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Taboo

Written by Casey Hill

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Dedication to come

Prologue

San Francisco Bay area, California

'Go on, Riley, I dare you.'

'Jess, forget it – I'm not doing it, OK?' Riley Steel trundled along the path on her way home from school. Her younger sister skipped along in front of her, her fluffy blond pigtails bouncing with every step. She hated collecting her sister from school – all her friends got to hang out at the mall, but no, she had to go get Jess, take her home, give her a snack, make sure she did her homework. 'You know Dad says we should stay away from him,' she said.

Twenty yards ahead, an old man walked slowly back and forth across his yard, raking leaves. Dressed in an old flannel shirt and dirty overalls, he had a pronounced stoop, thin silver hair raked across his head, and large gnarled hands wrapped round the handle of the rake. It was fall; the leaves were turning on the trees, the sun sinking lower in the sky with each passing day.

Jess looked at Riley, her clear blue eyes shining with mischief. 'Go on, say something to him.'

'Didn't you hear what I said? We're not supposed to talk to that guy.'

'But why?'

Riley exhaled in annoyance. 'Why *what*, Jess?'

'Why aren't we supposed to talk to Mr Reynolds?'

She glanced at the older man and shivered. Randy Reynolds they called him – word was he had a taste for little girls. Jess was staring at him, her eyes wide with fascination, as though she half knew the truth.

'He's a bad guy. He . . . e does things to little girls,' Riley said, finally. She gave her sister a nudge. 'Come on, let's get going.'

Jess didn't move. 'What kinds of things?'

Riley sighed. She knew her sister well enough to recognize that look – Jess wasn't going anywhere until her question had been answered. 'Well, he likes to . . . touch girls—'

'Touch them?'

'Touch their bits, you know . . . like their private parts,' she continued, uncomfortably.

Understanding suddenly dawned in Jess's eyes. 'Eeew! Why would he want to do that?'

How to explain to a wide-eyed 10-year-old when in all honesty Riley didn't get it herself? 'I don't know,' she mumbled. 'I guess some guys just do.'

Jess looked thoughtful. 'He's not supposed to do that though, is he?'

'No. Like Dad always says, nobody touches your private parts except you.' She nudged her again. 'Come on, let's go. We've got lots of homework to do, and you know

Dad'll get mad if it's not done before he gets back from work.'

Not only that but Riley also had to make dinner and clean the house, all the things a mom should do.

But not their mom.

She and Jess started walking again, closer to Reynolds' house. As they passed, the old man stopped raking. He looked up, his eyes glistening as he watched them walk past.

'Hi girls.' His voice was a low croak.

Riley said nothing and kept her head down, but Jess stared right back, insolent, looking him straight in the eye. 'Jess, I'm warning you,' Riley muttered out of the side of her mouth.

'You're a pretty one, aren't you?' Reynolds said, his mouth breaking into a grin. Jess stared back, a defiant look in her eyes. Riley grabbed her hand and tried to haul her along, but she pulled free.

'You like little girls, don't you?' Jess challenged. She stepped forward. 'You want to touch my private parts, right? Go ahead then.' And with that, she lifted her skirt and flashed her pink cotton Snoopy pants at him.

'*Jess!*' Riley cried, flabbergasted.

Reynolds stared transfixed – evidently torn somewhere between surprise, lust and shame. Then, just as suddenly, Jess dropped her skirt, picked up a stone and hurled it with all her strength. Caught off-guard, the man stumbled backward and landed in a crumpled heap on his lawn.

Jess turned and ran, grabbing Riley's hand as she raced past. 'Come on!'

They didn't stop running until they were around the corner.

Breathless, Riley looked at her little sister. 'What the hell were you doing, Jess? You don't flash at people . . . Don't you *ever* do something like that again!'

Jess was wide-eyed. 'Why not?'

'Well . . . because it's just not the thing to do.' Riley struggled for words. 'We were told to stay away from him. You could get yourself in serious trouble.' She shook her head, amazed but also faintly impressed at her brazenness. 'I can't believe you did that.'

'Of course I did.' Jess looked back at her with innocent eyes. 'You said he's a bad guy and bad guys are supposed to be punished, aren't they?'

One

Dublin, Ireland

Riley's head shot up off the pillow and she stared around her, momentarily forgetting where the hell she was. She took slow, deep breaths in an attempt to calm her heart rate, and let her eyes gradually adjust to the shadow-filled room.

Lying back down, she stared up at the ceiling, the lights of the passing cars creating abstract patterns as they slid by in the rain-slicked streets below. Her thoughts wandered in a random, half-asleep manner and wound up back with Jess.

It had been a while since she'd dreamt about her sister. Maybe a year or more, which was good; Dr Kyle, her shrink back home, would have been proud of her. The less she dreamt about Jess and the less she thought about Jess, the better.

Because thinking about her, about *it*, had never got Riley anywhere. Although Dr Kyle would probably argue that thinking about Jess had had a profound influence on Riley in every conceivable way. In fact, the doc had implied more than once that if the whole Jess situation had never

happened, then she might well have decided to follow a very different path. But he was a shrink so of course he *would* say that.

Her thoughts had brought her full circle, wide awake in a dingy Dublin apartment in the middle of the night. Sleep was gone for now so, pulling back the covers, Riley got out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

She switched on the light and gasped at the sight in the mirror. A bright red scar ran along one cheek and she rubbed furiously at it, hoping the seam mark from the pillow would go away. Her eyes were glassy and swollen from lack of sleep and her fair hair was tousled, knotted and badly in need of a trim. A quick wash and shampoo would just have to do for now, she sighed, stepping into the shower.

A few minutes later, she wrapped herself in a towel and padded barefoot into the kitchen. Or at least that's what the cheery real estate guy who'd leased her the place had called it – as she far as Riley was concerned, it was nothing but a glorified broom closet. But apparently in this town, a broom closet for a kitchen was all you got for the best part of a thousand bucks a month, and for that, Riley had also been blessed with a 'modern open-plan living area' and a 'cosy bedroom'.

If you considered coffins cosy, she'd wanted to reply. But at least the place was in better shape that anything else she'd seen, and at the time she'd needed to find somewhere to live – fast. By then the hotel bills had started to mount up, and her employers were bitching about the expense.

Dublin had come as a shock to her – no, strike that –

Ireland had come as a shock to her. Growing up back home in California, her father used to love telling her and Jess colorful stories about the country of his birth; it sounded almost magical – a land full of green, open spaces and welcoming, friendly people. She never tired of hearing tales about Mike Steel's childhood before the family's eventual emigration to California.

But upon her arrival four months before, Riley quickly realized that the slow-paced, easygoing picture of Ireland her dad had painted didn't fit at all with the Dublin she found.

Instead of the laidback and carefree natives he'd described, Riley was faced with a population of supremely confident, well-educated and ambitious go-getters, even though, like the rest of the world, Ireland had recently suffered its fair share of financial turmoil and unemployment.

While Riley was under no illusion that working in Dublin would be a holiday, she was already taken aback at level of serious crime in the country, particularly one with such a small population.

She fixed herself a coffee and turned her attentions to the day ahead. Although it was already 7.30 a.m., it was so dark outside it still felt like the middle of the night. It was days like this she really missed the sun coming up over San Francisco Bay – that she missed the sun, period.

She closed her eyes and pictured the view from the headland back home where she usually parked her car – the wide sweep of the bay, the breakers rolling in from left to right, the sea that deep, dark green that she loved,

whitecaps calling to her as she hauled on her wetsuit and unloaded her surfboard from the top of her car.

By contrast, winter here was oppressively bleak and miserable – at first, Riley couldn't understand how people even managed to rouse themselves from their beds, let alone summon the energy to work as hard as they did through those dark, gray days. But despite being starved of sun, Ireland was now Riley's home and, sixteen weeks in, she was just about beginning to get used to it.

Not that she'd had the opportunity to spend all that much time outside, though. Since moving to Dublin, she'd been practically chained to the lab, which she supposed was a good thing. Labs tended to be the same all over the world and the one place in which Riley felt most at home.

'Or the one place you feel most in control?' Dr Kyle had suggested, and maybe he was right. In the lab, surrounded by familiar equipment and implements that always did her bidding, she felt at peace.

Albeit temporarily.

Riley shivered and, pouring the last of her coffee down the sink, she returned to her coffin-cum-bedroom and began to get ready for work.

The spartan office was lit by two lines of fluorescent lights, which cast a harsh light on the long table. Riley spread a collection of evidence bags across the table and watched as her team wandered in, coffee cups and notepads in hand. They jostled each other, raced for the prime seats like kids in school, then finally settled and looked up expectantly at her.

'OK, what have we got?' she asked, glancing at the array of bagged and labeled items on the table in front of her. There was a bloodied T-shirt, a broken beer glass, a half-eaten burger and some fries – or rather, 'chips' as they were listed on the inventory.

One of the lab assistants, Gary, cleared his throat and peered at the report. He was the most confident of the bunch, in his late twenties with shaggy brown hair and small wire-framed glasses. 'According to the report, it's from an assault in Temple Bar.'

A popular tourist area of the city, Riley knew, full of restaurants and pubs.

'Yeah, it can get a bit rowdy down there at the weekends.' Lucy said quietly. Lucy was the only other girl in the group, a honey-pot the guys constantly buzzed around. 'Big groups of people out of it, not to mention all those hens and stags.'

'Hens and stags?'

Lucy flicked her blond hair back from her face and Riley immediately caught a scent of her perfume. One of those celebrity-endorsed ones she figured, trying to place it; *Lovely* or *Amazing* – something like that? 'You know – last night of freedom before getting hitched?'

'Ah, bachelor parties, you mean.'

'Yeah. They usually get pretty wild.'

'Pity it's gone like that. It used to be such a nice area, all cobbled streets and old buildings.' They all looked at Julius. He was the only one older than Riley, a career lab tech with the social life to prove it. She hadn't memorized all the details of his personnel file, but she did remember

that he was forty-two, unmarried, and had worked at the forensic lab for over fifteen years. *Now there was an unusual profile for a lab tech*, she thought, sardonically.

These gatherings gave her a good feel for the team; their individual personalities, who excelled in certain areas, and who didn't. Because this job wasn't just about collecting evidence and analyzing it to death, it was about spotting the small things, the tiny, seemingly insignificant threads that could suddenly bring an entire investigation together.

It was that great feeling, the immense thrill of chasing – and eventually finding – that crucial piece of evidence which had kept Riley going all throughout her studies at Quantico, and later during her time with the California Police Department.

Her determinedly hands-on approach was one of the reasons the Irish Police Commissioner had offered her the job of 'dragging the technical bureau into the twenty-first century' in the first place. And if Riley was going to get the brand new Garda Forensic Unit operating like a well-oiled machine – as per her brief – she knew she needed to keep its employees stimulated and interested in the evidence, rather than have them locked away carrying out mindless analysis in the recently built, state-of-the-art crime lab.

Hence this morning's gathering.

'There were some witnesses,' Gary went on, 'but apparently it all happened very fast . . . most of them were trashed, so they can't tell for sure who clocked him. The cops'll need a solid description before they can charge anyone.'

Riley wasn't personally familiar with Temple Bar and

made a mental note to go down there and take a look around. Since taking the job, she had spent much of whatever free time she did get walking through different parts of the city getting to know the surroundings and could now easily differentiate between the cobblestones at Dublin Castle to those situated around Trinity College – knowledge crucial to their work.

'Anyway,' Lucy grabbed the report from Gary, and continued reading, 'according to the cops, there was a bit of aggro, two men got into it, it quickly got nasty, and now one of them is unconscious in James's Street Hospital after being glassed with a beer mug. The bloke who attacked him legged it before the police got there.'

Riley nodded, translating Lucy's slang as best she could. 'OK, what else? CCTV?'

'Hold on . . .' Lucy quickly scanned through the report. 'Nope. They've got some, but they can't make the bloke out. Footage is blurred and there were too many other people around.'

'OK,' Riley turned to the others. 'Anyone got any thoughts?'

'Well, we can test the blood on the T-shirt,' Gary ventured.

'Which tells us what exactly?'

'It'll tell us whose blood it is for one.'

'But we know whose blood it is,' Julius pointed out. 'Obviously it belongs to the guy who was injured.'

'Yeah, but it was a two-way fight, remember?' Rory, as usual, had bided his time before speaking. 'Maybe the attacker bled too, which means there might be two different

samples on there. If there is, we can get a comparison sample from the victim, eliminate him, and then we're left with the sample from the guy who did it.' Rory was a rugby player, with a big build and dark, intense eyes. With his huge hands and crooked nose, he looked as though he himself knew a thing or two about street fights.

'That still won't help us identify the attacker, though, will it?' Lucy said, turning to Riley who had remained silent, content to let the team figure it out amongst themselves.

'OK, so it won't help us identify him *now*,' Rory conceded, 'but it will give us something for later, won't it?'

'Good point,' she agreed. 'But is there anything else here that could help us identify him, something we could use to give the police some kind of a definite description of him right now?'

There was a brief pause as the team contemplated this.

'Fingerprints from the pint glass,' Gary suggested, eventually. 'Although, I suppose that's only good for a comparison too, isn't it?'

'How about the burger?' Lucy's tone was studied. 'It says here that the attacker was eating a burger just before the fight, so we could analyze his saliva for DNA.'

'Still no good – wouldn't he have to be already in the system for us to find a match?' Julius pointed out and they all looked at Riley for affirmation.

'Correct. So again we're only talking about comparative evidence. All of your suggestions are great, and would certainly help mount a case against this guy if or when he's caught, but in the meantime, how do we help *catch* him? Come on, surely there's something among all this?'

The set of faces before her looked blank as they each raked through the evidence, and took yet another look at photographs of the scene.

Deciding to put them out of their misery, Riley picked up the bagged burger.

'You were half right, Lucy,' she announced, holding it aloft. 'This is the single most important piece of evidence relating to this case. Not, as Lucy pointed out, for DNA collection – although of course that too is important – but mostly because this innocent-looking cheeseburger can give us lots of information about this guy. His height, facial appearance, right down to whether he snores in bed or snuffles when he's awake.'

They looked at her, puzzled.

'In fact,' Riley went on, studying the bag more closely, 'I can tell from just looking at it that our guy has got a thin, pinched face . . . probably narrow too. And he seems to be missing a couple of wisdom teeth—'

'His bite mark,' Julius muttered, the penny finally dropping.

'Exactly. Now, a forensic dentist would have to give us specifics, but when time is of the essence and the cops are sure their attacker was the one eating the cheeseburger, we can at least confirm that it's a guy with a long, narrow face.'

Rory shook his head in wonderment. 'I would never have thought of that,' he admitted.

'Well,' the department's new specialist forensic investigator said with a smile, 'by the time I'm finished with you guys, there's nothing in this world you won't think of.'