deal the homeless.

"I can't be specific as to where, but I can give you parameters on the time frame. By the look of the swelling, I would say it was one to three hours between the assault and her death. This lady wouldn't have known if she was coming or going given the head trauma, and given the shape her spine was in I'd say someone had to help her over that railing even at her height."

"But you're not ruling out suicide, are you?" Finn pressed.

"No, I'm not, but let me put it this way. She might have survived the beating except the fall exacerbated those injuries; she wouldn't be dead from the fall more than likely except her neck was already injured. It might not be murder, but someone helped her die."

"Good of you to be clear." Finn sighed and parked his tongue in the side of his cheek. He hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans. "Well, then, I'll try to convince the captain to approve the time and resources, but I can't promise anything. The man has priorities as he's always telling me."

"Priorities might change depending on who comes looking for her."

Paul pushed away from the counter and walked to the table. He lifted the sheet to expose her feet.

"Those are not the feet of a homeless woman, Finn. And look at her hands."

Paul put the sheet over her feet and then lifted it where it covered her at hip level. He withdrew her narrow, lifeless hand. Her fingers were so long and slender that Finn thought they must be those of an artist.

"Look at those nails. No polish, but definitely tended to."

He tucked that hand back by the corpse's side and smoothed the sheet over it again.

"Look at her hair. No one can do that kind of braiding by themselves so there's a hairdresser somewhere who knows her. I found no natural debris in her hair so we know she's been sleeping somewhere decent. If you've got a middle class lady killed by a homeless guy off his meds the city is going to go berserk. That might just change Captain Fowler's priorities a wee bit as you would say."

Finn smiled. Paul's attempt at a brogue was fetching, it was his logic that was flawed.

"I'm not disbelieving you, Paul, but things aren't always what they seem. When I was a young uniform, I picked up an older woman named Sally for shoplifting. She looked like the president of the garden club, all turned out nice she was in a white suit and high heels, her hair done just so."

"And this is relevant because?" Paul raised a brow.

"Because it turned out that Ms. Sally's rich husband had divorced her and got a younger model. That one was a shrew, don't you know. She didn't want the old wife to have a penny. After the lawyers got done with her, Miss Sally was left with the clothes on her back and her car. She slept in her Mercedes, and when that got towed she couch-surfed until her fancy friends found her presence too much of an embarrassment. Then she lived by her wits.

"Every morning Ms. Sally would clean up in the ladies room at the department store. Then she would have her make-up done by one of those women in the cosmetics department," Finn waved a hand in front of his face suggesting he had only a vague idea of what women did to their faces. "She went over to the beauty college way down on Beverly and let them practice doing her hair because it was free. You would never know she lived on the streets.

"One day she was caught filching a fancy blouse in a boutique on Rodeo Drive and the owner wanted her prosecuted. That's how she was found out."

"And the moral of the story is don't jump to conclusions?" Paul cut to the chase.

"No pun intended, I'm sure," Finn answered. "Listen, this is the land of Hollywood. Smoke and mirrors are currency in this town. That being said, I will not discount your gut feeling, so let's have a look at her things."

* * *

While Paul put the body away, Finn stationed himself at the counter and had a look in the two plastic bags in which the coroner had placed Jane Doe's earthly possessions.

Finn pulled out a blouse, a skirt and a light sweater. Despite the dried blood and the rips, he could see that they were well made and modest. The labels were intact. Finn did not recognize the manufacturers but he would do some research. Even with that, there would be no way to tell if the items had been thrift store finds, charity or were bought and paid for in a real store.

He pushed them back in and looked into the small paper envelope attached to the outside of the plastic bag. Inside was a necklace with a fancy cross dangling from it. Sure he'd never seen anything like this in his church with serpents running up the sides where Jesus hung. Finn looked up as Paul came back into the room.

"Did you take anything off the body?" he asked.

"There were some fibers in her hair and on her sweater - I took a quick look under the microscope but I'm not a lab guy. I'd say they came from two or three different sources. I have some skin under the nails and something else I didn't recognize. Fabric, perhaps. I packed up hair

samples, too. She uses some sort of pomade. I don't know if that is important or unique but you might as well have the lab look at it.

"I also have a packet of photos for you. Full face and profile, plus close ups on the bruising. Fingerprints have been taken. There are no abrasions on the hands to indicate she tried to stop her fall - not that I think she would have had much grip strength given her other injuries. You'll have the full report tomorrow all typed up nice. Whatever hit her is pretty interesting. It had a squared edge but it was smooth. It wasn't a fist, or a bat or anything like that."

"You're thinking what? A brick? A two-by-four? There's construction in the area. Could it have been something like that?" Finn asked.

"I wouldn't think so. Either one of those would have left some trace evidence. Maybe dust from a brick or a wood splinter, something to indicate that's what was used. I'm thinking metal or stone."

Finn was listening but he segued when he reached to the bottom of the bag.

"There were pockets in her skirt and on her sweater. You didn't find a phone did you? A purse? Keys?"

"None came in with her," Paul said. "That other bag has her shoe, though. There's some greenery I took out of the seam between the vamp and the sole. Given how I found the stuff wedged in the seam, she would have had to be dragging that foot. She was roaming far afield which brings us back to the question of how she got on the bridge. A woman with decent clothes, a pedicure, fancy braids and greenery in her shoes wasn't living up there. I'd bet on it."

"And so you've forgotten Ms. Sally," Finn chuckled.

He picked up the clear plastic bag while Paul was talking. The shoe was scuffed and worn at heel but not with the kind of wear that comes from walking the streets for an extended period of time. The other one was probably on the bridge in someone's shopping cart. As for the phone, if she had one and if it fell out of her pocket it didn't fall onto the freeway. The police and clean up crew had done an extensive sweep of the freeway before they reopened it. They had also swept the bridge but most of the people who had set up camp had scattered by the time they got there. The few who remained knew nothing about anything.

Finn closed up the bag with her clothing, put the shoe bag atop it and gathered them both up. He tucked them under one arm and steadied them with his good hand as they left the room, talking shop all the while.

"I'll have the stomach contents analyzed and get that back to you soon as. She had a full meal within a few hours of all this." Paul opened the door that led to the outer office. "If she was killed by someone on that bridge, you better get a handle on it now. And if she wasn't —"

"We've still got a bad guy who hits people hard enough to do real damage," Finn said. "I'll do my best for her, I promise."

Paul put his hand on Finn's arm, stopping him before he walked through the door.

"There's something else you might want to know about our Jane Doe. I doubt it has anything to do with what happened to her but. . ."

Paul hesitated and when his dark brown eyes met Finn's blue ones they were troubled. The coroner took a deep breath, but found no polite way to tell the detective what he had found so he said it plainly.

"She was circumcised Finn. A pretty crude operation and it wasn't done when she was a child. I would venture to guess that our lady with the braids is probably not from around here and wherever she's from is damn barbaric."

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