

# *Chain Reactions*

*By*  
**Lynn Ames**

## **CHAIN REACTIONS**

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### **CREDITS**

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## **Dedication**

To my beautiful wife, Cheryl, who inspires me every day. You are the best teammate and most supportive writer's wife ever. Thanks for making it possible for me to do what I do, and thanks for dropping that book on my desk. I think there might be a story here too.



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## CHAPTER ONE

The doctor's office smelled of disinfectant and latex, and the protective paper covering the examination table crinkled under her bare legs. Nora Lindstrom tugged at the cloth gown that kept slipping off her shoulder and drew in a wheezing breath. The rattle in her chest echoed in the stillness of the space.

Why doctors' offices made appointments for patients was beyond her, since they never seemed to keep to the schedule. Nora had half a mind to leave, although in truth she had nowhere else she needed to be these days.

"You used to be more understanding, old girl," she mumbled. "Old age has made you impatient and priggish."

The door opened and a short, handsome, neatly bearded man in a lab coat walked in. Nora smiled at her old friend.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Dr. Lindstrom. Seems everyone picked today to come down with the flu."

"How long have we known each other, Daniel? To you, I'm not Dr. Lindstrom, I'm just Nora. And I was going to scold you for making me late for my disco dance lesson, but I've decided to forgive you."

"Disco went out in the '80s, Nora. Hip-hop is all the rage now."

"Then you saved me from an indignity, and I should thank you. Hip-hop? I tried to do that once. Broke the darned hip and needed a month in a skilled nursing facility."

He smiled warmly as he approached with a stethoscope.

"Seriously, how kids call that stuff music is beyond me. Then again, I stopped listening to music when the Beatles broke up."

"I'm glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

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“It’s practically all I have left.”

“I doubt that.” He warmed the instrument in his hand. “Let me take a listen to your chest.”

“Careful, it might blow out your eardrum.”

He listened as she breathed in and out on cue. When he was done, he sat on a wheeled stool to face her.

“You have your serious face on, Daniel.”

He frowned. “I’m afraid this *is* serious.”

“I know what you’re going to say.” She held up a shaky hand to forestall his next words. “It’s okay. I’m one hundred years old, and I’m not afraid of death. I’ve had a good, long life. Heck, I’ve outlived everyone I know. ’Bout time I went to join them.”

“You are a marvel. You teach me more about life every time I see you.”

“Which is far too often lately, if you ask me,” she said. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

She felt the cough bubble up in her chest before it exploded forth, shaking her frail form. When she pulled her hand away from her mouth, it was liberally coated with blood.

“Let me get that,” he said. His kind eyes reflected concern and sadness as he gently cleaned her hands and around her mouth.

“Thank you.” The words came out as a rasp as she struggled to catch her breath.

“Have you given more thought to what we talked about last week? You need both a health care proxy and a durable power of attorney in place.”

Nora shook her head. “I told you before. I trust you to make the decisions for me.”

“And I told you before, no can do. You must have someone you can trust to make life decisions on your behalf?”

She cast her eyes downward. It had been thirty-five years since that last heated discussion with her brother and his son and daughter-in-law. Thirty-five years since she kissed ten-year-old Diana on the forehead as her daddy pried her little fingers off Nora’s pant leg.

“I’ll always be with you in your heart, Diana. Carry me there,” she had whispered.



“You can’t go. I won’t let you,” Diana pleaded. “You’re my best friend.”

“I love you, Diana. Always remember that.”

Nora couldn’t bear to look back at the girl’s tear-stained face. That was the last time she’d seen her great-niece. More precisely, it was the last time Diana had seen *her*, Nora corrected herself. After all, she’d continued to keep a watchful eye on Diana from a distance. How would Diana react now if Nora or her lawyer reached out and told her Nora was dying and needed her?



Diana Lindstrom plugged her right ear with a finger and pressed the cell phone tighter against her left ear. “This is Diana Lindstrom. Who did you say you were?”

“This is Charles Fitzgerald. I’m the attorney for your great-aunt, Nora Lindstrom.”

Diana was certain she’d heard him wrong. “Excuse me? Wait. Hang on a second and let me get somewhere quieter.” She motioned to her lab assistant that she was leaving and headed down the hall to her office.

Once there, she shrugged out of her lab coat, lowered herself into the desk chair, and put the phone back to her ear. “Now, that’s better. I’m sorry to keep you waiting. The centrifuges in the lab are so loud I can’t hear myself think.”

“That’s not a problem, Dr. Lindstrom. I’m sorry to have disturbed your work day.”

“Tell me again who you are?”

“My name is Charles Fitzgerald. I’m the senior partner with the law firm Fitzgerald, Osborn, and Chase. We represent your great-aunt, Nora Lindstrom.”

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know who you really are, or what scam you’re trying to pull, but my Aunt Nora’s been dead for at least twenty years.”

“I’m afraid you’ve been misinformed, Dr. Lindstrom. I can assure you Nora is not deceased. In fact, she’s the one who asked me to contact you.”

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Could it be? Diana wondered. No. Surely her parents and grandfather wouldn't have been so cruel as to lie about something as serious as the death of her beloved great-aunt.

"Nora recently celebrated her hundredth birthday," he continued. "I have to tell you, she's amazing. She still lives by herself, has all of her mental faculties, and completes the *New York Times* crossword puzzle every day."

"If that were true, and I'm not saying it is," Diana said, unwilling to abandon her skepticism quite so easily, "why would Aunt Nora wait until now to reach out to me?"

"As I am bound by attorney-client privilege, that's a question you'll have to ask her. If you're so inclined, and I sincerely hope you are, I have contact details for you."

A breath caught in her throat and her heart hammered painfully in her chest. How many times had she wished and longed to talk with Aunt Nora?

"Aunt Nora wants me to...?" She couldn't even finish the question. She pressed the palm of her hand to her chest to stanch the pain blossoming there as she recalled her father's sneer when he told her the night before grad school graduation that Nora was dead and she should stop expecting her to show up. It was too horrible to think about that right now. Instead, her mind immediately gravitated to all the many instances as a small child she'd begged her parents to explain Aunt Nora's disappearance from family gatherings, from family photos, from reminiscences and conversations at reunions...

*"Your Aunt Nora is off doing top-secret work out of the country. We're not allowed to contact her."*

*"Your Aunt Nora no longer wants to be part of this family."*

*"Your Aunt Nora is working for the government and travels constantly. She's made it clear she has no room in her life for the likes of us. She's too focused on her career."*

The diversity and breadth of explanations, excuses, and prevarications from her parents and grandfather made her head spin. While she was never sure what to believe, the one thing she knew for certain was that her favorite person in the world, the woman she most admired, had abandoned her childhood self without a backward glance.

"...as I was saying..."

Diana struggled to focus again.

“Whether you make the phone call or not, whether you opt to see Nora or not, whether you accept the duties and responsibilities as Nora’s healthcare proxy and power of attorney or not—”

“Wait. Aunt Nora’s designated me as her power of attorney? Me?”

“As I said, that’s primarily the reason I’m contacting you today. Yes, Nora finally has been persuaded to get her affairs in order.”

“Why? Is she sick?”

“I am not at liberty to discuss her medical condition. But I will say that if I were you, I wouldn’t take long to act.”

Diana tried to digest that bit of information. Aunt Nora was taking the extraordinary step to break her silence. She was filling out end-of-life contingency paperwork, and she obviously was alone. “Where is she?”

“Resting at home.”

“Where would that be?” Part of her brain urged her not to get sucked in. What if nothing about this turned out to be true? *What if all of it’s true?* her heart whispered.

“If you’ll provide me with an e-mail address, I’ll provide you with all the details.”

She recited her e-mail address and Mr. Fitzgerald read it back to her.

“Dr. Lindstrom?”

“Yes?”

“On a personal note, I’ve known your great-aunt for many, many years. She’s one-of-a-kind. As Nora’s friend, I would advise you to make haste. Whatever you might be thinking or feeling, she needs you now. Trust that you have always, always been in her heart.”

Diana heard the raw emotion in his voice. Clearly, Aunt Nora was far more to him than simply a client. She choked out, “Send me the information, please. I’ll take it from there.”



Nora’s gnarled fingers fluttered through her hair and then down along the front of her blouse, smoothing the material. Perhaps she should check herself in the mirror one more time.

*Settle down, old girl. You’re jumpy as a cat.*

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The doorbell rang and she blinked. Was Diana here already? “It’s open,” she called out, hoping the strength of her voice carried through the sturdy wooden door.

Several seconds later, a fair-haired, long-legged, younger version of herself appeared around the doorway. In fact, she could’ve been her daughter or granddaughter, right down to the blue-green hazel eyes she remembered—eyes that gazed at her now, filled with uncertainty and wariness.

“Hello,” Nora managed. She realized she was staring. “I’m sorry, where are my manners? Diana, I don’t imagine you remember me all that well, and I certainly wasn’t old and decrepit when last you saw me. I’m your great-aunt, Nora. I’d get up, but...” She indicated her frail form propped up on the loveseat, and her motorized wheelchair parked just off to the side.

“You leave your door unlocked? In this day and age?” Diana hadn’t moved beyond the threshold.

“At my age, what in the world would anyone want with me? Besides, this is Cape Cod. There hasn’t been a crime more serious than jay walking since I retired here nearly twenty years ago.”

She thought she saw a ghost of a smile. Maybe she was getting somewhere. “Please, come in. If it makes you feel better, lock the door behind you.”

Finally, Diana stepped fully inside the cottage. “Can I ask you a question?” Still, she maintained a distance and remained standing.

“You can ask me anything in the world. I promise you I’ll do my best to answer honestly. Would you like to come and sit down?”

“Not just yet, thank you.” Diana’s lips formed a thin line and she furrowed her brow.

Nora recognized the expression as one Diana wore as a child when she puzzled through a difficult problem.

“Why...” Diana began. She closed her eyes for a moment and cleared her throat. “Why did you leave me? And why didn’t you ever come back?”

Even though she had expected the question, it was a punch in the gut that knocked the wind out of her. She leaned forward, struggling for air as a coughing jag overtook her.

“Oh, my God,” Diana exclaimed. “You’re coughing up blood.”

The voice was close and Nora felt a hand gently rubbing her back. The cushion next to her shifted, and she smelled a perfume

that wasn't her own. Finally, after what seemed like hours, she sucked in a breath with a shuddering gasp.

Diana drew her in and cradled her against a shoulder. "Are you all right? Never mind, that's a stupid question. Is there anything I can get you? A glass of water?"

She continued to wheeze, the sound a staccato rhythm in near-perfect synchronization with the ticking of the large antique grandfather clock in the corner. After several attempts at speech, she was able to whisper hoarsely, "I'm fine, dear. Just give me a minute."

One minute turned into five, and, when her breathing finally returned to normal, she sat up straighter. She was surprised to see Diana had tears in her eyes.

"It's all right." She patted Diana's cheek. "And I want you to know that I wasn't trying to sidestep your question or curry sympathy either."

"I would never think that. Gosh, what kind of person do you think I am?"

"I need you to know that walking away from you—never seeing you again—broke my heart."

"Then why did you?"

She pursed her lips. This was the crux of the matter. Telling her great-niece the ugly truth likely would forever change the way she viewed her parents and grandfather. But Nora promised honesty, and her word was her bond.

"I had no choice," she said quietly. "Your grandfather—my brother, Bill—and your parents forbade me to see you anymore."

"They..." Diana recoiled. "Why? Why would they do that?"

How much should she say? This was uncharted territory. "You'd have to ask them that."

"I haven't spoken to Mom and Dad in years."

She said it matter-of-factly, but the pain behind the comment didn't escape Nora's notice. "I didn't know. I'm sorry for that."

"Yeah, well, I'm not," Diana said bitterly.

"What happened, if I might be so bold as to inquire?"

"I was a disappointment to them."

She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but that wasn't it. "You were a disappointment to them?" She tutted in disgust. "You've built a brilliant career, published important papers, taught and

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trained bright minds at one of the most prestigious universities in the country—”

Diana stiffened. “How do you know all that?”

“I—I...” Well, she’d put her foot in it now. “Just because I wasn’t permitted to interact with you directly doesn’t mean I didn’t keep my eye on you from a distance.”

“You’ve been spying on me all this time?”

“When you say it like that, it sounds so untoward.” She reached out and took Diana’s hands. “As I told you, it was never my desire to be separated from you. I loved you then, and I never stopped. I am so proud of you, Diana.”

Diana swallowed hard and withdrew from Nora’s touch. “Well, you might change your mind when you hear the full story.”

“There isn’t anything you can say that will make me love you any less.”

“How about that I’m a lesbian?”

Nora nodded slowly. The admission didn’t come as a shock to her. “Is that why you don’t talk to your folks anymore?”

Diana laughed mirthlessly. “More like the reason they don’t talk to me. I’m an embarrassment to their sensibilities, something intolerable and abhorrent.”

Nora sighed and closed her eyes. She’d hoped that somehow Robert and Edwina had broadened their minds over the years. When she opened her eyes, Diana was staring at a spot on the floor, discomfort and defeat evident in her posture. Well, that wouldn’t do at all.

“I’m sorry for you. I’m sorry your grandfather taught his son to be as small and narrow minded as he was.” She frowned. “Your father always was a daddy’s boy. The sun rose and set on Bill for him. All the time I knew him, Robert tried everything to win Bill’s approval. I could’ve saved him a lot of time and heartache; Bill never cared about anybody but himself. I never understood how he got to be that way. Our parents didn’t raise us like that.”

Diana met her gaze. “You don’t seem the least bit fazed by my sexuality.”

She shrugged. “Why would I be?”

“Why...?” Diana blinked. “Your generation...”

“Look. I’ve lived a long time. Long enough to see too many wars, too much hatred, and never enough love.” She paused. “Are you happy?”

“Am I...?”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

Diana blanched.

“Well, do you?”

“No. I was in a long-term relationship for twelve years, and then Bethany decided she should’ve played around more before settling down. Our life was too staid. I was too boring.”

Nora raised an eyebrow. “Too boring, eh? Well, her loss. She probably wasn’t good enough for you, anyway.” Another cough rumbled up in her chest and she grabbed for the box of tissues on the end table.

Again, Diana rubbed circles on her back as she fought her way through the spasms. When the episode was over, Nora fell back against the seat cushions. Her breathing was shallow and her chest felt as though someone were sitting on it.

After several moments, Diana asked, “What does the doctor say?”

She shook her head.

“How long?”

“It’s an inexact science, but not long now.”

Diana got up, grabbed her glass from the end table, and disappeared into the kitchen. She returned with water and helped Nora hold it while she drank.

“What’s the diagnosis?”

“Advanced small cell lung cancer.”

Diana nodded as tears once again filled her eyes. “Is that why you had your lawyer call me?”

She struggled, and failed, to sit up straighter. She hated that these coughing jags robbed her of her energy.

“I should go,” Diana said. “You need to get some rest.”

She closed her eyes momentarily as she tried to gather her strength. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she wanted to hear. “This damned disease takes a lot out of me. The doctor says it might also have something to do with my age. Seems some people consider one hundred old.” She winked.

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Diana offered a sad smile. “You need to lie down. Can I help you into your bedroom?”

As independent as she was, she recognized she was too weak and exhausted to get herself into the wheelchair and from that onto the bed. “That would be most helpful.”

When Diana had her situated in bed, with pillows propped behind her and a glass of water on the night table, Nora asked the question that weighed heavily on her. “Will you be coming back?”

“I booked a bed and breakfast in Provincetown. I’ll be back first thing in the morning. Will you be all right until then?”

“You could’ve stayed with me. I have a guest bedroom.”

“I didn’t want to impose.”

She felt herself starting to drift. What Diana meant, she was sure, was that she wasn’t certain she wanted Nora back in her life at this late stage.

“We’re family,” she murmured. “There’s no such thing as an imposition.” Warm lips brushed against her forehead.

“Sleep well, Aunt Nora.”

“I love you, Diana. Always have. Always will.” She heard the quiet click of the front door closing.



## About the Author

Lynn Ames is the best-selling author of *The Price of Fame*, *The Cost of Commitment*, *The Value of Valor*, *One ~ Love*, *Heartsong*, *Eyes on the Stars*, *Beyond Instinct*, *Above Reproach*, *All That Lies Within*, *Bright Lights of Summer*, *Final Cut*, *Great Bones*, *Chain Reactions*, and one of five authors of the collection *Outsiders*. She also is the writer/director/producer of the history-making documentary, “Extra Innings: The Real Story Behind the Bright Lights of Summer.” This historically important documentary chronicles, for the first time ever in her own words, the real-life story of Hall-of-Famer Dot Wilkinson and the heyday of women’s softball.

Lynn’s fiction has garnered her a multitude of awards and honors, including five Goldie awards, the coveted Ann Bannon Popular Fiction Award (for *All That Lies Within*), and the Arizona Book Award for Best Gay/Lesbian book. Lynn is a two-time Lambda Literary Award (Lammy) Finalist and winner of a Rainbow Award for Lesbian Romance. *All That Lies Within* was additionally honored as one of the top ten lesbian books overall of 2013.

Ms. Ames is the founder of Phoenix Rising Press. She is also a former press secretary to the New York state senate minority leader and spokesperson for the nation’s third-largest prison system. For more than half a decade, she was an award-winning broadcast journalist. She has been editor of a critically acclaimed national magazine and a nationally recognized speaker and public relations professional with a particular expertise in image, crisis communications planning, and crisis management.

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