

“Excellent pacing and surprising twists will keep readers guessing until the end.”

— *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* on *Collision of Lies*

NETWORK OF DECEIT

A night scene of a suburban street. In the foreground, a road is lit by streetlights, with a long, bright red light trail from a car's taillights. In the background, a two-story house with a lit window is visible. A lightning bolt strikes the sky above the house.

TOM THREADGILL

Praise for *Collision of Lies*

“Excellent pacing and surprising twists will keep readers guessing and engaged until the end. This is Threadgill’s most intricate, propulsive novel yet.”

Publishers Weekly

“Threadgill plunges a detective from the San Antonio Property Crimes Division into a deep-laid plot involving murder, kidnapping, and myriad other crimes above her pay grade.”

Kirkus Reviews

“I didn’t want to put this book down . . . *couldn’t* put it down. I absolutely adore Amara Alvarez and her relationships with her coworkers, friends, and her iguana! Now I want one. She was a heroine who made me laugh and one I could really relate to. I can think of a few words to describe this book: amazing, incredible, intriguing, mesmerizing, unputdownable. . . . I could go on, but I need to stop so I can go buy up the entire backlist of my new favorite author.”

Lynette Eason, award-winning, bestselling author of the Blue Justice Series

“This book is a journey, drawing its readers and characters onto a path that is both curious and intelligent.”

More Than a Review

“The plot flows at breathtaking speed as the clues become more bizarre.”

World Magazine

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ALSO BY TOM THREADGILL

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How long could a human being scream?

Three times through the video so far and Amara's appreciation for the woman's lung capacity grew with each viewing. No sound on the recording, but there was no mistaking the outburst. The wide eyes, gaping mouth, and panicked attempt to be anywhere else other than there. Not that the shrieking had any relevance whatsoever. The woman's reaction was entirely normal. People tended to scream when dead bodies appeared beside them.

On the monitor, an older teenage male, his chin against his chest and face hidden with a baseball cap, drifted on the water park's lazy river. The deeply tanned boy floated on a huge yellow inner tube with each hand, palms up, tucked under one of the black handles. His knees were propped on top, allowing his feet to dangle in the water. During the seven-and-a-half-minute video clip, a series of rapids and a few collisions with other riders jostled him enough that his hands and feet moved, making it difficult to determine if the teen was dead or passed out. Either way, the other park visitors were too absorbed in their own day to notice. That would change.

A short way ahead, the not-yet-screaming woman and her three kids—two boys and a younger girl, all under ten or eleven by the looks of them—linked their floats together in an ovalish circle. Each member of the family held the foot of their neighbor as they meandered through the twists and turns of the attraction. The distance between the teenager and family narrowed, and Amara leaned closer to the monitor as her heartbeat accelerated. This was

like one of those nature videos where a lioness stalks her victim. Creeping up on the unsuspecting wildebeest until . . . now.

The teen caught up to the family and his left leg bumped against the back of the young girl's head. She jerked, turned to see who'd nudged her, mouthed something to him, and pushed his tube away. Barely a dozen clock-ticks later, he collided with her again, sending the mother into mom mode.

She grabbed his inner tube, pulled it to herself, then heaved it away with all the strength she could muster. Doing so flipped the boy's head toward her and his ball cap fell into the water. His open, unmoving eyes were all it took. The woman screamed. And kept screaming. She paddled furiously for several seconds in a futile attempt to flee the corpse's gaze. The adrenaline kicked in and—still shrieking—she rolled off her inner tube and pushed her three children aside as the corpse continued its slow, rambling journey.

“You can turn it off,” Amara said.

Dr. Douglas Pritchard, the medical examiner for Bexar County, clicked his mouse and the recording paused. “I requested the footage from the Cannonball Water Park after doing the young man's autopsy. I trust it will be useful in your investigation, Detective Alvarez?”

Her investigation? Would Zachary Coleman be her first case? Not unless Dr. Pritchard could convince her there was something worth looking into. Truthfully, he wouldn't have to show much. Her current routine, while interesting and necessary, wasn't exactly stimulating.

After the Feds took control of the ongoing probe into the Cotulla aftermath, she'd been granted a transfer from the San Antonio PD's Property Crimes Division to Homicide. Her first month in the new position had consisted of reviewing old files, shadowing

other detectives as they worked, and keeping her mouth shut as much as possible.

When the LT had hollered her name an hour ago, she figured he had more files for her to review. She was wrong. Lieutenant Rico Segura was sitting behind his desk, an unlit cigar hanging from his mouth. Every morning the man pulled a new stogie from his drawer and planted it between his teeth. By the end of the day, most of the cigar would be gone, whether from absorption or chewing or swallowing or spitting or . . . She managed to restrain a shudder.

Get to the ME's office ASAP, he said. Find out what Pritchard's got. Suspicious death. See if it's worth investigating.

After a quick yessir, she'd hurried over and caught the doctor between autopsies and meetings. Douglas Pritchard worked with her on Cotulla, and at the time he'd been dating Sara Colby, a Texas Ranger who'd also been involved in the inquiry. The two were no longer together, a fact Amara knew from her increasingly infrequent conversations with the woman.

The ME cleared his throat. "Detective?"

"Sorry." She shifted in the red leather armchair. "Yes, the security video will be helpful if we move forward with an investigation. But there's nothing on there that even hints at a crime. When the tox screenings come back, the department may take another look if warranted."

He scanned his desktop. "How's Sara? Do you two speak often?"

"Um, last I heard she was doing well."

He shuffled through a stack of file folders. "So that's a no?"

"We talk on occasion. She's fine."

"Give her my best, would you?" He looked up and stroked his goatee. "Now that's an interesting saying, isn't it? My best. My best what? Intentions? Makes no sense. Wishes? I suppose that might work under the right circumstances, but I—"

“You have more evidence to support your suspicions regarding the death?”

He nodded. “Zachary Bryce Coleman, seventeen-year-old Caucasian male. I have his file ready to, um, it’s right, well . . .” He moved his hand over his desk twice, then pounced on a folder. “Here we go. The young man expired in rather peculiar circumstances.”

“Yeah, it was on the news too.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps. I’m afraid I don’t spend much time watching television.” He dragged his finger down a sheet of paper. “The death happened two days ago. Exceptionally hot, if you’ll recall. The decedent and a group of friends planned to escape the heat at the water park. Have you ever been there, Detective?”

“Uh, no. Not that I recall.”

He tilted his head. “Is that something you’d forget? Of course, if you visited before the age of three, it’s unlikely you’d remember, and recent studies regarding Freud’s childhood amnesia theory indicate that most events occurring before a child reaches seven or eight fade as—”

“No,” she said. “I’ve never been there. You were saying the victim and his friends wanted to spend the day at the water park?”

“Yes, along with thousands of others. He had a blood-alcohol content of point-zero-eight. The final toxicology report may show a variance from that number, but he definitely consumed alcohol. Our initial theory was the combination of excessive temperatures and alcohol consumption led to heatstroke. The autopsy, however, showed no signs of petechial hemorrhages or—”

“English, please.”

“There was no indication of bleeding in the membranes surrounding some of the body’s organs. No congestion in the lungs or swelling in the brain. None of the symptoms we’d typically iden-

tify in a heatstroke victim. And before you ask, alcohol poisoning would exhibit many of these same indications, as well as others which also were not detected during the autopsy.”

She planted her elbows on the chair’s armrests and inched forward. “How did he die, then?”

“We don’t know. It will be four to six weeks before the toxicology tests are completed, so as of now, the cause of death is undetermined.”

“You told Lieutenant Segura it was suspicious. Just because you don’t know how he died doesn’t mean it’s a potential homicide.”

His eyebrows scrunched together. “What in the world?” He leaned back in his chair, pulled off his left shoe, and removed a tea bag from it before tossing the thing in the trash.

Don’t ask. Don’t do it. No wonder Sara broke things off. “I was asking why you think this might be a homicide?”

He slid a large photograph toward her. “Take a look at this. That’s from the water park’s security cameras. First image of Coleman on that ride. I requested video of him from the time he entered the water until he was pulled out. This is all they had. Something about camera malfunctions, but they estimated he’d been on the attraction for somewhere around two minutes at that time, based on the distance between the last working camera and this one.”

The cropped photo focused on the teen, though numerous people were visible in the water around him.

Amara glanced at the doctor. “Is he alive or dead here?”

“Hard to tell, isn’t it?”

“No video of him getting in the water?”

“What you saw is everything I received, but my request was extremely limited in scope. Beyond that, you’d have to ask the park.”

She scooted back in her chair and crossed her legs. “I get why you think this could be suspicious. Trust me, I’d love to look into

this, but so far you haven't said anything that makes me believe it might be a homicide."

"I thought not." He pulled another photo from the folder and passed it over. "Tell me what you see."

She held the picture higher. "Bottoms of his feet? Nothing unusual as far as I can tell."

"No? Think about it."

Guessing games. What fun. "Dr. Pritchard, I'm not a medical expert. If there's something here that might—"

"Do you ever shower? Take a bath?"

How did Sara last so long with this guy? "Now and then."

He waved his hand in a circular motion for her to continue. "And your toes and fingers . . ."

She knocked her fist against her forehead. "They wrinkle. Pucker up. And Zachary Coleman's toes didn't."

"Precisely. Our central nervous system triggers an involuntary reaction when we interact with water. Our capillaries shrink, causing the skin to furrow. As to why this happens, there are several theories. My favorite is—"

"I'll cede the point," she said. "So why weren't his toes wrinkled?"

"It usually takes less than five minutes for the body to initiate the reaction to water. That didn't happen with Mr. Coleman because his nervous system ceased functioning before the response could begin."

Amara licked her lips. "You think he was already dead when he went in the water."

"No, Detective. I'm certain of it."

2

Amara kept her head down as she walked through the Homicide department. Her reception had been tepid at best. Starsky said not to worry about it. They treated all the new ones this way. Maybe. Sure seemed to be an edge to the looks from the other detectives, men and women alike. Unspoken, but not hidden, bitterness or resentment. Alvarez hadn't paid her dues. Got all the publicity and attagirls because of Cotulla. The chief had no choice. Had to give her what she wanted. Plenty of others waiting to move over to the department but, well, better luck next time. Never mind that she was on the verge of a transfer even before Cotulla.

Starsky said it was all in her head. That she was seeing things that weren't there. Overreacting. Yeah? Then why didn't she have a desk yet? The LT told her on three occasions that he'd find a permanent home for her soon, but his voice had a distinct "whenever you ask, I push it back a week" vibe to it. Every morning, she toted her belongings to any open place she could see and arranged her makeshift office. At first, she'd tried to share desks with detectives who were out, but quickly decided it'd be easier to settle into a spot no one wanted. Fewer not-so-subtle hints about choosing somewhere else to sit.

Her latest semi-regular work location was a folding card table, clean when she'd left for the ME's office but now covered with the remnants of pizza or nachos or pretzels or all of the above. She clenched her teeth and brushed the crumbs into the palm of her hand before realizing her garbage can was gone. Again.

After a quick glance behind to make sure no one was watching, she flicked her wrist toward an open area off to the side and sent the food bits scattering through the air like a sprinkler. Cleanliness may be next to godliness, but God didn't have someone constantly stealing his trash can.

"I saw that."

The familiar voice came from across the room. Amara closed her eyes and shook her head, then spun her chair around. "You didn't see anything."

Detective Jeremiah Peckham, though everyone she knew called him Starsky, shrugged before ambling over. "I know what I saw. You threw crumbs on the floor. That's how we get mice."

Amara crossed her arms and smiled. "Witnesses are notoriously unreliable and I'm living proof. Twice I've been chosen out of line-ups. Shortish Hispanic female. That's me."

"Well, so far no tall, thin, exceptionally good-looking redheaded males have committed a felony around San Antonio, so I've been spared lineup duty."

"Gingers don't commit crimes, huh?"

He grinned and nodded. "Nothing other than stealing the hearts of women."

She rolled her eyes. "Your CI is giving you bad information. And two dinners. That's all it was."

"Hey, don't trash my confidential informants. And it's three if you include this coming Friday."

"Don't count your chickens," she said. "You know the only reason I go out with you, right? So people will whisper and wonder what *she's* doing out with *him*."

"Don't sell yourself short, Alvarez. Short. See what I did there?"

"I'd rather see you bringing me a cup of coffee."

“No can do,” he said. “No favoritism at work. I wouldn’t bring anyone else coffee, so why should I—”

“Because last time I brought it to you. And make sure it’s fresh,” she said. “Make a new pot if you have to.”

He lowered his voice. “Back in a few.”

She plugged in her laptop and waited for the device to finish booting. Lieutenant Segura had given the okay to proceed with the investigation for now but said he might bump her up in the rotation if she didn’t discover any evidence soon. And no overtime without his approval. Her plan was to spend the rest of the afternoon online digging into the deceased’s life and the Cannonball Water Park. Tomorrow, she’d visit the scene of the death to see what she could learn.

Starsky returned with a steaming Styrofoam cup. “Here ya go,” he said. “Saw your name on the assignment board. Who’s Zachary Coleman?”

“A teenager found dead at a water park. Dr. Pritchard thinks it’s suspicious.”

He peeled the wrapper off a Twinkie and bit the snack in half. “Yeah? Saw that on the news. Good luck.”

“You don’t want to know the details?”

“Nah. Your case, your investigation. You know what to do. At some point, you might need a second set of eyes on things. If that happens, don’t be afraid to ask for help.”

A surge of heat flashed through her. “You don’t think I can do this?”

He pointed the half-Twinkie at her. “Easy there, champ. We all need help. What, well over a hundred murders every year? And all the cold cases on top of that? Not many of us fly solo. All I’m saying is it’s your case, but it’s ours too, if that makes any sense?”

She settled back into her chair. “You didn’t answer my question.”

He laughed and shoved the rest of the snack in his mouth. “Of course you can—” He coughed several times. “Sorry. Twinkie crumb got me. Killed by a snack cake. That’s the way I want to go. Not yet though. Anyway, yeah, I think you can do the job, and anyone who doesn’t, didn’t see your work on Cotulla. You don’t have to prove anything.”

She smiled. “You’re just saying that so I won’t back out of Friday night.”

He returned her grin. “Whatever it takes.”

“Starsky!” Lieutenant Segura’s booming voice echoed across the room.

Amara turned her face so the LT couldn’t see and whisper-singsonged, “Somebody’s in trouble.”

“What else is new?” He strode away. “Coming, sir.”

She turned her attention back to the laptop. Gone out twice, with another dinner coming up Friday. Dutch both times. And no idea where things stood. Friends, yes. No question they enjoyed spending time together. But they were going out, not dating. Weren’t they? Did he understand the difference? There was a distinction, right?

She rubbed her palm on her shoulder and searched online for Zachary Bryce Coleman. The only results pointed to the recent news story. Nothing helpful there. She deleted his middle name and searched again. No new links. She leaned back and tapped her finger on her bottom lip. Was Coleman not on social media? Seemed odd for a teenager, but maybe not. She’d erased her own accounts after the privacy headaches outweighed the usefulness. Of course, some of the sites only identified people by their usernames, so Coleman could be there and she wouldn’t know. She made a note to ask his friends, then did a search for the Cannonball Water Park.

Page after page of links appeared. In addition to the official website, there were untold blogs, pictures, and videos posted by visitors. Over several decades, the place had grown from a few slides and pools into a resort mecca. With over forty rides and attractions, it now covered an area approaching sixty acres. On any given day, thousands of people visited for a chance to cool off in the spring-fed waters. Each year, the Cannonball received multiple awards from vacation websites and magazines around the world for its value and state-of-the-art water rides.

The park's website focused on their family-friendly environment and their excellent safety record. The most recent news articles zeroed in on improvements to the facilities and employment opportunities. No ride-oriented fatalities had ever occurred at the Cannonball, though several civil suits regarding accidents had been settled out of court. As far as the state of Texas was concerned, the place had a clean history.

After an hour of uninformative surfing, she phoned the park and asked to speak to the head of security.

"This is Eduardo Sanchez. How may I help you?"

"Hi," Amara said. "I'm Detective Alvarez, SAPD Homicide." Felt weird, but good, saying that. "I wonder if I could stop by and speak to you?"

"Of course, Detective. You said you worked Homicide? May I inquire as to what this concerns? If it's one of our employees, HR might suit you better."

"Not one of your employees. At least I don't think he was. I'm looking into the death of Zachary Coleman."

A long pause followed. "My assumption was that Mr. Coleman died of heatstroke. The medical investigator who came here thought that would be the most likely cause. Is that not correct?"

"I can't comment on that, other than to say I'm looking into all

possibilities. Would you be available this afternoon to meet with me?”

“Could we make it tomorrow morning? My schedule is full for the rest of today. If that will be a problem, I can try to shuffle some things around.”

“Tomorrow morning will be fine,” she said. “Eight o’clock?”

“Perfect. Park at the main entrance and I’ll meet you there.”

She thanked him and glanced at the clock while shutting down her computer. If she left now, she could beat rush hour traffic and get in a good workout at the gym before heading home to Larry, her three-foot-long pet iguana. Over the past month of training, one consistent message echoed from every detective she worked with. At least the ones who were civil. Once she got in the rotation, they said, any concept of normal hours would disappear. When the opportunity for me-time presented itself, take it.

Running in this heat was out of the question, but a few rounds of Muay Thai, a combat sport distantly related to kickboxing, sounded good. The activity cleared her mind and boosted her confidence. She’d used the training on the job only once, when she’d been undercover and captured in Mexico during the Cotulla investigation, and could remember the adrenaline rush that came from using her own body as a weapon. She didn’t seek conflict. Didn’t shy from it either. If someone wanted to underestimate her because of her size, that was their problem.

She scooped up her belongings and headed for the car. Tomorrow, the investigation into Zachary Coleman’s death would begin in earnest. Should be done long before the tox reports came back in a month. Either she’d run out of leads, determine it wasn’t a homicide, or catch the killer. The last two options suited her.

And if she couldn’t resolve things, there was always the chance

the tox report would close it for her. Her only fear was leaving “undetermined” as the cause of death. The boy’s parents would never know. His friends would wonder. And her first case would remain in limbo forever.

“Undetermined” meant failure.