

HIDDEN IDENTITY BOOK 2

NOWHERE TO TURN

A NOVEL

LYNETTE EASON



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Lynette Eason, *Nowhere to Turn*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. 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

Eason, Lynette.

Nowhere to turn : a novel / Lynette Eason.

pages cm. — (Hidden identity ; book 2)

ISBN 978-0-8007-2209-8 (pbk.)

1. Abused wives—Fiction. 2. Single mothers—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3605.A79N69 2014

813'.6—dc23


2014016608

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Published in association with Tamela Hancock Murray, The Steve Laube Agency, 5025 N. Central Ave., #635, Phoenix, AZ 85012.

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Dedicated to my Lord and Savior,
Jesus Christ.
I love you.



*But the Lord is faithful,
and he will strengthen you
and protect you from the evil one.*

—2 Thessalonians 3:3

1

THURSDAY, JUNE 5

12:15 P.M.

GREENVILLE, SC

Danielle Harding pressed the ice pack to her bruised cheek and watched her husband back out of the driveway. He was gone, headed to a two-day conference downtown, and she was ready. No time for tears or for the hatred she felt for the man.

Instead, she turned from the window and rushed up the stairs to the master bedroom. From the closet, she pulled her midsize suitcase and tossed it onto the king-size bed. She bolted into the large walk-in closet and grabbed the clothes she'd already planned to take. Next, the toiletries.

At the slam of the door she froze. Terror thrummed through her veins.

“Dani?”

He'd come back. No, no, no. Lightheaded with the rush of terror, Dani grabbed the suitcase and shut it, zipped it.

Heard his footsteps on the stairs.

“Dani!”

A cold sweat broke out all over her body. She pulled the suitcase into the closet and shoved it toward the back.

Breathless, she called, “I’m up here, Kurt.” What was he doing back? He’d already come home for an early lunch and to grab a few more things, including the box of toy snakes he’d had her buy that morning.

She should have waited.

Icy fear slugged her in the gut. She backed out of the closet and pulled the door shut. She made a beeline for the bathroom and grabbed the brush from the sink seconds before he stepped into the room.

“What are you doing?”

“Brushing my hair. It needed it.” She dragged the bristles through the tangles he’d left when he’d grabbed her by the back of the head. Her hand trembled. She set the brush on the counter and turned to face him, hoping no emotions showed. “What are you doing back? Did you forget something?”

“Yeah. My wallet. Have you seen it?”

“You put it in your coat pocket.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He stared at her. Before she could stop herself, she raised a hand to cover the forming bruise beneath her right eye. “I’m sorry,” he said, his dark eyes reflecting a remorse she’d seen too many times in their twelve years of marriage. A remorse that would vanish as soon as he perceived she’d done something “wrong” again.

“It’s okay,” she soothed. “You didn’t mean it. It was my fault anyway. I shouldn’t have pushed the issue.”

She’d wanted to have a birthday party for Simon, their son. Kurt had said no. She’d begged him to reconsider and he’d punched her in the face.

He reached toward her and she couldn’t help the small flinch. His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed.

Quickly, she stepped forward and placed a kiss on his lips. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

His features softened and he nodded. He glanced at the clock. “I gotta get out of here. You’re sure it’s in my coat pocket?”

“Positive.”

“Right. Bye.”

“Bye,” she whispered.

He loped back down the stairs. She watched him from the balcony overlooking the foyer. He turned back and she caught her breath.

“I’ll be home day after tomorrow.”

“I know. Be safe.” She tried not to choke on the words.

He gave her a two-fingered salute and slipped out the door. Dani sank to the floor, her legs no longer able to support her. “Oh Lord, I don’t think I can do this.”

Jenny Cartee had assured her she could. Jenny. Dear, sweet Jenny, who’d recognized an abused wife and confronted her about it. Jenny, who’d showed Dani that she had worth, didn’t deserve to be a punching bag, and helped her find the courage to leave before her husband killed her. Or Simon.

Just thinking her son’s name gave her the strength to rise to her feet.

Eleven-year-old Simon. If she couldn’t do this for herself, she had to do it for her son. Simon deserved to grow up without the constant fear and pain he lived with on a daily basis.

Dani waited fifteen minutes to make sure Kurt was really gone this time. Then she moved fast. She dragged the suitcase from the closet and finished packing it with her things, added Simon’s, and then carried the luggage down the stairs and into the garage.

The black SUV sat in the far spot, just waiting. Any other day, she wouldn’t have dared drive the car. Kurt kept a log of the mileage, when she drove, how far she drove, and demanded a list of

each person she talked to. Today was different. Today she didn't care. Today she and Simon would finally be free. Simon rode to and from school with a friend and he was due home soon. As soon as he walked in the door, they'd leave. Because Kurt would call Mitchell's mother to make sure she'd delivered him. All under the guise of being a loving father, of course.

Dani went back into the house and up the stairs to the guest bedroom. She moved the nightstand and pulled up the swatch of carpet covering the small hole she'd cut into the plywood. The small box beckoned to her from its resting place on the two-by-four. She grabbed it, covered the hole with the carpet, and moved the nightstand back into place. She had managed to gather a few hundred dollars and stash the money along with some other items in the little box. But she needed more.

Back in the master bedroom she set the box on the bed, then looked at the picture on the wall. Before she had a chance to talk herself out of it, she removed the picture and looked at the dial on the safe. She'd played with the combination a few times before when the thought of leaving had consumed her. Always before she had come up empty. If this time was the same, she'd just have to take what she had and go.

Again, she tried birthdays, anniversaries, the time Simon was born. Kurt's brother's birthday, his mother's. Nothing. Frustration clawed at her.

Then it hit her. Kurt was a narcissist. It wouldn't be about his family. It would be about him. His pride. What did he cherish the most?

His job. His status. She tried his birthday, his graduation day from the academy. Her fingers stilled.

His badge number.

4892.

But she only needed three numbers for the combination.

She shot a glance at the clock. Time ticked away. Maybe she should just give up.

But not yet.

Something pushed her to get into the safe. She spun the dial. 4-8-9.

Nothing.

She ran her sweaty palms down her jean-clad thighs. Heart pounding faster than usual, she went back to the combination. 8-9-2.

Nothing.

48-9-2. She pulled the handle.

Click.

The door opened with a quiet whoosh.

A thrill shot through her. She'd done it. The door to the safe stood open. She wasted a precious ten seconds just staring at the piles of cash in front of her. Then raced to grab a bag from her closet. Almost weeping with gratitude, she swept the money into the bag, and after only a moment's hesitation, emptied the entire safe.

Which included a Glock 17 and other items she didn't have time to identify.

Her blood hummed as she saw the stacks of twenty-dollar bills. Elation flowed. She would be able to take care of Simon without worrying about money until she found a job. A new name, a new place, a new life. The thought nearly made her giddy.

She shut the safe and replaced the picture.

And the clock continued to tick away its minutes. Minutes to freedom. Her heart beat hard and she heard herself panting.

Taking a moment to compose herself, she breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth. "You're almost there, Dani. You're almost there."

She raced back down the stairs and out into the garage once

more. She hid the bag with the money under the backseat. She returned to the house to fix a cooler of food when the phone rang. She jumped. Froze.

Then glanced at the caller ID. Kurt. Her hand hovered over the handset. What would he do if she ignored it?

Turn around and come back.

She snatched it up. “Hello?”

“Stuart’s coming by in about five minutes,” Kurt said by way of greeting.

“What? Why?” Her stomach cramped. That would ruin everything.

“He’s coming to get something I left in the safe. He should almost be there.”

The safe? Really? Today? Stuart came by occasionally to get something from the safe, but today? Fear screamed through her. She spun to look at the clock. “Couldn’t he get it tomorrow?”

“Why? You got plans?” The low threat in his voice warned her not to push him. Not when she was this close.

Dani swallowed hard. “Of course not. Tell him that’s fine, I’ll be here.”

“That’s what I thought you meant.” He hung up.

She ran to the window and glanced out toward the driveway. No sign of Stuart. Did she have time to get the bag out of the car and put the contents back in the safe?

Movement at the end of the street caught her eye.

Stuart.

No time.

Her mind spun and the only plan she could come up with was to play it cool. But what could she say when he saw the empty safe?

Just thinking about being alone in the house with him made her shudder. Three years Kurt’s senior, the man made her skin crawl in spite of the fact that he’d always treated her with noth-

ing but respect. Blessed with outrageous good looks, he had the personality of a viper. And the reflexes. Striking when one least expected it. Silent and sneaky with cold eyes she couldn't read and avoided looking at.

Her fingers shook, her blood raced. *Oh dear Lord, what do I do?*

Tears surfaced. How had she ever thought she could get away with this?

Stuart pulled into the drive.

Anxiety made her nauseous. She ducked away from the window as Stuart got out of his car.

“You can do this. Don't stop to think, just do it.”

She hurried toward the stairs and grabbed the handrail to steady herself.

The doorbell rang.