

FINDING
ALEX

FOR REVIEW
PURPOSES ONLY

Also by Helen Starbuck

THE ANNIE COLLINS MYSTERY SERIES

The Mad Hatter's Son

No Pity In Death

The Burden of Hate

STANDALONE ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

Legacy of Secrets

FINDING
ALEX

HELEN STARBUCK


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Finding Alex

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Who is it that can tell me who I am?

—William Shakespeare

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PROLOGUE

“WAKE UP! PLEASE wake up!”

The voice sounded frightened and far away. “Can’t,” she mumbled, her mind clouded, drifting, wanting nothing more than to drop back into nothingness and get away from the pain.

“No!” the voice sounded...worried...familiar. “Wake up! You have to wake up and get away...please...he’ll come back! He’ll hurt you.” The voice faded into the nothingness.

Cold. So cold and dark, she thought. Have to get away, have to get help. Someone told me that...someone...someone.

The pain in her head felt as if her skull would explode with each beat of her heart. She rolled onto her side and managed to get to her hands and knees before becoming violently ill. The pain in her head surged with each retch.

She waited for the nausea to pass, swaying on her hands and knees, her head hanging down. Slowly she lifted it and saw she was at the bottom of a deep culvert. Overhead, the moon was partly hidden by clouds. She crawled away from the vomit and made her way slowly up the incline, feeling the dry grass and dirt

under her hands and knees, feeling the rocks that punctured and scratched them. It would take an eternity to reach the top. Was it worth the effort?

“*Move, keep moving,*” the voice said. So, she moved.

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CHAPTER ONE

HE'D BEEN LOST in thought when he damn near hit the woman. If he hadn't had his headlights on high he would have. It was midnight and almost nothing was visible outside the twin beams of his car's headlights.

The fields on either side of Highway 93 and the foothills to the west were invisible in the darkness. In the distance to the east were glimpses of the multicolored lights of Denver. Clouds periodically obscured the moon. His was the only car on the road.

Detective Blake Halloran had been thinking about the case he'd been working on for the last week as he drove on autopilot toward Boulder and the woman he'd been seeing for a couple of months.

Movement from the side of the road at the edges of his headlights brought him out of his thoughts. A woman staggered out onto the highway, into the path of his car. He stood hard on the brake pedal, his tires screamed, and the car fishtailed. His heart was slamming against his chest as the car came juddering to a stop only feet from her.

As he got out of the car on shaky legs, the scent of burnt rubber from his tires surrounded him. The woman's head, face, and neck were bloody, and she swayed as she stood in front of the

car. She raised a scraped and bloody arm to shield her eyes from the headlights. Before he could round the front of the car, her legs gave way and she collapsed.

He fished his phone out of his jacket pocket and dialed 911.

“This is Detective Blake Halloran with the Denver Police Department,” he said, giving the operator his badge number. “I have an injured pedestrian and need an ambulance south of the entrance to the Leyden dump on Highway 93 going north toward Boulder.”

“Is this a pedestrian motor vehicle accident?”

There was no other car in sight. “I don’t know,” he said his breath uneven, a tremor in his hand made holding the phone difficult. “It could be a hit-and-run, but she’s on the highway so it’s urgent that emergency services and the police or the sheriff’s office are notified.” Blake couldn’t remember who had jurisdiction on this stretch of highway.

“Is the victim breathing?”

“Yes, but unconscious. Tell them to hurry,” he said, disconnecting and dropping his phone into his jacket pocket.

He knelt beside her in the glare of the headlights and felt under her jaw for a pulse to reassure himself that she was, in fact, just unconscious. She was deathly pale. Blood matted her dark red hair and had run down her neck and onto her chest. Purplish-blue bruises wrapped around her neck. Not a hit-and-run then, some sort of assault. He took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to slow his breathing and his heartbeat. He hoped she was strong enough to hold on until help got there.

She wore a very short, tight skirt and a tight stretchy top that didn’t leave much to the imagination. Working girl was his first assumption, but he’d seen some high school and college-age girls who wore similar outfits. There was a gash on the side of her head. The palms of her hands and her elbows and knees were scraped and covered in blood and ground-in dirt. Several of her fingernails

were broken, and there was a deep cut near the last joint of her left index finger.

Her elbows and knees were still bleeding. He stood up and retrieved his phone activating its flashlight and shining it off the side of the road. The ground dropped off into a deep culvert. Maybe the injuries to her hands, arms, and knees were from crawling up the side of the culvert. The bleeding from the head wound had stopped, so whatever had caused it had evidently happened a while ago.

He ran back to the car, hit his hazard lights, and opened the trunk to extract his triangular hazard warning signs and a blanket. He set up the warning triangles, hoping to prevent any approaching cars from hitting them.

Covering her with the blanket would screw up any trace evidence on her, but she was ice-cold. Figuring it was damned if you did and damned if you didn't, he went with the blanket. Once she was covered, he knelt beside her again to wait for emergency responders.

She moaned and, unable to restrain himself, he stroked the uninjured side of her face. "Help is on the way, hang in there," he said.

He had no idea whether she'd been conscious enough to hear him. She was unresponsive now, and he wasn't sure whether he'd said it to reassure the woman or himself. He took his phone and briefly peeled back the blanket to photograph her injuries and check that there were no other wounds. Replacing it, he tucked the blanket in around her and waited feeling a familiar numbness creep over him.

Five minutes later he saw flashing lights in the distance and heard sirens. A fire truck arrived with lights flashing. Fire fighters emerged and began blocking the highway to divert traffic. Mercifully, there wasn't any at the moment. EMTs unloaded a stretcher from the ambulance that had arrived with the fire truck, and a black SUV with a local police emblem on it pulled up. EMTs

rolled the stretcher over to where the woman lay and Halloran was still kneeling.

“What happened?” the EMT asked as he pulled the blanket off and replaced it with a reflective blanket that would help keep her body heat in. He began examining the woman as the other one took the transport board off the stretcher and placed it beside her. They transferred her onto it and the first EMT began taking her vital signs as the other hooked her up to oxygen.

Blake stood up and stared down at the EMT blankly for a moment. It was as if his brain had momentarily short circuited.

The EMT shot him a concerned look. “Are you okay? Any injuries that need looking at?”

Blake shook his head to clear it. “I’m fine, no injuries.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“She...she stumbled out into the road as I was driving. I damn near hit her.” He picked up the blanket and held it against his belly as if for comfort.

A cop appeared at Blake’s side and asked, “Where’d she come from?”

“I don’t know where she came from. There’s a fairly steep culvert leading down from the highway, she could have been down there. She’s got bruises around her neck. It looks like an assault to me. Maybe whoever did it left her there, thinking she was dead.”

“Dispatch said you’re a cop.”

“Yeah, DPD. Homicide.” Blake pulled his jacket back to show his badge.

“What were you doing up here?”

“I was on my way to Boulder to a friend’s house.”

“That’s quite a drive, and it’s late,” the cop said, giving him an impassive stare.

“You know the job. It isn’t bankers’ hours.” Blake eyed the guy for a minute. “You asking me for an alibi?”

“You got one?”

“Talk to my partner. I was with him until half an hour ago, when I left to head up to Boulder.” He provided his partner Clark Stevens’ name and phone number. “If I was the one who did this, why the hell would I call 911 or stick around?”

The cop shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.”

On the way back to his SUV he inspected the front of Blake’s car, shinning a flashlight on the grill and the front fenders.

Asshole, Blake thought as the cop slid into the SUV’s driver’s side and pulled out a phone. *Jesus, no trust in a fellow officer at all*, Blake thought. Still, he grudgingly admitted he’d have probably done the same thing. He watched as the EMTs wheeled the stretcher toward the ambulance and loaded her in. Christ, he’d nearly killed her. He followed them to the door of the ambulance.

“Where are you taking her?”

“Saint A’s. They’re Level 1 trauma.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“We’ll do everything we can, sir,” the EMT said, climbing into the back of the ambulance and shutting the doors in Blake’s face.

The lack of expression on the EMT’s face and their rush to leave worried Blake. Would she be okay? The ambulance made a U-turn and took off, lights flashing and siren wailing. Blake watched as the ambulance’s lights faded. He knew the lights and the siren meant ‘critical patient, no time to lose.’

The sense of responsibility for her and the urge to follow the ambulance washed over him. Maybe he’d call the ER when he got to Fleur’s place and see how she was doing. He rubbed his forehead. He must be tired or more shook up than he realized. No one at the ER was going to give him any information over the phone. The question was, did he let this go or stop at the hospital and see what her prognosis was?

“Gonna need you to give me a statement, tell me what happened. I’ll let you know when it’s ready for you to sign. Gonna need

contact info as well,” the cop said interrupting Blake’s thoughts. He eyed Blake carefully. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just a little rattled,” Blake said. He related what had happened and gave the officer his info.

A fireman walked up and stopped. “Need you to get your car off the highway,” he said to Blake. “And the sooner you can finish this up, we can get the scene secured and take off, unless you need us to stick around?” he asked the cop.

“No, thanks for the backup. We’re almost done here.”

The guy nodded and returned to confer with the firemen stationed around the accident scene while they waited. Blake got back into his car and pulled forward into the breakdown lane. He opened the driver’s door and waited for the cop to walk over. When finished questioning Blake, the cop handed him a card and said he’d be in touch.

“What happened to your hand?” Blake asked noticing the scratch marks on the back of it.

The cop gave him an appraising stare. “I had a little confrontation with someone earlier who objected to being arrested.”

“You might want to have them looked at. They look serious.”

The cop raised his eyebrows at Blake. “Thanks, I will,” he said. He got back into his car, made a U-turn, and drove away, shortly followed by the fire truck.

Blake realized he was still clutching the blanket. He supposed he should have given it to the cop but was too tired to turn the car around and follow. He’d give it to the guy when he went in to sign the statement. A few minutes passed before he realized he’d forgotten about his emergency triangles. Resignedly he got out of the car, retrieved them, and threw them into the trunk.

On top of the tiredness, the adrenaline was still humming. He sat in his car and looked at his hands on the steering wheel and watched them shake. It’d be a while yet before he could sleep. *You’d think I’d be used to this kinda shit by now*, he thought. Being

called to a crime scene never bothered him like this, primarily because he knew what he was getting into. But this had been so unexpected and jarring. Maybe you were never used to emergencies that actually involved you.

As a cop he'd handled other people's emergencies, but only one of his own, and that had been one too many. Lindsey had been the last time he'd allowed anyone to mean anything to him. It was the last time he'd been close to anyone or felt responsible for anyone. That had ended disastrously, so he'd made sure no one got close enough for it to happen again. He closed his eyes tightly, frowning, his breathing speeding up as he fought the images of holding Lindsey in his arms, unable to do anything, as she bled to death.

He forced his eyes open and focused on the interior of the car, remembering what the therapist had said—focus on your surroundings, where you're at, why you're not with Lindsey. *I'm in the car. I'm on the road to Boulder. I'm...here, not there*, he said to himself to counteract the panic that he felt building. He sat and breathed slowly, repeating the phrases, and waiting for his heart rate to drop.

Almost forty minutes later, surprised by the insistent ringing of his cell phone, he didn't know where he was for a moment until he remembered what had happened. Had he fallen asleep? He pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket. Glancing at the screen he saw it was Fleur. He'd planned to pick her up and have dinner, but those plans had been derailed early in the evening. She'd been pissed but told him to come up when he could. She was going to be even more pissed now.

"Where are you?" she demanded, "It's almost two a.m. This is the second time I've called. Are you all right?"

The second time she'd called? He hadn't heard the phone if she'd called before. He wiped a hand over his face. It had been almost six months since he'd had a flashback or lost time after one. Christ, he hoped that wasn't going to start up again.

“I’m sorry, babe, I can’t make it,” he said rubbing the heel of his hand on his forehead. “Something...came up on the way to your place.” There was dead silence.

Finally, she said, “This is getting old, Blake, but whatever. Let me know when you can make some time for me,” and disconnected.

He sighed, closing his eyes. Maybe it was time to call it quits and end this. She wasn’t happy, and he wasn’t entertained enough to continue enduring the sulks and tantrums when he couldn’t make whatever they had arranged. Even the sex wasn’t enough anymore. Initially it’d been fun, but it wasn’t worth all the other nonsense, he thought irritably as he put the car in gear, made a U-turn, and drove toward home.

He’d been seeing her for not quite two months. She was a twenty-four-year-old grad student at the University of Colorado, and he was ten years older. He’d been uncomfortable with the age difference from the beginning. He hadn’t thought it would be a huge problem, but it was becoming one rather quickly. Her outlook on life in general was that of someone who hadn’t had reality bash her in the head yet. Unfortunately, he had.

He’d met her at a friend’s house in Denver. They’d chatted, seemed to hit it off, and exchanged numbers. He’d always been a sucker for blond hair, long legs, and blue eyes, so they had reconnected a week later. The ‘relationship’—and he always saw air quotes around it when he thought about it—had sort of evolved from dinner and movies to sleeping together over the course of a couple weekends.

He didn’t have a goal in mind in regard to Fleur, and he’d been honest about that, but apparently she had one. He worried that he’d become the fish she was determined to catch and not release. She’d been more and more frustrated and angry as she realized what his job entailed and that he wasn’t going to commit or take their relationship any further than it was. He always kept women at a distance, something many of them complained bitterly about

before they left or he did. For some reason, women never seemed to believe that he had no interest in a long-term relationship. No matter what he told them.

Blake Halloran wasn't a classically handsome man. He was tall and well-built but he could blend in enough to go unnoticed. Unnoticed until he displayed his quirky smile that, when truly amused, lit up his deep blue eyes and made a dimple appear on his left cheek.

Women seemed to like his startlingly blue eyes and dark blond hair that looked as if he combed it with his fingers, which, about half the time, was true. He liked women, too, but between his aversion to getting too close and his job, relationships never lasted long and there were often hard feelings on the woman's part when things ended.

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This is a work of fiction. The Denver setting is one I know well, however, my apologies for any liberties I may have taken. The characters are fictional as well, although sometimes I wish they weren't. Congratulations to Connie Holtz for winning the 'name a character after you' contest.

Music plays a large part in my writing. The song *Only You* by Yaz seemed to fit this story perfectly.

AUTHOR BIO



HELEN STARBUCK IS a Colorado native, former OR nurse, and author of the National Indie Excellence Award-winning, *The Mad Hatter's Son*, An Annie Collins Mystery. *No Pity In Death*, the second book in the series, and book three, *The Burden of Hate*, finalist in the National Indie Excellence Awards to which *Kirkus* gave a starred review calling it, "A thriller that offers a master class in suspense." She writes her Denver mystery series from the perspective of Annie Collins an OR nurse. Her standalone romantic suspense novels are set in Colorado.

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