

A SECRET

TO DIE FOR

LISA
HARRIS



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A sharp clatter jerked Grace Callahan out of the novel she was reading. She dropped the paperback onto the empty side of the queen-sized bed, then sat up, trying to determine if the noise had come from inside the house, or outside. More than likely it was her neighbor's dog again, knocking something over. Or maybe she'd simply imagined it.

She glanced at the book's ominous cover. Next time she should stick to reading something less . . . intense when trying to go to sleep.

Not that it would matter.

Nighttime had become the hardest, especially this time of year. Seconds stretched into minutes that eventually stretched into hours. But morning never came soon enough. And then when it did come, most of the time she was still exhausted. She'd tried every natural sleeping remedy she could find, yet most of the time the middle of the night found her wide awake and unable to sleep.

Like tonight.

She heard the noise again. This time she knew she hadn't

imagined it. She reached for the subcompact Glock she kept stashed in her nightstand drawer. It was one of the fallouts of living alone. She was now the one ultimately responsible for taking care of the broken garage door opener, filing taxes, and keeping the gutters cleared.

And making sure there wasn't an intruder in the house.

Her mind started through a mental checklist as she made her way across the hardwood floor. Living alone made security automatic. Before she'd gone to bed, she'd made sure the front and back doors were locked, set the alarm, and turned on the night-light in the living room . . .

Everything Kevin used to do.

Shoving aside the thought, she opened her bedroom door and stepped out onto the upstairs landing, then paused to listen. The old clock that had been her grandmother's ticked off seconds from the living room. The air conditioner pumped cool air out of the duct above her. Water dripped from the faucet in the guest bathroom.

Nothing sounded out of the ordinary.

She took a deep breath in an attempt to suppress the wave of anxiety. She of all people should know how to deal with stress, and yet she'd still let reminders of today's date and the grief it always brought completely engulf her.

She started down the stairs for a final reassurance that she was alone in the house, then froze as the white beam of a flashlight coming from the kitchen caught her attention.

Oh God, show me a way out of this. Please.

Her finger felt for the trigger of her Glock, but even with the weapons training her father had insisted on, the last thing she wanted was a confrontation with the intruder. She needed to get out of the house.

She slipped back into her room and silently locked the door behind her. She figured she had very little time before whoever was inside the house made their way upstairs. Which meant she had two choices. Lock herself in her closet until the police showed up, or escape.

Thanks to her father's insistence, she'd already played the scenario in her mind, making the decision easy. Grabbing her Bluetooth from the nightstand, she dialed 911, then pocketed her car keys and phone and headed for the window with the under-bed ladder her father had bought her. She'd assumed she'd use it in the case of a fire. Never running from an intruder.

Seconds later, the operator answered.

"911, what is your emergency?"

Grace slid open the window and felt a rush of air enter the room, warm even for November. "My name's Grace Callahan and someone's just broken into my house."

She gave the operator her address as she hooked the ladder onto the windowsill.

"Where is the intruder?"

"On the first floor the last time I saw him. I'm getting out my bedroom window on the second floor."

"Grace, I want you to stay on the phone with me. I have officers responding to the call now who should be at your location within three or four minutes."

Four minutes.

She didn't have four minutes. Which meant she was going to have to handle this on her own. She drew in a deep breath and tried to settle her nerves. All she had to do was get down the ladder and out of her yard, all while avoiding whoever had broken into her house.

You can do this, Grace.

The doorknob to her room rattled behind her. Adrenaline surged.

“He’s at my bedroom door now,” she whispered, trying not to panic. “I’ve got to get down the ladder now.”

She slipped the Glock into one of her pajama pants’ pockets, then started down the ladder. The humid night air filled her lungs.

“Grace . . . are you still there?”

“Yeah . . . I’m outside.” A small measure of relief filled her as she put both feet on the ground.

“I want you to go to a neighbor’s house, but stay on the line so I know where you are.”

She wiped sweaty hands on her pants and gripped her weapon. “Okay.”

Her neighbor to the left was an eighty-five-year-old woman who still lived alone. Across the street was a football coach who worked for the local school district. Definitely her best bet. She headed toward the backyard gate that led to her front yard.

A shadow moved to her right, just inside her peripheral vision. She swung around and aimed the gun at the armed intruder, who now stood outside the open back door of her house, a gun pointed back at her. Her mind raced for an explanation. Why had the intruder come after her when he now had an empty house to himself? She had no idea what he wanted, but she wasn’t going down without a fight.

“If I go down, you’re going down with me,” she said, keeping her weapon steady despite the panic rising inside her.

She stepped to the left, closer to the corner of the house and the gate, and tried to memorize his features that were

partially illuminated by the back-porch light. A large, burly man, well over six feet tall, dark hair, thin nose, and a tattoo on his right wrist.

“Where is the key?” he asked.

“What key?”

“Stephen Shaw gave you a key, and I want it.”

Stephen? Her client?

Her mind fought to process the man’s words. This was about Stephen and a key? She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Who are you?” she asked.

She’d thought whoever had broken into her house had been nothing more than a burglar, but clearly she was wrong. And Stephen’s paranoia . . . Had she been completely wrong about that as well? Stephen had never given her any real proof that anyone was after him. He had spoken only of shadows, and ghosts he couldn’t catch. She’d told him she believed he was simply suffering from paranoia and tried to help him deal with the symptoms. He’d never given her anything.

“I don’t have time for games,” he said. “Tell me where it is.”

She took another step to the left, forcing him to re-aim. “I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And I know you’re lying.”

She weighed her options. If he was determined to murder her, she’d already be dead. Which meant the information he believed she had was keeping her alive. But while he probably hadn’t expected her to be armed, even if she were to shoot him, there were no guarantees he wouldn’t shoot her back. Or that a bullet would stop him. Neither did she want to risk becoming a hostage. And she wasn’t sure if she had time to

wait for the authorities to arrive. She was less than fifteen feet from the gate that led to the front yard.

She needed to run.

Sirens wailed in the distance, distracting him for a split second and giving her the opportunity she needed. Praying the darkness would shield her, she sprinted around the corner toward the gate as a bullet pinged off the side of the house.

Her heart felt as if it were about to burst out of her chest. She glanced behind her as she slipped through the gate in her bare feet. He was behind her. She could hear him cursing as he followed her. She cut across her neighbor's front yard, trying to outrun him.

What she really needed was a place to hide.

Moving into the shadows, she dashed across another driveway, then through five or six more yards. The sirens were getting louder. All she needed to stay safe was another sixty seconds. She crossed another driveway and threw a quick look over her shoulder. He was now two houses behind her and slowing down.

She crouched behind a row of neatly manicured shrubs in front of one of her neighbors' houses, and tried to catch her breath. Someone called her name. She'd forgotten the 911 operator—her headset had fallen next to her foot when she'd hunkered down behind the last bush.

"Grace."

She picked the Bluetooth up off the ground and put it over her ear again. "I'm here," she whispered.

"I heard you talking to the intruder. Are you okay?"

The man had stopped in the middle of a driveway, trying to determine which way she'd gone.

"Where are you now?"

“About seven . . . maybe eight houses north of my house. He’s armed, but I found cover behind a row of bushes.”

“Do you know the man who’s after you?”

“No.”

“Okay. I want you to stay on the line with me. Officers are thirty seconds out.”

Thirty seconds.

Just stay hidden, Grace, and you’ll be fine.

“Can you give me a description of the suspect and his weapon?” the operator asked.

She glanced through the foliage, searching for him as she answered the woman’s question, but the figure had vanished into the darkness.