

SERIAL BURN

LAKE CITY
HEROES

LYNETTE
EASON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Don't Look Back
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When a Heart Stops
When a Secret Kills

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LAKE CITY HEROES

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Dedicated to Jesus,
who is faithful even in the hard times.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

Isaiah 55:8

PROLOGUE

Someone had to stop her. She was going to ruin everything if left to do what she had planned. He clenched the steering wheel and narrowed his eyes. He'd have to be subtle. He couldn't let her find out he was involved. He couldn't let *anyone* find out. The price was too high.

And he was already paying a very high price—one he couldn't afford to pay anymore. Refused to pay it. He could run. At the thought, he kept one hand on the wheel and reached out with the other to touch the bag on the passenger seat. He had enough money to leave, but a life of always looking over his shoulder wasn't for him. And she'd never stop looking for him. No, it was better this way. Get rid of her once and for all.

His gut tightened, nerves thrumming as he followed her. If he was truthful, he was afraid of her. Of what she would do if she caught him . . .

But no. His plan was solid. She'd never know it was him. And at this point, he had no choice. He had to risk it. She *had* to be stopped. He fingered the bag once more and thought of all the years of pain and abuse. Of what the bag's contents meant.

It was his means to the end. Period.

Without putting himself at risk.

He took a deep breath and went to implement the first step in the plan.

ONE

JANUARY
MONDAY NIGHT
7:00 P.M.

Deputy State Fire Marshal Jesslyn McCormick surveyed the charred remains of the building that used to house a thriving church community—*her* church community. It had burned last night, and firefighters had worked tirelessly to put the blaze out.

This afternoon, she'd been able to do her walk-through with the structural engineer and established a safe path from one end of the scene to the other while she examined and collected what she could. It had been enough.

Now she stood in silence, helmet on the ground beside her, gloves tucked into her protective coat pockets, working hard to contain her anguish. And even harder to suppress her tears at the thought of sweet Mr. Christie, a member of the cleaning service, lying in the hospital with second-degree burns and smoke inhalation that might very well kill him.

FBI Special Agent Nathan Carlisle stepped up beside her. "Are you all right?" His compassionate blue eyes nearly destroyed what was left of her composure. She wasn't supposed to cry on the job.

"No." Maybe she couldn't cry, but she could be honest. Nathan

and his partner, Andrew Ross, had been called in because burning a church was considered a hate crime. She wouldn't be able to prove that intent until the suspect was caught, but best to bring in the FBI right from the start. ATF was also involved, along with the Lake City Police Department.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I mean it, Jesslyn."
His kind eyes said he really did. "Thanks."

"Do you need to sit this one out?" he asked, his voice low. "I'm sure another marshal wouldn't mind taking this one off your hands."

She shook her head. "No way. This one's personal." Which meant she probably *should* sit it out, but . . . nope. Not unless she was forced to.

"I don't blame you. I'd feel the same way."

She'd met Nathan a few months ago. He and Detective James Cross had become good friends during a law enforcement training event two years ago. When James needed a temporary partner at the Lake City Police Department, he put in for it while waiting for a position with the FBI. He was fortunate to get assigned to the Asheville, North Carolina, resident agency not long ago. There was some drama with his family, that much she knew, but no details were shared. Which was fine because the more she knew about him, the more she liked him. If she was honest with herself, she'd admit she'd grown fond of Nathan in record time. Too fond? Probably, but she wasn't going there. Not today.

But she *was* honored she got to work with him—with all of them.
And go to church with most of them.

Until now.

"A building isn't the church," he said.

She slanted him a glance. "You're a mind reader now?"

"Not exactly, but I read facial expressions pretty well."

"I'll save you the effort. The person who did it either didn't know Mr. Christie was there working, despite the vehicle parked right beside the back entrance, or he—or she—didn't care. Either way, a good man is in the hospital, and while I'm upset about the damage

to the church, I'm more upset about Mr. Christie." She wanted to talk to him when he woke up. If he woke up. It was possible he saw the arsonist. But she'd have to get in line. Nathan and Andrew would be the ones doing the questioning.

"Of course." Nathan paused. "Can I ask what you saw that makes you say it was arson?"

"Let me do this one time." She waved over Fire Chief Kurt Laramie.

"What do you have, Jesslyn?"

"I was just explaining a few things to Nathan and wanted you to hear as well."

Chief Laramie nodded. "Go on."

She turned toward Nathan. "Fires usually burn upward and outward. They create a V-shaped pattern." She pointed to the smoldering, blackened structure. "There are multiple V-shaped patterns inside. So what would you deduce from that?"

"Multiple starting points," Nathan said.

"Give the man an A." She sighed. "And the detection dog alerted to an accelerant. Which could mean nothing more than someone stored cleaning products together, but you don't store those in the pulpit, Pastor Graham's office, the kitchen, and the nursery."

He winced. "Someone deliberately burned the nursery?"

"They did."

"That's a special kind of evil," he muttered.

"Part of me wants to take it as a message of some sort. Another part, the rational part, knows it was just a good place to make sure the fire spread hot and fast since the nursery was next to the kitchen—in which all of the gas burners had been turned on." She shrugged. "And in the nursery, you have things like baby oil, wipes, plastic or vinyl mattress covers, and more. Stuff that burns fast and hot. Whoever did this was determined this building was going to burn to the ground. But, here's the kicker. What's interesting is the purple stains."

"Why is that interesting?" Nathan asked.

“It indicates a specific kind of accelerant. One that’s homemade and easy to make, relatively safe to handle, but I’ll know more once I talk to Marissa at the lab.”

“You think this is a one and done?” the chief asked.

“If it’s a hate crime and they simply wanted to burn the church down to make a point, then . . . maybe. Or maybe they’ll hit another church. No way to tell right now.” She turned to Nathan. “You get to investigate and figure that part out.”

Chief Laramie patted her shoulder. “I’m glad to have you working this one, Jesslyn. Your dad would be proud of you.”

“Thanks, Chief.” He and her dad had been good friends, and the chief had welcomed her into the role of fire marshal with open arms. He walked off and she chewed on her lip.

She guessed her dad would be proud. She could only take the chief’s word for it.

“How do you do it?” Nathan asked, breaking into her thoughts.

“Do what?”

“Your job. James told me about your house burning down when you were a child and losing your family. I can’t imagine. And then you have to face fire every day?” He shuddered. “I hate fire. Don’t even like bonfires.”

She was surprised he brought it up. Her past wasn’t a secret, but it did seem to be a taboo topic for almost everyone around her. “I’ll admit, it’s not easy,” she said, “but I wasn’t there when it happened.”

“Sometimes imagination is worse than the actual thing.”

“True.” She cut him a glance. “And mine is an educated imagination. I’ve studied the case notes. I know exactly what happened. I know how they died, what they might have suffered. I just don’t know who did it.” She nodded to the church. “But this? It’s my job, my passion. One I chose as an attempt to honor my family. An arsonist killed them and was never caught. I can’t describe what that feels like. I never want another child or family member to go through that.” She blew out a low breath. “Each fire reminds me of why I do what I do.”

“Makes sense.” He went silent for a moment, and Jesslyn waited for him to get around to asking whatever he was thinking about. “I caught the interview you did a couple of days ago. The plea for someone to come forward with new information that would lead to the capture of the arsonist before the twentieth anniversary of the fire.”

“You saw that, huh?”

“You did a great job. Your love for them and your passion for justice came through loud and clear—especially your intent to keep looking until you found the person who killed them.”

“Oh. Yes. I probably should have toned that down a bit.”

It had been the first time she'd publicly spoken out about her family's deaths, and the surge of anger and grief that had swept over her caused her to lose a fraction of control over her emotions. She'd jabbed her finger at the camera. “If you're alive, I just want you to know that I'm still searching. You killed my family twenty years ago. They didn't deserve that and neither did I. I hope you can't forget that night. I hope it lives with you and torments you each and every hour of each and every day. You may think you've gotten away with it and that people have forgotten, but I'm here to say you haven't and people haven't. In fact, I have a plan to make sure everyone remembers that night. Remembers my parents for all the good they did before their premature deaths. Remind the world that my sisters never got to grow up. My dad was one of the most prolific builders in this area, and he and my mom had a dream. I bought a building that will help fulfill that dream. They wanted to create a youth center where any and all are welcome to have a place to go after school. In doing that, my parents will be remembered for their dream of changing lives for the better, while you will be caught and punished for what you did. Because I will catch you and that's a promise I intend to keep.”

Replaying her words made her frown. Had she overdone it? Come across too strong? She swallowed against the sudden surge of emotion and looked Nathan in the eye.

He offered her a gentle smile. “No, I don't think you needed to

tone it down. It was raw and honest, and people will admire you for what you're doing."

"Thank you," she whispered, then cleared her throat. "I just don't want my family forgotten. They deserve more."

"Absolutely."

"I meant what I said. I plan to find him. As long as he's still alive, I'll find him."

His eyes lingered on her, studying her. Dissecting her?

She snagged his gaze. "What?"

"The more I talk to you, the more you intrigue me."

Okay, that was bold. "Hm."

"Too blunt?"

"No." Too perceptive maybe. She'd have to remember that if she wanted to hide her feelings from him. But right now, her interest in getting to know him a bit better overruled her caution. "You know my story. What's yours?"

He raised a brow. "I have a feeling I'm missing a few details."

"Not many." Okay, maybe a few.

"Jess?"

She turned to see Pastor Chuck Graham walking toward her, sorrow in his blue eyes. She looked at Nathan. "Excuse me a minute?"

"Of course."

She hugged the older man, who looked like he'd aged another few years overnight. "I'm sorry, Chuck."

He pressed fingers to his lips. "Just . . . why?"

"I don't know. Only God and the arsonist know the answer to that. So, until one of them talks . . ."

Chuck blinked back tears and nodded. "Well, this won't stop us. We'll just rebuild and find a place to meet in the interim."

Jesslyn nodded. "Absolutely." Other church members had started to gather outside the perimeter of the crime scene tape, and Chuck walked over to them, his shoulders held straight, chin lifted high. When he reached the group, they hugged one another, shoulder to shoulder, then started to pray. Jesslyn ground her mo-

lars and swept her gaze around the onlookers. Sometimes arsonists liked to watch the fallout of their work, but no one in particular stood out to her.

Then again, whoever was responsible wouldn't be wearing a sign labeled "I did it."

"You think he's here?" Nathan asked, his voice low.

She spun to face him. "You really need to stop doing that. It's unnerving."

His lips twisted into an amused smile that sent her heart racing in ways it hadn't done since . . . ever.

All righty then.

"You're an investigator," he said. "It's not hard for another cop to tell what you're thinking." His gaze slid from hers and scanned the crowd just as she'd done. "We'll get some video footage and pictures, but I don't think he's here. At least not in view."

"Well, he doesn't have to be." She pointed to the TV crew camped out to the side, cameras rolling. A helicopter buzzed overhead with more cameras. "He can sit at home and watch the whole thing from the comfort of his recliner."

THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME Nathan had gotten to work with Jesslyn, and he had to admit, watching her in action was downright impressive. He'd heard there wasn't anything she didn't know about fires and accelerants, but hearing her talk about purple stains and what they meant was fascinating.

Hanging out with her at a friend's lake house was very different from sharing a crime scene with her. While reserved by nature, at the lake house she was relaxed and witty when she decided to speak. Here, she was intense, focused, and dead serious.

Impressive.

Admirable.

Attractive.

Okay, maybe that last one wasn't exactly wise, but the truth was, he'd been interested in Jesslyn long before now. The moment he'd met her, he decided he wanted to get to know her better. Which was why he'd kept his distance. Mostly. He had issues. Burdens he'd never share. He'd keep his attraction tucked away—which meant he needed to find his filter and keep his mouth shut. What in the world was he thinking telling Jesslyn she intrigued him? She did, but that didn't mean he needed to announce it. No one knew he and Jesslyn had a whole lot in common when it came to their growing-up years. That they'd both lost people they loved to a fire. But while Jesslyn seemed to race toward a blaze, he avoided it at all costs. Fire terrified him. To find himself investigating it was fine. Just don't ask him to get close to it.

Andrew Ross, his partner of a few months, had no idea of any of that. They were still building that bond of trust most partners grew into. And while Nathan would die for the man if it came down to it, he wasn't ready to share his deepest, darkest secrets. That kind of trust took time and he was in no hurry to move it along. Thankfully, Andrew tended to mind his own business.

Nathan transferred his thoughts to the woman beside him and gave her a sidelong glance. She had her auburn hair pulled up into her standard ponytail, her naturally pale skin a shade lighter than usual. She continued to stand silent and still, her emerald gaze on the scene giving no indication she was aware of his presence.

Another reason to keep his interest in her six feet under. She might not appreciate it and they had to work together.

"How's the Airbnb? Comfortable?"

"Yes. It's fine. Roomy, which is nice." They were talking about nothing, but that was fine. It kept things on a low simmer, a distraction from the charred church.

"But you like living in Asheville?"

He studied her. "These days I like Lake City better."

Her eyes widened a fraction and a blush pinkened her cheeks. She looked away and the color faded. Andrew headed toward them

and Nathan cleared his throat. “I’ll call you if I have any questions,” he told her.

“Of course.” She turned to him and offered a slight smile. “It was good to see you despite the circumstances.”

He really needed his heart not to do that thing it did every time she barely smiled at him. Andrew stopped to talk to one of the other firefighters, giving Nathan a few more precious seconds alone with Jesslyn. “You too. I’ll be in touch.”

She nodded and her smile slid away. Then she took a deep breath and picked up her helmet. “I’ve got a report to write. I’ll see you later.”

“Later.”

She walked away, straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin, like she was preparing herself for battle. Because that’s what the investigation was going to be. A battle to find the arsonist before he struck again. They both knew the odds were that he would. They’d have to alert every church in the vicinity.

On that cheerful thought, he turned to his smirking partner, who’d snuck up on him. “What?”

“Why don’t you just ask her out already?”

So much for Andrew minding his own business. But Nathan heard the friendliness behind the mild teasing. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you want to?”

He really did, but . . . “I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both.”

Andrew’s smirk turned into a frown, but Nathan ignored him and headed for his Bucar—a Dodge Charger. While he liked the vehicle, he much preferred his Rhino XT—despite the ribbing he got from fellow officers for having such an expensive ride. But his brother-in-law, Kip Hart, was a personal injury lawyer and had presented the vehicle to him as his Christmas present. Nate tried to refuse, but the pleading look on his sister Carly’s face had him caving—with the caveat that when his twelve-year-old nephew was old enough to drive, Nathan could gift it back.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Carly said.

And now, Nathan had two more years of driving the cool SUV before he had to figure something out. In the meantime, he had an arsonist to find and a woman to put out of his head.

As soon as he climbed into the driver’s seat, his phone rang, and he answered it with a quick swipe of the screen before he registered the name. *Rats*. “Hey.”

“Wait, is this a recording?” Eli, Nathan’s eldest brother and all-around know-it-all, said.

“Stuff it, bro. I’ve got reports to write. What’s up?”

“Ah, you didn’t check your caller ID before answering, huh?”

“Eli . . .”

“I know you avoid me until you just can’t anymore.”

“Only because you annoy me.” Saying the words without heat didn’t make them any less true. Lately, his brother’s calls were about to send him over the edge. Changing his number was starting to look like a good option.

“Why do you think that is, Natty?”

His brother the psychiatrist. Always trying to psychoanalyze him. Did Eli truly not understand how obnoxious he was? For a guy who spent his days counseling people and helping them navigate their relationships, Eli refused to let go of the one topic Nathan didn’t want to talk about. And that one topic was driving them further apart than they’d already been.

“It’s Nathan.” Natty was in the past when life was fun and innocent. But Eli would call him whatever name Eli wanted to call him because he was Eli. And Eli only cared about himself. Always had, always would. “Tell me what you want or I’m hanging up.”

“Fine,” Eli said, “but one day you’re going to need to stop taking your anger at yourself out on others. Come to counseling with me, Nathan. Please? We can go together. It’s way past time you forgave yourself for—”

Nathan hung up.

Ten seconds later, his phone buzzed again and he let it go to

voicemail. Through the driver's window, he could see Jesslyn standing beside her car three spaces down, on the phone. He watched her, wishing once more things could be different. That he could be different. That his past was different. She lifted her head and caught his eye before he could look away, freezing him on the spot. He lifted his hand in what he hoped was a casual wave and drove out of the parking lot.