

THE LAST STAND Prequel

by

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Chapter 5

Skye's mind raced as she bent to feel for a pulse.

It took several seconds to find the faint flutter of a heartbeat. He was alive, but barely. Had Rickman already gotten to Dahlia, too?

Tempted to run next door for help, she pivoted. But then she heard a whimper from the bedroom, and she knew there wasn't time. She'd never be able to rouse the neighbors and convince them to call the police before Rickman finished whatever he had planned for Dahlia. By the time a squad car could arrive, it would be too late, anyway. All Skye had on her side was the element of surprise. She hadn't done anything yet to give her presence away.

But she didn't even have a weapon.

Another whimper made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. Was she hearing Dahlia's final seconds?

The terror of Burke's attack two years ago flooded through Skye, stripping her of strength and resolve. She felt helpless, frozen in a pool of Taylor's blood. It was as if she'd been placed right back in the situation she'd survived only by a small miracle.

And yet she had to do something. She was Dahlia's, and possibly Taylor's, last hope.

Swallowing the bile rising in her throat, she crept inside, cautiously feeling her way around the inert body of the man she'd met less than an hour before. If Rickman and Dahlia were in the bedroom, maybe she could get a knife from the kitchen—there was no way she was touching the one in Taylor's chest. But the thought of trying to wield any kind of blade against another human being made her shake so violently she doubted she'd be able to control her movements enough to make use of it. She had to come up with an alternative...a bat or...or a heavy vase or...

She thought of the BB gun Taylor had slipped behind the couch. It was a realistic-looking rifle. If she brandished it, would Rickman believe she could kill him?

She had to take that chance. If she brought a knife into the room, he'd only wrench it away and kill them both.

Saying a silent prayer for strength and clarity, she crept toward the couch, where she located the gun. She could hear words now--Dahlia begging Rex to spare her life.

"Why? Why are you doing this? I've never done anything to you..."

"You're the one who turned me in. Don't lie to me. You went to Garcia and tried to get me fired! Didn't you!"

No response.

"Didn't you?" he demanded.

Skye got the impression Dahlia couldn't answer. Was it because Rex had his hands around her throat?

Oh, God... The thought made her knees turn to water, but panicking wasn't going to help.

Skye fought to steady her nerves. She had to do this right; she'd only have one chance.

There was a loud thump and then a gasp and a scream that was suddenly cut off. Dahlia was putting up a fight.

That's the way, Dahlia. Keep it up. I'm coming.

With a BB gun.

When her mind added that, Skye tried to ignore it. He'd believe she had the power to stop him if she believed it, unless he knew a lot about guns.

Rounding the corner, she stuck the muzzle into the room. "Freeze, or I'll shoot!" she shouted and flipped on the light.

Her first glimpse was of a shocked man with a medium build and balding pate. He was straddling Dahlia and, just as she'd expected, he was choking her but not with his hands. He had a rope.

"Get off her, or I'll kill you." Skye heard the quaver in her voice but hoped he was too shaken up to notice.

"Who are you?" he asked.

He looked like an average middle-aged engineer-type, not someone she'd expect to be dangerous. But Skye recognized the glint of intent in those dark eyes. She'd seen it before, in Oliver Burke.

"Someone who'll kill you if you don't do as I say now!"

She wasn't sure what she'd do if he didn't move. The moment she shot him, he'd know she didn't have a weapon capable of threatening him. He had to fall for her bluff, had to buy the act....

Lifting his hands, he slowly climbed off Dahlia but Skye could tell he was sifting through options, searching for a way out. "You don't want to pull the trigger," he said. "This isn't what it looks like."

"I suppose what I saw in the entry isn't what it appears to be, either?"

"What are you, a cop?"

Dahlia remained on the ground, rolling around and gasping for breath. She'd been deprived of oxygen so long she obviously wasn't thinking straight or she would've found her feet and made a run for it. "Dahlia," Skye said, hoping to get through to her.

Her friend didn't answer.

"Dahlia, get out of here and call the cops."

"So you're not a cop." He smiled, growing more confident. "I would've guessed not."

Skye didn't answer. Dahlia's breathing was still hoarse but she'd started crawling for the door, and he hadn't stopped her. He was too focused on Skye.

Go...hurry.

"A cop wouldn't be shaking like a leaf." He laughed. "Anyway, I'm not afraid of no weak-ass woman."

Skye's stomach churned with acid. She was losing her advantage. "Don't underestimate me," she warned.

His gaze lowered to the gun, and then he laughed louder. "Oh, my God! You don't even have a real gun! What are you planning to do with that? Put my eye out?"

Dahlia was almost at the doorway. With one hand, Skye grabbed a handful of her T-shirt and pulled her through the opening, into the hall. Then she turned to follow her out. If they could get outside, where they could reach a neighbor's or wake someone with their screams, they might have a chance.

But Rickman was on them before they could go five feet. Skye blocked him with her body, giving Dahlia time to get away, but then Dahlia must've stumbled into her friend, because she started screaming hysterically as Rex dragged Skye back by the hair.

Twisting as she fell, Skye squeezed the trigger, but there weren't any BBs in the gun. It clicked without discharging anything, and Rex Rickman changed his grasp to include the rifle as well as her hair. He yanked her into the entryway, where he tossed the gun aside and pulled the knife from Taylor's chest. He was just lifting it when Dahlia grabbed the BB gun and swung it like a bat, cracking Rickman on the head.

His eyes rolled back, and he dropped like a stone. But Skye knew he wouldn't stay out for long. And she was right. He came to almost the second he hit the floor and shook his head to clear away the resulting confusion.

"Run!" Skye screamed. She shoved Dahlia out of the house but she didn't have time to escape herself. Rex was already lunging for her, and he had the knife in his hand. The blade flashed in the light that spilled into the house from the porch. All she could do was raise her arms to protect her head.

But the blow never landed. Taylor Hinshaw had grabbed his foot and knocked him off balance.

Rex Rickman cried out and dropped the knife as he fell. It clattered toward Skye. Her mind screamed for her to pick it up and stab him. But she couldn't make herself touch it. The memories of the attack two years ago were crowding too close. Anything but a knife; she couldn't manage a knife.

Fortunately, she didn't have to. Taylor got to it first. She kicked Rickman in the face and he fell back. Then, with a groan of pain, Taylor shoved himself into a sitting position and buried the knife in Rickman's throat.

Using the wall to help her stay on her feet, Skye turned on the light. Dahlia sat, dumbfounded on the porch, her mouth hanging open and tears streaking down her face, as she stared at the blood that was everywhere. Skye wasn't sure if it was Taylor's blood or Rickman's, probably both. But neither man was dead. Taylor had slumped onto his side, his chest rising and falling in a jerky, shallow manner. And Rickman stared at her with such loathing, she couldn't help smiling.

"You lose," she said.

Epilogue

Skye stood with Jasmine and Sheridan in the empty offices on Watt Avenue. The real estate agent, who'd met them after they'd called the number posted on the rental sign out front, held the keys as he stood at the entrance.

"What do you think?" Skye asked her friends as they milled around.

Sheridan and Jasmine glanced surreptitiously at each other, then at her. It was perfect, of course. Skye knew it, too. But they couldn't reveal the level of their interest. They still had to negotiate the rent and other terms of the lease, and they didn't have a lot of money. They were starting this victims' charity with more drive and determination than resources. If not for the seed money donated by Loren International, the defense contractor Dahlia worked for, they wouldn't even be able to get a start.

"I think it could work," Jasmine said, feigning uncertainty.

Skye attempted to hide her smile. "If we decide to take it, how soon could we get in?" she asked the agent.

"As soon as the tenant improvements are done."

"How much will that cost?"

"The landlord will pay up to \$15.00 a square foot."

"That should cover what we need," Skye murmured.

"He's very motivated," the agent volunteered. "He's also offering three months' free rent with a three-year lease."

Three years was quite a commitment for a new charity. Did they have what it took to stay in business that long? Could they build The Last Stand into what they envisioned?

Skye nudged Jasmine. Half East Indian, Jasmine was small with olive skin and startling blue eyes. Her sister had been abducted when she was twelve, while Jasmine was babysitting, and had never been seen again. Jasmine was as driven as Skye to make a difference to others who'd suffered from such random acts. "We can do it," Jasmine said.

"Sheridan?" Skye raised her eyebrows in question. Sheridan's fair coloring, deep blue eyes and dark hair drew attention wherever she went, but she wasn't as serene as a woman with her beauty might appear. She had yet to get over the mysterious shooting that'd cost the life of a male friend—and had nearly cost her own life--back when she was in high school.

They all had their scars, their unanswered questions. But they were determined not to let the past get the better of them. They were going to heal by fighting back.

"So...should I make the owner an offer?" the real estate agent asked.

Skye felt her heart pound in her chest. Rickman was awaiting trial. She'd stopped him from killing Dahlia and saved Taylor Hinshaw, as well. If she hadn't done what she'd done, they'd both be dead. That experience had given her a small taste of the relief and happiness that winning against violence could bring. She wanted to help more people. "Will he give it to us for a buck a foot?"

The agent pursed his lips. "That's twenty-five cents less than he's asking."

"But this is for a good cause," she said.

"What's the cause?"

"It's a victims' charity."

"You mean a support group?"

"No. We'll be different things to different people," Sheridan said. "If someone needs a lab to re-examine evidence, or a lawyer, or an investigator, or counseling, or self-defense classes--"

"Or a safe house, or a bodyguard," Jasmine chimed in.

"They can come to us," Skye finished. "We'll be here to fill the gaps in the system."

He frowned in confusion. "So...this is for battered women?"

"It's for anyone who needs it."

"How will you get your funding?"

"From outreach to private parties. But we have enough to get started." Skye pulled Loren International's \$20,000 check from her purse and showed it to him. "Will you work with us?"

"I'll see what I can do." He smiled. "What are you going to call the place?"

"The Last Stand," Skye said, "Where victims fight back."

For Skye Kellerman's story check out TRUST ME, out in May 08 month from Mira Books.