



Lethal Exposure (Navy SEAL Defenders)

By Elisabeth Rees

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UNDER THE NAVY SEAL'S PROTECTION

When single mother and photographer Rebecca Grey's home is invaded, she calls former navy SEAL Conrad "Jack" Jackson. Though she'd never betray her late husband's memory by falling for his fellow soldier, she's desperate for Jack's help. Rebecca is in possession of photos that can expose a plot to sell priceless artwork stolen from a Middle Eastern palace. Now a dangerous enemy wants her to either surrender the pictures...or her life. Jack promised his best friend he'd lay down his life for Rebecca and her daughters. And as the danger lurks ever closer, that's just what he may have to do to save her.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Elisabeth was raised as one of four sisters in the idyllic Welsh border town of Hay-on-Wye, where her father was the parish Vicar. She developed a love of romantic literature as a young girl and often dreamed of becoming a writer. After a very unfulfilling career in information technology, Elisabeth began to write for Harlequin Mills and Boon, and now writes full time from her home in West Wales. For more information visit www.elisabethrees.com

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911. What is your emergency?"

The operator's voice was calm and soft on the other end of the line. Alone in her home, Rebecca Grey was terrified.

"There's someone in my house," she said. "I've locked myself in the bathroom."

Rebecca tried to control her rapid breathing. She was in danger of having a panic attack.

"Stay where you are and I'll dispatch a police vehicle to your location immediately. Seventy-five Charleston Road?"

"No, it's Charles Road, not Charleston Road."

"I'll amend the address. Can you please confirm your name, ma'am?"

"Rebecca Grey."

"Deputies from the County Sherriff's Office are on their way, Ms. Grey. To assist them in finding your house, can you tell me—"

The line suddenly went dead. Rebecca looked in horror at the cordless handset cradled in her right hand. The digital display was blank: the power was out. She pressed the flat edge of the telephone to her forehead and sank to the cool floor tiles of the bathroom. The black-and-white tiling was the only thing that stood out in the enveloping darkness of 3:00 a.m. It was the beautiful art deco-style bathroom that had persuaded her to buy the house ten years ago. She would never have believed back then that she would, one day, be looking at the fan-shaped light fixtures, wondering if she could use them as a weapon. At least her children were spending the night with their grandmother and out of harm's way.

She pushed herself to her feet, pulling her flannel robe around her pajamas and securing it tightly with the cord. She didn't keep a gun in the house. That had been a constant source of disagreement with her late husband. As a navy SEAL, he believed he saw the worst side of human nature, and he wanted his wife and children to be able to defend themselves. She saw it differently. Her view of atrocities had always been softened by the lens of a camera. She had taken pictures of plenty of traumatic events during her time as a war photographer, but the camera always seemed to be her shield. It protected her in a way she couldn't explain. She had been in some of the most dangerous places in the world but never felt threatened because she had always simply been an observer. Now she was a potential target.

She put the phone in the sink and grabbed hold of one of the heavy, frosted-glass light fixtures attached to the wall. She positioned her thumbs on the carved etching of a 1920s figure and pulled down as hard as she could.

In the next moment, she was sprawling across the floor along with the light fixture. The glass clunked and bounced on the ceramic tiles, and she snatched it up as quickly as possible, feeling her heart race with the explosion of noise she'd created in the quiet night.

She jumped to her feet, clutching the glass in both hands, staring at the door, breathing hard with exertion and expectation. The flimsy lock was only intended to let others know that the bathroom was occupied. It was never meant to hold back an intruder. She braced herself for the door to be kicked open, holding the glass up high, trying to focus her eyes in the gloominess.

Instead, she was greeted with an eerie silence. She strained her ears to hear the sounds that had woken her: drawers opening, papers rustling, footsteps on her wooden hallway floor. Nothing. Maybe the burglar had been frightened off by the noise she had made upstairs. Maybe he had assumed the house was empty.

Flashes of red and blue flooded the tiled walls, and she breathed out, letting her body go limp. The police were here. She rushed to the window, only to see them sail right past her front yard.

"No!" she shouted, watching them drive to the end of the road and turn left, which would take them in the direction of Charleston Road. She banged on the pane. "It's Charles Road you want."

A loud crash downstairs made her jump. She knew she had to think quickly and try to reach someone else. Only one person came to mind—Conrad Jackson, her late husband's navy SEAL colleague and best friend. He didn't live far. He could be there in less than ten minutes, maybe even more quickly than the police officers, who wouldn't realize their mistake until finding that the numbers on Charleston Road stopped at fifty.

With no time to lose, she slid back the bolt with shaking hands and yanked open the door. All the lights in her bedroom were off, and her digital alarm was blank. It looked as though the power in the entire house was out. She heard a creak on the stairs and couldn't help a small yelp escaping her mouth. She grabbed her cell phone from her nightstand and darted back into the bathroom, slamming the door shut and bolting it again.

She tapped through her contacts list with fumbling fingers, found the name Jack and hit Call. "Pick up, pick up," she muttered to herself, pacing in her bare feet. "Please pick up."

The phone was answered on its fifth ring. "Rebecca, it's the middle of the night. What's wrong?"

"Jack," she said, rushing to get her words out. "There's someone in my house. He's coming up the stairs."

"What?" His voice was so loud, she had to pull the cell phone away from her ear. "Where are you?"

"I'm locked in my bathroom."

"Where are Charlotte and Emily?" he asked anxiously.

"They're with their grandma. I'm alone."

"Did you call the cops?"

She heard the drawers of her nightstand being opened. "Yes, but they went to Charleston Road. He's in my bedroom, Jack." She felt a little dizzy. "I can hear him right outside the door."

"Listen to me, Rebecca, and do exactly what I say."

Her throat was dry. She swallowed. "Okay."

"You grab anything you can find in the bathroom to barricade the door. Towels, sheets, even toilet paper can be jammed under the crack at the bottom of the door to create a door stop."

Rebecca's eyes darted around the bathroom, mentally checking off all the items she could use. There was a large shelving unit that would take all her strength to move.

"I'll need to put the phone down to move things," she said breathlessly.

"Put it on the floor," he said calmly. He had clearly gone into navy SEAL mode, despite having retired from the job right after her husband died. "Keep the line open. I want to hear you even if I can't see you. I'm walking to my car now, and I'll be there in ten minutes. I'll call the police and get them to turn around."

"I'm putting the phone on the floor now," she whispered as an icy chill flooded her veins. "Please hurry, Jack."

"Nothing will stop me getting to you, Bec," he replied. "And nothing ever will."

She placed the telephone on the floor, leaning it against the wall in an upright position to help the sound travel into its speaker. With Jack listening, it made her heart thud a little less in her chest. Knowing that he was on his way to the house gave her the strength to heave the shelf unit from its corner and drag it across the floor. The towels and toiletries fell to the floor and she dropped to her knees to push the cotton towels against the door, squeezing the fabric into the small gap beneath the door and the floor.

She then maneuvered the shelf into the center of the room and tried to slide it backward. The weight and size made it too difficult, so she had to walk the unit instead, snagging her hand on a sharp edge of the steel frame as she gripped it tightly. She yanked her fingers away and saw blood trickle down her palm. Instinctively she brought her hand to her mouth, trying to stem the flow and provide relief from the stinging pain. A noise outside the bathroom door reminded her of the urgency of her situation, and she ignored the discomfort, using the entire weight of her slight body to push the shelf into position. Sweat trickled down her forehead, and she wiped it away with her hand, smearing warm blood onto her skin.

"Please hurry, Jack," she whispered under her breath. "I need you."

She found herself taking a sharp intake of breath. This was the first time she had acknowledged that she needed Jack—a little too much, perhaps. She knew it wasn't just her dangerous situation that had prompted this feeling.

Since her husband, Ian, died, she found herself relying on Jack more and more. Now he was dashing to her rescue like a knight on a horse. As if by stealth, he had become the most important man in her life, and it made her feel very wrong inside. She regretted calling him. She should have called the police again instead.

A drawer slammed in her bedroom, and she heard heavy footsteps walking on her wooden floor. It sounded like somebody was looking for something, checking all her drawers and cabinets. But whatever it was, he clearly wasn't finding it. She renewed her efforts to push the shelf nice and tight against the door, noticing the door handle slowly turn. The door held firm. The handle rattled as it was shaken violently from the other side, and she used her body to push against the barricade, hoping that the police would arrive soon. After all, it was their job to protect her, not Jack's.

Conrad Jackson raced through the dark, empty streets in his Porsche 911. He rarely drove the car, preferring the sturdy robustness of his pickup truck. He only kept the Porsche because Rebecca liked it—she said the yellow color brightened even the darkest of days. And if anyone knew about dark days, it was Rebecca.

"Bec," he called into the cell phone hooked up to the car's speaker system on the dash. "I don't know if you can hear me, but I'm almost there. I've called the police, and they're on their way back to you."

The sounds coming from the speakers were impossible to distinguish, but he thought he could hear dragging noises, probably from the big metal shelf that stood in the corner of the bathroom. She sounded like she was barricading herself into the bathroom well. She was safe for now, and he shifted into fifth, increasing his speed to make sure she stayed that way. Rebecca and her children had been the focus of his life for the last eighteen months, ever since making a solemn promise to his SEAL colleague and best friend to look after his family. That fated mission had been the last for both of them—Ian Grey had lost his life, and Jack made the decision never to return to active duty. Cradling his dying friend in his arms on a dusty hillside in Afghanistan had changed Jack's life forever.

He turned onto Charles Street. "I'm here. Just hang on a little longer." He had no idea if Rebecca could hear his voice over the speaker of the cell phone on the bathroom floor, but it didn't matter. Talking to her made him feel more reassured. If anything happened to her, he'd never forgive himself. This was one promise he intended to keep no matter what, and the welfare of Rebecca and her children would always be his top priority.

He screeched to a halt outside her home. The front lawn was well-manicured, and the wooden exterior of the large house was pristine white. There was no sign of anything being wrong on this leafy Florida street. He grabbed his cell phone from the dash and slipped it into the top pocket of his linen shirt, making sure he kept the line open. Then he pulled a handgun from his glove compartment and exited the car, making his way quickly and silently to the front door. The door was closed but opened easily with a gentle push. The lock was lying neatly on the carpet where someone had gone to considerable trouble to disassemble it in order to gain entry. This guy was a professional.

The house was shrouded in darkness, and the only noise to be heard was the slow tick of the mantel clock in a living room strewn with papers and files from Rebecca's cabinets. He noticed some of her award-winning prints amongst the clutter—photos of Somalian soldiers holding guns aloft, images of Chechen children caught up in a war they didn't understand, pictures of ordinary Afghan people trying to rebuild their lives among the chaos of conflict. Rebecca captured more than the scene itself. She captured the pain in people's eyes and the humanity behind the headlines. Her dedication to photographing suffering in the world humbled him, and to see her life's work discarded on the floor made his anger bubble to the surface. Jack found himself hoping that the intruder had hightailed it out of there, lest he let his anger get the better of him.

Creaks on the floor above let him know that someone was walking through one of the bedrooms with hurried footsteps. He ascended the stairs with soundless movement, keeping one ear trained on any noise coming from the cell phone in his pocket. The dragging noises in the bathroom had ceased. He hoped it was a good

sign.

Then the house was filled with sounds of dull, repetitive thudding, reverberating through the air on a menacing wave. It was coming from Rebecca's bedroom, where she was hiding in the adjacent bathroom. He took the last few steps in one bound and burst into her bedroom to see a masked man bringing his foot heavily against the barricaded bathroom door. In one hand, the man held a semiautomatic pistol, raised level with his shoulder. Jack's sudden presence in the room caused him to jump back from the door and point his gun, ready to shoot.

Jack dived to the side before the bullet had a chance to seek him out, and he saw Rebecca's closet door splinter with a powerful impact. He rolled and sprang to his feet, running out into the hallway to see the black-clad man dart into Rebecca's youngest daughter's bedroom. The intruder yanked open the window with such force that the frame slammed into the casing, shattering the glass on impact. The guy let out an expletive and tried to force the remaining shards through the frame with his gloved hands, ready to make a quick getaway.

Jack took his opportunity and ran to the doorway, firing a warning shot into the wall right next to the man. The suspect immediately raised his hands in the air, shuffling on his sneakered feet, crunching on the glass beneath.

Jack looked at the shards scattered on Charlotte's doll-house, and his anger intensified. "You should be grateful the little girl who sleeps in this room isn't here," he said through gritted teeth. "What do you want with this family?"

The man didn't answer. And neither did he turn around. He remained standing with his back to Jack, hands aloft, still holding his gun.

"Put the gun on the floor," Jack ordered. "Slowly."

The man began to steadily lower his arms and bend his knees to squat down on the floor.

"Jack." Rebecca's voice was faltering behind him. In his peripheral vision, he could see her walking hesitantly into the hallway.

He didn't remove his eyes from the intruder, who was taking his time to lower his weapon to the floor. "You okay, Rebecca?"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Marquis:

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