

SOUTHERN CRIMES SERIES • BOOK 2

FATAL
EXCHANGE

A NOVEL

LISA HARRIS


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Lisa Harris, *Fatal Exchange*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harris, Lisa, 1969–

Fatal exchange : a novel / Lisa Harris.

p. cm. — (Southern crimes ; book 2)

ISBN 978-0-8007-2191-6 (pbk.)

1. Women teachers—Fiction. 2. Students—Fiction. 3. Drug traffic—Fiction.

I. Title.

PS3608.A78315F38 2014

813'.6—dc23

2013042560

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14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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This story is dedicated to my three sweet children
who make my life complete.

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CHAPTER

1

Mason Taylor shoved the airline ticket into the glove compartment of his single-cab pickup, then headed for the rear door of the police station. Guilt tore at him. He had been forced to choose between two impossible situations. The phone call from Denver two days ago had ripped through his world and left him reeling. But this morning's desperate call from Rafael, followed by photos of a brutally beaten young man, had become the deciding factor. Seventeen was too young to die. Denver, his dad, and everyone there would have to wait.

He pulled open the precinct door, his mind still spinning from Rafael's details of the setup. Drugs had slithered into Atlanta neighborhoods, both urban and suburban alike. They crossed boundaries of profession, class, and color, while leaving behind the ugly fallout by dealers, local gang members, and users. And more recently, cartel agents were being sent to cut out the middleman and bring in more profit.

The tug of duty pulled at him, but duty wasn't the only motivator that had tipped his decision to miss his flight. He'd seen firsthand how addictions destroyed families. His own father's habit had taken the man out of the picture for almost fifteen years.

For the moment Mason couldn't worry about the doctor's

report on his father's condition. His nine thirty flight was going to have to leave without him. Rafael had already faced enough tragedy and heartbreak in his lifetime. It was up to Mason to put an end to the situation and ensure Rafael didn't lose someone else he loved.

Inside the familiar walls of the precinct, Mason nodded at his fellow officers mingling in the hallway at the beginning of the morning shift. He paused in the doorway of Detective Avery North's office. Maneuvering to avoid the detective had become second nature on his part. Avery still believed that Mason was the leak who had put her brother Michael—his best friend—in an early grave. He'd finally come to realize that nothing he could say was going to change what she believed him capable of doing. The captain had him step in on a recent human trafficking case and help with a potential serial killer. Once they'd closed the case, Mason was happy to go back to another undercover gig away from Avery's watchful eyes. And he was certain she felt the same.

He pressed his hand against the doorframe of her office and drew in a slow breath before walking in.

Avery glanced up from the file she was working on, irritation clear in her expression. "Mason. This is a surprise." She pushed the file away and started twisting the engagement ring on her left hand.

Mason ignored the annoyance in her voice and closed the door behind him. "I need to talk to you about one of your current cases."

"I thought you were catching a flight to Denver this morning for some family reunion."

"News travels fast." A "reunion" certainly wasn't what Mason had called it, but he had no desire to add more grist to the rumor mill.

"It's a small precinct."

Mason shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket and attempted to rein in his frustration. “I was supposed to go visit my father, but my plans have changed. I’ve got a problem.”

She quirked a brow. “And you came to me?”

“We might not agree on everything, but like it or not, we are on the same side of the law.”

“What is it?”

He hesitated, hoping he’d made the right decision. No matter what their personal feelings were toward each other, there was a boy’s life at stake. “I understand your team has been working on the Torres case.”

James Torres had been the first victim in an ongoing drug trafficking investigation. He’d been kidnapped by a local gang, held for ransom, then executed when the victim’s family couldn’t pay the ten thousand he owed the gang. Three more murders in the past four months, and they’d yet to find the men behind the brutal killings. All four victims had ended up with their throats slit—and those were the ones the department knew about. Rumors on the street had the murders tied to a new drug cartel from Mexico that was spreading through the streets of Atlanta like the bubonic plague. They made the Mafia look soft.

“You have something for me?” Avery asked. Even the possibility of a new lead hadn’t erased the irritation from her face.

“I might.”

“Okay.” Her expression softened slightly. “Considering I’ve got four dead bodies and no solid leads on their murderers, I’m interested. What’ve you got?”

Mason handed Avery his smartphone. Eduardo Cerda stared into the camera in the first photo. Eyes wide open and blood-shot, blood trailing from his mouth beneath the gag, a bruise across his cheekbone . . . his nose clearly broken. Mason didn’t need his ten years on the force learning to read people to know the boy was terrified. The only thing keeping him alive was the

anticipation of the money the kidnappers were demanding. In the meantime, they'd torture him and wait to receive the ransom payout.

Avery studied the photos, her brow narrowed. "What are these?"

"Proof-of-life photos that came with a ransom note." Mason nodded toward the photos. "His name is Eduardo Cerda."

"Where did you get them?"

"From his brother, Rafael. The connections to your case are all there. Drug related, similar MO, including the ransom note tacked to the inside of their front door . . ." He had her attention now. "Could be your lucky break. This time we've got a witness and a live victim."

He'd discovered firsthand working undercover that a high percentage of drug-related kidnappings went unreported by victims' families who were afraid to call attention to their own involvement in the illegal drug trade. Which made it harder for the authorities to step in before it was too late. But this time, if they could find Eduardo before the deadline, they might be able to save his life.

"I can see you've studied up on my case files." Avery set the phone down on the desk between them. "You don't have to convince me to get involved in this."

Mason leaned forward, hands braced against the desk. "I'd like to take the lead on this case."

"Have you talked to the captain about this?"

"I decided to come see you first."

"Like I said, I agree this is worth following up on, but we've been working this case for four months, which means my team is more than capable of running point on this. Besides that, what about your time off?"

Mason caught her dismissive tone and bit back his own sharp response. "Denver can wait for now." Convincing Avery of his

innocence was like proving there was sustainable life on the sun. “Listen, for just a second forget about Michael and everything you think about me, and try to be objective. There’s a boy’s life at stake here.”

Her look pierced right through him. “Don’t try and lay a guilt trip and turn this back around on me. I don’t owe you anything.”

“I never said you did.”

Mason pushed away from the desk and clenched his fists. He’d been foolish to think he could convince her he needed to run this investigation. He could give her the information he had about the case and walk away. Except he knew Rafael, just like he’d known Michael. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—betray either of them. He’d lost Michael. He wasn’t going to lose Rafael.

“Listen.” Mason wasn’t finished fighting. “I know this kid. His older brother sent me these photos. His name is Rafael Cerda. He’s a straight-A student who’s trying his best to stay out of trouble in a neighborhood filled with drugs and gangs. His mom and his brother are the only family he has, and he’s scared of losing his brother. He came to me because he trusts me.”

She drummed her fingers against her desk. “What do you know about Eduardo?”

“He’s seventeen, no brushes with the law. An average student who has managed to stay out of trouble for the most part.”

“What else? He’s got to be a seller or at least a buyer for them to come after him this way.”

“Rafael doesn’t believe he’s involved.”

“And you believe that?”

“I believe that if Eduardo really is involved in selling, Rafael doesn’t know.”

“So we’ve got a drug-related ransom demand on a boy with no record, and a family with no clue of his involvement.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time an innocent victim ended up being held for ransom.”

“Or the first time a kid was working the streets and fooling his family at the same time.”

Innocent until proven guilty was supposed to be how it worked. Avery might be a good—even a great—cop, but her biases tended to run strong at times.

“I’m trying to be objective.” Avery leaned back in her chair. “What else do you know about the Cerda family?”

“Father died when Rafael was twelve from a drug overdose. His mother cleans laundry at the Peachtree Hotel six days a week to keep food on the table. Rafael delivers newspapers and does odd jobs for his neighbors to earn extra money. And as I said, his brother’s been pretty good to stay under the radar and out of trouble.”

“Until now. You seem to know a lot about this Rafael. Where do you know him from?”

“He’s part of a big brother program where I volunteer. He landed a full scholarship to Dogwood Academy a few years ago. Has dreams of college and becoming an engineer.”

“Dogwood Academy?” Avery’s chin tipped up and she caught his gaze. “That’s where Tess goes to school and my sister teaches.”

Mason nodded. He hadn’t missed the connection. Avery’s daughter was a student at the private school while her sister, Emily, taught history and coached girls’ volleyball. Funny how things tended to go full circle. He’d fallen for Emily the first time they met, while she was still in college. Completely opposite from her sister, Emily had broken family tradition, opting for a career in teaching rather than law enforcement.

But despite the attraction, it hadn’t taken him long to realize that she was everything he wasn’t. Born into a well-off southern family, she had more charm in her little finger than he could hope to have in a lifetime. Not that his long-dormant feelings for Emily mattered at the moment. His eyes went back to the screen still displaying Eduardo’s photo.

“What if Eduardo is selling?” Avery’s question broke into his thoughts.

“Worst-case scenario is that he’s working for some local drug lord and has an unpaid debt they’re insisting he pay up.” It was a scenario that even he couldn’t ignore. Atlanta was nowhere near the Mexican border, but its highway system had become the perfect route in linking Mexico to the rest of the East Coast. “Best-case scenario is that Eduardo turns out to be a normal, law-abiding seventeen-year-old kid who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. We rescue him, and you find out who’s behind your latest string of murders.”

Avery picked up a pen and tapped it against the table while he tried to read her expression. Irritated? Concerned? He wasn’t sure.

“What about his mom?” she asked. “What does she think?”

“I haven’t spoken to her, but Rafael said that if Eduardo is dealing, he’s been able to hide it from both of them.”

“Not too hard for a mom to miss something when working long hours six days a week.”

Mason caught the flicker of understanding in Avery’s eyes and felt his anger diminish slightly. Three years ago she’d lost her husband—a fellow officer—in a car accident. She knew firsthand what it was like to raise a child as a single mom.

“Where’s Rafael now?”

“His mother can’t afford any time off, so he drove her to work. I’m supposed to meet him at seven thirty. He’s counting on me to find his brother.”

“How’s Rafael going to react if we end up having to put his brother on trial for selling drugs?”

“I’ll help him deal with that when—and if—it happens.”

Avery tugged on the end of her ponytail that had the same reddish highlights as both her sister and daughter. “How much do the kidnappers want?”

Mason tried to swallow the lump in his throat. “Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

Her gasp was audible, and he understood her reaction. He’d had the same one. A quarter-of-a-million-dollar ransom from a mom who barely made minimum wage?

“I know what you’re thinking,” Mason said, “but these kid-nappers typically know where the money is and what their victims can afford to pay. There’s money or drugs somewhere in this scenario. Even if it isn’t Eduardo who’s behind it, the kidnapppers obviously believe he has access to it.”

“Who else knows about this?”

“No one. They told Rafael not to tell anyone, but with time running out, he didn’t know what else to do. You’re the only one I’ve told.”

“At least he did the right thing. How much time?”

Mason glanced at his watch. It was seven. “According to Rafael, we’re down to just under seven hours.”