

**HER
EVERY
MOVE**

A Novel

KELLY IRVIN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Her Every Move

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*For Eileen Key, my writing mentor, my friend, my sister
in Christ. Your departure has left a hole in my heart.
Breathe easy now, sweet friend. One day we'll talk books
again near God's heavenly throne. I can only imagine how
many books He has in His library. We'll read them all!*

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.

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 midthigh 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 Katrina 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."

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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."

HER EVERY MOVE

“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.