

FINAL APPROACH

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark jacket, a light-colored turtleneck, and blue jeans, stands on a beach looking up at a large commercial airplane flying overhead. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and pink, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The airplane is a large, white, twin-engine jet with green accents on the wings and tail. The woman is positioned in the lower center of the frame, looking directly at the camera while her gaze is directed upwards towards the plane. The background shows a calm sea and a distant shoreline with some buildings under a dramatic sky.

LAKE CITY
HEROES

LYNETTE
EASON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAKE CITY HEROES - 4

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Dedicated to Jesus.

I love you more than I have words to express.

Thank you for letting me do what I do.

May I do it for your glory, honor, and praise. Always.

ONE

OCTOBER 5

Air Marshal Kristine Duncan leaned back in her seat, her eyes skimming over the sunrise outside the Airbus 319's window. Minutes ago, they left the Lake City, North Carolina, airport and had just leveled out at cruising altitude after a smooth climb. When the Lake City field office opened a little over two years ago, she'd taken the offered position without hesitation. Moving away from Asheville had been a good thing. In many ways.

The hum of the aircraft was a familiar comfort, but it was a smaller craft than she usually flew, with only one aisle and three seats on either side. She and her friends were about halfway back in the main cabin. Not her favorite seat, but she wasn't complaining.

This was her last flight as an on-duty air marshal for the next two weeks. Vacation with fun and sun was on the horizon. She went through her usual flight check, scanning the passengers and the luggage being brought on board and noting those traveling with her.

Lainie Cross had already fallen asleep in the middle seat, her head tilted slightly to the left. How the woman could sleep like that was beyond her. In the window seat, Jesslyn fiddled with her new camera. The excitement on her normally reserved features made Kristine smile. She'd just gotten into photography, and her husband, Nathan

Carlisle, had purchased the Canon R5 Mark II for her birthday along with two very nice lenses. Kristine couldn't help wondering how much that had set him back. Detective Tate Cooper and his wife, Stephanie, had settled in two rows up and had their heads together, talking quietly.

"I can't believe we're actually doing this," Jesslyn said, leaning forward, her voice low. "How long have we been planning this? Six months? It felt like six years to get to this point." She had her red hair pulled into a casual ponytail with a few stray tendrils curling around her temples. A smattering of freckles crossed her nose and fanned out over her cheeks. "Ten days at an all-inclusive resort in Key West, snorkeling, scuba diving, parasailing—"

"I'm not parasailing," Kristine said. "No way."

Jesslyn raised a brow at her. "But you love to fly."

"In a plane. With a skilled pilot—or two. Or frankly, myself flying. With safety protocols in place. Not at the end of a rope attached to a boat with a driver who may or may not know what he's doing."

"Could be a she."

"Exactly. And neither of them may know what they're doing."

Jesslyn laughed. "You're still taking flying lessons?"

"I am. It makes me feel like I have more control."

"You've been doing that forever. Don't you have your license yet?"

"Just have to take the test." Her heart pounded at the thought.

"And when are you doing that?"

"I don't know." The truth was, she'd been putting it off ever since she'd had an issue with her first attempt. Something she'd not shared with anyone for a multitude of reasons.

Her tone must have conveyed her desire to terminate the subject because Jesslyn went back to her camera with only a raised brow.

Kristine looked over her right shoulder and across the aisle to see Kenzie King and Cole Garrison engrossed in a travel guide, plotting their adventures—and probably their wedding—while James, Lainie's husband, was lost in the latest bestselling thriller by Kate Angelo. Kristine drew in a deep breath, taking in the atmosphere of

anticipation and relaxation. It was a hard-earned break from their often hectic lives. With the exception of Lainie, who was a physician's assistant, they were all in some form of law enforcement, and the last couple of years had been chaotic. Thankfully, the last six months had been "quiet." Or at least "normal" for them and their occupations.

Her gaze drifted across the aisle and back one row, where a man sat immersed in his notes. FBI Special Agent Andrew Ross. Smart, dedicated, and definitely too handsome for anyone's good. His blond hair was slightly long, but not long enough to hide his green eyes from her. His five o'clock shadow was making an attractive appearance on his usually clean-shaven features. She and Andrew had known each other for a while now, but it was only lately that they'd acknowledged they wanted to get to know each other even more. She had to admit spending time with Andrew on a sandy Key West beach sounded like an amazing adventure. If she could just get past her fear. She'd avoided romantic entanglements most of her life simply because she was afraid that would entail giving up a lot of control over her life. She cleared her throat and pushed the thoughts aside, wishing she could dump her baggage once and for all.

Maybe one day. Her friends who were all pairing up at the speed of light didn't seem to have her issues and were offering her hope that maybe her perceptions of romantic relationships were wrong. That she wouldn't be giving up control of her life but sharing it. It was a nice thought, she just wasn't sure it was realistic.

Andrew looked up and caught her gaze. His soft smile stole the breath from her lungs. And then there was that. Every. Single. Time. She forced herself to smile back before returning her gaze to the other passengers, studying the ones she could see. All seemed well as, thankfully, it usually was. So why were her nerves itching?

"Come on, Kristine." Jesslyn reached across the still-dozing Lainie and nudged Kristine's arm. "Relax."

"I'm trying," she said. "Seriously. It's hard, though." She forced her features into a serious expression. "But keep your camera ready.

Nathan may decide to cut loose and dance down the aisle or something.”

Jesslyn smirked and Kristine laughed. That was about as likely as below-zero temps in the Keys.

The laugh felt good. It was a bubble of normalcy in the midst of a tension Kristine couldn't shake off. She glanced around the cabin, her trained eyes scanning the other passengers once more. Most were absorbed in their own worlds. Sleeping, chatting with seatmates, reading, snacking, and trying hard to keep restless children occupied.

Once she connected to the plane's Wi-Fi, she sent a text to her brother and sister.

On the way to Key West. I'm looking forward to the vacation, but wish the three of us could have some time together. Look at the calendar for next year and pick a date, okay? Take care and talk soon.

Emily and Ethan were twins and were six years younger than her thirty-two years. She'd been looking after them since their mother's death sixteen years ago and loved them fiercely.

When she looked up, one man five rows ahead, sitting in the aisle seat to her right, caught her attention. He seemed on edge, his movements rigid, jerky. She'd noticed him as they boarded, but he settled down, so she just decided to keep an eye on him. It appeared his restlessness had returned, though, and Kristine narrowed her eyes. Nervous flier? Personal problems? Or something more?

Or nothing?

The aircraft jolted, and a brief but rocky turbulence silenced the occupants. Kristine gripped the armrest, her body tensing. The captain's voice came over the speaker. "Sorry about that, folks. Hit a little pocket there. We're back to cruising smoothly, so go back to your book or your movie and we'll be on the ground in about an hour and a half."

Kristine relaxed. She wasn't usually jumpy. She flew all the time, but today . . . there was just . . . something.

Lainie, now wide awake, quirked a brow at her. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yes, of course." Again, the turbulence was nothing major. It happened.

The uneasy passenger stood up. Looked around. Then headed to the back restroom. Kristine shifted so she could watch for his return. At the ten-minute mark, she was about to ask Amanda or Jeffrey, the two flight attendants, to go check on him. Just as she started to rise, the man exited the lavatory and passed Kristine to take his seat again. Andrew rose and walked to the front of the plane, slipping around Amanda in first class, and went into the lavatory. Kristine caught Amanda's eye as she moved into the main cabin. Jeffrey was at the tail of the plane. Amanda raised a brow and nodded in the direction of the man who'd captured Kristine's attention.

Kristine gave a subtle nod back.

Amanda moved toward him, her smile friendly and professional. The passenger jumped to his feet again, his hand diving into his jacket as he stepped into the aisle.

Kristine reached under her jacket to release the snap holding her SIG in its holster. She'd intervene only if the cockpit was threatened. Andrew and Nathan were FBI. They had their weapons and would handle it to that point.

Amanda stopped next to him. "Sir, please sit back down," she said, her voice calm but firm. "Everything is fine. If you'll just put your seat belt on—"

"Stay back!" He pulled out a makeshift knife and held it to the neck of the person in the aisle seat next to him.

Amanda let out a startled yelp and stumbled back.

"Unbuckle or I'll slit your throat," he told the passenger.

She obeyed and he pulled the woman to her feet. Her shocked whimpers reached Kristine's ears even over the eruption of the panicked, screaming passengers.

Nathan rose, pulling his gun. “FBI,” he said. “Drop your weapon. Now.”

“I’m getting in the cockpit,” he shouted. “Open the cockpit!” His words were directed at Amanda.

A threat to the cockpit. That was Kristine’s cue. She pulled her gun and stood. “Everyone, stay calm!” The command in her voice stilled most of the people. “I’m an air marshal,” she said. “Sir, you need to drop the knife now.” The cockpit had a keypad code that only certain people knew. Amanda was one of those people. Kristine threw a look at Nathan. If he had a clear shot he’d take it, but right now, he didn’t. No one did.

“I got your back,” Jesslyn murmured. “We all do.” Jesslyn was a fire marshal, but she was also trained law enforcement.

Kenzie was also on her feet. A detective with the Lake City Police Department, Kenzie was a member of the SWAT team along with Cole and James, who also stood ready to assist. They wouldn’t have their weapons on them, but they were still powerful backup.

The man’s gaze flicked around the cabin, his desperation clear. “This plane is not going to Key West! I need the captain to fly it to another destination where I plan to disappear. Let me in the cockpit. Now!”

Disappear? Hmm . . . maybe. She wasn’t sure she believed that.

Kristine kept her focus on him and moved into the aisle toward him. If she could get close enough, she could take him down, but firing at him with a hostage in front of him wasn’t an option at the moment. “We can talk about this,” she said. “No one needs to get hurt.”

Andrew stepped out of the lavatory, his eyes bouncing between Kristine and the hijacker, who had his back to Andrew. It took him a nanosecond to read the situation. She shot him a quick glance and he gave a subtle nod indicating his readiness to help. His hand went to his weapon. Would he have a shot?

No. Amanda had just moved between Andrew and the hijacker. He frowned and shook his head. No shot.

Passengers whispered prayers, some crying, as the hijacker's hand trembled.

In a flash of movement, a man across the aisle lunged at the hijacker. The cabin erupted into chaos as the assailant, caught off guard, plunged the homemade weapon into his hostage's shoulder.

The wounded woman's scream echoed through the cabin and she went to the floor—and left the knife in the hijacker's hand. He swung the blade and caught his attacker across a raised forearm. Blood spurted and the man screamed and fell back. Another passenger jumped up to help him. "I'm a nurse," she said.

Andrew rushed at the hijacker and Kristine looked for an opening. Anywhere she could put a bullet in the man, but he twisted and slipped away from Andrew. Quick as a blink, he had his weapon against another woman's throat. "He shouldn't have done that! He shouldn't have . . . I didn't . . . She's . . ." He turned his attention to his new captive. "Get your seat belt off and stand up or I'll cut you too!"

Lainie rushed to help the fallen woman while James looked like he wanted to protest, but he clamped his mouth shut.

"Now!" The assailant's scream propelled the passenger to her feet. He pressed the knife against her skin, nicking it. A trickle of blood slid down and disappeared into the collar of her T-shirt. She squeezed her eyes shut but made no sound.

Kristine edged toward the assailant while motioning to Andrew to go to the left. He nodded his understanding and moved in accordance.

The hijacker swung the knife in front of him, keeping everyone at bay, then pressed the weapon once more against the neck of his hostage. "Stay away. I need in the cockpit. Someone open the cockpit door now or I'll—I'll slice her open! I will."

The woman bit her lip. Kristine caught her gaze and tried to convey she needed to remain calm. The woman stayed quiet, but her fear was a tangible thing.

Kristine didn't blame her.

Andrew moved in sync with Kristine, edging closer to the hijacker.

Slow, calculated steps. Each second stretched into an eternity while her mind raced, planning her next move. She had to end this before anyone else got hurt. Her mother's death flashed in her mind. Had her mom been as afraid as this hostage? Kristine could see the woman's tremors from her position in the aisle, but she was trying to be brave, to be strong.

"Sir," Kristine said, "no one can open the cockpit. You know that."

His eyes swept the sea of passengers. Some who were on their feet. He was looking for someone. His gaze locked on one of the passengers and tears trickled down his ashen cheeks.

"Th-then she dies!"

"No!" Kristine held out a hand. "Wait. Tell me. Once you get the cockpit door open, what do you plan to do?"

"Take control and fly where I want to go." His eyes flickered, and Kristine had a bad feeling he wasn't telling the truth.

"You can fly a plane?" She would play along for now.

He snorted. "Of course not. The pilot will."

Andrew had settled into an empty seat so when the man swiveled his head to look in his direction, Andrew looked like any other passenger. When the guy turned his attention back to Kristine, she caught Andrew's movement from the corner of her eye. He stood and moved closer. Nathan was ready to act as well. James, Kenzie, and Cole were waiting for her signal, but right now, no one had a clear way to stop this man without possibly hurting someone else.

The hijacker held the knife out in front of him once more, briefly removing it from the woman's throat. "Stop moving!"

Kristine froze and he swept the knife back beneath the woman's chin.

"I'm sorry. I have to do this. It's time."

TIME FOR WHAT? Andrew wondered.

"Time for what?" Kristine said.

“Time to do what I ask,” the guy said.

Kristine took another step forward. “Where do you want to go? What’s your plan?”

He shoved the knife toward her. “Stop!” Then back to his victim’s throat. “It’s not your business. All I need is to talk to the captain. I’ll tell him where to go.”

“What’s your name?”

“It doesn’t matter. Stop moving!” The knife swept out and back one more time.

Kristine stopped. “What are you going to do?” She took one more small step toward him.

Come on, shift and give me a clear shot. Andrew silently willed the man to move. But he was being surprisingly clever in his positioning.

“Hey! Put it down!” The yell came from several rows back in the main cabin.

Kristine shot a glance over her shoulder and Andrew caught movement in his peripheral vision. A passenger from the back raced up the aisle to tackle another passenger. Kristine’s attention momentarily shifted to the commotion.

The man holding the other passenger on the floor of the plane looked up. “He was heading toward you! I had to stop him!”

“Stay there,” Kristine ordered. “Both of you!”

She took another step toward the attacker, who swung the weapon out toward her. “Stop moving! I’m not playing with you!”

Before he could pull the knife back toward his hostage, Andrew moved fast, coming up from behind. He jammed his left arm over the attacker’s right forearm, shoved the woman away, then grabbed the guy’s wrist with his free hand. He twisted the captured arm down and back. The man screamed and struggled, but his one-armed fight was no match for Andrew’s vise-like grip.

Kristine lunged in and snapped a cuff around the extended wrist while Andrew finally put enough pressure on the hijacker’s other wrist that he released the weapon. It clunked to the floor. Nathan

swooped in to snag it with a gloved hand, Andrew cuffed the defeated man's other wrist, and then it was over.

Then the clapping started. Passenger by passenger until the plane was filled with thunderous applause by those who weren't capturing the moment on their phones.

Ugh.

"I'll stay with him," Kristine said. "You call it in."

He nodded and got on his phone.

Lainie had the plane's first aid kit and had put it to good use to help the woman who'd been stabbed.

"How is she?" Kristine asked.

"Fortunate. Her name is Bri. I've cleaned and bandaged it as best I could, but she needs stitches and pain meds. Thankfully, the blade went in just above her collarbone, and while painful, I don't think it went deep enough to cut anything major. Jugular is intact and she's breathing great." Lainie smiled at the woman, who blinked up at them from her position on the floor. She patted the woman's non-wounded shoulder. "You're going to be fine, Bri."

"Thank you," Bri whispered, then closed her eyes.

"I was going to take a look at the other woman, but when I started to go to her, she waved me off."

Kristine patted her friend's shoulder. "Thanks."

Thirty minutes later, they touched back down on the Lake City tarmac and rolled to a stop at the gate. The prisoner sat still and silent, chin touching his chest, refusing to talk or look at anyone.

As soon as the door was opened, Andrew hauled the sullen man to his feet, and he and the others escorted him into the hands of waiting FBI agents. He'd be taken to the Lake City County Detention Center where Andrew and Nathan would head to question him. He could only hope the guy was in a more talkative mood than he'd been once detained.

Andrew stood on the tarmac and gripped the bag holding the weapon. He marveled at the creative piece of "art." Sturdy wire cut into pieces fashioned into a blade and held together with superglue.

Then superglued to the end of a toothbrush. Everything that fashioned the “knife” was allowed in a carry-on or could be purchased in the airport after going through security. Except for the wire and the superglue. So how had those two items made it through security?

“Unbelievable,” he muttered. He couldn’t wait to search the guy’s bag.

“That’s the weapon?” Kristine asked.

He turned. As always, her beauty threatened to unnerve him. He cleared his throat and ordered himself to focus. “Yes. It’s clever, I’ll give him that.” Nathan and the others joined them.

“Who is he?” Nathan asked.

Andrew held up a black leather wallet. “ID says Marcus Brown. Forty-seven years old. Lives in Lake City.” They walked into the terminal. “You ready to go talk to him? I had a friend drop off a car for me.”

“Great minds think alike,” Nathan said. “I’ll see you there.”

Lainie oversaw the transport of her patient and the other two wounded passengers to the waiting ambulances and said goodbye to the others.

Andrew glanced at his phone. His mother had texted him.

I saw the news. Are you all right?

He tapped,

I’m fine, Mom. Back in Lake City, but fine. I’ll fill you in soon. Let Felix and Carson know pls.

She sent him a thumbs-up and a heart, and he tucked his phone back into his pocket. His brothers would be messaging any moment now. Instead of waiting for them to do so, he sent them a text on the family loop.

I’m fine. Busy wrapping things up. Will text or call later. Love you all.

FINAL APPROACH

His brother Carson was thirty-three years old and an architect in Atlanta, Georgia. He was older than Andrew by twenty-three months. Felix, their younger brother at twenty-nine years old, was a professional photographer, high in demand in the wedding and family portrait industry. He worked out of Greenville, South Carolina, and was married, with two girls. Andrew found it rather odd his parents tended to land where he was and not with their grandchildren, but he was glad whatever their reasons were. He climbed into the Bucar and headed for the detention center.