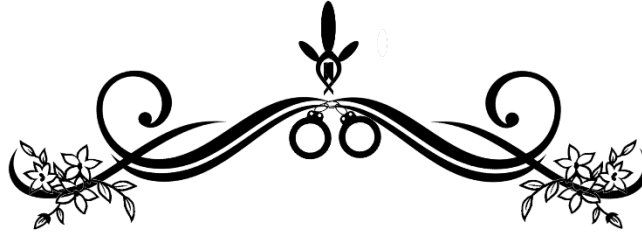


MURDER IN THE SANCTUARY

By R Shannon



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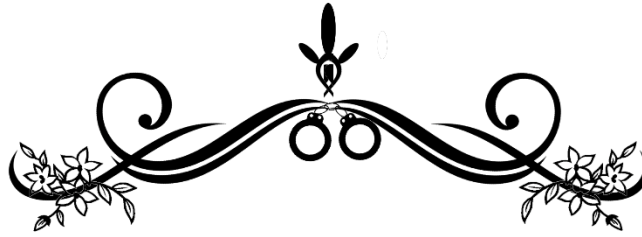
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CHAPTER 1

It was 6:50 in the morning, fifteen minutes before the alarm was set to wake him, when his cellphone rang. After a grunt or two, Jack Nolan reached over and picked up the call.

“What’s up, Lieutenant?” he grumbled, with his eyes still closed.

“I wanted to catch you before you came in,” said Lieutenant Duane White, Jack’s immediate supervisor and one of his only remaining friends on the squad.

“That doesn’t sound good. Why would you want to catch me before I came to work?” He opened his eyes and leaned up on one elbow to brace himself.

“Listen, Jack, you’re being reassigned to a new partner. Her name is Fiona Quinn.” White paused for Jack’s reaction, as there was always a reaction with Jack.

“That can’t be. Chief Salvo told me personally a male detective from New York City was coming down and he would be my partner,” said Jack, now fully awake, frowning, and not happy.

“Look, Jack, I’m just giving you a warning, so you don’t say anything stupid. I heard about the new guy coming from New York, but his house closing got put off and he’s not coming for another month or so. I’m giving you a head’s up that the chief is planning to assign you and Fiona Quinn as partners. She’ll be in today to meet the chief. I’m calling you so you have at least an hour to absorb the change and prepare yourself. You’re still on thin ice with the department and I don’t want you to blurt out anything that you’ll later regret. Don’t let the chief know I tipped you off.”

Jack paused and said, “What about Betsy? How is she doing?”

“She’s home but the word from the gossip mill is that she’s still angry at you. She already asked for a transfer to a new partner before the shooting, so I think this new assignment and the breaking of whatever promise you had with the chief is at least part of your punishment.”

“Just because I blurted out that women shouldn’t be police officers?” asked Jack, sarcastically.

“Yeah, that’s right. You should have known that was enough for a societal hanging. What world have you been living in?” asked White, sounding fed up.

“Betsy had her gun wrestled out of her hand — in two seconds, by the way — and we both wound up shot. We could have been killed. Doesn’t that matter to anyone? She’s five-feet one inch tall and weighs 100 pounds —”

“She’s five-six and weighs at least one thirty,” interrupted White.

“We both could have been killed on that call. No one seems to get that. She’s lucky she got shot in the shoulder. If I didn’t wrestle the gun away from that punk — after I had finished with my own punk, by the way — we’d both be dead.”

“It’s 2023 and you still need to keep your mouth shut, Jack.”

Jack hesitated and so did his boss.

“Betsy and I never had any chemistry as partners anyway. She’s just using the statement I blurted out as an excuse to get the transfer she wanted all along,” Jack said, taking a stab at getting one morsel of sympathy. It didn’t work.

“Well, that might be, but you handed it to her by shooting off your big mouth. Now you’re in the doghouse with everyone. In today’s climate, that’s enough to get fired. The only reason they haven’t fired you already is because your brother is an employment lawyer, and they know he would sue the department into oblivion and they don’t want the hassle or the expense of defending a lawsuit. And for some other strange and inexplicable reason, the chief seems to like you.”

“My brother is a legal jackal in the courtroom, but he’s actually a nice guy in real life,” said Jack, attempting to make light of things.

“And one more thing, Jack. Fiona is about five-five and weighs about 115 pounds. If you want to keep your job, just come in, say hello nicely, do your job and keep your mouth shut.”

“I’ll see you later. Lieutenant, listen, thanks for the head’s up.”

“No problem,” said his boss before hanging up.



Once off the phone, Jack laid back down and called his brother, Finn Nolan. It rang six times before his brother answered in a whisper. “Jack, it’s the middle of the night. What’s going on?”

“Sorry to call you so early, but I need to talk to you.”

“Let me go out to the kitchen so I don’t wake Julia up,” whispered Finn, as he tiptoed out of the bedroom and into the kitchen.

“What’s up, Jack?”

“Chief Salvo promised me a male partner, someone from New York City who would be moving to Florida. Lieutenant White called me five minutes ago to give me a head’s up that I’m being assigned a new female partner today. Do I have to take this kind of garbage?”

“If you want to keep your job, yes. You need to suck it up and don’t react to anything. Go in, act like you couldn’t be happier about the assignment, keep your head down and your mouth shut. Just do your job, Jack. You need to fly under the radar there for at least six months until someone else screws up and takes the spotlight off you. Can’t you keep your mouth shut for six months?” asked Finn.

“I don’t want to lose my job before I help Conor buy a car. He needs a co-signer,” said Jack, thinking out loud.

“Why can’t Maggie co-sign for him?” asked Finn.

“No credit. Her husband ruined the family credit before he ran off with the dancer.”

Finn scoffed and said, “We tried to tell her about him, but she wouldn’t listen. Even mom tried to tell her if her husband cheated on her once, he would do it again. I wish I had more sympathy for her, but I don’t.”

“She was blinded by love; that’s her defense to the whole thing. I have more sympathy for her because of my own situation. I think you won the marriage lottery in the family, Finn. You married a woman who is loyal and mentally balanced. Not everyone is so lucky.”

“You both married people of ill repute,” said Finn, “as granddad used to say.”

“That was his favorite saying, wasn’t it? Megan wasn’t of ill repute when I met and fell in love with her. It wasn’t until her car accident and getting addicted to the pain meds that things went sideways for us. That was the start of her descent into ill repute,” said Jack, attempting to mimic granddad, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“That may be, Jack. Anyway, that’s my brotherly advice and my lawyerly advice for today. Go to work, keep your head down and your mouth shut. Within six months, someone else will screw up and your neck will be off the block.”

“Will do. Hey, sorry I called you this early, but I appreciate the advice. Thanks, buddy.”

“Sure thing, Jack,” said Finn.



The entire Nolan family was born and bred in South Florida. After two years of college, Jack became a cop by the age of 24. He cut his teeth, so to speak, on the city streets of Fort Lauderdale for eight long years before his promotion to the detective squad. In Fort Lauderdale, unfortunately, there were enough murders and other violent crimes to keep the squad busy, but on occasion, they would aid the narcotics division with their bigger cases.

The Nolans were a close family, and all lived within a few blocks of each other. His sister Maggie, after marrying and having three adorable grandkids, became the central focus of the entire family. Then one day her husband was transferred to Bendex, a large manufacturer in Crescentville, at which time Maggie and the kids moved north. That was the first crack in the nuclear family.

No sooner had the movers unpacked Maggie’s things than Jack’s mom high-tailed it up to central Florida to be close to her daughter and grandchildren. Without the matriarch to hold them all together, the three brothers eventually migrated to central Florida over the next two years. Now the entire family was all back living within a few blocks of each other.

With his background and experience, Jack was hired almost on the spot with the Crescentville Police Department. The first three years on the new force were good and happy ones. The last two years -- well, that’s another story. Through no real fault of his own, although some would argue with that assessment, things in his life went south. His family would even say they went a bit strange and at times scary.

The initial event that set Jack’s life off in this darker direction was the sudden and unexpected disappearance of his wife Megan. The most recent event was being shot on the job. While interviewing two witnesses outside a barroom shooting, without warning, both guys abruptly attacked him and

his partner. During the struggle, one of the assailants grabbed Betsy's gun from her side holster and she was shot in the shoulder, only inches away from her heart. Jack was shot in the thigh while attempting to wrestle the gun away from Betsy's attacker. That shooting occurred two weeks ago. Jack was back at work but Betsy was still out on leave and her second formal Request for a Transfer had already been filed.



After talking to his brother, Jack laid back down for the last ten minutes before his alarm went off. At first, he stared at the ceiling and wondered what the future held for him. Next, he leaned up in his queen-sized bed and looked around his bedroom. Megan was gone for eight months and the whole house still felt empty. The bedroom felt not only empty, but there was still a sadness that hung in the air. Megan had decorated their large master bedroom like a French boudoir from the early nineteenth century — which could be a slight exaggeration — but without her, Jack felt like he didn't fit or belong in such a feminine bedroom by himself. But then again, he didn't feel like he fit anywhere else either. He thought about how his life seemed frozen in time.

With only five minutes left before getting up to face the day, he decided not to go down the Megan rabbit hole right now. Often his mind would wander back to when he found out she left him for another guy, and he would think back, go over every phone call, every text message, looking for any sign or clue that she was planning to leave him. He never found any rational explanation. His close friend, Deacon Steve, explained to him, more than once, that this search for logic or reason in someone's crazy behavior could be a life-long trap. He had to let go, agree that there was no logic and reason, and go on with his life. He needed to admit to himself that this search he would go into would only lead to continued frustration and sadness. That's why he decided not to go any further this morning.

He got up and headed towards the bathroom. His thigh had stiffened up during the night, so he limped his way into the shower. After allowing the hot water to pummel him for several minutes, his mobility returned, and he felt good to go.

He dressed in a pair of slacks, light blue shirt and dark navy jacket; typical attire for detectives working in one of the more exclusive counties in central Florida.

Crescentville was completely different from Fort Lauderdale, but the differences were more than welcome. He had wearied of working with the lower criminal class after 10 years in the city. Working with the suburban elite was more challenging in some ways, but it was a dream assignment compared to interacting with the hardened criminal thugs on the city streets.

As he tucked his shirt into his pants, his cell phone rang. It was a number he didn't recognize. He answered it. "Hello?"

Silence. He waited about three seconds.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Megan, is that you?" He waited another three seconds. "If you can't speak, just make a sound or something."

The phone call disconnected. He redialed the number, but no one answered. He let it ring ten times. Still, it went unanswered.

He saved the number as 'M?' in his contacts.

Looking in the bathroom mirror, he quickly ran a comb through his hair. It was time for another haircut, but it wouldn't be today. He was only 35 years old, but had a full head of smooth, thick, prematurely gray hair. It was an Irish thing.

Once he was ready to go, he hesitated and called his buddy, Aahan Bhatt.

Aahan answered groggily as he too was asleep at 7:45 AM. "Jack?"

"Listen, Aahan, I'm sorry to wake you up. I got a strange call this morning and I need a favor."

"Let me guess. You want me to check which cell tower a hang-up call pinged off."

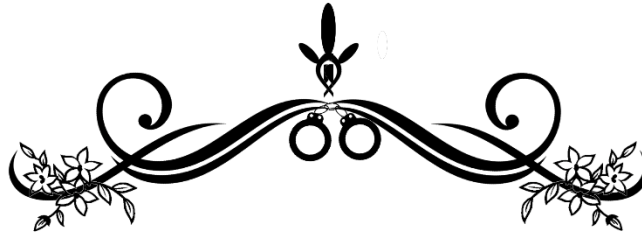
"Yes. I'm sorry to keep putting you on the spot with these requests, Aahan, but I think my wife is in trouble." Jack waited and hoped he hadn't finally crossed the line with his friend.

"It's okay, Jack. I understand. Text me the number and what time it came in. I have to sneak with this stuff for you, so give me until the end of tomorrow."

"Sure, no problem. Thanks, Aahan. I owe you one," said Jack.

"No, you don't, Jack. You helped me and my family when we needed it. I'll text you when I have something."

"Thanks, buddy. I appreciate it."



CHAPTER 2

Fiona Quinn dressed in navy blue slacks, a white button-down short-sleeved shirt, and a medium blue blazer. Everything was loose enough to cloak the curves of her body. Number one, she was a bit body shy, which she needed to cover at work as it could be read as a sign of weakness; and number two, she didn't like to lead with her sexuality because in her business, she needed to project strength and competence and makeup and cleavage didn't help with that.

She kept all her normal handbag items in the pockets of her slacks, shirt and jacket. Everything she wore had pockets. Her whole outfit was hiding something or other that she may need during the day. As she checked her pockets for everything, she thought it odd that she was asked to come in on a Friday, as her formal start date was not until this coming Monday. She was asked to come in to meet with Chief Salvo personally and get introduced to the staff. She had so much to do before Monday, but how could she say no?

In her first-day nervousness, she wound up ready to go ten minutes early. She felt a combination of excitement and anxiety about starting with a new police force and meeting all new people. She imagined her new coworkers would be more like country people, maybe sweeter and more down-home than she was used to in Deerfield Beach, Florida, where she worked for the last six years.

She glanced over at her boyfriend Gus, who was still sleeping. She was dating him now for almost a full year, and they decided to live together before getting married. They weren't formally engaged yet, but she was sure it would be soon enough. With the excitement of marriage and family on the horizon, she gladly gave up her job and moved north. She convinced herself she was ready for the slower pace that living and working in a real suburb would bring.

She stepped into the bathroom and brushed her long wavy red hair back into a tight ponytail. While still a patrol cop, she secured her hair in a tight bun with a metal bun-clamp that had a few convenient little spikes as decoration. These spikes prevented any criminal from grabbing her by the hair. When she was promoted to detective and no longer facing potential hand-to-hand combat on the streets, she dropped the bun clamp and went with just a tight ponytail.

Once fully dressed and ready to go, she tiptoed over and sat on the edge of Gustav's bed. "Gus, are you still mad at me?" she whispered, as she put her hand on and gently rubbed his shoulder.

He stirred a bit and opened his eyes. "I'm not mad at you, Fiona. I'm mad at all your stuff. When we agreed to move in together, I pictured you

coming with a few things. I didn't know you were going to show up with a U-hall truck and every stick of furniture and every trinket and bauble you ever owned." He sounded groggy but by the mouthful he just launched, she realized he had been awake and still stewing this entire time.

She could feel his anger still present, but at least he was serving it with a bit of sarcastic humor. Yesterday, as the movers were bringing in the items, he was ranting and raving about there being too much stuff. She rubbed his shoulder and waited.

"If we're going to live together, Fiona, you can't turn this place into a storage unit."

"If we're going to live together? What does that mean?" She knew Gus tended to shut down and get negative in the face of any type of conflict. "Gus, I dismantled and moved my entire life for us to be together. I thought we were moving towards marriage."

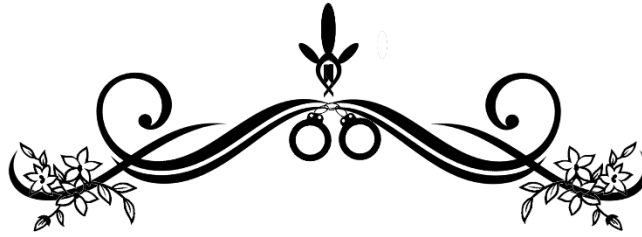
"I did too until you turned my apartment into a hoarder's paradise." He closed his eyes and maintained his distance.

"We'll work it out, Gus. Don't be fatalistic."

He looked at her but didn't respond.

She kissed him on the cheek and left for work. They were dating long enough for Fiona to know how to smooth down his feathers. She was confident that he would be okay as order came back into their life together.

She keyed the address of the Crescentville Police Department into her GPS, and off she went to the meet and greet.



CHAPTER 3

It was ten after eight in the morning in Oak Run Estates, one of the several exclusive neighborhoods in Cresentville. Oak Run had been the most expensive and exclusive neighborhood in Marion County for over thirty years until the New York developers got their hands on the land above and adjacent to it. They put up an even-swankier neighborhood known as *The Sanctuary*.

The Sanctuary was built on a hill that overlooked Oak Run Estates. It was a tiny hill, small enough for the neighbors to walk down a small incline to reach a beautiful walking trail between the two developments; but it was high enough for the residents of The Sanctuary to look down their noses just a wee bit at the residents of Oak Run Estates.

It was springtime and the weather couldn't have been nicer. It was a pleasant 68 degrees as Maxwell Wolf, an Oak Run resident and daily jogger, walked slowly down Jasmine Road to the opening in the trees that led to the jogging trail.

Like most of the residents of these two communities, he was dressed in high-end designer sportswear for his daily jog. Max walked or jogged every morning before work at Bendex Manufacturing Company, which was located only a few miles from Oak Run Estates. He was a senior engineer, married with two children, and all who knew him would agree that he was a respectable member of the Florida upper class.

This walking trail grew organically over the years and became known as Brookhopper's Trail. It got its name years ago when the school kids in Oak Run, against the advice of their parents, used to cut through the woods and hop over a small brook as a shortcut to the elementary school. Over the last ten or more years, as it became too dangerous for kids to walk alone anywhere, it morphed into an adult jogging and walking trail shared by both neighborhoods.

This strip of trail was canopied by a beautiful grove of elm trees which cast the right amount of sun and shade. It still contained the original brook and some residents had even created patches of decorative gardening that enhanced the natural beauty of the entire wooded area. The trail itself was still county property but the two developments cared for it as their own.

Max walked along the sidewalk at a good clip and suddenly stopped. He retrieved his cellphone from his jogging pants pocket and looked down to read a text message. His fingers quickly texted something and he returned the phone to his pocket.

He quickened his pace along Jasmine Road until he reached the four handmade stone steps installed by a resident to make the climb from the sidewalk to the top of the grassy incline easier and safer. Once he reached

the top, he stopped, looked all around him, looked at his watch, and then entered the trees onto the trail.



Mary Evans, a 78-year-old resident of The Sanctuary, was up at the crack of dawn, like all the other octogenarians in the neighborhood. Her morning routine was always the same; one cup of coffee at her kitchen table while doing her crossword puzzle, followed by a knitting session while watching the morning news. At twenty after eight, after putting her coffee and crossword away, she walked over to her well-tufted and cozy recliner chair. As she bent down to pull out her knitting project, the doorbell rang.

“Now, who could that be this early?” she mumbled to herself. She dropped her knitting back into the bag and ambled slowly to the door. She looked out the peep hole. She smiled and opened the front door. “Karl, good morning.” Mary opened the screen door and stepped aside as Karl stepped in.

“Mary, I apologize for calling on you so early, but I have a favor to ask you.”

“Sure, Karl. Come right in. Come right in,” said Mary with raised eyebrows. “Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

“Oh, no, Mary, I’ve already had my limit today. My handyman, Craig, is over today to build a new workbench for me and —”

“Is that right? A workbench, Karl? I didn’t know you did woodworking,” said Mary, as she waved Karl into the living area right inside the door. “Nancy told me you were a stockbroker. Have a seat. How can I do you a favor?”

“I don’t need to sit down, Mary. Craig needs a leaf bag; you know the thick garbage bags that are used for heavy items? For leaves and trimmings? I only have the thin kitchen bags but he said the wood pieces will break right through that type of bag. Do you happen to have one of those big black leaf bags?” Karl smiled and Mary relaxed, realizing this favor would not entail her having to get dressed to go outside.

“Oh, of course. Come into the kitchen. I know I have those somewhere. They’re probably in the bottom of my pantry. Let me look.” Mary waddled into the kitchen and over to the pantry. She opened the accordion doors and bent to have a look.

Craig positioned himself behind her as she rummaged around. “I really appreciate it, Mary. I hope I can return the favor one day. You know Nancy and I are right next door if you ever need anything.”

“Oh, I do,” said Mary, as she pulled out a box of black strong trash bags. “Nancy is always calling me to ask if I need anything from Publix before she goes. She’s so nice. You’re both very sweet. How many do you need, Karl?”

“Oh, just one, I think.”

“Well, I’ll give you two. I have a full box, as you can see. This second one may come in handy, and it will save you a trip back.” She smiled and handed him the two bags.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang. Mary literally jumped in place. “Oh, my God, I think that was a gunshot.” She stopped moving. Her eyes opened widely, and she stood still actively listening. She whispered a second time, “Oh, my God, that sounded like a gunshot.”

“A gunshot in our neighborhood?” asked Karl, chuckling. “Don’t be silly, Mary. It sounded like a car backfiring to me. It’s probably an old car with a spark plug problem. No need to worry, Mary. I’m sure it’s nothing.” He rubbed the side of her upper arm to settle her.

“I hope you’re right. We pay a lot of money here to know we’re safe, don’t we?” Mary settled down when assured by Karl it was nothing to worry about.

“So what are you going to build, Karl?” asked Mary, hoping for a longer visit.

Karl slowly positioned himself to leave as Mary was known to capture people in conversation. He took small baby steps as he spoke, moving closer to the front door with each one. “I think I may start out with a few boxes to get my skills back. I did a few shop projects as a younger man, you know, but I’ll need a little refresher. I’ll watch Craig Reynolds build the workbench and he said he’ll help me with the first few projects.” Karl had taken about four more steps over towards the front door.

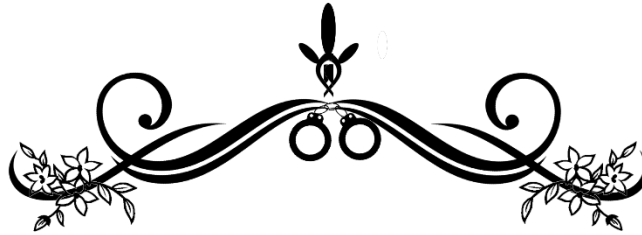
“I know Craig. He’s done work for me once or twice. Nancy told me you were happy with his work, so I called him to change my shower heads,” said Mary, as she followed step by step after Karl. “I thought he could fix them, but he said I needed new ones. He did a good job –”

“Yeah, he’s a great guy. Mary, thanks for loaning me the two bags. I’ll return them when I get a box of the heavy-duty bags.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. I won’t take them back, so don’t buy a new box on my account. I’m happy I had them and was able to help you out.”

Karl chuckled, smiled and said, “Thanks again, Mary. You’re a lifesaver.”

Mary smiled and made a dismissive motion with her hand letting him know he was making too much of her favor. Once he stepped outside, she watched him separate the bags as he walked towards his house. Still remembering the loud bang, she looked up and down her street, but everything seemed safe and secure, like it always did. She closed the door and returned to her routine.



CHAPTER 4

“Come on in, Detective Quinn, and have a seat,” said cartel Anthony Salvo, standing behind his desk and pointing to a chair in front. He was in his late fifties but still maintained a youthful appearance, including a full head of wavy Mediterranean hair that was lightly peppered with enough silver to give him an added veneer of respectability.

Fiona sat down and smiled slightly trying not to show her dimples. This was a technique she developed early on in her police career. She had noticed that women without dimples seemed to be taken more seriously.

“Welcome to the Crescentville Police Department,” said Chief Salvo before he sat down and flipped open a file on his desktop. “So what brings you to Crescentville?”

“My boyfriend and I are planning to get married and police work was voted *more portable* than his thrift store, so here I am. I also have a brother in the area, about twenty minutes away.”

“Well, getting engaged and married, that’s usually a happy time in a person’s life. Welcome aboard. We’re happy to have you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Looking at your resume here, I’m sure you will be an asset to the force. You’ll be in our detective squad, of course, but I want to introduce you to the patrol officers at roll call today. I’m giving everyone a pep talk today and I’ll introduce you when it’s over. This will break the ice with everyone in all of five minutes,” he said jovially.

He grabbed an employee handbook from his side desk drawer, as well as a few pamphlets from a second drawer, and handed them to Fiona. “You know what this stuff is. This is Crescentville’s version of everything. I also had business cards made up for you as well.” He passed her a box of 250 business cards.

“That’s great. I’ll look everything over,” said Fiona. She took the handbook and the pamphlets and put them on her lap with the business cards on top.

“I wanted to talk to you privately about your first assignment. You will be paired up with Detective Jack Nolan, at least temporarily, to get you started. He’s the best one to show you the ropes on department procedure around here. You don’t need any training, *per se*, but, as you already know, every department has their own rules and procedures. Jack’s a good detective. That’s the good news.”

Chief Salvo looked at her and hesitated a second for effect. “I’ll be blunt about the next part. I won’t use any curse words because you’re new here, but Jack can be a challenge, let’s say. His last partner was a female

and they both wound up getting shot during an investigation recently. He stupidly shot his mouth off afterwards by saying something inappropriate and started a cavalcade of issues for himself and for me. It was some politically incorrect BS but he's on thin ice because of it. I shouldn't be telling you any of this, but it being your first day, I don't want you to feel ambushed if you start hearing some whisperings going on about him. The gossip mill is in fourth gear right now."

"What's his problem? What's challenging about him?" Fiona wanted more information about what she was getting into. The chief seemed to be open on one hand, but she could tell he was holding back on something.

"He can be blunt about things, which some people don't like. The biggest problem is he hasn't learned to keep his mouth shut about things in the workplace. In today's climate, with everything being politically correct and woke, he hasn't adjusted well to all the changes. Again, I shouldn't be telling you any of this, but I'm letting you know enough back story so you know where he's coming from." The chief glanced up at Fiona, but she was too shocked to say anything.

"He was actually a great guy until his wife left him about eight months ago. That's when he started to . . . go off the deep end. He's been a thorn in the department's right side since then. I'm giving him some time to get himself back together but he's trying even my patience. Like I said, he's a great detective, but he's on a little thin ice right now."

He glanced over again at Fiona. She felt he was waiting for some kind of reaction, but she was still too shocked to know what to say. She knew that any partner that came with a warning label wasn't going to be a good partner.

"I see from your resume that you have a psych degree, so that may come in handy," said Chief Salvo, chuckling. "Anyway, we do have another detective who will be joining us soon, so this partnership with Detective Nolan is temporary. When the new officer arrives, there will be a little shuffling around with several people including you."

"Do you have any questions or comments?" he asked.

"No, sir. I understand."

"All right. Come with me and I'll introduce you to the officers," said Salvo as he stood and led Fiona out to the roll call room.



Jack Nolan walked into work at 8:00 AM. His shift started at 7 AM but he considered picking up his work clothes from the dry cleaner's part of his job duties. As he strolled into the station, he saw all the cops fawning over a beautiful redhead with the slightest amount of freckling. As he had already heard, she looked about five foot six inches and very thin. Her long red hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He could tell her hair was wavy by the few tendrils that pulled out of her hair band and were framing her face. She had the map of Ireland written all over her. He assumed that as a woman her size, she was probably an affirmative action hire. He reminded himself of his brother's warning to keep his mouth shut.

He ignored the brouhaha being made around Fiona and went over to his desk in the detective division. He sat down and arranged several files to begin his investigative calls for the day.

After about two calls, Chief Salvo walked over with Fiona at his side. "Jack, how's your leg?"

“It’s healing, sir, getting a little better every day.” He reluctantly got up from his chair as he knew an introduction was coming.

“Jack, this is Fiona Quinn, our newest detective. She’s joining us from Deerfield Beach, Florida where she worked for five years.”

Fiona reached her hand out to shake his hand.

Jack looked down at her hand, hesitated for one second, looked her in the eyes first and then reached out and shook hands. “Welcome, Fiona. Nice to meet you.” Jack was short and sweet, and the introduction ended there. An awkward moment of silence passed between them all. The phone on his desk rang.

Jack picked it up. “Detective Nolan.” He leaned over his desk, picked up a pen and jotted down an address. “Someone will be out right away.” He hung up and looked at Chief Salvo. “There’s been a murder on the Brookhoppers’ Trail behind The Sanctuary. A woman was found lying dead by a fellow jogger.”

“You and Fiona,” said Salvo, looking at Jack and pointing between them.

“All right, Detective Fiona. Get your purse and let’s go,” said Jack sarcastically, as he turned and walked towards the back door to the parking lot.

“I’m a detective. I don’t bring my purse to calls,” said Fiona, as she put her purse and other items into her new desk and followed behind him.

She turned back towards Chief Salvo who was smiling, nodding and giving her a thumb’s up.

After Chief Salvo’s warning about Detective Nolan, she pictured an ugly ogre, but Jack was handsome, just over six feet tall, lean, and quite energetic. He was walking at a clip where she had to almost jog to keep up with him and this was with a thigh injury. She was determined not to allow him to intimidate her, which she assumed he was doing by walking too fast.

As she lagged slightly behind him, she noticed his gray hair. His skin was too young for a full head of gray hair, but she knew others in her Irish extended family who inherited the premature-gray gene.

Fiona thought back to what the chief told her about Jack. She was aware that the chief shouldn’t share anything personal about Detective Nolan based on privacy laws, but he made the effort to let her know this partnering was not permanent. She took that to mean he valued her enough that he didn’t want her to feel ambushed, which she did feel right now. She knew immediately she was not going to like working with this guy, but she tried to focus on how the chief went out of his way to give her this head’s up and that meant something. That was at least one positive.

As she walked swiftly enough to keep up with Jack, she couldn’t help but think of the partner she left behind in Fort Lauderdale and how great they got along. Her move up to Cresenville was taking on a slightly darker color from the romantic and rosy glow she painted onto it during her planning stage.

Jack arrived at one of the unmarked cars, opened the driver’s door and got in without saying a word to her. She got into the passenger seat but not before rolling her eyes. She already ticked off passive aggressive and possibly misogynist on a mental score card she would be keeping on him from this moment forward.

Once in the car, she said, “so where are we going? Who got murdered?” She looked at him and they locked eye contact for the first time. His eyes were steel blue and held no warmth at all. Luckily, she had six brothers, and knew how some men weaponized their personalities to keep people away or to maintain control. She was determined not to react to this guy.

“A woman was shot in the back of the head while jogging. A neighbor called the cops when he found her. We’re going there now to see what happened.” Jack looked over again, looked her directly in the eyes and then looked away. She thought she saw a macro-sneer. She put another negative check mark on her score card, this one for bad attitude.

“What was that little sneer about?” asked Fiona.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Jack, maintaining a serious composure, but she could swear she saw the corners of his mouth turn up a centimeter. Was he enjoying this or was that in her imagination?

A moment of silence passed.

“Is this a high-crime area?” asked Fiona, trying to break the ice.

“No, it’s a ritzy neighborhood, one of the most expensive in our county. The people who live there buy expensive homes and pay high taxes, so they don’t have to rub elbows with the criminal and parasitic classes.” Jack smirked openly without looking at her.

“I see,” said Fiona, noting the drizzle of hostility that was seeping out in almost all his responses. She remained quiet, focusing only on her job. She realized it did help knowing this was only a temporary assignment. He got another check mark for being covertly hostile.

“Listen, Fiona, I just lived through a shooting incident with my ex-partner. She was about your height and weight and now she’s recovering at home from a gunshot in the shoulder. I got shot coming to her aid because she wasn’t strong enough to fend for herself. So for the record, I want you to know, don’t expect me to come to your aid if you can’t handle yourself on any of these calls. Because I’m not. If you women want to be cops, you’ll need to hold your own.” He threw a glare her way for emphasis.

Stunned, Fiona said, “That’s fine. Just know, that goes both ways.”

“I’m sure I won’t need you to come to my rescue,” said Jack, scoffing and chuckling. He continued looking at the road as he appeared to enjoy this moment of glee.

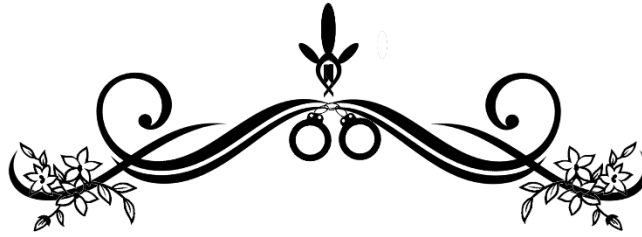
Fiona’s temper began to rise. “Listen, Jack. I know I’m not the biggest and toughest woman out there. I acknowledge you are physically stronger and more muscular than me. I didn’t become a cop so I could wrestle big men all day or prove I’m as strong as men are. I bring other investigative skills to the table. In today’s world, there are very sophisticated crimes that are committed, and I have a background in financial crimes, computer crimes, fraud, and I have an excellent track record of getting more confessions than any of my male counterparts.” She managed to get it all out without allowing her anger to take over, which was quite a feat.

Jack said nothing in return, but she was sure his lips tilted up a tad this time too. Then he looked out the driver’s side window, hiding his face from her.

After two more seconds, she added, “And I want you to also know, you don’t define me. What you think means nothing to me. I didn’t take this

job to live up to your expectations. You know, just for the record.” Inwardly, she thought she should get an Oscar for her performance.

Jack said, “touché,” and looked forward as he continued driving. He openly smiled without looking at her. Of course, she had no idea how to interpret any of it.



CHAPTER 5

Once he reached the crime scene, Jack parked alongside the curb and shut the engine off. Fiona assumed he was deliberately ignoring her. She thought the move to a smaller town would make her life less stressful, that somehow the people would be less jaded and hard-hearted. She could see she was wrong.

There were four patrol vehicles blocking Jasmine Street right outside the entrance to the jogging trail. They both exited the car. Jack finally looked over at her. She thought she saw some lingering smirk, but having just met him, she wasn't sure. Not knowing the area, she was also forced to follow him around.

Once they were on the sidewalk, Jack said, "The jogging trail is up this incline here and the victim lives in The Sanctuary, which is the housing development on the opposite side of this jogging trail." Fiona nodded and began walking up the incline next to Jack. She saw him wince in pain as he needed to use his thigh muscles to climb the small embankment. She considered it a bit of spiritual justice for his recent bad behavior towards her.

As he pointed out the incline and the Sanctuary development, she noticed he was wearing a wedding ring. She thought back to the chief telling her his wife left him a while ago. *'Could the wife be back, and the chief has fallen behind on his gossip?'* She took the ring to mean he was, at the very least, either back with the wife or hoping she would return. She took another look at him and said to herself, *'I can only imagine what living with this miserable beast would be like.'*

Once at the top of the incline, Jack led Fiona through the trees into the wooded scene that was known as Brookhopper's Trail. Fiona couldn't help noticing how beautiful the surroundings in this neighborhood were. The jogging trail was filled with what appeared to be one-hundred-year-old oak trees. As she looked around, she saw sections of the wooded area that had also been naturally landscaped with different levels of bushes, rocks, flowers, and stones. There was a small trickling brook that ran alongside the trail. The setting was beautiful. It appeared well cared for by the communities.

As they both slipped under the crime scene tape, Officer Joel Gunther walked over to them and addressed his remarks to Jack. "Hey, Jack. How's your thigh?"

"It's getting better. I'm lucky I'm alive. What's going on, Joel?"

Officer Gunther referred to his notebook and began. "The victim's name is Nancy Mueller. She's 34 years old, married and lives in The

Sanctuary, in that house over there.” He pointed down a hundred yards off to the right from where they stood.

Officer Gunther pointed with his chin towards a jogger still on the scene. “That’s the fellow jogger who found her. He knows her from the trail and from the neighborhood. He heard the shot, and within five minutes of walking and listening, he came upon the victim lying face down on the path. He took her neck pulse to see if she was dead. That’s when he called 911. He’s still pretty upset about it.”

“What’s his name?” asked Jack.

“Maxwell Wolf. He’s an engineer at Bendex Manufacturing. He jogs here almost every morning before work. There’s no visible blood splatter on him, but we asked for and got his jogging shirt to be tested by forensics.”

“Any weapon found?” asked Jack.

“No, but we’re still working the scene. No weapon found yet, but we’re still searching the bushes and grassy areas along the pathway.”

Fiona nodded as the guys talked, almost over her head. Her move turned two shades darker. She felt like she had been transported back to the 1950’s when women were completely insignificant. Both guys were taller than her and their conversation was literally taking place six inches over her head.

“Anything else?” asked Jack as he took out a small notebook from his inner jacket pocket. He began to record the details.

“There’s one clear footprint close to the body and they’re doing a plaster cast right now. The tech thinks it’s an Armour Under running shoe, about size 10. He worked a previous case with the same sole pattern, so he’s pretty sure that’s the brand. It’s also the most popular designer running shoe, especially for the elitist crowd in this area. Our witness, Max Wolf is wearing Armour Under size 10, so there’s that. But this is a jogging trail, so this casting may be just busy work. You’re going to need more than a shoe print.”

“You’re right about that,” said Jack.

“Chief Salvo has already called me and suggested we don’t miss anything. He wants this solved by sundown. Apparently, the mayor and the press are already on his case. That’s the latest scuttlebutt anyway.”

“I’m not surprised. The mayor’s re-election is coming up in a couple of months,” said Jack. “The people in these neighborhoods don’t suffer silently. He’s probably got residents from both developments calling him every ten minutes demanding justice and twenty-four-hour surveillance.”

Gunther pointed up to the area where the victim was lying. “Tell me about it. We have to wait for the ballistics report, of course, but the hole in the victim’s head, between you and me, looks like a .38 caliber.

“She lives up over this embankment in one of the houses that borders the jogging trail. The witness said she would sometimes walk around the block to enter the trail from his neighborhood, from Jasmine Street, and other times she would walk to the end of her yard and then walk down the embankment at the end of her property. He doesn’t know which way she came today. Anyway, that’s all we have for now.”

Officer Gunther pointed with his chin. “I told him to hang around to talk to a detective.”

“Thanks,” said Jack. “Have you met Detective Fiona Quinn?” Jack took a step aside to finally include her in the conversation.

“Yes, we met at roll call this morning,” said the officer nodding and half smiling at Fiona. He reached out and they shook hands again.

[Murder in the Sanctuary](#)