

DIVE TEAM INVESTIGATIONS

# BENEATH THE SURFACE

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BLACKBURN



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Lynn H. Blackburn, *Beneath the Surface*  
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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Blackburn, Lynn Huggins, author.

Title: Beneath the surface / Lynn H. Blackburn.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,

[2018] | Series: Dive team investigations ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2017044855 | ISBN 9780800729387 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Serial murder investigation—Fiction. | GSAFD: Romantic suspense fiction. | Christian fiction. | Mystery fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3602.L325285 B46 2018 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017044855>

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18 19 20 21 22 23 24      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To James—my favorite brown-eyed boy. I'm cherishing every day I have with you. You're compassionate, conscientious, and loyal, and I adore you. You make me proud every day, and I'm so thankful I get to have a front-row seat to watch the story God has for you unfold. I love you!

## Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to Jennifer Huggins Bayne—my sister and favorite nurse practitioner and the inspiration for Leigh in so many ways. Leigh has your name. Your compassion. Your fierce drive to protect and advocate for patients. Your strength. Your stubbornness. I hope she makes you proud. None of the medical scenes in this book would have been even close to accurate without your input and expertise. Thank you for replying to hundreds of texts about drugs and nurses and hospital procedures. I'm so lucky to have you as my sister and my friend.

Angel Glover—for sharing your experiences and helping me find a layer of complexity that Leigh was missing before your input.

Sergeant Chris Hammett—for your insights into the life of a homicide investigator. Thank you for the hours you spent explaining police procedures and giving me real-world examples of what it's like to do this day in and day out. Ryan, Gabe, and Anissa are each carrying parts of your story with them.

Mike Berry, Master Underwater Criminal Investigator (UCIDiver.com)—for answering my many questions about general dive team

procedures and the specific approach the Carrington divers use in the first scene. Thank you for your willingness to share your personal experiences with recovering bodies—and their condition after being in the water. Any mistakes in diving and underwater criminal investigation procedures are mine.

Investigator Tim Martin—for explaining the world of white-collar criminal investigations to me and for helping me bring Adam to life in a realistic way.

Daniel Fetterolf—for being willing to help me find the sources I needed to make this story a reality.

Keith and Beth Beutler—for helping me understand the best way to sabotage someone's brakes. 😊

Josh Moulin, cybersecurity expert (<https://JoshMoulin.com>)—for helping me understand how unrealistic my original version of Sabrina was and for helping me turn her into a more credible character even though my personal knowledge of cybersecurity and computer forensics is minimal. All mistakes and misrepresentations of the field are on me.

My critique group—for helping me brainstorm this series. The storylines and characters are all richer because of you.

My sisters of The Light Brigade—you've been there for me from the beginning. Your prayers, love, and support are never more than a Facebook message away, and I am eternally grateful for you.

Lynette Eason—for believing in me and mentoring me on this journey. I can't imagine how I could do this without you!

Tamela Hancock Murray—the world’s most patient and understanding agent. Thank you for your guidance, encouragement, and wisdom.

Andrea Doering—for giving me the chance to write this series.

Sandra Blackburn—for being the most supportive mother-in-law a girl could have and for being willing to do anything to help.

Ken and Susan Huggins—for being the kind of parents who taught me to work hard and love books and for still being there for me whenever I need you. Which is all the time!

Emma, James, and Drew—for being excited about every new book and for keeping my real world far more interesting than any I could make up.

Brian—without you there would be no stories with my name on them. My imagination never would have taken flight without your encouragement and your continual support and love.

My Savior—the Ultimate Storyteller—for allowing me to write stories for you.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

~ Psalm 19:14

# 1

**H**omicide investigator Ryan Parker flashed a thumbs-up to his dive buddy and fellow homicide investigator, Gabe Chavez.

Gabe responded in kind and they began a slow descent to the bottom of Lake Porter. He kept his breathing slow and steady. Unlike some people who experienced claustrophobia when diving, Ryan loved being surrounded by water. He paused to equalize the pressure in his ears and made sure Gabe did the same.

It had been too long since Ryan had been under. Too long since he'd been able to drown out the world and all its distractions. Beneath the surface, his focus was undivided. No phones rang. No sirens squawked. No tears dripped onto his shoulder from faces too small to be dealing with deserting, good-for-nothing . . .

No. He wouldn't go there.

Not today.

A fish darted past his arm. Then another.

Not everyone got to spend their day off floating around a real-life aquarium. Technically, he wasn't off work. He was on call until Monday morning, but he couldn't resist the chance to get a dive in. Most of the crazy stuff happened in the middle of the night

anyway. This was about as relaxing as an on-call Saturday could get, even if they were on a training exercise.

“You guys are awfully quiet. You doing okay?” The voice of homicide investigator Anissa Bell interrupted his thoughts. Anissa took her role as Carrington County Sheriff’s Office dive team captain seriously, and he appreciated the state-of-the-art equipment she’d managed to obtain, but he didn’t love the chatter messing with his peaceful descent.

“We’re good,” he said.

“Just keeping it old school,” Gabe said with a laugh.

Anissa didn’t laugh at Gabe’s joke. Those two needed to resolve their differences, but for now, not even Anissa’s animosity toward Gabe could mar the perfection of being underwater.

“What’s the visibility like?”

“Pretty bad,” he said. “I can only see a few feet, and that’s with the light.”

“Perfect.”

Only Anissa would be thrilled with less-than-optimal conditions. He could picture her hazel eyes flashing with delight. She might even smile. Or not.

“You must really hate me, Bell,” Gabe said.

“We don’t get to choose the conditions, Chavez,” she said.

Ryan stayed out of their spat. She wasn’t wrong. It certainly made the training more realistic, but at the same time he didn’t blame Gabe for not liking it.

The dive team was made up of officers from multiple departments—all of them experienced divers who volunteered to be on call for water-related emergencies, underwater crime scene investigations, and evidence recovery. They trained at least once a month, and for today’s training exercise they’d picked one of the deeper parts of the lake and scanned it with their side-scan sonar, looking for anything interesting to recover. They’d found a debris field of manmade objects—a rectangle and some round shapes that could



be tires, along with a few other objects they couldn't identify. It was one of the more interesting debris fields they'd ever found on one of these exercises, so they'd marked it with a crab pot and suited up.

Ryan kept an eye on his depth as he followed the rope down. He didn't want to hit the bottom and stir up a lot of debris.

"We're almost there, Anissa," he said.

One never knew what a training exercise would bring. Ryan and his buddies often wagered what would be the find of the day. Old appliances usually won. Every now and then they'd come across random car parts. One time they'd found what must have been the contents of some girl's closet strewn over a large swath of the lake bottom. He wished he knew the story behind that one.

But most of the time they found a whole lot of nothing. He forced himself to concentrate and kept his light trained on the surface beneath him. Maybe this time they'd find a lost wedding band or a missing necklace they could return to the rightful owner. It would be nice to make someone smile for a change.

"Easy," Anissa said. She was watching everything on the cameras they had attached to their helmets.

Ryan glanced at his dive computer. Plenty of pressure. Plenty of air. Plenty of daylight left. He'd enjoy an easy ascent, and if the good citizens of Carrington County could avoid any unnecessary criminal activity, he might be able to dive again this afternoon for fun.

The other side of Lake Porter had a great area for recreational divers. A few caves, a couple of old boats, even parts of an old community that had been submerged when the land was flooded to form the lake eighty years ago. He'd have to see if Gabe wanted to jo—

What . . . ? An object materialized beneath him. He barely had time to stop himself from swimming into the mass hovering above the lake floor.

"I've got something here, Gabe," he said.

Gabe swam closer and directed his light in the same area as Ryan's. "Is that . . . ?"

Bile rose in Ryan's throat.

"Anissa, are you seeing this?"

Visibility was minimal, but he was able to make out weights and chains. More than enough to hold down the body they were wrapped around.

What was left of the body, anyway. Whoever dumped this person here had wanted to be sure no one ever found him or found out who he was.

Because from what little he could see, this body didn't have hands.

Or a head.

---

The sharp rap on the door shattered Leigh Weston's peaceful morning. She tried unsuccessfully to stifle the scream that flew from her mouth.

"Leigh, are you okay?"

She knew that voice. Relief and embarrassment collided in her nervous system. What was with her? She had nothing to be afraid of. Not anymore. She steadied herself against the kitchen counter for a moment.

"Leigh? If you don't open the door, I'm going to break it down."

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she called as she willed her legs to propel her forward and the flush to fade from her skin.

She opened the door. Ryan Parker stood a foot away, his body at an angle to her, hands twitching at his sides. She had no trouble believing he hadn't been joking about breaking down her door. She appreciated the protective response, but what was he doing standing on her front porch—in a wet suit—in the first place?

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Why did you scream?" he asked at the same time.

“You first,” she said.

Concern-filled eyes held hers for a moment before he conceded.  
“Dive team training.”

“Did you forget your clothes?”

A flicker of a smile. Then back to tall, dark, and brooding.  
“Going back later. Why did you scream?”

She wasn’t going to get any more answers until she gave him at least one. “I wasn’t expecting anyone. You startled me.”

“Sounded more like terror than surprise.”

“Are you an expert on screams now?”

“Something like that.”

She refused to offer any more of an explanation. Her demons were her own. He didn’t need to know—

“I’m sorry I *startled* you,” he said. “We were doing a training exercise not far from here and came across something . . .”

She didn’t miss the way he stumbled over the word. Whatever the something was, it must have been bad.

“We’re going to need to spend some more time in this part of the lake and I was wondering if you’d mind if we use your dock.”

“Of course not. You didn’t even have to ask.”

Now he grinned. The grin that had left more than one girl in a state of breathlessness, herself included. “I thought you’d say that.” He looked over her shoulder. She turned and followed his gaze. Through the windows in the living room she could see at least four officers walking around on the dock and two boats tied on either side.

“Mind if we use your driveway too? Not everyone will be arriving by boat,” Ryan said. “It shouldn’t be more than a few days, but there might be more activity later on as evidence starts coming in.”

Law enforcement officers would be surrounding her home? Excellent. Leigh struggled to keep her expression serene. “That won’t be a problem. Always happy to come to the aid of Carrington’s finest.”

“I promise we’ll clear out as soon as possible.”

“No!” she said, nearly shouting. So much for cool, calm, and collected. “It’s not an issue. Stay as long as you need to.”

She didn’t like the look Ryan was giving her. Had she given away more than she’d intended?

“I sure do appreciate it, ma’am,” he said in an exaggerated Southern drawl, tipping an imaginary hat.

The unmistakable thumping of a helicopter reached her ears. “You aren’t planning to land a chopper in the yard, are you?”

“No,” he said with a frown. “My guess is that’s the news.” He walked out the door, down the steps, and onto the front lawn, shielding his eyes as he looked at the sky.

She couldn’t resist following him. He was right. The local news station helicopter hovered far too low for comfort. She gestured toward it. “Are you going to tell me what you found in the lake, or do I have to wait for my house to appear in footage on the evening news?”

“I’m surprised it took them this long.” Ryan’s eyes were troubled when he looked at her. “We found a body.”

Something about the way he said it made her shudder. “When you say ‘we found,’ you mean ‘I found,’ don’t you?”

His quick nod confirmed her suspicions.

She couldn’t imagine what that would be like. She’d spent more than her share of time around the dying, and the dead, but that didn’t mean she ever wanted to swim into a body on the bottom of the lake. “How awful,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Not the most fun I’ve ever had on a dive, that’s for sure,” he said. “But don’t feel too sorry for me. It’s a good thing. We didn’t know we had a problem before this morning. Now we know we have a killer out there. There’ve been no local reports of anyone missing that match the little bit of a description we have. My guess is this guy probably isn’t from around here. I hate to think that there’s a loved one out there somewhere who’s wondering why he

hasn't come home. At least we'll be able to give them some closure. No one deserves to die forgotten."

He moved toward the driveway and the path that led from there to the dock.

"Thank you, Ryan," she said.

He turned back toward her. "For what? Crashing your Saturday morning and invading your property?"

"No. For caring."

His eyes widened and he shifted from side to side. "It's no big thing. I gotta run."

This time he took off toward the dock without giving her a chance to respond.

Who would have thought a compliment would send Ryan Parker running for cover?