



OVER THE LINE

KELLY
IRVIN

SHE VOWED NEVER
TO TRUST HIM AGAIN.
BUT NOW HE'S HER ONLY HOPE.

OVER THE LINE

KELLY IRVIN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Over the Line

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*For my 1980s Laredo Sky Lounge gang, especially
Shellee Bratton, Mike Cisneros, Joanne Cisneros,
Danny Hermosillo, and Larry Burns.
We shared the good days and the bad days.
I'm so glad I spent them with you.*

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

I CORINTHIANS 13:6

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

MICAH 7:18–19

SPANISH GLOSSARY

abuelo: grandpa

abuelita: granny

antojitos: snacks

aquí estamos: here we are

arroz con frijoles: rice with beans

cabrito: little goat (type of meat)

cállate: shut up (command)

cálmate: calm down (command)

café con leche: coffee with milk

carne asada: thinly sliced grilled beef

carne guisada: stewed meat

carnita: braised pulled pork

cerveza: beer

chancla: flip-flop

chimenea: free-standing, portable fireplace, usually used in backyards

chiquita (o): little girl or boy

claro que sí: of course

¿Cómo te vas?: How are you doing?

con la policia de San Antonio: with the police from San Antonio

corazón: heart

dime: tell me

Dios te ama: God loves you.

— SPANISH GLOSSARY —

ejército: army
ese: slang for homeboy
familia: family
frijoles: beans
gracias: thank you
guero: slang for blond or light-skinned man
hermano: brother
hija: daughter
hijo: son
mamá: mom
mata-policía: kill police (nickname for particular bullet)
mentirosa: liar
mi amigo: my friend
mi amor: my love
m'ijo: contraction for *mi hijo*, my son
m'hijita: contraction for *mi hija*, my daughter
nada: nothing
no llores: don't cry (command)
n'ombre: contraction for *no hombre*: No, man. Slang
No pisar el césped: Don't step on the grass.
No hablo español muy bien: I don't speak Spanish very well.
No vi nada: I did not see anything.
pachanga: party
paletas: popsicles
papí: daddy
pastel de tres leches: three milk cake
pico de gallo: chunky Mexican salsa
pollo con calabaza: chicken with squash
por favor: please
¿Por qué?: Why?
primo (a): cousin
qué bella: how beautiful

— SPANISH GLOSSARY —

¿Qué haces?: What are you doing?

¿Qué pasó?: What happened?

querida: dear, sweetheart, literally “loved”

ranchera: a style of traditional Mexican music

rubio: blond

señor: sir

señora: madam

señorita: miss

sí: yes

taqueria: Mexican restaurant, specializing in tacos and burritos

te amo: I love you

telenovela: soap opera TV show

tío (a): uncle, aunt

tu mamá: your mama

turista: tourist

un idiota: an idiot

una: a

vámanos: let’s go

CHAPTER 1

THE *SLAP-SLAP* OF RUBBER soles against asphalt echoed in the darkness somewhere behind Gabriella Benoit.

Chills hopscotched down her bare arms despite the oppressive August heat.

She glanced over her shoulder.

Nothing.

On the nights she left her restaurant after midnight, Gabriella seldom saw anyone other than an occasional homeless man looking for a place to lay his head for the night. Ignoring the drop of sweat that rolled down her temple and tickled her cheek, she turned the key in the front door lock.

The footsteps trod closer. She fisted her fingers around the keys and listened.

A lone cricket chirped. A fly buzzed her ear. Cars zoomed on I-35 South in the distance, their hum white noise in the night.

Long strides. Nothing furtive about them. Someone out for a stroll? Someone who shared her insomniac tendencies? Her brief career as an assistant prosecutor in the district attorney's office had made her paranoid. Another tendency she couldn't shake.

San Antonio, like any major metropolitan city of its size, had its share of crime. It wasn't the big "small town" older folks liked to claim it once was. Her free hand clutching the pepper spray canister attached to her key ring, Gabriella fumbled for her cell phone in her bottomless leather bag.

Her fingers closed around it.

Get it over with, Benoit.

She sucked in air, let it out, and forced herself to back away from the glass double doors adorned with pale-blue wooden trim and the hand-lettered menu she created herself. Praying the breeze was at her back, she whirled, finger on the canister button.

“Gabs, it’s me.”

The familiar husky voice filled the night air around Gabriella. Fight or flight? The question she always asked herself now when she heard it. “Eli! You scared me.”

Eli Cavazos emerged from the shadows, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his faded blue jeans. “That was my intention, *querida*. How many times have I told you not to close by yourself? It’s not safe.”

“Last time I checked, what I do is no longer any of your business.” When they were dating, Eli would park his unmarked PD Crown Vic on the street during his supper break and watch until she drove away in her Mustang. Then he’d go back to work catching the bad guys and making the world safer. Even though she had no need of his protection—or any man’s—she found his concern touching. While it lasted. “I’m not kidding. Please stop.”

“I have a question for you.” He kicked at a rock with the toe of his well-worn size-twelve Nike, sending it skipping across the dirt and weeds that passed for landscaping on the other side of the sidewalk. “Miss Never-Miss-Church-On-Sunday.”

Gabriella refused to take the bait. Eli had never attended church with her during the four years they dated. Nor did he deny his faith. He simply refused to talk about it. She’d been hopeful about changing that. Instead, the opportunity had slipped away while she had her back turned. “I don’t owe you any answers.”

Quite the opposite.

“Don’t you believe in forgiveness? I know from my Sunday school days that God is big-time into second chances. Shouldn’t you at least be as gracious?”

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He couldn't know she asked herself that same question as she lay in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, praying for sleep, knowing it wouldn't come. She wanted to forgive. It would be so much easier than this impasse, and she would feel less like a hypocrite when she sat in the pew on Sunday morning.

Lowering her head so she couldn't see his face with its dark coffee-colored eyes, bronze skin, sculpted cheekbones, and familiar full lips, Gabriella started toward her Mustang in the middle of the parking lot. She always made it a point to park under a security light. "Go home. Get some sleep. You look like death warmed over."

Eli stepped into her path. His Polo cologne wafted around her, a spicy reminder of what she'd lost. His long fingers brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. She'd once loved those fingers and that touch. Sudden heat replaced the earlier chill.

"Are you ever going to forgive me for being a moron, *mi amor*?" he whispered.

"Forgiveness comes with confessing your sin and repenting. You refuse to do either." Gabriella made a show of looking at her wristwatch. "It was crazy busy for a Thursday today—yesterday. I need to get home before it's time to do it all again."

"I told you I came with a bunch of baggage."

"You didn't mention you were planning to open up a suitcase and dump the contents on my head." Her friends had warned her about dating a homicide detective. She'd rejected the stereotype and took her chances because she simply had no choice. Eli was a force of nature. "I'm too tired for our usual rehash. I'm going home."

She slipped past him, acutely aware of the gray PD T-shirt stretched tight across his broad chest, the five o'clock shadow that darkened his chin, and the fact that he needed a haircut. The feel of his wiry curls under her fingertips and the cool metal of the scissors in her hand as she scolded him about his restless wiggling in her kitchen chair wormed its way into her mind's eye. Every breath brought more

of the same familiar ache that radiated from her chest and brought tears to the surface. Six months of this impasse, and Eli still refused to give up.

“Drive carefully, *por favor*.” His words settled around her like a favorite jean jacket. “I’m off duty. I could follow you home if you want.”

A sudden image of her sister Natalie’s expression should she see Eli trailing up the porch steps behind Gabriella made her wince. *Idiot*, Natalie would think before going back to the suspense novels that occupied her sleepless nights. But her kids—should they learn of his reappearance—would be thrilled. What kid wouldn’t love a guy who insisted ice cream was a food group and allowed himself to be subjected to camping in a pup tent in the backyard in the middle of July in Texas? “It’s one o’clock in the morning. I’m too tired to fence with you. Go home. Sleep. Please.”

His lips twisted in a crooked grin. He ducked his head and swiveled without another word. The sound of his swift footsteps on the pavement followed by the slamming of the car door told her he’d received the message. For the moment, anyway. A few seconds later, the engine revved as if he’d jammed his foot on the gas pedal with his Charger still in Park.

Gabriella inhaled. Her shoulders relaxed on the exhale. The desire to bawl like a jilted teenage girl subsided. Glad to be out of Eli’s line of sight, she rounded the back end of the Mustang. He’d sit there, mulling his transgressions until she drove away.

She inserted her key into the door lock, careful not to scratch the paint on her ’73 classic. Every muscle in her thirty-four-year-old body ached for rest. For a Thursday night it had been busy at Courtside. Searing steaks for the law enforcement crowd paid the bills, but she couldn’t fall into her bed until she’d taken a shower to scour the grease from her face and hair. Along with the faint fear of failure. She walked a tightrope every day, trying to keep her restaurant in the black. Starting any business involved risks, but restaurants were

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at the top of the failure list. Too many options, too much cheap, fast food.

Clean cotton nightgown. Clean cotton sheets. Clean. Maybe somehow she would find the clean start she craved. She grabbed the door handle.

“Gabriella Benoit.” A breathless voice unfurled around her like tendrils of smoke wafting from the shadows. “Gabriella.”

The effect was the same as if the whisper had been a scream. Her cell phone slipped from her fingers. It hit the asphalt with an ominous cracking sound, then skittered away. She froze. Her fingers went numb around the pepper spray.

“Gabriella Benoit?”

A man stumbled from the portico that sheltered the slender porch in front of the law office doors. His mouth gaped in a brown face that appeared strangely childish in the building’s harsh security lights.

In one hand he clutched a gun. The torturous sound of his breathing filled the night air. “Are you Gabriella Benoit?”

Run.

Shoot the pepper spray in his face.

Pick up the cell phone.

Call 911.

Call Eli.

Her muscles refused to take orders. She forced her mouth open. No sound came out.

The young man dropped to his knees. One hand clutched at his chest. His curled fingers were red and shiny in the streetlights.

The gun clattered on the asphalt. He didn’t seem to notice. “Por favor, are you Gabriella?”

“You’re hurt!” Words, finally. Noise. Her voice sounded like someone else’s—someone scared spitless and about to pee her pants. He knew her name. “Do I know you?”

He swayed and groaned.

Gabriella shot forward. She knelt to catch him before he hit the ground. Her knees didn't want to hold her up anyway. "I'll call an ambulance. Or, look, there's a cop parked on the street over there—just let me go get him. He can help you. I promise."

The man's fingers closed around her wrist in a bruising grip. "Jake . . . he . . ."

Jake? Her brother Jake?

The man keeled over.

Gabriella caught him and lowered him to the ground.

Tears rolled down his temples into fine brown hair. His breath came in ragged spurts. "Jake . . ."

"Jake? Jake did what?" She glanced around. Phone. She needed the phone. It was lost in the shadows. She tugged her arm from his slackening grip. "I'm right here. I'm looking for my phone. I won't leave you. I promise. How do you know my brother?"

"He said . . ."

"He said what?" She crawled toward the shadows. Rocks and sticks bit into her palms. Her fingers touched plastic. She grabbed the phone and scrambled to her feet. "It'll be all right. I'll call for help. Is Jake hurt? Where is he? Do I need to send help for him?"

The man didn't answer.

She turned back to him. "I don't know who you are, but—"

His head lolled back. His eyes were open, staring.

Little details stood out in stark relief against the lights. A small scar on his chin, a mole on his lip. His cheeks were smooth. He wasn't even old enough to shave.

With shaking fingers, she called 911.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

"A man has been shot."

"Where, ma'am?"

Talking fast, she relayed the information and disconnected. She jolted to her feet and darted down the street. "Eli! Eli!"

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He shoved open his door and unfolded his long legs. “¿Qué pasó?”

“A man’s injured. He’s been shot. He has . . . had a gun.”

His Smith & Wesson M&P40 already drawn, Eli sprinted past her.

It took him a scant few seconds to cover the ground to where the man sprawled. With one foot he nudged the weapon away and then crouched next to him. He touched his neck, then looked up at her, shaking his head.

“He’s dead.” He rose and pulled his cell phone from his hip pocket. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Gabriella made a supreme effort not to throw herself at him, to that place where she could feel his familiar, steady heartbeat, lean on his solid chest, and inhale the comforting scent of his cologne. “He came out of nowhere. He knew my name. He said—”

“Are you hurt?” Eli grabbed her arm and jerked her from the shadow cast by a scraggly live oak and into the light. “Is that blood? *Are you hurt?*”

“He’s a kid. He’s just a kid.” Gabriella ripped her arm from his grasp. She glanced down. Red stains soaked the front of her white polo shirt. “I tried to help.”

“Of course you did, mi amor. You always do.” His voice roughened. “He knew your name?”

“My name and Jake’s.”

Ignoring the blooming concern on his face, Gabriella ducked her head and scrolled through the favorites in her phone until she found Jake’s. She punched his name. A few rings and her brother’s husky, amused message played. “*Can’t talk now. You know what to do.*”

She swallowed, determined not to bawl. “It’s Gabriella. Call me, Jake. Please. Call me.”