

*Night in Old San Antonio*

*La Villita Historic Art Village*

*April 22, 2010*

## Chapter

Drowning sorrows didn't come cheap. Hunter slapped his last two twenty dollar bill onto the ticket booth counter at the west end of Villita Street. He dug through his pockets and came up with another two dollars in change. The mingled aromas of flautas, tortillas, and fajitas cooking made his mouth water. He was starving. Or maybe he had the munchies. The food and drink ticket seller, decked out in a tiara of colorful paper flowers and ribbon on her head, accented with a dozen Fiesta medals pinned to her embroidered Mexican dress, smiled patiently.

He plunked the money on the booth's wooden counter. "That's all I got."

Hunter had to raise his voice over Bene Medina's conjunto band with its accordion sound. The NIOSA favorite drew crowds years after year. It was almost enough to right Hunter's world, even if he didn't understand most of the words. It almost made up for the fact that this was the last of the money he made from selling a painting. The only one he'd sold this month. It should've been saved for rent. A guy only lived once. He pulled his jean pocket inside out. "I'm flat busted broke."

"That'll buy you a few beers." She yelled as she handed over the tickets. "Sounds like you might have had a few already. Be safe."

Everybody's a critic. Hunter didn't need another mother or girlfriend. His had plenty to say about his extracurricular activities. "I will. Thanks."

She'd already moved on to the next guy in line. He wore an enormous sombrero covered with Fiesta medals, purple, yellow, and red paper flowers, and miniature beer mugs.

The sidewalk undulated. Hunter steadied himself on a nearby stone wall. *Get it together, dude.* He could grab a couple of fajita tacos or some flautas to tide him over until the rest of the gang showed up. Drinking beer and smoking a joint with Corey when Hunter hadn't eaten since the day before probably hadn't been his smartest move.

Still, the whole point of NIOSA was to enjoy the San Antonio Conservation's Society's effort to reflect the many ethnic influences in the melting pot that made San Antonio so special. And the money raised from the event went to historic preservation—a cause any artist worth his salt could get behind. Hunter had his heart set on a shrimp po-boy and crayfish etouffee in the French Quarter section. The Banjo Brown Band was doing a set. He could top that off with fried Oreos if he could remember where they were sold.

Definitely munchies.

Like a man on a mission, he pulled himself upright and waded into the crowd. The crowds at NIOSA were so massive and thick the organizers didn't allow baby strollers. No way they could be safely pushed through the foot traffic. A man in a Hawaiian shirt with a stack of plastic empties in one hand jostled Hunter. He careened into a woman chowing down on a steer-on-a-stick. She laughed and mouthed "*No worries.*" People came to NIOSA expecting this. Loving this. Thousands of their best friends.

Delaney better hurry up and get here or Hunter's tickets would be gone. She would be so mad when he told her what he'd done. She worshipped her older brother. But she didn't know the half of it. And Hunter couldn't be the one to tell her.

Eventually she would find out on her own, but by that time, the co-op would be gone, done in by Corey's weaknesses.

Where was Delaney anyway? Waiting for Corey and Ellie probably. It would be a long wait.

His phone vibrated in his back pocket. He dug it out and answered with his other hand against his ear to block out the brass oom-pah music coming from the Sauerkraut Bend German section.

Delaney.

Hunter sucked in air. *Pull yourself together, dude.* She would know he was stoned. She always did. "Babe, where are you? I'm headed to the French Quarter. I'm starving. I gotta get my shrimp po-boy fix . . . are you crying?"

Delaney never cried. Not even when her nana died. She was one tough cookie. She'd had to be. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I need you. The police are here. Hunter, he's dead. Corey's dead. Someone stabbed him to death. We have to tell Ellie."

At first only the words *I need you* registered. The woman Hunter had loved since he went with Corey to one of her softball games when she was a high school senior needed him. She needed her man.

And he had messed up by getting high.

The rest of her statement filtered through the alcohol and pot-induced haze. The planet spun faster and faster at a rate no human could survive. Puke rose in the back of Hunter's throat.

He ducked a couple smooching in the middle of the street, dodged a police officer hired by the conservation society to provide security, and made it to the steps of La Villita Church. *Don't pass out, don't pass out.* “No. No, that can't be right.”

“What do you mean it can't be?”

“We had an argument. Like we do. I'm sorry. I did what I had to do.”

“You got drunk with him, didn't you?” Her voice dropped to a hoarse, tearful whisper.

“You're high, aren't you? You had a fight.”

“It's okay, I can still drive.”

“Don't come near me. I'll call Jess. He'll help me tell Ellie.” Her voice gained strength.

“And you should turn yourself into the police.”

“Why? I . . .”

Dead space. She'd hung up on him. Hunter sank onto the church steps and let his head sink into his hands.

“Excuse me, sir.”

The police officer he'd dodged minutes before loomed over him.

“I'm fine.” Hunter struggled to his feet. “Just resting for a minute. I'm headed to the French Quarters—”

“Could I see some ID, sir, please.”

Hands shaking, Hunter managed to dig his wallet from his back pocket. He dropped it, scooped it back up, and pulled out his license. It fell to the ground.

“I’ll get it, sir. No worries.” The officer, a lean man with the stoic face willing to suffer fools in order to collect his time and half off-duty officer pay, picked up the license. He studied the ID and then Hunter’s face. “Sir, I’m going to ask you to take a walk with me.”

“Why? I promise to get a coffee with my beignet. I’ll call a taxi if you don’t think I should drive.”

“Sir, There’s an APB out on you. The information said you were here at NIOSA.” The officer didn’t return Hunter’s license. “You’re a person of interest in a homicide. If you’ll come with me, we’ll get you over to PD headquarters.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“All the better for you to do the interview and get this straightened out.” The officer gripped Hunter’s arm and helped him stand. “Don’t make me handcuff you.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not yet.”