

Love Inspired®

SUSPENSE

RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

FLASHPOINT

STEPHANIE
NEWTON

**Emerald
Coast
911**

"Why didn't you tell me, Lara? Did you think I'd judge you?"

Matt's voice was lazy, but with all the time she'd spent as his partner, she knew he was ticked.

Lara sat back down on the low wall that bordered their flower beds and looked up at him. "No. I didn't."

At his snort, she gave him a look. "I really didn't, Matt. I've been defined my whole life by my bipolar mother and drug-addict sister. And for once, I just wanted to be me, on my own, no family giving everyone a reason to doubt me—or feel sorry for me."

He dropped his arms and came to sit by her on the wall. "I can understand that."

Matt's dad was the Emerald County Sheriff. He had a mom who not only knew how to cook, she did cook, and he and his two brothers were all superhero material from what she'd heard.

She stared at him. There was something, some sadness she couldn't quite quantify in his expression, but when she looked again, he smiled and whatever it was had disappeared.

"This really isn't about us, is it?" His voice had gone husky.

Books by Stephanie Newton

Love Inspired Suspense

**Perfect Target*

**Moving Target*

**Smoke Screen*

**Flashpoint*

**Emerald Coast 911*

STEPHANIE NEWTON

penned her first suspense story—complete with illustrations—at the age of twelve, but didn't write seriously until her youngest child was in first grade. She lives in northwest Florida where she gains inspiration from the sugar-white sand, aqua-blue-green water of the Gulf of Mexico, and the many unusual and interesting things you see when you live on the beach. You can find her most often enjoying the water with her family, or at their church, where her husband is the pastor. Visit Stephanie at her Web site, www.stephanienewton.net, or send an e-mail to newtonwriter@gmail.com.

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NEWTON



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FLASHPOINT

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You were saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own.

—*Ephesians 2:8*



For Jessi. I'm so blessed to have a sister and honored to call you my friend. I love you!

Thanks so much to Joe Reeder, firefighter/EMT with Bay County Fire-Rescue, and to his awesome wife, Becki, for taking the time to vet this book. What's right is due to Joe's technical expertise.

Any mistakes or inconsistencies, those are all mine; Melissa Endlich, my fabulous and amazing editor; my family, who deal with long hours and odd Crockpot experiments—I love you; Catherine Mann, Brenda Minton and Holly La Pat. I wouldn't want to do this without you.

ONE

The flimsy door was no match for Matt Clark's boot. He kicked it in, ducking as the greedy fire sucked in fresh air. Heat surged toward him as he pushed into the front room, his partner, Lara Hughes, beside him. J.T. Keller and Miguel Santos were at the door behind them.

The house should be empty—on the foreclosure list according to property records. No one was supposed to be living here, but Matt had seen the overflowing trash cans baking in the hot summer sun, and the sleeping bags and uncovered mattresses on the floor of the living room added to the story. A story currently giving him the willies.

He caught Lara's eye. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Tell me about it." Lara made one more visual sweep of the room, her voice tinny through the SCBA mask.

Smoke swirled in the room, a living, breathing thing. Around the edges of the swinging kitchen door, he could see a telltale orange glow and pulled the hose with him deeper into the house. The basics of fire-

fighting. Put water on fire. "We're heading into the kitchen."

Matt barely registered the response over the heat that rushed them when he opened the door. He hit his knees, and beside him he felt more than heard Lara thump to hers. Obviously the center of the fire, the room glowed, every surface flaming or charred. The Sheetrock walls bubbled in some places and burned through in so many others that it was impossible to tell where the burn started.

The air too superheated for words, Matt motioned to Lara to stay down. He turned the nozzle to fire a stream through the nearest window, giving the hot gases a place to escape.

As the smoke cleared, they climbed to their feet. Matt took quick stock of the room. He laid the spray of water directly over the kitchen table. A conglomeration of objects remained, telling him that, although the residents of this house had definitely been cooking, they weren't using Grandma's cookbook.

They were cooking meth.

He ducked down to look under the table. And immediately knew that the heebie-jeebies he'd been fighting all afternoon had been seriously justified.

He started backing toward the door and turned to Lara. "Get out of here. This place is gonna blow."

She shook her head. "Another couple minutes and we'll have it under control."

"Another couple of minutes and we'll be dead. Get out of here. *Now.*"

She took off for the front door, the smoke billowing and closing around her. Close on her heels, he felt the

intense heat bearing down on him. He could almost hear the clock ticking in his head. As he broke through the smoke, the force of the blast slammed into him—a physical blow—catapulting him into the air. He flew, arms and legs splayed all directions.

In that split second his thoughts fragmented.

His family. His sweet dark-haired mom. His county sheriff father. How he'd never get to see his old man be proud that his son had joined the Sea Breeze Police Department as their first-ever arson investigator.

And Lara.

The last thought as the ground raced toward him was a wisp of a prayer that his beautiful, stubborn partner would be okay.

Lara Hughes blinked her eyes against too-bright sunlight. The sound of a PASS alarm found its way into her consciousness. Hers or someone else's?

She tested her legs and arms. All still attached. She tried to think back. She'd wanted to stay and fight the fire, but Matt had told her to get out.

Matt.

Struggling to a sitting position, she winced as pain shot up her arm. Todd Blankenship hoofed it across the lawn toward her, carrying a kit from the bus. It hadn't been more than a few seconds, then.

"I'm fine." She climbed to her feet, wavered, blinked to clear her head. Debris still rained down from the violent blast, soot and ash sifting to the ground. Todd grabbed her arm. She shook it off and stepped back. "I'm fine. Where's Matt?"

Blankenship gestured back at the house. At the base of the steps, Matt lay sprawled, paramedic Daniel

Hudson at his side. She pulled out of Todd's grip and ran toward Matt, stripping off her gear as she went.

Behind them, Ladder 2 had arrived. The crew was creating a spray over the top of the house—a place they all now knew had been a meth lab—trying to keep the fumes of ammonium hydroxide from spreading through the neighborhood.

Matt's PASS alarm trilled again. He still wasn't moving. He'd been so much closer to the blast than she. If she'd left when he'd first asked her to, maybe that would've given him the extra couple of seconds he needed to get away.

"Backboard!" Daniel yelled at whoever could hear him, and Todd came running with it.

She pulled her gloves off and stuffed them under her elbow, feeling under Matt's hood for his pulse. She, like most of the firefighters on their crew, also had EMT training. On their small crew everyone did double duty.

Where was it?

She moved her fingers. There. His pulse was there, strong and steady under her fingers. Why didn't he wake up? "Come on, Matt, open your eyes."

"Get him on the board." Daniel pulled Matt's SCBA gear off and rolled him to his back on the board, bracing his neck with a cervical collar. "Ready, go."

Todd and Daniel lifted Matt on the backboard and moved him about fifty feet away from the extreme heat and toxic fumes of the still-burning house.

She dropped to her knees at his side as Daniel checked Matt's breathing. "Airway clear."

Lara smoothed dark black curls away from Matt's

face. He was much more than a partner. He was a friend. "Come on, Matt."

Daniel shined a penlight on Matt's pupils. "Pupils equal and reactive."

That was something. *Okay. Okay. He's breathing on his own. Pupils aren't blown.* She took a deep breath and leaned in close to his ear. "Matthew Clark, stop being a baby and wake up."

He didn't move. She sat back on her heels, sweeping her damp sweaty bangs back from her forehead with a thick Nomex sleeve. It stung. She looked down and blinked. Her sleeve was smeared with blood.

Matt's eyes fluttered. "Lara, sweetheart. Kiss me. It hurts."

He opened his eyes, amusement winking in the dark brown of bitter chocolate. She slapped him on the arm with her gloves.

"Hey, what was that for? I nearly died. You can at least let me have a nice dream." A grin pulled at his lips, but underneath his tan, he was still pale, way more pale than he should've been. Concern knotted in her stomach.

She wouldn't let him see it, though. She didn't want him to know how badly he'd scared her. "I'll give you something to dream about, honey."

He laughed and pushed up to rest on his elbow, pain creasing the laugh lines at the edges of his eyes as he tested his range of motion. "You love me, you know you do."

She levered herself to her feet, used to the weight of the heavy suit. "Yeah, you and that overinflated ego of yours, too."

“She’s gotcha there.” Blankenship offered him a hand. “You all in one piece?”

Matt gripped Todd’s hand and eased into a sitting position, gingerly moving his arms and legs, rubbing his forehead with a hand adorned with two pink Hello Kitty bandages. “Seem to be. Got one tangle of a traffic jam going on in my head, though.”

Daniel activated an instant cold pack and handed it to Matt, then popped another one for Lara before pulling bandages from the kit. He quickly taped the cut on her head shut and placed the ice bag on it before packing the emergency gear back into the kit and taking the C-collar from Matt. “I suggest you both take a trip to the E.R. As hardheaded as you two are, a CT scan is still in order.”

She held out a hand to Matt and pulled him the rest of the way to his feet, watching him closely as he swayed, his feet crunching in the dry summer grass. “You okay?”

“Fine.” He shot her the grin that in the beginning had made her think he was a goofy show-off. He hadn’t done much to dispel that image, always playing practical jokes in the firehouse. But it hadn’t taken her long as his partner to see beneath that to the guy underneath who took his job very seriously.

Two in, two out. She’d always been tenacious, but sometimes it turned to a stubborn desire to be the best, to beat the fire. Today that stubbornness had almost caused her to forget that simple but most important rule of firefighting: *You go in with your partner. You come out with your partner.*

As the two medics walked away, she touched Matt's arm. "I'm sorry."

Surprise tinged his features. "We do what we do, Bump. It's no big."

At the nickname, she smiled. He'd dubbed her with it the first week she'd been in training because, unlike the men, she tended to use her hip as an extra appendage. It came from the days when her sister Emmy was an infant—she'd been a nine-year-old with a baby always in her arms because her mother wasn't around to take care of them. That hip came in handy.

A siren wailed to a stop outside the perimeter and a car door slammed.

He elbowed her. "Come on. That headache of yours isn't going to get you out of mop-up any more than mine is. And don't forget your gear. No going into this place without SCBA."

A self-contained breathing apparatus wasn't always necessary for overhaul, but in this case the toxic fumes associated with cooking meth made it dangerous to breathe without it. The nasty concoction of chemicals could kill. Their quiet beach town on the northwest Florida coast had seen its share of crime lately, but a meth lab right smack in the middle of a neighborhood... that was a new one, at least for her.

She found her mask and tank along with her helmet on the ground where she'd ditched them.

"Captain called in something about a meth lab fire?" Police lieutenant Chloe Rollins picked her way across the grass in high heels, the flash of myriad emergency lights flaring on her face.

Man-in-charge as the senior officer on-site, Matt

answered. "This place has definitely been used as a lab. If you're going in, you need gear."

"I've got it in the car." Chloe narrowed her eyes. "Looks like a bomb went off."

Matt nodded then grabbed his head. "That would be the propane tank, and the cause of the headache currently threatening to split my head in two. Gear up and I'll show you more inside, but we're probably not going to find much left, at least not in the kitchen."

The police lieutenant didn't move. Matt started for the house then glanced back. "What?"

Chloe grinned, her red hair gleaming in the sun. "Hello Kitty?"

Matt studied the bandages on his hand and shot her a cocky smile. "Dude, Hello Kitty rocks. It could be worse. Last week my neighbor's girls were into princesses. Sometimes she gets home after the bus drops the girls off. So I meet them at the bus stop, let them have a snack. They, uh, fix my boo-boos."

Guilt shot through Lara, a quick pang to the chest. She'd been working with Matt for two years and didn't know that about him. But she'd been the one to draw that line. Draw the boundaries between work life and home life. It wasn't that she didn't care.

She did.

But she couldn't be open in return and share the train wreck that was her life. She didn't want the guys—any of them—to feel sorry for her. "Sweet."

He made a face at her, then grinned at Chloe. "They're no trouble. They get a big brother who's a friend to their mom and I get somebody to water the

plants when I'm gone. And all the free Hello Kitty bandages I want."

Chloe laughed.

"Yeah, go ahead and giggle, Lieutenant Rollins. You and Pastor Jake'll probably have triplets."

Chloe's face drained of color. Her hand went to her stomach. "Bite your tongue."

Matt pulled his mask over his face and hollered at J.T. and Santos, who were hanging out by the rig. "Let's go, you slackers." To the cop he said, "Get your gear on and we'll meet you in the house."

Lara pulled her own mask into place, the snug straps making her aching head throb even worse. She followed Matt into the burned-out shell of a house. What had once been a fairly nice home was a smoking ruin. The mattresses and sleeping bags were melted into a charred mess. The remnants of the walls and ceilings would be coming down, too. Nothing could remain that might be hiding a smoldering hot spot.

Water dripped from the ceiling to form toxic puddles in the soggy carpet.

"We'll take the kitchen." Matt's eyes met Lara's. She nodded. She had to put their close call out of her mind. Facing the fear was part of what they did every single day. "Santos, you and J.T. start in the front room and we'll all work our way back through the bedrooms."

The detective in her white hazmat suit followed them into the kitchen—or what was left standing in the kitchen. The entire back wall had blown away, leaving the back steps and very little else recognizable.

"Whoa." The word was barely a breath as Lara real-

ized what would have happened to them if they'd still been in the room when it blew.

"Yeah." Matt looked around. "Well, I think we can safely say there's no fuel left in here. Everything's already in the backyard."

She turned away from the wreckage in the kitchen, taking in a tight breath. "Let's hit the front room, then. I'm ready to get out of here."

Chloe stood in the doorway with her digital camera. "What a mess. We're gonna need statements from you guys about what you saw—before the blast."

In the front room, J.T. and Santos tossed debris out the front door. It was a pile of tattered sleeping bags, and what Lara had managed to push to the back of her mind shoved back to the forefront again. Had her sister lived in a place like this? Had Emmy been so desperate for the drug that she'd been willing to poison herself to get it?

"Hey, Lara. You okay?" Matt looked into her face mask. "That bump on the head got you a little loopy?"

As her partner and friend, he would support her if he knew about her family, as would the other guys. But they would never look at her the same way again. She'd always be the daughter of a mother who showed up drunk for her school play and the sister of a drug addict. She'd always be the one who had to raise her sister and never just a firefighter who did her job well.

She shoved the pain away and picked up her shovel. "I'm fine."

Fine. Yeah, right. Matt watched as Lara nearly visibly shook off whatever was bothering her and turned