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Last Bridge Home

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Storm Winds

Wind Dancer

HUNTING EVE

IRIS JOHANSEN

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Many thanks to Roy Johansen, my son and cocreator of difficult and brilliant Kendra Michaels. He's always there to save me from drowning in her complicated and fascinating personality.

HUNTING EVE

CHAPTER

1

Rio Grande Forest
Colorado

IT WAS DOANE'S MOUNTAIN.

He was the hunter, she was the prey.

Was he still behind her?

Eve tore through the underbrush at the side of the trail, lost her balance, fell, then struggled to her feet again.

She mustn't give in to this weakness. She seemed to have been running through this wilderness forever. No, it couldn't have been as long as it appeared to her. It had been late afternoon when she had broken free of Doane and the house where he had been keeping her, and darkness was only now falling.

But why was Jim Doane still behind her, dammit? He was no young man, and she should have been able to lose him long before this. As a painful stitch stabbed her side, she paused and drew a deep breath, listening.

A crashing in the brush behind her!

She started running again.

"I hear you, bitch." Doane's breathing was harsh, labored. "Come back to me. If you do, I may not kill you . . . yet. But

you're making me angry and I may lose control. I don't want to do that. It would spoil everything for Kevin."

Kevin, Doane's son, whose reconstructed skull Eve had hurled off this mountain, less than an hour ago, to distract Doane. Doane's obsession with his dead son was deepening with every passing moment. Did Doane actually think she'd trust him? Kevin had been a serial killer, a monster without a hint of conscience, and his father, Doane, had been his enabler, the one who had made it possible for him to kill all those helpless children who had crossed Kevin's path. While Eve had been Doane's prisoner after he had kidnapped her, she had begun to wonder whether it was father or son who had been the true monster.

Perhaps it was both. There had been moments when she'd had the eerie feeling while working on his forensic sculpture that Kevin was trying to break through the bonds of hell and death and merge with his father.

Crazy. Imagination.

Or truth.

It was hard to tell the difference in this nightmare into which she had been drawn.

"You shouldn't have thrown his skull off into that ravine. Did you think I'd go after it and let you escape?"

It was exactly what she had hoped. That damn skull was everything to Doane, and she'd gambled that he'd go down the side of the mountain to try to retrieve it.

She'd been wrong.

She felt the twinge in her side become actual pain. How long could she keep running?

Stop whining. She'd run as long as she had to run. She was

far younger than Doane. She was strong, and she was frightened. Panic was a great spur.

And did she have Bonnie helping her?

For a little while she had thought that her daughter's spirit had been there beside her, putting speed and wings to every step. It had been a comforting thought . . .

But now there only seemed to be Doane and her in this deadly race. No loving presence that might warm and save her.

It's okay, Bonnie. I know you tried. There's nothing he can do to me that will matter in the end.

The stitch in her side was easing.

She was running faster.

She should have known Bonnie would not let her falter, she thought ruefully. Not if Eve showed even a faint hint that she would not do her best to keep herself alive.

I wasn't going to opt out, Bonnie. I wouldn't do that to Joe and Jane. I was just trying to be an understanding mother. I know you can't do everything. Well, I don't really know what a ghost can or can't do, but you seem to have some limits. I'll keep going.

As long as she could. Her heart was beating so hard that it hurt. She felt sick to her stomach.

She could hear Doane cursing behind her.

Farther behind than he had been before. Was he faltering?

Yes.

He was shouting at her, each word broken and harsh. "Don't think you're going—to get away. These are my mountains. Kevin and I spent months out here when he was a boy. He particularly liked to kill the deer. How do you think he

qualified to be in the Special Forces? I taught him to be a hunter.”

And had he taught him to hunt down those little girls and kill them?

“Do you hear me? I’m going back to the house and get my equipment and my gun. I’ll hunt you down like Kevin and I did the deer. I just hope that hypothermia doesn’t get you before I do. It gets cold in these mountains at night.”

She knew it was true, but it was hard to believe when her entire body was hot and perspiring from exertion.

“I can hear every move you make in that brush. Do you know how easy you’re going to be to stalk?”

She was pulling more away from him with every second. Close him out. She was *winning*.

“And then we’ll go get Kevin and take him to that butcher who murdered him. I’ll let Zander see how it feels when I kill you in front of him. There’s no greater agony than a father feels at the death of a child.”

More madness. Lee Zander, the hired assassin Doane was sure had murdered his son, was not her father. How could he be? Eve’s father had disappeared long before she was born, and her mother was never even sure of his identity. This particular insanity Doane had thrown at her when he’d been enraged after she had tossed Kevin’s reconstruction off the cliff to distract him. He had thought it would hurt her in some way to know she was a killer’s daughter and that she was to pay for Doane’s son’s death. It was just one more sign that Doane’s cold-blooded, calculated pursuit and abduction of her was completely bizarre and totally without reason.

Forget that nonsense. She was not the child of a murderer who was probably more deadly and ruthless than Doane. It

was all part of Doane's wild hallucinations. She just had to concentrate on getting out of these mountains or contacting someone to help her.

"Do you know how many people get lost in these mountains?" Doane's shout sounded still farther away. "Some don't survive the bitter cold and the animals and the mudslides. You might be glad to come back to me after a night or two."

Not bloody likely.

"Do you think your Joe Quinn or Jane MacGuire will be able to locate you out here? You could be out here a week, and no one would catch sight of you. You'd have had a better chance staying at the house. I'm the only one who knows you're here and how to find you. And I will find you, Eve."

Keep running. He might be trying to fool her into thinking he'd temporarily stopped the hunt. Don't trust his words.

It was pitch-dark now. She couldn't see anything but the shrubs directly in front of her. This was too dangerous. She'd be lucky if she didn't tumble off the mountain.

She stopped and tried to hear something besides the pounding of her heart.

No sound.

Doane?

She stood there, listening. No rustle of brush. No harsh sound of his breathing in the stillness.

Safe?

Good God, no. There was no way she was safe, but maybe she'd have a brief respite from the fear that had been with her since she'd been taken from everything she knew that was safe and good.

Joe, Jane, the cottage on the lake where they'd lived so many years.

She could still hear nothing but the flap of an occasional bird's wings and the wilderness night sounds. But they weren't the same sounds as the ones she heard in the forest on the lake. This was wild country.

Keep moving. Put distance between herself and the place where she'd last seen Doane. Providing that she didn't move in circles. She knew a little about the basics of surviving in a forest, but she wasn't an ex-SEAL like Joe. He could survive anywhere with no problem. Her profession of forensic sculpting kept her indoors most of the time, and even as a child, she had been a city girl.

So there were a few obstacles against her. She wouldn't overcome them by self-pity or remembering how good Joe was at this kind of thing.

Or remembering Joe at all. The look of him, the way he'd tilt his head and stare quizzically at her with those tea-colored eyes, the *feel* of him. There were moments when you could afford to remember the ones you loved, but this was not one of them. The thought of Joe made her painfully conscious of the loneliness of being here without him. Perhaps that was what Doane had intended by mentioning him before he'd left. He'd meant to make her more aware of her isolation. Salt in the wound. Joe Quinn, her lover, and Jane, their adopted daughter, the two people she loved most in the world. Eve would never have wanted to have them here and in danger but it was the—

A sound in the bushes up ahead!

A large animal. A bear. A deer?

Or Doane? He might have circled around and gotten in front of her.

Damn, she had no weapon.

Freeze. Don't move. The threat might dissolve and go away.

Darkness all around her.

She tried to breathe lightly so that she wouldn't be heard.

Please, go away.

Doane wouldn't go away. She just had to hope it was another beast looking for prey.

She was not prey, she thought with sudden fierceness. She would get out of this. She would find a weapon.

To hell with Doane and this mountain he thought belonged to him.

It's not your mountain any longer, you bastard. I'm going to make it my own.

University of Southern California

Los Angeles

IDIOTS!

Kendra Michaels pushed open the heavy main door of Alexander Hall and stalked down the tree-lined pathway that would take her to the parking lot.

Idiots. Narrow-minded fools.

"Dr. Michaels." The voice came from behind her.

She didn't turn around.

"Dr. Michaels, please!"

She didn't have to look back to know it was Steve Whitty, one of the conference organizers. Kendra hated these things, and her experience here, at the American Psychological Association's Conference on Autism Causes and Treatment, reminded her why.

She finally stopped. He wasn't going to be discouraged.

Whitty ran around to face her. "You were brilliant."

She pointed back toward the auditorium. "Try telling them that."

"You got a lot of people thinking in there."

". . . Thinking I'm some kind of fraud. Were you even listening to the Q&A?"

"Naturally they're going on the attack. You're on the bleeding edge in this field. Uncharted territory. Your work could make a good many of those people's life's work obsolete."

"That's not what I'm trying to do."

"Look at it from their point of view. You're telling them that music can actually help cure autism."

"It's not a cure. It's a treatment. And I never said it was the only treatment."

"But you told them that your study had results far more impressive than anything they've done. Of course you're going to ruffle some feathers. Which is exactly why I wanted you to be here." Whitty placed his hand on her forearm. "And when those researchers get over being scared and pissed off, they're going to examine your data and look at those hours of sessions you posted on the Web. They're going to see what I saw. They're going to see how this amazing young woman was able to draw patients out of their shells and help them join the human race."

Kendra took a deep breath, angry that she had let those fools get under her skin. She always tried to tell herself that the work was its own reward, finding the right instrument, the right chord progression, the right anything that would engage the interest of her patients and help coax them into a world beyond themselves. But she needed more, dammit. She needed

to know that she was able to open those educators' eyes so that they would follow her.

She looked away from Whitty. "Look, part of me understands why they're skeptical. Believe me, I know that the music-therapy field is populated with all kinds of nuts and woo-woo, and they give my profession a bad name. But I treat it like the science that it is. I got input from ten researchers in that room when I was designing the study, and I was tougher on myself than any of them were in their initial feedback."

"They're surprised at your results. Just give them a chance to digest it."

"I've found a way to help those kids, Whitty. And that study is proof of it."

"Kendra, there's a significant variable that some people feel you haven't addressed."

She looked at him in disbelief. "Impossible. I considered every variable."

"Not quite." He smiled. "The variable I'm talking about . . . is you."

"Me?" Then she realized what he meant and cursed under her breath. He could be right. She had been nervous about the presentation and several times had caught herself trying to impress the other attendees. It was completely unlike her. "Oh, you mean the dog and pony show? I knew they thought I was a little weird. I just kind of slipped into it. I didn't mean—"

"Hell of a carnival act, but there's already been some speculation that's how you get your positive results. By being so perceptive and empathetic with your subjects, giving exactly what they need in terms of body language, tone, positive reinforcement, the whole package."

Kendra's eyes narrowed on him. "That's what they're

saying? If they read the study, they'll see I wasn't the only therapist. My techniques got the same results from everyone."

He smiled. "I know that because I've read the study. And they'll know it soon enough. You just need to relax."

"If I'd wanted to relax, I would never have come to this conference. I thought for once that I could make a difference."

"Kendra, come back inside." He placed his hand on her arm again. He was trying to soothe her, dammit. He wasn't a bad guy, and the mistake had probably been her own, but it didn't matter.

She wanted to deck him.

Her BlackBerry vibrated in her pocket. Thankful for the opportunity to pull away from Whitty, she stepped back, pulled out the phone, and answered it. "Hello."

"Kendra? Joe Quinn. I need your help."

"Quinn?" She didn't like the tone in his voice. Grim. Ragged. She turned to Whitty and mouthed an apologetic "sorry." He nodded and headed back toward the auditorium. "What's wrong, Quinn?"

"You name it, everything. I need your help."

"Dammit, I'm not a detective. And I'm busy as hell. You can't pull me into—"

"You're always busy. You'll have to drop whatever it is." He paused. "It's Eve."

"Eve?" Kendra's hand tightened on the phone. "What's happened? Talk to me."

FORTY MINUTES LATER, Kendra was at her condo throwing clothes into a suitcase on her bed.

"You didn't answer the door, so I used my key. What on

earth are you doing?” Kendra Michaels’s mother was standing in the doorway of Kendra’s bedroom watching disapprovingly as Kendra threw clothes into the suitcase on the bed. “Besides packing with no regard to neatness or order. I taught you better than that, Kendra.”

“That was when I was blind, and you thought I had to be superefficient so that no one would feel sorry for me because I was handicapped.” She threw another pair of jeans and a sweater into the case. “After the stem-cell operation I discarded that guideline and embraced chaos.”

“In more than packing,” Deanna Michaels said dryly. “I was worried about you for a number of years after those doctors performed their miracle and made you see. I never thought that you’d sow quite so many wild oats.”

“That’s past history.” Kendra grinned. “Now I’m just a boring music-therapy teacher. I leave all the wild oats to you.” Her mother was a history professor at U.C. San Diego and was the most vibrant and young-minded woman Kendra had ever known. And the most caring. She had used that intelligence and forceful personality to raise a child blind from birth and make her as close to independent as was physically and mentally possible.

And every day Kendra blessed her for it. Though her mother could be difficult and definitely tried to manipulate Kendra and everyone around her to suit herself.

“That would be extremely clever of you. I like the idea of your leading a semiboring life.” Her mother crossed the room and started repacking Kendra’s suitcase. “But there are still lingering tendrils of that less-than-wise period you went through. Go get your things from your bathroom. Now that I’ve rearranged your clothes, I have a place for them in this corner of the suitcase.”

“Mom . . .” She stared at her a moment and turned and went to the bathroom. She had learned to pick her battles, and this one wasn’t worthwhile. A few minutes later, she brought her plastic bag to Deanna and handed it to her. “Keep it handy. I’ll have to pull it for security at the airport.”

“You’re flying? Where?”

“Atlanta.”

“Why?”

“I have something I have to do there.”

“That’s no answer. If you were still a teenager, I’d call it rude.” She frowned. “Why didn’t you answer the door?”

“I was in a hurry. I have to get out of here.” She smiled. “I wasn’t rejecting you. I gave you a key to the condo, didn’t I? That means you’re welcome anytime.” She paused. “Why did you decide to come today? I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“I dropped by your conference. I was going to take you to dinner.”

Kendra grimaced. “And you saw me almost blow my cool.”

“They were idiots. They should have known you were right. You were right, weren’t you?”

“Yep. But not diplomatic.”

“Thank God.” She paused. “I followed you out to the parking lot, and I was going to save you from that earnest young man, but you got a telephone call.” She shrugged. “You hung up right away and jumped in your car and left the conference.” She met Kendra’s gaze. “But I saw your expression. It’s happening again, isn’t it?”

“Wild oats?” Kendra shook her head. “I like my life, Mom. I’m not going to fly off and leave those kids I teach.”

“You know what I mean. Who is it? FBI? The local police? Say no, Kendra.”

Kendra hadn't thought she'd be able to deter her, but it had been worth a try. "I can't do that, Mom," she said quietly. "Not this time."

"Why not?" Deanna asked harshly. "Those law-enforcement people don't give a damn about you. How many times have you been hurt? And I've almost lost you before when they tapped you and ask—" She drew a deep breath. "You're too valuable to waste. You're good and giving, and you've worked too hard to become a complete person." Her lips twisted. "The only problem is that you became a bit more than complete."

"No, I won't accept that. Anyone can do what I do. All they have to do is concentrate." All during her childhood, she had trained all her senses to overcompensate for her blindness. At twenty, when she'd had the operation that had given her sight, she'd been amazed that the people around her weren't able to use those senses in the same way she did. In a way, they appeared more blind to her than she had been before her operation. It had been that ability that had brought her to the attention of the law-enforcement officers against whom her mother was so bitter. "And I assure you that most of those agents at the FBI don't consider me loving and giving. They consider me a bitch, useful but not comfortable to be around."

"I never taught you to suffer fools gladly." Deanna added, "There's a possibility I might have gone slightly overboard. But deep down, you have fine instincts. The rest doesn't matter."

"And since you taught me, it must be the world and not me that's wrong." She leaned forward and gave Deanna a kiss on the cheek. "I'll sign on to that." She grabbed her computer case. "I have to go, Mom."

"Not until you tell me who you're going to see." She added

grimly, "I need to know who to go to for the body if they get you killed."

Deanna wasn't going to be deterred. Kendra had hoped she would be able to avoid explanations. She didn't have time for them. "Joe Quinn. He's a detective with Atlanta PD. You may remember my mentioning him. I worked with him when he was out here chasing down a serial killer; and then later he involved me in a missing-person case."

"I remember you weren't happy to leave one of your students at a crucial time."

"It was okay. It worked out."

Deanna was frowning. "And you were working with an Eve Duncan. You had problems with her."

"We were a little too much alike. That worked out, too," she said. "I liked her, Mom. She was kind of special."

"So you're going to be working with her again? That's why you have to become involved?"

"Yes, she's the reason." She shook her head. "But I won't be working with her. Joe Quinn called me and told me that Eve has been kidnapped by some nutcase. The man's name is Jim Doane. Quinn asked me to help find her. I have to do it."

Deanna sighed. "Dammit, then I don't have a chance of talking you out of going, do I?"

"It won't be that dangerous. I'm not going to be actively working the case. I just have to try to pull up any clues as to where this Doane took her. I'll go in and do my job and get out." She added softly, "I won't tell you not to worry because that's been your modus operandi from the moment I was born twenty-eight years ago. I celebrate that you think I'm still worth it. But this time, I honestly believe that there's not going to be any reason to do it. Okay?"

“No.” She stared at her a moment. “If you don’t get yourself hurt physically, you’ll end up an emotional wreck. I’ve seen it before. And this time the odds are leaning in that direction. You told me yourself, you like this Eve Duncan. You’ll get hurt again.” She turned and slammed the suitcase shut. “And I’ll be here to pick up the pieces. Maybe someday you’ll develop a sense of self-preservation.”

“I already have. Things just seem to get in the way. You’d like Eve, too, Mom.”

“Would I?” Deanna asked as she turned toward the door. “I’m driving you to the airport. You can tell me about her on the way.” She held up her hand as Kendra opened her lips to speak. “I’m driving you,” she repeated firmly. “I’m not letting you fly off into the night without having a solid hold on the situation. Grab your suitcase.”

Kendra shook her head ruefully as she hurried after her out of the condo to her mother’s Mercedes in the parking space in front of her condo. “We might have to go to a therapy session or two when I get back. You’re being domineering again.”

“Am I?” She got into the driver’s seat. “Oh, well, you can take it. Talk to me. Tell me about Eve Duncan.”

“She’s a forensic sculptor, one of the best in the world. She does a great deal of work re-creating the faces of skulls of victims found by police departments across the country. She tries to devote most of her time to doing reconstructions of children. Perhaps you’ve heard of her? She’s very famous.”

“The name’s familiar, but I tend to avoid looking at skulls unless it has to do with something of historical significance. It reminds me of my own mortality. But a person is more than a profession. You haven’t told me about Duncan, just what she does for a living.”

“She’s illegitimate and grew up in the slums of Atlanta. Her mother was on drugs most of her childhood and didn’t list any name for the father on Eve’s birth certificate. Her mother wasn’t sure who he was. Eve had an illegitimate child herself when she was seventeen. It was a little girl she called Bonnie. She adored her. The little girl was kidnapped and killed when she was seven years old.”

“Dear God,” Deanna whispered. “How could she survive a blow like that? I don’t know if I could.”

“Eve survived. She went back to school and became a forensic sculptor. She spent years trying to find the body of her daughter and only succeeded a short time ago. She adopted a ten-year-old street kid, Jane MacGuire, years after her daughter disappeared, and she and her lover, Joe Quinn, raised her. Jane’s now an artist and temporarily living in Europe. Recently, Eve discovered she had a half sister, Beth, and they’re trying to build a relationship, but Beth lives here in California. They don’t see much of each other.” She looked at Deanna. “Is that enough personal background for you?”

Her mother nodded. “She’s no lightweight.” She made a face. “Maybe I shouldn’t have asked you to tell me about her. I don’t have much ammunition to convince you not to go off and try to find her.”

“No, you don’t. She’s strong, and she’s real. Like you, Mom.”

Deanna didn’t speak as she changed lanes to get on the freeway. “If they know the name of this man who abducted her, why can’t they find them without you?”

“I don’t know. Joe said that Doane had been planning this for years. His son, Kevin, had been murdered and partially cremated, and Doane only managed to salvage his blackened skull.”

“Ah, and he wanted Eve Duncan to do the reconstruction on the skull?”

“Presumably. Doane let her call Quinn and check on the condition of Jane MacGuire, and she told him she’d made a deal with him to do it.”

“Condition?”

She hesitated. Her mother was not going to like this. “Jane MacGuire was shot by one of Doane’s accomplices, a man named Blick.”

“Shit. And this isn’t going to be dangerous?”

“I go in, then get out. Jane wasn’t killed, only wounded.”

“What a relief,” Deanna said grimly. “Wonderful.”

“It is wonderful.” She wouldn’t tell her about the CIA man who had been found with his throat cut on the lake property. “I’m not saying that Doane isn’t dangerous. He’s not stable, but I’m not going to have to deal with him. That’s Joe Quinn’s job. And he’s fully capable of handling it. Before he became a detective, he was with the FBI, and before that, he was a SEAL. He only asked me to look around and see if I come up with something.”

“And he wouldn’t try to pull you into the case if he thought it necessary? You said he was Eve Duncan’s lover. That doesn’t bode well for cool professionalism.”

Trust her mother to cut through everything to get to the truth. “No, Joe isn’t at all professional about Eve.” Kendra wouldn’t lie. “He’s crazy about her. They’ve been together for years, and it’s still a love story. Nice . . .” She added quickly, “But no one pulls me into anything if I don’t want to go. I’m not reckless. You know me well enough to realize that, Mom.”

“But you don’t have to be reckless if you get emotional.

What about that case a few years ago, where there were kidnapped children involved? That nearly made you into a basket case.”

Kendra didn't answer.

“Okay.” Deanna sighed. “I'll shut up right now if you promise to call and give me reports how things are going.”

“So that you can get on your white horse and come to my rescue?” she asked gently. “Mom, you have to let me go some-time. You were the best, the most extraordinary mother a child could have. You fought a thousand battles for me and taught me to fight them, too. Now you have to trust me to make good choices. And, if I don't make them, you have to trust me to make the situation work.” She added softly, “Just as you did all those years. It shouldn't be so hard. After all, I am your daughter.”

Deanna didn't speak for a moment. “Was that supposed to appeal to my ego? It is hard. You'll realize that when you have a child of your own.” She pulled over in front of the terminal building. “And I will come to rescue you if you don't behave sensibly. I'll give you space, but I won't give you up.”

“And that makes me a very lucky woman.” Kendra opened the passenger door. “How could I ask for anything else?”

“You couldn't,” Deanna said brusquely. “Now, have you told me everything you know about the situation? If I have to mount that white horse, I want to know how to program this GPS.”

“How convoluted can you get?” Kendra got out of the car and retrieved her suitcase from the backseat. “I think you have the bare bones. I don't have much more than that. Quinn was rattling off names and details so fast that I still have to get

everything straight in my mind. I'll probably be landing in Atlanta before it becomes clear to me." She leaned back into the car and gave Deanna a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "Now you know as much as I do. Satisfied?"

"No." Her eyes were glittering as her palm cupped Kendra's cheek. "And if you don't want me to interfere, you'll call and keep me informed. That's not too much to ask."

"Blackmail." Kendra was laughing as she straightened. "What am I going to do with you?"

"I have no idea. I taught you to make your own decisions."

"True." She slammed the car door. "And there's really only one thing I can do with you." She turned away. "I just have to love you. I'll call you when I get to Atlanta."

She could feel her mother's eyes on her as she headed for the glass doors. She lifted her hand and waved as she went through the doors into the terminal.

Her smile faded as she went toward the kiosk. She had tried to comfort her mother and she wished she had been able to be more reassuring. She knew so little, and she hated it. She wanted to reach out, to see, to hear, to touch. She was going into this hunt for Eve as blind as she had been during the first twenty years of her life.

And she had a terrible feeling that she wouldn't be able to help Eve. Eve was very sharp, and if she'd been taken by this criminal, then he must be a formidable adversary. It was hard for Kendra to understand how the wary, intelligent Eve she had come to know had become a victim.

But most criminals left traces, clues that shined a light on their path. Doane surely wouldn't be different. All she needed

was to go to the crime scenes and everything would come clear.

God, she hoped he wasn't different.

I'll find him, Eve. Fight him. Give me a chance. I'll do everything I can. I'll search so hard for you. . . .