



CRITICAL THREAT

EXTREME MEASURES 3

LYNETTE
EASON

USA Today Bestselling Author

Books by Lynette Eason

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Protecting Tanner Hollow

DANGER NEVER SLEEPS

Collateral Damage
Acceptable Risk
Active Defense

EXTREME MEASURES

Life Flight
Crossfire
Critical Threat

EXTREME MEASURES #3

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Dedicated to the men and women
who put their lives on the lines for the rest of us.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.

John 3:16–17 NASB

CHAPTER ONE

MONDAY, NOVEMBER OUTSIDE WASHINGTON, DC

“A third victim has been found and a serial killer is once again thought to be terrorizing the Northeast—just east of the territory Peter Romanos paralyzed with his string of murders,” Rachel Goodwin reported from her position outside the prison. “Peter Romanos, who is incarcerated in the new high-security DC federal penitentiary, is serving twelve life sentences. Only this time, instead of teenage girls, this particular killer is targeting older women. That’s all the information I have at the moment. I hope to know more soon.”

The camera panned away from the woman, and clips of Romanos’s arrest thirteen years ago took over the screen.

The man in the recliner stood and frowned. Peter Romanos had gotten what he deserved—caught.

Because he’d been stupid.

The killer walked down the hallway, grabbed his keys off the table near the door, stepped outside, then crossed the yard to the barn. He unlocked the padlock, lifted the wooden beam, and

stepped inside, surveying his office. It wasn't what most people considered an office, but it was definitely where all the important work took place.

He stepped into the stall on the left of the area where he'd dug the hole. It had taken him a month to get it just the way he wanted. Once he had it deep enough, he smoothed concrete on the floor and then concreted the walls most of the way up. High enough that no one could climb out. The remaining sides, up to the barn's floor, had fencing with chicken wire to hold back the dirt and a heavy chain-link fence on top that would allow air in. He didn't need anyone suffocating in there. *He* was the one who chose the time of death. *He* was the one who decided *how* they died. And, because he paid attention to details, everything had gone according to the plan so far. No one would ever trace anything back to him. Ever. Because he was smart.

Not like Romanos.

Who leaves evidence in their house for their kid to find?

So dumb. And it was infuriating that Romanos had treated killing like it was a game, a sport. Killing was *not* a game *nor* a sport. Romanos's victims hadn't deserved to die like that. They were young. Innocent. They'd had so much to live for.

Not like some.

The ones who weren't innocent. The ones who deserved what they had coming.

Like Sonya Griffith. What a mean old bat. He'd taken care of her and made sure she never had a chance to spread her poison ever again.

His phone buzzed and he glanced at the text.

See you at noon for lunch, sweetheart.

He stopped and tapped back his response.

So sorry, hon. I need to cancel. Looks like a long day. I'll let you know when I'm on the way home.

So much for plans for lunch. He tucked the phone back in his pocket and headed into the workroom, where he wiggled the mouse on the laptop. It was thrilling to see all his hard work finally paying off.

Because killing wasn't a game. It was very serious business.

CHAPTER TWO

FIRING RANGE, QUANTICO

Supervisory Special Agent Grace Billingsley adjusted the ear protectors, aimed her weapon at the target fifteen yards in front of her, and pulled the trigger three times. Agent Mark Davis, in the space next to her, let out a low whistle. “That’s pretty deadly aim there. I don’t think you’re going to have any trouble requalifying.” Quarterly firearms qualification was required, and Grace was always ready to prove her skills on the range while praying she never had to use them in any other scenario.

She eyed the holes in the paper with satisfaction. “Don’t worry, Mark, you keep practicing and maybe one day you’ll be just as good.”

He snorted and holstered his weapon. “Better watch out or you won’t be able to get that head through the door.”

She laughed and reloaded her weapon. The lighthearted bantering was good for her soul. Healing. Dealing with what she had to see on a regular basis, she’d come to appreciate the moments when she could laugh.

Early this morning, she’d been sitting at her desk located in

the CIRG—Critical Incidence Response Group—building just outside of Quantico, scrolling through ViCAP, reading the latest information on new crimes. The Violent Criminal Apprehension Program was a database containing the details of certain violent crimes—solved and unsolved—as well as unidentified recovered bodies and missing persons believed to be victims of violent crime. It was created as an attempt to link crimes with similar methods of operating, signatures, et cetera.

She made it a point to keep up with the new entries. Unfortunately, not all departments entered their crimes into the system, but most did.

Six months ago, against some stiff competition, she'd applied for and been offered the position as behavioral analyst, formerly known as a profiler, with the Behavioral Analysis Unit 4—crimes against adults. Finally. She'd set her sights on this job when she'd been a teenager in juvie and had befriended the psychiatrist who'd worked with her and the others who'd been incarcerated there. It had taken hard work, a lot of sleepless nights, and some unappealing assignments, but she'd made it.

The range door opened and Jerry Stevens stepped inside. “Hey, how about an early lunch? I'm starving. The food court good with y'all?”

The Academy had a food court with an assortment of choices. Mark grinned and Grace shook her head. Jerry was always starving. At six foot three and two hundred twenty pounds, the man could put away some food.

“I'm in,” Grace said. “Just got to clean my weapon and change out my ammo.”

“Same here,” Mark said. “We'll meet you there.”

“Text me your order so I don't have to wait on you.” He left, and she and Mark did as requested before turning their attention to their weapons.

Fifteen minutes later, they walked into the cafeteria and Grace drew in a deep breath. Fried eggs and crispy bacon were on the menu today. She waved to two of the workers she often chatted

with, then spotted Jerry at the table, food already in front of him and two empty seats.

She slid into the chair, said a quick blessing, then dug in. Three bites later, Jerry's phone went off. He answered, listened, then nodded. "Grace is with us. Ask Frank if she can come along."

Grace raised a brow but continued eating. She'd know the details soon enough. Frank Boggs, her unit chief, would say yes, but they still had to ask. Mark shoved the last of his food in his mouth and waited.

Finally, Jerry nodded. "Great." He hung up and snagged his tray. "Got a body."

Mark sighed. "Right."

And just like that, her good mood darkened.

Jerry's gaze switched to her. "Looks like we might have a serial, so this is going to land in your lap at some point. Frank okayed you to go."

Grace nodded. "Just need to make a quick stop back at CIRG so I can grab my laptop and vehicle. You can give the details on the way."

They hurried toward the exit and Jerry's vehicle.

The men had been partners for almost fifteen years. They'd caught more than one serial killer and were ready to stop the next one—should this one turn out to be what was suspected.

Grace found she liked and admired both men. Thankfully, they respected her, too, and they made a good team when they had the opportunity to work together.

She climbed into the back seat of Jerry's Bureau-issued sedan, better known as a Bucar, and buckled her seat belt. Mark could ride shotgun.

Jerry slid into the driver's seat and glanced in the rearview mirror. "Local detective is at the scene and thinks he's got something we need to see," he said. "Says the killing is very similar to Gina Baker's death from last week and Carol Upton's from two weeks ago. He also said the media is already on the scene."

"The media?" Mark nearly shouted the question. "How are they already there?"

“Someone tipped them off, obviously.”

Jerry cranked the engine and aimed the car toward the scene.

“The detective put that together about the three killings? That they’re similar?” Grace asked. They’d deal with the media when they got there.

Jerry shrugged. “Apparently, he has his sights set on the Bureau and keeps up with cases. He read about the one in the paper last week, so it was fresh in his head when he was called to this one. Since this is number three, he decided to give us a heads-up.” Three was the magic number that labeled the cases as a probable serial killer, bringing in the FBI.

“Huh. I just reviewed Gina Baker’s case this morning and told myself her killer was going to kill again.” She rubbed her forehead. “Didn’t expect it to be this soon.”

As much as she hated the necessity for her job, she loved what she did—and excelled at it. And now, she was going to crime scenes, using her skills to track killers.

“Where’s this one?” Grace asked.

“Prince William Forest Park. Two hikers found a dead body and called it in,” Jerry said. “When park security responded, they called the local police. Thankfully, Detective Morgan caught the call and noticed the similarities to Gina’s murder.”

Mark ran a hand over his blond head. “Any ID on the victim yet?”

Jerry nodded. “Her purse was tucked up under her right shoulder. Sonya Griffith. She was a fifty-one-year-old history teacher at the local high school.”

“Any history of violence?” Grace asked. “Affiliations with the unsavory types? Relationships gone bad?”

“They’re in the process of finding that out.”

“What was the similarity to the other two killings?”

“Caucasian middle-aged woman with her purse tucked next to her. Fingernails gone. White forget-me-nots in her right hand. Bullet hole at the base of her skull and her tongue was cut out and placed on her chest with a Bible verse pinned to it. You know, the one from Proverbs.”

Grace grimaced. “The mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom, but the perverted tongue will be cut out.”

Jerry shot her a look. “Yeah. That one. Someone is really not liking what these women are saying.”

Grace mentally ran through what she’d read just a few hours ago in her scan of new cases. Fortunately, Gina’s murder had been entered into ViCAP. “Gina Baker, fifty-eight years old, wife, grandmother of three, churchgoer, movie lover—and part-time X-ray tech at the hospital. She was found in a neighborhood park—put there in the wee hours of the morning according to detectives, three days after her disappearance—with her tongue cut out and placed on her chest with the same verse pinned to it. And he took her fingernails so there was no DNA.” The pictures had disturbed Grace on a deep level. Deeper than just about anything else she’d worked on. “Her car was found parked in the Howlson Soccer Complex and the crime scene unit has it at the warehouse lab. No camera footage of it being parked or left there.”

“When we talked to her husband, Adam Baker, he had no idea why her car would have been at the sports complex. She had no reason to be there.”

“Killer dumped it there, of course,” Grace said. She looked at the iPad in her lap. “And Carol Upton, the first one killed, is the same setup. Neighborhood park, posed against a tree, tongue pinned to her chest, no fingernails, purse next to her. Disappeared and found three days later like these last two. And no phone to be found. What else?”

“That’s it for the moment. CSU is on the way, as is the ME.”

She nodded. “Has an analyst been assigned?”

“Daria Nevsky.”

A flash of relief slid through her. She loved Daria and admired the heck out of her. “Good. We’ll have something soon then.”

Jerry pulled into the parking lot of CIRG, and she ran in to grab her laptop. She’d take her own Bucar to the scene because she’d probably head home from there.

The drive to the park was short. She followed the guys to Mo-

have Road, and they all pulled to a stop behind the line of other emergency vehicles parallel to the South Fork of Quantico Creek. Grace found the scene as she expected—taped off and buzzing in an organized manner. The act of processing a crime scene was nothing short of amazing professionals doing what they did in the hopes of catching a killer sooner rather than later. She let Jerry and Mark bypass her, parting the crowd made up of media and other rubberneckers. Ignoring the shouts of the reporters, she ducked under the crime scene tape. The path to the creek was dense, but manageable. While she walked, she let her gaze scan the area. Trees and a gurgling creek were about all she could discern from her current location, but it was quiet. Peaceful. Serene. If one could mute the noise from the activity just a little farther ahead.

She made her way down the incline and came to a stop at the bottom where she turned her attention to the body covered by a black tarp.

Jerry was kneeling next to it, using a pen to lift the edge to see under.

“Don’t touch that body ’til the ME gets here,” Mark said. He stood at the edge of the minuscule beachy area where the victim lay propped up against a tree. “He’ll have your head.”

Jerry scowled at his partner and Grace bit her lip. The two had been partners for years, but Mark still liked to get his digs in, treating Jerry like a rookie.

“Not touching a thing,” Jerry said, “as you well know. Just looking.”

“I don’t suppose there are any cameras out here, huh?” Grace asked, walking over to join Mark.

He looked at her, with brow raised. “Please tell me you’re using that dry humor of yours.”

She shrugged. “Not exactly my environment. I’m a city girl.”

He just shook his head. “No cameras, city girl.”

“Not even one of those wildlife live-cam things? Seems like this creek would be a good spot to aim one. You know, you catch the animals coming in for a drink or something.”

He frowned. “Good point. I doubt it, but guess it can’t hurt to ask.”

She glanced at the road. “Where’s the ME?”

“On his way.”

Jerry stood and walked over to them. “She fought hard. Hands are messed up bad.”

“Good,” Mark said, “maybe we’ll get some DNA this time.”

“I doubt it. Just like Gina Baker and Carol Upton. Nails and tongue.” Grace shuddered and prayed the woman had been dead at that point.

Footsteps to her left dragged her attention from the body to a pair of feet clad in brown loafers. She let her gaze travel upward to meet familiar hazel eyes. “Sam?”

“Hi, Grace.”

She smiled at the man she’d met eight months ago at a psychiatric conference—and hadn’t been able to get him out of her head. “Good to see you. What are you doing here?” Sam Monroe was a prison psychiatrist but also an FBI agent with Health Services at HQ. She could have looked him up, but he’d made it clear he wasn’t interested.

“I had an interest in the case.”

“As in . . . ?”

“I called him,” Jerry said. “The first person who was killed—”

“Carol,” Grace said, her voice low, “her name was Carol.”

Jerry paused, then nodded. “Right. Carol. She was missing her phone. Same with Gina.” He pointed to Sonya. “And I can’t find hers either.”

Grace frowned. “What’s that got to do with you?”

Sam raised a brow. “Because of who my father is.” He cleared his throat. “It’s not like I advertise it—in fact, only a few people know—but my father is . . . unfortunately . . . Peter Romanos.”

Grace stilled. Her eyes went from him to Jerry to Mark. Mark gave a slow nod and Grace pursed her lips. “Peter Romanos. The Cell Phone Killer?”

“That’s the one.”



Saying his father's name always left a bad taste in his mouth, but telling Grace Billingsley that his father was the infamous killer left him a little nauseous. At the conference, he hadn't introduced himself as Sam Romanos, but instead as Sam Monroe—the name he'd taken in order to acquire some anonymity from his being related to an infamous killer.

His and Grace's time together at the conference blipped at warp speed through his mind. They'd hit it off on the first day, hung out and talked late into the night. He'd gotten her number and then done nothing with it. Divorced for eight years, he'd written romance off, deciding it wasn't for him—especially since he'd have to tell a potential love interest who his father was. And he hadn't been tempted to change that decision. Until her. Then he'd wimped out. Thankfully, she didn't look mad, just surprised.

"I thought you looked familiar at the conference," she said, "but I didn't place you until after I got home."

"Oh. How?"

"I followed the case as it unfolded. Your picture was on the screen a lot." She studied him. "You'd shaved the mustache and the five o'clock shadow, but I thought I knew you from somewhere."

With her trained eye, that didn't really surprise him. "You never said anything."

"When you didn't seem to recognize me, I figured I was just imagining things, but later, after I was home and going over a case, pictures from Peter's trial came up and there you were."

He rubbed a hand over his smooth-shaven chin. "Even as the trial unfolded, I was already planning how I could change my appearance—and my family's last name." He dropped his hand and curled his fingers into a fist at his side. "We took my ex-wife's maiden name. I figured it would make life . . . easier." He shrugged. "Or at least less stressful if every time we said our full names, we didn't get asked if we were related to the serial killer."

“I can see that. Peter Romanos *was* a household name for a while. And Romanos isn’t exactly common,” she said.

“I couldn’t let my kids go through life knowing . . .” He shook his head. “All of our friends disappeared during that time, so I figured it would be a good way to start over. With the move to a different neighborhood, different schools, and a different last name . . . it’s been good for all of us. Anyway . . .”

“Yeah. Well,” she said, “I can understand why Mark and Jerry would have you here.” She turned back to the body. “You think we have a copycat?”

Thankful for the redirection, he shook his head. “I don’t know, but no one knows my father’s cases better than I do, so . . .” Because he’d studied them ad nauseam trying to find out what he’d missed, how he hadn’t known.

“Right.” She glanced up at him. “You’re still at the prison when you’re not working with other agents’ trauma?”

“I am.”

The same one where his father was now incarcerated. It had been thirteen years since the man had been arrested and imprisoned—and thirteen years of dodging any contact with his dad.

The fact that Sam continued to work at the prison even after his father had managed to get himself relocated there last year probably said a lot about him. Something he hadn’t been willing to explore just yet.

She nodded. “You have someone in mind who could be responsible for this?”

He shook his head. “I’ve been mentally going over every person my father has been in contact with to see if I can find any kind of connection, but I’ve got nothing. And besides . . .” Could his father have managed to bypass the security and monitoring to influence someone to continue his twisted killings?

“Besides what?” Mark asked.

“The age of the victims doesn’t match up. My father stayed in the under-twenty-five range. The three you’ve got are quite a bit older.”

“So, you don’t think the missing cell phones are somehow connected to your father’s MO?” Mark asked, his gaze hard.

Sam ignored the man’s chill and fell silent, studying the scene, thinking back to the reports he’d memorized. Not because he wanted to, but because he’d read them so often, they’d become engrained in his brain. “I . . . don’t know. My gut says no, but I don’t want to say that and be wrong. Then again, I don’t want to say yes and have you chase an angle that’s not what you need to be chasing.”

“We’ll chase them all,” Jerry said. “We can’t afford not to.”

Sam’s phone buzzed and he glanced at the screen. A number he didn’t recognize, but the text identified the sender.

It’s me. Your daughter. Mom won’t let me have a phone for my birthday. Will you PLEASE get me one?

Working right now, sweetie. I’ll call you when I can.

Call me? On what? Because this is my friend’s phone. Not mine. The one that I could text you from if I had my own and you could call me on. But I can’t do that because I don’t.

I love you. Will talk later.

He sighed and tucked the device back into his pocket. Raising a preteen was harder than he’d ever imagined it would be. Then again, he’d never thought he’d be doing it as a divorced father.

“You okay?” Grace asked.

“Yeah. Just . . . family stuff. Nothing that can’t wait.” Eleni would be thirteen in a week, and while her nagging for a phone was driving him straight up the proverbial wall, he had to admit he grudgingly admired her dogged persistence in going after something she wanted. If he could channel that in the right direction, it would serve her well in the future. He just prayed he managed to hold on to his patience that long.

The medical examiner arrived, pulling Sam's attention back to the present situation. One that had him thinking this killer and his father really had nothing in common. Mark and Jerry were still waiting for him to give them a definitive answer. He shook his head. "I can't say one way or the other. I'm sorry. My father didn't take their fingernails or cut his victims' tongues out." But he did leave them in public parks, posed against a tree, one red rose placed in their right hand. Like an apology. *I'm sorry I killed you, so I got you a flower. Am I forgiven now?* He cleared his throat. "And he didn't leave any kind of note or verse with his victims. Did you find a rose with her?"

Jerry shook his head. "No, but she had a bouquet of forget-me-nots in her right hand. All three victims did."

"Forget-me-nots," Grace murmured. "Interesting choice. Wonder why he chose those."

A chill skated up Sam's spine. "I'm sure there's a reason. Just like my father had his reasons. All of these similarities are well-known. His killings were described in detail by the media. It could be someone who is sick enough to admire him and want to honor"—he used air quotes around the word—"him by using some of those details in his own killings. But, if you're wanting a yes or no answer, I would lean more toward no."

Mark crossed his arms. "Come on. How can you say that? We've got a victim in the park, with a flower, propped against a tree. And a missing cell phone. All shades of a Peter Romanos killing."

He wasn't wrong. But . . . "There are too many significant differences. Killers don't change some of the differences. Like age. The kind of flower. Everything has meaning in what he does." He shook his head and glanced at his watch. "Like I said, I'm leaning toward no, simply because I just don't have enough information to connect the killings to a copycat." He hesitated. "Although, I suppose you could talk to my father. He's in prison not too far from here."

"I know exactly where he is," Mark said, the chill in his tone obvious.

Sam raised a brow. “Okay, then. Well, since it doesn’t look like you need me anymore, I’ve got a client to see in about an hour, so I’m going to head back to Headquarters.” It would take him about that long to make the drive depending on traffic. Which was usually horrible.

“I’ve basically gotten what I need here too,” Grace said. “I’ll walk to your car with you, then come back and wrap up.”

He nodded and they fell into step together as they navigated the scene to arrive back at his vehicle. He placed a hand on the door handle and paused. Turned back to her and cleared his throat. “I . . . um . . . owe you an apology.”

She raised a brow. “What for?”

“For leading you to believe I’d call you.”

“Oh, that.” She shrugged. “It’s okay. I just figured you weren’t interested.”

“But I was,” he blurted. She tilted her head and studied him, waiting. He sighed. He’d started this, now he had to explain himself. “You know that phrase, it’s not you, it’s me?”

She gave a quiet laugh. “I’m familiar.”

“Well, there’s truth in that. It wasn’t you, it was me.”

“Okay.”

He sighed. “And I’m sorry I didn’t say anything the night we were at dinner and talking,” he said in reference to the meal they’d shared at the conference.

“Our conversation wasn’t that deep, Sam. If I remember correctly, we talked mostly about our jobs.”

“True.”

“And I guess it’s difficult to find the right time to bring that topic up,” she said.

“That’s putting it mildly.” He struggled to find the words. “I haven’t dated anyone in a very long time. Not seriously. If . . . when . . . I ask someone out, I will have to be honest with that person and tell her about my father up front. At least I feel like that’s what I should do. I guess I just wasn’t ready to do that with you. To see the look come into your eye . . .” He shrugged.

“I understand.”

When she said nothing more, he blinked. “That’s it?”

“Of course. I can see how that would be terribly . . . terrifying. I can’t imagine having that hanging over my head.” She paused. “And I’ll be honest too. I was a little disappointed you didn’t call, but I wasn’t waiting by the phone either.”

“I didn’t mean to imply you were. I just . . .” He groaned. “Now I’ve gone and made things awkward—more awkward. I’m sorry.”

She patted his bicep. “It’s okay, Sam. Let it go. I told you, we’re good. I understand.”

“But I don’t want to let it go, because now that we’ve run into each other again, I’d like to actually take you to dinner.”

“Why? Because it’s what you feel like you’re supposed to do?”

He hesitated. Was it? For a brief moment, he rolled the question around in his head. “No,” he finally said, “because I’d really *like* to. And the fact that I don’t have to explain about my father is no longer an issue, so . . .”

“Oh. Okay then. When and where?”

“Uh . . . how about tonight?”

“Fine.”

He blinked. “Are you this easygoing all the time?”

She tilted her head. “Easygoing? Hmm. Yes, most of the time. I’ve had to learn to let most things roll off and not take offense. And besides, I’ve never been one to turn down free food.”

He nodded. “All right, then. Good enough. I have your number in my phone.” He tapped the screen. “There. Text me your address and I’ll pick you up?”

“I live in Springfield. That’s a little out of your way from Headquarters.”

“I’m in Alexandria. You’re worth the drive.”

She raised a brow at him. “All right, then. Sure.” She texted him her address and then tucked her phone back into her pocket. “But we’ll go to a nearby restaurant so you’re not doing even more driving.”

“You pick the place.”

“Even better.” She glanced back over her shoulder at the scene, then turned her gaze to his once more. “He’s not done, Sam.”

“I know.”

She shot him a tight smile. “And I know you have an appointment to get to. See you tonight.”

“I’ll be there.”

She walked away and he couldn’t help but watch—and wonder. Her dark hair held a slight wave, like she’d gathered it into a loose ponytail earlier, fastened at the nape of her neck. Her flawless light-brown skin glowed with health and her brown eyes hinted at mystery, tinged with humor and fun beneath the serious exterior. In other words, she was attractive, with a smile that got under his skin. Again.

The first time, he’d managed to chalk it up to a fluke. This time? Had to be more than that.