



Hidden Witness (Return to Ravesville)

By Beverly Long



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Detective Chase Hollister knows the perils of protecting a witness. He's got the bullet wound to prove it. But getting shot is nothing compared to his next assignment: fake marriage. Gorgeous fake wife. Living together 24/7 in a fake house. All to protect witness Raney Taylor from a very real assassin. As Chase and his new "wife" set up house, he realizes there's something very genuine about his smoldering attraction to Raney. Then her safety is threatened and his every protective fiber goes on alert. Suddenly, although their wedding may have been a sham, Chase knows there's nothing fake about his feelings for this witness...

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Hidden Witness (Return to Ravesville) By Beverly Long Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #242971 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-11-01
- Released on: 2015-11-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Beverly Long writes romantic suspense and time-travel romances. Her first two books, *STAY WITH ME* and *HERE WITH ME* were both finalists in the Holt Medallion Contest and the Book Buyers Best Contest. She has a master's degree in business and many years of experience as a human resources director. She believes in happy endings and that chips and salsa brighten any day.

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Chase Hollister heard his cell phone ring and used his forearm to pull the pillow that he slept half-on and half-under closer around his ears. It rang four times and clicked over to voice mail. Thirty seconds later, it started ringing again.

"Damn," he muttered, tossing off the pillow. He glanced at the number, saw that it was his brother and reached for the phone.

He pushed a button. "I have not had any sleep for twenty-eight hours," Chase said. "This better be good."

"Brick is dead," Bray said.

Chase sat up in bed. He hadn't heard the man's name in over eight years. Hadn't spoken it himself for much longer. "How?"

"Car accident. His sister was with him. They had a double funeral two days ago."

Chase had met his stepfather's older sister once, maybe twice. He recalled that even as a teenager, he'd known there was something odd about her. That family had a bad gene pool.

"Anybody else get hurt?" Chase asked.

"Nope. One car. Only Brick and Adelle in it. They were on their way to Brick's doctor's appointment."

He lay back down. He didn't care about the details. "I'm going back to bed."

"I got a call from Mom's attorney," Bray said. "The house is ours."

In one smooth movement, Chase swung his body out of bed. His bare feet hit the soft rug first, then the polished hardwood. He walked down the short hallway and into his kitchen. The blinds were up and he was naked. He didn't care. He needed coffee. "That doesn't make sense. Brick had a son. I assume the man is still alive."

"I'm not sure but it's a moot point. When Mom died eight years ago, the house was in a trust for us. Brick had been granted lifetime use. The attorney said that we should have been made aware of that upon Mom's death but it was a slipup."

The irony was not lost on Chase. They could have fought the lifetime-use thing and booted him out of there. He'd have been on the outside looking in, kind of like Chase had been whenever Brick got a wild hair and locked him out.

He dumped some coffee in a filter, poured water in the coffeepot and flipped the start button. He didn't put the pot on the burner. Instead, he held a cup directly under the streaming coffee.

"You've got to go there and see what we need to do to get rid of the place," Bray said.

Chase jiggled the cup and hot liquid burned his hand. "No way," he said. "You go, you're the oldest."

"I would if I could. I'm three weeks into a new assignment. I can't pull out now."

"Cal will have to do it. We're older, we can make him." Chase added the familiar taunt, knowing there was nothing easy or familiar about his relationship with Cal.

"He's out of the country."

Cal had spent most of the past eight years out of the country. That was what navy SEALs did. For the past six months, following his discharge, he'd been working as a contractor. That was what his business card said. Chase supposed it could be true if the new breed of contractor was trained to blow up the bad guys, disarm bombs and generally screw with the enemy. "Well, I don't care if he's on the moon. I'm busy, too, you know. I've only been back for a week."

"How is the leg?"

Functional. Still not up to full strength. "Fine," Chase said.

"I thought you were going to be out for six weeks," Bray prodded. "You went back at four."

"We're short staffed."

"Aren't we all? I was especially impressed when your name popped up on one of my search engines. Then, when I dug a little deeper, I realized you were busy being a hero on your second day back."

Chase didn't answer. He'd hated the photo, the article, the attention. Hadn't considered that it went beyond the print edition.

"Detective Chase Hollister, one of St. Louis's finest, keeping the streets safe for the rest of us," Bray recited.

His brother did his own part to keep the streets safe. Working undercover for the DEA wasn't easy. He would have hated the attention, too. But now he was picking a fight in hopes that Chase, wanting to end the conversation, would agree to take care of things. It wasn't going to work.

"Listen, Bray. It's simple. I'm not going back. The house can rot for all I care," he said. Chase hung up and tossed his cell phone onto the granite countertop. The noise echoed through the quiet apartment. Then he stood in his stainless-steel kitchen and sipped his coffee, burning his tongue in the process.

Ravestille, Missouri. Two hours southwest of St. Louis. A little town in the middle of the country, undisturbed by major highways and big box stores. A place where everybody knew their neighbor, talked about them freely and dropped everything when they needed a hand. It was the kind of place where a kid got on his bike at eight o'clock on a summer morning and didn't come home until dinner. The kind of place where there were community-wide chili dinners and pancake breakfasts and people stuck around to clear the tables and wash the dirty dishes. It had been home. And he'd been a happy enough kid.

And then everything had changed the summer his dad died. Chase had been fourteen, just about to enter high school. And as bad as his dying had been, it had gotten worse two years later when his mother had remarried and Brick had become his stepfather.

There probably wasn't a meaner man in the entire state. Why he'd married a woman with three teenage boys when he didn't appear to like kids was a mystery. He was estranged from his own son, who was quite a bit older than the Hollister boys. Chase could only remember meeting him once.

When the phone rang again less than five minutes later, he picked it up, ready to give his brother an earful. At the last second, he realized it was his partner's number. The man should have been sleeping, too. He'd been awake the same twenty-eight hours.

"Yeah," Chase said.

"The boss called. He just heard from the chief," Dawson said. "Somebody used the Florida witness in the Malone case for target practice."

He and Dawson hadn't worked the Malone case but the man was suspected of murdering three Missouri women about a year ago, one of whom was the chief's godchild. Harry Malone was currently locked up in the county jail awaiting trial and everybody in the St. Louis Police Department, from the janitor up, had an interest in the case. "That doesn't make sense. That woman should have been sealed up tighter than your wallet."

"Funny."

"Was she injured?"

"No. Lorraine Taylor got lucky."

Then, it was the second time she'd gotten lucky. He wasn't sure of the details but through the grapevine he'd heard that she'd somehow managed to get away from Harry Malone. She'd told the cops about the pictures of the dead women that Harry Malone had proudly shown her and the admission Malone had made about

killing the women. She'd been able to lead them back to the apartment where she'd been held. Unfortunately, by that time, Harry and his pictures were gone. But her DNA had been in several places in the apartment and she'd had injuries consistent with her story.

But Harry had been careful and there was no physical evidence linking him to the Missouri murders because there were no bodies.

Even so, based on the information that Lorraine Taylor had provided, Harry Malone had been picked up and charged with kidnapping and assorted other crimes and three counts of murder. Lorraine Taylor had likely assumed that she'd done her civic duty by leading the police to the man and that she could get on with her life.

However, she'd no doubt quickly reevaluated those plans six weeks later after almost being killed by a hit-and-run as she walked to work. Witnesses had substantiated that the attack was deliberate. That was where it got complicated. Following her escape from Malone, Lorraine Taylor's identity had been closely guarded and her name had never made the newspapers.

Unfortunately, in the information age, that didn't mean much. Cops in both Florida and St. Louis knew her name. Then there were the people in the prosecuting attorney's office and the judge's office. Harry Malone certainly knew who she was, and jail might impede communication with the outside world but it certainly didn't stop it.

The cops considered whether the attack on Taylor could have been unrelated to her potential testimony against Malone. But even if that was true, it didn't really matter. Any attack, for whatever reason, had the potential of robbing the State of Missouri of their prime witness.

They'd decided to put her in a safe house. That was the last that Chase had heard.

Now somebody had shot at her. That was going to make a lot of people nervous, people who were counting on the fact that Lorraine Taylor was going to be an excellent witness.

She was going to have to be. Harry Malone, a rich, second-generation hedge-fund trader from New York, wasn't stupid. He wasn't talking and he'd retained a very good defense attorney. He'd been deemed a flight risk and denied bail so his attorney was working expeditiously to get the trial under way.

Plus, the scuttlebutt was that Malone was confident that he was going to walk free.

Was it possible that he wasn't as confident as he wanted others to believe and he'd decided to ensure his freedom by getting rid of Lorraine Taylor?

"The chief wants her moved to St. Louis," Dawson said.

The chief was a known control freak and, given his personal interest in this case, there was probably no talking him out of it. But Chase understood. They needed Lorraine Taylor.

"He told the boss that he wants us to start working on it," Dawson said.

"Why us?" They weren't the most senior detectives on the force. He'd barely spoken ten words to the chief and he figured it was the same for Dawson. He didn't care; brown-nosing his way to the top wasn't his style.

Besides, who knew how long he was going to stick around? Maybe there was a better job around the corner.

"According to the boss, the chief said that we did a hell of a job in the Brodger case."

Hamas Brodger had been a drug dealer who had executed three teenage boys who'd tried to screw him out of a couple hundred dollars.

A fourth boy had managed to get away. Chase and Dawson had babysat him, twelve-on, twelve-off, for six weeks. It hadn't been a good assignment. The kid didn't bathe regularly and had forgotten all the manners he'd learned in kindergarten. And he hadn't been able to keep his fingers away from social media and had led the bad guys to their door. Chase had taken a bullet in the leg as a result but had managed to get his own shot off.

The kid had testified and Brodger was going to call the state penitentiary home for a long time.

"I think you maybe should have let the guy shoot him," Dawson said. "The way it turned out, it's just getting us more work."

"Maybe next time," Chase said. "But listen, I may need to take a day off pretty soon. I've...uh...I've got something I need to take care of. Family business."

"Your brothers okay?" Dawson asked, his tone serious.

"Yeah. They're fine. My stepfather just died."

Dawson didn't offer the normal platitudes. He didn't know everything but he knew enough. "Can I help?" he asked.

"Nope. Just got to take care of a house. The lieutenant doesn't expect us back in, does he?"

"He said tomorrow was soon enough. Lorraine Taylor will be here then. The question is, what are we going to do with her?"

Raney Taylor was furious. The nightmare that had started the evening Harry Malone had wandered into Next Steps and volunteered to help was never going to end.

Wasn't it enough that she was going to have to testify and relive every awful moment of the fifty-four hours that she spent with him? As horrible as that would be, she knew she had to do it. The man had to be stopped.

Once he'd been arrested, it had never occurred to her that she would still be in danger. She'd gone back to work, brushed aside the comments from coworkers that she really should take more time off and hoped that someday, she'd be able to trust again. And each day had gotten a little easier. But six weeks later, when a dark SUV had tried to run her down three blocks from her house, she'd realized that things were about to get a lot harder.

The police had promised that they could keep her safe. *Don't worry*, they'd said, handing her the keys to the two-bedroom house in the modest Miami neighborhood. *We keep witnesses here all the time. Nothing ever happens.* Now they were going to have to change their sales pitch because last night, eleven days after moving in, someone had taken a shot at her as she took the garbage to the curb.

If she hadn't bent down to chase a wayward napkin, she'd be dead right now.

She'd assumed she'd be moved to another place. She hadn't expected them to announce that she needed to pack quickly because she was getting on a plane. And going to St. Louis.

She'd known that at some point she'd have to travel to the Midwestern city. Harry Malone's trial was taking place there because his three other victims had all resided in Missouri.

She'd never met the other victims but she *knew* them. Could easily imagine the terror they'd lived through. After her escape, she hadn't been able to keep from looking up the news stories. Had wanted to see the women as people, had wanted to know they had lives and that they'd been loved. Had needed to replace the images she carried in her head with something else.

She did not want to be in the same city with Malone. She'd made a terrible mistake in trusting him. And had almost paid the ultimate price.

She rubbed her ribs. He'd cracked three of them with a well-placed kick after he'd dumped her blindfolded on the floor of his squalid apartment. The doctor had told her that the bones would knit back together quickly but it might take months for the bruising to heal. Every night when she rolled over in bed, it woke her up.

Not that she was sleeping a whole lot anyway.

Maybe that would change in St. Louis. Maybe she could sleep away the next month until she had to testify at the trial. Leaving her job pained her more than anything. She loved her work.

Her clients, most of whom came from disadvantaged circumstances, wanted to work but for one reason or another had trouble securing employment. The assistance she provided took many forms. She taught basic communication skills to some. Took others shopping so that they understood what to wear to work. She'd helped with table manners, organizational skills and conflict management.

It made her day when a client showed up with his or her first paycheck. It made her week when they were still working at that same job three months later. She was over the moon when they celebrated their first anniversary.

Now Harry Malone had taken that away from her. That and more.

She jumped when there was a light tap at the door. "Ready, Ms. Taylor?" the officer asked. Luis had been with her since day one of her *captivity* and he'd been unfailingly polite.

"I don't understand why I have to go to St. Louis," she said for the twentieth time. "This is a big city, a big state. Surely you have other safe houses."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

April Little:

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