

BELIEVING HER

The delicate destiny of a man's life.

A Novel

David Colquitt

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MESSAGE SENT

Dani froze as the noticeably cooler air swept past her wet leg. The calmness and relaxation of a warm shower instantly turned to naked vulnerability and fear. Her fingers were immobilized, the tips still pressed against her soapy scalp where they were scrubbing just seconds ago. After a year of taking showers in her apartment, this sensation was alarmingly unfamiliar. She reasoned that cool air doesn't simply blow past a shower's closed curtain without cause. She tried to remember if she locked the apartment last night when she got in. She couldn't remember. Sometimes she forgot to.

A thud came from outside the bathroom, and her heart jumped as she took in a fast breath. Logic began to overtake fear, and she knew any action was better than no action while standing naked in the shower. She stepped under the water and wished then, for the first time, that she had kept her shorter cut instead of letting her dark hair grow out, now at shoulder length. After a rinse only adequate enough to stop the shampoo from running into her eyes, she turned the dial, and the spray reduced to a drip. She felt a chill and pressed her bent arms over her breasts, her closed hands tucked under her chin, and stood motionless, listening carefully. Her arms and legs were dotted with bumps despite the hot water. She slowly pushed the excess water from the front of her head toward the back and squeezed out the remains. Her mind raced with questions. Is somebody out there?

Did I leave the bathroom door open? Who has a key? What's in this bathroom that I can use to defend myself?

She knew that her slender physique, with no self-defense training—*damn that class she decided not to take*—would be no match for the menacing intruder her mind had conjured.

She weakly called out, “Hello? Is someone there?”

No response. She now stood on the bathmat with a towel hastily wrapped over her head, strands of dripping dark hair sticking to her face and neck, white plush bathrobe cinched tightly, eyes wide and mouth open. Staring at the partly open bathroom door, she couldn't remember if she left it that way. She stood motionless, listening, and only became aware of the whirring of the bathroom vent fan. She slowly moved her arm up and pinched the switch silently to the off position, faintly aware of the absurdity of her caution. Again, she stood motionless, listening. The towel that wrapped her hair was covering her ears, so she pushed the edges up to hear more clearly. She could hear her own heartbeat.

The shower head was still dripping the last of the water. Slowly she opened the bathroom door and crept out, still carefully listening. The hallway gave her some sense of protection with its walls while she considered her options. Fight or flight. She'd much rather fly! There was an opening on the right side of the hallway which led to the main living area of her small apartment. She glanced at the linen closet to her left, wondered what she kept in there that might be used to protect herself, and if there would be any sound if she opened that door. She chastised herself for the foolishness of thinking that whoever was in her apartment didn't already know exactly where

she was and was just waiting for her to appear. Her bedroom was directly ahead. In there was her cell phone. She took a small step, leaned only her head around the corner, one eye looking into the living room, and drew a fast breath as she discovered the door to her apartment was open, then quickly pulled her head back. Her muscles were taught, her body frozen with her back against the wall, and she suddenly became aware that she was up on her toes and momentarily wondered why that happens—it's not a very helpful stance in a dangerous situation! She mustered some courage, then inched her head around the corner again. The kitchen was off to the right, with knives and pans and other assorted self-defense items she could use if she had to. Still, she heard no unusual noises.

Then she saw it. A large knife, a chef's knife—was that one of her knives? she wondered, it looked like hers—standing straight up in the middle of her kitchen table, the point jammed into the wood. She took in a quick breath and made her decision. Her bedroom was the best option. For a moment, she looked into the bedroom to see any sign of movement. Seeing none, and not one to question herself after making a choice, she crouched and burst past the open doorway, surprised at the involuntary high faint squeal that came as she gulped in air. She quickly closed and locked the door.

With her knees up and feet tucked under her robe, she sat on the edge of her bed, adrenalin pumping, pepper spray she'd grabbed from her pocketbook in one hand, phone in the other, silently praying that nobody was in her closet or under the bed. She sent a text message. *Please come down now! Very afraid! Be careful!* She decided that wasn't enough information and sent

a second text. *I think someone is in my apartment!*

Ten minutes later, Dani's nerves had begun to relax.

"Wait! I didn't check inside the dishwasher!" Trey thought he was being funny, trying to lighten the mood and calm the tense nerves of his good friend, Dani. The attempt was almost out of context. But that was Trey. Social context was never easy for him. She gave him her 'That's not funny!' look, her head bowed just a bit, and her eyelids lowered slightly to glare at him.

"Sorry," he said contritely. He knew that look very well. She'd mastered it when they were just kids playing in the old neighborhood, and she used it often. It was a look that, with control, could carry with it affection. It had none this time.

Just 30 seconds after she sent him the text, Trey had rushed down from two floors above in the same apartment building and was at her still-opened door. There was no hesitation in his desire to help Dani, despite the very difficult conversation they had just days before. This was their first interaction since that talk.

Trey thoroughly searched her apartment. After they were both satisfied that nobody else was there, Dani began to feel like she was breathing again.

"Should we call the police?" he asked.

Dani looked over at the knife still standing upright embedded in the kitchen table. She didn't like the idea of having to answer questions both to the police and then, worse, to neighbors later on, who would naturally inquire about why there were police at her apartment. She thought about the fact that she

had no idea why someone would do this, what it might mean, and remembered reading about statistics of criminals repeating an offense at the same location.

“Yes, we should,” she answered. Then she retrieved her cell from the bedroom and dialed 911.

The dispatcher took the necessary details and assured Dani that a cruiser was on its way. After disconnecting, she informed Trey that he had to stand guard in the apartment while she got dressed. He did, and two minutes later, she came out of her bedroom, now in loose sweatpants, her oversized Red Sox sweatshirt, and fluffy socks. The process of deciding what to wear was absent-minded. The morning's ordeal left her feeling violated. She simply put on whatever felt appropriate. Protected.

She made an inventory check of her apartment, then sat on her couch. Trey sat in her recliner and pulled the lever to raise his legs. Dani observed him and gave him a friendly smile. A smile from Dani made Trey happy, and he returned a smile. A knock on the door startled them both. Each stood and walked to the door. Trey subconsciously assumed a protective stance next to Dani as she looked through the peephole. A policeman stood outside her door. She opened to greet him, and after he made his introduction, she let him in.

Officer Blackwell, with his pocket notebook in hand, asked all the routine questions. What time did the event occur? Where were you at the time? What were you doing? Did you see anyone? Was the door locked? Does anyone else have a key? Do you know who might have wanted to do this? Is there anyone who is currently angry with you?

Officer Blackwell, Dani, and Trey stood between the

kitchen and the living room. Trey was distracted by the array of gear attached to the officer's belt. He eyed them as the officer asked Dani his questions. The focal point was his polished gun holster which held his Glock pistol, but the impressive array included handcuffs, baton, pepper spray, police radio, tactical flashlight, and extra magazines for the gun. The officer pivoted some as he asked his questions, giving Trey visibility of the various gear.

"Did you see anyone unusual going in or out of the building?" the officer asked. Trey was looking at his impossibly shiny boots. "Sir?" he said, a bit louder.

Trey looked up and realized the question was directed at him. "Uh, no, I don't think so."

"You don't *think* you saw anyone unusual, or you didn't see anyone unusual?"

Trey looked at Dani who gave him a very slight nod. Then back at the officer to say with more confidence, "I didn't see anyone unusual."

The officer stared at Trey a moment longer, then flipped his notebook closed, looked at the knife upright in the table, and said, "Have either of you touched that? I'm gonna have to take it for evidence," as he nodded toward the knife. They both shook their heads. "I'm gonna go to my car to get an evidence bag. Wait here," he instructed as if there was a chance they might want to make a getaway.

Officer Blackwell returned with a clear plastic bag, blue latex gloves, and a small digital camera. He took photos of the knife in the table from three different angles, then two close-up shots. Wearing the white cotton gloves, he pivoted the knife

gently and removed it from the table then inserted it in the bag, sealing it thereafter.

“I’m going to speak with a few of your neighbors before I leave, just to find out if they happened to see anyone. Someone from the department will follow up with you if we need anything else. Until then, please keep this door secured and be careful who you let in.”

As soon as he left, Trey said, “I’ll be right back!” He wouldn’t tell her where he was going, but she knew that look. She wedged a chair against the knob to her door.

She went back to the couch, sat with her feet tucked underneath, and pulled the wool blanket that hung over the back of the couch to wrap around herself. She retraced the entire morning, wanting to find that missing piece that would help her understand why someone would do this. It didn’t have the appearance of a random act. Nothing seemed to be missing. And to stab one of her own knives in the table was clearly deliberate and must have some meaning. She thought about different people she knew, either casually or at work. She thought about relationships, recent and past. But nothing in the life she knew could warrant this violation. She felt like she was pawing in the darkness for something to hold onto, yet afraid of what that might be.

Another knock on her door. This time it was Trey visible through the peephole. She unwedged the chair and let him in. Trey walked in with his toolbox, an electric drill, and a new double-cylinder deadbolt he just got from Home Depot, only a half-mile away. She stopped herself from reminding him that their rental agreement prohibited them from adding or replacing

locks. The phrase 'It's better to ask forgiveness than permission' came to her mind. And given the morning she'd had, she welcomed any added measure of safety.

To say Trey was handy would be an understatement. Dani could not count the many ways he helped her with projects, big and small, over the many years of their friendship. They grew up together, having lived only a block apart from each other. Trey was a year ahead of Dani. At the age of seven, she convinced him to help her build a crude, misshapen birdhouse to protect the injured baby robin she discovered. The little box with no structural integrity soon became the coffin in which the lifeless little bird was buried the next day. But Trey's natural ability to understand how things were made and how they worked, quickly developed and consequently became a point of connection with Dani. For her Girl Scout activities, tree fort plans, a rabbit cage, school science projects, then eventually car repairs, and countless little fixes and improvements to the apartment in which she now sat and which may have just been violated by some stranger.

Their friendship had lasted all these years, Dani now twenty-six and Trey twenty-seven.

She stood near him, hands cupping her coffee, and watched him install the deadbolt on her door. He was in his element. She admired his abilities as he measured, marked, drilled, and installed, continuously cleaning up with each step.

They now sat in her living room, and she turned her gaze from the shiny new lock her friend just added to her life and looked at him, his 'Sorry' still hanging in the air. Trey was still looking at her. She knew he was waiting for some response to

his earlier apology. She gave him a little smile. He smiled back.

“Thank you for your help,” she said.

“Anytime.” A statement that had been tested and which she believed to be absolutely true. If it were at all in his ability, anytime, he would help her. She took a moment to observe him. He looked just like he usually did. His light brown hair seemed to be in between needing a cut and being stylishly longer, with waves and curls which seemed randomly situated over his ears and forehead. His nose was disproportionately small, making his eyes and mouth seem large. He was wearing khaki cargo pants and a light gray sweatshirt printed with SPAIN in block letters and the country flag. His father gave it to him as a gift one year after a business trip. Trey had no Spanish in his blood, but the shirt was standard in his rotation of apparel. Trey was a creature of habit and consistency.

She noticed his boots. Earlier, he was in bare feet. She recalled the sound of his feet slapping on the kitchen tile as he checked all the cabinets. She imagined that not having any shoes on was a result of his rush to respond to her distressful text. It gave her hope for restoration in their friendship, so recently fractured. He must have put the boots on when he went back to get his tools and before going to Home Depot.

She realized she’d been looking at him, so she lowered her eyes.

Sometimes Trey needed a prompt to recognize the pragmatic nature of a situation. She knew he had come to help her, but with the urgency and subsequent investigation and precautions now complete, she took in a deep breath and said, “Well, I better be getting on with my morning!”

“Right!” He stood, and his eyes momentarily jumped about the room as he tried to figure out what to say. Then, looking at her again, he said, “Well, you know where to find me if you need me!”

She smiled more warmly this time. “I do. And thank you so much again for helping me. I really don't know what I would've done without you.” That statement would carry with him throughout the rest of the day.

Dani poured another cup of coffee. Holding her mug, she sat on the edge of the coffee table in her living room, the hardness of which seemed more appropriate to her mood. She looked at her cell phone on the table next to her. She picked it up and dialed the number of the next person she had to talk to.