

DEADLY INTENTIONS

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For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but
of power and of love and of a sound mind.

2 Timothy 1:7

Prologue

Josh Solomon had barely slept in thirty-six hours. The call had come in while he'd been eating dinner with his wife. The body of a seventeen-year-old had been found in a dumpster on the north side of town by a store owner taking out the trash. It was days like this when he wondered why he hadn't chosen a different career. But a decade of investigating homicides had given him one thing. A feeling that he was responsible for—at least in part—cleaning up the scum littering the streets.

Still, he was exhausted.

He flipped off the car radio as the news came on, relishing the silence. The last thing he wanted to listen to right now was another depressing news cycle. Olivia wouldn't be home until tomorrow, which meant a night of playing the role of a bachelor. Not that he minded the time alone. As much as he enjoyed coming home to his wife, after the day he'd just had, he could use a couple hours to wind down watching some brainless movie and falling asleep on the couch.

Five minutes later, he pulled into the driveway of their two-story home, reached up to open the garage with the remote, then

paused. Two figures wearing dark hoodies ran out the side door of the house. His headlights caught a glimpse of the men as they hesitated, then took off running across the neighbor's lawn and down the street.

Without stopping to think about the consequences, Josh slammed the car into park, jumped out of the driver's seat, and took off after them.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and put in a call to dispatch. "This is Detective Josh Solomon. I need backup immediately at my residence. Two intruders just ran out of my house, heading north up Washington Street."

He gave the operator his full address, then glanced back at the house, now second-guessing his decision to give chase in the dark. There were always risks with following on his own, and he had no idea if the men were armed. Reacting without a plan—alone—was always dangerous, but this was *his* house. Over the past couple months, nine houses in his neighborhood had been burglarized. So far no one had been hurt in the process, but these guys needed to be stopped.

His internal debate ended. As long as he could maintain visual contact with them, he'd stay in pursuit. He'd ensure they knew he was behind them and let them tire out. If they tried to engage, he'd back off. He had no desire to escalate the situation, but whoever these guys were, he wanted them locked up.

The scenario in this neighborhood had become far too common, but this time they'd messed with the wrong homeowner, and he was going to make sure their string of luck had just run out. The streetlight exposed their position, and he quickened his pace. Unless he kept close, the odds of losing them were high. There were a dozen places they could hide, or even turn the tables and come after him.

Five seconds later, they vanished. Josh stopped at the street corner to catch his breath while he studied the surroundings for

movement. A dog barked in the distance, but there was no sign of the intruders.

He'd lost them.

His phone rang. "Quinton?"

"I just heard your call go through. What's going on?"

"Two intruders were coming out the side door of my house when I pulled up. I took off after them, but I've lost 'em."

"What about Olivia?"

"She left yesterday for a medical conference. Won't be back till tomorrow night."

"Don't try to find them on your own. Go back to the house. See what kind of damage they've done. I'm heading to your place now."

Josh started back to his house at a jog, adrenaline still pumping. Something had been nagging at him ever since he'd arrived home, but what? He stopped in the driveway and stared at the front of the house. Then it registered. The upstairs light was on. Which wasn't possible. Intruders wouldn't turn on lights. Olivia wasn't due home until tomorrow, and he knew he hadn't left it on.

He reached into his car, clicked the garage door opener on the visor, and felt his heart go still . . . Olivia's silver Prius was parked in the garage.

How was that possible?

He ran into the garage, then opened the door into the house. "Olivia?"

No answer.

He checked his phone as he rushed toward the kitchen. No messages. No missed calls.

But her coat had been thrown over one of the breakfast nook chairs where she always left it after work. Chinese takeout sat on the kitchen bar, still in the plastic bags. He breathed in the smell of garlic and seared meat and felt his stomach heave.

Why hadn't she told him she was coming home early?

“Olivia?”

The faint sound of sirens wailed in the background through the open garage. He hurried up the stairs while fear swept through him. If she’d been here when the house had been broken into . . . If she’d walked in on the burglars . . . And why wasn’t she answering?

This he knew—sometimes people died because they’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But not *his* family. Not *his* wife.

He stopped at the threshold of their room. Fully clothed, Olivia lay in the middle of the bed like she was sleeping, her hair spread out across the pillow. A red stain seeped from her abdomen.

He fumbled for his phone as he rushed to the bed. He needed to make sure they sent an ambulance. Needed to know if she was still alive.

“Josh . . .”

His heart stilled. “Olivia . . .”

He caught the pain in her eyes as she continued. “They . . . they must have already been in the house. I came upstairs to change . . .”

He grabbed a shirt from the edge of the bed, found the wound, then pressed the shirt against her side.

“Don’t try to talk. You’re going to be fine.”

With his free hand he punched in 911, praying he’d somehow be able to keep his word.

“I need an ambulance,” he said once the operator answered. “My wife . . . my wife’s been shot.”

“Sir, can you give me your name and address?”

Numbness spread through him as he gave her their address.

“A squad car and ambulance have been sent to your address. Where’s your wife right now?”

“I’m upstairs with her, in our bedroom. Third door on the . . . on the left.”

“Can you tell me where she was shot?”

"In her abdomen. There's blood everywhere."

"Were you there when it happened?"

"No. I . . . When I got home, two male intruders were exiting the house from a side door."

"I want you to stay on the line with me but keep pressure on the wound. The ambulance is about two minutes out."

Two minutes? He studied Olivia's pale face. She was the woman he'd pledged to be with through sickness and in health. To honor. To cleave to . . . To love . . . He dropped the phone, allowing him to pull her against him and nestle his face in her hair. He couldn't lose her. Not this way.

Olivia reached up and pulled on his arm, as she struggled to breathe, "I'm . . . sorry. So sorry. I came home early . . . because I needed to talk to you—"

"Don't talk. Just lie still. Everything's going to be okay."

Except he knew it wasn't. Blood already soaked through the shirt and onto the comforter she'd bought last month.

"I need you to know the . . . the truth about what happened. Why . . . why . . ."

Her increasing struggle to breathe only multiplied his panic as he struggled to understand what she was saying. "Shhh . . ." He pressed his fingers against her lips. "You're going to be fine. And we'll catch whoever did this."

Sirens wound down in front of the house, the vehicles' strobe lights reflecting against the mirror on the other side of the room. This was supposed to be someone else's nightmare. He investigated the crimes. Husbands murdering their wives, crimes of passion, jealousy. He was on the other side, looking on.

He wasn't supposed to be the victim.

A paramedic entered the room. "Sir . . . I need you to step back, out of the way, so we can help her."

Josh climbed off the bed and stumbled backward as they went to work. The walls were closing in on him. Why hadn't he caught

the men who'd broken in? There were no answers. Just questions about the nightmare he'd walked into.

"Josh." Someone grasped his arm and pulled him away from the bed. But he couldn't leave Olivia.

"Don't—"

He glanced up at his partner. Quinton Lambert was two hundred and thirty pounds, with dark skin and kinky hair that had started to gray over the past couple years. He forced Josh across the hardwood floors and out of the way.

"I know this is hard but let them work on her."

Josh stood in the corner of the room while they worked on her, his dress shirt now covered with blood. It was as if he were watching through someone else's eyes. Some late-night detective show. Because this couldn't be real—her pale face staring up at the ceiling, her body limp.

Quinton's hand rested on Josh's shoulder. "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know." When had his mind frozen? He couldn't think. Couldn't remember. He couldn't be a husband of the victim. He was a detective who found the answers. Who never panicked.

"Josh . . . the more information you give me, the more it will help us find them."

"I know."

"Take a deep breath and try to focus on my questions. Did you see the men who broke into your house?"

The words clicked something on in his brain. He knew Quinton. He was trying to distract him. Trying to get him to focus on something he could do rather than on what he was losing. Figuring out who had done this had to be better than this feeling of helplessness. He spent his days tracking down killers. Had learned to shut down his emotions in order to cope. He needed to do the same now.

"I saw them coming out of the house and tried to chase them down. Two men, early twenties. I only saw them for an instant in

the beam of my car's headlights when they turned and looked at me. One had a dark beard. The other . . . it was hard to tell. Red shoes. I remember he had red shoes."

He fought to remember the details. "I took off after them, heading north on Washington Street. After about five minutes I lost them in the darkness when they ducked into someone's yard."

"That's when I called you?"

Josh nodded. "I decided to go back to the house like you said. But Olivia . . . she wasn't supposed to get back until tomorrow." Confusion wormed its way through him again. "I don't know why she's here."

"She was here when they broke in?"

He nodded again. "I never saw a weapon, but they must have been armed."

"We'll have officers search the vicinity in case they dumped it."

Josh shifted his gaze back to Olivia. The paramedics were shouting back and forth. Trying to stop the bleeding. Trying to start her heart. The room began to spin again. Two men had broken into his home. Shot his wife. Something that never should have happened. It was his job to protect her, but now . . .

"Josh, I want you to keep focusing on me. You can help her the most right now by helping us figure out who did this."

The paramedics shouted out frantic directives as they continued working on her. He felt his own heart stop. Eleven years of marriage wasn't supposed to end this way. He'd always loved her. Always imagined the two of them getting old and retiring together. He couldn't hear Quinton anymore. Could barely breathe.

"I can't lose her, Quinton. Not this way." Josh started back toward the bed, but Quinton held him back.

"Let them do their job, Josh. They're going to take her to the hospital. If there's any chance at all for them to save her, they will."

He watched the paramedics transfer Olivia's limp body to a gurney. But he somehow knew it was too late. She wasn't coming

back. He felt his legs collapse as he leaned his back against the bedroom wall, then slowly slid to the ground. Suddenly everything was clear. This was his new reality. A widower before he turned forty. And Olivia . . .

Life as he knew it was over.

1

Caitlyn Lindsey hated the cold. That bone-chilling, icy feeling in the dead of winter that always felt impossible to shake. Cold that had finally compelled her to move from upstate New York to Houston, Texas. Then the weatherman had predicted an unseasonable arctic blast for the next thirty-six hours, with temperatures falling below freezing, forcing her to admit that today, she'd need the scarf and heavy coat she'd shed two years ago.

But facing the chill outside seemed nothing compared to the shock of having to attend Helen's funeral.

She swallowed the lump in her throat as she sat down on the padded seat in the church sanctuary and tried not to cry. Today's funeral had totally thrown her off-balance. She knew Helen. Knew she would never kill herself as the coroner had concluded. It just wasn't possible. For the past two years, nearly every day at eleven thirty, she and Helen had sat in the break room at MedTECH Labs, eating their lunches and chatting about things outside work, like Helen's three grandchildren and the trip she was planning to Vegas next summer. But the final verdict on Helen's untimely death had been strikingly different. She had been on anxiety meds, they'd

said, and had been depressed. An overdose of sleeping pills was the official conclusion.

But Caitlyn didn't believe it.

She stuffed down the wave of fear that was getting harder and harder to control as Helen's son started speaking. She didn't have any conclusive proof for any of her suspicions. Not yet. But three recent deaths of fellow employees at MedTECH wasn't something she could ignore. A year ago, Olivia Solomon had been shot in cold blood during a home invasion. Then three months ago, Dr. Abbott had died of a heart attack. At the time, both deaths had been tragic losses, and she'd never even considered they might be connected. Never considered they could be related to their work at MedTECH.

Helen had changed all of that.

Unable to force her mind to settle, she only half listened to Gavin Fletcher giving his mother's eulogy. Instead, she was taking the only approach she knew. Her scientific background required investigative skills that used observation, data, and evaluation from experiments to test predictions. That same approach was how she'd come to the conclusion that Helen's death—and that of the others—was no coincidence.

She leaned back in the cushioned pew and tried to push away the growing panic. Olivia's words from a year ago replayed through her mind like a broken record. Her friend had called her on her way home from a conference and asked to meet her for an early breakfast the next morning. She'd left a message on her voice mail.

Caitlyn . . . this is Olivia. You're probably at the gym, but I need some advice about some research going on at the lab and wondered if you could meet me for breakfast before work tomorrow. I'm concerned about some of the data from this new project I've been working on . . . Starlighter. We found some anomalies that I'm concerned about. Anyway . . . we can talk tomorrow if you're free.

At the time, she hadn't thought anything about her friend's

request. It wouldn't have been the first time they'd met for coffee to discuss a project, especially when their team moved into the development phase for a vaccine, before they could be approved for a clinical trial. But the next morning, instead of meeting Olivia, she'd gotten the call that her friend was dead. While her murder had left her and her colleagues reeling, there had been no reason to question the cause of Olivia's death. According to the official police report, two men had broken into a house and shot Olivia when she confronted them.

Now Helen had mentioned the same research project to her, Starlighter, and two days later, her friend was dead. Caitlyn had yet to confirm the project even existed, which didn't make sense. Looking back, she wished she would have pressed Helen to tell her what was bothering her, but when she pushed, Helen had gotten evasive and insisted on changing the subject.

On top of that troublesome case, when she'd spoken with Dr. Abbott's wife yesterday, she'd been left with more questions than answers. She'd spent the past few days searching the lab's computer system for a reference to the project, but hadn't found anything, which in itself was odd. And now, as discreet as she'd tried to be in her investigation, she was certain she'd gotten someone's attention.

The first strange thing she'd noticed had been a black van parked across the street from her house, then a couple days later, she noticed it following her to work. She'd also noticed a balding man loitering three mornings in a row across from the coffee shop where she frequented. Not knowing what else to do, she'd locked down all her social media settings to private, changed the locks on her house, and started asking for a security escort to her car at night after work. She also started varying her normal routine, leaving for work at different times and taking lunch at her desk where she felt safer. Maybe she was simply being paranoid, but if someone was watching her, she wanted to throw them off. Still,

there was only so much she could do to protect herself if her suspicions were true. And she knew that, like Helen, Dr. Abbott, and Olivia, if they wanted to get to her, they would.

Whoever *they* were.

Someone took Gavin's place in the front of the church and began reading a favorite poem of Helen's, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't concentrate. There was, of course, a chance that she was completely wrong in her theories. Helen *had* been depressed. She had confessed that herself. She'd said her son had been working too much, and her daughter-in-law was talking divorce and planning to move back east with Helen's grandchildren. With no other family, and her husband having passed away a few years ago, Helen was afraid of being alone. She'd told Caitlyn she couldn't imagine life without her grandchildren.

But had she really been that afraid of living?

Caitlyn couldn't believe that.

Fifteen minutes later, the minister dismissed the guests and she started making her way toward the front of the church to give her condolences to the family. She'd met Helen's son and daughter-in-law, along with their three boys, at a Christmas party last year, and couldn't imagine what they had to be going through right now. No matter how Helen had died, the reality was that she was gone.

Her son was in an intense conversation with someone, so Caitlyn turned her focus to Helen's daughter-in-law, who was standing a couple feet from him, looking lost.

"Anna . . ." Caitlyn reached out to squeeze the woman's hand. Anna's face was pale, emphasized by her stark black dress. "I'm so sorry about Helen."

"You worked with my mother-in-law, right?"

"Yes. I'm Caitlyn Lindsey."

"Of course." Anna fiddled with the metal strap of her purse. "I remember meeting you. We appreciate your coming. She talked about you a lot."

“How are you doing?” Caitlyn asked. “Like you, I’m having a hard time dealing with her death.”

And the fact that she’d killed herself.

“I’m not sure any of this has sunk in, to be honest,” Anna said. “Or how Gavin is going to deal with this.”

“Do you really believe she committed suicide?” Caitlyn felt a burst of guilt surface as the words slipped out of her mouth before she had a chance to filter them. But she needed to ask the question.

Anna’s brow furrowed. “I . . . I’m not sure what you mean—”

“I’m sorry.” As much as she needed answers, she’d just pushed too much. “I’m just having a hard time believing the coroner’s conclusion, but I shouldn’t be talking about this. Not now.”

Anna let out a soft sigh. “I admit I’ve thought the same thing. It was just so . . . unexpected. But everything the authorities uncovered was true. She’d been depressed ever since her husband died. I tried to be there for her, but obviously I didn’t do enough.”

Caitlyn shook her head. “I never meant to imply that you were to blame, Anna.”

“I know, I just . . .” The woman wiped away a stray tear, then pressed her lips together. “I’m sorry. Will you excuse me. I need to go to the restroom.”

Anna vanished out the side door, leaving Caitlyn standing alone in the small crowd of guests. She walked back down the center aisle of the church and into the lobby, the guilt still pulsing through her. She’d never meant to imply to Anna that she or her husband hadn’t done enough, but now she’d managed to upset the woman. And all she wanted was answers.

“Caitlyn?”

She turned around at the sound of her supervisor’s voice, surprised to see him. “Dr. Kaiser. I didn’t think you’d made it. I didn’t see you come in earlier.”

Mike Kaiser was wearing a pin-striped suit from a decade ago,

along with one of his signature bow ties. She'd been trying to speak to him for the past few days but had been told he was going to be out of the office for the week.

"Helen's death is horrible, isn't it?" he said, shoving his hands inside his pockets. "Strange how you can work with someone for so long and miss something like this. You were close to Helen. How are you?"

"She was a good friend," she said, surprised at his unexpected concern. "To be honest, I don't know how I missed the warning signs."

"I suppose you never really know a person, do you?"

Caitlyn shook her head. Except she had known her. Or at least she thought she had.

"I'm sorry, but I have a meeting to get to." The older man started toward the front door.

"Dr. Kaiser, wait . . ." Caitlyn caught up with him. "I was hoping to speak to you this week about Helen. I wanted to ask you about a side project she was working on. A research project called Starlighter."

Dr. Kaiser tugged on the end of his bow tie. "Starlighter?"

She tried to read his reaction. Surprise? Wariness? Or maybe she was just imagining things. "Helen mentioned the project before she died. She seemed . . . upset. Worried about something that was going on."

"I'd have to check into it, but there are usually a few side research projects that I'm not involved in. Projects employees work on before they come to me wanting to move forward. Have you asked anyone else about it?"

"I talked to Susanne, Helen's immediate boss—"

"And her response?"

"She hadn't heard about it either."

Dr. Kaiser's frown deepened. "Just be careful who you talk to about this. I hardly think Helen's death had anything to do with

a project from work, and I'd hate to have unsubstantiated rumors circulating."

"Of course not." There was something in the tone of his voice she didn't like. Surely he wasn't threatening her. "You know, forget it. I'm sure it's nothing. Helen just . . . she seemed upset, and I suppose, like all of us, I'm just looking for answers."

She pulled her leather gloves out of her coat pocket and headed out the door behind him. No matter how crazy it sounded, she was still convinced there was a connection between the three deaths and the lab.

The wind whipped around her, sending a shiver down her spine. She glanced out into the parking lot, looking for signs of the black van she'd noticed following her but didn't see it.

Maybe she was losing it.

Or maybe she was going to be next.

Shaking off the morbid thought, she hurried toward the car, her heels clicking against the sidewalk. A minute later, her gloved fingers gripped the steering wheel as she headed home. Thanks to the impending ice storm, schools would probably shut down tomorrow—something she'd been told happened whenever the temperatures started to dip toward freezing. It took an arctic blizzard for schools to close in Albany. She flipped on the turn signal and eased into the left lane, watching the flow of traffic surrounding her. All she wanted was to get home before the brunt of the storm blew in. At least for now, the roads were still dry, just heavy with the evening rush hour.

A truck changed lanes in front of her, forcing her to slam on her brakes. Her seat belt caught and jerked her against the seat. A breath of air shot out of her lungs as the car behind her narrowly missed rear-ending her. Her hands shook, her pulse racing at the near accident.

Caitlyn eased off the gas and let another car pass that was going at least ten miles over the speed limit. Sleet started splashing against

her windshield. Beating an impending storm shouldn't be an excuse to speed. She blew out another deep breath, trying to stamp down the growing anxiety that had settled in her chest.

Ten minutes later, she pulled off the highway and headed south. It was almost dark now, and the wind was picking up steam, but at least the traffic had finally thinned. Another twenty minutes and she'd be home. She'd pull out a microwave dinner from the freezer and go over all her personal notes as well as the police records she'd obtained regarding Olivia's murder. There had to be something she missed. Something to prove there was nothing to worry about. If only she could convince herself that was true.

A vehicle bridged the gap behind her when the road went down to two lanes as she headed toward her subdivision. The dark van put on his blinker and started to pass her. A second later, it rammed into the side of her car. There was no time to compensate for the collision. She lost control of her vehicle as it headed off the slick curve and rolled down the embankment into a ditch.