

THE LAST STAND

by

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"You begin saving the world by saving one person at a time..."

*--Charles Bukowski, American short
story writer, poet and novelist*

Sacramento, California

The jangling of the telephone woke Skye Kellerman in the middle of the night. Fumbling to stop the noise, she brought the handset to her ear and managed a groggy, "Hello?"

The person who answered spoke in a barely audible whisper. "He's here!"

At first, Skye wasn't coherent enough to identify the voice. But she recognized sheer panic when she heard it.

Blinking away the last vestiges of sleep, she maneuvered herself into a sitting position--and a name came to her: Dahlia Studebaker. It was the twenty-three-year-old woman from her victims' support group, the ultra-thin one who looked more like a teenager.

Once Skye placed Dahlia, there was no need for an explanation. She'd heard enough about the young woman's situation to guess who "he" was. Dahlia's coworker, thirty-eight-year-old Rex Rickman, had been

leaving threatening notes, vandalizing Dahlia's car and house and frightening her with heavy-breathing phone calls for nine months, ever since Christmas.

Heart pounding, Skye shoved her tangled blond hair out of her face. "How do you know?"

"I saw something, or someone, outside the window. God, I'm scared. He's going to kill me. I know he's going to kill me."

The tremor in her friend's voice brought back the night Skye had awakened to find a man in her own bedroom—a man wielding a knife. It'd been two years since she'd had to fight for her life. Oliver Burke's trial was over and they'd put him away. But, like the scar that Burke—a well-respected dentist—had left on her face, the fear would never go away.

This is different. It might be nothing, Skye told herself, but the mere possibility made her break into a cold sweat. "Have you called the police?"

"I don't dare."

"Why not?"

"Because the last two times they came out here, they couldn't find any trace of him. They think I'm crazy, Skye. And it's because he's so damn smart. He's watching me...always."

Dahlia was getting paranoid. But after so many months, it was understandable. "Where's your husband?" Skye asked, climbing out of bed.

"In L.A. I've called him, but what can he do from there?"

Christian Studebaker worked for a software company that required him to travel. Rex Rickman knew Dahlia spent time alone each week--they'd been friends before she'd refused his advances.

"Call the police."

Dahlia broke into tears. "It won't do any good. It never does. Why can't he just leave me alone? I never did anything to encourage him. What does he have against me?"

"Who knows what he's imagined. Just get the police out there again. The appearance of a squad car might scare him off."

"It's all so useless," she said and hung up.

Skye stared at the phone. She'd managed to dress while holding the handset to her ear with her shoulder, but she wasn't sure what to do next. Was this another false alarm? The product of nerves and imagination?

Maybe, but she couldn't risk the alternative, so she called the police herself.

The man who answered told her they'd already been notified and had sent a squad car. She breathed easier after that, almost considered going back to bed and letting the police handle it--until she tried reaching Dahlia and got no answer.

Chapter 2

There were two squad cars parked in front of Dahlia's gray and white tract house in Citrus Heights, and the door stood open despite the cool September air. A distorted rectangle of light fell across the stoop, and more light gleamed around the blinds at the kitchen window, but the rest of the houses on the street remained dark. It was three in the morning, and Skye knew from experience that a violent, life-and-death struggle didn't necessarily wake the neighbors.

She parked across the street from the cruisers and took a deep breath as she got out. The fact that she couldn't see anyone, couldn't hear anything, made her uneasy. She conjured up the image of the police arriving to find Dahlia lying in her own blood, and felt nauseous as she approached the house. She wished she'd called Sheridan Kohl or Jasmine Stratford. They would've met her here. Part of the same victims' support group through which she'd met Dahlia, Sheridan and Jasmine were her closest friends.

"Hello?" she called from the front step. There was no answer, but she could hear voices inside, male voices. She prayed the situation wasn't what she feared. "Dahlia?"

A policeman, probably in his fifties, with a round face and an even rounder paunch, strode around the corner. "Who're you?" he demanded, hooking his thumbs in his belt.

Skye hugged herself for strength as well as warmth. In her hurry, she'd left the house without a coat and it was colder outside than she'd expected. "A friend of Dahlia's. She-she called me when she thought she might be in trouble. Is everything...okay?"

"How well do you know Ms. Studebaker?"

He hadn't answered her question. Skye rubbed the gooseflesh that prickled her arms. "We met a few months ago, when she joined the victims' support group I'm in. Why?"

"Would you say she's...credible?"

Skye nearly sagged in relief. Dahlia was alive or he wouldn't be asking this question. "Absolutely. She's being terrorized, and it's been going on for months."

"But we can't find any evidence of a stalker. No footprints in the planter boxes, no cigarette butts, no witnesses, no collaboration from other folks on the street...ever. And there're plenty of people who say Rex Rickman wouldn't bother a soul."

"He broke the window of her car and slashed her tires while it was parked at the defense contractor where they both work," Skye said.

"How do you know it was Rickman? Did anybody see him? Were there any fingerprints?"

Skye had never asked. She'd just listened as Dahlia told her frightening story. "There've also been threatening notes."

His lips compressed into a line, his expression full of skepticism. "Created on a computer. Anyone could've put them in her purse or under her doormat or in her car."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

He lowered his voice. "Listen, I don't mean to disparage your friend. But there are...certain people who enjoy this sort of attention. You don't think there's any possibility—"

"That she could be making it up?" Skye shook her head. "No! None at all. She's not like that."

"You're positive? Because this is the tenth time we've been out here, and it's another false alarm. Surely, by now we would've seen some proof that she isn't doing this to herself."

Skye wanted to rush to Dahlia's defense. But she hadn't known Dahlia all that long. Was her own past making her too gullible? She'd participated in a few group sessions with Dahlia, and they'd gone out for drinks twice. But it wasn't as if Skye had spent as much time with her as she did Sheridan and Jasmine, who were in their early thirties and closer to her own age.

"Keep looking," she said, sounding more confident than she suddenly felt.

He sighed. "We will."

Skye glanced beyond him, straining to hear Dahlia's voice. "Can I see her?"

Stepping back, he waved her inside. "She's in the master bedroom."

She skirted past him, but stopped when she spotted a rifle leaning against the coffee table. "She has a gun?"

"That's not what it looks like," the cop said. "It only shoots BBs."

Two other officers emerged from the hall, one tall and lanky, the other about 5'8". "Her nephew left that behind when she was babysitting him earlier," the shorter of the two explained. "She was huddled under the bed with it when we arrived."

Obviously, Dahlia felt desperate enough to use any weapon she could. Skye nodded at the officers, telling herself she'd made the right choice in claiming Dahlia was credible. Trusting a lying Dahlia would waste taxpayers' money. Doubting a truthful Dahlia might cost the woman her life....

Chapter 3

Skye found Dahlia sitting in a chair next to her bed, alone now that the officers had gone out to canvass the yard and the neighborhood again. Her big brown eyes were wet with tears, but she wasn't crying anymore.

Skye hated it, but the initial police officer's words had put a question in her mind: Was Dahlia seeking attention?

"Hi," she said, forcing a smile. "How ya doin'?"

Dahlia shook her head, causing the beads at the end of her braids to clack, and fresh tears welled up.

"You're going to be fine. They tell me they don't see any prowlers or evidence that there ever was one."

"Of course not. Like I've told you before, he's too smart. But he was here," she whispered. "I know he was here."

Crouching at her feet, Skye took her hands, which were ice-cold. If she was lying about Rex Rickman, she was a damn good actress. "They're checking again. Maybe...this time..." She let her words trail off.

"No. It's a game to him. He's toying with me and with them. Once they stop believing me, once they respond a little more slowly or stop looking so closely...he'll be waiting." She shuddered, and Skye squeezed her hands.

"It won't come to that."

Dahlia didn't answer.

"Have you ever considered quitting your job? Getting completely away from Loren International and all the people associated with it?"

"I can't." A tear dripped off her chin and she swiped impatiently at her cheeks. "I just found out I'm pregnant, Skye. I need my job. And I love it. I mean...I've already transferred to a different division, we've moved twice in the past six months, and Christian's been traveling less. Now he only goes every other week, but he has to cover his territory or he'll lose his job. Nothing we do makes any difference."

The day Dahlia had started her job at the new division was the day Rex had supposedly broken her car window and slashed her tires. Skye remembered hearing about it at the support meeting. But before she could say anything, the first police officer came back in.

"No one's outside or skulking about the neighborhood," he said from the doorway. "And the 2002 beige Acura you describe as Rex Rickman's is parked in his drive. I had another unit go by to make sure. They just called me."

Briefly closing her eyes, Dahlia sank into herself in surrender. "Thanks," she murmured.

Compassion softened the hard edges of the cop's face. "You gonna be okay?"

"I'll stay with her," Skye said.

He nodded, advised them to call if anything changed and left.

The house fell silent except for the sounds of the door closing and two engines flaring to life. By the time Skye stood to peer through the blinds, both squad cars were gone. As far as she could tell, her Volvo, glowing eerily beneath the streetlight, was the only thing that didn't belong.

Turning back to Dahlia, she offered a smile of encouragement. "Do you have to work in the morning?"

"Yes. At eight," she said, her eyes glassy, hands limp in her lap.

"Then you should get some rest. I'll be here if you need me."

Dahlia didn't get up. She massaged her temples as if battling a terrible headache. "You don't have to stay."

"I don't mind. Really." Skye had to work in the morning, too, but as a carpet saleswoman focusing on commercial accounts, she didn't have to go in until ten. And if she was too tired to sell as much as her boss expected, she didn't care if he fired her. Ever since the attempted rape, and the long difficult trial that had followed, she'd lost her love for a lot of the activities she'd enjoyed before. Nothing was the same, especially her. That was the reason she'd joined the victims' group in the first place. David had recommended it.

David... She knew better than to think of the detective who'd handled her case by his first name. She'd recently learned that he'd gone back to his wife.

"A man from my church is coming over," Dahlia said. "If...if you'll just hang out until he arrives, I'll be fine."

"You called someone from your church?" Skye asked.

"No, my husband did. He was worried, so he convinced a friend to come over and spend the night."

That was a welcome relief. Skye hated the thought of being all that stood between Dahlia and disaster should Rex actually appear. She'd been taking self-defense classes but hadn't learned how to use a gun, although she was considering it.

"Sounds good. I'll wait for him in the living room so you can have a few minutes to pull yourself together."

Dahlia caught her hand before she could leave. "Skye?"

Skye turned. "Yes?"

"Do you think I'm crazy or...or that I'm imagining a threat that doesn't exist?"

Skye considered the other woman's red, swollen eyes and knew, in an instant of clarity, that Dahlia wasn't making it up. That kind of fear couldn't be faked. "No. I think Rex Rickman must be dangerous," she said, relieved to have established some trust again.

A faint smile curved her friend's lips. "Thanks. I'm glad I joined the support group and met you and Sheridan and Jasmine. Who else wouldn't mind receiving a call like this in the middle of the night?" She attempted a laugh, and Skye gave her a quick hug.

"You can call me anytime."

The doorbell rang.

"There's your husband's friend," she said. "I'll let him in."

Chapter 4

Skye instantly liked Taylor Hinshaw, the man from Dahlia's church. In his mid-twenties, with brown eyes and hair buzzed almost to the scalp, he had the looks and polite manner of a marine. The sweatsuit he wore highlighted his impressive physique, and his attitude inspired confidence.

"I've got it from here," he said, showing Skye a mouthful of large, straight teeth when he smiled.

"Great, thanks." Exhausted, she rubbed her face. "Dahlia's in back. She'll be out in a minute to say hello. As for me, I'm heading home."

He picked up the gun Skye had seen by the coffee table earlier. "What's this?"

"A BB gun."

"Lotta help that'd be," he said with a laugh, placing it behind the couch.

"I guess it's better than nothing." She knew how helpless Dahlia had felt. The night she'd been forced to fight off Oliver Burke, she'd had to resort to a pair of scissors. "'Night."

He waited on the front stoop to make sure she got off safely. Once she'd locked herself in her car, she waved and he closed the door.

She drove home almost on autopilot.

Ten minutes later, she pulled into the garage of her Orangevale condo. But when she went to grab her purse, it was gone.

With a sinking feeling, she realized she must've left it at Dahlia's.

"No way!" The last thing she wanted was to go back to Citrus Heights tonight, but she couldn't put it off until morning. Dahlia's church friend would be gone and Dahlia would be at work by the time Skye dragged herself out of bed. Her purse contained her cell phone, ID, credit cards, everything. She needed it.

"I can't believe this." With a curse, she got behind the wheel and drove back. But as she entered Dahlia's neighborhood, she saw something that made her put her foot on the brake: A beige Acura sedan. She had no idea of the year, but it hadn't been there when she'd passed twenty minutes earlier.

The police had mentioned that Rex Rickman drove a 2002 Acura.

A tingle of anxiety traveled up her spine as she pulled to the curb in front of it. She walked back to look inside, but she didn't have a flashlight and she couldn't distinguish much, certainly nothing that would reveal the owner or the owner's intent.

She put her hand on the hood to see if it had been driven lately.

It was cool to the touch.

Was twenty minutes in fifty-degree weather long enough for an engine to cool completely? She had no idea, but she figured she was probably making a big deal out of nothing. It was possible that the

Acura had been there when she'd passed before and she simply hadn't noticed.

In any case, Dahlia had a damn strong protector. Rickman wouldn't strike tonight.

Returning to her car, Skye drove the last two blocks. She cruised down the street just to be safe, didn't see anything and parked where she'd left her car before. The porch light on Dahlia's house cut through the black night like a beacon, but the rest of the house and the neighborhood looked as dark and quiet as before.

"Bed, soon," she promised herself, hurrying across the street and up the walkway. But she froze on the front step. Somehow, Taylor Hinshaw had been stupid enough to leave the door ajar. It was open only an inch or so, which is why she hadn't spotted it before, but it definitely wasn't secure.

What was going on? Lifting her hand, she swung the door open a little wider. She was about to call out to Dahlia when her eyes landed on something lying in the entryway, and she covered her mouth instead. Taylor Hinshaw was no longer on guard.

He had a knife in his chest.

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."