

THE NIKKI BOYD FILES, #1

# VENDETTA

A NOVEL



LISA HARRIS



Revell

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Lisa Harris, *Vendetta*  
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2015. Used by permission.  
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2015 by Lisa Harris

Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harris, Lisa, 1969–

Vendetta : a novel / Lisa Harris.

pages ; cm — (The Nikki Boyd files ; #1)

ISBN 978-0-8007-2728-4 (cloth)

ISBN 978-0-8007-2417-7 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3608.A78315V46 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015017812

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Published in association with Joyce Hart of the Hartline Literary Agency, LLC.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail.

—Proverbs 19:21

# 1

---

## **Northeast Tennessee near the Obed River**

The initial step off the sheer face of a three-hundred-plus-foot drop was always the most terrifying. Nikki Boyd leaned back into her harness as far as she could, locked her knees, then peered over the edge of the sandstone cliff that dropped into the ravine below. The terror faded, followed by a shot of pure adrenaline as she kicked off and plunged over the edge.

Legs horizontal to the rock face, Nikki shimmied down the side of the cliff, kicking loose a few rocks along the way. The stress of the past few weeks began to dissipate into the crisp morning air. A day climbing and rappelling with Tyler Grant had definitely been the right thing to do. They'd come, not to dismiss memories of Katie's death, but to celebrate her life. Which was exactly what they were doing.

Halfway down, Nikki glanced up, then slowed to a stop. The rope had shifted and now ran over a sharp edge of the cliff wall. She caught her toes against a narrow ledge and fought to

catch her balance. While perhaps not common, it was possible to sever a weighted rope on a descent.

“You okay?” Tyler hollered down at her.

“The rope moved and it’s running over a sharp edge.”

She’d been told by more than one experienced climber that they hated rappelling because it was the most dangerous part of the day. And this was why. No matter how much training and preparation, no matter how many times she checked her equipment, things could still go wrong. And it just took one mistake. But all she needed to do was unweight the rope and move it to a safer place.

“Can you move it?” Tyler asked.

“I’m trying.”

“You’re going to have to take some of your weight off the rope.”

“Like I said, I’m trying.”

Her gloved fingers held on to a crack in the rock face while she searched for another crack for her feet. Her fingers cramped. A trail of blood dripped down her arm. She didn’t even remember scraping it. Her feet finally found a narrow crevice, alleviating her weight on the rope enough to give it some slack. All she needed to do now was redirect the rope’s path.

Simple.

But she couldn’t get enough leverage to unweight the rope.

“Nikki?”

“Just a minute . . .” Sweat beaded across her forehead as she stood on her tiptoes, her fingertips pressed back into the crack, heart pounding against her chest.

She’d heard plenty of stories about things like this happening. Freak accidents against the side of a sheer cliff. Climbers plunging to their deaths.

*You know this isn’t how I want to die, Jesus . . .*

And certainly not today. Not on the anniversary of Katie’s

death. She glanced at the ground below, then felt her breath catch. If she couldn't move the rope to a safer spot, it could snap above her.

"Nikki?" Tyler shouted from the top of the cliff. "What's happening?"

She drew in another breath. "I'm okay, but I'm having trouble moving the rope."

She hung balanced on the ledge, trying to figure out what to do. Accidents like this weren't all that common, but as with any sport, there were always variables you couldn't count on. She shifted her gaze to the ground. Two months ago, a college student had plunged to his death near here. The steep, rocky terrain made it a popular spot for risk takers.

She pushed the thought aside. What she needed to do was focus on solving the problem. Theoretically she knew what to do, but she was going to need both hands. Which was a problem. Currently, with her right hand holding the rope behind her to keep her from sliding down, she'd need to run the end around her legs a few times in order to secure it. But that was a move even an experienced rappeller would hesitate performing. Unless—

"Stay put, Nikki, I'm coming to you."

"I can figure this out."

"Stay put," he ordered. "I'm coming down."

"Okay, just be careful."

A handful of small rocks bounced off her helmet as Tyler descended toward her on a separate rope.

"How was your date last night with Ryan?" he called down to her.

Her date? Was he serious?

She never should have told Tyler about Ryan. Now he was simply trying to distract her. Trying to get her to focus her thoughts away from the fear and panic. Panic because she was

stuck on a narrow ledge a hundred-plus feet off the ground with the potential of a severed rope. And with it the reminder of how quickly life could spiral out of control.

“The date went fine,” she finally answered.

She could hear him making his way down the sheer cliff above her. His feet scattered another volley of pebbles.

“Fine doesn’t tell me anything,” he countered. “Give me some details. Last night was your third date with Mr. Perfect. You’ve got to have something interesting to share.”

Details? He really wanted details while she was hanging off the side of a cliff praying she wasn’t about to plunge to her death?

A cramp gripped her calf as her fingers dug deeper into the rock crevice above her. She tried to wiggle her leg without losing her footing on the ledge. There honestly wasn’t much to tell. Ryan was six foot three and looked like a model straight off a Banana Republic ad. On top of that, he made a great living, owned his own house, and was completely debt free.

None of those things, though, was the real reason she’d agreed to a second and third date. She’d half expected him to be a snob, but surprisingly, he wasn’t. At all. Instead, he was down-to-earth, complimented her without making her feel he wanted something in return, and treated her like she was the only one in the room when they were together. She’d never met another guy quite like him—except perhaps Tyler.

Which was why Tyler had dubbed him “Mr. Perfect” the first time she’d told him she’d gone out with a guy set up by one of her mother’s friends at church. Making it to the third date was something of a record for her—as of late anyway. But despite Ryan’s “perfection,” she still wasn’t completely convinced he was perfect for *her*. Everyone—including her mother—had already made the decision she’d finally found Mr. Right in Mr. Perfect. But making that decision for herself felt a lot like taking

that first step off the cliff. A shot of terror along with a huge rush of adrenaline.

A sharp pain jettied through her head, and Nikki realized she was clenching her jaw. She took in a deep breath and forced herself to relax. “He’s not perfect, and there’s nothing new I want to share with you.”

Tyler laughed as he dropped next to where she hung and stopped. “The guy owns his own company, runs half marathons for fun, and supports orphans in Africa.”

“So he’s a good guy. That doesn’t mean I’m planning on—I don’t know—*marrying* him.”

“Yet.”

Nikki frowned. No, those were her mother’s plans. Besides, talking with Tyler about her date was . . . well . . . awkward.

“One of us needs a bit of a boost in the romance department, and since I’m not going there, that leaves you,” he said.

She caught a flicker of pain in his voice. How did you start dating again after losing the love of your life? She wasn’t even going to ask that question.

“There’s a slightly deeper ledge six inches to your right for your feet. It will give you some extra support, but I think the simplest solution at this point is to transfer you to my rope.”

Nikki drew in a deep breath as she felt for the ledge, then managed to shove her toes into the crack.

“What did the two of you do?” he asked.

She watched while he locked off his belay device and ran the bottom of his rope through hers, grateful for his special ops training.

“We went to dinner and the symphony.”

“And . . .”

“That was it. Dinner, good food, and interesting conversation.”

“Do you like him?”



She hesitated. “He’s nice. A gentleman.”

“Like I said. Mr. Perfect, though I’m not sure that *nice* is what a guy wants to hear.”

“Then what does he want to hear?” Nikki wiggled her toes while still trying to keep her balance. The cramp had spread from her calf to the arch of her foot.

“That he’s intriguing . . . intelligent . . . funny . . . a bit romantic.”

“He brought me flowers,” she said. Somehow he’d found out she loved wildflowers and had brought her a bouquet.

“But no fireworks yet?” Tyler asked.

“I’m just getting to know him.”

For Tyler and Katie, it had been love at first sight. She’d never believed in the notion until the day they’d met. But that wasn’t exactly her own experience. Her longest relationship—two and a half years—had ended in a nasty breakup. Not exactly a scenario she wanted to repeat.

Like the scenario she was dealing with right now.

“You’re good to go,” Tyler said finally. “Ease down slowly.”

Nikki tightened her fingers on the rope as she made her way down the rest of the cliff with Tyler following. She skidded down the slight incline at the bottom of the rock, then disconnected from the rope.

“Let’s not try that again,” she said, thankful her feet were finally once again on solid ground.

“You’re telling me. You okay?”

She brushed the dust from her pants, then peeled off her gloves. “I think my ego’s more bruised than I am. I anchored the rope in the wrong spot.”

“Sometimes you do everything right and it still isn’t enough.”

She caught the sadness in his eyes as they began collecting the equipment. Why was that statement always so hard to accept?

“You’re sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

She held out her hands, unable to stop them from shaking. “I’ll admit, that was a bit sobering.”

He pulled her against his chest while she tried to let go of the fear that had surrounded her only moments before. She snuggled into his shoulder. His heart was beating as fast as hers. She looked up at his familiar brown eyes and short, military cut hair and felt his day-old beard brush lightly against her cheek. His arms tightened around her shoulders, making her feel safe and protected.

He knew as well as she did that sometimes doing everything right simply wasn’t enough.

But thankfully, today hadn’t ended in tragedy.

“As long as you’re okay,” he said, “that’s all that matters.”

She let out a soft swoosh of air. She didn’t want today to hold another reminder of what could go wrong. How in one fragile moment life could suddenly slip away and be gone forever. But that fact wasn’t something either of them could ever forget.

“Thank you.” Her heart rate was beginning to slow to normal. “You saved my life, you know.”

He brushed away a strand of her shoulder-length blond hair that had fallen across her cheek, then took a step backward. “Being here with you today has made me realize—not for the first time—that I’m the one who needs to thank you.”

“For what?”

“For coming with me today.” He squeezed her hand before pulling off his helmet. “For everything you’ve done for Liam and me. I’m honestly not sure I would have gotten through the last year without you.”

“I miss her too. Maybe that’s why I’m feeling so distracted today.”

Nikki felt the tears well in her eyes and tried to blink them back. She’d promised herself she’d be strong for Tyler. Blubbering like a baby wasn’t keeping that promise. But while the

pain had dulled even a year later, sometimes the loss still felt like it had happened yesterday. Sometimes she still heard Katie's voice. Heard the phone ring and expected it to be her, until she remembered that Katie would never call again. But as much as she missed her best friend, her grief was nothing compared to what Tyler and Liam had gone through.

"You ready to call it quits for the day?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" Nikki blinked back the rest of her tears and smiled. "We've barely started. I didn't wake up before dawn to give up and go back home again before breakfast."

They'd planned this day for months. A day out of the city, near the place where they'd sprinkled Katie's ashes. A day to celebrate Katie's life. She would have wanted them to be here today.

"How about a break then?" he asked. "Your hands are still shaking."

Nikki pressed her palms against her sides. "I could use some coffee. And if you're hungry, my mom packed breakfast to go along with the thermos she sent with us."

"I love your mom." Tyler smiled as he started for the trail leading away from the cliffs. "But the smell drove me crazy the entire trip here."

"Me too, and there's plenty."

There always was. Boyds' BBQ in downtown Nashville had been in the family for three generations, and Nikki's mom never missed an opportunity to ensure her daughter stayed well fed.

"How about we take care of that scrape on your arm first," Tyler said. "Then we can eat some of your mom's breakfast and get at this again."

Nikki nodded, then glanced at the gash where she'd noticed the blood earlier. "You know you don't have to baby me."

He smiled at her and shook his head. "You've always been there for me, Nikki. Just let me do the same thing for you."

Five minutes later, she sat on the tailgate of Tyler's pickup truck in the parking lot while he pulled out the first-aid kit and started cleaning her wound. He washed away the trail of blood caked with dirt from the mountainside, then covered it with an antibacterial spray.

Nikki winced.

"You're worse than Liam," he teased.

"Funny, but that stuff—whatever it is—stings. Remember you're going to school to be a psychologist, not a doctor, Mr. Grant."

"I think I can handle this assignment, Special Agent Boyd."

She laughed, thankful that most of the panic was finally wearing off, because she still had her eye on conquering a couple of climbing routes that had gotten the best of her the last time she was here. Today, she was determined to stay focused and make it to the top of at least one of them.

Her phone rang, and she pulled it out of her back pocket.

She glanced at the caller ID. Unknown. "I should ignore it, but it could be my sister-in-law trying to get ahold of me. She was supposed to go see her obstetrician this morning."

"Anything wrong?"

"Maybe. She's only got a couple weeks before her due date, but she started bleeding last night."

Which had Nikki worried. She'd watched Matt and Jamie navigate an emotional roller coaster through eight years of infertility and three miscarriages. This pregnancy finally promised the first grandbaby of the family, and just last week they'd finished the nursery. If anything went wrong now . . .

"Go ahead." Tyler pressed a butterfly Band-Aid over her cut. "I've got my phone on in case Liam needs me. You'd better answer."

Nikki nodded and took the call.

"Agent Boyd." The voice of her boss, Tom Carter, took Nikki by surprise. "How is the great outdoors treating you?"

She glanced at Tyler, who'd started putting the first-aid supplies back into the plastic case. "I'm fine, sir, thanks."

"Good. Listen, I hate to put a wrinkle in your day, but I have a favor to ask of you."

Nikki frowned. Saying no to her boss was somehow harder than saying no to her mother. "I'm here with Tyler Grant, sir, we're—"

"I remember you mentioned you were going climbing." He paused. "Today's the anniversary of his wife's death, right?"

"Yeah."

"How's he doing?"

Tyler had met her boss during a joint military training exercise designed to increase the military's ability to function in an urban setting. According to Carter, he'd been highly impressed with Tyler's skills and instincts.

"He's okay. We're having a good time. The weather's perfect." There was no use mentioning she'd been clinging to the side of a cliff a few minutes ago, afraid for her life. "What's the favor, sir?"

"I just got a call from a friend. Actually, I went to university with his father, and we stayed close until he died. The son's name is Kyle Ellison. He's not far from where you are with his sixteen-year-old sister, celebrating her birthday over the weekend. Problem is, she went out for a walk this morning and didn't return."

Nikki glanced at her watch. It was just past eight. "Has he called the local authorities?"

"Not yet. He's convinced she probably just wandered off the path to get a closer look at some wildlife and sprained her ankle, something like that. He called me for advice."

"How long has she been gone?"

"He's not sure. She was gone when he got up, around seven."

Which meant they were already looking at a minimum of two hours ago, and maybe longer.

There was another pause on the line before her boss spoke

again. “Listen, all I’m asking is for you to look into it for me. I’ll text you the address of the private cabin where they’re staying. Interview the brother and the girl’s friends, then pass it on to the local law enforcement if you need to. The boy’s scared.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do.”

Nikki hung up the phone and glanced down at her climbing clothes. With her tan, lightweight climbing pants, orange T-shirt, and hiking shoes, she wasn’t exactly dressed for the job, but it would have to do for now.

She jumped down from the tailgate. “That was my boss.”

“What did he want?” Tyler asked.

She hesitated. “A favor.”

“He wants you to work a case.”

Nikki nodded, trying to read Tyler’s expression. “It shouldn’t take long. A quick interview about a missing girl who’s probably just lost out here somewhere.”

“I don’t mind.” He shot her a smile. “As long as I get some of your mama’s cooking as soon as we’re done.”

Nikki laughed, hoping he truly didn’t mind. She’d already begun sorting through the limited information she had. Because with missing persons cases, time was never on their side. If the girl *had* been abducted, at a mile a minute she could easily be across the state border by now. But hopefully the girl’s brother was right. She’d simply gone out walking and gotten lost or turned her ankle. Most kids who went missing were found.

Nikki tossed Tyler the truck keys that he’d laid on the tailgate. “They’re staying in a private cabin not far from here. I’ll pull up the directions on my phone while you drive.”

The familiar feeling of guilt swirled through her as she slid into the truck and fastened her seat belt. Because not knowing what’s happening to someone you love can be the hardest thing in the world to handle. And something she understood far too well.