



CROSSFIRE

EXTREME MEASURES 2

LYNETTE
EASON

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Dedicated to those who put their lives
on the line every day for others.
Thank you for your service.

So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10 NIV

CHAPTER ONE

MAY THURSDAY MORNING

FBI Special Agent Julianna Jameson glanced at the alert on her phone. “Hostage situation in progress,” she murmured, reading the text aloud.

Federal judge taken hostage in full courtroom.
Suspect threatening to kill her and everyone
else.

The address was a good thirty minutes away from her home.

“Let me guess.” Dottie leaned back in her chair and looked up at Julianna through the dark bangs that hung over her striking aquamarine-colored eyes. “You’ve got to go.”

Julianna pushed her half-eaten omelet aside and drained the rest of her orange juice in one swallow. “Yeah, sorry. You good?” Her sister had been living with her since her eighteenth birthday nine months ago—when their mother had no more say in where Dottie had to live. They’d settled into a pretty good routine, but Julianna’s occasional sudden departures still took the teen by surprise.

“Sure. We’ve got all of this end-of-school stuff going on, along

with exam reviews, so I'm staying busy." With only four weeks left in her senior year, Dottie was determined to experience it to the fullest.

Julianna grabbed her gear and shoved her weapon into her holster. "I'll text you when I'm done."

"Cool."

She paused and held her sister's eyes. "I'll be fine. I promise."

"I know." Dottie stood, her red sneakers squeaking on the hardwood floors. She snagged her backpack, detached her plethora of keys from the hook on the side, and threaded them through her fingers.

Her own version of brass knuckles—or more likely a sign that she felt stressed. Before Julianna could decide whether to mention it or not, Dottie strode to the door. "I've got to get to school. I'll be looking for your text."

Julianna followed her. "Dottie—"

"It's all good, I promise." She whirled back to face Julianna. An abrupt move that took her by surprise and almost sent her crashing into the girl. "I know you're careful," Dottie said, "but I need you, okay? I can't go back to living with her." She grimaced. "*Not* that that's the only reason I don't want you to die, but—"

"I know. I promise." She squeezed Dottie's shoulder. "I need you too, Dot. You're good for me."

Dottie relaxed a fraction. "Okay, then." Another slight pause. "And I know what I do with the keys. It chills me for some reason. Makes me feel ready to fight back should I come across the enemy."

Even when it was an invisible enemy like anxiety. "Whatever works for you, hon. I'm not judging."

"I know. Thank you."

Julianna followed her sister out the door and climbed into her Bucar, a Bureau-issued late-model Ford sedan, while Dottie cranked her ancient Jeep Wrangler. Julianna still couldn't believe the girl had driven it from California to Charlotte, North Carolina, all by herself. Thoughts of the trouble that could have happened

still sent shudders through her. “Nothing happened,” she muttered, backing out of the drive. “She’s fine. She’s safe. She’s in a good place.” And she’d stay that way as long as Julianna had a say in the matter. For now, she did.

More texts came through, blowing up her phone. She activated the Bluetooth, listened to the messages through the car’s speakers, and responded to them individually via voice texting.

She drove as fast as she dared and made it to the courthouse to find local law enforcement on scene along with fire trucks, ambulances, and the FBI mobile command post. SWAT was on standby. Julianna parked, pulled on her vest and windbreaker, and headed for the RV.

When she stepped inside, Supervisory Special Agent Hector Rodriguez looked up. “Glad you could make it.” His dark eyes, normally serious, held a new level of intensity. A neatly trimmed black mustache graced his upper lip, and he stroked it with one finger, as he was known to do when stressed or thinking.

“Got here as fast as I could.” Julianna slipped on the headset that would allow her to connect with the man holding the judge and a roomful of people hostage. “Do we have eyes?”

“We should any moment now.”

“Catch me up.”

“This was the Nicholas Manchester trial.”

“Ah yes. The guy who hijacked the plane last year and killed six passengers.”

“That’s the one.”

Rodriguez ran his finger over his mustache once more. His collateral duties included supervising SWAT and the field office coordinators for crisis negotiations and the Behavioral Analysis Unit. No doubt, both were on call, ready to conference as they learned more. “Apparently, Nicholas didn’t like the guilty verdict. He had a crew in place ready to help him out. Complete with masks and tear gas. SWAT is attempting to get a camera under the door, but so far no luck.”

“How’d Manchester’s crew get the stuff in there?”

“The security footage is still being scanned, but so far, it looks like someone allowed them access to a back door late last night. The perpetrators hid out in the building’s mechanical space, and when they got the guilty verdict, they stormed the courtroom. I’m sure we’ll be learning more as the investigation continues.”

The monitor in front of her flickered and the courtroom scene came to life. Julianna leaned in, processing the visual. She counted. Eleven jurors in the box, seated. Several crying, some with stone-faced fear. Two US Marshals lay on the floor in front of the bench with a woman kneeling next to one of them. Judge Lisa Stevens sat in her chair staring straight ahead. The man behind her held a fistful of Lisa’s chin-length blond hair and a gun aimed at her right temple. The room was still smoky, but only in the far left corner. The people who’d been closest to the tear gas had their shirts pulled up over their faces, and several were coughing.

“Who set the tear gas off?” she asked.

“Guy posing as a US Marshal is our best guess. It was a small amount. Enough to cause a distraction, but not enough to reach Manchester and his cohorts. Someone slipped him a weapon. Again, that was probably the fake marshal. When the real marshals went after him, he opened fire. One’s wounded but seems to be okay. As for the other one?” He shook his head. “No word if he’s still alive. Life Flight out of Asheville is on the way.”

Julianna wondered if Penny Carlton would be the pilot. The company Penny flew for covered eighteen counties across the Carolinas and into Tennessee and Georgia. “All right, so first order of business is to get the wounded out of there.” Before she could make that happen, she needed Manchester talking. “Anyone in communication with him?”

“No. Not yet. Waiting on you. He’s not answering the courtroom phone. We have a couple of the hostages’ numbers. Thought you could try them and see if someone would chance answering.”

“Okay, let’s start dialing.”

They dialed three and no one answered. “But the phones are on. They’re ringing,” she said. “Could be on silent.” She rubbed her chin, thinking. “How’d you get the information about the wounded marshals and how everything went down?”

“Manchester sent out a pregnant woman who thought she was going into labor when all the excitement started.” He showed her the picture of the woman being helped into the back of an ambulance. “Turns out it was false labor.”

Julianna raised a brow. “He sent her out? I would have thought he’d just shoot her.”

“Guess there’s a conscience in him somewhere.”

She frowned. “No, not him.” She’d studied the airplane case after it happened. Manchester hadn’t surrendered—and he hadn’t planned on being taken alive. But one of his own had turned on him and allowed agents into the plane, where Manchester had taken two bullets and then tried to turn the gun on himself before a passenger tackled him. “He sent her out for a reason,” she said. “She’s not his wife. I remember her being interviewed after it was stated Manchester would survive his wounds. So, this woman . . . is she related to him? His sister? Sister-in-law? Girl-friend? Mistress? Is the baby his? Because she means something to him.”

Hector studied her, then consulted his laptop. “Her name is Abigail Freeman, goes by Abby. She was among those in the gallery. I’ll get someone to ask her if and how she knows Manchester.” He sent a text to one of the agents, then turned back to Julianna. “They’re talking to her now.”

“Did he send anyone else out?”

“No.”

“So, just her.”

“Yeah. What are you thinking?”

She closed her eyes and tried to put herself into Manchester’s head. “He’s not answering the courtroom phone because something happened with the plan. He wasn’t supposed to be trapped

in there. So now he's planning, concocting escape plans, working them out in his head, then discarding them. He's desperately trying to figure out how to get out of this impossible situation. When he has what he thinks is a workable plan, he'll answer the phone. Maybe. Or, he already has a plan, is implementing it, and doesn't want to talk."

"Like what?"

"No idea, but it's possible Ms. Freeman is a part of the plan. I'd keep an agent with her in the ambulance and at the hospital. Then take her to the field office for a more thorough interview. Get a signed statement from her."

"Already on that."

Of course he was. She drew in a steadying breath. "All right. Let's try this again. While I'm working on getting him on the phone, I need to know everything about him and every single person in that courtroom. You know the drill."

"I've already set that ball rolling. Daria Nevsky is your analyst and will be feeding you all the information she gets."

"Great. She's good."

He snorted. "They're all good."

"Yeah, but she's special. I like her accent. And she likes me." Some of the analysts were just downright rude, but not Daria. Julianna picked up the phone and dialed the courtroom number again.

No answer after four rings. Okay . . .

She tried calling four more times. "This isn't working. I don't want him thinking for too long."

"Keep trying. He'll answer eventually."

"Or he'll just start shooting when he can't come up with a way out." Julianna chewed on her bottom lip and pondered her options. First things first. Get him to answer.

The screen went blank and Hector slammed a hand on his thigh. "They found the camera."

So now she was blind, deaf, *and* mute. Not a good position to be in.



AROUND 8:30 AM

Clay Fox's phone buzzed again. He ignored it until he finished typing up the report. As a school resource officer for one of the biggest high schools in the area, he was never caught up on the paperwork. Sixty seconds later, he looked up from his report to glance at his phone.

Unknown

911 at courthouse. Hostage situation. Help.
Don't call this #. Reese

Clay shot to his feet. He didn't recognize the number, but Reese was his baby sister and serving on the jury of the Manchester trial.

Jason Belue, another SRO for the school, looked up from his desk, green eyes clouded with concern and brow furrowed. "What's going on? You okay?"

"I need to leave. Family emergency. I'll explain when I get back." Clay grabbed his lightweight police department-issued wind-breaker and headed to the school's office while typing,

On my way. Where are you? Are you safe?

Probably a dumb question, and while he desperately wanted to hear her say she wasn't one of the hostages, his gut knew differently. Why else would she be using someone else's phone? And why did she have it? Where was her phone? He stepped through Steve Callahan's door without knocking. The principal looked up from his computer. "Clay?"

"Sorry, family emergency. I have to run."

Steve stood. "Of course. Anything I can do?"

Clay almost said *pray*. "No, nothing. I'll fill you in later." He bolted to his cruiser and climbed behind the wheel. He clipped

his phone into the holder on the dash where he could see if Reese texted him again. He didn't dare call her like he wanted. *Please—*

He shut down the instinct to pray, then flipped on his lights and sped to the scene. When he arrived at the courthouse, it was organized chaos, but somewhere behind the police barricade and inside the building was his sister. A hostage. His heart pounded a furious beat, but he ignored it and ducked into the fray, his uniform blending with the others.

For a moment, he stopped and let himself process the area. The FBI command post RV was stationed to his right. That's where the negotiator would be. He started toward it when his phone pinged again. His best friend, Vince Covelli.

What's going on at the courthouse, dude?
I thought Reese was there.

She is.

She okay?

I'm not sure. Will explain later.

I'll be praying for her.

Not sure that will do much good, but fine.

Do I need to come down there? I have a badge.

Vince had just joined the US Marshals.

No. I'll update you when I know something.

His phone flashed again. Reese.

Gotta go. Will touch base later.

He returned to Reese's text.

22 hostages. 2 USM wounded, 1 conscious.

1 possibly dead, can't tell. M. threat to k all.
Furious. Judge tackled him when tear gas went
off. 2 others with guns. Barricaded all 3 doors w
chairs & people. Wondering if they can get out
via ceiling.

Stay low. Do NOT let them catch you with the
phone. Make sure it's on silent, not vibrate.
SILENT.

A thumbs-up emoji flashed at him.

Oh, God, please . . . Honestly, if he thought God would listen,
he'd discard his pride and pray. For Reese.

He bolted to the door of the command post and knocked.
The door opened and he stared into the hard dark eyes of an
older gentleman with a neatly trimmed mustache over tight lips.
“What?”

“My sister’s in there. She’s texting me.”

Clay held up the phone and the man stepped back. “Get in
here.” The man shut the door behind him. “Julianna, take a look
at this.”

A woman in her early thirties spun in her chair. She had her
chestnut hair pulled up in a tight ponytail, and it slapped her in
the cheek at her quick move. When her blue eyes locked on his,
Clay blinked. She looked familiar. “I’m Clay Fox,” he said. “My
sister, Reese Fox, is in there.”

The woman scowled at the man next to him. “Why’s he in here?
We don’t let family in here. Not even cops with family in trouble.”

“Reese texted me,” Clay said, refusing to be intimidated or
insulted. He knew the protocol. “I know you probably have eyes
and ears already in there, but I thought you might like to know
what she’s saying.”

The woman’s eyes sharpened and her annoyed look fled. “That
would be amazing. Our eyes and ears have been shut off.”

He handed her the phone. “She texted in a kind of shorthand,
but you can figure it out.”

“Yeah.” She looked up. “This is Hector Rodriguez. He’s the boss around here.”

Clay nodded and Rodriguez shook his hand. “Where’d she get the phone?”

“I don’t know,” Clay said. “I didn’t ask her. I didn’t want her texting anything that wasn’t necessary. For now, all that matters is she has it and is sending information as she can.”

A knock on the door interrupted them. Rodriguez opened it and another agent stood there. “Abby Freeman, the pregnant woman, is Manchester’s sister. She was the only family in attendance.”

“Well, at least now we know,” Julianna murmured. “She have anything to do with his being able to pull this off?”

“Doesn’t look like it, but we’ll do a full investigation.”

“Good.”

The phone buzzed, drawing Julianna’s attention. Clay tensed. “What’d she say?”

“Oh boy.”

“What!” Clay shouted the word.

“She said they’re talking about killing one of the hostages to let everyone know they’re serious.”

Clay pressed his palms to his temples. “So, tell them you already know that.”

“I would if I could get him to answer the phone.” She glanced at Hector and took the headset off.

“Julianna—”

“I have to. It’s the only way.”

“You can’t. You have Dottie to think about now.”

“I know. I’m not going to get myself killed. As soon as I can convince him to answer the phone, I’ll skedaddle to safety, I promise.”

“No—”

“I’m the only negotiator here at the moment, and I need to talk to him. I can’t do anything with the silent treatment.”

“The other two negotiators will be on-site in less than ten minutes.”

“We might not have ten minutes.”

Clay’s gaze bounced between the two. “You’re thinking of going in.”

“Not in. But close enough for him to hear me. Hector, I’m going to need that radio to toss in should I get the opportunity. If he refuses to speak in spite of the fact that I’m just outside the door, then he’ll at least have to hear my voice before he smashes the thing. And if he does that, then . . .”

“We’ll know.”

“Yeah.”

“Know what?” Clay asked.

Her big blue eyes met his. “That things are way more serious than they’d be if I could get him talking.”

His gut twisted.

That kind of next-level serious most likely meant no one was walking away alive.