

Searching for **Serenity**

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Chapter One



Harp music penetrated Grace Caldwell's dreams. She flung her left arm over to wake her husband. "Go see what that is." Her hand hit the cold mattress, and pain arrowed through her heart. He'd been gone three years. She lay her arm across her forehead and let the tears flow down her cheeks onto the pillow. Would she ever get used to being alone?

The harp music changed to violins. She glanced at the clock before swinging her feet out of bed and pulling on her robe. The baseball bat she kept by the bed wouldn't be much use against an intruder with a gun, but then, what burglar would be watching the Music Channel at four in the morning? And the bat would have to do. She'd vowed never to touch a gun again. Not after ...

Grace padded down the hall with the bat cocked on her shoulder. At the door to the family room, she paused. What if there really was someone in there? Her nightgown clung to her where she'd begun to sweat. She'd worried about something like this happening since John died. Maybe she should retreat to the bedroom and call nine-one-one.

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But if the house was empty, she'd feel like a fool. However, she could at least be prepared to call if need be.

Back at the doorway to the family room, Grace took a deep breath. "Whoever's in there, I'm coming in. This is your chance to leave the way you came." She pressed nine-one-one, held her thumb over the green button, and stepped through.

Everything looked the way she'd left it the night before. Including the urn on the mantle that cradled her husband's ashes. Her courage bolstered, she continued her search of the house, flipping on lights and checking in closets in every room. Everything appeared just as she'd left it. All the windows and doors securely locked.

Returning to the family room, Grace canceled the call and eased into her recliner. She peered at the big screen across the room. Why did her television suddenly turn on in the middle of the night? Could it have been an oops on the cable company's end? She gazed around the familiar room.

The soft music washed over her, and she closed her eyes. How many times had she and her husband sat like this together? Too many to count. She needed a break.

In this house, the memories of their life together pressed in on her from all sides. Even though they had a wonderful marriage, she likely still had many years to fill without his loving presence by her side, and she wasn't sure how to do that.

She curled into her chair and sobbed. "Oh, Lord, I miss him so much. Show me how to move forward." Spent, she gave in to the avoidance of reality that sleep held for her since John died.

Chiming and a vibration against her thigh drew Grace from the depths of a black place into the light of day. She pulled her phone from her robe pocket.

"Mom?" The worried voice of her daughter Liz sounded in her ear. "You're not still sleeping, are you?"

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“No.” Grace straightened in her chair and tried to put some force into her words. “I just sat down for a breather. I’ve been up for hours.”

“Uh-huh.” Doubt replaced worry.

“Did you call just to give your mom a hard time, or is there another reason I get to hear from my favorite daughter?”

“I’m your only daughter.” Liz chuckled at the old family joke. “I wanted to invite you over for dinner tonight.”

“I’d love to.” Grace levered the recliner to its upright position. “What time?”

“How about five?”

“I’ll be there.” She stood. “Will the boys be joining us?”

“Yep,” Liz said. “And you know what that means.”

“A rousing game of Phase Ten. My favorite card game.” Grace smiled to herself. “I’ll try not to trounce them this time.”

“Hey, I don’t mind. It’s the boys who get frustrated, and that’s their problem.” Liz laughed again. “See you tonight. Love you.”

“Love you more.” Another zing to her heart. John used to say that to her.

Grace pushed to her feet and stretched. Another empty day spread before her. She’d shower, eat breakfast, and climb the stairs to her office, where she’d pretend to write. At least she wouldn’t have to make the decision between a frozen pot pie or running out for a hamburger and fries for dinner.

What a rut she’d gotten into. How had she let that happen? But more importantly, did she have the energy to break it? “Not today.” She combed a hand through her hair and shuffled back to her bedroom with her baseball bat propped on her shoulder.

Clean and dressed, Grace entered her state-of-the-art kitchen and made coffee and toast. The sun shone out of a cloudless blue sky.

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“Another perfect day in paradise.” The sarcasm in her tone plucked a nerve of guilt in her. “Sorry, Lord. I am truly grateful for all Your blessings.” But some days, it was hard, and she knew He understood.

As Grace deposited her plate in the dishwasher, her phone sprang to life. The face of her best friend, and publisher, appeared on the screen. She groaned before sliding her finger across the screen to answer the call. “Hello, Olga. How are you this morning?”

“The bigger question is, how are you? Are you writing?” A trace of her Scandinavian accent came through in her voice when she was worried.

“It’s slow, but yes.” Grace grabbed her coffee and headed for the stairs. “Hang on. I need both hands for a minute.” She tucked her phone into her pocket and took hold of the banister. At the top, she caught her breath and pulled her phone out. “I’m back.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Either I’m out of shape, or those stairs are multiplying.” Grace plopped into her chair in the office.

“Do you exercise? You have that beautiful pool. You should be out there doing laps every day. It’s good cardio.”

“Says the woman who once told me that exercise is a four-letter word.” Grace chuckled.

“We haven’t gotten together lately.” Her voice turned cool. “I have type two diabetes, and I’ve been watching what I eat and exercising regularly.”

“Olga, I’m sorry.” Grace straightened. “I ...”

“No worries.” Her usual friendly tone returned. “But I’ve dropped ten pounds already.”

“That’s great.” She glanced down at her own midriff and sighed.

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“Anyway, I didn’t call to brag. I want to know how you’re doing with your book.”

Another quiet sigh as Grace put on her reading glasses and squinted at her computer screen. The word count glared at her from the left corner of the document. Not good. She was faced with a choice. Pretend as if everything was moving along great, or tell the truth. She closed her eyes.

“Grace, are you there?” The worry in Olga’s voice notched up a level.

“I’m here.” She cleared her throat. “I’m having some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I can’t seem to write anymore.” Tears choked her words. She removed her glasses and pressed her fingers to her eyes.

“Oh, sweetie.” Olga-publisher turned into Olga-best friend. “Grieving is a process. It can’t be rushed. You thought you were ready, but you just aren’t. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Anger surged in her. “I want to move on with my life. Will somebody tell me how to do that? Please?”

“Nobody has the answers, but ...”

“But what? Say it.” Grace gripped her phone tighter.

“I was just going to say it might help if you had a change of scenery. Went someplace for a while.” Olga paused. “I could take some time off if you wanted to take a trip together?”

Time away. A break. Something stirred in Grace. “Let me think about it for a couple of days. Thanks, my friend.” She hung up and let her eyes roam around the small room they’d once used as a nursery.

Her gaze snagged on the photo of her and John in front of their beach house on Trinity Sands Island. That would be a change of scenery, but she hadn’t been there since he’d passed away. It too held so many memories.

But she’d always loved it there. And her good friend,

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Serenity James, still lived at Trinity Sands Beach Club. In fact, she'd received a letter from her yesterday. Grace hadn't opened it yet. She hadn't been in the mood to read all the gossip Serenity had heard from Ursula, the housekeeper, or all the problems she was having with the renters next door. Maybe when she got back from dinner, she'd feel up to it.