

Trust Me



A Novel

THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798

KELLY
IRVIN



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To my family, love always



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CHAPTER 1

APRIL 22, 2010

SAN ANTONIO ART CO-OP
SOUTHTOWN, SAN ANTONIO

The cloying stench of pot told the same old story.

With an irritated sigh Delaney Broward quickened her pace through the warehouse-turned-art-co-op toward her brother's studio at the far end of the cavernous hall. On his best days Corey had little sense of time. Add a joint to the mix and he lost his sense not only of time but of responsibility. It also explained why he didn't answer his phone. When he got high and started painting, he wanted no interruptions. His lime-green VW van was parked cattywampus across two spaces in the lot that faced Alamo Street just south of downtown San Antonio. He might be physically present, but his THC-soaked mind had escaped its cell.

Marijuana served as his muse and taskmaster. Or so he'd said.

The soles of her huarache sandals clacking on the concrete floor sounded loud in Delaney's ears. "Corey? Corey! You were supposed to pick us up at Ellie's. Come on, dude. She's waiting."

No answer.

At this rate Delaney would never get to Night in Old San Antonio,

affectionately known to most local folks as NIOSA. Everyone who was anyone knew it was pronounced NI-O-SA, long *I* and long *O*, the best party-slash-fund-raiser during the mother of all parties where her boyfriend would be waiting for her. “Hey, bro, I’m starving. Let’s go.”

Delaney’s phone rang. She slowed and dug it from the pocket of her stonewashed jeans. Speaking of Ellie. “I’m at the co-op now. He’s here.”

Share as little info as possible.

“He’s stoned again, isn’t he? I’m sick of this.” Ellie’s shrill voice rose even higher. “I swear if he stands me up again—”

“*Us*. Stands *us* up.”

“Stood us up again. That will be it. I’m done. I’m done waiting around for him. I’m done playing second fiddle to his self-destructive habits. I’m done with his starving-artist, free-spirit, pothead schtick. The man is a walking stereotype. I’m done with him, period.”

Delaney mouthed the words along with her friend. She knew the lyrics of this lovesick song by heart. The childish rejoinder “It takes one to know one” stuck in her throat. “We’ll be there in twenty. You can tell him yourself.”

Ellie would and then Corey would kiss her until she took it all back. With a final huff Ellie hung up.

The door to his studio—the largest and with the best light because the co-op was Corey’s dream child—stood open. “Seriously, Corey. Think of someone besides yourself once in a while, please.” Delaney strode through the door, ready to ream her brother up one side and down the other. “You are so selfish.”

Delaney halted. At first blush it didn’t make sense. Twisted and smashed canvases littered the floor. Along with paints, brushes, beer bottles, and Thai food take-out cartons.

Wooden easels were broken like toothpicks and scattered on top

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of the canvases. Someone had splattered red paint over another finished piece—a woman eating a raspa in front of a vendor’s mobile cart, the Alamo in the background.

Delaney’s hands went to her throat. The metallic scent of blood mingled with the odor of human waste gagged her. A fiery shiver started at her toes and raced like a lit fuse to her brain. Her mind took in detail after detail. That way she didn’t have to face the bigger picture staring her in the face. “Please, God, no.”

Even He couldn’t fix this.

She shot forward, stumbled, and fell to her knees. Her legs refused to work. She crawled the remainder of the distance to Corey across a floor marred by still-wet oil paint, beer, and other liquids she couldn’t bear to identify.

He sat with his back against the wall. His long legs clad in paint-splattered jeans sprawled in front of him. His feet were bare. His hands with those thin, expressive fingers lay in his lap. Deep lacerations scored his palms and fingers.

Her throat aching with the effort not to vomit, Delaney forced her gaze to move upward. His T-shirt, once white, now shone scarlet with blood. His blood. Rips in the shirt left his chest exposed, revealing stab wounds—too many to count.

Delaney opened her mouth. *Scream. Just scream. Let it out.*

No sound emerged.

She crawled alongside her big brother until she could lean her shoulder and head against the wall. “Corey?” she whispered.

His green eyes, fringed by thick, dark lashes that were the envy of every woman he’d ever dated, were open and startled. His skin, always pale and ethereal, had a blue tinge to it.

Delaney drowned in a tsunami of nausea. “Come on, Corey, this isn’t funny. I need you.”

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Her teeth chattered. Hands shaking, she touched his throat. His skin was cold. So cold.

Too late, too late, too late. The words screamed in her head. *Stop it. Just stop it.* “You can’t be dead. You’re not allowed to die.”

Mom and Dad had died in a car wreck a week past her eighth birthday. Nana and Pops had taken their turns the year Delaney turned eighteen. Everybody she cared about died.

Not Corey. Delaney punched in 9-1-1.

The operator’s assurance that help was on the way did nothing to soothe Delaney. She sat cross-legged and dragged Corey’s shoulders and head into her lap. She had to warm him up. “Tell them to hurry. Tell them my brother needs help.”

“Yes, ma’am. They’re en route.”

“Tell them he’s all I’ve got.”



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CHAPTER 2

TEN YEARS LATER

NASH RESIDENCE, SAN ANTONIO

Real men didn't cry. Not even during a reunion with a beloved truck.

Swallowing hard, Hunter Nash wrapped his fingers around the keys, concentrating on the feel of the metal pressing into his skin. He cleared his throat. "Thanks, Mom. For keeping it all these years."

His mom didn't bother to try to hide her tears. She wiped her plump cheeks on a faded dish towel, offered him a tremulous smile, and hustled down the sidewalk that led from the house on San Antonio's near west side where Hunter had grown up to the detached two-car garage in the back. It had housed his truck for the past eight years. Almost ten if he counted the two years it took for his case to go to trial. He had no place to go in those years when he'd allegedly been innocent until proven guilty. His friends no longer friends and his job gone, he had no need for transportation.

The door to the garage was padlocked. Mom handed him the key. "My hands are shaking. You'd better do the honors." She stepped back. "I still can't believe you're here."

"I did my time, Ma." As a model prisoner he'd earned time off for

good behavior. It was easy for a guy to behave when he spent his days and nights scared spitless.

“I know. All those nights I’ve lain in bed worrying about you in that place, whether you were safe, if you were hurt, if you were sick.” Her voice broke. “I can’t believe it’s over.”

“Me neither.”

It wasn’t over. In fact, it was just beginning, but she didn’t need to know that. His determination to prove his innocence would only worry her more. A divorced mother of four, she’d raised her kids on a teacher’s salary and an occasional child support check from the crud-for-brains ex-husband who showed up once every couple of years in an attempt to make nice with his kids. She deserved a break.

The aging manual garage door squeaked and protested when Hunter yanked on the handle. He needed to do some work around here, starting with applying some WD-40. The smell of mold and old motor oil wafted from the dark interior. Hunter slipped inside and waited for his eyes to adjust. A layer of dust covered the 2002 midnight-blue Dodge RAM 1500, but otherwise it remained in the pristine condition in which he’d left it the night he said goodbye and promised he’d be back. “My baby.”

More tears trickling down her face, Mom chuckled softly. “After you finish reintroducing yourself, come back inside. I’m making your favorite chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, gravy, pineapple coleslaw, and creamed corn. Your brother and sisters are coming over after work. Shawna’s bringing a carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. Melissa’s contribution is three kinds of ice cream, including rocky road. She said it seemed appropriate. I hope you haven’t lost your sense of humor. And you know Curtis. He’s all about the beer.”

The last thing Hunter wanted to do was celebrate with his sibs. Mel and Shawna had visited faithfully at first, but less as the years rolled

by. Curtis never showed, even though Fabian Dominguez State Jail was only a few miles down the road from San Antonio.

Nor did Hunter want to explain why he'd sworn off alcohol. The conditions of his parole included monthly pee tests—no alcohol or drugs, but that part of his life was over anyway. It had been easy to comply in prison, obviously. Whether he could maintain his sobriety in the beer drinking capital of the country remained to be seen. He'd do AA if necessary. "Mom—"

"No buts. They're family. They love you. You need to live life, enjoy life, make up for all you've missed. You haven't even met most of your nieces and nephews. Did you know Mel is expecting another baby in August?"

"Yes, I—"

"Today we celebrate your new job and your new life."

His bachelor of fine arts with an emphasis in drawing and painting from Southwest School of Art might once have allowed him to teach art in one of the school districts, but not anymore.

It didn't matter. The prison chaplain had hooked him up with Pastor James. The preacher ran a faith-based community center that served at-risk youth. He'd hired Hunter to teach art to those who'd already had their first brush with the law. He figured Hunter could teach life lessons at the same time he introduced them to art as a way to channel their anger at the hand life had dealt them. Learning what happened when a guy got off track would be the lesson.

Even though Hunter hadn't gotten off the track. He'd been shoved off it. By an eager-beaver, newbie detective; a green-as-a-Granny-Smith-apple public defender; and an assembly-line justice system.

He would get by in this world that had hung him out to dry. Especially knowing Mom had his back. She had that *don't-mess-with-me* teacher look in her burnt-amber eyes. Like her sixth graders, Hunter

knew better than to argue. It felt good to know she remained in his corner. When everyone else had hit the ground, scattering in opposite directions, she never budged in her belief that son number two could not be a murderer. She'd brought him up better than that.

"You're right. Give me a few minutes."

She patted his chest and stretched on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek. Her lips were chapped, and the wrinkles had deepened around her mouth and eyes. Her long hair had gone pure white during his years away. "Take your time, sweetheart."

Hunter gritted his teeth. After years of looking over his shoulder, bobbing and weaving around hard-core convicts who'd as soon shank a guy in the shower as look at him, he didn't know how to cope with nice. With sweet. With love tempered with wisdom and a hard life.

"*One day at a time.*" That's what the prison chaplain had told him. "*Get through the next minute, the next hour, the next day.*" That's how he did eight years at Dominguez. This couldn't be any harder. He opened the truck's door and slid into the driver's seat. The faint odor of pine air freshener greeted him. And citrus.

More likely that was his imagination. Delaney's perfume simply could not linger that long. *Move on. She has.* She did. To her credit Delaney held on as long as she could—until the guilty verdict. Then she was forced to move on. She couldn't be blamed for that.

Hunter picked up the sketch pad on the passenger seat. In those days he kept one everywhere. Just in case. The first page. The second. The third. All drawings of Delaney. Sweet Laney eating a slice of watermelon at a Fourth of July celebration. Laney rocking Hunter's newborn nephew in a hickory rocker on the front porch. Laney in a bathing suit sitting on the dock at Medina Lake. Laney with her soulful eyes, long sandy-brown hair, and air of sad vulnerability worn like a pair of old jeans that fit perfectly. That too-big nose, wide mouth,

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and pointed chin. Corey might have been the angelic beauty—totally unfair—but Delaney’s face had character. She had a face Hunter never ceased to want to draw and paint.

And kiss.

He turned the pages slowly, allowing the memories to have their way with him. Meeting at a party Corey had thrown when Delaney was a senior in high school. Their first date, ribs and smoked chicken with heart-stopping creamed corn, potato salad, coleslaw, and jalapeños at Rudy’s Country Store and Bar-B-Q followed by dancing at Leon Springs Dance Hall.

She had danced with the abandon of a small child. As if she didn’t care who watched. Her face glowed with perspiration. Her green eyes sparkled with happiness. His two left feet couldn’t keep up, but she didn’t mind. She twirled her peasant skirt as she flew around him, her hands in the air, her curves beckoning.

Hunter closed his eyes. Her softness enveloped him. Her sweetness surrounded him.

He needed to see her again. He needed to talk to her. Somehow he had to prove to her that she was wrong about him. Whatever it took. He laid the sketchbook aside. “Come on, dude, let’s take a ride.”

He stuck the key in the ignition and turned it.

Nothing. Not even a *tick-tick-tick*. He tried a second time. Nada. “I’m an idiot.” He patted the steering wheel. “Not your fault, man.”

The truck hadn’t been driven in years. The battery was dead. He might be able to jump it, but more likely he’d need a new one. Batteries cost money.

One thing at a time. He’d waited this long.

Hunter slid from the truck and eased the door closed. “I’ll be back when I get my act together.”

In the kitchen Hunter found his mom peeling potatoes. She

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pointed the peeler at him. “You can’t imagine how good it feels to have you home.”

“You can’t imagine how good it feels to be here.” He landed a kiss on her soft hair. She smelled of Pond’s cold cream. The same old comforting scent. Life had changed but not her. “I’m gonna take a walk. I need to blow the prison stink off.”

“Enjoy. They redid the walking trail at the lake and installed new outdoor fitness equipment.” She waved the paring knife in the air. “But don’t stay too long. You have company coming.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He pantomimed a mock salute and headed for the front door.

One thing at a time. One step at a time. That’s how he’d get his life back.



CHAPTER 3

Good smells meant good sales.

The scents of warm coconut oil, mimosas, and pink grapefruit wafted through the open shop windows. On the doorstep Delaney inhaled and rolled her eyes. Her friend Ellie must be on another spring break–induced beach trip down memory lane. A hint of gardenia but not enough to overpower. Delaney’s oversized schnoz—a family heirloom—could detect Ellie’s aromatic flights of fancy with little problem. If they couldn’t close their neighboring shops in San Antonio’s historic La Villita artisan district and road trip to Texas’s Gulf Coast, at least they could let the familiar scents soothe their wanderlust.

The Beach Boys crooned “Kokomo” on the radio through an open window. Definitely wishful thinking. A cool March breeze lifted homemade dark-blue-and-white-checked curtains. Everything about the small stucco-covered building that housed Mother Earth Oils and Candles beckoned those seeking a peaceful retreat from a troubled world.

If only it were that simple.

The sign on the door was already turned to CLOSED. Usually Ellie left the door open until Delaney reminded her she now had other

responsibilities besides providing soothing oils and fragrant candles to people desperate to quell their stress.

Delaney tugged the door open and stepped into a wonderland of infusers, essential oils, handcrafted candles, and wax chips. “Ellie! Quitting time. All the shoppers are busy drinking margaritas on the River Walk or eating ribs and being insulted at Dick’s.” She pressed her fingertips to the bridge of her nose. Her acute sense of smell could handle only so much of Ellie’s passion for scent. “You can go home, stick your feet in the kids’ sandbox, and pretend you’re on the beach at South Padre.”

No answer. Ellie had to be here. Never in the three years since Delaney had gone to work at the neighboring shop *You’ve Been Framed* and then took over the lease had her friend left first. They’d always walked together. Tragedy often tore families apart, but in this case it had woven Delaney and Ellie together in a tight hug. Ellie was like the sister Delaney never had.

“Let’s go, girl. You don’t want the kids to starve, do you?”

Still no answer.

Another scent—crude, ugly, and painfully familiar—alerted Delaney’s nose. She sniffed, took another half step, stumbled, and paused.

No, no, no.

“Ellie? Where are you?” Delaney’s voice dropped to a whisper. Memories, buried with hundreds of hours of therapy and a determined mental shovel, crowded her. The cloying metallic odor reared up and choked her. Weak-kneed, she gripped the glass display counter that held the cash register and Ellie’s laptop. “Come on, answer me. This isn’t funny.”

Her legs threatened to bail on her. Heart slamming against her chest like a slugger with a Louisville baseball bat, Delaney pushed forward.

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One step, two steps, three steps, four.

She rounded the display case. Red paraffin molds lay scattered across the floor. The day's special, a rose-gold lantern etched with delicate seashells lay on its side, melted wax cooling. An Andy Warhol print leaned against the wall, its black frame mangled. Delaney had matted and framed that print. Chairs were overturned, candles rolled under display tables in a topsy-turvy puzzle that couldn't be put back together.

Anger whooshed through her. Delaney forced her gaze past the destruction. Ellie lay sprawled on the whimsical purple-and-pink balloon-print rug she'd picked out to make the plain wood floor warmer. Her brown eyes were open and startled under dark-black eyebrows still lifted as if questioning her fate.

This is not happening. Not again. "Ellie, oh, Ellie, please, Ellie."

No answer. The stepmother of Skye, soon to be four, and Jacob, six, would not be making their favorite mac-n-cheese casserole for supper tonight—or any night ever again.

Blood soaked her white tube top and frothy African-print skirt. Delaney swallowed vomit in the back of her throat. That grotesque smell sent her hurtling back in time to another body and another death mask. Corey's body had been slumped against the wall in his studio. He, too, looked surprised, but he was young, so young. His beautiful green eyes begged her to do something to change the outcome.

Blood everywhere. His skinny chest exposed. Stab wounds in a nonsensical pattern. His face had been ethereal and angelic in repose. So peaceful. It took years for her to overcome the desire to join him.

Her peripheral vision caught movement. Adrenaline returned for an encore. Delaney crouched and swiveled right. A tall, dark figure shot from behind a display case and lunged at her. She ducked. His right arm swept out and over her head.

Delaney backpedaled. She needed traction. Her self-defense training surfaced. She kicked out hard, aiming for the most vulnerable part of a man's anatomy.

Her attacker, despite his height and boulder size, danced back. The kick missed its target.

More backpedaling.

Her keys. Her pepper spray was attached to the key ring. They were in her purse. Her Taser was in her Trailblazer's glove compartment. *"Always be prepared,"* her instructor had said.

She'd failed miserably.

The attacker's breathing bellowed. The sound mingled with Delaney's.

Time passed in slow motion.

His arm swept out. His fist smashed past her uplifted hands into her throat and sent her reeling.

Arms flailing, Delaney staggered back. She hit the floor. Her head smacked against the solid pine wood.

Fighting for air, she grabbed her throat with both hands. She gagged, coughed, and gasped. Black threatened to close in. Purple dots danced on the edges of her vision.

Dying wouldn't be the end of the world. The well-worn thought ping-ponged inside of her head.

Everyone died sooner or later.

No. Not yet. I'm not through living. I lied. I do want to love, to marry, to have children.

Who was she telling this? Not God. He had stopped listening to her ten years earlier when He let Corey die and left her all alone.

Her assailant paused for a split second over her.

He was a big man. He wore black sweats, a long-sleeved black T-shirt, and black sneakers. A jogger out for a run. Except for the thick

black mesh stocking that covered his face, distorting his features and hiding his identity.

No. You aren't allowed to kill me.

Delaney scooted back on her elbows and heels. She threw her hands out, searching for her backpack-style purse. Her keys. Her pepper spray. Her phone. Anything. "Help, somebody, help!"

The words were barely a scratchy whisper. *Come on, come on.*

Another wave of unadulterated, heart-pounding adrenaline flowed through her. She thrust forward, then rolled to one side.

The killer's fingers wrapped around her bicep in a cruel, unwavering grip. He jerked her up. His dark face came within inches of hers. His other hand was empty. He pointed at her and then made a cut-throat gesture. "Stay out of it or you're next."

The hoarse voice struck no familiar chords.

Stay out of what? Delaney tried to ask but she croaked, the words unintelligible.

He let go. She plummeted to the floor. He whirled, shot through the open door, and left her lying there. Still alive.

Why?

She knew who had killed Corey and why.

Who would kill Ellie? Sweet Mother Earth Ellie who'd reinvented herself after her boyfriend's murder.

Why not kill Delaney?

She rolled over and scrambled on her hands and knees, searching for her purse. There. Next to the counter. She dug her phone from the outside pocket and called 911.

"Help. He's getting away." Her throat was on fire. The croak was worse. "We need your help."

"Ma'am, I can't understand you. Tell me what's happening."

Delaney cleared her throat and tried again. A gravelly whisper

proved to be adequate. This time the operator understood. Delaney identified herself and spelled out her location.

“Is your friend breathing?”

“I don’t know.” Delaney fought for calm. *Don’t go to pieces now. Keep it together.* “I don’t think so. There’s blood everywhere. Should I do CPR?”

“EMS is on the way. We need to know if she has a pulse, ma’am. Stay on the line with me while you check.”

Delaney edged closer. She held her breath and leaned over as far as she dared. *Move, Ellie, wake up. Tell me it’s all a big joke. It’s not Día de los Muertos. We’re not kids anymore.*

“Ma’am. Ms. Broward?”

Ellie’s skin still felt warm and slightly sticky. South Texas humidity, no doubt. “She doesn’t have a pulse.” Delaney’s voice betrayed her with an acute tremble. She cleared her throat again. “She’s dead.”

Sirens screamed in the distance.

“Help is on the way, ma’am.”

“I know.” Delaney eased back until she could sit cross-legged without disturbing the blood that pooled around her friend. “Tell them I’m waiting with my friend.”

Tell them I’m keeping her company just like I did my brother ten years ago.

CHAPTER 4

“If I were in labor, I would know it, *mi amor*.”

His wife’s tart assertion over the phone eased Homicide Detective Andy Ramos’s angst. After all, this was baby number three, and Pilar had experienced Braxton Hicks contractions before. This baby wasn’t due for a few more weeks. Pilar knew the real thing when she felt it. Surely. Andy hoped.

He squeezed between a Fox 29 Ford Explorer and KSAT 12’s live truck parked on Nueva Street meters outside La Villita. The media were all over this dead body, like vultures circling overhead, waiting for the opportunity to descend. “Just call me if you need me. I’m headed to a crime scene, but I can hand it off. Call me. I mean it.”

“Just do your job and come home safe.” Pilar’s tone softened. “Love you.”

“That’s the plan. Love you too.” Andy hung up.

He professed ignorance to the Univision reporter who stuck a mic in his face on the small entryway to the art district with the grandiose moniker King Philip V Street and moved on until he found a park police officer. “Could you back the media up? Tell them to park in the lot on Presa Street. Please. If they question you, tell them the chief’s mouthpiece is on his way.”

The park police officer grimaced but acquiesced. No one liked media duty.

A homicide during spring break in a popular tourist attraction would be media fodder for weeks. And bring intense pressure on PD from City Hall. Tourism served as the heartbeat of the city's economy.

A crime scene investigator wielding a digital camera blocked Andy's entrance to the essential oils shop. He waited for the guy to get his shot, then headed for his final destination: Gregorio Flores, a detective at least fifteen years Andy's senior and the reason he had made the scene. No one in Andy's memory had ever called Flores by his first name. Just Flores.

"Flores, señor, what am I doing here?"

The detective, who stood near the door watching the CSU folks do their thing, grinned his trademark snaggletoothed grin. "Ramos, welcome to the party."

"So what's the deal? On the phone you said this may have ties back to the Broward case. We caught the guy and put him away ten years ago. How's it related?"

"It's possible. Probable. One scenario. Take a gander at the victim and tell me if you recognize her."

Risking the medical examiner investigator's wrath, Andy edged closer so he could get a better view of the victim sprawled on the floor, her shirt soaked in blood. Fake blonde hair, dark eyebrows, brown eyes, midthirties maybe. He searched the catalog of secondary actors, witnesses, and victims that crowded his brain.

"Her hair was probably dark brown," Flores prompted. "She was ten years younger."

"Ellie . . . Ellie . . . Cruz. Corey Broward's girlfriend."

"You got it." Flores air-fist-bumped Andy. "Only now she's Ellie Hill, married mother of two stepkids and small business owner."

“This place is hers?” Andy glanced around. Smelly candles, essential oils, infusers. Stuff his three younger sisters would love. “Back in the day she was a wannabe painter, if memory serves. She talked the talk, for sure, but I got the impression Corey Broward was the one with the real talent.”

Not that Andy knew beans about art.

“The woman who found her called Mrs. Hill an artisan. I guess that’s something different from an artiste.” Flores shoved his dark-rimmed glasses up his nose with one bony finger. “She said Mrs. Hill opened the store seven years ago and turned a profit within two years. Not bad for a small business selling stinky stuff.”

“Robbery gone bad?”

“On the face of it, could be. Cash register was emptied. Her wedding ring—a huge solitaire—is missing and so is her wallet and a laptop. But it’s what happened with the witness that makes me want to consider all the possibilities.”

“Who’s the witness?”

Flores straightened to his full six-foot height. His glasses magnified his brown eyes. He seemed ready to burst into song. “You’ll love this. Delaney Broward.”

“Corey Broward’s sister?”

“What are the chances?”

Indeed. The memories flooded back. His first homicide as a detective. Andy had arrived on the scene pumped and primed for action. Delaney Broward, wearing a blood-spattered UTSA Roadrunners’ T-shirt, sat cross-legged with her brother’s head and shoulders in her lap. Keening softly, she rocked him on the cement floor in a warehouse on South Alamo Street that had been turned into studios for a bunch of artists. They called it a co-op. The EMT said she was in shock. Efforts to get her to let go of the victim had failed. The medical

examiner was chomping at the bit, but the EMT was determined not to traumatize her further.

Talking her down had fallen to Andy's partner, Pilar Narvaez, who had a woman's soft touch going for her. For months afterward hazy dreams filled with a sobbing green-eyed woman wearing bloody clothes had haunted Andy. "It could be totally a coincidence."

"Could be." Flores snorted. "And Elvis is alive and living in Rio de Janeiro."

He was right, but it was never good to go into an investigation with tunnel vision. "So she called it in?"

"Yep. One of the park police officers responded first. He and some of his compadres are canvassing the other shops for witnesses as we speak."

"Cameras?"

"Not in the shop, but outside, yes. I'll see what we can get from them."

"What did Ms. Broward say she was doing here? Shopping?"

"She has a shop next door."

Andy rubbed his forehead. The smells were getting to him. He sneezed into the crook of his elbow. "I thought she was studying to be a social worker."

"She said she bailed—my word not hers—five years ago from her job as a Child Protective Services caseworker. A burnout, apparently. She frames and sells artwork. Her shop is called You've Been Framed. Kinda catchy, no?"

"So she saw the offender? Why didn't he kill her too?"

"She asked me the same question. I don't know. She says he had a black mesh stocking over his face. He wore a long-sleeved shirt, sweats, and gloves. No identifying marks showing. Nothing about him seemed familiar."

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Flores's cat-ate-the-canary expression tipped off Andy. "What else?"

"After he punched her in the neck, he threatened her. His exact words, according to Ms. Broward, were, 'Stay out of it or you're next.' He made a motion like he'd slit her throat."

"Is she all right?"

"Physically, she'll be okay. EMTs examined her. She's bruised, sore, shaken."

"She got lucky." If there were such a thing as luck. Andy didn't believe in it, but Flores would understand the sentiment. "Stay out of what?"

"The million-dollar question. She claims to have no idea."

"Did he leave the murder weapon?"

"Nope. She said it was a big knife. Which doesn't narrow it down much. I'm sure the ME will give us more after the autopsy."

Knives were second only to guns for weapons used in robberies. Usually they were intended to coerce the victim into giving up valuables. Many times, if victims cooperated, they remained unharmed. Other times, like this one, they escalated. Had Mrs. Hill refused to give up her wedding ring? A deadly move if she had. "So it might have started as a robbery. Or the perpetrator wanted it to appear like a robbery?"

"Possibly." Flores scratched his forehead below a receding hair-line and shrugged. "Still, why threaten Ms. Broward? The pieces don't quite fit together."

They would, eventually. Most investigations began with more questions than answers. "Next of kin?"

Flores glanced at his notebook. "Michael Hill, age forty-four. Owner of his own accounting firm. No priors. Not even a parking ticket. I'm headed to make the notification when I get done here. Want to come?"

“Actually I’d like to talk to Ms. Broward, if that’s okay.”

“Have at it, my friend. LT says I can use you and abuse you for as long as I want since your partner pulled his pin and that snot-nosed newbie partner of mine managed to break his ankle. How’s your main squeeze doing anyway?”

Flores’s partner had been hit by a car while crossing a busy downtown thoroughfare on a green light and in the crosswalk. Andy’s most recent partner had retired and headed to the Gulf Coast where he planned to open a bait shop. Andy’s first partner was now his wife. “Pilar’s good. She’s eating us out of house and home.”

When they’d finally been forced to admit they were more than partners, it had taken another two years for Andy and Pilar to have the guts to make the walk down the aisle. Pilar had switched from homicide to cyberterrorism during her first pregnancy for obvious reasons.

“Go talk to Ms. Broward and let me know what you think.” Flores and his wife had chosen rescue dogs in lieu of children. “Godspeed. Better you than me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s bitter. And prickly.”

“She’s an orphan with not a single family member. Her boyfriend killed her brother. She’s allowed.”

Flores was already moving to talk to the ME’s investigator. He didn’t care as long as Andy got her to talk.

CHAPTER 5

Delaney contemplated throwing a rock at the river barge filled with tourists passing through the Arneson River Theater on their way to see the sights on the River Walk. Their raucous laughter and ebullient chatter didn't belong here, so close to the scene of Ellie's violent death. With no rock within reach she chewed off another fingernail instead.

The barge pilot waved and shouted, "Hello." Delaney managed a wave. She couldn't imagine smiling ever again. But then, she'd thought the same thing after Corey died. Life tended to smooth the edge off the pain, little by little, like water dripping on a stone.

The police officer assigned to wait with her while the crime scene unit scoured Ellie's shop for evidence shifted from one foot to the other on the narrow, steep steps that split the aisles of the outdoor theater's grassy seats.

"You could sit down. I promise not to report you." Delaney held her hand over her forehead to block the sun and peered up at the woman. Talking made her throat hurt. The words were a whispered croak. "We could be here a while."

"That's okay—"

"Do you have the witness? Her shop is empty." A tall man in a stylish gray suit and pale-lilac tie bounded down the steps toward them.

The officer cocked her thumb at Delaney. “She said she needed some air.”

“Thanks. I’ve got her from here. You can take off.” He moved aside so the officer had room to pass. “Ms. Broward—”

“Delaney.” She stared up at him. His face was familiar. Older but just as chiseled and clean-shaven. Ocher eyes just as kind. A shudder ran through her. A blast from the past. How was it possible? “Detective Ramos, right?”

“Good memory.”

How could she forget the detective who had played a critical role in ferreting out her brother’s killer and putting him in prison?

“Where’s your partner? Detective Narvaez?” Detective Narvaez had been the one to gently disengage Delaney’s arms from around Corey’s body. She hugged Delaney and helped her to her feet. With one arm around her waist to prop her up, the detective moved her out of the medical examiner’s way. The entire time murmuring encouraging words. “She was nice.”

“We’re not partners anymore. She switched to cyberterrorism. The guy I’ve been working with decided to retire suddenly so I’m at loose ends in the partner department.”

Delaney plucked a slender blade of grass and rubbed it between her fingers. The theater smelled like spring. It smelled fresh, like Ellie always smelled. “In what universe is it possible that you’re the detective assigned cases that involve two of the worst days of my life?”

“I didn’t catch this case. Detective Flores called me when he realized there was a connection between his case and the one Detective Narvaez and I solved involving your brother. Are you okay to talk to me? Your throat sounds raw.”

“I’ll live. If this was a simple robbery, why threaten me? And if it was meant to seem like a robbery and was more than that, why not

kill me too?” All the questions that had swirled around in Delaney’s head from that second when she realized she would not die today jockeyed for position. They all wanted to be first and they all wanted to be answered now. “He must’ve had the murder weapon on him. Why let me live?”

“All good questions. Ones we hope to answer during the investigation. The question of why he let you live may be the key to who did this to you and why.”

“I can’t believe this is happening again.” Delaney stared at the murky ribbon of water that paraded itself as part of the San Antonio River. Making eye contact with Detective Ramos was out of the question. He would see her grief, her anger, and her disbelief. “Wasn’t Corey enough? He was all I had.”

“He’s all I have. He’s all I have.” Those words had been her refrain the day Corey died. She and Corey had been raised by their grandparents after their parents died in a collision with a semi on the way to celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary in Port Aransas. Pops and Nana died one after the other when Delaney was in high school. Then Corey when she was a master’s student studying social work.

Now Ellie.

“Why don’t you start by walking me through what happened today?”

Apparently Detective Ramos didn’t have the answers she needed. His only recourse was to ignore them.

Delaney took a long breath. She swiveled and pulled her knees up on the seat so she could put her arms around them. Her purple Converse sneakers were muddy. One green lace was undone. She took her time tying it and retying the blue lace on the other shoe. Finally she met Detective Ramos’s gaze head-on and recounted the day’s events.

“Before you went into the shop and found Mrs. Hill—”

“Ellie.”

“Before you found Ellie, had you been in the shop earlier in the day? Or spoken with her?”

“She has a part-time employee who opens for her and stays through lunch. Ellie has stepkids she’s trying to bond with. She makes them breakfast and takes them to the Montessori school before she comes to the shop.”

If Detective Ramos found her use of present tense strange, he didn’t let it show. It was too soon to relegate vivacious, crazy, funny Ellie to the past tense.

“So we brought our sack lunches out here and ate around noon. She met me here.”

Detective Ramos tugged his notebook from his back pocket and made notes. “Employee’s name?”

“Kimberly Martinez. She’s an art student at UTSA. A potter.”

“How long has she worked for Ellie?”

“Since Ellie married Michael and took over mother duties for her husband’s two kids. Since November, I guess.” Ellie took her new role as mommy seriously. She wanted the kids to like her. “She wanted to be a family. She’d waited a long time for that. She and Michael were already talking about having more.”

Grief wrapped itself around Delaney’s neck and choked her. She swallowed again and again. *Breathe*. She swiveled away from the detective and studied the people strolling along the sidewalk below. *Just breathe*.

“What did you talk about?” Detective Ramos’s voice was soft, the prompt gentle. “Anything stand out in retrospect?”

“Whether almond yogurt tastes better than regular yogurt. Why I don’t eat hummus. Whether gluten-free diets are a fad. How disgusting kale is. If this is a rebuilding year for the Spurs or whether

they'll make the play-offs. Why Skye refuses to eat white food." The unimportant stuff two friends who've known each other a long time talked about on a sunny day when all was right with the world. "Stuff. The stuff you talk about when you don't know it's the last time you'll ever talk to someone."

"I'm sorry to drag you through this."

"You're doing your job." Delaney straightened her shoulders. She raised her head. "I want you to find the monster who did this and put him away. You did that for Corey and it helped. It didn't bring him back, but at least Hunter isn't walking around free enjoying life . . ."

This time the sobs threatened to pour over the sandbags in a torrent of sorrow. If she started crying, she would never stop. She couldn't do that to the detective. She put her hand to her mouth, gritted her teeth, and pulled a sodden tissue from her pocket to wipe her nose. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Take your time. I know this is hard. When you feel up to it, tell me about the intruder."

He was too nice. It only made it harder. Delaney wrangled the emotions back into their box. "The man was about six two or three. He probably weighed 190 or 200 pounds. He was a big guy. I'm in good shape and I didn't stand a chance against him." All the time spent at the gym working out and the hours she spent pounding the bag at home hadn't made a bit of difference.

"He wore dark clothes, high-end running shoes. His whole body was covered, so I can't tell you anything about identifying marks or even the color of his skin. The only thing I can say is that he sounded relatively young and local."

Detective Ramos scratched his furrowed forehead with his free hand. "What do you mean by sounded local?"

Stay out of it or you're next. She ran the words through her head once again.

“San Antonio has its own sound. It’s not the Dallas twang or the East Texas drawl or the border Tex-Mex accent. He was from around here, but that’s based on one brief sentence. It’s not like we had a conversation.”

“Got it. Nothing stood out about him?”

“He moved fast. He was strong. It felt like he crushed my windpipe with one blow. Otherwise, no. He was a stranger.”

“Did Ellie seem upset about anything recently?”

“Ellie worked hard to be an optimist. It was part of her therapy. Today the sun broke through the early morning clouds and banished the fog and drizzle. It’s spring break. She exuded contentment.”

“Enemies?irate customers? Anyone who would want to do her harm?”

“She sells candles and essential oils. She morphed from a hippie-wannabe-artist to Earth Mother. Peace and joy.” No one could be so blithely happy so much of the time. “Sometimes it actually irritated me. I felt guilty for wishing she’d tone it down a little. Corey died and she walked around like the world is full of angels, unicorns, butterflies, rainbows, and hummingbirds. Life is too short for long faces, she always says.”

“Any problems at home?”

The image of Ellie and Michael sharing a piece of pink wedding cake after a ceremony on the pristine white sands of Riviera Maya, Mexico, floated through Delaney’s mind. Ellie had frosting on her upturned nose and upper lip while Michael’s grin stretched from ear to ear. “*Best cake ever*,” he opined. “Does Michael know? Should I tell him? It doesn’t seem right to tell him something so awful on the phone. Who’ll pick up the kids from school?”

“Detective Flores is on his way to break the news now.” His expression pained, Detective Ramos ran his free hand through thick, black

hair. No one wanted to break that kind of news. “How long had they been married? Did they get along?”

“Five months. That’s what’s so incredibly messed up about this. Ellie decided to take the plunge after all these years. To get on with life and now this. It makes no sense.” It made no more sense than Corey’s murder on the cusp of making it big on the San Antonio art scene. “They were practically still on their honeymoon.”

“Wasn’t she an artist like your brother?”

Not in her wildest dreams. None of their tight-knit group had Corey’s talent or drive. “She eventually realized she was a better businesswoman than she was an artist. Her parents helped her finance the shop. She worked really hard to make it a success. That’s tough to do in this economy and this location.

“She met Michael at a Small Business Administration workshop and they struck up a conversation. Michael was smitten.” So much so he had sent Ellie a dozen red roses after their first coffee “date.” “He pursued her. She resisted, but he can be very charming when he wants to.”

“Is that a note of sarcasm in your voice? Are you not a fan?”

He could also be overly anal and controlling. “He’s divorced, a numbers guy, has two kids, and he’s eleven years older than she is. Everyone thought it was an odd case of opposites attract. Michael’s a type A personality. He works hard and expects everyone to do the same. It’s not a bad quality for a business owner. But sometimes he came on a little strong. He treated Ellie like an employee sometimes instead of his wife. It was almost like she singled out someone the total opposite of Corey. But she was happy, so I was happy for her.”

“You can’t think of anyone who would want to hurt her?”

Only one person. Delaney’s stomach clenched. “The only person I can think of is in prison where he belongs. Ellie testified against him.”

The jury took a mere forty-five minutes to convict Hunter of manslaughter. The prosecution argued that he killed his best friend in an alcohol- and drug-fueled fit of rage.

Even after all these years, it still boggled the mind. Every muscle and sinew in Delaney's body had believed Hunter was innocent. Needed to believe he was innocent. But he admitted to being there that night. He admitted to arguing with his best friend. He admitted to getting into a shoving match with Corey in an argument over money and the co-op's future.

Hunter insisted Corey was mixed up with something nefarious, something he kept from Delaney and Ellie. Corey would never do that. It wasn't his nature. It didn't help that Hunter never produced any evidence of this criminal enterprise. Instead, he went to prison, still proclaiming his innocence. Still sending her letters, asking her to believe in him, to trust him.

How could she?

"Have you had any contact with Nash since his conviction and incarceration?"

"He sent me letters at first, but I never responded."

"He was your boyfriend for several years. You gave up on him fairly quickly."

"He was convicted of killing my brother. You saw the same evidence I did. You believed he did it and this is what you do for a living."

As much as she didn't want to believe Hunter stabbed Corey to death, the justice system said otherwise. She had no choice but to accept the verdict and move on with her life. Erasing Hunter from her life had been like amputating an arm and a leg. Like she needed a heart transplant. It had taken years to recover.

"What about the other members of the co-op your brother started? Have you and Ellie stayed in touch with them?"

They'd been like family until Corey's death and Hunter's trial tore them apart. Pain twisted in Delaney's gut. She sucked in air and blew it out. *Let it go, just let it go.* "Zach and Sandy got married. They're still in town, but we don't talk much. Jess is a lawyer now, in family law. He was really there for me during the trial and afterward. We were both at the courthouse a lot when I was with CPS. He's helped me with legal stuff over the years. Four of us stayed close. Ellie, me, Jess, and Cam." Delaney bit her lip, focusing on the small spurt of pain. *Keep it together.* "I need to call Jess and Cam. They'll be devastated."

She stopped, closed her eyes, and breathed.

"Take your time."

"We don't have time." White-hot anger seared through her. It was so much easier to handle. It felt good. "My friends—old or new—didn't do this. They love Ellie. We all love Ellie."

"You know the way these investigations work—"

"I know. I know. I do," Delaney bit out the words. "Okay, Billy Riggins is still Billy. He lifts weights during the day, works as a bouncer until the club closes at night, then sculpts until morning—that and drinks. I'm pretty sure he hasn't slept since Corey died."

"You mentioned Cam. That would be Camille Nakamura?" A faint smile flitted across Detective Ramos's face. "How does she fit into the picture?"

He obviously remembered her. Most men did. The Filipino beauty couldn't easily be forgotten. "She's Camille Sanchez now. She and her husband, Jaime, double date with Michael and Ellie. She babysits for them when I can't. Why? Do you still have a thing for her?"

Detective Ramos's face turned a deep red. "I was never—"

"Don't lie. There's not a man alive who has met Cam and not been bowled over with one look at her."

"I'm married."

Sure enough. His left ring finger sported a plain silver band. “You married Detective Narvaez.”

“You’re pretty astute.” This time the detective’s face lit up with a genuine smile. The guy was movie-star handsome. “I did. We have two little girls and another one on the way.”

“Good for you.” Lives went on. Good people like Detective Ramos and Detective Narvaez got married and had kids. Only Delaney was stuck in the first act of a three-act tragedy. “I’m glad. I bet you’re great parents. The kind of parents kids should have.”

“Did you move on—?”

“Cam teaches silversmithing at the Southwest School of Art.” Delaney’s love life—or lack thereof—played no role in this investigation. “She was in a car accident five years ago. Her mobility was affected.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. She’s the same force of nature she always was. We’re still close. Occasionally one of the others who subleased studios will come by the shop to get something framed, but otherwise, we’ve lost touch.” Corey had been the glue that held them together. Without him they’d drifted apart. Or in Delaney’s case, sprinted in the other direction. “Too many memories. Some good ones, but bad ones too. At least for me. I was always an outsider. Corey’s tagalong little sister.”

“What happened to the co-op?”

“They let the lease on the warehouse lapse. The owners rented it to some company that stores its product there.”

“You were studying social work back then. Detective Flores said you quit to buy the shop here. Can I ask what happened?”

Delaney had answered this question a few dozen times, but it never got easier. She’d worked hard for that master’s in social work. Gone into debt for it. The desire came from the need to do good

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in this world, to help others, to make a difference. The desires of a naive college kid who wanted family any way she could get it—or so she'd thought. "I stuck it out as long as I could. One of the children I supervised, a little boy sixteen months old, was shaken so hard by his mother's boyfriend that he suffered a catastrophic brain injury. That was it for me. I needed an occupation that allowed me to go home at the end of the day knowing my best was good enough. I took a job working as an apprentice to the woman who owned the frame shop. I did that for three years. When she decided to retire, I took over."

No matter how many times she explained, it still came out sounding like an excuse.

"It's a tough gig. Burnout isn't uncommon." Detective Ramos leaned forward, elbows on his knees. His tone was kind. "I'm sure it was a hard decision to make. I'm probably a philistine, but I can't imagine how there's enough business framing artwork to keep a person afloat, especially in an expensive location like this one. Don't most people go to Hobby Lobby?"

"It's not just fine art, although I get work from local galleries and artists preparing for exhibits as well as art restoration companies." If that were just it, she'd be sunk, but Delaney had inherited a good client base and marketing plan from her predecessor. "I do shadow boxes, framing of medal displays for veterans, visual art, and even cross-stitch that women want to frame and hang in their homes. You have to know about interior design, color, carpentry, marketing, and business. Except for an occasional customer who doesn't like the finished product, it's a calm space."

"No angry parents?"

"Nope. I feel guilty sometimes, but I'm willing to live with the guilt if it means not having to look into another child's face and know he's in danger of being murdered by someone who's entrusted with his care and knowing there's nothing I can do about it."

Nodding, Detective Ramos tapped his stubby pencil on the tiny notebook in his hand. Another barge swept its way through the narrow bend in the river, then slowed as its pilot regaled the occupants with details of how the theater was home to an endless variety of performances from Mexican folkloric dance to jazz to Alamo Bowl pep rallies celebrated in a city known for its capacity to party at the drop of the proverbial hat.

“Is that it, Detective?”

“I’m sorry, just collecting my thoughts. One more question. Do you have employees?”

“One. Abigail Simpkins, also an art student at UTSA. She goes by Gail. She staffs the shop so I can have Sundays and Mondays off and when I have appointments or have to meet clients off-site.”

Detective Ramos rose and stretched. He had to be at least six-foot-two. Delaney was five nine and he towered over her. She forced herself to get up. “Are we done, then?”

“I’ll walk you up to your shop. I imagine Detective Flores told you he’ll need you to make a formal statement at PD headquarters.”

“He did, but I already knew how these things work.”

“I wish you didn’t.”

He was a good man. “That’s kind of you to say.”

“I wish it for all the family members and friends I meet as I investigate these crimes.” He backed out of the row and waited for her to go first. “Violent death and the sudden loss of a loved one are not things I would wish on my worst enemies.”

He was also a better person than Delaney. “I do. I wish them on the person who did this to Ellie.” Delaney trudged up the steep stairs. “An eye for an eye seems just to me. Whoever killed Ellie deserves a violent death or worse.”

“I’m more of a New Testament guy myself. Turn the other cheek.

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Love thy enemies. Let God be the judge.” Detective Ramos joined her on the red-brick road that led to her shop. “You’re not considering a little old-fashioned revenge, are you?”

Delaney halted in front of her shop. The early Victorian building painted a sunny yellow with white trim appeared so inviting. So safe.

No one was safe anywhere.

She crossed her arms and met his gaze squarely. “You’ll find I’m not the same person I was ten years ago. I’ve grown up. No one pushes me around anymore. The man threatened me. He killed my friend.”

“We solved your brother’s murder. We’ll solve this one.” Detective Ramos’s posture stiffened. His tone turned steely. “As much as I understand the powerful need to do something, I also hope you’re not planning to interfere in our investigation.”

“I won’t interfere or get in your way.”

His frown deepened. “You’ll stand down, then?”

“I’ll stand my ground.”

“Spoken like a true Texan.” He extracted his business card from his suit jacket pocket. “If you think of anything else that might be helpful, call me.”

Delaney pocketed the card without examining it. “Believe me, I’ll be in touch.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?”

“Take your pick.”

“You’ve been warned.”

Indeed she had. It couldn’t be allowed to matter. Corey was dead. Ellie was dead.

Delaney had nothing left to lose.