



Outlaw Lawman (The Marshals of Maverick County Book 3)

By Delores Fosseen

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Enmeshed in a web of escalating violence, they know their only hope of surviving is to trust each other. But Harlan doesn't know if he can trust himself—and the feelings Caitlyn is awakening. With the noose tightening, tracked by a killer who's always one step ahead, Harlan is blindsided by an explosive secret from the past—and a passion that's even more dangerous....

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Editorial Review

From the Author

This is book 3 of a 6-book series, The Marshals of Maverick County.

About the Author

USA Today bestselling author, Delores Fossen, has sold over 50 novels with millions of copies of her books in print worldwide. She's received the Booksellers' Best Award for romantic suspense, the Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award and was a finalist for the prestigious Rita ®. In addition, she's had nearly a hundred short stories and articles published in national magazines. You can contact the author through her webpage at www.dfossen.com.

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Marshal Harlan McKinney heard a soft clicking sound.

He waited, heard a second one and eased back the covers on his bed. In one smooth motion he snatched up his Glock from the nightstand and got to his feet.

Just as someone opened the back door of his house.

Harlan listened, hoping it was one of his foster brothers who sometimes crashed at his place. But no such luck. Since all of his brothers were federal marshals, they wouldn't have risked sneaking in at 2:00 a.m., knowing that he was armed and a light sleeper.

He heard the door being closed. Then footsteps. They were barely audible on the tiled floor of the kitchen, but the person seemed to be making a beeline for the hall that led to his bedroom and home office.

There was no time for him to pull on his jeans or boots. It was bad enough that he had an intruder, but now he'd have to bring down this person while he was wearing only boxers.

Harlan ducked behind his bedroom doorjamb and kept watch. There were no lights on in the house, but there was enough moonlight seeping through the windows that he could see the shadow that appeared on the wall.

Just a few feet away.

He didn't move. Didn't make a sound. He wanted to see if the person was armed, but he couldn't tell.

"Put your hands in the air," Harlan growled, his voice shooting through the silence.

The intruder gasped and turned as if to bolt. Harlan wasn't going to let that happen. He darn well intended to find out who was brassy or stupid enough to break into a lawman's house in the dead of night. He lunged toward the person, slamming him back against the wall.

Except it wasn't a *him*.

It didn't take long for Harlan to figure that out, because his chest landed against her breasts.

"It's me," the woman said, her breathing heavy.

Harlan instantly recognized that voice, and he reached behind him and slapped on the hall light.

Caitlyn Barnes.

It had been a few years since he'd seen her, but there was no mistaking that face. Or that body.

Harlan had firsthand knowledge of her breasts—bare, at that—pressing against him. And while that was a pretty good memory made years ago, there weren't too many recent good memories when it came to the woman herself.

He stepped back, met her wide blue eyes. He caught just a glimpse of panic in them before she lifted her chin defiantly. He knew she was trying to look a whole lot more confident than she was. That's because he was six-three, a good eight inches taller than she was, and he outsized her by at least eighty pounds. He was a big guy, and no one had ever accused him of looking too friendly.

Plus, there was the part about him having a Glock aimed at her pretty little head.

"Most visitors just knock, even the uninvited ones," he snarled, easing the Glock back to his side. However, Harlan didn't ease up on the glare.

She made a sarcastic sound of agreement, huffed and put her left palm on his chest to push him back. "I didn't think you'd be here."

Well, that wasn't much of an explanation for breaking and entering or for driving all the way out to his family's ranch. The place wasn't exactly on the beaten path and was a good fifteen miles from the town of Maverick Springs, where he worked. Much too far out of the way for a friendly spur-of-the-moment visit, and Harlan let her know that with the hard look he gave her.

Caitlyn stared back, and then her gaze drifted lower. To his chest. Then lower. To his boxers. Since it wasn't anything she hadn't seen before, and because he was still waiting on that explanation, Harlan didn't budge.

But he felt that old kick of desire.

Hard not to feel it, since they'd been lovers. Well, onetime lovers anyway when they were teenagers. But once was enough. Stuff like that created bonds that weren't worth a thimbleful of spit.

Unless...

The heat was still there. Much to Harlan's disgust, it was. Probably because Caitlyn and he had spent way too much of their teens driving each other hot and crazy. He didn't intend to let it cloud his head.

For Pete's sake, the woman had broken into his home.

Just as he would have done to any other criminal caught in the act, he took her by the arm, turned her and put her face-first against the wall. Another gasp, and she tried to fight him off, but he grabbed the Colt she had tucked in the back waist of her jeans.

So not only had this blast from his past broken into his house, she'd come armed.

Harlan turned her back around and dangled her gun in front of her. "Last I heard you were a reporter," he said.

"Still am." She managed to hold her glare a moment longer before she lost the staring match and glanced away. "I came because I needed answers."

Again, no explanation for the gun or her presence, but Harlan made a circling motion with the Colt so she'd continue.

Her blue eyes snapped back to his. "Do you want me dead?"

Now, that wasn't a question he'd expected. "No," Harlan answered, and he stretched out the word a bit. "Is there a reason I'd want you dead?"

"You might think there is."

Another puzzling answer, and Harlan was getting tired of them. He wasn't a patient man, even on good days, and this didn't qualify as good in any way, fashion or form.

"A Texas Ranger came to visit me," Caitlyn said.

His heart slammed against his chest, and things became a lot clearer. "About Kirby?"

But it wasn't really a question. The Rangers were indeed investigating the sixteen-year-old murder of Jonah Webb, the SOB headmaster of the pigsty of an orphanage where Harlan and his five foster brothers had been raised.

Caitlyn, too.

Several months ago the Rangers had identified the headmaster's killer, Webb's own wife. Webb had been physically abusive, and she'd killed him during one of his beatings. But there'd been an accomplice. Neither Harlan nor any of his foster brothers had been ruled out as suspects, but the Rangers no doubt had their foster father, Kirby Granger, at the top of their list. Kirby had motive, too. Six of them.

Because that was how many kids he'd saved from the orphanage—Harlan and the five other boys who'd become his brothers. But Kirby hadn't saved them until after Webb had been murdered.

"What'd you say to this Ranger?" Harlan asked. And it better not have been anything incriminating.

"I told him there was nothing to tell." Caitlyn paused, pushed her choppy blond hair from her face. "But he didn't believe me. He thought I was covering for one of you—even though I told him I haven't seen you or any of your foster family since we left the Rocky Creek facility after it was shut down."

That part was true. Caitlyn had been sent to another children's home, and Harlan and his foster brothers had left with Kirby. Harlan had written her, for a while anyway, and then they'd lost touch.

Until now.

Of course, he wasn't ignorant of what had happened to her. Nope. Caitlyn had become a high-profile investigative journalist. Heck, he'd even seen her on TV a couple of times while reporting stories. But then she'd practically disappeared. Why, he didn't know, and he hadn't given it much thought. Until now.

"I don't want you dead," Harlan clarified. "But I also don't want you saying anything that might get Kirby arrested. He's sick. Going through cancer treatments. And I won't have you or anyone else making his life harder than it already is. Got that?"

She nodded. "And that's why I thought you might want me out of the picture, to make sure I wouldn't implicate Kirby in Webb's murder."

Harlan didn't roll his eyes, but it was close. He tapped the top of his boxers. "Normally I wear a badge there, and I took an oath to uphold the law—"

"An oath you'd break in a heartbeat to protect Kirby," Caitlyn interrupted.

Harlan shook his head. "I can't argue with that. But murder? Really?"

"There's no love lost between us," she reminded him.

Yeah, thanks to her renegade brand of journalism that had trashed the marshals and others in law enforcement. Heck, a couple of times she'd revealed names on investigations that had come under fire, including Harlan himself. So she was right—no love lost. Still, something about this didn't make sense.

"If you thought I was out to kill you, then why come to my house?" he demanded.

"As I said, because I didn't think you'd be here." She cursed under her breath. "I wanted to search the place, to see if there was any evidence."

"Sheez. Evidence of what?"

"That you hired someone to come after me."

Harlan tried to hold on to his temper, but this was a very frustrating and confusing conversation. "Start from the beginning," he insisted.

Her gaze dropped to his boxers again. "Get dressed. Your file is in my car."

He didn't budge. "My *file*?"

"Yes, with a sworn statement from a criminal informant that you paid him to scare me, 'or worse.'"

Now it was Harlan's turn to curse, and he didn't keep it under his breath. "I've hired no one. And I want to see this file."

Another glance at his boxers. "Then I suggest you put on your jeans, because I'm parked at the end of the road."

Of course. A good quarter of a mile away. Harlan didn't mind the walk, but his mood was getting more

ornery with each passing second.

Why the heck would Caitlyn think of him as a killer?

Harlan turned to go into his bedroom but decided he wasn't going to take any chances where she was concerned. He latched on to her wrist, pulled her into the bedroom with him and shut the door.

"How'd you know I lived here?" He put both her gun and his on the dresser while he pulled on his jeans.

"Research." She glanced around. Not much to see, though. A bed, dresser and nightstand. The entire house was the same—a no-frills man cave, exactly the way Harlan liked it.

"The place used to belong to Kirby's father," she remarked, probably to let him know that she had indeed done her research. "And the main ranch house where Kirby and the others live is about a mile that way." Caitlyn tipped her head in the opposite direction from where she'd said her car was parked.

"My brother Dallas doesn't live there," he disagreed, just to show her that her research sucked. And it did. Because there was no way she had any real proof that he'd hired someone to kill her.

She nodded and didn't look away when he zipped his jeans. "Because Dallas married Joelle, and they built a house on the property."

Joelle, a woman who'd once been Caitlyn's friend at Rocky Creek Children's Facility. He doubted his sister-in-law knew anything about this little visit, but he would ask her first chance he got.

Harlan put on his boots and a shirt and stuffed her Colt into the back waist of his jeans. "Why'd you think I wouldn't be here?" he asked, heading for the door.

"The P.I. that I hired said you were transporting a prisoner to Dallas."

He had been, but had finished early. The transport of a prisoner wasn't usually classified info, unless it was a high-risk, high-profile case. In this case, it wasn't. Still, it wouldn't have been common knowledge, and along with all the other things he wanted to know, Harlan would need to address that.

"What's the name of this P.I.?" He opened the front door and held it for her so that she'd be in front of him.

"I'd rather not say."

"I'd rather you did say," Harlan insisted. "In fact, I've got grounds to arrest you for breaking and entering. Don't add failure to cooperate to those charges."

Caitlyn whirled around and would have tumbled down the flagstone steps if Harlan hadn't caught her. "You're not going to arrest me."

"Who says? Give me the name of that P.I."

"Mazy Hinton." Her teeth were clenched so tightly that he was surprised she was able to speak. She tore herself from his grip and stomped through the yard toward the road.

Harlan didn't recognize the name, but within an hour or two, he'd know everything there was to know about this P.I., who was either incompetent, stupid or an out-and-out liar. None of those possibilities sat well with him.

He glanced up the road, spotted her car right where she said it would be, and he cursed both it and the August heat. There was a breeze, but it was muggy and still hot despite the late hour.

"What exactly did you think you'd find in my house?" he pressed.

She shook her head. "I wasn't sure. An email, maybe.

Or a paper trail to prove you hired someone. I wanted something in your own handwriting or from your personal computer."

Something she wouldn't find, because he hadn't done anything to set this crazy visit into motion. "I guess it didn't occur to you that if I was really a rogue marshal you should go to the cops?"

"Wasn't sure I could trust them." Ahead of him her steps slowed, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I wasn't sure I could trust anyone. Like I said, someone's trying to scare me or something."

"Considering your job, is that much of a surprise? You've riled a boatload of people, including me."

She turned, and in the moonlight he got a glimpse of her expression. Not the fake bravery she'd tried to sport in the hall. Not the emotions from their past. But something else. Something Harlan couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Some people do hate me," she said, as if choosing her words carefully. "But this isn't about that. The threatening notes had, well, personal details in them."

"Personal?" Harlan caught up with her, and even though they were still yards from her car, he stopped her. He whirled her back around to face him.

Not the brightest idea he'd ever had.

That whirl put them too darn close, and the breeze hit just right so that her scent washed over him. Through him, actually. Yeah, not a bright idea.

"*Personal*," Caitlyn verified. She took a deep breath. "The notes were typed, and they warned if I said anything about the investigation into Jonah Webb's murder, I'd be sorry. Your name was on them."

It didn't take Harlan long to figure out what this might be. "So? Anyone could have typed them."

"No. Not anyone." She didn't say anything for several moments. "Remember when we were together that night at Rocky Creek?"

Even though they'd had a lot of nights at that hellhole, Harlan figured he knew which one she meant.

"Jonah Webb went missing that night," she continued. "And we heard they were closing the place, that we'd all be split up and sent to other facilities. Well, except for Kirby Granger's boys. Kirby was getting all of you

and some of the others out of there."

"He couldn't get you out," Harlan reminded her. "He couldn't locate your next of kin to get permission to request guardianship of you."

Users Review

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