

Burning Bright (A Peter Ash Novel)

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"LOTS OF CHARACTERS GET COMPARED TO MY OWN JACK REACHER, BUT PETRIE'S PETER ASH IS THE REAL DEAL."-Lee Child

*An Entertainment Weekly Must List Pick

In the new novel featuring war veteran Peter Ash, "an action hero of the likes of Jack Reacher or Jason Bourne" (Lincoln Journal-Star), Ash has a woman's life in his hands-and her mystery is stranger than he could ever imagine.

War veteran Peter Ash sought peace and quiet among the towering redwoods of northern California, but the trip isn't quite the balm he'd hoped for. The dense forest and close fog cause his claustrophobia to buzz and spark, and then he stumbles upon a grizzly, long thought to have vanished from this part of the country. In a fight of man against bear, Peter doesn't favor his odds, so he makes a strategic retreat up a nearby sapling.

There, he finds something strange: a climbing rope, affixed to a distant branch above. It leads to another, and another, up through the giant tree canopy, and ending at a hanging platform. On the platform is a woman on the run. From below them come the sounds of men and gunshots.

Just days ago, investigative journalist June Cassidy escaped a kidnapping by the men who are still on her trail. She suspects they're after something belonging to her mother, a prominent software designer who recently died in an accident. June needs time to figure out what's going on, and help from someone with Peter's particular set of skills.

Only one step ahead of their pursuers, Peter and June must race to unravel this peculiar mystery. What they find leads them to an eccentric recluse, a shadowy pseudo-military organization, and an extraordinary tool that may change the modern world forever. Nick Petrie received his MFA in fiction from the University of Washington, won a Hopwood Award for short fiction while an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, and his story "At the Laundromat" won the 2006 Short Story Contest in the *The Seattle Review*, a national literary journal. A husband and father, he runs a home-inspection business in Milwaukee. His novels in the Peter Ash series include *The Drifter*, winner of the ITW Thriller Award and the Barry Award for Best First Novel, *Burning Bright*, and *Light It Up*.***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected copy proof***

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PROLOGUE

Don't get in the car.

June Cassidy had heard this many times. From her mom, from her self-defense instructors, from her friends, the same thing, over and over.

No matter what, don't get in the car.

Because then they have you.

It was good advice, she thought.

But it did her no good now that they'd gotten her in the fucking car.

She had her back against the locked door of a big SUV, plastic handcuffs on her wrists, and a witless slab of pseudo-government beef leering at her from the next seat over.

Her options were limited.

June was having a particularly bad week in a challenging few years.

Her newspaper got bought out just like practically every other big-city paper, and the new owners loaded it up with debt to pay themselves for their investment. When the classifieds plummeted like a rock - thanks, Craig, for your free fucking List - the paper began to lay off reporters, especially investigative reporters, who might take weeks or months to research a story for publication. June was young, cheap labor, and she was good at her job, so she lasted longer than most. But the economics were brutal and getting more unforgiving by the minute.

Then the axe finally fell and June was just another freelancer with a degree in journalism. In this age of technology, it was almost as useful as a degree in Klingon, or, God forbid, English.

For a woman on her own and pushing thirty, freelancing was no substitute for an actual job.

Somehow, after a year of scrounging for scraps and trying to learn how to drive traffic to her blog, she'd gotten invited to join Public Investigations, a non-profit group of investigative journalists funded by a Kickstarter-like model, dedicated to doing the kind of work that many papers could no longer afford to pay for.

Public Investigations did awesome work. Their financial reporters broke the in-depth story about the attempted bank bombing in Milwaukee last year and the flash-crash that went with it. But the budget was small and June was still essentially a freelancer with editorial

backup, which was not the same thing as health insurance and a byline in the Chicago Tribune.

Still, she was making real progress, splitting time between her garage apartment in Seattle and her mom's little house in Palo Alto, which gave her an inexpensive platform to cover the west coast. Her specialty was issues of privacy in the electronic age. After Manning and Snowden and the NSA revelations, privacy seemed permanently in the headlines, and her professional life was finally taking off again.

Then her mom, a yoga fanatic and vegetarian who also swam a half-mile every day, was killed by a hit-and-run driver and died. A week ago today.

June's mother. Hazel Cassidy, tenured professor at Stanford University, MacArthur "Genius" Grant winner and renown pain in the ass, killed by a plumber's truck at sixty.

Like a lot of women, June had a complicated relationship with her mother. June's career choices, her boyfriends, her hair, all were candidates for improvement, although her mother never made a direct assault.

Hazel's trademark was a certain kind of passive-aggressive backhanded compliment. "That outfit wouldn't work on me, but it looks very nice on you." When June's investigative series on data breaches in medical technology was nominated for the Pulitzer, Hazel threw her daughter a fabulous party, but also invited June's ex-boyfriend, because June's current flame didn't meet Hazel's high standards.

The worst of it, of course, was that she was usually right. She was right about the outfit, and she was right about the fucking boyfriend, too. About all the boyfriends, actually. June tried, sometimes successfully, not to be so stubborn that she couldn't recognize how well her mother knew her, and how much she cared.

It was easier now that her mother was dead.

What June wouldn't give for another snarky comment about her goddamn hair.

Her mom had been gone a week, and it already felt like forever.

June had spent the first few days planning and surviving the memorial service, and the days after in her mother's house, going through her things, crying and remembering and trying to figure things out.

Not least of which was the fact that her mother had apparently been working on some kind of classified software project for the Department of Defense. And she'd never even

hinted at it to June.

Unable to sleep, June had planned to use her mother's key card and code to let herself into the cluttered lab at Stanford. She told herself she was there to collect family pictures and the few plants her mother had managed not to kill, but mostly she just wanted to sit with the memory of her mom in the place she'd most fully inhabited, her computer lab.

Instead, June found a broken lock, the door held open by chair, and a pair of thick humorless men in dark suits with Defense Department ID's packing Tyg3r, her mother's experimental benchmade mini-supercomputer, into a cardboard box with all the spare drives they could find. They'd already stacked their hand truck with banker's boxes, apparently filled with the contents of her mother's secure, fireproof file cabinet, which now stood open like a corpse for the medical examiner.

Although the G-men didn't show their ID's long enough for her to get their names, they made sure June could see the guns on their hips. The pale one did the talking, while his eyes wandered up and down her body. The dark one didn't say a word. They left her standing in the doorway with a warning that even this incident was classified, and if she even spoke of it she would face federal prosecution.

June watched them trundle the hand truck down the hall, thinking that her mother had always hated the government.

So why would she work for the Department of Defense?

Put another way, why would they show up at three a.m.?

And why would they take Tyg3r, the temperamental mini-super, but leave the big blazing-fast liquid-cooled Cray her mother had been so proud of?

So June had a lot on her mind. And when she finally dragged her ass out of bed the next day, she realized there was no coffee in the house. How the hell had that happened?

When she recognized the emergency conditions, she pulled on yesterday's clothes, slung her messenger bag over her shoulder, got on her mother's ancient but highly-tuned single-speed Schwinn, and headed for Philz Coffee.

On Middlefield Road, a giant black SUV with tinted windows pulled up beside her, crowding her toward the parking lane. Red and blue lights flashed on the dash. When the passenger window hummed down, the same pale humorless G-man from the night before pretended to smile at her now.

He wasn't looking at her face, of course. He was watching the way the cross-strap from her messenger bag defined her breasts. Definitely not cool, she thought. Some woman needs to rewrite the DOD training manual.

"Please pull over, Ms. Cassidy. We'd like to speak with you for a few moments."

"Not right now," said June crossly, still pedaling. She was dangerously undercaffeinated, with a headache that would kill a rhino, and hadn't done shit for exercise in several days. The bike ride was just beginning to unknot her muscles when this moron showed up. "I need some coffee."

The big SUV kept pace with her. "This will just take a moment," he said. "We can drive through Starbucks if you'd like."

The G-man clearly failed to comprehend. Plus she would never go to Starbucks unless she was taken hostage, and even then she would fight it. "Hey," she said. "I'm busy. Send me an email. Call my cell. I'm sure you can figure out the number."

The G-man looked at the driver, who was definitely less pale but appeared no less humorless. Why did they have such horrible suits? The driver nodded.

"Ma'am," said the pale G-man. "I'm with the United States government. Are you refusing my lawful request?"

"Jesus Christ, no." Although she was starting to wonder if it was a lawful request. This wasn't her area, but she could make some calls and find out. "After lunch, okay? I have a meeting. Send me a text."

The G-man raised his hand and the driver slanted the black SUV into her path, leaving June no option but to slam on the brakes or be forced into a parked car.

"Hey listen motherfucker," she began, but the G-man stepped out of the SUV, jammed a crackling electric stun gun into her side, and pulled the trigger.

It felt like being punched by a gorilla. June's legs stopped working, and she collapsed over her mom's bike.

The man captured her wrists in a pair of plastic riot handcuffs, disentangled her from the Schwinn, picked her up like a rag doll, and threw her into the back seat.

The driver scanned his mirrors. "What about the bike?"

"Leave it," said the first man, picking up June's fallen bag and getting in beside her. He took a phone from his pocket, touched a button. "We have her," he said.

The SUV roared back into mid-morning traffic, red and blue lights still flashing, conveying the impression of importance and urgency, with only a faint crunching sound as the left rear wheel rolled over her mother's beautiful old bicycle.

The next car slowed as he detoured around the twisted frame of the fallen Schwinn, but he

was the only person to wonder what had happened.

By then, the black SUV was long gone.

June's skin felt hot under the T-shirt where the stun gun hit her. She didn't feel damaged, thankfully, just sore, like a long day at the climbing gym. She was more banged up from falling across her mom's bike. Mostly she was scared at finding herself thrown into a strange car with strange men. But that fear was rapidly converting to anger.

She was sure now that these men were not with the government, despite the badges and flashing lights. They wouldn't have used a stun gun on her. They'd simply have had the local cops knock on her door and bring her in.

But why did they want her to begin with?

The only thing that made sense was that it had something to do with her mother's lab.

She took careful inventory of her surroundings. The back doors were locked, and the driver watched his mirrors and the road ahead. The negligent way her seat-mate kept an eye on her told her that he didn't consider her a threat, just a girl like any other. Until he began to leer at her a little, checking her out in her handcuffs, like he might ask her for dinner when the whole thing was over.

As if he didn't quite get that he'd fucking zapped her with a stun gun and abducted her.

She recognized this particular look from the guy who got her staggering drunk on everclear-laced "punch" early in her freshman year, so that he could rape her in the coat room of a fraternity. The kind of guy who told himself that the girl went to a party to get drunk and laid and he was just helping her out, and that No really meant Yes because dude he was so damn handsome that a girl couldn't really be turning him down on purpose.

She reported the rape to the campus cops, but his asshole buddies rallied with bullshit stories of how she'd gotten drunk and come on to him, and the investigator couldn't do much. She didn't even know if he believed her.

So, with no other option available but to allow the whole thing to eat her alive, June decided to consider the incident to be a powerful lesson in poor judgment and a strong incentive to take full responsibility for herself. She stopped going to big parties, started self-defense classes and never drank anything she hadn't poured herself.

She never thought of herself as a violent person, or someone easily angered. The self-

defense training was just that, a means to protect herself. But she had been known to harbor a grudge, and now she took long, deep breaths, oxygenating her blood and stoking her anger to a pure white heat while she waited for a red light.

When the driver stayed in the lane for Old Middlefield, she knew she was running out of time. Once they hit the freeway, she was fucked. There would be no red light. She saw the sign for Las Muchachas, tightened her abs, locked her left hand on the back of the driver's headrest, and pivoted on her seat to kick the man she now thought of as the date-rapist directly in the face.

She wore her favorite heavy hiking boots, and her legs were very strong from running and biking, so the kick had substantial force. He rocked back and tried to block her, but she kept kicking him as hard as she could in the face and neck and forearms.

When he finally went on the offensive, reaching out for her with thick hands, she leaned in with a wrist lock, grabbed his vulnerable little finger and bent it back, not an easy thing with her wrists cuffed but very effective. The date-rapist's meaty bloodstreaked face twisted up and he shouted in pain, the driver was yelling and trying to pull over, and she really should have thought this through first but she was in it now and not giving up because the alternative was entirely unacceptable.

"Give me the fucking stun gun," she growled. His finger was at the edge of breaking. His face was torn up from her all-terrain soles, but he was clearly furious and she didn't want to get close to him. He was much bigger and stronger than she was, and the enclosed space was not to her advantage. She didn't know how long he'd give a shit about his finger. If he zapped her again or pulled her into a clinch or even hit her once in the face with a closed fist, she'd be finished. She shouted it again, loud and hard, "Give me the fucking stun gun!"

"Okay, okay," he said and fumbled in his pocket. But she could read his intentions in his piggy little eyes and as the stun gun came out, she broke his finger. She could feel the crunch as the bone broke, a small weak bone despite the meatiness of his hand. He howled, but he'd already reached the same calculus she did, so despite the broken finger he pushed the stun gun toward her, trigger down and contacts crackling bright.

She hadn't let go of his finger. Now she pulled hard on it, twisting, grinding the bone. The date-rapist yelped and dropped the stun gun. She had to let go of his finger to scoop up the stun gun, but that's an exchange she made gladly, because the SUV was veering to the curb a...

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