

DIVE TEAM INVESTIGATIONS

INTOO DEEP

LYNN H.
BLACKBURN



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To Drew—my favorite blue-eyed boy. My warrior child. You've had me wrapped around your little finger from day one. You're fierce and tender, serious and silly, and I'm amazed that God allowed me to be your mom. I know God has big plans for you, and while I'm in no hurry for you to grow up, I'm excited to see what he has in store for you. I love you!

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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

The shrill ping of his cell phone earned white-collar crimes investigator Adam Campbell a vicious glare from his aunt Margaret. His cousins all dropped their gazes to their plates, several of them failing to suppress snickers, as Adam stood. He glanced around the table at the assembled family members before focusing on the matriarch of the family. “Excuse me, Grandmother. Everyone. I’m on call.”

Grandmother sniffed. “Very well.”

Conversation resumed as Adam made his way around the perimeter of the oval dining room. He refused to look down or run like a frightened schoolboy. He maintained a measured pace and made eye contact with anyone who bothered to look in his direction. He had nothing to be ashamed of.

His parents were in Italy until Thursday, or his mother would have given him an encouraging smile. Oh well.

No one glared at his brother when he was on call. Grandmother never batted an eye when Alexander needed to miss Sunday lunch because he was in surgery. But heaven forbid Adam miss the monthly meal. Keeping the citizens of Carrington, North Carolina, safe

was a perfectly good job as far as Grandmother was concerned. But not for a Campbell.

Grandfather Campbell caught his eye.

And winked.

Adam didn't bother trying to hide his smile as he left the room. His grandfather was a rock. They met for breakfast at least once a week at the Pancake Hut, and Adam regaled him with stories from the sheriff's office.

The restaurant was a favorite with the law enforcement and medical communities in Carrington, and Adam's standing breakfast date with his grandfather had gotten a lot of attention when he first joined the force.

The Pancake Hut wasn't the kind of place the Campbell family usually frequented.

As Charles Campbell made it a point to get to know Adam's co-workers by name, Adam's fellow deputies soon realized he might be worth several billion dollars, but he was no snob.

It was a poorly kept secret that Charles Campbell was in the habit of picking up the tab for every law enforcement officer in the Pancake Hut whenever he was there—whether or not he was with Adam.

Grandmother wasn't exactly aware of that arrangement.

Before long, deputies and investigators started coming by Adam's desk and saying, "Yo, Campbell, I've got one for your grandfather. He'll get a kick out of this." Or they'd stop by their booth and share something that had happened while they were on patrol.

Grandfather ate it up.

Over the last few years, Grandfather had managed to fund several scholarships for law enforcement officers, and he'd fallen completely under the spell of homicide investigator Anissa Bell, captain of the Carrington County Sheriff's Office dive team. All Anissa had to do was hint that she'd been eyeing some new piece of equipment for the team and Grandfather made it happen.

Grandmother wasn't exactly aware of that arrangement either.

Adam paused in the hallway and looked again at the text that had saved him from another hour of family politics.

Uh-oh. He walked briskly as he maneuvered his way through the library and music room and then hit the marble floor of the large foyer.

"Everything okay, Mr. Adam?" The concerned words from the family's longtime butler slowed his steps.

"Not really, Marcel. A car ran off the highway and over the embankment at the double bridges. Probably last night. A boater found the car this morning."

The double bridges spanned Lake Porter and connected the tourist side of the lake to the city of Carrington. The car would have gone close to a hundred yards over bumpy terrain next to the bridge approach before plunging into the water.

Failed brakes?

Road rage?

Suicide?

It had happened before.

"Was someone in the car?" Marcel asked the question in a low voice.

When Adam nodded in the affirmative, Marcel shook his head in dismay.

Adam's family, and Marcel was family, had come unglued when a car accident took Adam's younger brother, Aaron, at the far-too-young age of ten. None of them had ever completely gotten over it.

"You going to have to get in? It's cold." Marcel handed Adam his coat.

"We have dry suits," Adam said. "We'll be okay."

"Be careful, sir." Marcel opened the door, and Adam broke into a jog. "Thanks, Marcel. Hold the fort."

Marcel's low chuckle reached his ears as he slid behind the wheel and took the turns of the lengthy driveway at a speed that would

have gotten him on Grandmother's bad list, if he hadn't already been there.

It took fifteen minutes to reach the double bridges. The bridges had a formal name—after a local politician from the thirties—but no one used it.

He slowed as he approached the roadblock, then pulled in behind fellow dive team member and homicide investigator Gabe Chavez. Gabe climbed out first and met him at the door, giving a low whistle as he looked the Audi over. “When you gonna let me drive this baby?”

This was why he tried not to drive his personal vehicle to crime scenes, but sometimes he didn't have a choice. Grandmother had given him the car for his college graduation—even though he had told her he didn't need it—and she didn't approve of him arriving for Sunday lunch in the unmarked sedan he drove for work.

He held the keys out to Gabe. “Any time.”

Gabe eyed the keys, longing evident on his face. “One of these days I'm going to take you up on it.”

Adam pulled his bag out of the back, locked the car, and pocketed the keys. He glanced at the line of cars on the side of the road. “Who else is here?”

“Ryan is hiking in the mountains with Leigh,” Gabe said. Homicide investigator Ryan Parker was the second-in-command on the dive team. His girlfriend, Leigh Weston, had survived an attack by a serial killer last spring.

“Hiking? Or proposing?”

Gabe grinned. “I guess we'll find out when they get back. He got the text about this, but Anissa told him to disregard it.”

“You've talked to Anissa?” Gabe and Anissa hadn't gotten along well since she'd kicked him off the dive team a few years ago when his undercover work had repeatedly kept him from making it to training dives. But since he'd come back to Homicide, and since two of their divers had left the team—one for medical reasons and

another for retirement—she'd been encouraged to allow him back. Their relationship remained strained, but since the serial-killer case involving Leigh last spring, the tension between them had eased.

Slightly.

“Yeah. I talked to her. She bit my head off for being on the wrong side of town and told me to hurry up because she and Lane were already on the scene.”

“She didn't call me,” Adam said.

Gabe smirked. “Man, it's the second Sunday of the month. We all knew where *you* were.”

Adam bit back a retort. He loved his family. He really did. Some of them were awesome. Some of them weren't. Same as most families, he imagined. And a sight better than a lot of the families he'd seen while working in the uniformed division. Even Grandmother's disapproval, which irked him to no end, was part of her way of showing love.

At least Grandfather said it was. He said she worried over her grandson far more than her frosty demeanor indicated.

Gabe punched his arm. “Don't worry about it, man. This is an evidence-recovery situation. Nothing we could have done for the victim even if we'd been sitting in the water waiting on the car.”

“How do you know?”

“The guy who found her said he was out here around lunch-time and saw the car. Dove in and pulled the body out. Probably destroyed a ton of evidence. He said she was limp in her seatbelt, but he thought maybe she was just unconscious. After he got her to shore, his take on it was that her neck was broken.”

Adam fought the image Gabe's words created in his mind. He was sorry for the victim. Horrified at the manner of death, whether it had been a dreadful accident or a successful suicide attempt. But he wasn't sorry he wouldn't have to be the one to pull her body from the water.

He scrambled down the incline to the waterline. There would be no need for any of their fancy sonar equipment on this case.

He could see the car from the edge of the lake. Dive team captain and homicide investigator Anissa Bell and Deputy Lane Edwards were in dry suits, checking tanks and gauges.

“Bout time,” Anissa said. “We’re shorthanded. Chavez, sketch the scene. Campbell, get suited up for backup, but you’re on topside evidence. Get the path of the car, etcetera. I want all of it documented before we pull the car out and contaminate the scene.” Anissa pointed to a makeshift changing area—a couple of tarps tied up between a few trees. “And be quick. We don’t want to run out of daylight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Adam said.

Gabe glared at Anissa for a second before grabbing a sketch pad and getting to work. “She thinks she’s being mean, but I didn’t want to get wet today anyway.”

Adam didn’t bother responding to Gabe’s mutterings. Partly because he wasn’t so sure Anissa had been trying to be mean. As far as he was concerned, she’d given the worst job to him. It took him fifteen minutes to change out of his clothes, get into the dry suit, and prep his own tanks and gauges so he had everything ready if Anissa or Lane required assistance.

He tried to ignore the shrouded body near the water’s edge. They couldn’t do anything about the evidence destroyed by the man who’d jumped in the lake and tried to save the victim. Even after he was sure she was dead, he’d gone down repeatedly until he freed her and pulled her body to the surface.

Adam focused on the work Anissa and Lane were doing in the water, prepping the car to be retrieved. The car was in water shallow enough that they didn’t need lift bags to float it to the surface. They would be able to tow it out of the water with a wrecker.

Anissa was using this as an opportunity for Lane to be the rigger—he would wrap a chain around the car’s axle a few times and then stretch the chain to the shore, where it would be hooked to a tow truck. Anissa was acting as the safety, observing everything and ready to assist if Lane needed it.

“Adam.” Anissa’s voice came through the earpiece he was wearing. “You might as well go ahead and call Sabrina.”

Dr. Sabrina Fleming was a local professor of cybersecurity and computer forensics.

“What did you find?” Adam asked.

“A laptop.”

The Carrington County Sheriff’s Office had a wonderful forensics team, and they did great work, but Sabrina had a lab filled with all the latest equipment as well as everything that would be needed to attempt to pull any information from the waterlogged computer.

“I’ll send her a text now.” Adam retrieved his phone from his bag. He didn’t need to look her up in his contacts. He had her number memorized.

She responded immediately.

“Anissa,” Adam said, “she can come now. How long will it be before you bring it up?” Underwater criminal investigators never removed anything from the water. The laptop would need to be placed in a special box filled with lake water. Recovering anything from the hard drive was actually harder if it dried out improperly.

“Tell her to come on,” Anissa said. “We’ll have it ready.”

Adam fought the grin that tried to cross his lips. This wasn’t the time for it. Someone had died. But at least he’d get to see Sabrina this afternoon.

A shower of gravel drew his attention to the steep incline surrounding him. He gave Dr. Sharon Oliver, medical examiner, a nod as she inched her way down the embankment to the body. “Weren’t you on call last weekend?” he asked her.

She let out a huff as she set her bag down beside the body. “I was. And I will be on call for the next two weeks while Dr. Sherman enjoys his thirty-fifth anniversary by traipsing all over Europe.”

Adam laughed. She sounded put out, but he knew she wasn’t. “You’re just jealous.”

She flashed him a wicked grin. “You got that right.”

“All right, honey,” she said, addressing the victim. “Let’s see what you can tell me, and then let’s get you away from prying eyes.”

Gabe approached the body and snapped pictures as Dr. Oliver examined it. “I assume you’re talking about our hovering friends?” He glared at the heavens, where a news helicopter was circling.

“Indeed,” she said.

Adam studied the surface of the water, thankful he had an excuse to look away from the body.

But Gabe’s low whistle was hard to disregard.

“Um, Campbell?”

Adam tried to ignore Gabe, but he didn’t want to be unprofessional. “What?” He didn’t turn.

“You may want to see this.”

Jerk. Gabe knew how he felt about dead bodies. Everyone knew. He couldn’t look at one without seeing Aaron. “I’m watching Anissa and—”

“Adam.” Gabe’s tone was . . . off. What was going on?

He kept his eyes on the water but backed toward the body. “What is it?”

Gabe clapped a hand on his back. “I’ll watch the water. You need to talk to the doc.”

“Wha—”

Gabe shook his head and then nodded toward the body.

Adam made eye contact with the doctor. She pointed to the victim. Why were they so insistent that he look at a dead body?

Fine.

Lord, help me.

He glanced at the victim.

Then stared.

There, written in permanent marker on the victim’s abdomen, were six words.

They killed me. Ask Adam Campbell.

Sabrina slowed her MINI Cooper as she neared the police barricade at the double bridges over Lake Porter. A young deputy, hand raised, approached her car.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. You’ll need to follow the detour signs and go around.”

She handed him a business card. “Investigator Campbell called me,” she said. Where was Adam? He was always so courteous. She couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t met her at the police barricade and escorted her through.

Technically, she didn’t need to collect the evidence. This dive team knew what they were doing. She’d never received evidence from them that hadn’t been properly handled. No laptops in plastic bags. No flash drives in Styrofoam. No one ever took a hair dryer and tried to dry out a cell phone before sending it her way.

She could trust them. She did trust them.

She also liked them.

A lot.

Some more than others.

Her friend list was short. When she added people to it, she made it a point to try to keep them there. And it was always a good idea to help out your friends. That’s why she’d jumped at the chance to pick up the laptop. At least, that was her story and she was sticking to it.

The deputy smiled. “Give me a minute, ma’am.” He ducked under the police tape and signaled to someone. A few moments later Gabe Chavez appeared on the other side of the tape and waved for her to come through.

She fought the disappointment that Adam didn’t greet her, pasted on a smile, and nodded.

The deputy returned and showed her where to park her car, then he escorted her to where Gabe stood, arms crossed.

“Hi, Doc. Sorry to bother you on a Sunday.” Gabe gave her a tight smile.

“It’s no problem.” She couldn’t stop her eyes from scanning the scene below. Where was Adam? Was he under the water?

“You want to scramble down there? Or would you rather me bring the box up to you? I don’t mind,” Gabe said.

“I’ll come down if that’s okay,” she said.

“Sure thing. Be careful. It’s steep.”

She eased her way down the side of the hill.

“At least you’re dressed for it,” Gabe said as they made their descent. “Nice shirt. I haven’t seen that one. Is it new?”

This was one of the things she liked about the dive team. They didn’t give her grief about her standard uniform—superhero T-shirts with skinny jeans and Converse tennis shoes. “Old. I’ve had it about ten years,” she said.

“Cool. Pretty boy showed up dressed for church. Probably ruined his expensive shoes.”

Sabrina ignored the pretty boy comment. She hadn’t been too sure about Gabe when she first met him earlier this year. She’d bristled each time he’d made a snide remark about one of his co-workers. It had taken a while, but she’d finally realized many of his comments were meant as jokes and had no malice behind them. Adam liked Gabe and enjoyed working with him, so that was good enough for her.

“Sunday lunch with the family?” Sabrina asked.

“Yep.”

Poor Adam. He had a love-hate relationship with those lunches. Loved the people. Hated the drama.

“Is he in the water?” She tried to keep the question light. It wasn’t unreasonable for her to ask, especially since Adam had called her.

“Um, no.”

At Gabe’s words, she stopped watching her feet and looked at him. She should have picked up on it before now. Gabe was not his usual jovial self. For Gabe, he was almost . . . serious.

“Is he okay?” Again, she tried to keep the question professional in tone. But based on the way Gabe’s eyebrows shot up, she must not have succeeded.

“Depends on your definition of okay,” he said. “Physically, he’s fine. Hasn’t even been in the water.”

They’d reached the bottom of the incline, and Sabrina paused to take it all in. The medical examiner hovered over a body to her left. The dive team van was parked near the shore—they must have driven down here on the service road the utility companies used. Two divers bobbed around the car.

But still no Adam.

Gabe tilted his head to the left and she looked beyond the body.

There he was.

Adam paced along the edge of the lake in the direction of the double bridges.

Nothing about this made any sense.

“Dare I ask?” This time her words were a mere whisper.

“I’m the lead investigator on the homicide, and under normal circumstances there wouldn’t be much I could say. But there’s been a development I’m going to need to share with you because you need to know what you’re dealing with when you start working on that laptop.”

Gabe motioned for her to follow him toward the medical examiner.

This was getting weirder by the second.

They stopped a few feet away from the body. “Dr. Oliver, have you met Dr. Fleming?” Gabe’s formal introduction caught Sabrina by surprise.

Dr. Oliver stood. “I’d shake your hand, but—” She indicated her gloved hands. “I don’t know if we’ve met in an official capacity or not, but I’ve heard wonderful things about you, Dr. Fleming. I’m Sharon.”

“Likewise. And I’m Sabrina.”

“I’d like Sabrina to see what you showed us a little while ago,”

Gabe said to Dr. Oliver. “She’ll be the one trying to recover anything we can get off the laptop, and while we intend to keep this little piece of evidence out of the press, I think it’s important for her to be aware of it. I trust her implicitly.”

Sharon regarded Sabrina with a speculative look. “Have you ever seen a dead body?”

Why on earth did they want her to look at this poor victim? Sabrina swallowed hard. “I have,” she said.

“You won’t pass out?” Sharon pressed.

“I will not.” Sabrina wasn’t offended by the question. Sharon Oliver had no idea the kinds of things Sabrina had seen. She got no pleasure from viewing this poor victim’s body, but there was no way it would replace the stuff of her nightmares.

Sharon pulled the sheet away from the body. A woman. Probably in her late forties to early fifties. Pixie-cut hair. Something about her looked familiar.

Why was she lifting the woman’s shirt?

As the words written on the victim’s abdomen came into focus, Sabrina blinked a couple of times and then knelt closer. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t want to risk anyone overhearing, although no one stood within twenty feet of them.

She straightened and tried to process it.

They killed me. Ask Adam Campbell.

She took a closer look at the victim’s face.

No. It couldn’t be. “Do you have a name yet?” she asked Gabe.

“Yeah,” he said. “Her name is Lisa Palmer. She’s an—”

“Accountant,” Sabrina said.

“Do you know her?” Gabe asked.

“Only by reputation.” Who had killed her? Why? And what did Adam know about it?

“What can you tell me about her?” Gabe asked.

“Not much,” Sabrina answered. “She was my father’s accountant. I saw her leaving the house once. I never met her.”

“Was your father’s accountant?” Gabe frowned. “Did he fire her?”

“No. He died.”

A deputy called Gabe’s name and waved for him to come up to the road.

Gabe pointed at her. “We’re not done.”

Awesome. Her mind spiraled through the possible ramifications. All her family’s secrets part of the public record. Adam would find out . . .

“I’ll be back to get your statement.”

“Fine.” She pointed to Adam. “Can I go talk to him while I’m waiting?”

“You can try. As soon as I took his statement, he changed back into clothes and said he wanted to be alone, but my guess is you might be the exception to that request.”

“I don’t know. If he wants to be alone . . .”

“Go on. He needs to talk to someone. Maybe he’ll talk to you.”

She refocused on Adam. He’d stopped walking and now sat on a fallen log near the water’s edge. He might have been staring at the water. Might have been praying. She couldn’t tell.

Gabe gave her an encouraging nod and took off in the direction of the road.

This was so not her area of expertise. She worked best in a world where the facts reigned supreme. Emotions always left her fumbling for words.

And saying the wrong thing.

But even from this distance, Adam’s misery was so evident it made her chest hurt. Her feet started moving toward him before her brain registered what she was doing.

Lord, I’m going to need a lot of help here.