

“Lynn H. Blackburn is an amazing voice in romantic suspense—don’t miss her!”

—LYNETTE EASON, bestselling author of DANGER NEVER SLEEPS series

# LYNN H. BLACKBURN



# UNKNOWN THREAT

DEFEND AND PROTECT



“Blackburn’s Defend and Protect series is off with a bang in *Unknown Threat*. This heart-racing romantic suspense is one for the keeper shelf! Don your tactical vests and get ready to engage a compelling story that will forbid you from abandoning its pages. Do. Not. Miss. This. One!”

**Ronie Kendig**, bestselling, award-winning  
author of *The Tox Files*

“*Unknown Threat* is a fantastic read! An action-packed opening and sharply drawn characters drew me right in and held me captive. Blackburn has an exceptional gift for weaving twisting plots with characters that walk right off the page. I absolutely adore Faith, the bright and stalwart FBI special agent. I love the attention to detail regarding Secret Service operations. The swoon-worthy romance between Faith and Luke is the perfect slow burn. *Unknown Threat* is an exciting start to a thrilling new romantic-suspense series!”

**Elizabeth Goddard**, award-winning author  
of the *Uncommon Justice* series

“In *Unknown Threat*, Lynn Blackburn has created a page-turning novel with all the elements I’ve come to love in her books. The hero and heroine are unique and compelling, while surrounded by a rich cast that adds depth to the story. The suspense thread is intense and pulses with energy and pressure. And the romance? It’s perfection, with tension to keep me rooting for the characters. It’s a perfect read for those who love engaging stories that are threaded with hope.”

**Cara Putman**, award-winning author  
of *Flight Risk* and *Imperfect Justice*

# UNKNOWN THREAT

Books by Lynn H. Blackburn

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DIVE TEAM INVESTIGATIONS

*Beneath the Surface*

*In Too Deep*

*One Final Breath*

DEFEND AND PROTECT

*Unknown Threat*



DEFEND  
AND  
PROTECT

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LYNN H.  
BLACKBURN



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To my sister, Jennifer—the keeper of decades of memories, the master of mischief, the world’s greatest aunt, and the best storyteller in the family. You’ve made life fun from day one, and I’m thankful every day that God chose you to be my lifelong playmate, advocate, and friend.

# — 1 —

LUKE POWELL'S HEAD THROBBED as he parked his sedan in the empty lot and glared into the nearby trees. The darkness had just begun the slow fade toward dawn, and the US Secret Service special agent could barely make out the trailhead. He used to love Mondays. There was nothing quite like tackling the week and showing it who was boss before the sun had a chance to reach the horizon.

He didn't love Mondays anymore, and he hated running alone. Where was Zane? If he didn't show in the next three minutes—

Headlights pierced the predawn air.

Finally.

Luke climbed from the car and paced in front of it until Zane joined him. US Secret Service Special Agent Zane Thacker didn't speak but fell in beside Luke as they walked toward the trailhead.

Until eleven weeks ago, they'd been a trio. Barring protective details or urgent cases, Luke, Zane, and Thad had met here every Monday morning to tackle the three-mile trail around the lake. Thad was the one who'd introduced them to it when first Zane, and then Luke, joined the Raleigh resident office. It had been Thad's favorite place to run, and since his death in February, Zane and



Luke had continued to meet here every Monday. It was as if they would be spitting on their friend and mentor's memory by failing to go for a run. It was pathetic, but for now it was all they had.

They still couldn't explain to Thad's widow, Rose, why her twins had celebrated their eighth birthday over the weekend with their daddy's buddies instead of their daddy. They could tell Rose all about the explosive that had ripped Thad's car in half. They could tell her there had been a woman of Asian ancestry, somewhere between twenty-nine and thirty-five years of age, in the car with him. But no one could tell Rose who the woman was or why Thad had been at dinner with her—and most devastatingly of all, no one could tell her who had killed them.

Some buddies they'd turned out to be.

"Hold up, man." Zane stopped and propped his foot on a nearby bench. They'd reached the midpoint of the trail, and Luke looked out over the lake beside them as Zane tied his shoe.

"That party nearly killed me." Zane popped to his feet and they resumed their pace, running side by side. "I had no idea eight-year-olds could be so vicious."

"I could have lived my entire life without that experience." Luke loved Betsy and Bobby Baker like they were his own niece and nephew, but their party had been slow torture. He'd spent half the time playing laser tag with Betsy and the other half getting a massive beatdown from Bobby at basketball. The twins had fun. But Luke had been completely unprepared for the chaos, the noise level, and the amount of sugar consumption.

"The twins are great on their own, but I think next year we should see if Rose could choose something calmer," Zane said. "Instead of going to an arcade, maybe we could take them to a movie or something."

"They won't be here next year." Luke had tried to keep the

emotion out of his voice, but based on Zane's quick "What?" he hadn't succeeded.

"She told me last night after the party. She's moving to Texas in June. Her parents have a big ranch, and they're fixing up a small house on the property. The kids will have their own horses, and they'll have cousins and uncles and aunts and grandparents . . ."

Luke gave up on trying to make it sound wonderful.

"But what about Thad's parents?"

Thad's parents lived in Virginia, a short two hours away. The move would devastate them. But Luke would bet his next five Americanos that Zane was using them as an excuse to keep from saying what he wanted to say. *What about us?*

"She didn't say much about them other than that they were supporting her decision and she hoped we would as well." Like they had a choice.

"Is this about the woman in the car?" Zane spat the words.

"Thad loved his wife and kids, and he was not having an affair." Luke repeated the phrase that had become his own personal mantra. "There *is* an explanation."

Zane held up his hands in surrender. "Man, you don't have to convince me. I'm asking if we need to convince Rose."

Luke didn't say anything for a quarter of a mile as they continued around the lake loop. The late-April morning was cool and crisp, with a faint hint of something floral in the air. It was shaping up to be a beautiful day in North Carolina. Maybe he would see if Betsy and Bobby could go fishing this afternoon. He'd promised them he would take them sometime, back when he thought he had all the time in the world. Not less than six weeks.

He couldn't blame Rose. Wouldn't. But it still hurt. Was Zane right? Did they need to try to convince Rose? "I don't think this is about the woman in the car. Not directly. I don't think she

suspects Thad of infidelity. I think she suspects us of keeping her in the dark.”

“She’s no more in the dark than the rest of us.” Zane swiped at a branch. “Thad was up to something. I don’t believe for a second that there was anything inappropriate going on, but whatever he was doing, it got him killed.”

They finished the run with no more conversation. What more was there to say that they hadn’t already covered a million times?

Luke slowed to a walk as they exited the tree line and approached the parking lot. Zane fell into step beside him.

They were fifteen feet away from Zane’s car—the finest late-model sedan the US Secret Service had to offer—when a shot split the air, and Zane hit the ground.

Luke dropped beside him. Another shot, and the ground spat dirt into Luke’s face. He strained to hear something—anything—that would give him a clue as to the shooter’s location, but his ears throbbed with the sound of his own heartbeat, nothing else.

“Zane?” Luke hissed.

Zane stirred beside him.

Relief flooded through Luke. “You hit?”

“Arm. You?”

“Missed me. Can you move?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Both men crawled toward the relative safety of Zane’s car. Two more shots peppered their path, and the distinctive scent of burnt gunpowder infiltrated the morning haze. A third shot left Luke’s leg burning like someone had branded him.

But after the next shot, Zane dropped to his chest and didn’t move. Luke gave up all attempts at staying low. He grabbed Zane under the arms and dragged him behind his car, leaving a trail

of blood to mark their progress. Another crack split the air, and the toe of Zane's running shoe disintegrated before Luke's eyes.

Luke made sure Zane was completely hidden by the vehicle before he stopped and eased Zane's body to the ground. "Stay with me, buddy. Hang in there."

Luke twisted his wrist, tapped his watch until the phone keypad appeared, and dialed 911.

Zane mumbled something Luke didn't catch. While he waited for the call to go through, he patted Zane's pockets, looking for the keys. Zane grabbed Luke's arm and jabbed a finger in the direction of the car before his head dropped back to the ground.

Luke bent lower to get a look at whatever it was Zane had been trying to show him. The 911 dispatcher was saying something, but Luke didn't respond.

The wires hanging from the axle didn't belong. Neither did the slab of C-4 they were attached to.

Two more shots rang out. This time they hit Zane's car.

"We have to move." Luke wasn't sure if Zane was still conscious, but he didn't have time to worry about that. Once more, he grabbed Zane under the arms and dragged, this time away from the car.

His own car was a good hundred feet away, but staying beside a vehicle that was ready to blow wasn't any safer than risking the trip to the other side.

Around the halfway point, the glorious sounds of sirens filtered through the surrounding trees.

Then the ground shook.

And everything went dark.