

A World Apart – Sample Chapter

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Chapter One

“WHAT HAVE WE got, Lou?” Ben asked as he stepped up to the reception desk at Corinth Police Department. He glanced at a handcuffed man sitting on a nearby bench and staring determinately down at the scuffed linoleum floor. The man’s strawberry-blond hair was disheveled, falling low over his forehead and brushing his reddish eyelashes as his eyes flicked up nervously at Ben. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. One knee was jiggling nervously, and his jaw worked as if he was biting the inside of his mouth repeatedly.

“That guy was driving the vehicle involved in the hit-and-run yesterday,” Lou, the gray-haired desk clerk, said, jerking his thumb at the man on the bench. “Browne and O’Donnell brought him in. They’re with the captain.”

Just that moment, the door to the inner sanctum of the station opened, and Jason Browne strode out of Captain Buckley’s office. The sleeves of his uniform were rolled up as usual, to show off his muscular, tanned arms.

“How was court, brother?” Jason sounded cheerful, but his gray eyes were cold. In Ben’s partner and best friend since high school, that was never a good combination. Ben gave Jason a long look, then shrugged.

“As expected.” He didn’t want to think about the peculiar effect the defendant’s words had had on him, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to discuss it in front of a suspect, or Lou.

“You missed all the excitement.” Jason gestured toward the handcuffed man, who was staring at the floor again. “Saunders here knows some pretty colorful language, and he was none too happy to accompany us, neither.”

“Hence the handcuffs?” Ben asked drily.

Jason nodded, smirking.

“Wasn’t me that hit that kid,” Saunders suddenly muttered, his dark voice shaking slightly with suppressed anger. “Told y’all I wasn’t in town.”

Jason sighed, folding his arms across his chest with exaggerated impatience. “And I

told you this: We got witnesses placing you at the scene, smart-ass. It's your word against theirs. Who're we gonna believe, some deadbeat, or the boy's mother?"

Ben frowned at his partner. They had been in the radio car on their usual route the day before when the call about a hit-and-run near Corinth High had come over dispatch. O'Donnell and Myers, the department's other two sergeants, had been closest and responded to the call. Last night, back at the station, O'Donnell had told them that the boy had a broken leg from being flung off his bike, but that he would undoubtedly survive. There really was no need for Jason to be so aggressive about the issue.

Saunders suddenly sat up straight on the bench, glaring at Jason. "It wasn't me! Why're ya not listenin'?" His dark blue eyes were wide with fury.

Ben, knowing Jason's thought processes and impulses nearly as well as his own, stepped in his partner's way. Gaze fixed on his friend, he said loud enough for Lou and any bystanders to hear, "Why don't you and I take Mr. Saunders through to the interrogation room *for a statement?*" He put special emphasis on the last words, hoping Jason would get his meaning: Anything other than a polite request for an official statement from the suspect would be out of order at this point.

Taking Jason's reluctant jerk of the head as assent, Ben turned around, intending to escort Saunders to the interrogation room. But as soon as his back was turned, Jason stepped nimbly around him and grabbed the man hard by the upper arm.

Saunders flinched, but Jason's grip on him was like a vise. Saunders's eyes met Ben's, and there was pure animal fear in them, as well as something Ben couldn't quite place. Anguish, perhaps?

He stepped up close behind Jason. "If you dislocate his shoulder there'll be an awful lot of paperwork to fill in for both of us, brother." Ben kept his voice quiet and even, but Jason knew him well enough to detect the steely undertone. After a moment, Jason huffed, then let go of Saunders and took a step back. There were finger-shaped marks on Saunders's well-defined bicep, just below the rolled-up sleeve.

Now Ben stepped forward, and Saunders looked at him. He was still breathing fast, but the fear was beginning to fade from the indigo blue eyes.

Ben motioned at Saunders to stand, then pointed down the corridor. "Would you come this way, please?"

Good cop, bad cop. Ben really hated playing this game, but Jason had left him no

choice. Saunders got up. He was no taller than Ben, who just about scraped five foot ten. Jason towered over them both, still glowering. Saunders gave him a quick, disgusted look, then preceded Ben down the dreary-gray hallway, handcuffed arms held stiffly behind him. As Ben followed, he noticed that Saunders's shoulders were unusually broad for a man his height.

At the door to the interrogation room, Ben let Jason draw ahead. He followed the two men inside and closed the door. Jason approached Saunders, who had backed up against the one-way mirror.

"Turn around," Jason said gruffly.

Saunders ignored him and stared straight at the bottle-green linoleum floor. Ben spoke before Jason could get angry again. "Sir, the sergeant will move the handcuffs to the front so you can sit down more comfortably." The indigo blue eyes that met Ben's were still full of mistrust, but after a moment, they softened and Saunders turned obediently.

"Sit," Jason said when he had shackled Saunders's arms again in the front. Saunders sat down heavily in the single chair on one side of the square floor-bolted table. Ben and Jason took the two chairs opposite.

Leaning forward, Ben waited until he had the suspect's attention. "Do you mind if we record this conversation?"

"Yer arresting me?" The narrow blue eyes were suspicious again, but Saunders sounded more wary than belligerent. And he completely ignored Jason, his gaze never wavering from Ben.

"No, we're not," Ben said quietly. "But having a record of what we talk about will aid your cause."

Saunders chewed this over, trying to decide whether Ben was telling the truth. Eventually he gave a small shrug.

"Sir," Ben said. "Please state for the protocol: Do you mind if we record this conversation?" Forcing the police procedural on this man was surprisingly distressing. Saunders gave him a pained look.

"Go 'head."

Jason pressed the digital recorder button on the small panel in the tabletop to his right. But it was Ben who spoke again. When they interrogated a suspect together, Ben

usually started off the interview. His milder, calmer demeanor tended to relax the atmosphere better than Jason's hot temper. For now, Jason seemed to have gotten all his anger out by playing scary cop in front of Lou and sat quietly back in his chair.

"Statement protocol, September twenty-second, eleven forty-five a.m. Officers present: Sergeant Ben Griers and Sergeant Jason Browne." Ben nodded at the suspect. "Please state your full name for the record, sir."

"Donnie Saunders." The man's voice was quiet, and he sounded tired.

Ben waited for Saunders to look at him again, and nodded his thanks. Then he glanced at Jason, eyebrows raised, reminding his partner with his most level stare to act appropriately.

"Officer Browne will now ask you a few questions."

"Alright," Jason said. Ben took this as the opening of the interview and an affirmation that he would stay calm. "Mr. Saunders, your pickup truck was seen driving away after hitting Dennis Mallory on his bike while he was riding home after school yesterday afternoon at about three thirty p.m."

"I told y'all three times now, it wasn't me. Why is it that ya can't hear me?" Saunders's voice had risen again in volume, but there was a strange quiver in it, too. He leaned back in his chair as far as he could, regarding Jason from eyes narrowed in anger.

Before Jason, who looked ready to explode again, could respond, Ben said quickly, "Let's rephrase the question: Sir, where were you yesterday at three thirty p.m.?"

Saunders didn't immediately reply. His eyes darted nervously around the room, never meeting Ben's, and ignoring Jason completely. Then they settled on the shackled, tightly folded hands in his lap.

Is he trying to come up with a lie?

Eventually, Saunders said, "Was in Atlanta. Had an appointment at the DFCS." His voice was very quiet, and he didn't look up. It didn't sound like a lie, but a truth the man was reluctant to share.

Ben decided not to press for details. It was none of his business why the guy had been summoned to the Division of Family and Children Services. As long as he could determine that Saunders had been forty miles away from the scene of the hit-and-run, he had done his job.

"I need to know who you were there to see," Ben said just as quietly, and wasn't surprised when his gaze was met with one of suspicion again. He added in explanation,

“A phone call to the person you had the appointment with will clear you.”

Saunders gave a small jerk of the head in understanding. “Stacy Miller.”

“Thank you.” Ben looked at Jason, considering his options. Could he leave these two alone for a few minutes? His partner’s steely gaze never wavered from Saunders, and Ben could feel Jason’s tension. But if he told Jason to make the phone call, would he try very hard to get at the truth? No, Ben would have to call the DFCS himself. He’d just be really quick about it.

“Jason, stay with Mr. Saunders. I’m going to call Ms. Miller.”

Not waiting for Jason’s acknowledgment, or asking permission from Saunders to make the call on his behalf, Ben got up and left the room. He went back to the front desk. “Lou, find me the number for Atlanta DFCS.”

The desk clerk looked grumpy for a moment but then started hacking away at his keyboard without a word. Finally he picked up the phone, dialed a number, and held the receiver out to Ben.

“DFCS switchboard,” a tinny voice announced in Ben’s ear. “How can I help?”

“Stacy Miller, please,” Ben said, ignoring Lou, who was trying hard to look like he wasn’t listening in.

“Hold the line.”

Ben half turned away while he listened to the annoying phone queue music. After a few moments, there was a click and a crisp voice said, “Medicaid assessment team. How can I help you?”

“Is this Stacy Miller?”

“It is. Who’s asking?”

“Ms. Miller, this is Sergeant Ben Griers, Corinth PD. Did a man by the name of Donnie Saunders have an appointment with you yesterday afternoon?” Ben mentally crossed his fingers that the mention of his rank would suffice to elicit this piece of fairly innocuous information. Legally, he had no leg to stand on, but his experience had taught him that a courteous yet firm manner often got you surprisingly far.

And his experience held true again. After only a moment, the woman on the other end said, “Yes, he did.”

“And he attended?”

“Yes.”

“What time was his appointment?”

“Three p.m. But we were running late, so I think I started with him around three fifteen.”

“And how long was he there for?”

“About forty-five minutes. Officer, is Mr. Saunders alright?”

That was a surprising question. State employees usually had no time or interest to worry about the hundreds of people that passed by their desks every week. But then, here Ben was himself, trying to help Saunders as well, as quickly and with as little delay as possible. *Maybe some of us do still care.*

“He’s fine. Ma’am, if I were to check your office’s visitor register for yesterday, would the record back up your statement?”

“It would,” Ms. Miller said composedly. “And you’d find a parking permit in Mr. Saunders’s name as well. We don’t have much space out front, so clients get timed permits for the parking lot at the back.”

That was more than good enough for Ben. “Thank you for your time, ma’am.”

“You’re welcome, Officer. Have a good day.”

“And you.”

Ben put the phone down, nodded at Lou, and swiftly turned his back before the desk clerk could make a comment or ask any questions.

As he walked down the corridor toward the interrogation room, Ben’s mind was on the phone call, even as he kept telling himself that, beyond establishing a suspect’s alibi, what he had just learned was none of his business. But he couldn’t help wondering about it. Why had Saunders gone to the Medicaid office? He didn’t look ill. Of course, there were a dozen possible reasons. A sick family member. An old injury that no insurance would cover. Or even trying to get at some extra state assistance for no good reason at all. None of this was relevant to the case, and as he reached the interrogation room, Ben tried his best to push the thoughts from his mind.

He opened the door but didn’t rejoin the other two at the table. “Mr. Saunders, your alibi for yesterday afternoon was confirmed by Ms. Miller. You’re free to leave.”

Jason looked around at Ben, scowling. Ben ignored his partner and kept his eyes on Saunders, who, after a fleeting look of surprise, raised his shackled wrists. “Ya gonna let me keep them as a souvenir?”

Surprisingly, he didn't sound aggrieved. Ben had been prepared for righteous indignation and anger, and wouldn't have blamed the man for it. But Saunders just sat there, looking kind of tired and defeated. He held his arms out without comment as Jason leaned over with the handcuff keys. Once he was free, Saunders got up and, without a glance at Jason, walked toward the door. When he drew level with Ben, he stopped, eyes on the floor in front of him.

"Thanks," he muttered quietly, then strode out of the room.

Ben glanced after Saunders as the man continued down the hall, shoulders hitched, face averted from the people milling around the lobby. A strange sensation rose up in him. Was it pity? He tried to tell himself that it was only natural to take an interest, feel something, after what Jason had put this man through without a single good reason.

And for Ben, the whole thing wasn't over yet. Turning to his partner with a scowl, he asked, "Why were you so sure it was him? You practically had him convicted already."

Jason shrugged. "Witness said they saw a dark brown pickup, same as Saunders has. And today, he was just sort of hanging around the gas station on Fullerton. Thought we should check him out."

"Did you have anything else to go on? Description of the driver, partial number plate, anything?"

"Nope."

Jason sounded smug, and Ben had to take a deep breath to keep his voice level. "Did he maybe behave in a suspicious manner?"

"Maybe," Jason agreed as he got up. In Jason-speak that meant: *Just didn't like the look of the dude.*

Jason sometimes got like this; he was all guts and instinct and reaction. That had its uses in policing, too, and Ben usually made excuses for his friend's hot-headedness, because it mostly came from the right place in his heart. But somehow, this time he couldn't. Maybe it had happened one time too many. Or maybe, because this time Jason's ire had focused on a completely innocent party, he'd simply rubbed Ben the wrong way.

As he followed Jason out of the room, Ben hissed, "Since this was your party, *brother*, you can write it up for the captain as well, alright?" This would annoy Jason more than anything. He hated writing reports.

Without another word, Ben strode past the other man and out into the parking lot. He needed a moment to calm down or else he might well punch his partner and best friend in the face before the day was done.