

SOUTHERN CRIMES SERIES • BOOK 1

DANGEROUS PASSAGE

A NOVEL

LISA HARRIS


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To all those seeking freedom.
May you seek and find it in your heavenly Father.

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?

Matthew 6:26

CHAPTER

1

After another grueling weekend spent wrapping up a homicide, Detective Avery North was not about to let anything get in the way of her one nonnegotiable indulgence on her first day off in two weeks. She pulled into the parking lot of Glam Day Spa and stepped into the sultry Atlanta morning. The rest of her Monday might end up being a marathon, but she didn't care as long as she had the next hour to look forward to being pampered.

The petite, dark-haired manicurist greeted her at the front counter. "Morning, Miss North. You're right on time."

"Morning, Riza."

"You're off today?"

"Thankfully." Avery finished the rest of her iced tea while following Riza back to an open chair. "I managed not to cancel my appointment a third time. Crazy weekend."

"Then you need to sit down and relax completely. We could add a manicure? I have a new color that would look stunning with your red hair."

Avery melted into the padded chair, kicked off her sandals, then dipped her feet into the hot, bubbly water, feeling herself relax for the first time in days. "Maybe next time."

Her feet tingled. One whole hour to forget about the leaky

kitchen sink, her father's retirement party, and her mother's relentless questions about it. She closed her eyes. One whole hour to completely unwind and indulge her thoughts in something beside caterers, plumbers, and homicide cases.

Something pleasurable like . . . Jackson Bryant. Her first date with Jackson had started off with a severe case of rattled nerves that left her realizing she'd rather confront an armed murder suspect than jump back into the dating scene. By the end of the second date, she'd somehow managed to lose a corner of her heart to the handsome heartthrob, but even that hadn't been enough to lessen her surprise over the fact that there was now a third date planned for tonight.

At thirtysomething, with a somewhat moody tween and a mother whose own emotional stability was currently in question, Avery wasn't exactly Atlanta's perfect catch for a rising professional like the associate medical examiner. She wondered how many dates it would take before he started reconsidering his options—or she got cold feet.

Her shoulders relaxed. Dreaming of Jackson might be dangerous, but it might also prove to be the perfect escape. Gorgeous brown eyes that seemed to peer right through her. Dark hair, solid muscles, and an illegal amount of charm for one person—

Avery's phone rang in her front pocket. She opened her eyes and rubbed the back of her neck. She wasn't going to answer. It was probably her mother again, with more nagging questions about her father's upcoming retirement party.

Or it could be Tess. But she'd just dropped off her daughter at the middle school, so she should already be in her first-hour class.

A glance at the number told her it wasn't either of them. "Detective North speaking."

"This is Simons. 911 just received a call about a homicide. We've got an officer securing the crime scene, but Captain Peterson wants you there ASAP."

Not today, Lord. Please, not today. You know how badly I need a day off . . .

Avery glanced at her watch. She deserved this day off. Having to reschedule the eleven o'clock lunch with her mother was one thing, but missing an hour of pure relaxation was an entirely different story.

Avery pressed her fingers against her now throbbing temple. "It's my day off—"

"There's a tattoo of a small magnolia on the victim's right shoulder."

Avery's chest contracted. The recent crime scene flashed before her. A young girl. Asian. Body discarded next to a Dumpster. And a small magnolia tattooed on her right shoulder.

They'd never found the murderer.

"Where?"

Simons passed on the address.

"I'm on my way." She flipped the phone shut and turned to Riza. "I'm sorry . . . I've got to go."

"Do you want to reschedule?"

Riza patted Avery's feet with a white fluffy towel, but Avery was already reaching for her sandals, ready to slide them on her still damp feet. "Yes . . . no. I'll have to call."

She left a generous tip on the chair, then slipped out the front door, back into the sultry Georgia morning.

CHAPTER

2

A very slowed down as she approached the address Simons had given her over the phone, her gaze scanning the area for anything out of the ordinary. It wouldn't be the first time a killer returned to the scene of the crime.

The tree-lined street, with its brick buildings looming on either side, reminded her of the neighborhoods she'd worked as a rookie police officer. It was a unique mixture of mom-and-pop stores, neighborhood bars, apartment buildings, and charming older homes.

Statistically, crime might be higher in this community situated outside the ritzier golf courses and gated country clubs, but she'd always found the people friendly. More often than not, it turned out to be the combination of too many drinks or the addition of illegal drugs that turned simple disagreements into something ugly.

Like murder.

Of course, it was also the neighborhoods like this one that Mama was convinced would be the downfall of the city. She believed Atlanta's greatest attribute was its lingering pockets of old-fashioned southern charm. And everyone knew that transplants diluted that charm and added to the growing crime rate.

Avery, on the other hand, loved the diversity Atlanta offered

with its collection of ethnic neighborhoods. The fact that she and Tess could spend a cultural afternoon in the city or escape to the nearby mountains on her time off was, in her mind, a plus. But someone had just lost any chance to visit Kennesaw Mountain Trail or Amicalola Falls. And it was up to her to find out why.

Especially if they were dealing with a serial killer.

A chill ran through her.

Avery pulled into the open space next to the alleyway, ten feet away from the yellow crime tape blocking off the scene. Detectives Sanders and Martin's unmarked sedan sat next to the medical examiner's vehicle and a couple of patrol cars. Already, a good number of onlookers stood gathered at the edges of the cordoned-off area. Avoiding the press would be impossible.

She grabbed her cell phone from the console, then hesitated. She should call her mother, except she'd never hear the end of missing today's meeting with Aunt Doris, who was catering her father's retirement party. She shoved the phone into her pocket. Mama would have to wait.

She got out of the car and headed for the sidewalk, where she took the clipboard from the uniformed officer standing guard at the front of the alley. She signed in, scribbling her initials and badge number.

Jackson Bryant's name had already been scrawled above hers.

She ignored the unsolicited flutter of her heart and addressed the officer. "Tell me what you've got."

"Asian female. Late teens, early twenties. The scene is secure. The medical examiner and two other officers arrived just before you did."

She nodded toward the growing number of spectators. "Make sure no one steps onto this scene without my permission."

"Yes ma'am."

The alley smelled like cheap liquor and overripe garbage. Cigarette butts lay scattered across the gravel. Green ivy threaded

its way up the walls of the brick buildings lining the alley. A white Accord blocked the left side of the alley, its back taillight broken, leaving shards of the red plastic lying scattered on the ground. Determining what was evidence from this crime was going to be long and tedious.

On the other side of the Dumpster lay the body.

Avery's stomach heaved at the familiar smell of death—something she'd never gotten used to—mingling with the coppery taste of blood and the stench of the alcohol. The haunting scene from six weeks ago continued to flash before her. Even at first glance, the similarities were unmistakable. A young Asian victim, no more than seventeen or eighteen. Facedown on the ground, simply dressed in a shirt, short-sleeved sweater, and skirt. No shoes. The only difference was the copper bracelets adorning her left forearm.

Jackson finished covering one of the victim's hands in order to preserve evidence, then looked up. The butterfly-eliciting smile he normally gave Avery was missing.

"Avery." He pulled back the girl's sleeve to reveal the tattooed magnolia. "I knew you'd want to see this."

"What happened to her?"

He leaned forward and pointed to the mass of dried blood on the side of her head. "The autopsy will give us something more conclusive, but for now it looks as if she was killed and then dumped here."

Like the last victim.

Avery tried to push aside the feelings of vulnerability that swept through her. She was supposed to be the strong one who could handle anything. Except it wasn't always like that. "How long ago?"

"Not long. Rigor mortis has already set in, but I still don't think we're looking at more than five or six hours."

She pulled on a pair of latex gloves, then crouched down

beside him. "So someone killed her, then dumped her here in the middle of the night, hoping to cover up their crime?"

"That would be my initial guess."

"What about the tattoo?"

Jackson pointed to the edge of the flower. "Healing typically takes anywhere from two to six weeks, so she's had it for some time."

"Any idea who she is?"

Detective Sanders leaned over her, camera in hand. "No ID, wallet, or purse was found on the body or in the car near the Dumpster. Which means, so far, we've got another Jane Doe."

"Signs of sexual assault?"

Jackson shook his head. "I'll let you know for sure after the autopsy, but there are definite signs of struggle. She has scratch marks on her arms and left cheek."

Sanders stepped back and snapped a photo of the wall behind the victim. "I've already taken photos of the body."

"Finish photographing the scene, then I want the area swept in a strip search pattern, with each block numbered individually." Avery signaled to the other detective working on sketches. "Martin, when you're done, talk to Missing Persons and see if anyone has been reported missing in the past seventy-two hours that fits her description. Maybe we'll get lucky. Then find out who owns that car and make sure the Dumpster is searched for evidence."

She stood up. "Who called this in?"

"A guy who works at the bar . . ." Martin flipped open his notebook. "A Jeffery Vine. He was taking out the trash about six forty and found her."

"Let him know I want to talk to him once we've gone over the scene and processed the evidence. For now, we need to canvass the neighborhood to see if anyone saw anything."

Avery strode to the far end of the alley. Anger simmered as

she tried to imagine what the girl had gone through the last moments of her life. Tried not to imagine if this had been Tess or one of her friends.

Pushing aside her emotions, she studied the narrow passageway, trying to see it through the eyes of the victim. Windows lined the brick walls. Trash bags and piles of empty boxes lay on the ground next to the overflowing Dumpster. There had been a fight with someone. A boyfriend? A stranger? Then someone had dumped her body here . . .

She turned around and started back toward Jackson. TV shows concentrated on the value of forensics evidence and high-tech computers, but experience had proven over and over again that it was the door-to-door grind and gathering of evidence that usually paid off with the best results. Which was exactly what they were going to do. Because her job was to ensure that whoever did this didn't get away with a senseless murder.

As with all their cases, they'd end up sifting through piles of evidence, most of which had nothing to do with the case. But all they needed was one lead. One tiny clue that would point them in the direction of the killer.

Jackson caught up with her halfway down the alley. "As soon as you're done with the body, I'll bag her and take her back to the morgue."

"Promise you'll call me as soon as you're done with the autopsy."

"Of course."

She didn't want to be there. Some cases hit too close to home.

"Hey, are you going to be okay?"

"I don't know." She shook her head and started back toward the Dumpster again. "These are the cases that always get to me. Somebody's baby, lying in an alley. Just like the last one."

"Avery."

She glanced back at him and let his sympathetic gaze wash over her.

“This isn’t your fault.”

Avery stopped midstride. “What if these cases are related? If I’d found the murderer of the last victim, this girl might not be lying in the back of some alley.”

“Maybe, but you don’t know that.”

“Sometimes I can’t help but wonder if I’m really cut out for this. I want to make the world a safer place, but the evil around us never stops. What did she do to deserve being murdered? What did my other Jane Doe do?”

“That’s what you have to figure out.” Jackson’s hand brushed the back of her arm. “The reason you do this is because you have this uncanny ability to look inside a person and see why they do what they do. You look at the root cause and motivation behind the crime. In the end, you win more than you lose—and make things safer for Tess and all the other young girls out there.”

“What about the next girl he murders?”

“We don’t know yet if this is the work of a serial killer.”

“But what if it is? What if I can’t save his next victim?” The guilt still refused to dissipate, but Jackson didn’t deserve to see this side of her. “I’m sorry. It was a long weekend and my mother . . .”

She missed her mother. The strong, supportive woman she used to be. Instead, they’d argued again this morning over the details of Daddy’s retirement party. Lately Mama would argue with a fence post if there were no one around.

“You have no reason to be sorry.” Jackson’s comment pulled her from her thoughts. “I know things have been extra hard for you lately. Any new leads on your brother’s case?”

They walked a few silent paces. Michael’s unsolved murder had left all of them searching for answers.

“I found a discrepancy in the witness list.” For months there had been nothing but dead ends. She didn’t expect this latest lead to turn into anything, but like every other piece of information,

it was worth following up on. She'd learned firsthand that seeing death through the eyes of a homicide detective was nothing compared to experiencing it through the eyes of the victim's family. Which was one reason she wanted to stop someone else from experiencing the unending grief she still wrestled with.

"Maybe it will turn out to be what you've been looking for."

"I hope so."

"What I said about this case is true, Avery. None of this is your fault—"

"Maybe not." Avery turned back to face him. "But we've got to find out who did this before he strikes again."