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—JAMES ROLLINS,
New York Times best-selling
author of *The Doomsday Key*

FORGET ME NOT

A Novel

VICKI
HINZE

Praise for
Forget Me Not

“*Forget Me Not* is edge-of-your-seat suspense. Each page left me breathless with anticipation for the next page. This book is non-put-downable.”

—DEBBIE MACOMBER, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author

“Written with equal parts grace and passion, Vicki Hinze’s latest thriller, *Forget Me Not*, delves deeply into a chilling world of twisted loyalties, amnesia, and the struggle of a woman to expose a terrorist plot. Romantic, suspenseful, and ultimately uplifting, this story proves that what is buried in the past never stays buried forever. A great read by a writer who continues to amaze.”

—JAMES ROLLINS, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Doomsday Key*

“I literally couldn’t put down *Forget Me Not* by Vicki Hinze. The suspense kept me flipping pages until long after midnight, and I loved the plot twists. Highly recommended!”

—COLLEEN COBLE, author of *The Lightkeeper’s Bride* and the Rock Harbor series

“Vicki Hinze is a masterful storyteller who has woven unique and rich characters into a compelling, thought-provoking novel. *Forget Me Not* is a fabulous page-turner with incredible plot twists that will keep you guessing until the very end. Highly recommended!”

—MARK MYNHEIR, homicide detective and author of *The Night Watchman*

“Vicki Hinze’s *Forget Me Not* is a novel I couldn’t put down. The fast pace makes for a quick read; the story is full of action and intrigue, while the romance flows naturally from the plot. The message of God’s presence in our everyday lives provides an emotional uplifting long after the story ends. I highly recommend *Forget Me Not*.”

—ROBIN CAROLL, author of the Bayou series and *Deliver Us from Evil*

“The always-entertaining Vicki Hinze breaks new ground with this intriguing tale filled with nail-biting suspense, emotional turmoil, and heartfelt redemption. This novel celebrates the sturdiness of the human spirit and the healing power of faith. Don’t miss it!”

—SUSAN WIGGS, author of *Just Breathe*

“*Forget Me Not* took off like a bullet from a shotgun and gripped me all the way to the exciting end. With tight plotting, twists and turns, a sweet romance, and lots of action, I’ll be making room on my romantic suspense shelf for more books from Vicki Hinze!”

—SUSAN MAY WARREN, award-winning author of *Nothing but Trouble*

“*Forget Me Not* is a season of the television show *24* in print, with a long list of surprises, a good love story, and a great inspirational uplift. An excellent read!”

—HANNAH ALEXANDER, author of *A Killing Frost*

“One of the best romantic suspense novels I’ve read this year! The mysterious, intriguing opening hooked me right away, and Vicki’s characters made me root for them. I can’t recommend this book enough!”

—CAMY TANG, author of *Deadly Intent* and the Sushi series

CROSSROADS CRISIS CENTER, BOOK ONE

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FORGET ME NOT

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*To Kathy Carmichael.
A good friend is a treasure.
Thank you for being a good friend, Kathy.
With blessings and love,
Vicki*

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are
heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

MATTHEW 11:28 (KJV)

Prologue



July 12

You know what I want.”

Hearing him behind her, she jerked and dropped her paintbrush. It slid across the canvas, streaking the emerald gulf water with a bold, jagged slash of white.

“Gregory,” she said, her voice half croak, half whisper, her eyes seeing far beyond the easel and canvas in front of her.

She had made this confrontation inevitable, but she hoped to finish one last painting before—

“Well? Are you going to give it to me?”

Shaking, she turned. He stood closer than she expected, towering above her and blocking both studio doors. The one to the deck overlooking the gulf was closer, but with his stride and reach—she didn’t stand a chance.

Inevitable.

Putting down her palette, she squared her shoulders and stiffened, unable to see past the bloodlust in his eyes. Would her response push him over the edge?

Regardless, she had only one choice. Her mouth as dry as the sand

between her and the surf, she hiked her chin and looked him right in the eye. “No.”

“Reconsider—and think carefully.” His hands curled into fists at his sides, his face darkened to red, and the blood vessels in his thick neck protruded. “Is that your final answer?”

How could anyone that angry sound that controlled? She darted her gaze from door to door, still seeking a way out. But there wasn't one. No one would interrupt, would hear her scream. There would be no escape.

She glanced to a painting of a young girl hanging on the wall. What more could she have done? The man was rich, powerful, and more manipulative than anyone she'd ever known. She had gone all the way to the mayor looking for help. Well, to his wife, Darla, but even she had to admit how outrageous her claims had sounded. Gregory Chessman *did* seem incapable of anything that wasn't wonderful.

Yet she knew better. She studied the painting, the innocence and promise in that beloved face. If he found her—and sooner or later, he would—then she, too, would die. That left but one option. One. And who knew if it would work?

“I know the truth about you.” She injected her tone with confidence and a warning of her own. “If anything happens to me, others will know it too.”

“You tried that and failed.” He grunted. “You're a crazy woman. No one believes a crazy woman, not even an airhead.” He followed her gaze to the painting.

Something inside him snapped. His face contorted and he closed the gap between them in a flash, clamping his fingers around her throat. Fury pounded off him in waves, rivaling the six-foot surf. With a throaty growl, he jerked, lifting her off the ground.

She fought hard, kicking and swinging her frail arms, trying to break his hold, but she couldn't make contact beyond his forearms.

Her vision blurred, her starved lungs burned, craving air. Her limbs turned leaden.

Then the brilliant light flooding the studio faded to black, and she knew no more.



Gregory watched the life leave her eyes, taking pleasure in the fact that his would be the last face she would see. How dare she refuse him? Threaten him? *The crazy fool.*

When the last spark of hope for revival passed and she hung limp and lifeless a foot off the floor, he dropped her.

Her body crumpled in a heap.

He didn't look down, just walked over her, knocked the aged painting off the wall, and then crushed it with the heel of his shoe. Three years, and the subject in it still taunted him. Still made him vulnerable to Alik Demyan. Gregory shuddered.

Now she would suffer for both, for trespassing on his peace.

The portrait lay tattered and torn, its brittle frame cracked. He went at it again, and kept at it until the painting was utterly destroyed.

Though he despised dirtying his own hands, NINA would be pleased. No one had messed up this one...

1



Friday, October 9

It's a bad business decision."

Behind the wheel of the red Jaguar, she checked her rearview mirror, uneasy at being where she shouldn't be after dark. "Maybe"—she braked for a traffic light—"but it's a good heart decision."

The man on the phone grunted his true feelings; his words proved far more diplomatic. "I understand that position on some of your ventures, like your work building the children's center, but I don't understand it on this. We're talking about a run-down beach house three states away, with exorbitant taxes and insurance, that you never visit. Retaining it isn't logical."

Her aunt Beth had loved that run-down beach house, and they'd spent almost twenty wonderful summers together there. But maybe you had to grow up orphaned and denied the privilege of living with your last blood relative to understand the value of that.

"It's in hurricane country and eighty feet from the gulf," she told her financial advisor. "Of course the taxes and insurance premiums are outrageous."

Two blocks ahead, a jazz funeral ambled down St. Charles Avenue. Bluesy music floated on the night. Not wanting to intrude, she flicked her

little finger, tapping on the blinker, then turned at the corner and headed out of the French Quarter.

Her uneasiness grew. There had been some police presence in the Quarter. Where she was headed, there wasn't apt to be any.

"That's why you should sell it." His sigh crackled static through the phone. "Look, it's a good offer. Market value plus twenty percent is rare."

She looked down the deserted street. A group of teenage boys were hanging out in front of a half-gutted building. Yet another remnant of Hurricane Katrina; the kids had no place safe to go. She hoped to soon change that. In this neighborhood, being on the street at night wasn't just unsafe, it was dangerous. "Now you're upset."

"I am not upset."

If his tone got any stiffer, it'd make the trek from Atlanta to New Orleans without benefit of the phone. He was definitely upset. "Good." She needed to get past this call and focus on returning to the hotel.

Trash littered the sidewalk and clumped in a pile near a storm drain carved into the corner's concrete. Smelly garbage, rain-soaked and muddy from that afternoon's thunderstorm, assaulted her.

Finger to her nose, she looked from the grungy walk back to the street. "Why are these 'blind' buyers offering more than fair market value anyway?"

"You've refused their previous offers and they want the property."

"Yes, but why?" That just didn't make sense. "Dozens of homes are on the market. Why not buy one of those? Why Aunt Beth's place?"

"Who cares? Just take the money and run."

She didn't live her life that way. "See, that bothers me. When people hide who they are and push this hard, there's a reason." This property was in Seagrove Village. She couldn't afford to forget that or not to be suspicious.

"Their reason doesn't matter. This is the perfect time to unload it."

“I don’t want to unload it.” Without the beach house, she wouldn’t have any personal family memories after age seven—a fact he well knew since he’d handled her estate from the time of her parents’ passing. How could he not understand?

“If you’re going to ignore my advice, then why pay me for it?”

She paid handsomely for it, but it was still a bargain. “You’re a very good analyst, and I value your opinion, but I make my own decisions. Since I’m accountable for them, that’s as it should be.” He should understand that; he’d taught it to her.

She pulled up beside a car parked near a stop sign. Sitting stopped on dangerous streets gave her the willies. She wasted no time scanning for oncoming traffic, and then drove on.

“Why are you so eager for me to sell?” Even before she’d reached legal age and he had gone from trustee and replacement guardian to financial advisor, he never pushed her this hard on anything.

“It’s in your best interests.”

“In your opinion, but not in mine.”

“I know you make the final calls—and how you make them.” He sighed deeper, heavier. “You’ve prayed about this and it doesn’t feel right, so you’re not doing it.”

Well, at least he understood that much. “Yes, prayer is my bottom line.” Saying the offer didn’t feel right would do, but it was an understatement. Down to the marrow of her bones, she felt certain she was supposed to keep the beach house.

As certain as she was that she must never return to it.

God’s reasons on both went far deeper than her own, and if and when He was ready to reveal them to her, she’d be eager to know them. Until then, she would act in trust. Follow His will.

“There is another reason you should consider and aren’t.”

“Oh?” His brittle tone had her stiffening. This wouldn’t be good news.

“A man purporting to be an investigator showed up at your neighbor’s house this afternoon looking for you.”

No. Not again. Please, not again. Fear streaked through her chest, squeezed. No sound came out of her mouth, so she waited on tenterhooks for him to continue.

“You’re going to have to run again. NINA’s found you.”

NINA? She had been running from men, not a woman. “Who is she?”

“Not who, but what. NINA is the name of the group looking for you.”

The men were a group? They had been scary; this was terrifying. “What kind of group?”

“Nihilists in Anarchy.”

She swallowed hard. “So the biological terrorist threat is still out there, and it’s bigger than I thought.” A group. An organized *group*. The taste in her mouth turned bitter. “I’d hoped if I disappeared...”

“It didn’t help. These are not fly-by-night thugs. I wish they were. NINA is a multinational organization—far too substantial to let one woman interfere with their plans.”

Her muscles went tight, knotted, and the urge to cry swelled inside her. She blinked fast, fighting it. “I have to disappear again.”

“If you want to live, yes.”

Her nightmares were starting all over again, and growing worse. “Are they connected? The beach house buyers and these people?”

“What interest would a major terrorist group have in a shack of a beach house?”

“That was my question to you,” she reminded him.

“None known to the FBI. I contacted my friend there and made a few inquiries—citing a hypothetical situation again, of course.”

“And his advice remained the same,” she guessed. “That I should come in and get into Witness Protection.”

“Actually, no. With this new development, he doubts he can protect you. His hypothetical advice is to get lost and stay lost somewhere far, far away.”

“So he was already familiar with this NINA?”

“Oh yes,” her advisor said. “They’re on multiple international watch lists.”

Boy, had she fallen into it. “I told you the men after me were bioterrorists.” She’d overheard that much from that conversation that had kept her looking over her shoulder these past three years.

“Bioterrorism is but one of the threats NINA poses.”

“There’s more?” The news just kept getting better and better.

“Much more, I’m afraid. NINA embraces the destruction of all political, social, and religious order. They reject morals and ethics as mere products of pressure. Life, to them, has no meaning. Good and evil are based on perspective, nebulous things. They even reject the significance of family.”

Alien philosophies. Spooky ones. And wasn’t that just great? Having a duo of cutthroats after her hadn’t been bad enough. She had to run into an entire army of them. “Charming. How did you find out NINA was involved?”

He hesitated and then sighed. “It’s safer that you don’t know.”

Not from the FBI apparently. Two trucks blew past her. One had a back end full of wooden crates that wobbled. She tapped the brakes to put more distance between them, not trusting the ropes securing them to hold.

“Did you tell your FBI friend that the men could be members?”

“Of course not. You’d be pulled in for questioning and be at even greater risk. NINA would know the moment you entered the building—even my friend couldn’t deny it.”

That was her take on the matter too, but it comforted her to know he had hypothetically discussed the situation with a professional, and he was in agreement. Clearly, he considered the men and the anonymous buyers two separate events—and they well might be. At this point, she had no way of knowing. “How did they find me?”

“No idea. You’ve avoided the press, public gatherings... Has the media caught wind of your reasons for being in New Orleans?”

“No.” She’d had a close call with a reporter from the *Times-Picayune*, but no direct hits. She’d grown adept at avoiding television cameras and reporters long ago.

“No public records filed?”

“Only the beach house deed.”

“That leads to me, not you, and it’s in another state.” He sighed. “I have no idea how they located your current home. But don’t delay down there. They’re one step away. Vanish.”

In ordinary circumstances, it would be unfortunate to be skilled at vanishing, but in this case, her having a great deal of experience at it was a blessing. “I’ll wrap up here in a few hours and then go.”

“A few hours? That’s risky.”

“Yes, but necessary.” If NINA knew she was here, they wouldn’t have been at her home this afternoon talking to her neighbors. And since she didn’t know her neighbors and they didn’t know her, she should be safe for a few more hours. That would be long enough. The kids here needed the center. She couldn’t raise their hopes and then dash them by leaving without doing anything.

“Invoke your power of attorney. I’ll contact you again in six months—sooner, if I can—and when I do, I want to hear that this center is up and running.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said. “Our usual financial arrangement?”

Her life, the dire straits of the kids here, and the man was concerned about money? He had plenty and was still fixated on amassing more. “Our usual arrangement is fine.”

“Very well. I’ll decline the offer for the beach house,” he said, caving on that issue. “And I’ll pay the taxes and insurance.”

“Tell the buyers we won’t entertain future offers too.” This was their third attempt in the three months since Aunt Beth passed away, and she did not need the fear of a fourth offer dangling like a dark cloud on the horizon.

Not knowing their motivations sparked worry. Every time these mysterious people made an offer, it triggered more, and she stayed knotted up like a pretzel for days. Now she discovered her pursuers, who might or might not be connected, had an entire organization behind them, and it was hunting her down. That made these anonymous buyers a lot less intimidating.

“I’ll tell them. Though it’s never wise to close the door on future opportunities.”

“If I’m wrong, it won’t be the first time or the last. I’ll live with it.”

“Very well.” He clipped his tone. “I’ll handle the matter first thing in the morning.”

“On this NINA group,” she said, determined to try one last time to learn more. “I know it’s safer for me not to know how you found out about them, but have you placed yourself in jeopardy? I need to know that much.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

That didn’t give her much leeway to insist on disclosure. “Just in case, you’d better tell me all you can.”

“No. I won’t take deliberate action that pushes you further into the fire.”

“But—”

“No,” he insisted, then softened enough to add, “Let’s just say that sometimes people are the exact opposite of who they appear to be.”

Which told her nothing. Who was the exact opposite of who they appeared to be? “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Fine.” No sense arguing. He wouldn’t budge. “Thank you for everything.” His warning could take her out of the line of fire. At least she knew they had found her home and were closing in on her. “Take care. I’ll call when I can.”

“Be smart about it, and do stay alive. You know how I detest having to rearrange my schedule.”

Boy, did he. And for him, this comment was intensely personal. So much so that a lump formed in her throat. “I’ll do my best not to cause you any inconvenience.”

She would; she always had. But would her best be good enough to keep her alive?



“I found her.” A gravel-voiced man reported in via phone. “Interception is complete.”

“Excellent.” He stepped outside and permitted the long-held tension

to drain from his body. He'd been expecting this call for weeks. "Where is she now?"

"Don't worry. She hasn't checked out of her hotel. She's scouting sites for the new center."

More good news. He glanced at his watch—7:15. "So you've enacted the plan? With the red Jag?" That car was crucial for two reasons. One, to signal their men, and the other to signal a key player who didn't yet realize he was a key player. The car would serve notice he couldn't miss.

"Yes sir. The plan is active, the Jag is in place, and our men are in position. All I need is your authorization, and I'll cut them loose." He paused and then added, "It should all be over before you catch the nine o'clock news."

He'd seen this moment in his mind's eye a million times, and he'd studied at least that many possibilities, seeking a different final solution. But all the seeking and sifting had changed nothing. In the end, the same simple truth remained. Pit anything—money, power, or blood—against survival and survival won.

"Two twenty-two," he said, relaying the code.

"Code master?"

His mouth went dry and his tongue stuck to his teeth. He sipped from a crystal glass that cost more than most made in a week and then whispered on a hushed breath the word he had yearned and dreaded to speak. The word that opened craters of fear in those unfortunate enough to understand its meaning: "NINA."