

THE NIKKI BOYD FILES, #2

# *MISSING*

A NOVEL



LISA HARRIS

  
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Lisa Harris, *Missing*  
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# 1

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**8:25 a.m., Thursday**

**Nashville suburb**

Nikki Boyd slid out of her white Mini Cooper as two bagged bodies were being wheeled from the one-story house nestled in one of Nashville's nicer suburbs. Her stomach clenched. Even after eight years on the force, the emotional challenges of the job had yet to make her completely calloused. It was impossible not to personalize some of what she saw. The cases she couldn't solve. The brokenness she couldn't fix.

But neither could she let her cases become personal.

She started down the walk where half a dozen police cars and the local medical examiner had parked in front of the taped-off crime scene, allowing both uniformed and plain-clothed officers to take over the sleepy, tree-lined street. One of her teammates, Jack Spencer, stood waiting for her on the curb dressed in one of his suit jackets and white dress shirt paired with a typical blue-and-orange paisley tie.

“Morning,” she said, holding up a takeaway box from her parents’ barbeque restaurant. “I was having breakfast with my mom and Jamie when the call came in. Thought you might like a couple of my mom’s homemade cinnamon rolls to celebrate your first day back to work.”

Five weeks ago, he’d gotten shot in the middle of a hostage situation that had almost gotten both of them killed.

“You can’t imagine how happy I am to be back in the field,” Jack said. “Though next time, I’d appreciate it if you’d remind me to duck when someone starts shooting at me.” He laughed, then took the offered takeaway box and dropped it into the backseat of his car. He slammed the door shut. “I love your mom’s cinnamon rolls.”

“I know.”

“How’s that little niece of yours?” he asked.

Nikki smiled at the question. “Five weeks old tomorrow and a perfect little angel.”

She started for the house with him, then stopped, noticing the red marks around his wrist and the fact that his face looked a bit . . . chalky. She pulled up the sleeve of his jacket a couple inches, revealing a line of ugly splotches. “What in the world happened to you?”

He frowned, then moved his arm away in order to pull down the jacket sleeve. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? Are you kidding me?” she asked. “That looks horrible.”

“I was in the middle of a session with my allergist when we got the call to come in.”

Nikki pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. It hadn’t taken long for her to discover that not only was Jack a magnet to anything that stung, bit, or floated in the air, he was also a bit of a hypochondriac.

“It’s not funny,” he said, heading toward the crime scene.

“I didn’t say it was funny. I’m just curious about why you got retested. I thought you went through that a few months ago.”

“The previous tests were . . . inconclusive.”

Nikki matched his stride as they walked down the sidewalk toward the house, waiting for him to elaborate. When he didn’t, she decided to change the subject. “Any clue about why we’re getting involved in a double homicide?”

Homicide detectives handled homicide cases. The Missing Persons Special Task Force typically did not.

“You know as much as I do at this point,” he said as his phone went off. He pulled it out of his pocket. Checked the caller ID, then put it back in his pocket without answering.

“What about Gwen?” she asked.

“Boss asked her to go to the precinct. We’ll meet her there when we’re done here.” Jack flashed his badge at one of the officers. “We’re here to see Sergeant Dillard.”

The officer nodded. “He’s expecting you. He’s there at the front door talking with the ME.”

Jack nodded. “Thanks.”

Sergeant Dillard stepped away from the medical examiner as they walked up the sidewalk. The older man stood a couple inches shorter than Jack’s six foot two, with a slight pudg around the middle.

He shot them both a friendly smile before shaking their hands. “You two are with the missing persons task force?”

“Yes. We were told to report to you, but . . .” Nikki caught the flashing lights of the vehicle as the ME finished loading the bodies into the back of the van. “I’m still not sure why we’re here.”

“I opted to call your team in because I’ve got two dead bodies *and* two missing persons. This house belongs to Mac and Lucy Hudson, but those two men in body bags aren’t the home owners.”

Jack’s brows furrowed. “Then who are they?”

“Haven’t been able to ID the bodies yet, so at this point, your guess is as good as mine. We’ve been here over two hours processing the scene, and my team’s still trying to come up with a timeline of what happened. If you want to come inside with me, you can see for yourselves.”

Nikki slipped on a pair of latex gloves and booties, then stepped into the ransacked living room behind Jack. She sucked in her breath at the scene surrounding her. The scent of death permeated the space. Dozens of yellow markers had been set up in the aftermath of whatever had happened in the house. Bullet fragments, shell casings, and fluid samples were being recorded by CSU. Blood pooled on the hardwood flooring and seeped onto a rug in the center of the room. A couple of slugs had hit the far wall and splattered blood against its creamy beige finish.

A shiver shot through Nikki. Things like this weren’t supposed to happen on a quiet street in the suburbs.

But they did.

“As you might have guessed,” the sergeant said, “both men presumably died from gunshot wounds.”

Nikki scanned the rest of the room. It had been completely trashed. “Do you have any idea when the shootings took place?”

“Rigor mortis was completely set in on the two bodies we just took out,” the sergeant said. “The ME said we’re probably looking at some time yesterday evening, though we’ll have to wait to hear back from him after the autopsies.”

“Yesterday?” Nikki glanced at Jack and then back at the sergeant. “At least half a dozen shots are fired in a sleepy suburb and the authorities are just showing up now? You can’t tell me no one heard a disturbance.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Our initial findings show there were at least three weapons involved, including that of the home owner, Mac Hudson.”

“So Mr. Hudson was defending himself?” Jack said.

“That’s my best guess. According to the records we pulled, he owned two handguns, and one of the neighbors said he spends a lot of his free time down at a local shooting range.”

“So what are you thinking?” Jack asked. “The home owner shoots the intruders, killing them, and then what? Panics and runs?”

“That’s one of the theories we’re looking at,” the sergeant said. “But here’s why we brought you in. A call came through to 911 last night, and we’ve finally been able to identify the caller as Mac Hudson.”

“Why did IDing the call take so long?” Nikki asked.

“It came through on a prepaid cell phone,” the sergeant said. “He must have been indoors, since the operator wasn’t able to get a location.”

He pulled out his smartphone and played the file.

911. What is your emergency?

*I need help. They’re going to kill me.*

What is your location, sir? . . . Sir, I need you to tell me your location so I can send someone to help you.

*My wife . . . Lucy . . . Please . . . you have to help her . . .*

His voice sounded panicked. Someone scuffled in the background. Then nothing.

“So the wife was kidnapped?” Nikki asked.

“Implying there was a third intruder,” Jack added.

“Agreed, but this is all we’ve got,” the sergeant said. “That and the fact he was using a prepaid cell instead of his regular phone when he called 911, which is also odd.”

Nikki looked again at the mess around them. “Is the rest of the house trashed like the living room?”

Dillard nodded. “Most of it. Yes.”

“A typical burglar uses a search pattern—master bedroom, bathroom, living room—a quick sweep for electronics and valuables,” Jack said. “No more than a minute to break in, and out in under ten. But in this case, the entire place is trashed, and they certainly didn’t try to cover their tracks.”

“Because they were looking for something specific,” Nikki said.

She worked through the limited information the sergeant had just given them. What had been worth searching for that had ended up costing the two men their lives?

“But something still seems off,” she continued. “Going with the theory that the home owner killed a couple intruders and ran, my question is, why run? If Mr. Hudson owned two guns, legally, he should have known that when facing imminent danger of death, he’s allowed to use deadly force. If this was a burglary, he had every right to defend his property.”

“And if he did run, where is he now?” Jack asked. “And what did he mean, ‘You have to help her’?”

“Those are the questions I’m hoping the two of you will help us answer,” Sergeant Dillard said.

“What do you know about the Hudsons?” Nikki asked.

“I’ve got officers canvassing the neighborhood now. From the limited information we’ve been able to gather so far, we know a couple things. Lucy’s boss told us she didn’t show up for work this morning, which apparently isn’t like her. Same is true for her husband. He never showed up at work today.”

“What else do you know about them?” Nikki asked. With every missing person case, time was of the essence. They needed to get through the basic facts as quickly as possible.

The sergeant flipped open his notebook. “The profile I have so far is sketchy. No children. No family in the area. They were friendly to their neighbors, though kept to themselves. Accord-



ing to the next-door neighbor, Mac Hudson is a research scientist who works for Byrne Laboratories. Lucy's a kindergarten teacher who works a couple miles down the road where she's been teaching the past five or six years."

"And beyond this 911 call, no one heard anything?" Nikki asked.

"At least two of the neighbors are retired and on vacation. The weather's been pretty warm the past few days, which means people have their windows shut and their air conditioners on."

Nikki picked up an eight-by-ten framed photo of the couple on their wedding day. They looked happy. Content. Lucy smiled up at the camera beside her husband, a radiant bride with her ebony skin, long, straight hair, and a stunning white dress.

Nikki set the photo back down and glanced around the living room. The neutral-colored throw pillows on the gray suede couch had been ripped open. Accent pieces from the coffee table had been knocked to the floor, and an embroidered wall hanging that said Happily Ever After had fallen to the ground, its glass cover shattered.

Something had gone terribly wrong in their fairy-tale world.

"What about their cars?" Jack asked.

"Mac's car is still in the garage. Lucy's is gone."

"And who initially made the 911 call this morning?" Nikki asked.

"A neighbor found their two dogs wandering around her yard and realized no one was home. She went into the backyard, planning to lock them up in the house with the spare key the Hudsons had given her, and discovered the dead bodies inside."

"I'd like to see the rest of the house," Nikki said. "Then we can talk to the neighbor."

They started in the back of the house in the master bedroom. Once again, the room had been ransacked, but makeup, toothbrushes, and a contact lens case were still sitting on the

bathroom sink. If either of them had run, they hadn't taken the time to grab anything personal.

The second bedroom had been set up as an office and looked even more disheveled than the master bedroom. Files were scattered across the floor alongside books and reference materials. A broken laptop lay on top of the pile.

"The last room is an unfinished nursery," the sergeant said as they moved on. "Doesn't look like it was touched."

The room was empty except for a pile of baby clothes, a bassinet covered with white lace, and a few baby blankets.

"Is Lucy pregnant?" Nikki asked.

"If she is, no one has mentioned it," the sergeant said. "Our crime scene unit will finish going through the house, then we'll pass on whatever we find."

"Great," Nikki said. "What's the name of the neighbor who called 911?"

The sergeant glanced at his notepad. "Colleen Jeffers. She lives in the house next door. She's pretty shaken—she was the one who discovered the bodies. According to her, she and Mrs. Hudson are good friends. Last time I saw her, she was standing on her front porch."

"Sergeant Dillard?" Someone from the other room called the officer.

"I need to go," he said. "We'll keep you in the loop."

Jack glanced at his phone as they headed for the front door, then shoved it into his back pocket.

"If you need to take a call . . .," Nikki said.

"It's nothing."

"Am I missing something here?" Nikki stopped beside him on the porch, pulled off her gloves and booties, and handed them to one of the officers. "Your phone's been going off every five minutes."

"It's nobody," he said.

“You met someone?” she asked.

Jack frowned. “I didn’t say anything about meeting someone.”

“You didn’t have to. I can see it in your eyes.” Nikki grinned at him as they headed for the neighbor’s house. At nine o’clock, the temperature was already rising. It was going to be another hot, humid day.

“Fine. I went to see a different allergist a couple of weeks ago,” Jack said, matching her pace. “We hit it off and have gone out a couple times. End of story.”

“And the real reason you went to be retested. Hmm . . .” She glanced at his profile. “Though I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“I don’t know yet. She’s beautiful. Stunning, actually. But she might be a bit needy. She won’t stop calling me.” Jack tugged on the end of his tie. “Back to our case, what do you think?”

“You’re changing the subject,” Nikki said.

“You bet I am.”

Nikki’s phone rang. Gwen was on the line. She answered the call and put it on speakerphone.

“Carter caught me up on what’s going on from this end. I’ve been trying to trace the Hudsons’ phones and finally got a hit on the husband’s,” Gwen said.

“Where is it?” Jack asked.

“At a marina about fifteen minutes from where you are. The Royal Harbor Marina. I’m sending you the address now.”

“That’s okay,” Nikki said. “I know the place.”

Seventeen minutes later, Jack pulled into the marina parking lot while Nikki got Gwen back on the phone.

“Tell me what we’re looking for, Gwen. There are hundreds of boats, a restaurant—”

“Give me a second . . . Take the left pier and head toward the end of the dock. I’ll get you as close as I can.”

Nikki hurried in the direction Gwen gave them, with Jack right behind her. The full-service marina would be crowded

and noisy on the weekend, especially in the summer, but it was the middle of the week and fairly quiet. Dozens of boats filled the slips, primarily small sailboats and a few larger yachts. She stopped and told Gwen where they were.

“Another fifty feet or so,” Gwen said. “End of the pier.”

Nikki continued down the pier, then stopped in front of a forty-foot boat. “Wait a minute. Are you sure? This can’t be the boat.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asked. “You recognize it?”

“Yeah.” Nikki felt an odd sense of dread sweep over her. “It’s the *Isabella*.”

“That’s got to be it,” Gwen said. “Looks like it’s registered to . . . Tyler Grant.”

Nikki’s mind whirled with confusion. “Yes.”

Jack’s initial look of surprise turned to one of concern.

“Tyler’s been planning to sell the boat,” Nikki said, “but as far as I know, he’s not even been back since Katie died. We’re here now. I’ll call you back in a minute.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed in the damp, sweet smell of the lake. Tyler had inherited the boat from his father. Before Katie had died, she and Tyler spent every free day they could out on the water, often inviting Nikki to come with them. Cutting ties with someone you cared about, even though they were gone, wasn’t easy. Which was why selling the boat was another piece of closure Tyler had yet to conquer.

The three of them—Tyler, Katie, and their son, Liam—had gone sailing last spring. Everything had seemed perfect. Tyler was home from the Middle East and promised Katie he wasn’t going on another tour. They were awaiting their second child, and Liam was over the moon with the news of a baby sibling. They hadn’t decided on a name yet. At three months along in the pregnancy, there was plenty of time to choose one.

Or so they’d thought.

Katie had been feeling tired that week. Tired of feeling nauseated. Tired of feeling tired. Tyler thought a day on the water would make her feel better. His guilt over that decision had yet to completely fade. He'd told Nikki that it was his job to protect Katie, and yet he hadn't been able to stop her from dying. She'd slipped, hit her head, and fallen out of the boat. By the time Tyler managed to pull her back in, it was already too late.

"Nikki?" Jack's voice pulled her back to the present. "What's the connection between Tyler and our missing couple?"

She opened her eyes and shook her head. "None that I know of."

Which was why it didn't make sense. Why would Mac and Lucy Hudson's disappearance lead them to Tyler's boat? Showing the question aside for the moment, she stepped onto the boat ahead of Jack.

She climbed down into the cabin, taking in the details of the familiar room. Michael Grant had spared no expense when he bought the boat over a decade ago, eventually willing it to his son. Cherry cabinetry, leather seating, and an updated drop-down flat-screen TV . . . But none of those things had her attention. For the second time today, the scent of death filled her nostrils. Her mind tried to process the scene in front of her. Blood pooled on the carpeted floor. And Tyler Grant hovered over a man's lifeless body.