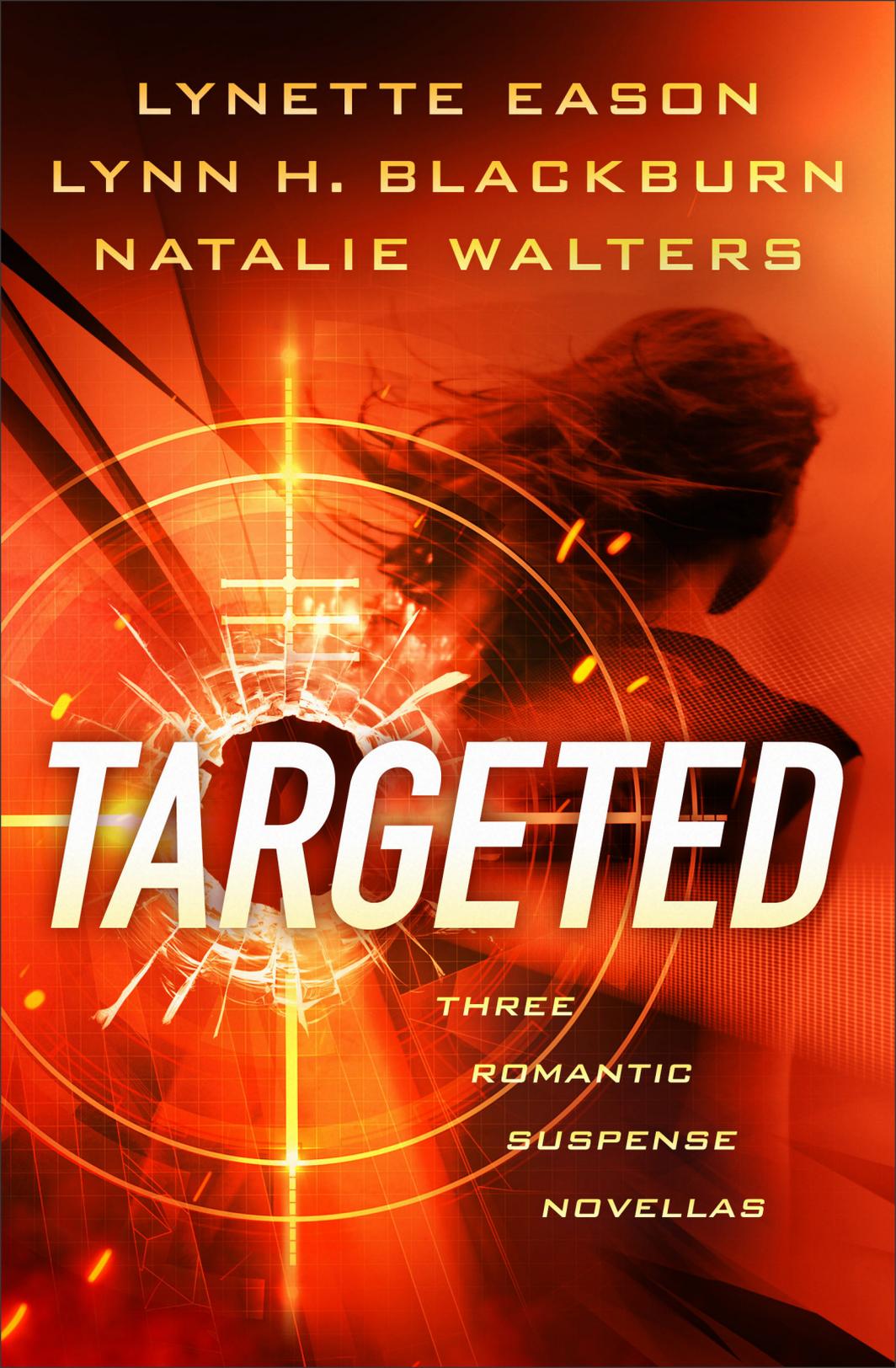


LYNETTE EASON
LYNN H. BLACKBURN
NATALIE WALTERS

A woman's profile is shown in silhouette against a vibrant orange and red background. She is looking towards the left. Overlaid on the scene is a complex digital interface consisting of concentric circles, a central crosshair, and various glowing lines and points, resembling a target or a tracking system. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and suspenseful.

TARGETED

THREE

ROMANTIC

SUSPENSE

NOVELLAS

TARGETED

**THREE ROMANTIC
SUSPENSE NOVELLAS**

**LYNETTE EASON,
LYNN H. BLACKBURN,
AND NATALIE WALTERS**



a division of Baker Publishing Group
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To our amazing agent,
Tamela Hancock Murray.
Thank you for believing in us,
encouraging us, and championing us.
You're the best!

ON THE RUN

LYNETTE EASON

ONE

Daria Nevsky slammed the door of her Ford F-150 truck and tucked her jacket under her chin to ward off the chill of the November wind. She headed toward the front steps of her Virginia townhome, thinking how nice it would be to park in a garage. But she loved this home located in a quiet neighborhood that backed up to a park where children played, dogs chased Frisbees, and couples picnicked on warm spring days.

As she started up the steps, her phone rang. She stopped midstep to swipe the screen and turned to lean against the porch railing. “Marsha?”

“Daria, honey, I hope I haven’t caught you at a bad time.” Marsha McBride managed Daria’s home in South Carolina. The one she abandoned seven years ago after the death of her mob-boss father and her adoption by FBI agents Linc and Allie St. John.

“Not at all.” She ducked her head against the wind but enjoyed being outside at the same time. “What’s going on?”

“Someone broke into my house.”

Daria straightened. “What? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, but the lock on the door is broken, and I don’t feel comfortable staying there.”

“All right. Why don’t you stay at my father’s—” She took a deep breath. “My house?”

“No, that place scares me too. I’ll clean it, but I don’t want to sleep there.” She let out a self-conscious laugh. Daria didn’t

blame her. She didn't care for the house either. But it was hers. She just avoided dealing with it.

"What did they take?" Daria asked.

"Nothing that I could tell. I guess I came home and scared him off. I just wanted to let you know that I'll be staying with my sister until I feel comfortable going home—and I'm not sure I'm up to cleaning this week. Do you mind if I put it off until next week? I know I sound like a wimp, but I keep thinking, *What if I'd been home?*"

"Of course I don't mind. And you're not a wimp. Anyone would be shaken after coming home to that."

"Thank you, Daria. Enjoy your vacation and time with your family."

Yes, vacation—with the family who was already waiting for her in the sunny Caribbean. "I will. I'll check on you when I get back." She hung up and shivered. The temperature was dropping, and the wind cut through her coat. She was done with being outside. Her flight left at six o'clock the next morning, and she still had some packing to do.

She dug her key from her pocket and aimed it for the deadbolt. And froze.

The door was open a fraction. A slight crack that she might not have noticed if she didn't always shut and lock her door—and arm the alarm system. Chills skittered up her arms, and she took a step back. So someone had either *been* in her home—or was still there. But why hadn't the alarm gone off?

She spun to leave, only to jerk to a halt with a gasp.

A man wearing a ski mask and a hoodie stood at the bottom of her porch steps.

"Who are you? What do you want?" She edged toward the railing.

“You. Your father sent me.”

Daria froze. “My father’s dead.”

Eleven brick steps now separated her from trouble. He started up, lessening the distance, and she caught sight of the knife in his left hand. “But he’s not gone.”

Daria drew in a deep breath, trying to control her hammering pulse and . . . *think*.

He lunged.

She whirled, gripped the rail, and hauled herself over. His fingers grazed her right foot. She hit the ground hard, the seven-foot jump jarring her to the bone. She stumbled, gained her balance, and headed for the side of the townhome.

Think!

Her feet pounded the street while she searched for an escape.

“Hey! What’s going on?”

Mr. Jackson. The sweet neighbor who always looked out for her had just opened his door for his evening walk.

“Get back inside and call the cops!” With a quick glance over her shoulder, Daria saw the man in the ski mask gaining on her. She cut across the street to a neighbor’s front yard, hoping to go around and into the back.

“Hey! You! Stop! Leave her alone!” The man chasing her ignored Mr. Jackson’s shouts.

Her foot tripped over an exposed root and she landed with a breath-stealing thud.

Move! Her body wouldn’t cooperate.

He caught up with her and the knife flashed. She kicked out and connected with his knee.

“Ah!” He landed on the ground, and his pained cry gave her only a second of satisfaction before he caught her ankle in a tight grip. Daria lashed out once more with her right hand,

feeling the burn of the blade on her side even as she slammed her fist into his jaw.

He jerked back and she lurched to her feet, ignoring the pain arching through her hand and just below her ribs. She kicked again. Her booted foot landed against his rib cage with a harsh crack. He screeched and rolled to his knees, his left hand clutching his side while his right hand reached for her. She grabbed it and twisted, then jammed her heel into his face. His roar reverberated in her ears as he fell to the ground once more, leaving her clutching his glove. A tattoo peered up at her from the back of his hand. Daria noted it, then covered her own bleeding wound with her right hand and ran.

“Paging Dr. Donahue. Please report to the ER. STAT.”

Ryker rolled over with a groan and sat up. The lounge was shockingly quiet, and a glance at the clock said he’d managed to snag an incredible two hours of uninterrupted sleep. He’d lost track of how long he’d been at the hospital. Too long. He should have left before he’d collapsed on the bed, but he’d been too tired to risk driving home.

“Paging Dr. Donahue. Please report to the ER. STAT.”

Ryker stood, went to the sink and ran cold water over his face, brushed his teeth in record time, grabbed his ever-present iPad, then hurried out the door. He rubbed a hand down his cheek and knew he needed to shave, but that would have to happen later.

He walked into the ER and Maggie, his nurse, pointed. “Door number four. Stab wound. She refused any pain meds.” Maggie tapped her tablet. “Sent you the chart.”

“Thanks.”

He pulled the patient’s chart up on the device and scanned it.

Daria Nevsky—why did that name sound familiar?—twenty-four years old, laceration to her right side under the rib cage. He knocked, then stepped inside the room.

“Daria Nevsky?”

“Yeah.” She blinked up at him, face pale, jaw tight, nostrils flared. This was a woman in intense pain, yet she didn’t want meds. Her gaze flicked to the door, then back to him.

“I’m Dr. Ryker Donahue. What happened? Who did that to you?”

“There was an intruder at my house. I fought him off, but he took a chunk of flesh out of my side before I could get away from him. He’d left his keys in the car, so I stole it and drove as long and as far as I— Where am I?”

“Mission Hospital.”

She frowned. “What state?”

Her light accent struck a chord with him. “Asheville, North Carolina.” He narrowed his gaze. An intruder had done this to her? “Where did you drive from?”

“Quantico, Virginia.”

“That’s quite a drive.” At least eight hours.

“No kidding.”

“You drove all night?”

“Pretty much.”

“Did you call the police?”

She winced. “I didn’t, but I yelled at my neighbor to. He probably did, so I’m sure they have a record of his account. I should probably let him know I’m okay, but I had other priorities at the time—like getting away.”

“Away from the intruder.”

She shot him a harsh frown. “Yes. Why do you say it like that?”

“Was he someone you knew?”

“No.”

“Hold on a second.” He backed out of the room. “Maggie?”

“Yes?”

“We need the cops. Can you get an officer in here so we can file a report?”

“Sure.”

“It happened in Virginia at my home.” She reeled off an address.

“They’ll let Virginia authorities know,” Ryker said.

“Yep. And the guy’s car should be in the parking lot here.” She told him where she parked, and he noted it.

“You stole his car?”

“I did.”

“Gutsy.” He gestured to her side. “All right if I take a look?” He pulled on gloves and snagged the rolling seat with his foot to park it next to the bed.

“Sure, why not?” She lifted the hem of her bloodied shirt to reveal a bandage.

“Did you do this?”

“A triage nurse.”

“Okay, I’m just going to peel it off and see what we have.”

She nodded and he went to work. The wound wasn’t pretty, and when he went to probe its depth, she flinched and let out a pained hiss. He stopped and sighed. “I really need to give you some meds so I can better assess this without causing more pain.”

“Just stitch it up and give me some antibiotics.”

Ryker frowned. “That’s not how this works.”

“Look, that guy came after me for a reason. I can’t risk being drugged up and unconscious in case he finds me.”

“Eight hours away?”

Her gaze, while pain-filled, was also rock steady. “Yes.”

“Okay, well, seems to me you came this direction for a reason. Do you have anyone nearby who can sit with you? Watch out for you?”

“I do, but I don’t really want to bother them.”

“Then it sounds like you need some new friends. Why don’t you tell me the truth? Was it a boyfriend, husband, or fiancé who did this?”

She shot him a scowl. “No, it wasn’t. I don’t have any of the above, so just do your job and let me worry about the rest.”

“Wow, rude much?”

She groaned. “I’m sorry. I’m not usually. I’m just . . .”

“Scared and in pain?”

After a slight hesitation, she nodded. “Both are accurate. Add confused in there, and you have a surprisingly good picture of my mental state.” She sighed.

Her admission touched him. “Thanks for being honest.”

“I’ll be honest about one more thing. I could call my family, but they’re on vacation. And I don’t just mean a simple trip up the interstate. They’ve been saving and planning for this trip for two solid years. I refuse to be the one who brings it all to a screeching halt. And . . . there are other factors in play as well.”

He studied her for a moment. “All right, here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll give you a little something to take the edge off, then I’m going to numb, clean, and stitch the wound.” He held up a hand to stop her protests. “I won’t give you anything that will knock you out. You’ll be awake the entire time. And I’ll get a security officer to stay within sight of your room. How’s that sound?”

She studied him like she was trying to figure out whether she could trust him. Then she nodded. “Like a plan I can live with. Thank you.”