

WALL OF SILENCE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Ever wonder if, before you die, there's an early warning sign? Sort of a "smoke all you want, drink tons of alcohol, fuck up a storm, because it doesn't matter anymore" free pass to hell?

Well, let me be the first to say, death is never that polite.

I'm not dead. At least, not anymore. But that's a long story and I'll never know exactly when I started to lose the life I'd been building. However, the day things changed forever began just like the rest. It was actually kind of pretty as days go in the City of Angels. My commemorative 1969 New York Mets alarm clock went off at six a.m. as usual. And as was my habit, I sent it sailing across the room. Sold as "childproof," it continued to tick after crashing against the wall and hitting the hardwood floor with a hollow clatter.

I rolled off my bed and stumbled to my sparsely decorated kitchen. A friend of mine, Stacy, says Starbucks is the devil's spawn. I, however, would gladly nosedive into the devil's ass for a decent mocha.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I grumbled as the phone started ringing its annoying little halfhearted bleat before I could brew my morning fix. I picked up as I spooned beans into the coffee grinder. "Everett."

I quit smoking cigarettes years ago, but I still have a morning cough and a huskiness that dissipates as slowly as the L.A. smog.

My caller said, "You better get your ass in gear. You're late again."

I pressed down on the grinder for a few seconds before answering. "I'll be there in a few."

My partner, Detective Joseph Smith, had married the boss's daughter, so he showed up on time for shifts. I had no such incentive.

Not waiting for him to launch into his familiar tirade, I dropped the phone back into its cradle. A slight movement caught my eye and I reached for my gun, which, since I sometimes sleep unarmed, was hanging in its holster on a chair across the room, one of only three pieces of furniture in my supposedly furnished studio apartment.

I slid to the floor and crawled on my hands and knees over to the corner where I had seen the flash of movement. Cursing up a storm and cackling with glee, I dove. “Gotcha, you little bastard!” I hated to lose, and this rodent had managed to elude me for the past two weeks.

The tiny white mouse simply stared at me with beady red eyes, as if *I* were the one that had been up at all hours of the night munching on *his* last box of Cracker Jacks.

“Don’t look at me like that. I have every right to send you to mouse heaven.”

I didn’t have time to make good on this threat, so I located a shoebox I’d neglected to toss when I bought my last pair of Docs, and stuck my captive inside. This uninvited guest was not going to be munching on my shit at three in the morning anymore. As soon as I got the chance, I would find a field somewhere and let him go.

I quickly slipped on my baggy black cargo pants and a ribbed T-shirt, halfheartedly brushed my teeth, and put my long red hair into its customary ponytail. The mirror was always a mistake but I stared into the tired, hazel eyes of my reflection. I looked like a wreck. I hadn’t been sleeping well; the dark circles were more pronounced than usual. I was one of the millions of people who suffer from nightmares, or so the police psychologists told me. I wouldn’t know. I could never remember what they were about when I woke up the next morning. Whatever they were, I hadn’t had a good night’s sleep since joining the force.

Feeling much older than my twenty-nine years, I leaned closer to the Foster Everett staring back at me and whispered ominously, “That’s because you see dead people.”



“If I wasn’t in love with you, I would have to kick your ass,” Smitty said as I walked into the office that we shared with six other detectives. My partner was one of those guys that other guys loved

and girls ended up marrying: tall, dark, and vaguely handsome in that “nothing *ugly* about him” sort of way.

“Well, if I wasn’t in love with your wife, I might have to kick *your* ass.” I handed over the shoebox. “Don’t look in there.”

As curious as Smitty was, it would only be a few minutes before he had a look in the box. He hated mice, so it would serve him right for being nosy.

I made myself look busy, not difficult in a place where everybody is either coming or going, but nobody seems to really be getting anywhere in particular. That’s about how the division is—a whole lot of chaos, all the time. The hustle and bustle soothed me. Hell, occasionally I was able to put my feet up on my desk and actually catch a few hours of shut-eye. I’ve been a part of that kind of life for as long as I can remember. My dad was a cop. My grandfather was a fireman, but his father was a cop, too. There’s a long line of dumb-ass civil servants in my family.

“What the fuck?” Smitty stared at the box, his head angled.

I heard scratching sounds. “Don’t look,” I reminded him and fished a scrap of paper from my pocket. “I almost forgot, give this to Monica.”

“You should try to come to the funerals sometime. They’re really beautiful.” Smitty folded the check and put it in his shirt pocket.

We both knew I wouldn’t come. How could a child’s funeral *ever* be beautiful?

Every year in Los Angeles County, hundreds of bodies were discarded like so much refuse. About two hundred were never identified. Most would be buried in mass graves in east L.A. Of those, ten to fifteen were children, and the numbers seem to rise every year.

Monica, Smitty’s wife, raised money to provide decent burials for these Johnnie and Janie Does. She coerced, shamed, and threatened every cop and politician in the Los Angeles area to obtain donations. She and her father appeared on numerous television shows and got donations from as far away as China. Every couple of months, I wrote a check and told myself it was okay not to go to the funerals, and maybe if I did my job right I could keep a few children from ending up in Monica’s Cemetery of the Unwanted.

How Smitty could voluntarily look at the young, untainted faces of dead children, children we had failed to protect, was beyond me. I

picked up a piece of paper from my desk, pretending to study it. “The newspaper said over a hundred fifty people came last time.”

“Yeah, it was a big one. We got a lot of donations. Monica’s going to add a few more plots and maybe get some decent clothes for the ones that don’t need closed caskets.”

One of our colleagues paused at my desk. “Captain’s looking for you.”

Smitty seemed to find this funny. “Probably wants to discuss your tardiness again.”

My stomach knotted. I looked around to make sure no one was listening. “I don’t know why that woman got into law enforcement. And those tailored suits she wears. In this place?”

I refused to wear suits. They were just too damn confining. If I wore a suit, where would I keep my gun? Not to mention the illegal key picks, Swiss Army knife, the obligatory high-calorie snack, and the other nifty objects that I carry in the pockets of my pants. Smitty was right, though; the captain seemed to have a woody for me, and not in a good way. We were like two caged lions just waiting for the chance to piss on each other.

Smitty surveyed my pants and T-shirt. “Maybe you want to explain the appropriate dress code to her while you’re in there.”

“Very funny.” I dropped my black bomber jacket over the back of my chair and headed for Captain Simmons’s door. I hoped she wouldn’t hear me knock, but of course she instantly barked, “Come in.”

She didn’t bother to look up as I closed the door behind me and waited a few feet from her desk. She continued reading some document while tapping her pen. Her arrogance was just one of many annoying things I hated about her. That and the fact that she was so good-looking it was easy to forget she dripped venom from every pore. I took the time to study her as she patently ignored me. She wore her long, dark hair pulled back in a severe bun. The body beneath the suit promised not to disappoint. She probably did aerobics or some other such shit.

“Everett, how come you’re always the last one in every morning?” she asked as she continued to gaze down at the mound of papers in front of her.

As I sat down, I desisted from checking her out. I didn’t want to be caught if she looked up suddenly. Besides, I wasn’t interested in this witch. If I were, I would have gone home and used that damn dildo that Stacy had bought me as a gag. At least she *said* it was a gag. What it

was was a waste of a perfectly good dildo. For reasons I preferred not to examine too closely, my libido had bailed on me around about the time I left my teens.

I spent my early twenties forcing myself into relationships I never found fulfilling. After a while, even the most understanding partner gets tired of one-sided sex, so I had to date women who were selfish enough to let me pleasure them without reciprocation. They weren't that hard to find, and I'd gotten used to women who were perfectly happy to let me take them where they wanted to go before they turned over and fell asleep. The last such fling—well, one-nighter really—was about two years ago.

I straightened, hoping to steal a look at the papers Captain Simmons had been so intent on finishing. I already had an idea what this was about, but I wasn't volunteering any information. "Well, Cap, you know I don't have a car."

"That's because you crashed the last two."

"Yeah, so I have to walk to work."

"You only live a few minutes from here," she said, still not bothering to glance up.

Bitch, I thought. "I was here pretty late working with Smitty on that snuff film case, so I kind of overslept."

"And what's the status? You two have been on that case for a month and from the look of things, you haven't made any headway."

"We should be bringing in some suspects in the next day or two. We just want to make sure the DA won't have a reason to let them go."

She nodded. The only person the captain hated more than me was the district attorney. I patted myself on the back for coming up with that on the spur of the moment.

"All right, just keep me posted. That's not why I brought you in here, anyway. I've had another complaint against you. This makes the third in as many months."

I sat quietly, not denying the allegations as she read them off. They were all true, and she'd probably missed a few gory details. She took a break from the infernal tapping and leaned back in her chair.

"Have you been seeing the psychologist?"

"Yeah, but I don't need a psychologist. I'm fine." I shifted in my seat and tried in vain to find some common ground with the woman. "You know how things are out there."

“You’re going to lose your temper one time too many, Everett, and I won’t be able to help you.”

When had she ever helped me, anyway? “Look, jerks try to test me, probably because of my size and because I’m a woman. If I don’t take them down a few pegs, they think they can run all over me.”

“You kicked the last one in the balls so hard that he’s still in the hospital. We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t file a lawsuit.”

“It was self-preservation. He was coming at me. IA cleared me.” The internal review had not only cleared me, but determined that if I hadn’t disabled the offender, serious injury to me or my partner could have resulted. That finding had left the captain steaming for days.

I wondered about the new complaint. Was it the guy I shot in the toe?

The captain shuffled some papers. “This one reads like a nuisance lawsuit. I can’t see anything sticking.”

“That’s good news.”

“No thanks to you.”

I grinned. This woman would never be on my side no matter what I did. “Is there anything else, Captain?”

“Yes, you can refrain from slamming my door on your way out.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I got to my feet and headed for the door, a triumphant grin already plastered across my face. That had been fairly painless as visits with the captain go.

“Oh, and Everett, get me something on who’s distributing that trash on my streets by Friday or your ass is working parade duty.”

“You got it, Captain.” Her streets, huh? Yeah, right.

As I reached my desk I contemplated sending my trash can flying across the room. Throwing things always makes me feel better. But Smitty had the shoebox lid poised on the end of his pencil, so I settled back in my chair to enjoy the show. The shriek that erupted was worthy of the loud applause I received from the rest of the room when I retrieved the box.

“I told you not to look.” I sneered in mock disgust at my 6’3” partner, who was cowering in the center of the room.

“God damn it, you know I hate those things. Why’d you give it to me?” Smitty glared at the shoebox as if a mouse attack was imminent.

I peeked inside to make sure the little guy wasn’t traumatized. “Because I thought you were the one person I could trust. I’m going to let him go as soon as I find a good place.”

“Make it a long way from here.”

“No shit, Smitty.”

From the glint in his eye, I could tell he was drawing his own conclusions about my attitude. “What did the boss want?”

“Let’s just say I need some good news.” I was still pissed off at the captain for threatening me with the rookie parade detail.

“Well, I just may have some.” Smitty sat down at his desk with the self-satisfied air of a man with a good lead. Or at least something that looked like a good lead. As of the night before, we’d had nothing.

“Spill it,” I said.

“While you were in there gossiping with Captain Simmons, I got you some coffee.” He pointed to the cup on my desk. Smitty hadn’t been my partner for three years without learning a thing or two about me. The most important was that bringing me coffee secured my undying love. Hey, what can I say? I’m a cheap date.

I sipped the vending machine concoction gratefully. “So, what’s up?”

“I ran into Fuller. He and Jackson brought in Pistol Pete last night.”

“Oh yeah, what for?”

“Same ol’. Flashing some rich chick.”

Pistol Pete was so named because he loved to pull out his “six-shooter,” as he called it, and fire off a few rounds at unsuspecting targets. Generally, though, he was harmless, and somewhat of a division mascot. I’d seen his six-shooter when he was showing it off through the bars of his jail cell. Personally, I thought it was more like a four-shooter, but who am I to judge?

“So, what, they put him in detox?”

“Yeah, he’d purchased himself several boxes of wine.”

“Oh yeah? Where did the cash come from?” I feigned interest.

“He made a few bucks from a video store owner over on Hartford.”

My antennae went up at the mention of videos, but I had to play Smitty’s game. When he thought he had something good, he couldn’t be rushed. He was also one of those people who had a story for everything and about everyone, and he would tell it over and over again if he could find someone willing to listen. I prompted, “So?” and started looking through the piles of paperwork on my desk as I waited for him to continue.

“Well, this guy paid Pete to move some boxes into his store. While the guy wasn’t looking, Pete got nosy and took a look in the boxes.”

“Let me guess, there were DVDs in there, right?” I asked sarcastically.

“Yeah, right, but the thing is, our friend Pete filched some so he could sell them for a few bucks. Only when he got back to his motel and took a look at them, there was some pretty wild stuff.”

“Where are the DVDs?”

“Pete says he tossed them in the trash. He thought Jackson and Fuller were arresting him for the theft, not the flashing.”

I put my empty cup down with a thud. “Well, shit, what are we waiting for? We need to search that trash, unless Jackson and Fuller already did.”

“Those pussies? You have to be kidding me.” Smitty was on his feet.

I snatched the keys out of his hand and raced out of the division. “I’m driving. You drive like an old lady!”