

SECONDS TO LIVE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

Homeland Heroes Series – December/2019

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With only seconds to live there are no limits to what a man can do...

When cybercriminals hack into the US Marshals' Witness Protection database and auction off witnesses' personal details to the highest bidders, the RED Team led by FBI Agent Sean Nichols begins a high-stakes chase to find the hacker. But before he can even get started, the first witness is targeted and barely escapes with her life. Sean believes Phantom, an obsessed hacker who previously outwitted the top minds in the field, is behind the attack, and Sean needs this witness's help, as she's the person who has come closest to discovering Phantom's identity.

And now he's her last chance.

Trouble is, she's a witness under the care of US Marshal Taylor Mills, and Sean is reluctant to work with the captivating marshal who knows his deepest secrets. But Phantom claims he knows where the witness is hiding and will kill her, so to stop the hacker, Sean and Taylor must work through their personal pain and learn to trust each other. . . . The seconds are ticking down before someone dies.

Chapter One

One mistake. That was all it took to put Dustee's life on the line—death right on her heels.

She glanced over her shoulder into the murky night, with shadows shrouding the tall city buildings. She searched the soupy fog. Looking—seeking the man tailing her. A thick wall of fog blocked her view, but he was there. She could feel him. Feel the evil. The anger. The desire for revenge. Following her, his footsteps silent and deadly.

Phantom, he called himself, had been hot on her heels since she'd gotten off the bus, reaching out to grab her. She'd bolted into a group of fellow riders strolling down the hill. He'd hung back, his hoodie up, hiding his face. He lurked like a whisper of her imagination. But she hadn't imagined him. He was real.

Terrifyingly real.

Her stomach knotted tighter, twisting into a stiff ball of agony. It *should* be knotted. She deserved it. She'd done this to herself.

What made her think she could break the witness-protection rules? Be the exception and get away with it? She was forbidden from using any electronic device to access the internet. But it had been too long. She couldn't help herself. The library computers called to her. Now Phantom had found her, and she'd put both her life and her twin sister's life at risk.

Stupid craving for an online connection. She shouldn't have given in. Definitely not. She had to get away from him. But how?

She focused ahead on the winding road leading into the city of Portland. She picked up her pace. Hurrying. The clip of her spiky heels on the concrete sounded like machine-gun fire.

Run. Faster. You're so good at it.

Running from everything. From her past and nearly being incarcerated by the FBI. They offered a deal instead. All she had to do was help them take down Phantom. She'd jumped at the chance to help bring in the notorious hacker, but he outed her, and she had to go into the Witness Protection Program to stay alive.

Now he wanted to kill her, brutally, like the last person who'd tried to infiltrate his organization.

She didn't want to die.

Oh, please. No.

She picked up speed.

Click. Click. Click. The staccato bursts of her pointy heels rang through the air, a beacon for the man hot on her trail. She paused to kick them off. The pumps she'd been so excited to buy only a week ago tumbled down the road in front of her. Shoe over shoe, the rainbow-dyed leather disappeared into the curtain of fog kissing the asphalt.

She slowed to take another quick look over her shoulder. Other riders had turned off, and he'd silently moved closer, his hand in his pocket like he had a knife. One to slice her open, as he'd done with the last person who betrayed him.

Her heart raced, threatening to explode and paralyze her.

She swallowed hard and took off running. The sidewalk was cool against her feet, the roughness biting into her tender skin, but she didn't stop. Not even when sharp rocks cut into her flesh. Or when she heard his footfalls echoing into the night and pounding closer.

Closer.

Disappearing was her only hope.

She ran. Harder. Her breathing labored. An alley lay a few feet ahead, beckoning her. She careened around the corner, catching her fingers on the rough brick of an old seafood shop to keep from plummeting down the incline.

She picked up her pace, searching for a hiding spot—somewhere he wouldn't think to find her. Her chest burned, and she labored to gain even a sip of oxygen. She couldn't keep this pace up for long, but if she didn't, he would catch her.

He'd tower over her. His ghastly eyes glazed with the anger of betrayal. Filled with the darkness of revenge. A weapon. Pointed at her. Warning that she was about to die. That he was going to feel the relief of revenge.

Help. Oh, help.

Who would help her? She'd made a huge mistake. She was on her own.

She searched both sides of the narrow alley. A dumpster. Trash cans. Cardboard boxes. Her gaze settled on a big grate in the back wall of the fish market, the sour smell of rancid seafood almost suffocating her.

She ran to the spot. Assessed the grate.

The vent was large enough for her body. She released the catches on all four corners and tugged hard. The grill suddenly popped out. She fumbled with the cool metal. Catching the grate before it hit the ground, she set it down silently to slide her fingers into the slatted openings.

Balancing the grate, she tucked up her legs and wiggled into the yawning duct. She clasped the steel tightly and jerked it back into place. Holding it with one hand, she dug out her phone and scrolled to the number for Taylor Mills, the Deputy U.S. Marshal assigned to her protection.

The call connected. Rang. Once. Twice.

C'mon. C'mon. Answer, Taylor. Please! You always do.

Footsteps pounded down the alley, coming closer.

No. Not yet.

One more ring.

Phantom was almost to her hiding spot. She had to end the call before the screen's light gave her away.

She punched end and silenced her phone. Taylor would call back. Dustee was sure of it—as sure as she was that she had to escape Phantom. Taylor was like that. The best person Dustee had ever known. Selfless and caring.

Dustee's fingers on the grate cramped, but she clung tightly.

Phantom's footsteps halted nearby. Eerie quiet settled over them.

She caught a glimpse of him through a sliced opening. His face was shadowed as he stood tall. Strong. Searching the area. Looking for her. For a hint to her location. For anything, even the barest of clues.

Anger and hatred emanated from his body. Finding her was personal to him—so personal—this could be the end for her.

She didn't want to die.

Please, no.

Her heart raced. Faster. Faster. Pounding against her chest like the heavy beat of a conga drum.

A sob crept up her dry throat. Pressing hard. Begging for release.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out. From letting him discover her location. Tears welled up. She swallowed hard.

Waited. Waited.

The silent night pressed in on her.

He turned. Faced the wall. The grate.

Please. Oh, please don't let him see my fingers. Please.

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