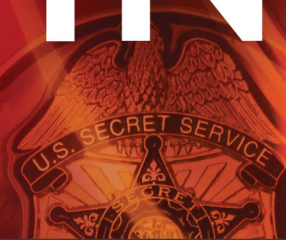


"Lynn H. Blackburn is an amazing voice in romantic suspense—don't miss her!"
—LYNETTE EASON, bestselling author of the DANGER NEVER SLEEPS series

LYNN H. BLACKBURN

MALICIOUS INTENT

DEFEND AND PROTECT



Praise for *Unknown Threat*

“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*

“By far the best romantic suspense book I have read this year! Fans of Blackburn will not want to miss this fantastic read!”

Write-Read-Life

“*Unknown Threat* by Lynn H. Blackburn is a fast-paced romantic suspense read. I loved the action-packed scenes.”

Urban Lit Magazine

“Wow, talk about an intense and riveting read. This series started with a bang and kept up a thrilling pace. I think this is my favorite book by Blackburn to date.”

Relz Reviewz

Books by Lynn H. Blackburn

DIVE TEAM INVESTIGATIONS

Beneath the Surface

In Too Deep

One Final Breath

DEFEND AND PROTECT

Unknown Threat

Malicious Intent



DEFEND
AND
PROTECT
2

MALICIOUS INTENT

LYNN H.
BLACKBURN



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For Jane B. Huggins, aka Granny,
for a lifetime of memories and a legacy of grit.
We don't make wimpy women in our family,
and I suspect that's because of you.

And in memory of Houston Huggins, aka Pa,
who I adored, who adored me,
and who I suspect would have been my biggest fan.

THE STACK OF CASH on his desk was as close to genuine currency as squeeze cheese was to Brie.

US Secret Service Special Agent Gil Dixon turned one of the fraudulent twenties over and studied the back. There were a few similarities to the real thing, but not enough to confuse anyone paying attention.

“Free money?” Special Agent Zane Thacker asked as he passed Gil’s cubicle for his own.

“Hardly enough to fool with.” Gil glanced back at the file. Two hundred dollars in twenties. Even if the person who deposited it had been trying to do something illegal, no prosecutor would touch the case. It simply wasn’t worth it.

“Where did it come from?” Zane asked the question, but his tone indicated he was making conversation to pass the time, not because he cared about the answer.

“Hedera, Inc.”

Zane’s head appeared over the top of the cubicle wall they shared. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.

“Why would she have counterfeit bills?”

“No idea.”

“When are you going to see her?”

“This afternoon. I thought I’d swing by her office first since the cash came from a business deposit.”

“What’s a company like Hedera doing depositing cash anyway?” Zane’s question was the same one Gil had been pondering since the case hit his desk.

“Beats me.” Hedera’s accounts should have been almost entirely digital. The deposit had been for a little over two thousand dollars in cash, only two hundred of which were fake bills. “That’s the reason I want to talk to Dr. Collins.”

One reason, but not the only reason.

Everyone in the office knew that Hedera, Inc. was owned by Dr. Ivy Collins. But no one knew that Ivy Collins was *his* Ivy.

No. Not his anymore. And she hadn’t been in a long time.

The Ivy from his memory had grown into a delicately boned woman with intense eyes that sparkled from the home page of Hedera, Inc., the company she’d founded four years earlier.

She’d been his best friend. They’d had their whole life planned. School, college, marriage. It was all so simple. Next to Emily, Gil’s twin sister, Ivy was his favorite person in the world, so it only made sense that he would spend the rest of his life with her.

It never occurred to either of them that anything could tear them apart . . . until the day she said goodbye and climbed into her mom’s sedan. He scampered up a tree and watched until the car disappeared from view, his nine-year-old heart broken.

When he saw her again, she was sixteen. He was seventeen. And that summer, she stole his heart.

And then . . . she was gone.

He’d thought before about confronting her, but he’d never

followed through. What would he say if he ran into her? “Why did you cut me out of your life?” or “What is wrong with you?” or “I missed you.” He had no idea what might fly out of his mouth. Their reunion was fifteen years overdue, but this certainly wasn’t how he’d expected it to happen. Would she be surprised? Did she even know he was in town? Did she ever think of him?

Not that it mattered. Or it shouldn’t matter.

Who was he kidding?

Ivy Collins was the girl who got away. The woman who had haunted him for years. The mystery he needed to solve.

It was time. He was going to get answers. Today.

SIX HOURS LATER, Gil and Zane pulled into an empty Hedera parking lot. Zane waved a hand to indicate the vacant spaces. “It’s only four thirty. Why isn’t anyone here?”

Gil parked in a visitor space and dialed the Hedera number. A recorded feminine voice with the barest hint of a Southern drawl told him Hedera’s business hours were 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and encouraged him to leave a message, assuring him he would be contacted during normal business hours.

“These people work seven to four? I wonder if they’re hiring.” Zane glanced at his watch. “What now?”

Gil wasn’t ready to let this go. Not yet. “Do you have time to swing by her house?”

“What else do I have to do?” Zane laughed, but there was a bite to his words. Zane was usually a fun guy, but he’d grown somber and withdrawn over the last few months. Most people assumed it was because of the trauma they’d all been through in the spring. Zane had been shot, then he’d lost his car, his home, and almost everything he owned. And if that wasn’t bad enough,

his transition to the protective detail had been delayed indefinitely. All solid reasons for a guy to be in a funk.

But Luke Powell, another fellow agent, was convinced it had more to do with Zane's tense relationship with the only female agent in the office, Tessa Reed, and Gil was increasingly sure he was right.

This wasn't the time to pry, but the time was coming. For now, he let it go. "She lives about five minutes from here. Let's see if she's home."

Gil slowed as he approached Ivy's house but didn't stop. The house was in an older part of Raleigh, where the lots were large and the subdivision delineations weren't clear. Two stories. Probably with a basement. Sitting on a wooded acre of land.

He drove past five more houses, turned around, and came back. He pulled into Ivy's driveway and parked near the walkway to the front porch. Gil and Zane exited the car and walked to the front door.

Should he warn Zane about his history with Ivy? As far as Zane was concerned, there was no reason to think this would be anything other than a friendly chat.

If the roles were reversed, he would want to know. He paused on the step. "Zane—"

Zane reached around him and hit the doorbell. "What?"

He couldn't very well start this conversation now. "It'll keep." He hoped.

They waited, but there was no sound of footsteps. Gil stepped to the door and knocked. The door swung open as soon as his knuckles made contact.

Not normal.

Was it possible that Ivy had left her front door open? Sure. Was he going to assume that was the case? Absolutely not. Gil pulled his weapon from his hip.

Zane was already dialing for backup. Good. Better safe than sorry. He put his phone back in his pocket and gave Gil a quick nod.

Gil pushed the door all the way open. It swung silently. He concentrated all his senses on this new environment. The foyer was small, with a hexagon-shaped library/office to his left. To his right sat a formal dining room. Both were empty. Straight ahead was a living area with sofas, a large TV, and comfortable chairs. The room was tidy, and there were no apparent signs of a struggle.

But two distinct and wildly contrasting odors battered his senses. Cinnamon and charred flesh.

Zane lifted his chin in a quick up-and-to-the-left. Gil followed, and they cleared two bedrooms and a small bathroom. Then Gil took the lead, and they prowled through the living area. A door to the left was probably another bedroom. If the house plan made any sense at all, then the archway to the right would lead to the kitchen area, but he couldn't get a good sense of the space from where he stood. A door opened from somewhere at the back of the house and feet pounded down steps. But someone was moving in the space on the other side of that wall.

Was a drawer being opened?

After another quick glance at Zane, Gil swung into the next room. A breakfast nook was on his left with a door that he assumed led to the outside, and on his right was the kitchen.

Across the large island stood Ivy Collins.

His Ivy.

It was as if no time had passed. No years of silence. Something strong and true pulled him to her. His body tried to close the gap between them, but his mind resisted. Years of training forced Gil to scan the room.

"Hold here." Zane's voice vibrated with rage as his footsteps retreated. "I'll clear the bedroom."

Blood ran down her right temple and trickled from puffy lips. Her sweater was ripped and hung off one shoulder, revealing a nasty burn. Something was very wrong with her right hand, but Gil couldn't focus on that, because in her left hand, she held a gun.

Before he could tell her that he was there to help, she pulled the trigger.