

SOUTHERN CRIMES SERIES • BOOK 3

HIDDEN AGENDA

A NOVEL

LISA HARRIS



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Lisa Harris, *Hidden Agenda*
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In memory of Angelica, Ana, and Julia.
You will not be forgotten.

For all that is secret will eventually be brought into the open,
and everything that is concealed will be brought to light and
made known to all.

—Luke 8:17

CHAPTER

1

Michael Hunt staggered from the impact of the blow. His hand reached instinctively for his bruised rib cage. He knew the techniques of ignoring pain. Bargain with self. Dissociate yourself from your body. Focus on the finish line. But focusing on the finish line wasn't easy when two years of undercover work was about to vanish.

His attacker, Tomas, shoved Michael into a chair and hovered over him. Topping six foot with a solid two hundred fifty pounds of muscle, the man was clearly enjoying himself.

"I can do this all day." Tomas's smile displayed a gold tooth and far too much pleasure. "What's your real name?"

Michael struggled for a breath. "Michael Linley."

"Who are you working for? CIA? FBI? DEA?"

Michael groaned, then spit out the same name he'd repeated over and over the past twenty minutes. "Antonio Valez."

He could add his own list of jumbled abbreviations for Valez. CEO . . . CFO . . . CIO . . . After two years of working with the real estate mogul, the answers, both real and fake, surfaced automatically despite the thick fog clouding his brain brought on from the pain. Michael Linley . . . Liam Quinn . . . Michael Hunt. All layers of who he was and who he'd become.

"Try again," Tomas spat out.

Michael's jaw clinched as the man pulverized his side with his ironlike knuckles, knocking the breath out of him. He fought to concentrate on a water spot on the dingy wall, shaped like a rabbit. Tried to concentrate on anything but the pain. Anything besides the fact that today was Christmas and he might not ever see his family again. The best he could hope for—if he managed to survive—was a few cracked ribs and bruises.

But he wasn't betting on that.

"Last chance. Who are you working for?"

Michael groaned, tired of the relentless questions. The lines between fact and fiction had begun to fade months ago. All he'd ever wanted was to serve God and country. Now his family believed he was dead. His country believed he was a traitor. To live, he needed to convince Tomas he was the man he'd claimed to be. A corrupt businessman, happy to ensure Valez's dirty money came out clean. But while today wasn't the first time he'd faced death, something told him he'd run out of extra lives.

Michael lifted his head and caught Tomas's gaze. "I keep telling you. I work for Antonio Valez. You've known me for months. Nothing has changed." He forced a weak smile. "Besides, why would I betray any of you? I make too much money off of your boss."

"That's a question you're still going to have to answer to him, but in the meantime, I have something that should help jog your memory."

Michael looked up, his left eye swollen, vision blurred. Two of Valez's goons dragged a man into the cottage. It took Michael a few seconds to recognize Sam Kendall. The man's face was beaten. Blood crusted across his right cheek and his upper lip was split. They dumped Kendall onto the floor in front of Michael, then one of them shoved him over onto his back with his boot.

Kendall worked to brace his elbows against the floor in order to sit up. "I'm sorry, Michael."

Sorry?

The word shot through Michael like a stray bullet. Nothing—especially not “sorry”—would save either of them at this point. Neither could “sorry” make up for all those months of risking his life for the sake of justice. He never should have trusted the man. Never should have believed that he could keep him safe.

Michael turned away, trying to mask any hint of recognition, but one look at Tomas’s eyes and Michael knew everything he’d managed to accomplish had just been destroyed. He’d never be able to take down Valez and the men above him. His decision to meet with Kendall had been a mistake. Undercover work had always come natural to him, but he’d missed something today. Something that could end up costing both of them everything.

But despite the odds, he wasn’t ready to give up. Not yet.

Michael shifted his gaze back to Tomas. “Wait until Antonio gets back. He knows I’d never betray him.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe, because Antonio’s the one who told me to take care of this problem. He’s had some doubts regarding your loyalty, and this man proves it.”

Michael drew in a breath and felt crushing pain sweep through his rib cage. Push too hard and Tomas *would* kill him. Push just hard enough and he might be able to save them both.

“Does Antonio know what you’re doing or is this your own personal witch hunt?” Michael kept talking, not giving Tomas a chance to answer. “I know how this works, and I even understand. Valez isn’t easy to impress, and you need to climb the ranks. But what if you’re wrong about me. Betraying one of the boss’s trusted men isn’t going to go over well when he finds out what you’ve done.”

Michael caught the seed of doubt germinating in Tomas’s gaze, but was another string of lies going to be enough?

“Untie me and I’ll explain everything.” Michael jutted his chin toward Kendall. “Including this man, because apparently someone is feeding you the wrong information.”

“I don’t think so.” Tomas’s eyes narrowed, clearly not ready to buy into Michael’s attempt to talk his way out of an early grave. “We intercepted a message from your friend here to meet you. We know he’s a Fed. That the two of you have been communicating over the past few months, primarily phone conversations on burn phones and blocked email addresses, and that you were passing information on to him.”

“No—”

“There’s no need to defend yourself.” Tomas laughed. “Your friend here’s already confessed everything.”

Michael studied Kendall’s expression but couldn’t read him. Tomas knew how to play the game as well as he did, but still, he had to be bluffing. They were both trained to withstand interrogation, which meant if Kendall had kept his wits, Tomas knew nothing. He was simply playing him. But if he was wrong and Tomas *had* stumbled upon the truth . . .

Michael felt his world slowly collapse around him. If they could tie him to the agent, they’d both end up with a bullet in their heads. Even if he did survive, their killing Kendall would put him on the run, not just from the cartel, but the government as well.

The hesitation Michael had caught momentarily in Tomas’s gaze vanished. “You do know what Valez does to people who betray him, don’t you?”

It was a rhetorical question. Michael had seen firsthand what Valez and his men could do. The only reason he hadn’t walked away months ago was because there were bigger fish to fry. Taking down Valez would put a dent in the cartel’s grip of the southern United States. Finding out the identity of La Sombra could cripple the entire organization.

He knew the stakes, just like he’d known the risks of staying undercover. There was no one to come to his rescue. No one besides Kendall who knew where he was. Or knew for certain, for that matter, that he was innocent.

Funny how life played out sometimes. This morning, despite Kendall's new reservations, he'd convinced the agent to give him another week before he walked away. Another week was going to be seven days too late.

"Can't answer?" Tomas's smile broadened, dragging Michael back to the present. "Valez has a dozen ways to silence people, but he prefers methods that are slow and painful. Whatever method he chooses, you'll both end up at the bottom of the Atlantic."

Michael's chest heaved, followed by another wave of searing pain through his torso. The authorities would never find either of them. All it would take was a trip out into the ocean, a weight, and their bodies would disappear. The chilly water surrounding the lengthy string of barrier islands off the coast of Georgia would become the perfect graveyard.

Tomas pointed his weapon at Kendall's head and pulled the trigger. Michael flinched at the explosion. Kendall's body jerked. A trickle of red trailed down his forehead as he stared lifelessly at the ceiling.

"You didn't have to do that!" Michael felt his heart rate accelerate, while his mind worked to absorb what had just happened. This wasn't how it was supposed to end.

I'm not ready to die, Lord. Not yet. You brought me here to help bring about justice, and this . . . this is pure evil.

Michael sat rigid, waiting for a bullet to stamp out his own life. Had he thought he could outsmart the cartel? Believed they wouldn't find out what he was doing? His desire to bring them down might have numbed the sense of danger, but he'd never forgotten that death could—at any moment—become his reality. Just like he'd never stopped believing that integrity and truth could still prevail in a fallen world.

Tomas pressed the gun against Michael's forehead. The weapon clicked. Adrenaline soared. Nothing. Michael stared at

the barrel of the gun, his heart racing as a wave of nausea swept over him. Russian roulette wasn't a game he wanted to play.

"Don't worry." Tomas pushed Michael's head back with the barrel of the gun and laughed. "The boss has something different planned for you. He's currently caught up with some unexpected business, but he'll arrive early tomorrow morning so he can take care of you himself. Which gives you just over twelve hours to think about your final demise."

Tomas shoved the gun into the holster on his waistband, then exited the room with his two lackeys. Michael's gaze flicked toward Kendall's lifeless body, his open eyes still staring up at him.

It wasn't supposed to end this way, God . . .

A stab of pain shot through his throbbing rib cage as he weighed his options. It would be dark within the hour. His hands and feet were tied with zip ties, the windows of the cottage barred, and the nearest neighbor—a half-dozen miles away—would never hear him. Which meant he had twelve hours to find a way out. And even if he did manage to escape, finding a way off the island was only the beginning of his problems.

The charcoal pencil dropped from Ivan Hamilton's fingers. He watched it roll down the windowsill of the cottage, unable to move. If he made any noise, Tomas would realize he was being watched. He held his breath, but Tomas's beady eyes never looked past the shadows of the room where he had just killed a man. And while Ivan's lip reading skills might not be perfect, he was certain he understood what had just been said.

Twelve hours to think about your final demise . . . Antonio arrives tomorrow . . . he can take care of you himself . . .

Antonio Valez.

His father.

The realization hit him like a punch to his gut. His father had always been elusive. Yes, he'd covered Ivan's school bills and spending money, let him visit during summer holidays, but how much did he really know about the man? Antonio had always been more of a looming authority figure than a father. But even that hadn't stopped Ivan from looking up to him. He'd wanted what any boy wanted from his father. Love. Approval. Time.

Ivan sank into the shadows as he watched Tomas and his cronies leave the cottage and head toward the main house, still terrified they would see him. Tomas had shot the bald one before walking out of the cottage. Killed him in cold blood. And he'd promised to return for the other man.

He waited five long minutes before moving away from the shelter of the cottage. He needed to find Olivia—they needed to leave the island. If someone knew he'd just witnessed a murder, or . . . He drew in a sharp breath. What if someone discovered that he now knew that Antonio Valez, posing as a multimillion-dollar entrepreneur who'd made his fortune in real estate, was involved in something much, much darker?

Ivan escaped the deepening shadows of the small alcove and headed toward the main house through the wooded surroundings, wishing he was able to hear the twigs snapping beneath his feet and the sound of his labored breathing. He might not know the entire truth about his father, but he did know that he and Olivia needed to get out of there. They would take the boat to the mainland, then drive the four hours back to Atlanta and forget everything he'd just seen. They could make up an excuse about why they wouldn't be here to celebrate Christmas with their father. Olivia'd gotten sick maybe. An unfortunate case of the flu. His father probably wouldn't even notice they weren't here.

Ivan hesitated at the sandy trail leading toward the beach. More than likely, Olivia was sitting on the beach. Even during

the colder winter months, she loved bundling up to watch the waves come in off the Atlantic, the early morning sunrises, and the last rays of light vanish from the horizon at sunset.

He set off down the path toward the beach, wondering if Olivia had already guessed—at least partially—the truth about their father. Something had been bothering her these past couple of weeks, but she'd denied it, trying to protect him like she always did. When was she going to realize he was grown up?

He paused as he caught sight of her sitting along the shoreline and started praying. Because he had no idea how he was going to tell his sister that their father was a man they should be deathly afraid of.