



HER

THE CLOCK IS TICKING.
AND HE'S CLOSING IN.

EVERY

MOVE

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on the edge of your seat until 'The End.'"

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author of the Logan Point series,
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and Natchez Trace Parkway Rangers series

**KELLY
IRVIN**

ELSON

HER EVERY MOVE

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

A Novel

KELLY IRVIN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

ONE

Jackie Santoro checked her smartwatch for the fifth time. She needed to leave *now*.

She waved to catch her best friend Estrella Diaz's gaze. The City Council District 1 chief of staff stood next to her boss, Councilman Diego Sandoval, who was in deep conversation with the library foundation board chairman a few feet from the stage. Estrella offered a discreet fist pump. Jackie grinned and gave her a thumbs-up in return. Then she pointed at her watch.

Estrella nodded and cocked her head toward Sandoval. That meant she would shoo him and his entourage toward the doors shortly. Part of Estrella's job consisted of keeping him on message and on schedule. The woman loved being in charge and she loved being chin deep in local politics.

So far everything had gone like clockwork. Elected dignitaries, city officials, and citizens who'd plunked down their hard-earned money to watch a debate between a climate-change activist and author and an it's-all-a-hoax proponent crowded the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts.

The next step in this elegant special event waltz belonged to Jackie, who created programming as part of her position as adult collections coordinator at the Central Library. The library foundation had agreed to sponsor a more intimate reception for the authors, dignitaries, and VIP donors at the library only a dozen blocks away, and they were running late.

Adrenaline pumped through Jackie's veins and left a metallic taste

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in the back of her throat. Event planning added spice to a job she loved. It also kept her from sleeping much.

Intent on a quick getaway, she strode toward the back of the hall. Best friend number two, Bella Glover, waved from the reserved media seating. Jackie waved back. She'd scored tickets for herself and her friends to the Spurs game Saturday night. She could critique the *Express-News* reporter's story while the Spurs clobbered the LA Clippers. Spurs fans were nothing if not optimistic.

A steady stream of patrons stood and edged toward the center aisle. A low murmur swelled to the sound of hundreds of people all talking at once. Soon they'd be in front of Jackie, impeding her progress from the parking garage and on the narrow, one-way downtown streets of San Antonio.

"Great job, Jackie. Looks like your boss was wrong." Sandoval's constituent services director, Tony Guerra, sauntered up the aisle toward her. "Climate change opponents can coexist amicably in the same space. And so can city manager and city council staff."

"Thanks, but it took a whole host of partners to make this happen. And it's not over yet." Jackie stuck her hand on the door lever that would release her to the Tobin's massive lobby.

She liked Tony, which was a good thing since he'd asked Estrella to marry him. However, he wore his political ambitions like an obnoxious neon-pink tie.

"I have to go. I want to make sure there are no last-minute snags with the reception. Then it's back to fine-tuning the altars for the Catrina Ball. It's only a week away, and I'm behind because of the debate."

"You never let up, do you? Are we still on for the Spurs game tomorrow—"

A powerful force knocked Jackie from her feet.

Her skull banged on the hardwood floor.

Sharp projectiles pelted her face in a painful *ping-ping*.

What's happening?

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Estrella? Tony? Bella?

Muffled screams and even her own moaning seemed strangely distant. “Estrella? Tony? Bella?”

If they answered, Jackie couldn’t hear them. She dragged herself onto her hands and knees. Glass and sharp metal pierced both. She forced open burning eyes.

Heavy black smoke shrouded the hall. Metal and debris like deadly confetti showered her. She raised her arm to her forehead to protect her face from the remnants of folding chairs and electronics.

Warm blood dripped from her nose. The acrid taste of smoke and fear collected in her mouth. Her stomach heaved. Her pulse pounded so hard dizziness threatened to overcome her.

No, no, no. Do not pass out. People need help.

Shrieking alarms bellowed.

Water, like torrential rain, poured from above. Rain, inside? Her ricocheting thoughts made no sense. Jackie shook her head. Neither the smoke nor the clanging in her brain subsided.

Sprinkler system.

The smoke had triggered the sprinklers.

Where there’s smoke there’s fire. The old cliché ran circles in her mind like a children’s nursery rhyme.

Estrella’s mama and papa would never forgive Jackie if something happened to their sweet daughter. Mercedes and Mateo always saw Jackie as the instigator of trouble. And they were usually right.

Ignoring pain and panic, she crawled forward. Sharp metal bit into her skin. Where were her shoes?

Finally she encountered a warm, writhing body. “Tony?”

“What happened?” He struggled to sit up. Blood poured from an open wound on his scalp, his nose, and a cut on his lip. “I have to get to Estrella and Diego.”

He might have yelled, but Jackie could barely make out the words. She leaned back on her haunches. “You’re hurt. Does anything feel broken?”

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"No, but I can't hear anything." He wiped at his face. Blood streaked his once crisply starched white shirt. "Why can't I hear?"

"It'll pass. We have to get everyone out."

With a groan, Tony leaned over and vomited on the floor. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Okay, let's go."

"Everyone out. If you can walk on your own, evacuate." One of the contract security guards hired for the debate loomed over them. "The bomb squad is on the way. Go, go."

"We're fine. We'll help get the others out."

"Negative. Get out, there could be more bombs."

Bombs.

That word came through loud and clear. It hit Jackie with the force of a second explosion. People were hurt. People might be dead. People she cared about.

She grabbed Tony's arm and together they managed to stand. Around them others dragged themselves up. Frantic, bloodied faces with numb, shocked, baffled expressions. Screams and moans mingled in a horrible, muffled cacophony.

A woman knelt beside a man. She pressed her jacket against one leg. "Hang in there, hang in there." She repeated the phrase like a mantra to block out his agonized shrieks. "You're okay, you're okay."

A man carried a young teenager in his arms. Both her legs were mangled and bloody. "She needs help." Dazed, he seemed unaware of the blood pouring from a jagged wound on his arm. "Somebody, she needs help."

"Get outside. Help is on the way." Jackie guided him toward the door. "Take care of yourself."

People stumbled into her. She staggered and kept going. *God, please.*

A few more yards. She squatted beside a man's body facedown on the floor. He groaned, pulled himself to his knees, and crawled away. *Oh God.*

A few more feet.

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There.

Jackie closed her burning eyes and opened them. “Oh Estrella.”

“No, no, no.” Moaning, Tony pushed Jackie aside. “*Mi amor*, I’m here. I’ve got you.”

He collapsed next to her still body. Her lovely cocoa-brown eyes were wide and surprised in death. Blood matted charcoal-colored curls that surrounded her head like a jostled tiara. Her mouth was open as if caught in a perpetual *oh no*.

“*Por favor*, answer me, *mi corazón*.”

“Tony, let me.” The grotesque smell of death in her nose, Jackie swallowed against vomit in the back of her throat. Her stomach rocked. It took every ounce of strength left in her body to raise her hand. She touched Estrella’s throat and found no pulse. “*Mi amiga*.”

“No.” Tony shoved Jackie away. “She needs a doctor. Get a doctor. Hurry.”

Jackie fell backward in a heap next to the woman who had gone with her to a Britney Spears concert in the fifth grade. Estrella colored Jackie’s hair with henna before her first date. She held Jackie’s ponytail while she retched into the toilet after her first keg party. She managed Jackie’s student council campaign for president her senior year in high school. She held Jackie’s hand at Daddy’s funeral.

Tony’s sobs sounded more like screams. Jackie fought the urge to scream with him. She clasped her hands over her ears. *God, God, God, God. You brought Jairus’s daughter back to life. And Lazarus. Why not Estrellita?*

A run-of-the mill doctor couldn’t bring back this woman who had celebrated her thirtieth birthday Memorial Day weekend. One moment she was arguing social justice issues like the path to citizenship for Dreamers. The next she lay shattered and still, in the aftermath of a bomb, alongside her boss.

Part of the councilman’s face was missing.

Jackie rubbed Tony’s back. “She’s gone on ahead of us, Tony. She’s dancing with Jesus right now.”

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Estrella's unflinching faith offered the one silver lining in this dark, unfathomable moment.

Tony wiggled closer. She put her arm around his shoulders and held on as if they could buoy each other up on a storm-lashed sea. They were both drowning.

"Get out, get out." An SAPD officer in bomb gear lurched toward them. "Evacuate now."

"I'm not leaving her." Tony struggled to free himself from Jackie's grip. "I'm staying right here with her."

"We have to go." Jackie released him.

"Sweet dreams, my friend." She kissed Estrella's still-warm forehead and gently closed her eyelids. "We have to go, honey, but we'll make sure they take good care of you. We have to help the police find who did this."

Find them and make them pay.

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

TWO

Only a coward would look away.

Jackie fought the urge to rip her gaze from the body bags on gurneys in the triage tent set up on Municipal Auditorium Way across from the Tobin Center. The bomb squad had cleared the building without finding another incendiary device, and the removal of bodies had begun.

One, two, three, four, five. Five body bags. Estrella occupied one of those bags awaiting transport to the Bexar County medical examiner's office. By now crime scene investigators had photographed and videotaped her body from every angle. An ME investigator had done a preliminary review of her body and injuries. The final indignity of an autopsy still awaited her. Who were the others who faced the same ignominious procedures?

Head down, cell phone to his ear, Tony stood next to Estrella's gurney. The bandage on his brown forehead shone white. His face was red and swollen from crying. His free hand patted the bag every few seconds as if to comfort his fiancée.

Bella hovered close by. Whether as a friend or a reporter remained to be seen. Life became even more complicated in the aftermath of an explosion that ripped their lives into tiny pieces and scattered them across eternity.

Only a coward would refuse to look. Just as only a coward would detonate a bomb in a crowded auditorium.

Focus. Jackie tightened her grip on an elderly woman who wore a

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pink suit splattered with blood. Together they hobbled on punctured bare feet to the triage tent. The woman kept saying the blood didn't belong to her. She was fine, she said, but she wasn't. The gash on her rouged cheek needed attention.

An EMT took the handoff with a murmured thanks. He held out a blanket. "You look cold."

It would take years to shake this chill. Jackie settled the blanket around her shoulders and headed back into the fray. They wouldn't let her inside the building, but she made the rounds to the other victims who'd been deemed able to wait while the more critically injured were transported to area hospitals. She offered them what little she could—a kind word, a hug, a blanket, a cup of hot coffee made by Victim Assistance.

She pulled the blanket tighter, turned, and bumped into City Manager Jason Vogel. His normally perfectly coiffed black hair stuck out in tufts on what had always struck her as an absurdly oversized head. The knees of his navy pinstriped suit were torn, his tie askew, and his hands caked with blood. His lips were blue. His teeth chattered. "Do I know you?"

Technically he was her boss. Ultimately all twelve thousand-plus city employees worked for him.

Jackie introduced herself. They'd met numerous times at library special events, but he couldn't be expected to remember all of the employees in his charge, especially in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

"Sam Santoro's daughter, I remember now."

Even a bomb with multiple fatalities couldn't erase that fact from Vogel's mind. The man had had the audacity to attend the funeral as if he'd forgotten his role in her father's untimely demise.

"A lady is a lady no matter the circumstances." Her mother's voice shouted in her ears. *"Only Jesus is perfect. Forgive, seventy times seven."* "Yes, sir."

He nodded, but his gaze shifted over her shoulder toward the

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command center set up by Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and shared by the FBI, San Antonio Police Department, and Homeland Security Investigations. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, sir. Are you?”

Surprise flashed across his face. He probably thought his Teflon coating made him Superman. Couldn’t a lowly librarian see that? “Of course. I have to go. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, sir.” It was nice of him to stop long enough to say the words. He managed a city of 1.3 million citizens, and ultimately he was responsible for their safety. “Here, take this blanket. You’re freezing.”

His hands remained at his sides. Jackie arranged it across his beefy shoulders. “It’s okay, I’ll get another one. Go.”

“People are dead.”

“I know, sir. Do the police have any idea who did this?”

“Lots of ideas. All conjecture.” Vogel reached for the blanket. His hands were shaking. “Rest assured, we will get whoever did it. My wife could’ve been killed. Bill was my friend . . .” His voice trailed away.

Chief of Police Bill Little? “Is the chief—?”

“I have to go.” He brushed past her and trudged, head down, toward the command center.

“This is all your fault.”

Jackie whirled at the familiar, shrill voice. Meagan Nobel. Her immediate boss. Meagan’s black silk blouse gaped open, revealing a lacy camisole. Either the explosion or a fall had ripped her tight, narrow skirt up to mid thigh on the right side. Her shoes were intact but one heel was missing, so she meandered toward Jackie in a hip-hop, drunken fashion. “This debate was your idea. It’s your fault.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Jackie staggered back from Meagan’s pointed forefinger with its long nail lacquered in blood red. Her tone blasted the words for everyone in a one-block radius to hear. “Are you hurt?”

“Oh no, I’m fine and dandy.” Meagan swiped at a straggling strand of red hair that covered her hazel eyes. “Milton is dead. Dead. You said

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it would be fine. You said it would be a great fund-raiser. I told you it was political dynamite. I never thought it would be actual dynamite.”

Milton Schaeffer, San Antonio Library Foundation board chairman and number-one donor recruiter, lay in one of those body bags.

Her fault. All her fault. Jackie threw her hands up, but she couldn’t stop the spewing words. Would Mercedes and Mateo Diaz hold her responsible for their daughter’s death too? *Was* she responsible? “His wife . . . is his wife okay?”

“Injured. On her way to University’s trauma center right now. The downtown hospitals are full.” Meagan projected her ire with such velocity, a fine spray of spittle landed on Jackie’s face. “Thank God the director is at an ALA conference this week. At least he’s safe. Wait until he hears about this. What was I thinking to trust you with this?”

“I never thought—”

“Of course you never thought. We had our hands full with the Catrina Ball next weekend, and yet you bulldozed your way through every objection because you want what you want and you’re always right and you have no respect for the opinions of others. You love the limelight. You’re never satisfied with simple signings by local authors. You want the big names, the controversy. ‘Intellectual discourse,’ you said. ‘Civilized conversation,’ you said. All along you wanted to make a big splash. You never should have become a librarian.”

Of all the accusations spewing from Meagan’s mouth, only the last sentence held no kernel of truth. Meagan stopped abruptly. Even she knew she’d gone too far.

Jackie’s best friends—aside from Estrella and Bella, who grabbed on to Jackie and refused to let go—were books. She never went anywhere without at least two—one for backup. Church, camping, fishing, basketball games, the bathroom. Everywhere. Her now-lost bag contained Laurie R. King’s newest Mary Russell novel and *Strands of Truth*. “Libraries are meant to be places of intellectual exchange.”

“People died.”

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"I know. My best friend died." To her horror Jackie's voice cracked. She swallowed back tears. "I'll never forgive myself for that."

"You shouldn't. If I could fire you, I would."

Another piece of Jackie's world crumbled. She'd known since she was eleven that she would be a librarian. It defined her. Going to the library every day to work among thousands of books gave her life not only meaning but joy. "Do what you think is best, Meagan."

"Have you seen either of your guest speakers, by any chance?" Meagan's voice rose so high it hurt Jackie's ears. The pounding in her temples spiked. Her boss didn't seem to notice Jackie was hanging on by a thread. "Have you even looked for them?"

She had but to no avail. "There were more than eight hundred people in there. I'll keep searching for them."

"You'd better pray they weren't hurt. They could sue us, the library director, the city, you, me—"

"Meagan Nobel, are you saying you know who the bomber is?" Bella stepped between them, her back to Jackie. "Bella Glover with the *Express-News*. Are you saying you think it's a city employee? One of your employees? Are you willing to go on the record with that statement?"

Meagan's face blanched. She stuttered for a few seconds, then drew herself up to her full height—not quite to Jackie's shoulders. "Of course not. You misheard. Don't you dare quote me. All media requests to city officials are being referred to the city hall PIO—"

"I don't want a watered-down news release quote from the city manager. I want the real story from people who were here." Bella swiped at her face with a sodden tissue. "People like me."

Meagan backed away. "I'm not authorized to talk to the media." She pointed at Jackie. "Neither is she."

"She's my friend. I only want to make sure she's okay." Bella wrapped her arm around Jackie and squeezed. "I'm sure HR would love to know that she was being bullied by her superior on the worst day of her life."

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The two women locked gazes. Meagan whirled and hip-hopped toward the command center. “If I pick up tomorrow’s paper and see you quoted, Jackie, you’re gone. Fired for cause.” She threw the words over her shoulder, stumbled, regained her balance, and hobbled away.

Meagan always had the last word.

“You didn’t have to do that. I’m capable of holding my own with her.” Jackie entwined her arm with Bella’s. “But thank you.”

“I know, honey, you’re fearless. You’re my hero. I just despise a bully.” Bella sank against Jackie. “I can’t believe Estrella is dead. My brain—my heart—refuse to accept it. Why? Why her?”

Meagan could suck a lemon. Jackie guided Bella to a folding chair in the Victim Assistance area. Bella had been her roommate at UT–Austin. They’d navigated the collegiate world of keggers, campus politics, and college boys together, and pulled all-nighters at the library. No way would they abandon each other now.

Bella had skinned knees and puncture marks on her hands, bare legs, and arms. Her beaded braids, normally bundled in a ponytail at her neck, lay askew around her face. Her round, sturdy body shook. Tears streaked her mocha-brown cheeks. Jackie draped a blanket around Bella’s shoulders and hugged her. “It’s okay. Give yourself a minute to recover.” She rubbed the other woman’s back. “I can’t believe you were able to hang on to your backpack throughout the explosion.”

“The laptop belongs to the newspaper and I have a job to do.” Having served with Bella on the high school newspaper staff, Jackie knew nothing stood in the way of the born-to-write reporter getting her story and finishing it on deadline. She took her Fourth Estate government watchdog responsibilities seriously. “I can’t believe I’ll never hear Estrella’s laugh-snort again. Or hear her screaming, ‘Go, Spurs, go’ again. Or hear her stupid puns again.”

They had been the fearsome threesome in high school. Debate, school newspaper, basketball team. The Three Amigas, as Mateo liked to call them. Jackie drew a shuddering breath. “It’s surreal. I keep

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thinking she'll come bursting out of the building and start giving orders. She would've taken charge of the whole rescue operation."

"I feel terrible, but I have to get the story. People have a right to know what happened and whether there could be more attacks coming," Bella clutched her backpack to her chest. "I can't mourn right now."

"Estrella wouldn't want it any other way. We'll have time to mourn later, when we've figured out who did this."

"Jack, I know that look on your face," Bella shook her head so vigorously the braids flopped and rearranged themselves. "The entire law enforcement community will run with that ball. Whoever did this doesn't have a rat's-behind chance of getting away with it."

"I saw her. I was with Tony when he realized she was dead."

"It's beyond unfathomable," Bella closed her eyes and heaved a tear-laden sigh. "Okay. This was supposed to be a climate-change debate story. Now they want a page 1, above-the-fold story about a bombing. Sig can't get inside the crime scene tape to interview people. The PIOs aren't answering their phones. The city editor says it's on me. My thought is extremists who are angry that safeguards designed to slow climate change were dismantled during an earlier administration. Or extremists who support the contention that climate change is a hoax perpetuated by Democrats that's hurting industries and big businesses."

"That's a decent theory. You can do this. You'll share the investigation with Sig." Sig was the crime reporter and Bella's beau. Sometimes it seemed all Jackie's friends were engaged or in long-term relationships. Everyone except her. Not even close. "He has the sources you need. Together you'll be a formidable team. Have you interviewed witnesses who were inside?"

Bella nodded and winced. Her free hand went to her temple. She likely had the same concussive headache as Jackie. "But I couldn't get close to the command center. Everyone's there—the city manager, the mayor, the federal agencies, the cops."

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“Something this big, they’ll hold a news conference. They won’t want to give individual interviews with every media outlet in the city, let alone the country.”

“I know you, Jack. If you want to know something, you don’t let up. At least confirm what I’ve got. Off the record.”

“As a friend or as a city employee?”

“Either. Both.”

As a city employee Jackie had no authority or permission to speak to the media. In most circumstances she would be expected to refer a reporter to the library systems’ public relations manager, who would run it up the flagpole with the director’s office. An arduous and lengthy process. Most reporters—not all—could be trusted when it came to speaking off the record. Bella’s integrity, like her honesty, was impeccable. “I’ll make you a deal. I tell you what I know and you keep me in the loop.”

“Deal. It’s not like you work for a competing media outlet.” Bella opened her laptop. “This is what I know or think I know. At 3:05 p.m. Friday—today—a bomb went off in the Tobin Center for Performing Arts’ H-E-B Performance Hall. At least five people were killed. I have the names of four. I need the fifth one.” She ran down a list of four names. The names coincided with the ones Jackie could confirm. All except the last one.

The fifth body bag held a vivacious and smart climate-change expert named Laura Peterson, who was also a journalist and international bestselling author of a book on the global climate-justice movement. She carried around her cell phone, showing a photo of her first granddaughter to anyone who would look.

Guilt tightened its noose around Jackie’s neck. “I arranged for her to speak here today. I convinced Meagan to go to the foundation to secure the funds to pay her fat speaker’s fee, her travel expenses, her hotel. She was worth every penny, but now she’s dead. Because of me.”

“A psycho killed her, not you.” Bella’s fingers flew across the small keyboard. “You’re not responsible for her death any more than you’re

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responsible for Estrella's. They were doing what they loved and what they believed in. I tried to get the name of the fifth person, but the cop I talked to—off the record because he didn't have the authority to talk to the media—said they weren't releasing it until the family had been notified."

Pain so acute it took her breath pierced Jackie. Estrella's mother and father knew she was involved in this event. Word of the bombing would spread like the common cold. The media were already camped out down the street, held back by crime scene tape and uniformed officers. No doubt onlookers who joined them behind the tape were recording the scene and posting on social media. So would those who had been inside but escaped unscathed.

She and Tony needed to tell Mercedes and Mateo about Estrella before they turned on the TV and saw the news. The TV stations would break into regular programming for this. Or one of the Diaz's dozens of extended family members could call them to report seeing something on social media. "*Have you heard? Have you talked to su hijita? Is Estrellita okay?*"

They would call her, their message would go to voice mail, and they would start to worry.

So would Jackie's mother, her brother, and her sister. They'd lost so much already. She could call her mom but not Estrella's parents. A person didn't tell parents over the phone that their daughter was dead. Thankful she always kept her phone in her jacket pocket and not in her purse, Jackie wrapped her fingers around it. "I need to call my mom. We have to tell Estrella's parents. Have you told yours?"

"Mama called me, freaking out. She saw a special report in the middle of *Judge Judy*. Call Aimee. She'll be scared to death if she hears it from my mom. She's probably calling her right now."

Jackie made the call with trembling fingers. "Mom, it's me."

"I know, honey. I have that funny ringtone Tosca set up for me, remember? Al Yankovic?"

"Mom, listen. Have you been watching the news?"

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"You know I never watch the news. After school we went out for Mexican food to celebrate the end of another week and I—"

"Mom, listen to me." Once Mom started to describe what she and her best friend and teaching colleague managed to accomplish in a few hours' time, she was almost unstoppable. "There was an explosion at the Tobin Center. I was there, but I'm fine."

No response. Just jerky breathing.

"Mom, I'm okay. Did you hear me? Call Cris and Tosca for me. I don't want them seeing it on the news and worrying."

"I'll come get you." Her mother's tone turned determined. "Where are you?"

"I can't leave yet. I'm here with Bella. She's fine too. I have to talk to the police. Mom, Estrella was killed."

"Sweet baby Estrella is gone?" Mom's voice broke. "I can't believe it."

No one could. "You'll be there for Mercedes and Mateo?"

"Yes. Of course. I'll send an email to my Sunday school class. We'll get the prayer chain and the meals going." A half sob punctuated the words. "Are you sure? What about Tony? Does he know?"

"He was here too. She's gone, Mom. Don't call Mercedes yet. I have to get to them as soon as I leave here."

"I'll call Bella's folks. We can go over to Mateo's as soon as you give us the go-ahead. I'm so sorry, honey."

"Me too."

"She's with Jesus."

"I know."

"Good. Keep that tucked in your heart, baby."

"I'll try."

Jackie disconnected. Bella, her hands poised over her keyboard, jumped in. "I've been asking the other witnesses these questions. Did you see anybody or anything suspicious before the event began, or during it, for that matter?"

Jackie forced herself to rewind her day to midmorning on a

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record-breaking cold day in October. The Tobin Center staff had been perfect. Everything went like clockwork. She grabbed a quick lunch at Boudro's on the River Walk, most of which butterflies in her stomach forced her to leave on the table. She returned to wait for Meagan to arrive with their guest speakers. Estrella called. They discussed parking and reserved seating for the councilman and his entourage.

Jackie's head pounded and she rubbed her temple. "It's all muddled right now. Honestly, I can't think straight."

"What about as you were preparing to leave? Right before the explosion?"

"Surely the culprit wasn't inside the hall . . . unless you're thinking suicide bomber. Why would terrorists target a relatively small event in San Antonio?"

"I don't know, but that's why the FBI, Homeland Security, and ATF are here. They have to consider all possibilities. They have all the intel on any chatter that might have been heard in the last few weeks. Did you see anyone or anything that seemed out of place?"

Jackie rubbed her eyes. The memories fast-forwarded past her chat with climate activist Laura Peterson, who asked for a bottle of water and two Tylenol. She was jet-lagged. Hoaxer Robert Mitchell helped himself to fruit and cheese in the green room and asked for a Big Red soda. The dignitaries started arriving shortly after that. Jackie led them to their reserved seats. She chewed her lower lip. Polite chatter, chatter, chatter.

Then what? "Meher."

"Meher? The catering manager?"

Jackie shot from her chair and did a 360-degree turn, her gaze bouncing from one survivor to the next. "I need to find Meher."

"Why? What did she do?"

"She didn't do anything. It's what I did." Jackie caught a glimpse of a black hajib wrapped around a woman's head. In San Antonio the sight was rare. The woman stood talking to a man in a Tobin Center catering polo. "There she is."

Jackie wound her way through the metal chairs set up in meandering lines that suggested a drunk person set them up. Her event planner persona chastised whoever had done this. Didn't they know to leave adequate space between chairs for oversized men who needed to spread out their legs? Didn't they know about adequate space in the aisles?

Aware of Bella's exasperated breathing behind her, Jackie plunged forward. "Meher, hey, over here."

The petite chef swiveled and waved. Her grave expression blossomed into a relieved smile. "You're okay. I'm so glad you made it."

"I need to talk to you." Jackie drew the much shorter woman into a quick hug. Meher's dark eyebrows arched, but she returned the hug. Jackie took a breath. "What did you do with the backpack?"

The smile disappeared. Meher excused herself from her coworker and moved away from the tent. "I gave it to a security guard. He saw me with it and demanded I turn it over. I thought he was going to arrest me or something."

"What backpack?" Bella barreled her way into the conversation. "What are you talking about?"

"I had found it before everyone started coming in." Jackie swatted away the defensiveness that threatened to overwhelm her. "I figured it belonged to one of the workers. Meher said she would check for me."

An obscenity popped from Bella's mouth. She'd claimed her penchant for colorful language came from working in a newsroom. Jackie reminded her twenty times a day that cussing was the result of a weak vocabulary—something no journalist wanted. "Neither of you opened it?"

"I was in a hurry."

"So was I." Meher's face crumpled. "You think it was the bomb. I had the bomb in my arms? The security guard will tell the police. They'll be looking for me."

"You turned it over. You did the right thing. Just tell them the truth."

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“They’ll take one look at my name and all they’ll see is Middle Eastern, Muslim, terrorist.”

“Seriously? You’re a Saudi American. That doesn’t make you a terrorist. I work with a woman whose parents are Iranian. She was born here. I work with a Kuwaiti man who immigrated here with his family when he was six. They’re Muslim, just like Bella and I are Christians. They’re Americans just like you and me.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Bella glanced around. “You two need to find a cop and tell him about this. The backpack might have held the bomb.”

Jackie clasped her hands to her pounding head. “You’re saying we could’ve prevented this?”

Fear etched deep lines in Meher’s lovely face. She backed away. “You can’t tell them I was involved. You can’t tell them I was the last person you saw with the backpack.”

“We’ll talk to them together. Just tell the truth. I’ll have your back.”

With a little snort of disbelief, Meher shook her head. “I love that you’re so naive. You live in such a small, secure world. DHS will take me in before I have a chance to even say good-bye to my children. Under the Patriot Act they can hold me as long as they want.”

“Meher, wait. I’ll be—”

“I can’t. Leave me out of it. Please, keep me out of it. Promise!”

“We have to tell the police. It will help them find the monster who did this.”

“No it won’t. They’ll be too busy investigating me, my family, and my friends.” Meher whirled, dodged a cluster of survivors, and ducked behind the tent to parts unknown.

Shivering, Jackie wrapped her arms around her chest and tried to think. Meher had reason to be afraid. Muslim Americans still faced profiling, discrimination, and hate-mongering every day thanks to 9/11.

That didn’t change the situation. “I have to tell.”

“Yes, you do. I feel for Meher. Wrong place, wrong time, but if she didn’t do anything wrong, the police will figure that out.” Bella slid into a chair and opened her laptop. “Go. I have to file the website

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story, but I'll be waiting right here for you. I want a blow-by-blow account."

For a reporter Bella had far more faith in the system than Jackie did. Her teeth chattering, ears ringing, hands shaking, she headed for the command center. Maybe Bella would be right. Maybe this time justice would prevail.



THOMAS NELSON
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THREE

Finding a cop was no problem. Getting him to stop long enough to listen proved more challenging. Jackie approached the uniformed officer standing guard outside the command center. He had his spiel down. “Wait. They’re interviewing everyone. They’ll get to you as soon as they can, ma’am.”

“I may have important information—”

“Everyone is anxious to get out of here, ma’am. Have a seat. They’ll get to you as soon as they can. They’ve got more than eight hundred witnesses to process. Have a cup of coffee. The Red Cross is bringing in sandwiches.”

He was trying so hard to be kind. Jackie stuffed a sock in her impatience. First responders and law enforcement saw the worst of the worst—just as she had this day.

She trudged toward the chairs again. A lanky, scruffy-looking man in street clothes and a Windbreaker emblazoned with SAPD across the back brushed past her, headed the same direction. “Excuse me, are you interviewing witnesses?”

He glanced back and stopped. The irritated expression faded. “If you’ve been triaged, ma’am, you can wait in the area set up by Victim Assistance. We’ll get to you as soon as we can.”

“I know that. Please listen to me.” Jackie fought to bring her voice down a notch. He didn’t need a hysterical witness right now. “I have information that might be important to give to you now rather than later.”

KELLY IRVIN

“Who are you?”

“Jackie Santoro, the adult collections coordinator at the Central Library. I helped plan this event.”

“You don’t look like a librarian.”

Jackie got that a lot. She didn’t understand it. Librarians came in all shapes and sizes. “Sorry I don’t meet your expectations.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s been a day for everyone.”

His assessment of the day was spot-on, even if he didn’t catch her sarcasm. “Do you want to take my statement or not? Officer—”

“It’s detective. Detective Avery Wick. SAPD Homicide Unit. I’d be happy to take your statement.” He glanced around, then took her arm.

Surprise washed through Jackie, followed by sudden warmth. He had a steely grip—one a person could count on—and he hadn’t hesitated to reach out. It had been a long time since someone did that for her.

He guided her to the curb. “Someone who volunteers to share information is either innocent or trying to look that way.”

So much for warmth. Detective Avery’s prickly-pear persona re-asserted itself.

Anger could be a tonic under the right circumstances. Jackie’s bubbled up. She tugged her arm free. “I was one of a team of people who planned this event. One of my best friends died in there.” She pointed to the Tobin Center. “What possible motive would I have to set off a bomb in the middle of my event?”

“Sit down, please.” Detective Wick’s assessing gaze ran over Jackie from head to toe and back. A shiver ran through her that had nothing to do with the cold. It felt as if he could see through her. He smiled—a grim, sardonic half smile. “Give me a minute. I’m sure I can come up with a motive.”

Before Jackie could introduce herself, he walked away, leaving her with her mouth open and her entire body shaking.

He returned a minute later with a blanket and a cup of coffee.

HER EVERY MOVE

Jackie wrapped the blanket around her hunched shoulders automatically. It wouldn't help, but his offer was so unexpected in light of his last words, she couldn't refuse.

"Here, drink this." He held out a Styrofoam cup filled with steaming liquid. "You look frozen."

Did this man have multiple personalities? "Bless you." Her words came out in a croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Thank you."

Her hands shook so hard the hot liquid spilled over the edges, burning her fingers. "Ouch. Sorry."

"Stop apologizing." Detective Wick cupped his hands around hers and steadied them. Again, with the touch. "You're in shock. Why weren't you transported to Baptist or one of the other downtown hospitals?"

"I'm not hurt, not physically." Her voice didn't quiver. For that small victory she was grateful. "I refused to be transported. Or treated."

She wasn't leaving until Estrella did.

"Not smart."

"Not hurt. They're overwhelmed as it is."

"We're doing preliminary interviews . . ."

His big hands covered Jackie's completely. She closed her eyes, concentrating on how real and firm they were. He had a callus on his thumb. His fingers were strong. Finally the shaking stopped.

"You're not going to pass out on me, are you?"

She opened her eyes to find him leaning so close his scent of cinnamon gum and citrusy aftershave filled her nose. After the stench of blood, excrement, and burned rubber, it was comforting. So was his angular face filled with a mixture of concern at war with barely tethered impatience.

Jackie leaned away from his space. "Absolutely not. I've got it—the coffee, I mean."

His hands dropped. The warmth dissipated. She swallowed against sobs. No more tears. Estrella would not want tears. She would want

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action. She deserved action. “Did they find the remnants of the explosive device? Do they know how it was triggered?”

Detective Wick looked up from the narrow notebook he’d tugged from the hip pocket of his Dockers. “You said you had important information. Let’s start with that.”

Once she told him about the bag, her opportunity to get information from the detective would be gone. “Were there any unexploded devices found?”

Impatience spread across his face, his effort to muzzle it obvious. “The bomb squad cleared the hall before search and recovery began. Let me ask the questions, if you don’t mind.”

Everyone knew that. The other first responders wouldn’t have been allowed in otherwise. Search and recovery. “One of the victims is—was—my best friend Estrella Diaz.”

Detective Wick’s pale-blue eyes studied her so intently he squinted. “I’m sorry about your friend. This has to be the worst day of your life. The faster we get all the facts, the faster we can track down the monster who did this. Okay?”

Another day came close, but Detective Wick didn’t need to know that. They were on the same page, even if he chose not to share information with her. “Won’t the ATF and the FBI have jurisdiction? How does SAPD figure in?”

“You ask a lot of questions.” The crow’s feet around his eyes and the lines around his mouth deepened. He sucked in a long breath and let it out. “Contrary to what you see on TV, the Fed’s don’t come in and take over. They assist. There’ll be a joint task force. But you can be sure we’ll be leading the charge with one of our own dead. Chief Little—”

“Chief of Police Little is dead?” Confirmation of the city manager’s words. Body bag number five. The chief, dressed in street clothes, had been sitting near the front with his wife—right behind the city manager and his spouse. The Littles had four kids, all still young enough to live at home. “I’m so sorry for your loss. Did his wife survive?”

HER EVERY MOVE

“Yes, but she’s in critical condition. We want the monster who did this for the sakes of all the victims, but this one is personal.”

Estrella would be relegated to the *also killed* paragraph of every news story written about this incident. After the biographies and quotes collected from the peers of Councilman Sandoval, Chief Little, and Milton Schaeffer. That was fine if it meant law enforcement went after the killer with every resource available to them because of the intense public scrutiny that came with the victims’ lofty status in the community.

“You said you had something important to tell me.”

She held the coffee close, concentrating on its warmth. “There was a backpack left on the front row. I found it.”

Any hint of cordiality disappeared from his rugged face. “You found it? When?”

She repeated the facts she’d shared with Bella. “I didn’t give it another thought until I was talking to Bella and she asked me if I saw anything unusual before the event started.”

“Bella Glover, the reporter?”

“She’s also my friend.”

“You told a reporter before you told law enforcement?” Anger rippled through his words like a current in a downed electrical line. He let go a string of obscenities under his breath. “You just compromised the investigation of five murders and more than 120 people injured in a bombing. The worst since San Antonio’s founding in 1730.”

“It wasn’t my intent to c-compromise anything,” Jackie stuttered. “She was walking me through the day when it hit me. I’d completely forgotten.”

“Do you know the name of this catering person?”

Here we go again. Jackie again explained about Meher. “She said a security guard demanded the backpack. She gave it to him and went back to work.”

“You talked to her after the bombing?”

“Yes.”

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Scowling, Detective Wick glanced around. “Where is she then?”

“She declined to come with me. She was frightened, in shock, and wanting to go home to her family. You can understand.”

“Meher Faheem. Muslim?”

“Yes, but—”

“I’m not profiling. I’m following the evidence.” Wick blew out air. His overly long bangs rose and descended. He might be trying not to draw conclusions, but his expression told a different story. “Describe her for me.”

“She has brown skin, brown eyes. About my age. Medium height, medium build. She was wearing a hijab and an abaya, the black cloak they wear.” The description fit more than half the women in San Antonio—until Jackie got to that last sentence. A mixture of various Arab nationalities accounted for less than 1 percent of San Antonio’s population. “She’s pretty.”

“Okay.” Wick stretched the two-syllable word across the length of a football field. “What did the backpack look like?”

Jackie closed her eyes and imagined the moment when she’d picked it up from the seat. “Dark-blue or black nylon. Heavy like it was full of a bunch of books. A typical backpack like a college kid would use.”

“You didn’t think to report a suspicious package?”

A rush of blood made her ears ring, and nausea rocked her stomach. “Are you saying I could’ve prevented this? I never thought . . . It never occurred to me.”

“You walked your way through the day with Bella Glover. Now do it for me.” All compassion and concern had disappeared, replaced by a valiant attempt to contain his anger. “You gave the backpack to Faheem. You went about your business. You were inside when the incendiary device detonated?”

Jackie clasped her dignity around her like a shredded shawl. “Just barely. I was at the door, ready to go to the Central Library to prepare for the book signing and reception, but Tony stopped me.”

HER EVERY MOVE

"Tony Guerra, who works for Sandoval?"

"Yes."

"Why did he stop you?"

"To congratulate me on how well the event went." The dark irony of that statement added burning salt to her wounds. "He and Estrella were engaged. They were planning a Valentine's Day wedding."

Why had she volunteered that information? It would not help this detective find the animal who rained hell down on innocent people this afternoon.

In fact, a faintly sardonic look flitted across the man's face before he shut it down. "Was Mr. Guerra injured?"

"No."

"Where is he now?"

Jackie forced her gaze from the detective to the triage tent. His cell phone firmly planted to his ear, Tony still stood next to the gurney that held Estrella's body. He didn't understand. The woman he loved was no longer there. Bella stood next to him, one hand on his back. She might be a reporter, but she was also a steadfast friend.

"He's with Estrella's body. He wants to make sure her remains . . ." Jackie's throat clogged with tears. She heaved a breath. "*Chin up, chin up*," that's what her dad always said. *Chin up*. "Her remains are treated with respect. I imagine he's figuring out what's next. His boss is dead. The council seat will have to be filled. The political fallout will have to be dealt with."

"Sandoval's body isn't even cold yet." Detective Wick's sarcastic tone matched Jackie's feelings about politics. So many of the politicians she knew had no soul. He stared at Tony. "I'll talk to him later, to confirm your story."

"It's not a story."

"Who else was seated in the first row where you found the bag?"

"The city manager and his wife were supposed to be seated in the same row, but they arrived late and I was dealing with some library donors so Meagan—my boss—seated them a few rows back."

She cradled her head in her hands. *God, what have I done?*

Something . . . fingers . . . brushed against her hair. "Look, no one thinks a bombing will happen to him." His voice was hoarse.

She forced herself to raise her head. Detective Wick ducked his head, but not before she saw the hollowness of his expression. "I'm cynical and suspicious by nature. And because of the job I do. It was only a question."

"Who do you think did this?"

"Who do you think did it?"

He changed personalities like a chameleon changed colors. "The possibilities are mind-boggling, aren't they?"

Detective Wick ran his free hand through long locks of hair the color of lightly toasted bread highlighted by an occasional silver strand. His scowl deepened. "Santoro. Are you related to Samuel Santoro?"

There it was. Most people made the connection sooner. In his defense the detective had a lot on his plate. "He was my father."

Detective Wick unfolded his long legs and stood, but he didn't walk away. He paused a moment longer, as if processing the information and weighing his options. "Get up, please."

"Excuse me?"

"You need to come with me. You likely had the explosive device in your hands. You handed it to a person of Middle Eastern descent. You gave that information to the media. And you're Sam Santoro's daughter. We need to talk some more, more formally."

"My father's death has nothing whatsoever to do with this."

"Your father took his own life after being accused of crimes by your boss. You have every reason to want the city manager dead. Didn't Vogel lead the charge to have him fired before his case went to trial?"

Jackie stood. Not because Wick ordered her to do it. But because she wanted to look him in the eye when she responded. Unfortunately he fell in that category of men taller than her five eleven. He had to be at least six two. "Maybe you're the kind of person so lacking in morals that you would kill and maim innocent people, including your best

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friend since second grade, in order to exact revenge on a few, but I assure you I am not.”

“I’m sure you’ll forgive me for not taking your word for that.” Wick held her gaze. Jackie refused to avert her gaze. The air crackled between them in a strange push and pull of currents she couldn’t identify. The emotion faded from the detective’s face, leaving a carefully neutral businesslike facade. “I’m sorry for your loss. But I do need to follow the facts where they lead. Period.”

“Hey, Wicked!” Another plainclothes officer yelled from the command center.

Wick’s eyes narrowed, but he looked away from Jackie. The other officer waved a pocket-sized notebook to indicate the detective was needed.

“Again, I’m sorry for your loss—both of them.” He ducked his head and swept his arm out in an *after-you* fashion. “Time for you to meet some of my associates.”

Her feet so numb she couldn’t feel them, Jackie did her best to obey. She stumbled and Wick took her arm once again. Jackie shrugged off his touch. “That’s not necessary. I’m sure you don’t touch your male prisoners.”

“You’re not a prisoner.” He paused. “Not yet, anyway.”

FOUR

A very did a gut check. No way this good-looking, well-spoken, nosy librarian could be a mass murderer. His gut was never wrong.

Regardless, she'd screwed up the investigation by speaking out of turn to the media, and by setting aside the effort not to profile, she had spoken with one possible suspect in the bombing and allowed her to leave without talking to authorities. And she was Sam Santoro's kid. Avery pointed to a chair. "Sit."

Ms. Santoro didn't blink. "I'm not a dog. Don't speak to me like one."

She was right. Days like today brought out the worst in him. "Please have a seat, Ms. Santoro."

"Jackie. Ms. Santoro is my mother."

"Jackie."

Without further ado, she sat.

Avery brushed past Detective Scott Heller, aka Scotty, his partner, and moved far enough away that Jackie wouldn't hear the conversation, but not so far that Avery couldn't keep an eye on her.

"Who is she?"

"A librarian at the Central Library."

"She doesn't look like a librarian."

It didn't speak well of either of them that they noticed this woman's attributes in the aftermath of the worst bombing in San Antonio's history that dated back to the Spanish missions. Everything about

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Jackie Santoro, from her curves to her long legs to her tangled black curls and sapphire eyes that snapped when she was angry, caught and held a man's attention. "Moving right along."

"Just sayin'." Scotty didn't seem the least bit repentant. He was a happily married man, which made him all bark and no bite. "Why bring her over here? Aside from the fact that she is attractive?"

"She's also Sam Santoro's daughter."

Scotty's bushy gray eyebrows popped up. With his handlebar mustache and bulbous nose, he looked like a cartoon character come to life. "Huh. I'd say that moves Ms. Santoro up a few notches on the persons of interest list."

"He was as crooked as the day is long. Rather than going to prison, he took the cowardly way out and offed himself." Wick contemplated Jackie from afar. Her eyes glassy with unshed tears, she stared at the triage tent. Avery followed her gaze. Tony Guerra stood next to a body bag on a gurney. The ME investigators wanted to move the gurney, but Guerra wouldn't let go. Bella Glover was trying to cajole him into releasing his hold.

Avery let his gaze travel back to Jackie. She swiped at her face with a sleeve. Everything about her dejected pose made Wick want to fly to the rescue, but he wasn't the knight-on-a-white-horse type. Not anymore.

He recounted her story to his partner, including the backpack and Meher Faheem. "She stuck around to tell a cop her story. To cast suspicion elsewhere? My question is, why would she blow up the H-E-B Performance Hall with herself in it? She's no radicalized suicide bomber. She's wearing a cross, for crying out loud. Even if she could stomach killing Estrella Diaz, Tony Guerra, and Bella Glover, whom she claims are her closest friends?"

"She intended to get out before it went off." Scotty smiled a wolfish grin that showed off narrow canine teeth. "She was at the door when Guerra stopped her. She miscalculated. Maybe she cared more about getting back at the city manager who fired her father before

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he'd been adjudicated than she did about her friends. Maybe she had a secret grudge against them for working for Sandoval. Didn't he lead the charge against Sam Santoro after the accusations surfaced that he was for sale?"

"I thought the same thing, but it's not like Santoro was a crime boss. He took bribes from some developers who needed permits and inspections."

"He made money at the expense of citizens who bought homes built by cutting corners and in subdivisions stripped of heritage trees." Scotty's disdain turned his tone icy cold. He was son of a career U.S. Army man. He didn't like dishonorable people. "It's not like he was hurting for money. He was a Santoro."

The grandson of one of the richest men in San Antonio, Santoro had chosen a life of public service as a lowly Development Services Department inspector who worked his way up the food chain to director. He didn't need the money. He wanted to thumb his nose at his father. So the story went.

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, even when it tries." Avery studied his person of interest. Was he barking up the wrong tree here? "Why tell me about the backpack then? She sought me out and she told a reporter about it. Why didn't she fade into the crowd and slip out in the first wave before the cavalry arrived? You know some people did. They started running and never came back."

"Maybe she is planting a red herring. A Middle Eastern woman in a hijab would definitely serve that purpose. Santoro is smart enough to know we would've tracked her down. She helped plan the event. She was in the hall before the crowd arrived. Plenty of opportunity to plant the bomb with the intention of detonating it after she left the building." Scotty excelled in creating worst-case scenarios, but he hadn't interviewed Ms. Santoro. He hadn't seen her agony. "She could be lying through her teeth. You only have her word there was a backpack at this point. We need to find the catering manager, as well as the security guard, and corroborate Santoro's story. When the

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explosive experts get done sifting through the debris, we'll know more about the bomb."

The job demanded they trust no one. Yet. Avery stuck his pen behind his ear and rubbed the two-day-old stubble on his chin. Jackie Santoro's angst had been so real. The thought that she should've handled the backpack differently had shaken her to the core.

Or not. Avery had investigated murders for a living for nine years. Mothers who killed their babies. Teenagers who killed one or both parents. A sleeping eight-year-old killed in a drive-by shooting because the gangbanger got the wrong house. A drunk old man who got into a fight with his best friend over a card game and stabbed him to death with a butcher knife. Nothing surprised Avery anymore.

Jackie Santoro moved him. *Get over it. She's young and pretty and way out of your league.*

Not to mention a person of interest in an investigation.

"What's the matter with you?" Scotty flapped his notebook at Avery. "Earth to Wicked."

"Nothing." Avery cocked his head toward the command center. "I need to pass this tidbit up the chain of command. Do you want to see if Meher Faheem has a record? Get her address."

"Will do. I'll see if she's been interviewed by any of the other officers and ask for a background check."

Avery nodded, but his gaze was riveted by the scene playing out at the RV that served as the mobile command unit.

The ATF special agent stood in fierce conversation, his finger occasionally jabbing in the air, with FBI Agent Petra Jantzen, who would serve as their case agent. The Homeland Security Investigations rep had his arms crossed. His head turned side to side like he was watching a tennis match. Avery's path had crossed with Jantzen's on a missing child case a few years earlier. She was a good agent and a good person.

Chief Little should be right there in the middle of it all. Instead he was on his way to the morgue for the final indignity of an autopsy. City Manager Jason Vogel rubbed his forehead every few seconds

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while adding nothing to the conversation. Avery turned back to Scotty. "What do you think's going on there?"

"They're not telling a lowly detective like me anything, but I heard from one of our civilian PIOs that they're huddling up before they do a press conference. They want to feed the beast." His acne-scarred face filled with contempt, Scotty tugged on his mustache so hard it had to hurt. "All the PIO types from every agency are holed up inside drafting news releases so everyone and his uncle can approve the language. That'll take at least a week."

Avery snorted. He would never move up the chain of command for reasons like this one. "Or a month. In the meantime we should find the scum who did this and end him."

"Yep. You and me, brother, you and me." Scotty let loose with a string of obscenities meant to show his support. "Little was straight-laced, but even the police officers' association liked him. Ruiz is dumb as a doorknob. He won't last five minutes as the interim."

"Rogelio is the interim?" The desire to puke overwhelmed Avery. Operations Support Bureau Assistant Chief Rogelio Ruiz had memorized the playbook and never deviated from it. They had graduated from the same class at the academy. While Rogelio flew up the chain of command, Wick chose to stay close to the streets. "That didn't take long. Is LT moving up too?"

As head of the Homicide/Attempted Homicide Unit, Lieutenant Deke Carmichael was their direct supervisor. A good guy who worked to get them the resources they needed while he gave them the space they required to do their jobs.

"As far as I know. The ripple-down effect isn't over, but they had to move fast." Scotty lit a cigarette and stuck his BIC back in his pocket. "The city manager probably figured he needed someone familiar with the SWTFC to stand in front of him at these task force meetings."

The Southwest Texas Fusion Center was a multiagency task force that handled intelligence and technology for fighting both terrorism and violent crime.

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"So far we have international and domestic terrorism on the table," Avery glanced at Jackie. Her face a study of impatience, she scowled in return. He turned back to Scotty. "Or, it might be something as simple as revenge."

"Environmental terrorists are pretty crazy. They're just as likely to resort to violence as the Aryan Nation." Scotty wrinkled his oversized schnoz. "Some gun-lovers don't like the climate-change peddlers either."

"So you think the climate-change lady was the real target?"

"I wouldn't put it past the hoax people to take out an opponent, thinking it'll make points with some political leaders."

"Wicked & Hell. I guess we're getting the old band back together." Despite an obvious attempt at joviality, Rogelio Ruiz approached with all the signs of a man under enormous stress. "What are you doing here?"

Ruiz's use of the tongue-in-cheek nicknames thrown around in the Homicide Unit did nothing to improve Avery's mood. Scotty could be aggressive, but he was a crack detective and their solve rate was excellent.

Ruiz's questioning gaze remained on Avery, so he stepped into the line of fire. "I was up next."

Detectives rotated as lead detectives on murder/attempted murder cases. Avery and Scotty were next in line. This was more than a murder investigation, but five people had been murdered, one of them his chief. Nobody was taking this case from him.

If Rogelio had other ideas, he didn't express them. "I just came from the hospital. Bill's wife is in surgery. They asked us to wait until she comes out to tell her the news." His eyes reddened. His Adam's apple bobbed. "Bill's brother elected me to be the one to tell her."

"Tough gig."

"Four kids are fatherless. They could be raised by their grandparents if their mother doesn't pull through. Our families live daily with the fact that their loved ones might not come home, but he was

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off duty at a library event, for crying out loud.” Rogelio cleared his throat and spit on the sidewalk. “I better get to the meeting. They want me to lay the groundwork with the media and then introduce the Feds.”

“Do you need anything from us?”

“Did you learn anything from interviews you’ve done?”

“Too early in the game to draw conclusions, but we’ve got persons of interest out the wazoo.” Avery ignored his partner’s raised eyebrows. They did way too much talking. “It could be environmental terrorists. We’ve got a catering manager who’s Muslim. It could be the people who think climate change is a hoax. We have a witness who saw an unaccompanied backpack shortly before the event began. We can’t even discount domestic violence at this point.”

Avery didn’t need to remind them that the worst mass shooting at a church occurred at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, only a few miles southeast of San Antonio, and it had resulted from domestic violence.

“You have eyes on this Muslim?”

“Not yet, but—”

“Then get on it. And find out everything you can about the backpack. It could be our bomb.”

The guy was a regular Sherlock. Avery kept his surly comments to himself and offered his new boss a half salute. “Yes, sir. Good luck with the news conference.”

“Thanks, but if good luck existed, I wouldn’t be interim chief right now.”

No one wanted to get a promotion—even a temporary one—by stepping on the body of a fallen comrade in arms. Avery nodded. “We’ll get the guy.”

“Or woman,” Scotty added. “You never know. This might be the day the stats on mass murderers even out. Ain’t that right, Wicked?”

Scotty claimed to never be wrong—about anything. A puzzled look on his face, Rogelio—Chief Ruiz—trudged away. Avery waited

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until he got close to the command center to smack Scotty's arm with his notebook. "Seriously?"

"Why didn't you tell him the witness is Miss Bodacious?"

"Because we'll get cussed out by LT if we jump over him in the chain of command. We need to tell LT first. I'll call him and see how he wants to handle it."

"Don't you think the Feds will want to know about the backpack ASAP?"

"I don't answer to them. It'll be LT's responsibility to report up the chain of command. We're just grunts on this one."

"When do you ever care about chain of command?"

Avery didn't, but something about Jackie Santoro had burrowed under his skin. Until he knew more about her, he wasn't giving her up to the Feds. If it turned out she had anything to do with the bombing, he would be on the front row to watch her get the needle.

THOMAS NELSON
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Tim Irvin

Bestseller Kelly Irvin is the author of nineteen books, including romantic suspense and Amish romance. The *Library Journal* said her novel *Tell Her No Lies* is “a complex web with enough twists and turns to keep even the most savvy romantic suspense readers guessing until the end.” She followed up with *Over the Line* and *Closer Than She Knows*. The two-time ACFW Carol finalist worked as a newspaper reporter for six years writing stories on the Texas–Mexico border. Those experiences fuel her romantic suspense novels set in Texas. A retired public relations professional, Kelly now writes fiction full-time. She lives with her husband, photographer Tim Irvin, in San Antonio. They are the parents of two children, three grandchildren, and two ornery cats.

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