

## Chapter 1

### “Jaded”

*You're gonna die-you bitch!*

I looked at the words sitting alone on the expanse of white. A ridiculous thought occurred to me. The words were innocent. They had no volition. Just photons squirted out by a display system.

“Uh huh,” I said to myself. It was a shame this moron couldn't see my eyes rolling. Woo hoo, someone else wants me dead. I held the cursor poised over his idiotic nickname, Addictedtolove, waiting. Sunday nights bring out the miscreants, the later it is, the worse the behavior. It was almost Monday.

*I'm serious. You are gonna die.*

I typed a reply, *I'm sure you are, bye-bye*. Then hit the twenty-four-hour ban and watched him disappear. The chat room went quiet; to enjoy the moment I clicked off Real Player and with it the latest Grange album I'd been listening to. The room plunged into deep silence. I stretched my legs out under my desk and tapped away at the keyboard. *What's that now, Stormy? Twelve death threats?* I looked up to see her answer on the screen.

*Yup*, she replied.

I'd set a new record, the most death threats received in one night. Excellent.

I typed, *well, that's me for the night then, best check my doors and windows*.

Stormy replied, *LOL. Talk tomorrow*.

I shut down the computer, not tired, but not interested in sitting at my desk all night either. The house creaked and grumbled like an old man settling into a rocking chair.

I prowled around the house, both upstairs and down, checking every window, door and deadbolt. It wasn't fear that motivated me. It was boredom. Funny really, boredom wasn't something I tended to suffer from. Perhaps I was wrong about the boredom. Maybe it was me being just a little sick of my own company. It sure as hell wasn't empty threats from chat room weirdos. I mean, what were they really going to do? Turn up on my doorstep and shoot me? I think not.

I live outside a very small town, west of Lexington, in Rockbridge County, Virginia;

more an old village than a town. It's a long way from anywhere and not the type of place where one has unexpected visitors.

I stopped thinking about chat room weirdos and made a firm decision.

In the morning, I would drive north and visit Mac. What I needed was fun, and he was the perfect person for the job. Mac was fun with a capital F. It didn't hurt that he was drop-dead yummy either.

Half way up the stairs, I heard a car door slam followed by heavy footsteps moving in the direction of my back door. The chat room screen flashed in my mind. People I know would not be visiting at this hour of the night. I scurried up the remaining stairs to my office, snatched my gun from the desk, and crept back down. The kitchen light was out, but from the glow of the security lights outside, I could see the silhouette of a head through the back door's frosted glass window. A stupid rhyme popped into my head, 'One two, they're coming for you, three four, don't open that door'. I slipped through the darkened room and stood on the hinge side of the door. It took conscious effort to keep my breathing calm and mind centered. My body was willing to react without the go ahead from my brain and controlling the twitch in my trigger finger wasn't going to be easy; it didn't like being disturbed in the middle of the night.

The door handle moved, keys rattled. The door handle moved again, this time twisting back and forth. The frame groaned under applied force to the door. Keys rattled once more and the handle now moved freely, unrestrained by the lock, but the secondary deadbolt kept the door from opening and seemed to annoy the person outside the door. It was almost ghostly as the handle twisted back and forth, even if mortal cursing emanated from the dark silhouette. My cell phone rang in the other room.

I backed into the living room and answered the call as I kept my gun trained on the door. I had to wonder how and why someone had keys to my house, as I thanked God for the extra deadbolts that this person didn't expect to find.

"Are you home?"

I detected an angry tone and stifled the urge to reply in kind. Instead, I returned to the kitchen. The silhouette appeared to be talking into something.

"Yes, I am home."

"Then open the goddamn door." Yep, I was getting tone, not something I appreciated

at this time of night. I recognized the voice but still had no idea how he came by keys to my home.

“Why are you out here?”

“Ellie, open the fucking door.”

“How about ‘no’? How about you fuck off and *never* come back?” My mind groaned: way to be a grown-up, Ellie! My heart rate was climbing and my trigger finger itchy. He was the last person on earth I would ever give a key. He was pond scum.

I disconnected the call. No point in a brain tumor from the cell phone when he was yelling on the other side of the door. While he hollered, I pressed in the panic sequence on the alarm panel. My old pal Kevin and several police officers would be along presently, admittedly *presently* when you live forty minutes from town wasn’t always as quick as I’d like. Tonight, I wanted quicker than humanly possible.

I settled myself by the kitchen counter on a stool. He couldn’t get in unless he broke a window because I wasn’t about to open the door.

He pounded on the door. I made coffee. He kicked the door. I lit a cigarette.

He yelled at me. I ignored him. He threatened me. “I have a free lesson in manners out here for you. I won’t be banned! You need to learn your lesson.”

I took a deep breath.

He violently rattled the door handle. “I have something for you. You’ll like it.”

I remained silent. He cursed my mother. I silently agreed with him that it was all true.

I opened a drawer and found a small Dictaphone and some new micro cassettes. I pushed the record button as he told me what he was going to do to me, in graphic detail, once he found a way in.

Maybe he secretly longed for life behind bars or perhaps he was drunk. Insanity was also a possibility.

My laptop sat on the kitchen table. Its sleek black case begged me to open it.

The ranting outside became boring. I grabbed the laptop and settled back on my stool. He yelled louder when I fired up the computer. I figured he’d seen the glow from the screen, and didn’t like me ignoring him.

While I basked in the joy of satellite Internet, he banged something heavy against the glass in the door. It could have been his head. God knows it’s thick enough.

I signed into Messenger. My pulse quickened. Galileo was online. I smiled. Galileo, AKA Mac, always made me smile and I had someone to talk to while I waited for the police.

I typed into the chat box. *Hey, call me on my landline at home.*

Galileo typed back, *you okay?*

I'm just fine and dandy. I lied to myself on a regular basis about all sorts of things. It stopped me curling up into a little ball and sobbing like a two-year-old.

Something that sounded like a rock hit the kitchen window.

I flinched as I typed, *Yeah, I need some company is all.*

The kitchen phone rang, followed by another string of curses from outside. I answered the call and hit the speaker button.

"Hey, Mac."

"Hey, Ellie, what's up?"

"I'm having a small problem with an uninvited visitor."

There was silence on the phone as another heavy object smashed into a window. The window vibrated but withstood the blow. I wasn't sure how much it would weather, but so far so good.

"What the fuck was that?" Mac asked.

"That was the *problem*." I didn't want to worry him unduly and attempted to keep my voice light. "I am being entertained this evening by Carter's verbal and sometimes physical tirades."

I heard Mac sigh.

"That's not such a small problem," he said. "You're okay?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm okay. He's outside having a little fit." Yep I'm okay. If I say it enough times, it will be true.

"Police?"

"On the way, I pushed the panic button."

"Good. So what brought this on?"

"No clue, dude. He did yell something about being banned, but why would he fly in from Chicago to pound on my door 'cos he was banned from a chat room?" The chat room weirdos entered my thoughts. "I have, however, received a recording-breaking twelve death

threats today. Guess it's just my lucky night."

Mac laughed. "I know about the death threats. Stormy filled me in on the chat room activities."

"It's nice that so many morons feel so strongly about me."

"How sure are you that Carter isn't one or all of those morons?" he asked. Now that was something I didn't want to think about in any great depth. If that was true then he was a lot sicker than I'd originally thought.

Yep, I'm okay.

Another rock hit the window. A loud crack resounded throughout the room. A shard of glass flew past me.

"Well, damn, he broke my window."

"Where's your gun?" I heard the concern in his voice and felt the beginnings of dread. I pushed the feeling away with a resounding internal, I'm *okay*.

"In my hand." I picked my gun up from the counter and chambered a round. I pulled the base of the phone toward me and picked up the handset, the speaker turned off automatically. With my gun in one hand and the phone in the other, I slid from the stool to the relative safety of the floor. There was little chance of me actually sitting in broken glass so I leaned against the cabinets under the sink. With great resolve, I forced out emerging fear and replaced it with general annoyance.

I'm okay dammit!

The noise outside stopped.

"He broke my window!"

His quiet calm voice came back at me, "I can fix the window."

"Thanks."

"What's going on?" Mac asked.

"He's gone quiet. I don't think that's a good thing." I couldn't hear car sounds, so he hadn't left.

"Me neither."

Something crashed. I heard the tinkle of breaking glass. There was a thud from the living room. It wasn't good. I took a breath.

"I think he's inside."

I reached up to the counter, snatched the taped evidence out of the cassette player, and slipped it into my jeans' pocket.

I could hear stumbling and cursing as he floundered around in the dark.

"Get out, Ellie."

I'm getting. No need to tell me twice.

I shoved the gun into my waistband and with the phone in my hand slid the heavy bolt off the backdoor. It was good of him to unlock the door for me earlier. I ran across the driveway, passed his car and down the tree line. The security lights were blazing. I ducked into a little clearing under a stand of pines. Small branches and tree limbs jabbed me as I moved further into the undergrowth and out of view. Something crunched under my feet. I knelt down and felt around in the dark. My fingers touched sharp edges and a mess of something slimy. Abigail's nest: I'd crushed her eggs. She must've been frightened from the nest by the noise and I'd stomped right in the middle of it.

I suck as a pet owner.

"Mac?" The phone crackled. Now was not the best time to test the range on a cordless phone. "Mac?"

"I'm here. I put another call through to the police. They're five minutes away."

"Thank you." I brushed my hand across my face to dislodge cobwebs.

A loud cracking sound over by the house made me wish Mac was five minutes away. Something flew past my head. Another loud crack followed, then another. I crouched down even lower, pulling fallen branches in front of me. Random thoughts associated the sound with gunfire. I don't like people shooting at me. It made my tummy feel weird, ruined my congenial disposition, and made me doubt the little voice that told me *I* was okay.

"What the hell is that noise?"

"I don't know." I wanted to say he's shooting at something, but that was too frightening to acknowledge over the phone. A crazy man taking pot shots at shadows was not a good thing to hear about from a hundred and seventy something miles away. I'm okay.

"Ellie, is that gunfire?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe's ass. You keep your head down!"

"I'm okay."

“Let’s keep it that way.”

“The house will be a mess.”

“I can fix the house. I can’t fix you.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear for a second. “I can hear traffic.” I listened. I could hear at least two cars moving at speed towards my address.

“No sirens?”

“Sirens don’t make you go any faster and there is no need to advertise that you’re coming.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I still heard anxiety in his voice and it made me feel terrible thinking that I had caused him to worry so much. I didn’t know which was worse: telling him in the morning and him being really cross with me, or sharing the whole thing from the beginning and him worried as hell. *Catch 22*.

Another crack rang out followed by a falling branch. “Ouch.” I rubbed my head. Damn, it stung. It wasn’t pain, but it was a hot stinging sensation.

“What ouch?”

“Nothing, just a branch I think. Something hit my damn head.” Two cars turned into the driveway. “Hang on; let me talk to the police.”

“Okay.”

I escaped the confines of the trees and the gnarly branches that poked and scratched me. Keeping to the shadowed area of the driveway, I waved to the first police car. I still had the phone in my hand. The car stopped beside me. Kevin zapped the window down.

“You all right?”

“Yep.” I pressed the phone to my shoulder, covering the receiver. “He’s got a gun.”

Kevin nodded. The two officers in the car with him were already wearing Kevlar. He spoke into the radio. Four officers from the car behind walked quietly past me. Two officers from Kevin’s car joined them.

“Who’re you talking to?” He indicated to the phone in my hand.

“Mac.” I pushed my palm to my forehead in an effort to stop the stinging sensation.

“What’s wrong with your head?” Kevin opened the back passenger door. “Get in.”

“Nothing is wrong with my head. It just stings.” Outwardly, anyway; there was something wrong with me mentally to even be in a situation like this at two-thirty in the

morning.

He took the phone as I slid into the passenger seat. I rested my head on the back of the seat, and listened as he spoke to Mac. I tried to hear what he said but all I heard was the intonation of Kevin's deep voice. Even closing my eyes didn't make the words any clearer.

Another loud crack rang out. There was a pause, then an announcement by one of the officers, followed too quickly by another sharp crack. Kevin dropped the phone in my lap.

"Stay here," he ordered, leapt from the car, and set off at a run toward the house. I peered into the shadows created by the security lighting as I picked the phone back up.

"Mac?"

"How's your head?"

"It's fine." I lied. It wasn't exactly fine. The interior light was on, I could see a lot of blood on my palm, and I could feel it trickling down my brow. I pressed my palm hard against my forehead and thought that maybe I should keep it there. A quick succession of shots, fired somewhere near my house, caused me to cringe.

"Kevin's going to take you to Holly's." I knew then he wasn't buying the 'head's fine' line.

"There's no reason why I can't stay here."

"Ellie!" He sounded a little pissed off. "This is not the best time for your usual contrary attitude."

"Contrary?" I don't think so. I am not contrary. Wanting to sleep in my own bed is not being contrary.

Mac was breathing down the phone in a very controlled way. I reached over the front seat and pulled the visor down. Vanity mirrors have their uses.

I lifted my hand off my head and inspected the damage. A decent gash and it didn't look like a branch injury. Blood was still running down my face. I plonked the heel of my hand back over the bloodied wound and pressed hard. I didn't feel any kind of joy at seeing my blood roaming free.

Someone yelled. I heard running and scuffling.

Having some lunatic threatening to kill me in a chat room was somewhat amusing, but having some lunatic act on his impulses, scream abuse, bang on my door, break my windows and fire actual bullets at me, ruined my night.

“Okay. I’ll go to Holly’s.”

“I’m coming down.”

“You don’t need to.” I had plans involving Mac and a museum.

“The hell I don’t! Anything you want me to pick up on the way?”

A suture kit would be handy, but it wouldn’t thrill him to hear that.

“I can’t think of anything.”

“Stay in the police car, keep pressure on that head of yours. I’ll see you in three hours.”

I never said I was bleeding. Kevin! I hope my loose lips don’t retaliate and accidentally tell vegan Annie at the health food store that the last vegetable Kevin ate was stuffed inside a pig’s mouth!

“Thank you.” Tonight was not a good night. It sucked and there were a million better reasons for Mac to drive all the way down here. None of them involved a mad man, a gun, and my blood dripping all over. I started to feel quite cross.

Why it takes so long to capture one man, I do not know. Rolling red and blue lights illuminated the car interior. Either this was a migraine coming on, or another police car had arrived. Two cops carrying shotguns hurried passed me. I’ll go with the police car, not the migraine. I’m sure that’ll come later, brought on by rolling lights and a moron with a gun.

Mauryville had never had so much excitement.

The gossip mill will be working overtime tomorrow.