

ERIN UNGER

EVEN MURDER ON THE
MOUNTAIN CAN'T
KILL THEIR LOVE

*A Worthington Investigations
Romantic Suspense*

SUMMER FLASH BURN

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Erin Unger

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Dedication

To my hubby, Michael, who has been my biggest fan
and best motivator to keep writing.

Jeremiah 29:11 NKJV For I know the thoughts that I
think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and
not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Books by Erin Unger

Practicing Murder

Worthington Investigations

Fateful Fall
Summer Flash burn

1

Shauna

The constant whisper of wind through the trees out here, deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains, might make me a little crazy this time around. That and the record-breaking heat of July in Virginia. It would be perfect by anyone else's standard. But try being on the way to a murder case like I was and see if the creeps didn't form tense little patterns through your nerve endings. But I had my buds, Ava Worthington and Jillian Rory—fellow investigators—to get this case rocking in the right direction.

I glanced out the mucky windows of my souped-up, camo-painted truck, Beast, to the endless line of trees on both sides of the highway and gunned my engine a little. Beast rumbled like an enraged elephant and sent a thrill through me. Some days, I swear my truck knew me better than my friends. It fed the wild part of me.

Decisions, decisions. I thrummed the steering wheel to the beat of my favorite Christian band and flicked a glance to the dried-up air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror. Just like my life...faded and useless. Not like the vibrant command and order the military had given me. My lifeline. One I'd opted out

of two years ago because being away from my family and best friends was getting to me. I should've thought a little bit harder before breaking rank. Civilian life and I weren't syncing... But why? God had this, right? Then why did I wake up every morning drenched in an abyss of emptiness? Utterly alone.

I glanced down at the gauges on the dashboard. *Ninety-six degrees and climbing at ten o'clock in the morning.* Hades in the making. And wouldn't the AC be on the fritz? I tugged on the vent toggle and angled the blades toward me as much as I could get them, leaning in close enough for the lukewarm air to blow my ponytail awry. At least it was cool enough that I didn't need to open the windows.

I followed Jillian's SUV and moved into the right turn lane behind her. "No, Jillian. Not here. We've already taken this road twice."

We were lost, and she refused to let me take charge. Why didn't she trust my directional skills? I had navigated my whole battalion out of some pretty desperate situations—with no coordinates. So why didn't Jillian think I could get our investigative team out of this mess too?

That's it. At the next turn, I'd take charge and get them to the small town of Uppland. At this rate, we'd already lost valuable time. If only our client had answered his phone so we could clarify the directions. The GPS had us in some endless loop.

I cranked up the music and began mentally reviewing the case and its grisly images from crime scene photos.

When Jillian slowed on the wide turn-off, I speed-dialed her. "It's my turn to get us off these country roads. Pull over." My voice carried through Jillian's

SUV Bluetooth with a distorted resonance. "Please."

"Fine. But don't think you're going to one-up me."

Right. With all her technology expertise, Jillian wasn't to be undone by a simple miscalculation on a computer device. I opted to keep my mouth shut.

After a U-turn on the dirt road and a stop at the intersection, I tapped the leather steering wheel with my thumbs. Maybe a little farther down the highway. We hadn't tried that way yet.

Turning right into the mirage-like wave of heat on asphalt, I got up to speed. Two miles farther, a road sign hung at a precarious angle as if some teenager had sideswiped it on a late-night cruise. Bingo. Adelphy Way, where we were supposed to turn. Beast crunched on the loose gravel. I rolled down my window and stuck out my hand, pumping it in the air, and stared Jillian down with a smirk in the rearview mirror. "Yep. I knew it. I was right."

Rumbling around me turned into the rush of a gale force wind. My pulse throttled into overdrive as I turned in slow motion. The sound...where was it coming from? It was too close. I grasped the wheel at the shattering blare of a train's horn surrounding me.

Its impact against my bumper rocked me from side to side. My eyes squeezed shut of their own volition.

The shearing of breaks against metal screamed in my ears. Beast bounced away from a freight train as something on my truck grabbed hold of a rail car and then cut loose from the impact. My bumper cartwheeled through the air. So unreal. Was I dreaming?

Huge graffiti on another freight car warned that I was on Piggyback's territory—whatever that was—as

Beast jerked against the bubble-type lettering. Oil and burning hydraulic-infused air choked me.

My seatbelt seared into my shoulder and propelled me into real time.

The last car rocked close to me as the train grated to a stop down the tracks. Some guy in heavy-duty jeans and a bright orange safety vest flew down the locomotive's laddered exit and ran straight for me.

Ava was at my door, the beating sun creating a halo of wavy hair around her delicate face.

Pain? Anywhere? I put a hand to my head and then my legs. My shoulder ached a little.

Why was I so foggy? Nothing fit together. Had a train really just hit Beast? I should get out and check the damage, but my hand didn't seem to want to move off my leg to the door handle.

Now Jillian was beside Ava. Were there tears in her eyes?

The man who'd flown down the ladder yanked open my door. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

I blinked and nodded. "Yeah, I think."

My door squeaked on its hinges and opened partway.

"Don't move. You might be hurt worse than you think." He reached in and checked my neck with his huge, black-cuticled fingers. "Sorry about the grease. It goes with the job." His eyes were such an amazing shade—light brown mixed with golden sun rays. It was hard not to stare.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a warm smile, his moist lips all too close to mine as he leaned into the vehicle a little farther and ran his fingers over my head. "Unfortunately, this isn't my first vehicle, slash, train incident."

With all the strength I could muster, I pulled away but not before I noted his almost-black hair falling into his brilliant eyes and square jawline accented with a smatter of stubble.

He circled the vehicle, took out his cell phone, and talked rapid-fire speed to a 911 dispatcher. How'd he know all the medical lingo to which I'd grown accustomed while investigating cases?

He returned to my door and stated to the person on the other end that there were no clear signs of hemorrhage. A few more crew members surrounded Beast while another one of them stayed to check along the wheels and under the train where the initial impact marred it.

Ava pressed closer. "He said don't move."

Had I? "Sorry."

"How did you not see the tracks? What's got into you? I mean—you could've been killed," Ava yelled at me.

"I don't know." Wow. Ava never got really upset about anything. I wanted to chuckle at the way her hands flew around as she chastised me.

Jillian swept her red, bobbed hair behind an ear. "I can't believe this. You must have brain damage..." With her head tilted to one side, she smirked. "But that would've happened before the accident." Jillian drew in a breath. "Sorry. Inappropriate time to joke."

My own personal medic returned. "I'm Christopher. I work as a volunteer at the fire hall."

But he'd climbed out of the locomotive only a minute ago. He must've noted my confusion. "I'm a switch conductor, mainly. I do firefighter work on the side."

A train conductor and a fireman. Wow. The fog

continued in my head even when I tried to shake it away.

"The man never sleeps." One of the men who'd been looking over my truck stepped into the conversation. "If he's not in the rail yard, he's putting out a fire or rescuing someone."

Christopher quirked an eyebrow and his gaze dropped to my wrist, where he checked my pulse. "Well, someone has to clean up after your crazed parties."

"Yep. Burned the siding off the back of my barn." He thumbed his hand in Christopher's direction. "Good thing he was there to stop an inferno from ensuing."

To me, Christopher said, "You're in shock."

"Is that why my brain is foggy?"

"Yes. Sit tight. The squad should be here soon."

Jillian crossed her arms. "So, no brain damage?"

"Nothing evident right now." He kept his focus on me. "And you could have whiplash. Accident victims don't always realize it for up to a day after they've been injured."

I recoiled at Christopher's intense investigation of my body. A year and a half of inactivity after PT every morning had added a nasty thirty pounds I hadn't had any desire to fight off...until now. I averted my eyes and shook myself. I was being ridiculous. "I think I'm OK." Except for the stupid desire to stare into his eyes forever. "My shoulder is the only body part that hurts. Can I get out?"

His gaze moved from me to the truck and then to the train. "I wouldn't advise it. Why don't you at least rest? Shock can be serious."

With careful movements, I stepped down to the

sideboard and brushed past him. No way was anyone going to consider me a weak-kneed girl. My chin went up. "I hear you, but I can handle a little brain fog. And we have a murder case to work, so..."

He didn't stop me from moving. "The Newen murder case?"

"Yes." I hated how sharp my reply came out, but I never thought before I spoke. I stopped, sharper focus taking hold. It was a small town, which meant possible leaks about the case, unprocessed evidence because of lack of funding, and a limited workforce dedicated to investigating it. All locals needed to be avoided, starting here.

"I'm the one who hired you."

How awkward. I began to stammer and shifted to my other foot. My competence was out the window. And there was no avoiding his stare, which had darkened from golden sun to summer storm. "Oh. Christopher Newen?"

Jillian moved away from the side of her SUV and joined us. "Mr. Newen. Sorry we didn't get a more formal introduction. I'm Jillian Rory. This is not the way we intended to meet you. And I can assure you we are not in the habit of being so..." She glared at me. "Unprofessional."

I scratched my temple and averted my eyes. "Sorry..."

He scanned me again with those brilliant brown eyes. "Accidents happen. I'm just happy no one was seriously injured."

"I—I promise I don't make a habit of being run over by trains." Pulling myself together, I stood a little straighter. "Well, let me tell you a little about us. I'm Shauna Pratley. Jillian Rory, here, is our tech gal. And

Ava Worthington"—I pointed across the street—"is the head of Worthington Investigations."

Jillian elbowed me. "Shauna, here, is the go-to investigator on this case. Our muscle, as I like to think of her." She settled into an easy stance. "I like to call her our bulldog."

Since when did Jillian get so chatty? What happened to her quiet, observational nature? I eyed her again. There was no interest in her own stance—just wide eyes. Wait a minute...was she trying to set me up with Christopher? No way. Not a client. A nervous laugh echoed past my lips. It was fun when we double-teamed Ava last fall and hooked her up with her cowboy fiancé, Cory—but this was me. I did not need a man.

With a curt nod, Christopher ceased his staring and took two steps backward. Had he seen through Jillian as well? "I better go help my men check the freight."

Jillian threw her hand up to stop him. "Are we still on for our two o'clock meeting?"

He shook his head and put a hand on his hip. "Well, this will change things. I'll have some reports and extra checks to do first. How about we try for four?"

"Yes, sir."

As he began to leave, he gave my good shoulder a little squeeze. Hmm, my spine did a happy dance even though I didn't want it to. I tried to not follow his movements. No one had showed that kind of thoughtfulness to me in forever. When was the last time even my friends gave me a hug? Yeah, I had a great tough act going, but still...I needed physical contact sometimes, too.

Then reality hit. What had gotten into me? This was a job. Short and simple. But there was no doubt he was one of the most attractive men I'd ever laid eyes on—greasy hands and all. Regardless, I'd better get my head in the game and off the player.

My sudden hunk radar didn't get past Jillian's sharp senses, but at least she kept her mouth shut about it after he left.

Across the road, Ava talked on her cell phone, her hand motioning in the air in all directions. Just fantastic. Once again, she must be telling Cory how incompetent I was. My shoulders dropped. Proof. This was evidence I still wasn't handling life in the civilian world.

Irresponsible. That's how I'd be labeled by all my brothers when they got wind of this fiasco. And somehow, they always found out about my foibles. As if one brother wasn't enough to make a gal crazy, I had four of them. To say they were relentless, even mean at times, was an understatement. And all under the guise of rough housing and teasing: an acceptable form of supposed caring, as seen by Dad.

My fists clenched at my side, sending shooting pain through my shoulder. I needed to take it easy for now. Well, better check the truck. A slow walk around it allayed some of my fears. The sheer fact that I'd been going slow must've minimized the whole accident. Not like in the movies where the car blew up into tiny pieces of metal. The train had pushed Beast off the tracks instead of crushing it. It looked like a missing bumper was the biggest thing. And thank God for that.

The other guy checked over the doorframe. "Looks like most of your damage is to the right front corner, but I have a feeling the insurance company will total

this baby. I bet the speed and impact bent the frame. That's why your door was so hard to open."

Not my truck. And there was no gap insurance to cover the distance between what I owed and what it was worth. Why hadn't I listened to Jillian? I squeezed the bridge of my nose.

Ava stopped ranting and listened for a couple minutes, hit the *end call* button on her phone, and then strolled over the rocky road.

Jillian followed behind once Ava got close.

"Look, we're being hard on you," Ava said. Cory must've talked her down. "I apologize for being so upset. This could happen to...almost...anyone."

That brought me a chuckle. "I've been unfocused the past few months, but I'll work harder, girls. No more victory dances. At least not while I'm driving."

Jillian punched my left arm. "Yeah right."

I tried to focus on the reason we were there and not the hot train conductor whose loose jeans and oversized hazard vest didn't hide his nice physique. The case. It wasn't fair to hold them up when we should be questioning the locals or gathering information at the courthouse. "Why don't you two head to town and start work. I'll get a ride with the tow truck guy and call you when I finish with all this."

Ava didn't hide the concern in her eyes with the smile on her face. "As much as we'd like to abandon you, we're witnesses. They won't let us go yet."

"Ha-ha."

As if on command, sirens started as a whisper and grew in intensity.

I rolled my shoulders and moved my head back and forth. When I opened my eyes, a fire truck and ambulance, followed by a police car, had pulled next to

Beast.

They headed straight for us and began asking questions. How was I going to explain that my over-exuberant celebration about Jillian's directional skills caused the whole terrible event?

2

Shauna

I wanted to boohoo all the way to town, but I held it in like the soldier I was. Beast bounced and crunched behind the tow truck as we headed down the mountain. Something told me the way I hit the train had totaled Beast. What could be worse than a run-in with a train when you were hours from home?

"Is there a specific place in town I can drive you? I don't mind." The tow truck driver gave me a curt nod and ran his hand through his dirty blond hair. Even though he was an average build, his potbelly extended past his tan coat edges. I'd guess he was in his mid-forties by the lines forming at the corner of his eyes.

I bounced around in the seat as the truck bumbled over the road. The suspension system created a roller-coaster-ride affect with each dip and bump. "I can get my partners to pick me up from the garage. Are you sure?"

His straight-toothed grin held a true kindness. "Not at all. Folks have to look out for each other. I don't mind one bit."

"Hmm. How about the courthouse, then?"

"Will do." He concentrated on the road. "Sooo...you hit a train, huh?"

My fingers tapped the door handle. "Yep." It came out harsher than I intended. "Carelessness."

His eyebrow quirked. Great. Here came all the jokes. "Well, bless your heart." Southern for "what an

idiot." But he didn't say that. "It'll all be OK. Luke will fix you up at Pete's Garage. And I'll cut you a deal. I can only imagine how hard it is to be far from home and have an accident."

How nice. And he didn't even know me. "Thanks, but I couldn't. You have to make a living."

"I got this. Don't you worry."

As the road curved to the left, the mountainside peaked to the right. I sucked in a breath. "Whoa, baby. Check the view."

I scanned the road. Gray stone walls lined the edge of the highway along the national park we traveled through to get to Uppland. Black-charred trees and ground marked the neighboring mountain like a reaper running his deadly scythe across a thousand acres of life and cutting it to nothing. A forest fire that took out fifteen hundred acres a few months back had provided cover for a murder. And it was what had brought Worthington Investigations to the little town of Uppland.

The zone. Location of body discovery was somewhere on one of the sad edges of lost forestry.

"Want me to pull over so you can get a look-see?"

"Sure."

When he stopped the wrecker truck, I scaled down the side of it and moved to the low wall. I didn't expect him to climb out and follow me.

He pointed out the charred mess. "That was some scary stuff, right there. My house isn't too far from the burn. The wife wanted to leave when they started evacuating the area, but I said no. You have to protect what's yours, you know." He crossed his arms. "And the body?" He whistled between his two front teeth and shook his head. "Don't know 'bout that in my