



JUSTIFIABLE MEANS

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

The lights from the squad cars were still flashing in the night, illuminating the modest apartment building in alternate shades of blue and black. Larry Millsaps pulled his unmarked Chevy to the curb and glanced at his partner.

“So much for having a night off.”

Tony Danks nodded bleakly as he scanned the crowd forming on the sidewalk. Officers were already questioning some of the neighbors, and other uniformed cops came and went through the building’s front door. “This hasn’t happened in—how long?”

Larry grabbed his windbreaker from the backseat and pulled it on over the 9 mm he had holstered under his arm. “Almost a year since the last one.”

They got out of the car and pushed through the crowd, not bothering to flash their badges since all of the cops in the small St. Clair Police Department knew the two detectives by sight. They made their way through the crowd into the building. “One a year is too many for me,” Larry said. He’d been plagued by the trauma on the young girl’s face the last time. There was a look that rape victims wore, a waiflike, haunted look that spoke of violation and soul-deep despair. This one probably would be no different, and he started up the stairs reluctantly, past the other tenants who were watching the open door of the apartment with fascination and dread, waiting for bits and pieces of the drama to be revealed. There were four cops inside the apartment, two with cameras and one with a camcorder, recording the crime scene just as they’d found it. Lamps were broken, tables overturned, glass shattered . . .

Larry spotted the victim then, sitting alone on a chair in a corner, cocooned in a blanket, her blonde hair wet and stringing in her face and around her shoulders, her pale blue eyes raw and swollen from crying. One of the cops handed him a clipboard with

her report on it, then turned his back to her and, in a quiet voice, said, “She showered before she called.”

“Figures,” Tony whispered.

Larry looked back at the young woman and felt that familiar, unwelcome stirring of frustration and compassion as she glanced hopefully up at him with big, blue, tearful eyes, as if he might offer her some comfort, some hope, some . . . something. Her showering would definitely make it tougher to get the evidence they needed, but Larry couldn’t say he blamed her. She had been defiled, desecrated, dehumanized, and he couldn’t imagine any victim of such abuse not wanting to wash the filth away.

“Is she hurt?” he asked.

The uniformed cop nodded. “He had a knife. She has a pretty deep cut on her leg. The ambulance should be here soon.”

Larry stepped over the broken glass, the lamp shades on their sides, and skirted around the overturned table until he stood in front of the woman. “Hi, I’m Detective Millsaps.” He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Tony was right behind him. “This is my partner, Detective Danks. Are you all right?”

She swallowed hard and whispered, “Yes.”

Stooping down to get eye level with her, Larry glanced down at the report the other officer had handed him. “Your name is Melissa Nelson? May I call you Melissa?”

“Yes,” she said again.

“Good,” he said in a don’t-spook-the-victim voice. “And you can call me Larry. He’s Tony.” He scanned the information the first cop to the scene had compiled, and saw that she was twenty-three years old. He looked into her face again. “Melissa, I know that you’ve already given your statement, but would you mind telling it one more time? Tony and I will be the ones trying to find the man who did this to you. We really need to hear it firsthand.”

A stark, determined look filled her reddened eyes. “Yes. I’ll tell it over and over until they catch him,” she said through clenched teeth. “I don’t care how many times I have to tell it.”

“Good. First, could you start with a description of him?”

“I can do better than that,” she said, smearing her tears away with a trembling hand. “I can give you his name.”

“You know him?” Tony asked, sitting down on an ottoman near her chair.

“Yes. I work with him. His name is Edward Soames, and he lives in some apartments on Fresco Street on the north side of town.”

Larry jotted down the street. “Have you given this information to anyone else?”

“Yes,” she said. “The first officer I talked to is calling it in.” A sob broke her voice, and she gave in to it, then tried to recover.

“He probably thought I wouldn’t tell anybody, that I’d be too ashamed. That I’d just sit here and deal with it.”

Tony took his notepad out of his coat pocket and clicked his pen. “Was this someone you were dating?”

She shot him a disgusted look. “Of course not. I was just sitting here watching television, and he knocked on the door. When I opened it, he pushed his way in. He grabbed me, and . . . I started fighting him with everything I had . . . but it didn’t stop him . . .”

“I understand he had a weapon?” Larry asked.

“Yes,” she said. “A knife. A switchblade, I think.” She opened her blanket, revealing the shorts and T-shirt she wore, and lifted the bloody towel she’d been pressing on her leg. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

Larry winced at the sight of the cut. “That’s deep. You’re going to need stitches. The ambulance should be here soon.”

“It just all happened so fast,” she went on. “And then he was gone . . . and . . . I didn’t know what to do. I was so disgusted, so repulsed . . . I didn’t think about the evidence. I just wanted to wash it all away . . . but it’s not going to go away . . .”

She was trembling, and Larry feared she was going into shock from loss of blood. He made her press the towel back over the wound. Outside, sirens sounded. He hoped it was the ambulance.

“He . . . he touched that table. His fingerprints are there. And they’re on the doorknob. And he had my blood on his shirt when he left . . . it was a . . . a T-shirt with some cartoon on it. And if he’s not home, if you need to identify him, there’s a picture of him in his office at work. We both work at Proffer Builders, over on Haynes Street. He has a recent picture of himself on his desk, catching a fish or something. You could use that to identify him.

My boss, Henry Proffer, could let you in. He’s in the book.”

Tony jotted rapidly as she spoke, and Larry was amazed at how easy it was to get information out of her. Victims of such trauma were usually confused, disoriented, and too upset to remember details.

“Has he ever threatened you before?”

“No,” she said. “Oh, he’s come on to me, but I just blew it off.

I didn’t know he was capable of this.”

They heard the paramedics running up the stairs. “Melissa, we’ll talk to you later. You go get that leg stitched up and let the doctor examine you.”

Larry started to stand up, but she grabbed his coat and looked up at him desperately. “You won’t just let this go, will you? You’re going to go pick him up, aren’t you?”

“Of course. Someone’s probably picking him up right now.”

The paramedics hustled in, but she kept clinging to Larry’s coat. “But what if he didn’t go straight home? He probably wouldn’t.

He would know that someone might be looking for him. You have to find him! He’s dangerous, and he’ll come after me again.”

“We won’t rest until we have him behind bars,” Larry assured her. “You have my promise. Now show them your leg. She needs stitches, guys, and she’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Let’s get you onto the stretcher,” one of the EMTs said, coaxing her out of her chair onto her good leg.

“But behind bars isn’t good enough!” she pled through gritted teeth, eyes desperate, in obvious pain as she stood. “You have to keep him there. You have to get a conviction.”

“We will.”

She glanced frantically around the apartment as they tried to put her on the stretcher. “My word won’t be good enough. You’ll have to have enough evidence. You can’t forget anything!”

Larry frowned. “Our police officers are trained, Melissa.

They know what to do.”

“But will they dust for fingerprints? Will they look for hair follicles, to prove he was here? They can’t just stop with my identification of him!”

The paramedics began to carry her out, even though she hadn't yet lain down. "Please don't let them miss anything," she said. "Find the officer I talked to first. I gave him more details—you need to know them."

"We will, Melissa," Larry said. "Just try to relax. We'll talk to you after the doctor examines you. And I'll let you know the minute we pick him up."

But the look on her face as she finally lay down told him that she would believe it when she saw it. Larry watched the paramedics carry her out. Slowly, he turned back to his partner.

Tony looked pensive, perplexed. "Well, she sure came out of her shell. Coaching us on police procedure? That's a first."

Larry shook his head. "Maybe we just underestimated her because she looks so fragile. She's obviously pretty sharp. And let's face it—botched investigations make headlines. You can't blame her for being careful."

Tony stared at the empty doorway for a moment longer.

"Yeah, but careful is one thing. There was something more than careful there. Doesn't feel right."

"You're not suggesting she's lying."

"No," Tony said thoughtfully. "Not exactly. I'm just saying that something doesn't ring true. It was all too easy."

"You could look in her face and tell she was raped," Larry said quietly.

"Unfortunately, facial expressions don't hold much water in court."

"Give me a break, Tony. Are we gonna make a broken, violated woman tap-dance and stand on her head to prove that what she described really happened? There's no reason anyone would want to put herself through all this if it didn't really happen."

"Put herself through what?" Tony asked.

"Through what? Are you kidding?" Larry asked. "You think this is fun for her? The interrogations of cops who don't believe her, lawyers who drag her through the mud—"

"Okay, okay," Tony cut in. "Maybe you're right. Obviously, there's plenty of evidence here."

"And there'll probably be a lot more when we find this guy."

"We'll see, buddy," Tony said. "I hope you're right."

Two hours later, after being photographed, stitched, examined, and interrogated by the doctors and social workers who claimed to want to help her, Melissa sat alone in the examining room. She had turned the lights off; now she watched frantically out the window into the parking lot for some sign of Edward Soames.

He's going to kill me, she thought miserably. If they don't lock him up, he'll kill me.

But they hadn't locked him up. So far, according to the social worker who'd made some phone calls for her, he hadn't even been picked up. He was still out there somewhere, driving around, no doubt looking for vulnerable women to attack.

She had begged the doctor not to release her—not until Soames was off the streets and in police custody. She was too terrified to stay in that apartment by herself, too plagued with memories—she would get no rest. If she could just stay here overnight, long enough for them to find him, then tomorrow she could face going home.

Reluctantly, the doctor had agreed, but told her that, before they admitted her, a police detective would need to talk to her some more. She didn't know why. She'd already given them more than enough information to find him and arrest him. She'd left nothing to chance. Instead of talking to her, they ought to be out looking for him.

She heard footsteps coming up the hall and looked toward the door. Her doctor ambled into the room, studying her chart.

“Okay, Melissa,” he said, still in the soft, cautious voice that made her want to scream. “We're going to move you to a room now. Are you sure you want to stay?”

“Will it have a guard?” she asked.

“I'm afraid not. But I'm sure you'll be safe here. They'll have this guy picked up in no time, and you won't have to worry.”

She sighed and looked out the window again. A car had just driven up, and a tall, slender man was getting out. Was that him?

No, she thought with relief. Not yet.

She stood up, wincing at the pain from the stitched gash on her thigh, and the doctor made her sit back down. “An orderly is bringing a wheelchair. You need to stay off that leg for a while. You don't want to break the stitches. Oh, and I've prescribed something for pain, if you need it.”

Her eyes strayed out the window again. “No, I don't want it.

I need to stay sharp, just in case.” The orderly wheeled the chair in, but she didn't take her eyes from the window. “Does that room have a window over the parking lot?”

The doctor glanced at the orderly. “I don’t know. Does it?”

The orderly thought for a moment. “Yeah, I think it does. I can change her to a room that doesn’t, if she wants—”

“No,” she cut in, getting up on her good leg and transferring her weight to the chair. “I want to be able to see the parking lot. I need to see who’s coming.”

The doctor shot another look at the orderly. She realized that they thought she was suffering from paranoid delusions, but she didn’t care.

The orderly wheeled her out, and the doctor stayed beside her. “Oh, Detective Millsaps called and said that he might not be able to come back by tonight. He said it might be morning before he could make it.”

“No,” she said quickly. “Tell him to come tonight. Please. I don’t care what time it is. I don’t think I’ll do much sleeping tonight.”

“We could give you something to help you.”

“No,” she said again. “I told you, I need to stay alert. Tell him to come no matter how late it is. Have they found Soames yet?”

“He didn’t say.”

Tears sprang to her eyes again, and she scanned the hallway as if he might jump out of one of the rooms at any moment. “He’s still out there. He’s too smart to get caught.”

“If he’s in St. Clair, they’ll find him.”

“And what if he’s not? What if he’s already left town?”

“Then you’re safe. You don’t have to worry.”

But his logic was lost on Melissa, and as they pushed her onto the elevator, she tried not to panic. This was just the beginning, after all; it was too soon to jump to conclusions. Larry what’s-his-name had seemed competent. Maybe he would catch him. Maybe Soames would finally be taken off the streets. Maybe women everywhere would be safe from his violence.

It had taken two hours to get the warrant they needed for Soames’s arrest, as well as a search warrant to check out his apartment, car, and place of business. Though the paperwork had taken longer than he wanted, Larry had been confident that the uniformed officers would find and apprehend Soames even before the warrant was in Larry’s hand. But Soames had managed to evade them so far.

As they walked rapidly between the police squad cars in the parking lot toward their own unmarked car, Tony said, “You have that look on your face, Larry.”

“What look?”

“The look that says you know exactly where we’re going to find Soames.”

“Wish I did, pal. I was thinking we should probably go by his office first and get that picture Melissa told us about. Then we could start with the bars in town. See what turns up.”

Tony climbed into the passenger seat and checked his notes as Larry started the car and pulled out into traffic. “Let’s see. We have the name of the business owner. We could ask him to meet us there to let us in.”

“That’s what I was thinking. Meanwhile, if Soames is stupid enough to go home, we have people there waiting for him.”

“Sure would help if we had a tag number.”

“Yeah. Kind of weird, don’t you think? A man that age not having a tag registered to him?”

“Maybe he uses somebody else’s car.”

“Or maybe he drives a stolen car.”

Tony grinned and nodded toward a pay phone coming up on their right. “Pull over. I’ll call her boss.”

Larry watched, chin propped on his palm, as Tony made the phone call. He tried to calm the rising tide of urgency he felt. But that woman sitting with wet hair stringing around her shoulders, trembling as she hugged her bloody knees to her chest, had gotten under his skin, and he wanted, badly, to give her some peace—right now.

Tony got back into the car. “He said he’d meet us there. Sounded helpful. He said he had the guy’s tag number in a file at the office, too.”

“Great. Let’s go.”

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