Delores Fossen

SAFETY BREACH

MILLS & BOON

HEROES

Delores Fossen
Safety Breach

Аннотация

Her safety is breached. Can he protect her? Gemma Hanson is being stalked by a serial killer. That's the message Sheriff Kellan Slater personally delivers. Although Gemma and Kellan share an intense past, escaping the violence surrounding them is all that matters. Especially once Gemma realises nowhere is safe…

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Can a Texas lawman capture an escaped serial killer after a witness's location is breached?

The serial killer Gemma Hanson narrowly escaped just discovered her WITSEC location, and he's coming after her to finish what he started. That's the message Sheriff Kellan Slater personally delivers. Although Gemma and Kellan share an intense past, escaping the violence surrounding them is all that matters. Especially once Gemma realizes there is no safe place—not even protective custody...

DELORES FOSSEN, a *USA TODAY* bestselling author, has sold over one hundred novels, with millions of copies of her books in print worldwide. She's received a Booksellers' Best Award and an RT Reviewers' Choice Best Book Award. She was also a finalist for a prestigious RITA® Award. You can contact the author through her website at www.deloresfossen.com.

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Chapter One

The moment that Gemma Hanson opened her front door, she heard something she didn't want to hear.

Silence.

There were no pulsing beeps from the security system. No flare of the bead of red light on the panel, warning her that she had ten seconds to disarm it or the alarms would sound. That meant someone had tampered with it.

The killer had found her.

The fear came, cold and sharp like a gleaming razor slicing through her, and it brought the memories right along with it. Nothing though, not even the fear, was as scalpel sharp as those images that tore into her mind.

She dropped the bag of groceries and the gob of keys she'd been holding, and Gemma grabbed the snub-nosed .38 from her purse. Just holding the weapon created a different kind of panic inside her because in the back of her mind, she knew that it wouldn't be enough to stop *him*.

No.

This time the killer would get to her. This time, he would finish what he'd started a year ago and make sure that the ragged breaths she was dragging in and out were the last ones she would ever take.

She forced herself to go as still as she could. Tried to steady

her heartbeat, too, so she could listen for any sound of him in the small house. It wouldn't do any good to run. She'd learned that the hard way the last time he'd come after her—because running had been exactly what he'd expected her to do.

Maybe even what he'd *wanted* her to do.

It had been a game to him, and he'd been ready. Good at it, too. That's how he'd been able to fire three bullets into her before she'd barely taken a step.

"Where are you?" Gemma asked, still standing in the doorway. A whisper was all she could manage with her throat clamped tight, but the sound still carried through the quiet house. Too quiet. As silent as the grave.

He didn't answer, no one did, so Gemma tried again. This time, though, she used his name.

"Eric?"

She got out more than a whisper with that try. Her voice actually sounded a whole lot stronger than she felt, but any strength, fake or otherwise, wouldn't scare him off. If Eric Lang had any fears, Gemma had never been able to figure them out, and uncovering that sort of thing was her specialty.

Had been her specialty, she mentally corrected.

These days, she didn't teach criminal justice classes and didn't assist the FBI with creating criminal profiles for serial killers like Eric. Instead, she input data for a research group, a low-level computer job that the marshals had arranged for her. The only talent she had now was getting easily spooked and having

nightmares.

And speaking of being spooked, every nerve inside her went on full alert when she heard the sound of the engine. Gemma automatically brought up the gun as she'd been trained to do. She forced herself not to pull the trigger though. Good thing, too, because it wasn't Eric. However, it was someone who shouldn't be here.

Sheriff Kellan Slater.

Gemma instantly recognized him even from this distance and behind the windshield of the unfamiliar blue truck. Of course, it would have been hard not to notice Kellan. The cowboy cop was tall, lanky...unforgettable. Gemma knew because she'd had zero success in forgetting him.

Kellan got out of his truck, but he stopped when he spotted her .38, and he pulled out his gun in a slick, fluid motion. "Is Eric Lang here?" he called out.

That didn't ease her thudding heartbeat. Even though she hadn't seen Kellan in the year since her attack, Gemma hoped this was his version of a social visit. Not that they had any reason to be social, now that the hurt and blame was between them. However, if he hadn't come here to find out how she was, then perhaps he'd tell her that she was imagining things. That her WITSEC identity hadn't been compromised, that no one had actually tampered with her security system and that she was safe.

But Kellan wasn't giving her much of a reassuring look.

With his gaze firing all around them, he hurried onto the

porch, automatically catching on to her arm and pushing her behind him. Protecting her. Which only confirmed to her that she needed to be protected.

"Is Eric here?" Kellan repeated.

Gemma knew this was going to make her sound crazy. "I haven't actually seen him since the night he attacked me, but someone turned off my security system." She swallowed hard before she added the rest. "I sensed he was here. And I think he's been watching me. He found me."

Those last three words had not been easy to say, and they'd had to make their way through the muscles in her throat that felt as if they were strangling her.

Even though Kellan hadn't given her much reassurance before, she waited for some now. But he didn't give her any. "Are you sure you just didn't forget to set the alarm when you went out?"

Gemma wanted to laugh, but it definitely wouldn't be from humor. "I'm positive."

Even though she was living her fake life with a fake name that the marshals had given her, all the steps didn't mean she was safe. Gemma knew that, and it was why she was obsessive about taking precautions. Not just with arming the security system but carrying the .38.

"Do you know for sure if anyone's actually inside the house?" Kellan pressed.

Gemma shook her head, and she was about to explain that she'd stopped in the doorway. No explanation was necessary

though. Because that's when Kellan glanced down at the floor where she'd dropped her groceries and keys. It was the kind of sweeping glance that cops made, and while Kellan didn't exactly look like most cops, he was a blue blood to the core. A third-generation sheriff of Longview Ridge, Texas—their hometown.

Of course, he'd only gotten that sheriff's badge after his own father had been murdered, and she knew Kellan would have gladly given it up to have his father back.

"Stay right next to me," Kellan insisted, and he stepped into the small entry. The moment they were both inside, he motioned for her to shut the door.

Gemma did, and while she kept a firm grip on her gun, they stood there, listening. With her body sandwiched between Kellan and the door. The back of him pressed against the front of her.

It stirred different kinds of memories.

Of the heat that had once simmered between them. Of the long, lingering looks that he'd once given her with gunmetal eyes. Of the way his rough hands had skimmed over her body. Years ago, they'd been lovers but had drifted apart when she'd left for college. They'd found their way back to each other and likely would have landed in bed again if Eric hadn't struck first. After that, well, Kellan no longer wanted her that way.

Because he blamed her for his father's death.

Of course, he blamed himself, too, which had put an even bigger wedge between them. Kellan would never be able to forgive himself for what'd happened, and Gemma wasn't sure she

could forgive him for not being able to stop it.

All that lack of forgiveness was why she knew something was horribly wrong. This was the last place Kellan would have wanted to come, and she was the last person he'd want to try to protect.

"Wait here while I have a look around," Kellan insisted. "And lock the door. If you hear anything, and I mean anything, get down on the floor." He glanced back over his shoulder at her, and she saw that his jaw had tightened even more than it had been when he'd first arrived. "Understand?" he added.

There was a lot of anger and old baggage in that *understand*. The last time she hadn't listened to a sheriff, she'd nearly been killed and two people had been murdered. Maybe three since one of the possible victims, Caroline Moser, was still missing and presumed dead. She would definitely listen this time.

Kellan stepped away from her, heading first to the kitchen, where he checked the pantry. Since the living room, dining room and kitchen were all open, she had no trouble seeing him, but that changed when he went into the bedrooms. First hers and then the guest room. Gemma just stood there, waiting and praying. If Eric was indeed inside, she didn't want him claiming another victim.

Especially a victim who was trying to protect her.

That's what Kellan's father, Buck, had been doing the night Eric had gunned down him and his deputy. Then Eric had escaped and hadn't been seen in the past year. But unlike the people he'd murdered that night, Eric was very much alive. Gemma could feel that all the way down to her breath and bones.

It seemed to take an eternity or two, but Kellan finally came out from the bedrooms, and he shook his head. “He’s not here, but your bedroom window was open. I’m guessing you didn’t leave it that way?”

The air stalled in her throat, and it took her a moment to answer. “No. I’ve never opened that window.” Heck, the only times she’d ever opened the curtains was to make sure the window was closed and locked.

He nodded, and the grunt he made let her know that it was the answer he’d expected. “So, someone’s been here. Maybe Eric.” He went to the keypad for the alarm, brushing against her arm as he walked by her. It was barely a touch, but she noticed.

So did Kellan.

Their gazes connected for a split second before he mumbled some profanity and looked away. He sounded disgusted with himself. Maybe because he didn’t want to feel that quick punch of attraction. Gemma didn’t want to feel it, either. It was a distraction, and something like that could get them both killed.

Kellan took out his phone and texted someone. Perhaps one of his brothers who were all in law enforcement. Gemma took out her phone, too, ready to call her handler, Marshal Amanda Hardin, but Kellan shook his head.

“Don’t involve your handler yet,” he said. “There’s been a leak, and I haven’t discovered the source.”

Gemma lost what little breath she’d managed to regain, and because she had no choice, she leaned against the wall for

support. Kellan helped, too. Well, he did after he muttered more of that profanity. He took hold of her arm, marched her to the sofa and had her sit before he went to the window. Keeping watch.

"What happened?" she asked. "Tell me about the leak."

He glanced back at her, his tight jaw letting her know she should brace herself, that what he was about to say would be bad news. "There's been another murder."

Gemma was glad she was sitting down, but she had to shake her head. Kellan was a sheriff, and while Longview Ridge wasn't exactly a hotbed of crime, murders did happen there. That was something that Kellan and she both had too much experience with. However, Gemma couldn't figure out why a murder there would have brought Kellan here to her WITSEC house in Austin, a good ninety miles from Longview Ridge. Unless...

"Did Eric kill someone else?" she managed to say.

Kellan's hesitation confirmed that that was indeed what had happened. "We found the body about two hours ago."

Two hours. That meant Kellan had left the crime scene and come straight to her. "Who was killed?" she snapped.

Judging from the way his forehead bunched up, he didn't want to tell her. But then she knew it was connected to her, or Kellan wouldn't be here. "Iris Kirby," he finally answered.

That felt like the slam of another bullet into her. Oh, God. Iris. Gemma knew her, of course. She knew almost everyone in Longview Ridge. Iris had been her favorite teacher in high

school.

Gemma wasn't sure she could stomach hearing the answer to this, but it was a question she had to ask. "You're sure she was murdered? And how do you know it was Eric?"

Without taking his attention from the window, he pulled up a photo on his phone and handed it to her. "That was left at the crime scene. And as for how we know it's murder, Iris died from three gunshot wounds to the torso."

The slams and punches just kept coming, and each of them brought one more wave of the nightmarish images. That's because Eric had shot both Gemma and Kellan's father three times. She supposed Eric considered that his signature. One of them anyway. Leaving notes at the crime scenes was the other. And the picture on Kellan's phone was that of a note.

"'Too late again, Sheriff Slater,'" she read aloud. "'Tell Gemma that Iris didn't suffer. I made it fast as a favor to her. And then tell Gemma that she's next. I know where to find her. Three-twenty-three East Lane, Austin. Our girl didn't go too far, did she?'"

As hard as it was to read those words, Gemma tamped down the rising fear and tried to view this as a profiler. The note was meant to taunt Kellan and her.

And it had.

Along with twisting her insides into knots. Judging from the tight muscles in Kellan's body, it had done the same to him. However, this wasn't proof there had been a breach in WITSEC.

“How would Eric have gotten access to WITSEC files?” she mumbled.

Gemma waved it off though before Kellan could even speculate. Eric was smart, and he was a whiz with computers. He’d even joked once that he would have made a fairly decent hacker, and then had added to the joke that Caroline and she would have made even better ones. Eric wouldn’t have needed help from anyone in WITSEC to get into the files because he could have done it himself.

“So, Eric knows where I am,” she concluded. “He killed Iris to...what? Send me into a panic? A rage, maybe? To hurt me by murdering someone I knew? Because panicked, angry people don’t always think straight, and they make mistakes.”

Kellan huffed. “Best to save your criminal analysis for Eric. When the FBI was looking for him, he was right under your nose, and you didn’t even know it.”

Because Kellan glanced at her again when he said that, she saw the glare in his eyes. She saw it soften, too, when he regretted giving her that jab.

But in this case, it was true, and she deserved any jab he might send her way. That’s because Eric had been her student in a criminal justice class before she’d made him her intern. He’d worked side by side with her, case by case, and until the night he’d tried to murder her, she hadn’t known he was a serial killer.

That was the ultimate taunting.

“I believe Eric was here,” Kellan continued a moment later.

“He killed Iris last night so he had plenty of time to get from Longview Ridge to Austin. Plenty of time to watch you and wait for you to leave so he could break into your house.”

Yes, but why hadn’t Eric just stayed and waited for her? Had he found out Kellan was coming, and Eric hadn’t wanted to deal with a lawman? Especially one who wanted him dead.

Still, that didn’t feel right.

Of course, she’d learned the hard way that it was a mistake to trust her feelings when it came to Eric.

“There’s Owen,” Kellan said, his voice shattering the silence.

Owen, as in his brother Deputy Owen Slater. And he was yet someone else who would want to face down Eric.

“Owen’s been working with Austin PD to set up spotters on the road,” Kellan added. “Don’t worry, Owen didn’t tell the local cops who you really are. He said you’re a witness in an upcoming trial and that we need to get you back to Longview Ridge.”

Her legs suddenly felt like glass, but she forced herself to stand. Gemma also glanced out the window. Owen was indeed out there, sitting behind the wheel of a black car.

“Are you really taking me to Longview Ridge?” she asked.

“Best not to say where we’re going in case Eric bugged the place.”

Oh, mercy. She hadn’t even thought of that. But she should have. Eric had succeeded in rattling her, and he had likely figured that was the first step in getting to her.

“Don’t bring anything with you,” Kellan instructed when she

reached for her purse.

Yes, because Eric could have planted tracking devices on clothes or anything else in the house. She'd had her purse with her when she'd gotten groceries, but maybe Eric had managed to put a tracker on it before that quick shopping trip. Or even while she was at the store. She couldn't take her phone either because he could use it to pinpoint her location. Then, he could follow wherever Kellan was taking her.

Kellan motioned toward his brother, and Owen got out of the car. Like Kellan, he already had his weapon drawn, which meant any of her neighbors could see that and become alarmed. Maybe alarmed enough to come outside and try to figure out what was going on. No one had shown much interest in her in the nine months she'd been there, and now wouldn't be a good time to start.

"Move fast," Kellan said, and that was the only warning she got before he took hold of her, positioning her right next to him. He opened the door and got them moving.

"Aww, don't be that way," someone said.

Eric.

The voice came from behind them, from inside the house, and Kellan must have recognized it, too, because he dragged her to the ground next to the concrete steps.

"Don't leave before we have time to play," Eric joked.

And the killer laughed just as the shot blasted through the air.

Chapter Two

Hell. Kellan wanted to kick himself for not getting to Gemma sooner so this wouldn't happen.

But he hadn't been sure who he could trust, hadn't known how the info about Gemma's location had been breached. His brother Jack was a marshal and would have been his normal contact for something like this, but Jack was in Arizona escorting a prisoner. That's why Kellan had tried to handle this himself.

Now none of that mattered because they could both be gunned down by a serial killer.

Kellan scrambled over Gemma, pushing her all the way to the ground so he could cover her with his body. It wasn't an ideal position, nothing about this was. They were literally out in the open with only the steps for cover. That wouldn't do squat to protect them if Eric came around the side of the house and through a back door. Of course, if he did that, then Owen would see him.

"Were either of you hit?" Owen called out.

Kellan shook his head and hoped that was true. Beneath him, Gemma was trembling. No doubt reliving a boatload of memories, too. But he couldn't tell if she'd been injured, and Kellan didn't want to risk moving off her to find out.

While Owen made a call, no doubt to get them backup, his brother had taken up cover behind the door of the unmarked

cruiser. It was bullet resistant, which meant if Kellan could get Gemma to it, she'd be a whole lot safer than she was here. But there was a good twenty feet of space between them and Owen. That was twenty feet that Eric could use to gun them down.

Well, maybe.

When Kellan had searched Gemma's house, Eric hadn't been inside. And Kellan had shut and relocked the open window along with checking to make sure no other locks had been tampered with. So, how had Eric gotten in?

Or had he?

There was something else off about this. The angle of the shot seemed to have been all wrong. It was hard to tell, but instead of coming from inside the house, the bullet had been fired more to the left side of it. If that's indeed where the shooter was, then he and Gemma wouldn't have been able to see him. Neither would Owen—which could be the exact reason the shot had been fired from there.

And that led him to something else that didn't fit.

Eric himself.

There was no reason for Eric to put himself in the middle of what could turn out to be a gunfight. Way too risky. No, he was more the lay-in-wait type, and if he'd truly wanted Gemma dead, he would have just waited inside and shot her when she'd opened the door. That would have given him a minute or two to flee before Kellan had even arrived.

So, who'd fired the shot? And where the hell was Eric?

“I think the voice we heard could have been a recording,” Kellan whispered to Gemma.

She went still, obviously giving that some thought, then nodding. A recorder wouldn’t have been that hard to hide if Eric had indeed managed to come in earlier through the window. Also, it would give Eric an advantage if they thought he was inside the house. That’s where they would be pinpointing their focus when the real danger could be at the side of the house. Or even across the street from them.

That sent Kellan snapping in that direction. “Get down!” he yelled to Owen. Kellan hadn’t actually seen anything, but a year of chasing Eric had told him to expect the unexpected when dealing with the snake.

Owen did drop down, putting his body behind the door. Just as another shot came. And just as Kellan had thought, this one came from a house directly across the street. This time, he got a glimpse of the shooter who’d fired out the second-story window. A bulky guy dressed all in black, and he was using a rifle with a scope. If Owen hadn’t ducked when he had, he’d be dead.

Which might have been Eric’s intent all along.

In addition to being a snake, Eric also liked to torment his victims, and killing Owen would have definitely accomplished that. Along with adding another huge layer of guilt and grief they were already feeling because of his father’s murder.

“Hold your position,” Kellan instructed Owen. “How long before the local cops get here?”

“About five minutes,” Owen answered. “I’ve texted them to let them know about the gunfire.”

That meant Austin PD wouldn’t come in with guns blazing. They’d stay back, evaluating the situation while trying to figure how to get Gemma safely out of there. Kellan and Owen would be doing the same thing. Because Kellan didn’t want anyone dying today. Eric had already claimed enough lives.

Another shot came—again from the second floor of the neighbor’s house. The bullet blasted into the stone steps just inches from where he and Gemma were. Owen pivoted and returned fire. It worked because the gunman ducked out of sight. That didn’t mean he was leaving, but the guy might think twice before appearing in the window again.

“I need to stop this,” Gemma whispered, and she mumbled something else he didn’t catch. “One of my neighbors could be hurt.”

That could have already happened. The shooter could have harmed or killed anyone else who happened to be in that house just so he could use the window to launch the attack. However, it was also possible that her neighbor was working for Eric. Or maybe Eric had simply hired some thug to break into the house and fire the shots. Either way, Kellan wasn’t seeing how Gemma would be able to do anything to put an end to this.

However, Gemma must have thought she could do something because she moved, levering herself up on her arms and lifting her head. “I’ll try to bargain with Eric. It’s me he wants.”

Kellan put her right back down on the ground. “You don’t know that. Don’t get Owen and me killed because we’re trying to protect you.”

Yeah, it was harsh, but it worked because Gemma stayed put. Besides, it was partly true. He didn’t wear a badge for decoration, and that meant he’d do whatever it took to keep her safe.

Even though Kellan seriously doubted that it was possible to negotiate with Eric, he took out his phone. He was about to shout out for Eric to call him, but before he could do that, his cell rang, and he saw Unknown Caller pop up on the screen. He hit the answer button and put it on Speaker so he could keep his hands free in case he had to return fire.

“Want to talk, do you, Sheriff?” Eric asked.

Just hearing the sound of the killer’s voice caused the anger to roar through Kellan. He hated this man for what he’d done, and Kellan wished he could reach through the phone line and end this piece of slime once and for all.

“Call off your hired thug,” Kellan warned him.

“I will...in about four minutes, give or take some seconds. That’s about when the city cops will get there.”

Kellan wasn’t sure if Eric had heard Owen say that, but it was just as possible the shooter across the street had relayed that info to him. Not just that info, either, but every move they were making. It was highly likely that Eric wasn’t anywhere near Gemma’s house.

“Why are you doing this? Why now?” Kellan demanded while

he continued to keep watch around them.

That included keeping watch of Gemma.

Her breathing was way too fast now, and it was possible she was about to have a panic attack. God knew what kind of psychological damage had been done to her because of what had happened a year ago. Of course, she was hearing the voice of the man who'd nearly killed her, so Kellan doubted she was going to have much luck reining in her fear.

"Why now?" Eric repeated. "Well, duh. Because it's nearly the anniversary of your daddy's death. Which I'm sure you remember in nth detail. I'll bet Gemma remembers it, too."

They did. It was impossible to forget that in only three days, it would be a year since their lives had been turned upside down. And apparently Eric was going to make sure they recalled it by giving them a new set of grisly memories to go along with it.

Kellan tried to fight off the images from that night, but they came anyway. The storm with lightning slicing through the sky. Ironic that it was the lightning that had given him glimpses of what was going on. Just flashes of the horror that had started before Kellan had even gotten on the scene.

When Gemma had figured out too late that Eric was a serial killer the FBI had been after for years, she'd called the sheriff, Kellan's father, Buck, and he'd told Gemma to wait, not to confront Eric until he got there. Instead, she'd attempted to stop Eric when he tried to leave. Eric had then taken Gemma and her best friend/research assistant, Caroline Moser, hostage. Kellan's

father, Buck, and another deputy, Dusty Walters, had gone in pursuit, only minutes ahead of Kellan who'd gotten the call after them.

His dad and Dusty had come upon Eric's vehicle that had skidded off the road because of the storm. The accident had happened in front of an abandoned hotel with the mocking name of Serenity Inn. A crumbling Victorian mansion with acres of overgrown gardens and dark windows that had looked like darkened eye sockets. Eric had forced the women at gunpoint onto the grounds, and Dusty and his father had followed.

That's when Kellan had arrived.

Just in time to hear the crack of the gunfire, and then seconds later, he'd seen his father lying, bleeding—dying—on the weed-choked, muddy ground.

Kellan had ordered Dusty to call for an ambulance and stay with Buck while he went in pursuit of Eric who had slipped into the house with the women. Because of more of those flashes of lightning, Kellan had seen Eric shoot Gemma in the shell of what had once been the grand foyer. He'd seen her collapse, and while he was saving her life by stopping the blood flow, Eric had escaped with Caroline in the dark maze of rooms, halls and stairs. Kellan hadn't even managed to get off a shot for fear of hitting Caroline.

For all the good that'd done.

While Kellan had been saving Gemma, Eric had shot through one of the windows at Dusty, killing the deputy instantly. Kellan

hadn't known it then, but his father was already dead.

Later, they'd found Caroline's blood in one of the rooms. No body though. No Eric, either. Just a dead sheriff and deputy who'd been doing their jobs and an injured profiler who hadn't done her job nearly well enough.

"You screwed up the investigation," Eric went on. "You didn't get things right when it came to solving your father's murder."

"What the hell are you talking about? You killed him. I got that right." Kellan snapped. Then, he reminded himself, again, that Eric liked playing the tormenter, and what better way to do that than by implying that Kellan had botched something as important as the investigation that followed the murder and Gemma's attack?

"You need to take a second look at the details of your father's case. The devil is in those details," Eric went on. "That's what this warning is all about."

"Warning?" Kellan questioned. "You had someone shoot at us. That's more than a warning."

"My man didn't hit you, did he?" Eric said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

In the distance, Kellan heard a welcome sound. Sirens from the responding police officers. Now, he had to hope that the cops' arrival didn't cause the gunman to open fire again.

"Time's running out," Eric added, which meant he'd likely heard the sirens, too. "Gotta go."

Of course, he wasn't staying around for this. And his hired

gun must have felt the same way because Kellan saw him run from the window.

Getting away.

That was better than trying to gun them down again, but Kellan hated that the shooter would escape. Kellan wanted to chase down the idiot and make him pay for what he'd done. But that would mean leaving Gemma—and she'd then be an easy target for Eric.

"One more thing," Eric said. "My advice would be for you to run because things are about to get very...loud."

Eric ended the call, and it didn't take Kellan long, just a couple of seconds, for him to realize what was about to happen.

"Cover us," Kellan shouted to his brother.

He hooked his arm around Gemma's waist, dragging her to her feet, and with her in tow, Kellan started running toward the unmarked cruiser. Good thing, too.

Because behind them, Gemma's house exploded into a fireball.

Chapter Three

Gemma clutched her hands into fists to try and stop herself from shaking. It didn't help, but maybe it made it less noticeable to Kellan who kept glancing at her while he carried on his phone conversations.

She hated feeling like this—with the nerves and fear all tangled in her stomach. But what she hated even more was that Eric and his hired gun had gotten away. She had no doubts, none, that they'd be back.

And this time, they might actually kill them.

"You need to put some distance between us," she told Kellan.

It wasn't the first time she'd said it, either. She'd repeated variations their entire time at the Austin Police Department. However, Kellan was doing the opposite of distancing himself, because he and Owen were taking her to Longview Ridge. Something she'd been opposed to the moment Kellan had told the Austin cops what he had planned for her.

Gemma agreed with him about her needing protective custody while the Justice Department figured out how her WITSEC identity had been breached, but going "home" had enormous risks. Still, here they were on the interstate, heading to the very place Eric would expect them to go.

Owen was behind the wheel of the unmarked cruiser, and Kellan was next to her on the back seat. Both were keeping watch

while they got updates on the investigation. There was also an Austin patrol car with two cops behind them just in case things turned ugly. Eric likely wouldn't be able to set explosives along this route, but he could perhaps cause a car accident.

"Eric will keep coming after me," Gemma repeated when Kellan finished his latest call.

Just saying that caused the sound of the blast to echo through her head. And she could feel the effects of it, too, since the debris flying off the explosion had given Kellan and her plenty of nicks and cuts. None serious, but they stung, giving her a fresh memory of how close they'd come to dying.

Everything she owned was gone, of course. Not that she'd had anything of value. The place had felt, well, sterile. A lot like her life had for the past year. The only real loss of her personal things was her purse and phone. Now she had no cash or credit cards —which meant she had to rely on Kellan to help her. At least for a little while. But once the marshals were cleared of having any part in the WITSEC leak, Gemma needed to call Amanda to see about arranging a safe place she could go.

If there was such a place, that is.

Since Kellan didn't even react to her reminder about Eric not stopping, she gave him another one. "You could get caught in crossfire, or worse, the way you did at my house."

That got a reaction. He gave her a look that could have frozen El Paso in August, and he tapped the badge he had clipped to his belt.

“That badge didn’t save your father,” she snapped, but she instantly regretted the mini outburst. There were enough bad memories floating around them without her adding that one. “I’m sorry.”

He was back in no-reaction mode and turned his lawman’s gaze to keep watch out the window. Gemma watched, too. Not out the window but at Kellan.

Mercy, that face. It still got to her. Still tugged and pulled at her in all the wrong places. Sculptured with so many angles and tinted with just a hint of amber from his long-ago Comanche bloodline. Those bloodlines had blessed him with that thick black hair that he’d probably never had to comb. It just fell into a rumpled mane that he hid beneath his cowboy hat.

There was nothing rumpled about his body. It was toned from the endless work he put in on his family’s ranch and the rodeo competitions he still did. Once, she’d seen him take down an angry bull that he’d roped. All those muscles—both the bull’s and Kellan’s—locked in a fierce battle. Dust flying. Hooves and feet digging and chopping into the ground. The snorts from the bull, the grunts of exertion from Kellan.

Kellan had won.

He had literally taken the bull by the horns, brought it down and then calmly walked away. Gemma thought that was the way he handled lots of things in his life. Not women, of course. He did take what he wanted from them. But never forced or even coerced. He took simply because it was offered to him.

Gemma knew plenty about that because once she'd offered herself to him. And he'd taken.

He glanced at her again, maybe sensing that she was playing with memory lane, and she got a flash of those incredible eyes. That had been the first thing she'd ever noticed about him. Sizzling blue or stormy gray, depending on his mood. Right now, his mood was dark and so were his eyes, but she'd seen them heat up not from anger but from the need that came with arousal.

Arousal that she had caused.

It hadn't been one-sided back when they'd been eighteen, and she'd willingly surrendered her virginity to him on the seat of his pickup truck. She had no idea who'd been on the receiving end of his virginity, but she'd been thankful for whomever had given him enough practice to make that night incredible for her. One that had become her benchmark. She was still looking for someone who could live up to him.

His eyebrow came up, and for one humming moment, they stared at each other until his mouth tightened. It was as if he'd gotten ESP issued with that badge, and he was giving her a silent warning to knock off the sex thoughts. He was right, too, as he usually was. But it had been much easier to slip into those memories than the things she needed to face.

Things she needed to piece together.

Like why Eric had waited a year to come after her? But that could be as Kellan had suggested—because it had taken him that long to find her. However, there were the other things that Eric

had said.

You need to take a second look at the details of your father's case. The devil is in those details. That's what this warning is all about.

"Do you believe you could have missed something in your father's murder investigation?" she asked, knowing it could earn her another of those frosty glares.

It didn't though. Instead, Kellan took a deep breath. "Maybe."

There was doubt, but that could have nothing to do with the way Kellan had handled the case. It could be the guilt over not being able to save his father.

"Eric's never said anything like that before," she went on.

Kellan shifted his position, their gazes colliding. "You've had other contact with him over the past year?"

"No." And she was thankful she hadn't, either. Not just because she hadn't wanted to deal with Eric, but also because she was betting Kellan would have been riled to the core if her answer had been yes. He would have wanted to know why he hadn't been told everything that pertained to Eric since he was looking for the killer.

"Eric left messages for me when I was still in the hospital, remember?" she continued. Gemma hadn't actually spoken to him since she'd been first in surgery and then recovering from her injuries. But the hospital staff had recorded the calls and turned them over to Kellan.

"Yeah, I remember." The muscles in his jaw went tight again.

“He threatened you.”

She nodded, hoping that he didn’t repeat the actual words. Gemma didn’t need to hear them again to recall that Eric had been enraged that she’d lived and could therefore testify that he’d been the one to shoot her.

Except she couldn’t.

Gemma had some memories of that horrible night, but because of the storm and the darkness, she hadn’t seen much. About the only thing she could say for sure was that Eric had taken Caroline and her from Gemma’s house in Longview Ridge, and that later there’d been a gunfight.

“I’ll take another look at the investigation,” Kellan assured her, though it wasn’t necessary for him to say that. From the moment she’d heard Eric toss that out there, she’d known that Kellan would dig back into the files despite the fact that he likely knew every single detail in them.

“The Austin cops weren’t able to trace the call Eric made to you, and there’s been no sign of the shooter,” Owen relayed to them when he got off the phone.

Neither piece of information was a surprise. Eric had no doubt used a burner or disposable phone. And as for the shooter, the guy hadn’t been in the house when Austin PD had searched it. The home owners hadn’t been there when the shooter had broken in, so they hadn’t seen him, either.

Now the hope was that there was some kind of trace evidence or prints that the CSIs could use to ID him. Gemma doubted

though that he'd been that careless, and if the shooter had slipped up, then Eric would just kill him rather than allow him to be captured and interrogated. Heck, the man could already be dead. Eric didn't like leaving loose ends. It was the whole reason he was so angry with her. So, why had he issued just a warning and not finished her off? Maybe he wanted to torment her first. An easy kill might not be as much fun for him.

"What about my neighbors?" Gemma asked. "Were any of them hurt?"

Owen shook his head and made eye contact with his brother in the rearview mirror. "Were you able to get any details on the bomb?"

"They haven't been able to find the detonator and until they do, they won't be able to start figuring out who built it. Eric doesn't have bomb-making experience. Or at least he didn't a year ago, so he likely hired someone or spent some research time on the internet."

Gemma had heard Kellan talking with the bomb squad, but she'd only heard his end of the conversation. Which hadn't been much. Obviously, Kellan hadn't liked that there hadn't been much progress in the investigation. Then again, it'd only happened six hours ago, and the CSIs were still processing the scene.

Kellan's phone rang again, something it'd been doing throughout the drive, and he mumbled some profanity when he saw the name on the screen. For a heart-stopping moment,

Gemma thought it might be Eric, but then she saw her handler's name on the screen. Amanda had already called once when they'd still been at the police station, and Kellan had let it go to voice mail, but he answered it now, and he put it on Speaker.

"Have you figured out who leaked Gemma's location?" he greeted.

"No, but it wasn't me," Amanda answered without hesitation. However, she did sound as frustrated and annoyed as Kellan. "Where's Gemma?" she snapped.

"She's safe." Kellan looked at her and put his index finger to his mouth in a stay-quiet gesture. "I need you to find the source of the leak and prove to me that you fixed it. Then I'll give you Gemma's location."

"That's not the way this works, *cowboy*," Amanda argued. "I'm the one in charge here, not you."

Gemma winced because she could feel Kellan bristling from the marshal's cowboy label and sharp tone. Amanda had never been a warm and fuzzy kind of person, and she was even less so right now.

"Gemma's in WITSEC," Amanda went on, "and that puts this under the jurisdiction of the marshals."

"Only if the marshals can protect her, and you've just proven that you can't." Kellan huffed. "Eric killed another woman last night and left a note for Gemma with her address. He's coming after her, and I'd rather make sure that no one wearing a badge is feeding Eric info to help him do that."

That silenced Amanda for a couple of seconds. “Is this about Rory?” Amanda came out and asked.

It was a question Gemma had expected. Rory was Marshal Rory Clawson, and Kellan’s then fellow deputy, Dusty Walters, had been investigating the marshal for the murder of a prostitute whose body had been found in Longview Ridge. Dusty hadn’t been able to find any evidence other than hearsay before Eric had gunned him down.

“Why would it be about Rory?” Kellan challenged.

“Because I figure you’re holding a grudge against Rory because you weren’t able to pin bogus charges on him. You still haven’t been able to pin those charges on him,” Amanda emphasized. “Or maybe you’ve got a wild notion that he aided Eric in some way.”

Kellan didn’t waste any time firing back. “Did he?”

Amanda made a dismissive sound. “This isn’t over. You will turn Gemma over to me,” the marshal added before she ended the call.

It sounded like a threat, and Gemma was certain they’d be hearing from her again soon. Maybe though, Amanda wouldn’t try to put her in a new WITSEC location until they had some answers about this latest attack.

“Do you trust her?” Kellan asked when he put his phone away.

Gemma opened her mouth to answer yes, but she stopped. The truth was, she didn’t know Amanda that well at all. They’d only met twice in the months that Amanda had been her handler.

“I don’t have any reason *not* to trust her,” Gemma settled for saying.

“Other than someone compromised your location, a location that only a handful of people knew, and Amanda was one of them.” Kellan paused, and then he huffed even louder than he had when he’d been talking to Amanda. “I just don’t want to make another mistake.”

Gemma could have said those same words to him. If she’d just lived up to her reputation of being a top-notch profiler, she could have stopped him.

“I owe you,” Kellan added a moment later.

That got her attention, and Gemma turned in the seat to face him. “You owe me?” she repeated.

Again, that was something she could have said to him. She’d been the one to mess up, not Kellan. But before she could press him on that, his phone rang again, and this time it wasn’t Amanda. It was Unknown Caller on the screen.

“Eric,” she whispered on a rise of breath.

Owen must have thought it was him, too. “I’ll try to trace it while he’s on the line.” Owen quickly handed his brother a small recorder, and Kellan clicked it on before he hit the answer button.

“So, I guess you’re both still alive and kicking?” Eric asked the moment he was on the line. “If Gemma had died, my little bird would have told me.”

“And who exactly is that little bird?” Kellan snapped.

“Someone in a very good seat for birds.” Eric chuckled.

Maybe a marshal or a cop. But Gemma tried not to react to that because this could be just another of Eric's taunts. The word was probably already out that she'd survived, and he could have heard about it through any means from gossip to even a news report. Then again, maybe he knew she wasn't dead because he'd had no intentions of killing—yet. Not until he'd made her suffer.

"Sorry, but I need to keep my bird's name to myself for now," Eric added a moment later. "Might need him...or *her* again."

Kellan's eyes narrowed. Obviously, he also hated these games that Eric loved to play. "I'm guessing you blew up Gemma's house just in case there was any evidence left behind. That tells me you were actually in it."

"I was," Eric admitted, causing her skin to crawl. "It was fun to see how she's living her life these days. So much security! You could practically feel the worry when you stepped into the house."

Three bullets could do that, and it twisted away at her that just by hearing his voice, he could pull that old fear from her.

"I left that little microphone so I could talk to you," Eric admitted.

"You mean so you could try to make us believe you were still inside," Kellan snapped. "But you weren't. No way would you have risked getting blown up, because you're a coward."

"Sticks and stones," Eric joked, but there was just enough edge to his voice that made Gemma wonder if Kellan had hit a nerve.

At one time Eric had wanted to be an FBI agent. Or so he'd led her to believe. And maybe that was true. If so, that coward insult would have stung.

"Too bad you didn't blow up her neighbor's house where you had your hired thug shoot at us," Kellan went on. "It wasn't very smart of him to leave a spent shell casing behind. Sometimes there are fingerprints on those."

It was a bluff. If the CSIs had indeed found something like that, they would have mentioned it in the calls Kellan had made to them. Still, it got a reaction from Eric.

Silence.

She doubted this would send Eric into a rage or panic, but maybe it would rattle his cage enough for him to make a mistake.

"If there really is a casing," Eric said, his words clipped, "then I suppose we'll just have to wait and see."

"Oh, there's a casing all right," Kellan assured him, "and if we use it to ID the shooter, then there'll be a trail to you."

"No, there won't be. But good luck wasting your time with that."

"It might not be a waste of time," Gemma reminded him. And it earned her a glare from Kellan. But she finished what she intended to say, and she made sure her voice was as steeled up as she could manage. "You believe you covered your tracks, but maybe you didn't. You're not perfect. You were in a panic the night Caroline and I found out what you were, and you took us hostage, remember? That wasn't the well thought out actions of

a cocky killer."

Eric paused for a long time. "I remember," he snapped. "And I'm sure you do, too. All that research we did together on Geo-Trace, and you didn't have a clue."

She hadn't. She, Eric and Caroline had worked for two years on Geo-Trace, the name of their project for profiling and predicting specific areas of cities where violent crimes were most likely to occur. It could have helped law enforcement if Eric hadn't been manipulating the data. He'd done that by murdering his victims in those predicted areas.

"Why did you do it? Why did you kill all those people?" Gemma asked Eric, earning her another glare from Kellan.

Yes, those were questions that could wait, and Eric likely wouldn't even give her an honest answer, but maybe by keeping him on the line, Owen would be able to trace the call.

"That's a conversation for another time," Eric snarled.

"Not really. My guess is that you were in love with me and wanted to impress me."

"Don't flatter yourself, sweetheart. I never loved you. It was never about you."

There'd never been any hints that Eric had indeed had any romantic interest in her, but it twisted away at her to think that Eric could have done those monstrous crimes because of feelings that she hadn't picked up on. That was yet another layer of guilt she could add to her life.

"Sheriff Slater, are you going to let Gemma do all the

talking?" Eric pressed. "I wouldn't if I were you. After all, if it wasn't for Gemma, your daddy and that deputy would still be alive."

"If it weren't for *you*, they'd be alive," Kellan corrected.

"Oh, but you're wrong about that," Eric quickly answered.

Kellan cursed. "Quit playing mind games and tell me what the hell it is you want."

"Always did enjoy your direct approach. So, here's the deal. Now that I'm back on my feet, I'm looking for Caroline. And you should be, too."

"I have been looking for her," Kellan assured him. "Plenty of people have been. Did you kill her?"

"No. Last I saw her, she was very much alive."

Gemma found herself gripping on to the seat, but she shook her head. Eric could be lying, though she wanted that to be true. She had enough blood by association on her hands.

"I've killed a dozen or so people," Eric went on, "but Caroline isn't one of them. Neither was your father or the deputy. Dusty Walters. As much as I'd like to take credit for their deaths, I can't."

Gemma nearly laughed, and it wouldn't have been because that was funny but because it was ridiculous.

Wasn't it?

"What the hell are you talking about?" Kellan snarled. "I saw you shoot Gemma, and the bullets that killed my dad came from the same gun."

“Because I found it on the floor inside the house. I picked it up and used it. I didn’t, however, use it on Deputy Walters. You know that because he was shot with a different weapon.”

“You had two guns on you,” Gemma murmured. At least that had been the most logical theory. For now, she scoffed, “So, you’re saying you’re innocent?” Gemma didn’t bother to take the sarcasm out of that.

But still, something inside her turned a little.

“No, I shot you, all right,” Eric admitted, and he sounded so pleased about that. “Wish I’d put the bullets in your head, but that’s what do-overs are for. You can have your own do-over, too, Kellan. But here’s my advice—find Caroline because she’s the one who can tell you who really killed Deputy Walters and your father.”

Chapter Four

Kellan wasn't able to shut out Eric's words. They knifed through his head, a violent steady assault that was screwing around with his concentration.

Gemma wasn't helping with his concentration, either, and since they'd arrived at his office, Kellan had been silently cursing her almost as much as he was Eric.

Almost.

Eric was a sociopathic lying snake, and he loved batting around people's emotions. Like a cat playing with a half-dead mouse. That didn't mean Kellan could dismiss what Eric had said, but he also wasn't going to accept it as gospel truth.

So far, there'd been nothing about Gemma he could dismiss. Damn her. He wanted something to make himself immune, and common sense and bad blood sure as hell weren't doing it. It riled him that his body hardened whenever she looked at him. Like now, for instance.

Gemma was in a corner of his office, and their gazes connected when he finished his latest call to the techs who'd tried to trace Eric's call. Kellan had to shake his head. As expected, they'd had no luck with that. Also as expected, she sighed, lowered her head and got back to work.

She was working on a laptop that Owen had gotten for her so she could start researching some angles about where Eric

might have been for the past year. Kellan had warned her to have no contact with her handler, had issued other warnings about hacking—something she was darn good at—or exchanging any communications with anybody. Since Gemma was scared and feeling guilty about Iris's murder, she would probably stick to that, and maybe she'd even be able to find something that would help.

Now that I'm back on my feet... Eric had said.

Maybe that meant he'd been out of commission. That would explain his nearly one-year absence. He hadn't been in jail. Kellan had combed the records for that, just in case Eric had been picked up under an assumed name. He'd investigated any and all possibilities for that and had come up empty.

So, maybe Eric had been hurt and physically unable to kill? Of course, this could be about finances, too. With every law enforcement agency in the state looking for him, he would have needed funds to move around.

Kellan's phone rang again, and he answered it right away when he saw that it was Austin PD. That caused Gemma to send another look his way. Caused Kellan to issue another round of that silent profanity for the bronc-kick of heat he felt behind the zipper of his jeans. Thankfully, it didn't affect his hearing.

"Just wanted you to know that there's still no sign of the shooter," Sergeant Alan Gonzales said. "Or Eric Lang. We'll keep looking though." The update, or rather the lack of it, had probably come because Kellan had left the sergeant two messages

to call him.

Kellan was still stewing over the gunman's getaway, and nearly peppered the sergeant with questions about why the gunman hadn't turned up on highway cameras or why no one had spotted him or someone matching his description, but he knew Gonzales. He was a good cop. Still, if Kellan had thought it would get him answers, he would have peppered a good cop with those questions and more. But it was obvious Gonzales had nothing to give him.

He ended the call, taking some of his frustration out on the button on his phone that he jabbed too hard, and he got up to pour himself his umpteenth cup of coffee. Of course, Gemma was looking at him, waiting.

While he gathered his thoughts—and pushed other thoughts aside—he studied her a moment over the rim of his cup. She was as wired as he was, and she'd chewed on her bottom lip so much that it was red and raw. Her fidgeting hands had plowed through her long brunette hair, too. Another sign of those nerves.

She was normally polish and shine with that flawless face and mouth that had always made him think of sex. Today though, her mussed hair tumbled onto her shoulders as if she'd just crawled out of bed, and the only shine came from those ripe green eyes that shimmered from the fatigue of staring too long at the computer screen.

Kellan thought of sex again, cursed again, and forced himself to tell her what she was no doubt waiting to hear. The info he'd

just learned from that phone call.

He went across the room toward her. Close enough to see that her pulse was already skittering against the skin of her throat.

"They didn't find Eric or the shooter." He said it fast, knowing there was no type of sugarcoat that would make it better. It'd left a bitter taste in his mouth, all right. Because it meant Gemma was in just as much danger now as she had been when they'd escaped from her house.

A weary sigh left her mouth, causing her breasts to rise and then fall. If they'd never been lovers, he might have put a comforting hand on her arm. But that was dangerous. Because even though he doubted either of them wanted it, there was a connection between them that went beyond the pain and the hurt of what'd happened a year ago.

"Why did you say you owed me?" she asked.

The question came out of the blue and threw him, so much so that he gulped down too much coffee and nearly choked. Hardly the reaction for a tough-nosed cop. But his reaction to her hadn't exactly been all badge, either.

Kellan lifted his shoulder and wanted to kick himself for ever bringing it up in the first place. Bad timing, he thought, and wondered if there would ever be a good time for him to grovel.

"I didn't stop Eric from shooting you that night." He said that fast. Not a drop of sugarcoating. "You, my father and Dusty. I'm sorry for that."

Her silence and the shimmering look in her eyes made him

stupid, and that was the only excuse he could come up with for why he kept talking.

"It's easier for me to toss some of the blame at you for not ID'ing a killer sooner," he added. And he still did blame her, in part, for that. "But it was my job to stop him before he killed two people and injured another while he was right under my nose."

The silence just kept on going. So much so that Kellan turned, ready to go back to his desk so that he wouldn't continue to prattle on. Gemma stopped him by putting her hand on his arm. It was like a trigger that sent his gaze searching for hers. Wasn't hard to find when she stood and met him eye to eye.

"It was easier for me to toss some of the blame at you, too." She made another of those sighs. "But there was no stopping Eric that night. The stopping should have happened prior to that. I should have seen the signs." Gemma silenced him by lifting her hand when he started to speak. "And please don't tell me that it's all right, that I'm not at fault. I don't think I could take that right now."

Unfortunately, Kellan understood just what she meant. They were both still hurting, and a mutual sympathy fest was only going to make it harder. They couldn't go back. Couldn't undo. And that left them with only one direction. Looking ahead and putting this son of a bitch in a hole where he belonged.

She nodded as if she'd reached the same conclusion he had, and Gemma swiveled the screen so he could see it. It was a collage of photos of the crime scene at the Serenity Inn. He'd

wanted to give her some time to level her adrenaline and come down from the attack, but it was obvious she was ready to be interviewed.

"I've been studying this," she said, "and Eric could have been telling the truth about some things." She paused. "I hope he's telling the truth about Caroline, that he left her alive."

Yeah. But if she was alive, did that mean she'd been with a serial killer this whole time? That twisted the knot in his stomach. There were things worse than death.

"I know you didn't get a good look at everything in the inn where Eric had you that night. Eric said he picked up the gun from inside the inn. Did he?" Kellan asked.

"It's possible. He'd drugged me by then so everything was blurry around the edges. But, yes, he could have done it. When he stepped into the house, he had his arms crooked around mine and Caroline's necks. Caroline hadn't been drugged so she managed to elbow him as he was backing up with us. She fought like a wildcat."

Kellan nearly smiled. That sounded like Caroline. "If he was telling the truth, the gun would have been on the floor. Eric would have had to reach down to get it."

She stayed quiet a moment, and he could almost see the images replaying in her head. "He staggered when Caroline was clawing at him." Another pause, her forehead bunched up. "They both fell, I think. But only for a few seconds."

He hadn't thought that knot in his stomach could get any

tighter. It did. Because a few seconds was plenty enough for Eric to have grabbed a gun and used it to shoot Gemma just as Kellan had been walking through the door. If that had happened though, and if by some miracle Eric had been telling the truth, then that left Kellan with a big question.

Why was the gun there?

Kellan looked at the photos again, letting it play out in his mind, too. "There are some *inconsistencies*." He hated that blasted word, so sterile and detached from the emotion. Still, it was better than saying that there were things that had caused him a year of living hell and to not have a single full night of sleep.

"Dusty was shot with a different gun than my father and you," Kellan said, spelling it out, again, with the hopes the inconsistencies might go away. "We always assumed Eric had two weapons and had possibly even run out of ammo in the one he'd used on Dad and you and that's why he shot Dusty with another one."

She cleared her throat just a little as if trying to clear her head, too. "Neither gun was found at the scene, which means Eric could have taken them with him. I don't suppose either have turned up in a pawn shop or someplace like that?"

"No." He'd been keeping tabs on that because a gun could possibly still have trace or fiber evidence even after a year. "I did put in a request, though, to have the CSIs go through the Serenity Inn again. They'll head there first thing in the morning."

For the first time today, he saw some kind of amusement in

her eyes. He doubted it was from actual humor but rather because Gemma would know how that played out. “I’ll bet they weren’t happy about that. How many times have you had them go through it?” she asked.

“Three.” He’d lost count of how many visits he’d made himself. “That hotel was once a house, built in 1880, and people had hidey-holes all over. It has twenty-eight rooms and nearly fifteen thousand square feet. And as if that weren’t enough, it sat empty for a decade before Eric got near it. The squirrels and mice could have added even more holes. Easy to miss something in all that space.”

Gemma made a sound of agreement, pushed her fingers through her hair again. She opened her mouth, but then closed it as if she’d changed her mind. “Sorry. I was about to attempt a profile. We both know how reliable I am with those.”

That bite to her voice was drenched in regret and pain, things he knew plenty about. And while he didn’t want to go the profile route, either, he did want to run something past her.

“Rory Clawson,” he threw out there. “I know you’ve been doing hypnosis and therapy to help you remember more of what happened after Eric drugged you, and just wondered if you recalled him being there that night.”

“No. No recollection of that,” she said without hesitation but then paused. “How did you know about the hypnosis and therapy?”

“I’ve been getting updates on any and every aspect of this

investigation—in case any new evidence came to light." Kellan didn't intend to apologize for it, either. "I want my father's killer caught."

Gemma continued to stare at him as if trying to figure out if that was all there was to it, but she didn't press it. "I've been searching computer records, too, for updates. In case there's any new evidence," she added, emphasizing his own words.

Of course, she had. Because his father's killer was also the same person who'd put three bullets in her. Well, probably. Unless Eric was telling the truth and Gemma had been the only person he'd shot that night.

"I can't hack into Rory's records," she went on. "And, yes, I just tried."

Again, no surprise, but he gave her a warning glare because she'd just confessed to committing a crime. He was ornery enough to consider arresting her but secretly wished he'd had the "moral flexibility" to do the hacking himself. Yes, he wanted the truth, but the badge meant something to him, and it had meant something to his father, too. Buck wouldn't have wanted Kellan or his other sons bending the law even when it was for the sake of finding his killer.

Gemma must have had no trouble interpreting his glare or the way *his* forehead was now bunched up. While looking him straight in the eye, she lifted her hands, palms up, wrists exposed, as if waiting for him to cuff her.

Kellan's glare deepened, and using his free hand, he braceleted

those exposed wrists to push them back down. Unfortunately, that involved the touching that he'd been trying to avoid. Touching, that seemed to bother Gemma, too, because her breath hitched a little, and her gaze finally darted away.

"I'm sorry," she said when his grip melted off her. "That put you in a tough position, but I'm not sorry for trying to get to the truth. Eric is out there, *killing*." Now she shuddered, gave her bottom lip another bite until her mouth stopped trembling. "And he found out where I was, how to get to me. It bothers me that Rory's a marshal and therefore could have gotten access to my WITSEC location."

"That's not the only thing that bothers me about him, but yeah, that's part of it. What bothers me just as much is that I haven't been able to solve the murder of Lacey Terrell, the prostitute Dusty was investigating. He was convinced that Rory was behind that somehow."

Kellan didn't add more because his phone rang again. This time it was Jack, and Kellan went back across the room so he could have at least a little privacy when he talked to his brother.

"Owen just told me what Eric said," Jack blurted out the moment he was on the line. "Did he really say he didn't kill Caroline?"

None of this was a surprise. Not the question and certainly not the desperate emotion that went with it. Jack loved Caroline, and even though all the signs had pointed to her being dead, Jack would never give up, never heal, until they found her body.

“For just a second, think with your badge and no other part of you,” Kellan insisted. “Eric is a liar.”

Kellan glanced at Gemma to see if she was listening. Maybe she was, but she was also back to working on the computer. Hopefully, not hacking into anything.

“Yeah,” Jack snapped. “But there’s no reason for him to lie about that.”

Sure there was, and it was going to slice Jack, and himself, to spell out what his brother already knew. “If we’re focused on finding Caroline, then we’d be looking in the wrong direction—for Eric. No way would he leave her alive if she could be found and lead us back to him.”

“Maybe she escaped,” Jack insisted.

“Maybe.” This was going to slice, too. “But then, she would have found a way to get in touch with you.”

His brother’s groan was the worst slice of all. Jack was his kid brother, and it hurt to feel him hurting like this.

“I want to talk to Gemma,” Jack snarled several moments later. “I want to work this latest murder investigation with you.”

Kellan had anticipated that, too, and had no intention of refusing. “It might hit close to home,” Kellan warned him. “The marshals might be involved.”

“Rory?” Jack immediately asked.

“Maybe. But also Amanda Hardin. Any idea how and why she became Gemma’s handler?”

His brother paused a moment. “No. I would have done it, but

I wasn't exactly at my best."

No, because Jack had been in love with Caroline, and she was still missing. His brother had gone a little crazy when they'd found Caroline's blood and then no sign of the woman.

"You're asking if I trust Amanda?" Jack concluded. "I don't really know her that well, but I soon will. Let me see what I can find out, and I'll get back to you."

Kellan thanked him, and he turned, ready to face Gemma's questions about what Jack had said regarding her handler. But it was obvious from her widened eyes that he had his own question.

"What happened?" Kellan demanded.

"Eric," she said, a new kind of quiver in her voice. "I know where he's been for the past year, and I think I know how to find him."

Chapter Five

The fear was gone now. Or at least it had been stomped down for a while and replaced by the relief of what Gemma had found in her computer search.

Now that I'm back on my feet.

Eric probably hadn't even given it a thought about saying that to her and Kellan. It'd been simply a way of starting his latest taunt. But it had opened a big, wide door for Gemma.

She caught on to Kellan's arm, pulling him closer so she could show him what was on the laptop. For just a split second he went stiff, maybe because she'd touched him, but it was possible that she looked a little crazy. He might have thought she was losing it.

And then he saw the screen.

The records from a hospital in Mexico City.

"I started doing hospital searches for the last year. Looking for anyone who fit his description. And, yes, some hacking was involved," she added.

With his eyes fixed on the data, Kellan waved that off, moved out of her grip and went even closer to the screen.

"I figured you'd searched the jails so I excluded those," Gemma added and waited for Kellan to nod. "So, I decided to go for medical records. Eric obviously used an alias, but that's him." She pointed to the name on the file. Joe Hanson. "The SOB used my last name."

That irritated her, but she pushed it aside, knowing that Eric would have done that with the hopes of her noticing and feeling the sting. Gemma wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

"Everything fits," she went on. "The age, height, weight and the small sun tattoo on the inside of his right wrist." The tat he'd told her that he'd gotten for his eighteenth birthday. To celebrate, he'd said. But now she wondered if it had a sinister meaning, maybe even to mark his first kill.

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