

LYNETTE EASON

DANGER NEVER SLEEPS ④

HOSTILE INTENT

Praise for *Active Defense*

“*Active Defense* by Lynette Eason is a riveting romance, full of character development and edge-of-your-seat moments. . . . *Active Defense* has it all.”

Life Is Story

“*Active Defense* by Lynette Eason proves once again that she is at the top of her game in Christian romantic suspense.”

More Than a Review

Praise for *Acceptable Risk*

“Readers will be kept on the edge of their seats.”

Booklist

“*Acceptable Risk* by Lynette Eason is another can’t-put-down suspense thriller. Eason never disappoints me and *Acceptable Risk* is no exception. . . . You won’t want to miss this one.”

More Than a Review

“Buckle up, folks, because you are going on a wild roller-coaster ride, and you’ll probably not put this book down until you are done.”

Interviews and Reviews

Praise for *Collateral Damage*

“Eason remains a force in action-packed inspirational fiction with this excellently paced, heartening tale.”

Publishers Weekly

“Readers who enjoy the combination of faith and romantic suspense will be thrilled with Eason’s latest, the first in the Danger Never Sleeps series, which introduces a fascinating cast of characters who will surely populate forthcoming sequels.”

Booklist

“Lynette Eason keeps getting better with each new novel, and fans of her work will absolutely love the start to this new series. . . . I am falling more and more in love with her writing as she releases each new book.”

Write-Read-Life

“*Collateral Damage* by Lynette Eason is full of danger, suspense, and risks. . . . Every page had me sitting on the edge of my seat.”

Urban Lit Magazine

Books by Lynette Eason

WOMEN OF JUSTICE

Too Close to Home

Don't Look Back

A Killer Among Us

DEADLY REUNIONS

When the Smoke Clears

When a Heart Stops

When a Secret Kills

HIDDEN IDENTITY

No One to Trust

Nowhere to Turn

No Place to Hide

ELITE GUARDIANS

Always Watching

Without Warning

Moving Target

Chasing Secrets

BLUE JUSTICE

Oath of Honor

Called to Protect

Code of Valor

Vow of Justice

Protecting Tanner Hollow

DANGER NEVER SLEEPS

Collateral Damage

Acceptable Risk

Active Defense

Hostile Intent

Lynette Eason, *Hostile Intent*

Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2021. Used by permission.

DANGER NEVER SLEEPS ④

HOSTILE INTENT

LYNETTE EASON



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2021 by Lynette Eason

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Eason, Lynette, author.
Title: Hostile intent / Lynette Eason.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, 2021. | Series: Danger never sleeps ; #4
Identifiers: LCCN 2020049184 | ISBN 9780800729370 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800739966 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493430369 (ebook)
Subjects: GSAFD: Mystery fiction. | Suspense fiction.
Classification: LCC PS3605.A79 H67 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020049184>

Scripture quotations, whether quoted or paraphrased, have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Then you will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

CHAPTER

ONE

**BEGINNING OF APRIL
NEW MEXICO**

Today, the watching ended and the killing started. Anticipation arced through him. The man in the ski mask turned his gaze from the front door of the luxury home to the end of the street. For ten days, he'd hidden and observed—and learned—the routine of the household and even the neighborhood.

Right on time, the mail truck turned onto the street and began its stop, deliver, go. Stop, deliver, go.

As soon as the vehicle moved on to the house next door, the man's gaze swung back to the front door once more. And there she was. In her midsixties, the woman of the house took care of herself. She ate healthy with the occasional sweet indulgence, used her gym membership daily, and jogged two miles every morning. On Wednesdays, she volunteered at the local elementary school.

He could have snatched her off the street during one of her runs, but he couldn't take the chance that a doorbell camera would catch him. No, this was better. They had an alarm system, but no cameras.

She slipped out onto the porch, down the walkway, and to the mailbox. She'd done the same thing every day at approximately the same time. Other than the Wednesday break in routine, it was like she had nothing else to do but work out, jog, and wait for the mail. What a sad, sorry life. But that wasn't his problem.

On the wraparound porch, the planter with the seven-foot piece of lush greenery to the left side of the door hid him well. Adrenaline sent his heart thudding, and his right hand curled around the grip of his weapon. He'd had fifteen years of preparation and training, research and planning. The time was now and he was ready.

She was on the first step, then the second, then walking to the door.

As she twisted the knob, he stepped from behind the tree and clapped a gloved hand over her mouth. A muted scream slipped from her, and he brought the weapon up to the base of her skull. Whimpers escaped through his fingers. She shook so hard, he thought he might lose his grip. He shoved her through the door and kicked it closed behind him.

"Where's your husband?" He kept his voice low.

A sob ripped from her throat and harsh breaths gushed from her nose. He released his grip to hear her say, "He's not here."

"He is, because I know you're supposed to be leaving in an hour for your holiday in Turks and Caicos. The suitcases next to the door tell me he's getting ready to load the car. So, if you want to live to enjoy your trip, you'll get him in here."

"He's—"

"Darling?" The voice came from the balcony overlooking the foyer. "I'm almost ready. Was there any mail? I'm expecting—" He stopped, gasped. His hands gripped the railing and his gaze met the man's. "What do you want?"

A smile curved beneath his mask. “Hello, Maksim. Come on down.”

“Don’t hurt her.” The husky baritone held fear—and . . . something else . . . resignation?

“Well, now, that depends on you, doesn’t it?”

“I’m coming.” The man hurried down the winding staircase, stopping at the bottom. “Please. Let her go. I’ll do whatever you want. Do you need money? I have ten grand in the safe.”

Money? He almost snorted. Money was the last thing he needed. He kept the weapon on the woman’s head. “Turn slowly,” he told her without taking his eyes from her husband, “and reach into my left-hand pocket. Pull out the object.” She didn’t move and he narrowed his gaze on the man at the bottom of the steps. “You might want to convince her to do as I ask.”

“Darling, do as he says, and it will be all right.”

The woman whimpered and turned, her eyes downcast. She reached for his right pocket.

“My left,” he snapped.

She jerked her hand away and then slid it into the left pocket of his blazer. “Good. Pull out the photo.”

With shaking fingers, she did so.

He nodded to the husband. “Come get it.”

The man’s brows dipped farther over the bridge of his nose, but he did as ordered without having to be told twice. When he held the picture between his thumb and forefinger, he looked at it—and swayed. “I see.”

“I’m sure you’re starting to.”

“Max? Make him let me go.” The woman mewled and the intruder tightened his grip.

“Who are you?” Maksim whispered.

“I think you know that answer.”

What little color the man had in his face drained away as his suspicions were confirmed. “You’re Nicolai, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“How did you find me?”

“It’s a long story. And not one I have time to tell. I have one question, and if you know the answer, you will live.”

Maksim’s eyes lifted to meet his. “Let me guess, you want to know who the man is.”

“No. I know who he is. I want to know who the child is.”

The woman had gone completely still, with only an occasional tremor shuddering through her.

Maksim stood still, studying the picture. When he looked up, his fear was written in his blue eyes. “Why?”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Nicolai snapped. “Who is it?” He dug the suppressor harder into the woman’s head. She shrieked, the sound grating against his eardrums.

Her husband stepped forward, hand outstretched. “Please!”

“Who. Is. The. Child?” Nicolai asked, his voice low. Calm, controlled. “Don’t make me ask again.”

“His daughter.”

A daughter.

A thrill like nothing he’d ever experienced lit up everything inside him. His enemy had a daughter.

“Well, well,” he murmured.

His original plan immediately shifted. He had a lot of thinking to do, but he’d stick with the beginning of it. It was the end that would change.

In the end, the daughter would be the last to die. “What’s her name?”

“I don’t know and that’s the truth.” He held up a hand. “I don’t know. He never mentioned her. Ever. The only reason I know he has a daughter is because I overheard him say something to his boss about protecting her.”

The desperation in Maksim’s eyes said that he was telling the truth. That was okay. He’d find out who she was.

Nicolai fired the first shot and the woman slumped, dead before she hit the floor.

The husband screamed. “You promised!”

“Exactly. I made a promise, and now, I’m keeping it.” He aimed the weapon at Maksim.

“How did you find me?”

The wobble in his voice did much for Nicolai’s disposition. “Some people just can’t throw anything away.”

Maksim swallowed. “The files?”

“The files, the pictures, copies of those old floppy disks with your handiwork on them. Everything. Now, it’s just you and me, and we have a lot to talk about before you die.”

“A death that will be slow and painful, no doubt?”

“The slowest and the most painful.” He quirked a smile at the man. “I learned from the videos on those disks.”

Maksim bolted into the hallway.

Nicolai blinked. Okay, he hadn’t expected that, but he knew this house as well as its owners, thanks to the blueprints he’d acquired. He followed his target to the closed office door. He might try to call for help, but no calls would go through. He’d made sure of that.

Nicolai didn’t bother trying the knob. He simply lifted his foot and kicked the door in on the first attempt.

Maksim sat behind his desk, pistol to his chin, blue eyes teary, yet determined. And resigned.

“No! Don’t you dare!” He lunged.

Maksim pulled the trigger. A red mist coated the window behind him. Nicolai screamed his fury before he grabbed the nearest bookcase and shoved it to the floor. Then the next and the next and the next.

Until he slumped to the floor amidst the chaos to catch his breath and reconfigure the plan. Visions of torturing the man now staring at the ceiling with sightless eyes were shattered,

and his blood pounded from the rage of being robbed of that dream. But—he drew in a steadying breath, ordering his pulse to slow—there was the daughter. That fact brought him a peace he'd not known since his childhood.

He had a new target. He'd find her and make sure she suffered greatly before she died.



SIX WEEKS LATER
SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 15
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

FBI Special Agent Caden Denning stood outside the home in the upper-middle-class neighborhood with his phone pressed to his ear. “There’s a security system, Annie. This is a very nice neighborhood with a lot of cameras, but first see if you can get anything on the home system.” Annie’s skills at the Bureau were legendary. Hacking into an alarm system that recorded footage would be child’s play for her. Sheriff Jay Nichols had called the Bureau when he recognized the similarities of the case to the killing of the Bailey family in Houston, Texas. “Officers are going house to house asking for footage,” he said to Annie, “but I want inside the home cameras now. I don’t want to have to wait for the alarm system powers that be to give it to me.”

“Of course,” she said. “And I know it’s early and missing a lot of data since you haven’t even seen the crime scene yet, but I’ll run this murder through ViCAP and see if it matches any other murders of entire families—including the one in Houston. Depending on what shows up, we can add the other information as we get it.”

“Perfect.”

Caden shoved his phone into his pocket, pulled the little blue

booties over his shoes, and signed the crime scene log just as a black Jeep Wrangler pulled to the curb. His partner, Zane Pierce, joined him on the porch, coughing into a tissue. The man's nose was red, his lips chapped, his hazel eyes bloodshot with dark circles beneath them. Morning stubble graced his face and his dark hair looked finger combed.

"Dude, are you on some undercover assignment I don't know about?" Caden asked him. "That's one heck of a disguise."

"I wish. I think I'm officially sick."

"Sorry, man. I can take this if you need to go home."

"I'll be fine, just don't get too close."

"You don't have to worry about that." The last thing he needed was a cold—or whatever affliction the man had.

The foyer held a set of stairs to the second floor. From his position in front of the door, Caden could see straight ahead into the den. The living room was to the left, the dining room to the right. From his vantage point, he could see the kitchen, with a large island, connected to the dining room. "Who found them?" Caden asked.

The officer looked up from the log. "The neighbor. She and the wife—"

"Angelica," Caden said, his voice low. He'd studied what little notes the responding officer had gleaned. "Staff Sergeant Michael Fields, his wife, Angelica, and their two youngest children, Brian and Ellen, ages eight and ten."

"Right. Angelica. They go walking every Sunday morning. When the woman—Angelica—didn't show up at their usual meeting spot on the curb, the neighbor came looking for her. The front door was open, so she walked in."

Caden groaned. "Walked in to see—"

"Yeah. She ran screaming to her husband, who called us. Paramedics almost had to sedate her, she was so hysterical. They finally got her calmed down."

“Poor woman.” Bracing himself, Caden forced his covered feet forward and entered the den.

He spotted the victims and let his chin drop to his chest while sorrow slammed him. Kids. He’d almost quit the job more than once because of the children. But they had to have someone fighting for them, to see they received justice.

Zane blew out a harsh sigh, coughed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Man.”

“Yeah . . .” Caden shook his head. For a brief moment, he squeezed his eyes tight. He didn’t want to see any more. He finally opened his eyes and studied the family huddled together on the couch. Each had one bullet to the forehead. The nausea swept him and he fought it to focus on the building rage. He could manage the anger. “Where’s Mickey?”

“Who?”

“Their oldest son. According to the notes I read on the way over here, he’s fourteen or fifteen. His name is Michael Jr., but he goes by Mickey.”

“I’ll get someone looking for him.” Zane turned to the nearest officer and requested he ask the neighbor about the teen.

“Who would do this?” Caden didn’t expect an answer. The question wasn’t so much disbelief that someone could actually kill them, but him fathoming who would *want* to do it—or why.

“Robbery doesn’t appear to be a motive,” Zane said. He nodded to the elaborate media system nestled into the wall unit. “That would bring in a lot of cash.”

“So, why?” Caden muttered. Another rhetorical question. Until they took apart this family’s lives, they wouldn’t speculate.

Zane continued to frown and turned his eyes from the scene. “Adults are bad enough,” he muttered, “but kids . . . they get to me. I’m going to be seeing them in my nightmares for months.”

“I know. Same here.” It would probably be more like years. Caden’s phone rang. Annie. He swiped the screen. “That was fast.”

“I had an almost immediate hit in ViCAP. There are two other murders that I can say initially match yours.”

“Tell me.”

“The information received was that the entire family was murdered with one gunshot each to the head. They were all seated on the sofa, kind of huddled together. The scenes were middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhoods.”

“Where?”

“First one was the Holden family in San Diego, California, last month. Second one was two weeks ago—like the observant sheriff noted. Carl Bailey and his family in Houston, Texas.”

“So, this is the third,” Caden said.

“Yes. I’ve pulled the photos and other information from those two scenes and sent them to you. Family members also reported missing photos.”

“Of what?”

“Family pictures. Mostly older photos. No one seems to know why.”

He was stealing pictures of the families he killed? For a souvenir? To relive the killings? “Okay, I’ve made note of that. Thanks. What else?”

“That’s all for—” A pause. “Hold on, Caden, we might have something more for you.”

We?

In a short minute, she came back. “Okay, Daria’s got more information for you.” Daria Nevsky, another analyst with mad skills in all things technical. “And as of twenty seconds ago, she’ll be your go-to on this one. Gary’s handed me something else to work on.” Gary Smith was Annie’s supervisor.

Caden went still. Daria had worked on other cases with him,

but . . . “This is a big one, Annie. Probably a serial killer. You think she can handle this?”

“Without question.”

Her complete lack of hesitation settled his momentary twinge of anxiety. “Fine.”

“Truly, Caden, she’s better than I am. I’m putting you through to her. Hold on.”

Better than Annie? Not likely. The line clicked. “Caden?”

Man, she sounded too young to be as good as Annie said. “Yeah.” Not that age had *everything* to do with skills or being a good agent, but still . . .

“ . . . has a camera in the den facing the sofa, so I’m sending the footage to your phone. You can watch it yourself.”

“Wait, you actually got something?”

“Yes. Our speech reader even got some of the words from Mr. Fields’s lips before . . . well . . . before.”

Before he’d been shot. He just prayed the father had been the last one to die and the kids hadn’t seen—

“Caden?”

He blinked the images away. For now. “I’m here.”

“Did you get the video?”

He checked. “I did.” Along with everything Annie had sent him.

“I added the captions to it so you can see what the words are.”

“Impressive.”

“I aim to please. Unfortunately, the camera in the kitchen area wasn’t working, so I’m not sure what happened after you see the gun fly back into the living area.”

“What?”

“Just watch it. It’s self-explanatory. Call me if you need anything else. I’ve also texted you my direct line.”

“Thanks. I’ll be in touch.” She’d managed to reassure him

she was up to the tasks ahead of her with that one conversation. Caden hung up and filled Zane in.

His partner rubbed his head. “Three?”

“Yeah. And at the moment, it looks like they could all be connected. Too many similarities not to be, even without the full workup of this scene.”

“Then it’s got to be the same person or persons doing this.” Zane’s hoarse, flat words pierced Caden’s carefully constructed emotional barrier. “I hate to say it,” Zane said, “but . . . I think we’ve got a serial killer running loose in this country.”

“Probably.” Caden kept his voice calm, detached, even as his heart thudded hard enough to hurt. *Focus*. “Serial killers don’t usually have a territory this wide. Three different states? And opposite ends of the country?”

“True. Not that it’s impossible, but what’s the connection that made them targets?”

“That’s the question of the day, isn’t it?”

“So, once again, we circle back to motive,” Zane said. “When we find out the connection, we’ll figure out the motive. Or vice versa. You know what I mean.”

“Exactly.” Caden rubbed a hand over his chin. “So, this is it. We don’t leave here until we know what we’re dealing with.”

“Yeah, because if we don’t, what you wanna bet there’s going to be a fourth?”

“I agree.” He looked up as the officer Zane had assigned to find Mickey stepped next to him.

“No one seems to know where the teen is,” the man said. “The neighbor had the kid’s number. I’ve called it, but it went straight to voice mail.” He handed Caden a piece of paper with the number on it.

“Thanks.” He texted the number to Daria and asked her to find the phone. He looked at Zane. “We’re going to need to set up a task force.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” His partner coughed and pulled a pack of tissues from his pocket. “Be right back.”

Caden let his gaze scan the room, ignoring the chatter of the other officers coming from the open front door. He stopped at the mantel. Pictures lined it. Mostly of the children. Some of the family.

“Hey, Caden?”

He turned at an agent’s voice.

“Yeah?”

“You’re going to want to see this.” She handed him a box. “Found it in the attic behind a wall.”

Caden opened the box and sifted through the pictures and other items. At first, he didn’t see anything that caught his attention. They were just things that someone had stuck in a keepsake box. But the closer he looked, the more intrigued he became—especially of the one with two people he knew. Ava Jackson as a child sitting in a swing and her father pushing her. What in the—

“Sorry.” Zane returned with a bottle of water. “Had to find some Motrin and blow my nose. Seriously, how can your nose feel stuffed completely full and when you blow it, noth—”

“I don’t need the details, dude.” Caden nodded to the tablet Zane still held in his other hand. The box could wait for now. “Let me see those pictures from the Houston crime scene again, will you?”

Zane pulled them up. “Why?” He popped a cough drop.

“Scroll through them. I’m looking for something in particular.”

His partner swiped one picture after another.

“There,” Caden said. “Stop.”

“What do you see?”

“The same picture on that end table in the Baileys’ home that’s over there on the mantel.” He pointed, then enlarged the

photo for details. “There.” A do-it-yourself Christmas photo in a small black frame sat on the stone mantel next to others like it. An antique clock behind the pictures ticked away the minutes. He stepped forward. “But look, there’s a space next to it like another picture is missing. Now, look back at the picture Daria sent us. Same space next to that one?”

Zane raised a brow. “Yes. Exactly. You and that memory of yours,” he muttered. “Okay, then. It’s possible family number one and family number three knew each other and had the same photo that the killer took. Could family number two know one and three? But how? Or is that a stretch? Is there any evidence in family number two’s home to suggest a connection? Did they have the same pictures? Or were they pictures that the killer just liked and have no connection at all?”

The questions came rapid-fire, Zane not necessarily expecting immediate answers, but Caden said, “If family number two had the same picture, they didn’t have it out.” He scrolled through the crime scene photos from family number two. No spaces between pictures to suggest one was missing. “It could be any kind of a connection,” he said. “Could be a college fraternity or sorority. We also have to look at both spouses’ connections to each other.”

“Let’s watch the footage. Maybe that’ll help.”

Caden tapped the link to the footage. Zane watched over his shoulder as it began to play.

The picture was clear.

As was the barrel of the weapon aimed at the family.

Unfortunately, the killer’s face was not.

Beyond the gun, seated on the couch, were the staff sergeant, his wife, and the two younger children. All four of them looked terrified. Mingled with Michael Fields’s terror was fury. He appeared to hold himself still only out of fear for his family.

“That’s freaky,” Zane said. “I feel like I’m watching this from his point of view.”

Caden paused the video, turned, and pointed to the wall behind them. “That camera up there in the corner near the molding. It almost blends right into the wall. The killer might not have realized it was there.”

“I don’t know. He keeps his back to it.”

“You think he wanted us to see the footage?”

“Who knows, man. Let’s get this over with and watch to the end.”

Caden ignored his anxiety at what he knew was coming and pressed Play. Daria’s captions popped up on the screen.

“I’ll give you whatever you want, just let them go,” Fields said. He stopped speaking and seemed to be listening. Then his lips moved once more. “You want me to say what?”

The tip of the gun turned on his wife. She cowered over Brian and Fields held up a hand, yelling, “Stop! I’ll say it. ‘Trusting a liar will only get you killed.’ There. I said it. Now, let them go.”

The gun jerked. Four times. And it was over.

But no. It wasn’t.

The gun flew back into the room and landed on the floor just within range of the camera. A foot appeared in the frame for a brief second before disappearing. For the next ninety seconds, the footage simply revealed the family on the sofa. Then the killer returned. He walked from the foyer, his back still to the camera, and went to the mantel to snag the now missing picture.

Caden blinked, swallowing hard. “Mickey must have made it home,” he said, his voice low. “He walked in the front door as the man was killing his family and he acted.”

“Kicked the gun out of the guy’s hand?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know.” Caden’s mind played out several scenarios of what could have happened next. None of them good. All of them stomach-turning. He drew in a shuddering breath. “But the man wanted that picture. He came back to get it for a reason.”

Caden swallowed twice and sighed. He handed the iPad to Zane, walked outside, and lost his breakfast in the nearest bush.