



LIFE

FLIGHT

EXTREME MEASURES 1

LYNETTE
EASON

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EXTREME MEASURES #1

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To my incredible family,
many of whom are in the medical field.
Thank you for your dedication and commitment
to helping the sick.

But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

—Isaiah 40:31

CHAPTER ONE

OCTOBER THURSDAY AFTERNOON

Today was not going to be the day they died—not if she had anything to say about it. EMS helicopter pilot Penny Carlton tightened her grip on the throttle of the MBB Bo 105 chopper and prayed the wind would calm down long enough to get their patient to Mercy Mission Hospital on the other side of the mountain.

Flying in bad weather was nothing new, and Penny often did it without hesitation, knowing it was a life-or-death situation. But today was exceptionally bad, with rain and ice slashing the windshield, requiring all of her concentration to keep them on course. Not to mention in the air as the potential of icing increased.

“Come on, Betty Sue, you can do this. We’ve come this far, we’re gonna make it, right?” Penny talked to the chopper on occasion—mostly when she was worried.

She’d protested the flight to her supervisor, and he ordered her to do it or find another job. With only a brief thought that she should walk away, her mind went to the person in jeopardy. At the time, the weather hadn’t been nearly as violent as it was now, so

she'd ignored the weather warnings and agreed, praying they could beat the storm long enough to get in, get the patient, and get out.

Unfortunately, things hadn't worked out that way, and now she battled the weather while fifteen-year-old Claire Gentry fought to live.

Claire had been hiking with friends along one of Mount Mitchell's most rugged trails when a gust of harsh wind had blown her off balance and over the side of the mountain onto a ledge below. Once the rescue team had gotten her back up, it was Penny's turn to make sure Claire lived to see sixteen. "How's she doing back there?"

"Not good," Holly Cooper said into her mic. A nurse practitioner, Holly could handle just about any medical emergency that came up. However, controlling the weather was out of their hands. "Raina, hand me that morphine," she said. "She's hurting. And get pressure back on her side. She's bleeding again."

Raina Price, the critical care transport paramedic, moved to obey. The three of them had been saving lives together for the past twenty months.

Thunder boomed and lightning lit up the sky way too close for comfort. Penny tuned out the familiar beep and whine of the machines behind her, knowing the best way she could help Claire was to get her to the hospital.

A hard slam against the left side of the chopper knocked the cyclic control stick from her grip, sending them sideways. Yells from Raina and Holly echoed in her ears. "Hold on!" Penny grabbed the stick, righted the chopper, and pushed the left antitorque pedal, the helicopter sluggish in response to her attempts to turn it into the wind.

"Penny! What's happening?"

"We got hit with something! I think it damaged the tail rotor. I'm going to have to land it."

"You can't." Holly's calm words helped settle her racing pulse. A fraction. "Claire's most likely going to die if we don't get her to the hospital."

The wind threw them into a rapid descent, sending Penny's stomach with it. The chopper wasn't spinning, so the tail rotor wasn't completely damaged, but something was definitely—desperately—wrong. “I don't have a choice!” They would *all* die if she didn't do something now. She keyed her microphone and advised air traffic control of the emergency and their approximate location.

“ . . . breaking up . . . please repeat.”

Penny did and got silence for her efforts. “Mayday! Mayday. Anyone there?”

Nothing. She was out of time.

The instrument panel flashed and went dark. “No, don't do that! You're not supposed to do that.”

“Do what?” Holly yelled.

Penny ignored her and got a grip on her fear while she tried to make out the fast-approaching ground amid flashes of lightning. The last one allowed her to spot a small neighborhood with a row of houses farther down the side of the mountain—at least she thought that's what she saw. The storm was now raging, visibility practically nil.

She would have to go by the memory of the brief glances. The top of the mountain had looked flat with a bare area where she thought she could safely land. Or at least not crash into trees—or homes.

The throttle was set, controlled by the governor. Now all she had to do was point the nose of the chopper downward to keep them from entering an out-of-control spin. “Come on, girl, you can do this,” she muttered. “We can do this. Just a little farther.” The trees were somewhere straight ahead. The loose watch on her left wrist bounced against her skin in time with the movement of the chopper.

“Penny!” Holly's tightly held fear bled through her voice. “Tell me what we're doing.”

“Just focus on your patient and I'll get us on the ground. We're

going to be fine.” *Please, God, let us be okay. Please.* She’d trained for this. Over and over, she’d practiced what to do if she lost a tail rotor or had engine issues or whatever. The engine was still good, and a Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm could perform amazing aerobatic maneuvers when called on. For a brief moment, her panel flickered to life and she quickly checked her altitude and airspeed. So far, so good. For now.

“I can do this,” she whispered. “Come on, Betty Sue, please don’t quit on me now.”

They’d *all* trained for situations like this. Mostly, focusing on how to keep the patient stable in the midst of an emergency landing. *Landing, please. Not a crash.*

When her panel fluttered, then went dark once more, she groaned and squinted through the glass. More thunder shook the air around them, but the nonstop lightning was going to be what saved them.

The landing spot she’d picked out wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do. At least it was mostly flat—and big. “Brace yourselves,” she said. “It’s going to be a rough landing, but we *are* going to walk away from this. *All* of us.”

The tops of the trees were closer than she’d like, but the small opening just beyond them was within reach. “Almost there!” A gust of wind whipped hard against her and debris crashed into the windshield, spreading the cracks. Penny let out a screech but kept her grip steady. “Come on, come on.” She maneuvered the controls, keeping an eye on the trees through the cracked windshield. Okay, the tail rotor was responding somewhat. That would help. “We’re going to have a hard bounce! Be ready.”

She whooshed past the trees, their tips scraping the underbelly of the chopper, but she cleared them. Her heart pounded in her ears. Down, down . . .

The helicopter tilted, the right landing skid hitting first and sliding across the rocky ground. A scream came from the back and supplies flew through the cabin. Something slammed into the

side of Penny's helmet, and she flinched and pushed hard on the collective, angling the rotors, desperate to get both skids on the ground. They bounced, rocked, then settled on the skids. Upright and still breathing.

She'd done it. She was alive. *They* were alive. With shaking hands, she shut down the engine and took off her helmet. *Thank you, Jesus.*

She turned to see Raina and Holly unbuckling their safety harnesses. Holly dropped to her knees next to the patient while Raina dabbed at a cut on her forehead.

"You okay?" she asked Raina.

"Yeah. This is minor compared to what it could have been."

"How's Claire?" Penny asked.

"Hanging in there," Holly said. She pulled the stethoscope from her ears. "Where are we?"

"I don't know, but there's a rescue team on the way. I hope." If they could get through. Even now, the rain and wind whipped at the chopper body. "We just need to stay put until someone comes."

Raina met her eyes. "You did good, Pen. I don't know how you did it, but you did."

Penny wasn't sure either. "God did it. I was praying the whole time, so that's the only explanation I've got."

"Yeah."

She needed to check the chopper and see what the damage was. Not that she could fix it, but . . .

She glanced upward. "Thank you," she whispered.

Holly shot her a quick look. "What?"

"Nothing." Penny eyed Claire and didn't like what she was seeing. She snagged the radio again. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is Medevac 2646 advising of an emergency landing somewhere on top of Mount Mitchell. Requesting immediate extraction. Four passengers. One critical. Over." Then waited. No reply.

With another glance at her passengers, she tried one more time, all the while knowing it was useless. "Mayday, Mayday!"

No response.

“Okay, that’s not good,” she muttered. She snagged her cell phone from her pocket. One bar. She dialed 911 and waited. The call dropped. She tried again with the same result. If she had a sat phone, she could use that, but she didn’t have one, and she didn’t have time to be angry over the reason why.

Think, Penny, think. She turned back to the others, who were monitoring Claire. “Holly, I can’t get a signal and nothing’s happening with the radio. I’m going to have to try and walk until I get something.”

Raina scowled. “Stupid mountains.”

“All right, here’s the deal,” Penny said. “I have no idea if anyone heard my Mayday—or anything else. You guys keep Claire stable. I’ll be back as soon as I can get word to someone where to find us. I saw a few houses scattered in the area. I just need to find a road and follow it. Hopefully the closer I get to a neighborhood or house, I’ll pick up a cell phone signal.”

“Can’t they track the ELT?” Holly asked.

The emergency locator transmitter. “They should be able to, but I don’t want to take a chance on it malfunctioning. Something’s going on with the electrical. The instrument panel keeps flickering and the radio’s not working.”

“You can’t go out in this,” Raina said. “This weather is too dangerous.”

“If Claire wasn’t in such bad shape, I’d sit it out with you guys, but I’ve got to try—and when we get back, we’re having a fundraiser for a satellite phone.” She was going to have it out with her supervisor as soon as she saw him face-to-face. Thanks to his budget cutting, they could very well die out here. If she had a sat phone, she could—

Nope. Not going to think about that.

Penny grabbed the poncho from the bin next to the stretcher. “If I’m not back and help arrives, you get Claire to the hospital. I can wait for the next ride.”

"But, Pen—" Holly started to protest, but Penny was already shaking her head.

"I mean it," she said. "You know you can't wait on me to get back."

"Fine," Raina said. "But if you're not back in an hour, I'm coming looking for you."

"Don't you dare. Holly needs your help with Claire. I'll be fine. If I can survive juvie, this little storm is child's play."

"Juvie?" Holly asked. "Why is this the first I've heard of that?"

"Long, boring story. I was a bad girl, they sent me to juvie, and I got my head on straight. End of story."

"Right."

Penny pulled four protein bars and two bottles of water from the small pack she carried on every flight. "Just in case you guys get hungry." She slid the pack with the remaining protein bars and bottles of water over her shoulder and grabbed the emergency flashlight from the box, then opened the door. The rain had slacked off slightly—at least she thought so. She pulled the poncho over her and the pack and hopped to the ground. "Keep her alive! I'll be back!"

Penny shut the door behind her and turned. With her cell phone clutched in her left hand, she darted into the woods.



FBI Special Agent Holton Satterfield jerked his feet from the desktop and slammed them to the floor even while he pressed the phone to his ear. He hadn't thought the day could get any worse. First, his conversation with his sister Rachel about their older sibling, Zoe, had gone so far south, it was probably north at this point. And now this. "I know you didn't just tell me that."

"Unfortunately, I did," Gerald Long said. The Special Supervisory Agent didn't sound any happier than Holt. "But Rabor is armed and on the run."

"How?"

“He had help. His loyal girlfriend, Shondra Miller, disguised herself as a nurse and walked right in with a key to the cuffs.” Gerald’s disgust echoed through the line.

Holt didn’t bother asking how she managed to bypass all the security and ID checks to get to the patient. That was someone else’s responsibility to investigate, but it had happened and now he needed to deal with the fallout.

“When?” After Darius Rabor had killed a federal judge, the FBI had joined the hunt for him. Holt had been lead on the task force that put Rabor away a year and a half ago. He’d been on death row, his execution date coming up next month.

“Two hours ago,” Gerald said. “Rabor was in the hospital for emergency gall bladder surgery. Killed a nurse and the two transport officers. One of the hospital security guards is in surgery. I’m reconvening the original task force, as everyone is already familiar with this guy. I need you and Sands in Asheville, North Carolina, yesterday.”

“Asheville. Of course he’d go back there,” Holt muttered. Rabor knew the mountains well and had family there. Holt was in the Columbia, South Carolina, field office, and Rabor had been incarcerated at the Broad River Correctional Institution just a few miles away. Where Holt’s sister was also an inmate. He grimaced at the unwanted thought. But there was nothing he could do about Zoe. He had a killer to capture again before anyone else died by his hand.

“He had surgery yesterday,” Gerald said. “This afternoon, he was in his room, cuffed to the bed. The next time someone checked on him, he was coming out of the bathroom, dressed in street clothes. Before the guard had a chance to pull his weapon, Rabor used a knife to stab the guy three times.”

“That’s his weapon of choice. A knife slipped to him by his girlfriend, along with the key?”

“No doubt. And the clothes to allow him to blend in. After he killed the guard, he took the man’s weapon and, in the ensuing

chaos, shot his way out. The two then stole a car from the valet parking attendant and headed out of town with police after them. They made it to Asheville, then crashed at the bottom of Mount Mitchell. He and Shondra took off on foot, going up. I'm sending you the coordinates. Police chased them up the mountain and put out an alert for residents to lock their homes and report anything suspicious. Asheville's RA is expecting you and will be offering support." He paused. "On the ground anyway. Air support is iffy at this point, with the storms getting ready to unleash their worst on the area. But you're going to have to take a chopper to get there. It's standing by. When you land, the RA has a car waiting for you."

Great. "We're on the way." He hung up, took a moment to gather his thoughts and emotions, then shot to his feet.

His partner, Martin Sands, looked up. "What now? More stuff with Zoe? Her kids okay?"

Marty was the one person Holt felt comfortable venting to about his sister and her confession to killing her husband two years ago—and the fact that he'd finally conceded that she did it. He ignored the shame that tried to creep in every time he thought about her. He should be turning over every rock to find evidence to the contrary, but the truth was, his sister was guilty of murder. Why work to prove her innocence when all the evidence and her own words said the effort would be a waste of time?

"No, she's on the back burner for now. Her kids are fine." They lived with his parents for the moment. Twelve-year-old Ellie and eight-year-old Krissy. His precious nieces that he never got to see enough of. "Rabor and his girlfriend are on the loose. You and I are now officially back on the task force to recapture him."

"What? You're kidding me. How?"

"I'll explain on the way."

Martin followed him out the door, muttering his displeasure. Holt let him vent while he concentrated on how best to catch the man. Again. It hadn't been easy the first time.

It would be even harder now, as Rabor wouldn't make the same

mistakes twice—and he had his girlfriend helping him this time. However, he was one day out of surgery. How far could he get? Then again, the fact that he'd managed to kill three people in spite of being on drugs and, most likely, in pain, sent dread coursing through him. Holt knew better than anyone just how resourceful the killer was, and he had the scar to prove it. His hand went to the area just below his vest on his left side, but he didn't need to touch the place to know what was there. The nightmares reminded him most nights.

They headed for the chopper while thunder boomed in the distance. It wasn't raining yet, but it was about to start at any moment. The pilot nodded to them and soon they were in the air, headed toward the mountain. Thirty minutes later, Holt slid into the driver's seat of the Bureau's waiting sedan and checked the weather app on his phone. "This is going to be a fun drive. It's cold and icy, and storm warnings are everywhere."

"We've driven through worse. Right?"

True, but he didn't like it any more than Marty did—and Marty *really* hated bad weather. Holt's phone dinged again. "Command center is on the way too. We'll meet them there."

They drove through the blowing wind and rain with Holt fighting to keep the vehicle on the road. Across the street from the base of the mountain, the mobile command center had already been set up in the elementary school parking lot. Holt ducked into the customized motor home and shook the water out of his hair. Marty entered behind him. Seated in front of the first computer to Holt's left was Julianna Jameson. "Jules? What brings you here? He hasn't taken any hostages, has he?"

"Not yet."

Julianna was one of the Bureau's most skilled negotiators with the Crisis Negotiation Unit. She was also one of his favorite people, with her quick wit and dry humor. However, she usually didn't go into the field unless the situation called for it.

"I was in the area doing some training. When I got word about

the situation, I hightailed it over here. I'm here as a precaution," she said. "Local cops are swarming the area in spite of the weather. There are six small neighborhoods spaced out along the road that leads to the top of the mountain. Two cop cars are assigned to each one. One at the entrance and one that's driving a constant loop."

"What about the houses that don't have neighborhoods or fences or alarm systems?"

"We've activated the Reverse 911 and officers are going door-to-door and asking residents to phone everyone they can think of to warn them, but it's definitely possible someone will be missed."

"Yeah."

"That's not all. We've gotten word that a medevac chopper made an emergency landing about an hour ago in a clearing on top of the mountain, and Gerald asked me to be on-site just in case Darius manages to get there first."

"Oh no." He took a seat opposite her.

She studied him. "It's Penny and her crew, Holt. They've got a fifteen-year-old patient in pretty serious shape."

Holt raked a hand through his hair. Penny, Holly, and Raina had been the ones to save his life eighteen months ago. He and Penny had hit it off and gone out a few times after he'd recovered. While their relationship was only at a friendship-but-could-possibly-be-more stage—and had been for longer than he liked as he was ready for the "more" part—their schedules hadn't allowed more than brief dinners and short conversations on the phone. But he cared about Penny. A lot.

She and Julianna were tight friends, sharing a past that he still didn't know all the details of. "All right, then we need to head that way and get them down off that mountain. If Rabor or Shondra run into them . . ."

"Yeah. And unfortunately, they're not answering the attempts to contact them. The emergency locator beacon is the only thing they have to go on right now."

"That doesn't sound good."

“This storm is only going to get worse in the next little while,” Julianna said. “Hopefully, we can get to them before too much longer.”

“We?” Julianna wouldn’t normally do something like that, but since it was Penny—

“I’m going with you.” She narrowed her eyes. “There’s a killer up there. And so are Penny and the others. If he manages to grab one of them, it’s not going to be good.”

“Yeah.”

“I need to be there.”

“I agree,” Holt said. “Rabor knows we’re on his tail and is going to be looking for someone he can use as leverage. I don’t want to give him that opportunity.”

She nodded. “Exactly.”

With practiced movements, they gathered their gear, satellite phones, and rain ponchos and headed back out into the storm.