

"A smart, edge-of-your-seat story with plot twists you'll never see coming."

—KARIN SLAUGHTER

A

FLICKER

IN THE

DARK

A Novel

STACY WILLINGHAM

A FLICKER
IN THE
DARK

STACY
WILLINGHAM



MINOTAUR
BOOKS
NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
St. Martin's Press ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

*For my parents, Kevin and Sue.
Thank you for everything.*

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that, in the process, he does not become a monster. If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

—*Friedrich Nietzsche*

PROLOGUE

I thought I knew what monsters were.

As a little girl, I used to think of them as mysterious shadows lurking behind my hanging clothes, under my bed, in the woods. They were a presence I could physically feel behind me, moving in closer as I walked home from school in the glare of the setting sun. I didn't know how to describe the feeling, but I just *knew* they were there, somehow. My body could sense them, sense danger, the way your skin seems to prickle just before a hand is placed on an unsuspecting shoulder, the moment you realize that unshakable feeling you had was a set of eyes burrowing into the back of your skull, lurking behind the branches of an overgrown shrub.

But then you turn around, and the eyes are gone.

I remember the feeling of uneven ground twisting my skinny ankles as I walked faster and faster down the gravel roadway that led to my house, fumes from the retreating school bus billowing behind me. The shadows in the woods danced as the sun streamed through the tree branches, my own silhouette looming large like an animal prepared to pounce.

I would take deep breaths, count to ten. Close my eyes and squeeze my lids.

And then I would run.

Every day, I would run down that stretch of isolated roadway, my house in the distance seeming to move farther and farther away instead of closer within my reach. My sneakers would kick up clumps of grass and pebbles and dust as I raced against ... something. Whatever was *in there*, watching. Waiting. Waiting for me. I would trip on my shoelaces, scramble up my front steps, and slam into the warmth of my father's outstretched arms, his breath hot in my ear, whispering: *I've got you, I've got you*. His fingers would grab fistfuls of my hair, and my lungs would sting from the influx of air. My heart would crash hard against my chest as a single word formed in my mind: *safety*.

Or so I thought.

Learning to fear should be a slow evolution—a gradual progression from the Santa Claus at a local strip mall to the boogeyman under the bed; from the rated-R movie a babysitter let you watch to the man idling in a car behind tinted windows, staring at you for just a second too long as you make your way down the sidewalk at dusk. Watching him inch closer in your peripheral vision, feeling your heartbeat rise from your chest to your neck to the backs of your eyes. It's a learning process, an ongoing progression from one perceived threat to the next, each subsequent *thing* more realistically dangerous than the last.

Not for me, though. For me, the concept of fear came crashing down with a force my adolescent body had never experienced. A force so suffocating it hurt to breathe. And in that moment, the moment of the crash, it made me realize that monsters don't hide in the woods; they aren't shadows in the trees or invisible things lurking in darkened corners.

No, the real monsters move in plain sight.

I was twelve years old when those shadows started to form a shape, a face. Started to become less of an apparition and more concrete. More real. When I began to realize that maybe the monsters lived among us.

And there was one monster, in particular, I learned to fear above all the rest.

MAY 2019

CHAPTER ONE

My throat tickles.

It's subtle, at first. The tip of a feather being trailed along the inside of my esophagus, top to bottom. I push my tongue back into my throat and attempt to scratch.

It doesn't work.

I hope I'm not getting sick. Have I been around a sick person lately? Someone with a cold? There's no way to be sure, really. I'm around people all day. None of them looked sick, but the common cold can be contagious before ever showing any symptoms.

I try to scratch again.

Or maybe it's allergies. Ragweed is higher than normal. Severe, actually. An 8 out of 10 on the allergy tracker. The little pinwheel on my weather app was solid red.

I reach for my glass of water, take a sip. Swish it around a bit before swallowing.

It still doesn't work. I clear my throat.

“Yeah?”

I look up at the patient before me, stiff as a wooden plank strapped to my oversized leather recliner. Her fingers are clenched in her lap, thin, shiny slits barely visible against the otherwise perfect skin of her hands. I notice a bracelet on her wrist, an attempt to cover the nastiest scar, a deep, jagged purple. Wooden beads with a silver charm in the shape of a cross, dangling like a rosary.

I look back at the girl, taking in her expression, her eyes. No tears, but it's still early.

“I'm sorry,” I say, glancing down at the notes before me. “Lacey. I just have a little tickle in my throat. Please, continue.”

“Oh,” she says. “Okay. Well, anyway, like I was saying ... I just get so mad sometimes, you know? And I don't really know why? It's like this anger just builds and builds and then, before I know it, I need to—”

She looks down at her arms, fans her hands. There are tiny cuts everywhere, like hairs of glass, hidden in the webby dips of skin between her fingers.

“It’s a release,” she says. “It helps me calm down.”

I nod, trying to ignore the itch in my throat. It’s getting worse. Maybe it’s dust, I tell myself—it is dusty in here. I glance over to the windowsill, the bookshelf, the diplomas framed on my wall, all of them sporting a fine layer of gray, glinting in the sunlight.

Focus, Chloe.

I turn back toward the girl.

“And why do you think that is, Lacey?”

“I just told you. I don’t know.”

“If you had to speculate.”

She sighs, glances to the side, and stares intently at nothing in particular. She’s avoiding eye contact. The tears are coming shortly.

“I mean, it probably has something to do with my dad,” she says, her lower lip trembling slightly. She pushes her blonde hair back from her forehead. “With him leaving and everything.”

“When did your dad leave?”

“Two years ago,” she says. As if on cue, a single tear erupts from her tear duct and glides down her freckled cheek. She wipes it angrily. “He didn’t even say goodbye. He didn’t even give us a fucking reason why. He just *left*.”

I nod, scribbling more notes.

“Do you think it’s fair to say that you’re still pretty angry with your dad over him leaving you like that?”

Her lip trembles again.

“And since he didn’t say goodbye, you weren’t able to tell him how his actions made you feel?”

She nods at the bookshelf in the corner, still avoiding me.

“Yeah,” she says. “I guess that’s fair.”

“Are you angry with anyone else?”

“My mom, I guess. I don’t really know why. I always figured that she drove him away.”

“Okay,” I say. “Anybody else?”

She’s quiet, her fingernail picking at a chunk of raised skin.

“Myself,” she whispers, not bothering to wipe the puddle of tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. “For not being good enough to make him want to stay.”

“It’s okay to be angry,” I say. “We’re all angry. And now that you’re comfortable verbalizing *why* you’re angry, we can work together to help you manage it a little better. To help you manage it in a way that doesn’t hurt you. Does that sound like a plan?”

“It’s so fucking stupid,” she mutters.

“What is?”

“Everything. Him, this. Being here.”

“What about being here is stupid, Lacey?”

“I shouldn’t *have* to be here.”

She’s shouting now. I lean back, casually, and lace my fingers together. I let her yell.

“Yeah, I’m angry,” she says. “So what? My dad fucking left me. He *left* me. Do you know what that feels like? Do you know what it feels like being a kid without a dad? Going to school and having everyone look at you? Talk about you behind your back?”

“I actually do,” I say. “I do know what that’s like. It’s not fun.”

She’s quiet now, her hands shaking in her lap, the pads of her thumb and pointer finger rubbing the cross on her bracelet. Up and down, up and down.

“Did your dad leave you, too?”

“Something like that.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve,” I say.

She nods. “I’m fifteen.”

“My brother was fifteen.”

“So you get it, then?”

This time, I nod, smile. Establishing trust—the hardest part.

“I get it,” I say, leaning forward again, closing the distance between us. She turns toward me now, her tear-soaked eyes boring into mine, pleading. “I totally get it.”

CHAPTER TWO

My industry thrives on clichés—I know it does. But there’s a reason clichés exist.

It’s because they’re true.

A fifteen-year-old girl taking a razor to her skin probably has something to do with feelings of inadequacy, of needing to feel physical pain to drown out the emotional pain burning inside her. An eighteen-year-old boy with anger management issues definitely has something to do with an unresolved parental dispute, feelings of abandonment, needing to prove himself. Needing to seem strong when inside, he’s breaking. A twenty-year-old college junior getting drunk and sleeping with every boy who buys her a two-dollar vodka tonic, then crying about it in the morning, reeks of low self-esteem, a yearning for attention because she had to fight for it at home. An inner conflict between the person she is and the person she thinks everyone wants her to be.

Daddy issues. Only child syndrome. A product of divorce.

They’re clichés, but they’re true. And it’s okay for me to say that, because I’m a cliché, too.

I glance down at my smartwatch, the recording from today’s session blinking on the screen: 1:01:52. I tap *Send to iPhone* and watch the little timer fill from gray to green as the file shoots over to my phone, then simultaneously syncs to my laptop. *Technology*. When I was a girl, I remember each doctor grabbing my file, thumbing through page after page as I sat in some variation of the same weathered recliner, eying their file cabinets full of other people’s problems. Full of people like me. Somehow, it made me feel less lonely, more normal. Those four-drawer metal lockboxes symbolized the possibility of me somehow being able to express my pain one day—verbalize it, scream about it, cry about it—then when the sixty-minute timer ticked down to zero, we could simply flip the folder closed and put it back in the drawer, locking it tight and forgetting about its contents until another day.

Five o'clock, closing time.

I look at my computer screen, at the forest of icons my patients have been reduced to. Now there is no *closing time*. They always have ways to find me—email, social media—at least before I finally gave in and deleted my profiles, tired of sifting through the panicked direct messages of clients in their lowest moments. I am always on, always ready, a twenty-four-hour convenience store with a neon *Open* sign flickering in the darkness, trying its hardest not to die.

The recording notification pops up on my screen, and I click on it, labeling the file—*Lacey Deckler, Session 1*—before glancing up from my computer and squinting at the dusty windowsill, the dirtiness of this place even more obvious with the glare of the setting sun. I clear my throat again, cough a few times. I lean to the side and grab a wooden knob, yanking the bottom drawer of my desk open and rifling through my own personal in-office pharmacy. I glance down at the pill bottles, ranging from run-of-the-mill Ibuprofen to more difficult to pronounce prescriptions: Alprazolam, Chlordiazepoxide, Diazepam. I push them aside and grab a box of Emergen-C, dumping a packet into my water glass and stirring it with my finger.

I take a few swigs and start composing an email.

Shannon,

Happy Friday! Just had a great first session with Lacey Deckler—thanks for the referral. Wanted to check in re: medication. I see you haven't prescribed anything. Based on our session today, I think she could benefit from starting a low dosage of Prozac—thoughts? Concerns?

Chloe

I hit *Send* and lean back in my chair, downing the rest of my tangerine-flavored water. The Emergen-C deposit trapped at the bottom of the glass goes down like glue, slow and heavy, coating my teeth and tongue in an orange grit. Within minutes, I get a response.

Chloe,

You're always welcome! Good with me. Feel free to call it in.

PS—Drinks soon? Need to get details on the upcoming BIG DAY!

Shannon Tack, MD

I pick up my office phone and dial into Lacey's pharmacy, the same CVS I frequent—convenient—and am taken straight to voice mail. I leave a message.

“Hi, yes, this is Doctor Chloe Davis—*C-h-l-o-e D-a-v-i-s*—calling in a prescription for Lacey Deckler—*L-a-c-e-y D-e-c-k-l-e-r*—date of birth January 16, 2004. I've recommended the patient start on 10 milligrams of Prozac per day, eight-week supply. No auto-refills, please.”

I pause, tap my fingers on the desk.

“I'd also like to call in a refill for another patient, Daniel Briggs—*D-a-n-i-e-l B-r-i-g-g-s*—date of birth May 2, 1982. Xanax, 4 milligrams daily. Again, this is Doctor Chloe Davis. Phone number 555-212-4524. Thank you so much.”

I hang up, eying the phone, now dead on the receiver. My eyes dart back over to the window, the setting sun turning my mahogany office a shade of orange not too dissimilar to the gluey residue sitting stagnant in the bottom of my glass. I glance at my watch—seven thirty—and start to close my laptop, jumping when the phone screeches back to life. I glance at it—the office is closed now, and it's Friday. I continue packing up my things, ignoring the ringing, until I realize it may be the pharmacy with a question about the prescriptions I just called in. I let it ring one more time before I answer.

“Doctor Davis,” I say.

“Chloe Davis?”

“Doctor Chloe Davis,” I correct. “Yes, this is she. How can I help you?”

“Man, you are a tough woman to get ahold of.”

The voice belongs to a man, and it laughs an exasperated kind of laugh, as if I've annoyed it somehow.

“I'm sorry, are you a patient?”

“I'm not a patient,” the voice says, “but I've been calling all day. *All* day. Your receptionist refused to put me through, so I thought I'd try after hours, see if I could be directed straight to your voice mail. I wasn't expecting you to pick up.”

I frown.

“Well, this is my office. I don't take personal calls here. Melissa only forwards my patients—” I stop, confused as to why I'm explaining myself

and the inner workings of my business to a stranger. I harden my voice. “Can I ask why you’re calling? Who is this?”

“My name is Aaron Jansen,” he says. “I’m a reporter for *The New York Times*.”

My breath catches in my throat. I cough, though it comes out more like a choke.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes, fine,” I say. “I’m getting over a throat thing. I’m sorry—*New York Times*?”

I hate myself as soon as the question comes out. I know why this man is calling. To be honest, I had been expecting it. Expecting something. Maybe not the *Times*, but something.

“You know,” he hesitates. “The newspaper?”

“Yeah, I know who you are.”

“I’m writing a story about your father, and I’d love to sit down and talk. Can I buy you a coffee?”

“I’m sorry,” I say again, cutting him off. *Fuck*. Why do I keep apologizing? I take a deep breath and try again. “I have nothing to say about that.”

“Chloe,” he says.

“Doctor Davis.”

“*Doctor Davis*,” he repeats, sighing. “The anniversary is coming up. Twenty years. I’m sure you know that.”

“Of course I know that,” I snap back. “It’s been twenty years and nothing has changed. Those girls are still dead, and my father is still in prison. Why are you still interested?”

Aaron is silent on the other end; I’ve already given him too much, I know. I’ve already satisfied that sick journalistic urge that feeds on ripping open the wounds of others just before they’re about to heal. I’ve satisfied it just enough for him to taste metallic and thirst for more, a shark gravitating toward blood in water.

“But you’ve changed,” he says. “You and your brother. The public would love to know how you’re doing—how you’re coping.”

I roll my eyes.

“And your father,” he continues. “Maybe *he’s* changed. Have you talked to him?”

“I have nothing to say to my father,” I tell him. “And I have nothing to say to you. Please don’t call here again.”

I hang up, slamming the phone back into its base harder than I intend to. I look down and notice my fingers are shaking. I tuck my hair behind my ear in an attempt to busy them and glance back at the window, the sky morphing into a deep, inky blue, the sun a bubble on top of the horizon now, ready to burst.

Then I turn back to my desk and grab my bag, pushing my chair back as I stand. I glance at my desk lamp, exhaling slowly before clicking it off and taking a shaky step into the dark.

