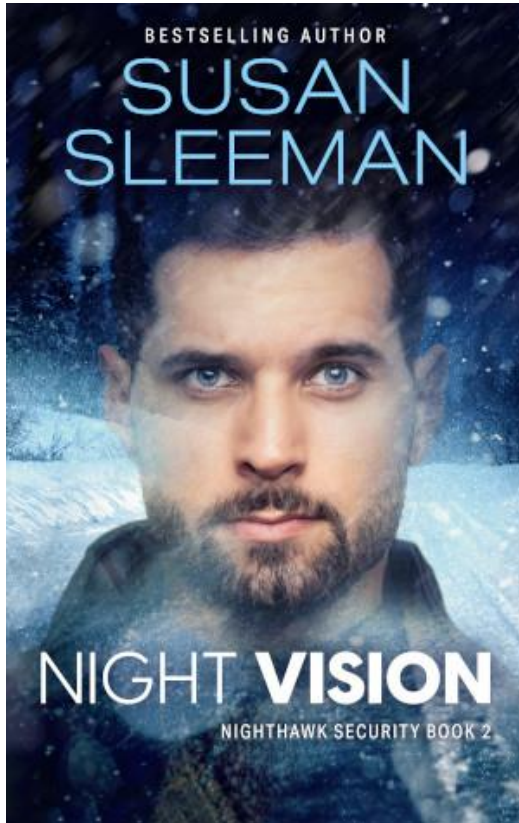


NIGHT VISION SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and E-Book

Nighthawk Security Series – JAN/2021

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A woman on the run with no one to trust...

When a Christmas vacation at a snowy Mt. Hood cabin turns into a home invasion, Jenna Paine will do anything to protect her four-year-old daughter. Even if it means putting Jenna's own life on the line. Which she must do when the intruder threatens to kill her. She knows the invader will stop at nothing to take her out, and she can't let him get close or he might harm her daughter too.

She wants to disappear, but she can't survive on her own.

In fact, Jenna would be dead now if Brendan Byrd of Nighthawk Security hadn't come to her rescue during the invasion. Former Army Delta Force and county

deputy, Brendan doesn't think twice about offering his agency's protection services for Jenna and her precious daughter. What he does think twice about is opening his heart to Jenna only to have it broken again. But as the threats escalate, he must hone his vision where she's concerned, figure out this crafty attacker's identity, and in the process, find a way to keep her alive.

Chapter One

Jenna Paine would do anything to protect her daughter. Anything. But she didn't think she'd need to prove it tonight.

Not this way. Not with strong fingers pinching the tender skin of her arm in near blizzard conditions outside her rental cabin. Twisting that arm behind her back. Forcing her toward the

cabin in knee-high powdery snow.

She reached over her shoulder with her free hand and raked her nails over her attacker's face. Scraping. Gouging. The sumo wrestler of a man squeezed harder. Pain razored into her body and a moan erupted from deep inside her soul.

"Please don't," she begged for the first time since this unknown man surprised her. "I'll give you whatever you want."

"Shut up!" He shoved her up the back stairs of the mountain retreat, her feet dragging in the drifts of snow.

How could this be happening? She'd just stepped outside to get wood for the fireplace. It had seemed safe. Everything about this cabin had seemed safe. Now this?

She kicked hard and caught his shin. He spun her around and punched her in the face. Her head whipped back. She gasped the cold air. Breathing hard. Willing the shock and pain from her mind.

If only she could make a break for it. Try to run. To escape. But she'd never leave Karlie alone with this man. Her four-year-old was sound asleep in the master bedroom.

Please! Please, protect my baby girl from this lunatic. She can't handle this too. Not after losing her dad.

Just fifteen minutes before, Jenna had been so excited about the *Christmas in the Mountains* giveaway she'd won on a local radio station. Two full weeks in the cabin and Christmas just under a week away. Should've been fun. Now, she'd give anything to be back in her dingy one-bedroom apartment.

Her attacker shoved her over the threshold. She tumbled to the floor, her knees and shoulder taking the brunt of the fall. More pain. Agonizing. Sharp. She wanted to curl up. To

protect herself from more pain. But she wouldn't give up. Not when Karlie needed her.

She shoved her boot in front of the door to keep it open. She doubted anyone was out in the snowstorm, but if they were, maybe they'd see the light spilling out of the doorway and investigate.

The man jerked her to her feet, wrenched the door closed, and thrust her into the first bedroom, his hand clamped on her arm. She eased away to look at his face. His dark eyes narrowed, his long chin jutted out. He spun, his gaze running over every inch of the room like a radar. He pulled her deeper inside the room and jerked open the nightstand and dresser drawers, his fierce grip bruising her arm. He checked the closet and uttered a long string of curses.

"Not here." He dragged her like a rag doll along with him into the hallway.

"What do you want?" she asked, desperation creeping through her words. "Name it. I'll give it to you."

He muttered something under his breath, but she couldn't make it out. He hauled her through three more bedrooms, searching and pawing through everything before marching toward the master. Toward Karlie.

Jenna's heart raced, and she dragged her feet.

He pulled harder, the heels of her boots scraping against the wood, the high-pitched sound grating on her nerves. He grabbed the knob. Paused. Twisted. He issued a grunt of satisfaction.

No. Please. Not Karlie.

He slammed his meaty hand onto the door and sent it flying inward. The wood banged against the wall.

Jenna's breath caught in her throat. She shot a look at the bed.

Empty.

Karlie, where are you?

The attacker gave her no time to think but dragged her past the closet and toward the master bath. A hint of light seeped under the closet door.

Karlie. It had to be her.

Lately, Karlie had taken to dragging her bedding and a flashlight into the closet at home. She snuggled under her blankets to look at her favorite books when she should be sleeping, eventually dozing off. Even after a year, she was still having a hard time over her father's sudden death from a heart attack. Camping reminded her of her younger days when she'd gotten along with Toby. Before he constantly nagged Karlie to get over her juvenile idiopathic arthritis, as if she had control over the autoimmune disease.

Her assailant's fingers tightened on Jenna's bruised arm. She winced but didn't cry out and give him the satisfaction of knowing he was hurting her. He shoved her toward the closet. She swung her body hard, forcing him to turn from the closet doors.

"Please," she said loudly, hoping Karlie heard. "What are you looking for? If it's a person, I'm alone here."

He grabbed the knob and whipped open the door. Jenna's breath stilled, and she glanced inside. Karlie had left the light on, but she'd huddled under a mound of blankets.

The creep ripped the blankets free.

Curled in a tight ball, Karlie's eyes were closed.

The creep grunted his frustration, closed the door, and quickly moved to the dresser drawers. Pawing through each one of them. He let out a long breath and marched Jenna down the hall and into the family room. He jerked out a wooden dining chair and shoved her into it.

She massaged her arm and watched him. He whipped out a long knife and eased closer, his eyes tight. He pressed the tip of the red blade into her throat.

The steel bit into her skin, the sharp sting excruciating. Blood dripped down her neck. She angled back, trying to get away.

He bent lower, his face inches from hers, staring at her with mean, ugly eyes. Spittle clung to the corners of his full mouth twisted in a nasty smirk.

Was this it? Was he going to kill her now?

Sweat beaded on her forehead. She tried to draw back.

“You move even a fraction of an inch, and I’ll cut you.” He released her as if she wasn’t worth the trouble and started pacing across the cabin. He passed her purse on the table, upended it, and dug through the contents.

He was distracted, but for how long? Could she escape?

He swept her things to the floor in an angry swipe then began pacing again, his heavy boots thumping on the wood floor. He was dressed all in camo. Like a hunter. And she was the prey. His body was massive, as if he lifted weights all day long or was a bodybuilder of some sort. Or a monster, like Bruce Banner when his heart rate skyrocketed and he turned into the Incredible Hulk. Yeah, she’d think of him as the Hulk.

Step. Step. Step. He turned. Paced again. His quick movements stirred up the fresh pine scent from the tree she and Karlie had decorated just hours before. The attacker moved past the Christmas lights she’d strung around a door. Past a fire dying in the big stone firebox. She could barely believe the cozy space filled with plump furniture had gone from cheery and welcoming to terror and danger.

He slowed. The footsteps halting and uneven now.

Was he rethinking his plans? Could he be considering taking off and not hurting her?

Doubtful. She'd seen him. Could describe him to the police. He had to know that.

Oh, why hadn't she waited to go for wood in the morning?

She'd wanted to get a head start for tomorrow. For the big day planned with Karlie.

Hitting the bunny slope early. Sharing large cups of hot cocoa at the lodge. Forgetting about the turn their lives had taken when Toby died and left them in debt and homeless.

Now this? Could she take any more?

Please, please, please. Protect us. Protect my baby. Help me to protect her.

Jenna could call 911 but her phone was across the room. Probably didn't matter. The deputies would likely be hard-pressed to respond in this weather. At least not quickly enough to save her and Karlie. Didn't matter anyway. She couldn't get to her phone.

The front door was her only escape as the creep stood between her and the back door.

Could she race across the room to that exit with her attacker nearby?

Possibly, but then what about Karlie? Jenna could circle around the back and get her daughter. But what might he do to Karlie before she reached her baby girl? No, Jenna couldn't risk it.

He muttered a curse then paused by the Christmas tree. Maybe he was looking for presents to steal. If so, he'd come to the wrong cabin. She had no money for presents other than trinkets for Karlie's stocking.

He jerked out his phone and thumbed the keys.

A text? He was sending a text or an email in the middle of all of this? Or, even crazier, looking something up on the internet? And what about Karlie? What was he going to do with her?

His phone rang, and he answered it. “Yo.”

An angry male voice was coming from the other end of his call, but she couldn’t make out the words.

“I had to secure the place first,” the Hulk said. “Did a quick search but haven’t had a chance to do a thorough one.”

A spew of angry words filtered from the phone.

He scratched his chin covered in stubble. “What do you want me to do?”

Another long string of words from the man on the other end of the call.

“I can do that.” He shoved his phone in one jacket pocket then pulled a thick roll of duct tape from the other one.

His eyes locked on hers in a bone-chilling glare. He moved toward her, ripping a long strip from the roll, the tape sucking against itself and echoing through the stillness. “Hands behind your back.”

“Please, don’t do this,” she begged again. “I have money in my purse. It’s not much. Fifty dollars. You can have it. And I have a credit card too. Just take it and go.” She didn’t tell him that Toby had maxed out this card along with every other line of credit they had.

“I don’t want your stinkin’ money.” He jerked her arms behind her back and secured the sticky tape around one of her wrists. It clung to every pore of her skin, and she tried to jerk her hand away, but he yanked her arm back.

“If this isn’t about money,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him. “Then what do you want? Why are you here?”

“Wasn’t supposed to be...never mind.” He shook his head, his expression angry as he stepped around her.

“Wasn’t supposed to be what...me?” she asked, as she couldn’t think of any reason someone would want to hurt her.

“Shut up. I need quiet so I can think,” he said in response, neither a confirmation or denial. So what, then? His comment about searching made it obvious that he was looking for something, but maybe he was also looking for someone. But who?

Shawn. Yes, Shawn. Made perfect sense that this creep would be after her brother. He was a drug addict and had recently become involved in selling drugs. She hadn’t seen him since Toby’s funeral, but now, with her husband gone, she and Karlie were alone. So alone. She’d reached out to Shawn. Invited him to the cabin for Christmas to try to make amends.

And this is what it got her in return. Par for the course. A user for years, Shawn had worn out his welcome. If she hadn’t been so desperate for family of any kind, she wouldn’t have called him. But she was.

She eyed the attacker. “You’re looking for Shawn, aren’t you? What did he do?”

He dropped her wrist and clamped big, beefy hands over his ears, which were sticking out below a rolled up stocking cap. “Stop your yammering. I have to think.”

“Maybe I can help you.”

His eyes narrowed into tiny slits. “You wanna help me figure out how to get rid of you?”

She gasped. Jerked back. “Why? Why do you want to get rid of me? If this is about Shawn, I don’t know anything about his business. And you...I don’t even know you. I didn’t do anything to you. Please.”

“You seen me, didn’t you? You’ll go to the cops and then...” He shook his head and grabbed the other wrist.

This was it. She would die if she didn’t do something. She had to get help. But how? She

couldn't protect Karlie if she was dead. She tried to wrench free.

He cuffed her across the face, his meaty hand snapping her head back, her body following. Her shoulder slammed into a small table. It wobbled then tumbled to the floor, taking his attention.

Perfect. She could run. Now.

She jumped to her feet. Charged for the door. Flung it open. The icy cold air felt good. Cleared her mind. Her thoughts.

No. This was wrong. She'd let her fear of dying get to her. She couldn't abandon Karlie. She paused on the threshold.

What was she thinking? She wasn't. At least not more than the desperation of a woman who was about to die. She wouldn't run out on Karlie. Ever.

That left only one option.

She threw back her head and screamed from the bottom of her toes.

*

Brendan came to a stop and jerked the stocking cap from his head to listen.

He'd heard a scream. He was sure of it. But up here? In a family resort at Mount Hood? Maybe something he'd hear on his job as a partner with Nighthawk Security, but not up here. Right?

He cocked his head again. Another sound. Just down the road. A woman. Definitely a woman. This one less intense, and it was suddenly cut off as if a hand had covered her mouth and silenced her.

Probably someone just playing in the snow and whooping it up before the brunt of the storm settled on them and howling winds made it too treacherous to be out.

But could he afford to believe in *probably*? He never had. He'd stepped up whenever there was a question. And especially if a woman's life was on the line.

He took off running, adrenaline fueling his legs. His heavy boots whispered through the foot of powdery snow that had fallen today. The moon shone bright, illuminating his way up the curving mountain road. He rounded a bend just in time to see a cabin door slam closed. The sound reverberated through the tall pines and echoed across the wide clearing.

He raced for the long walkway to a large log cabin lit from inside. The pristine snow glistened in the moonlight. Not a single footprint had marred the perfection, but the porch held a small set of prints facing out.

Had a woman opened the door and screamed?

He shook his head. He'd come up here to get away from the tense life of protecting people and running investigations. Away from working crazy hours. Not having a day off for weeks. He needed a break. So why, after two days in seclusion, was he jonesing for some action?

Most likely the reason he was inventing this scream.

Still, he couldn't just walk away. He had to check it out.

He took the walkway, his hand automatically drifting to his hip, where he carried his sidearm at work. But, of course, he was on vacation and wasn't openly carrying. He did have his favorite pistol, a compact .380 Colt, in his pocket. That would have to do.

He knocked on the door. As he waited, he glanced up into the night sky. Snow pelted down from above and whipped sideways in the wind. The weather forecaster had predicted another ten inches or more tonight. Perfect powder for a day on the slopes tomorrow. If he could get to the slopes.

When no one answered, he knocked again and waited. Still no answer.

His concern mounted. If he were still a deputy, he would have enough information to believe that someone was in harm, and exigent circumstances would've allowed him to bust through the door to check on the occupant's welfare. But he wasn't a deputy anymore. Just a private investigator on vacation. If he barged into the place, he could be arrested for breaking-and-entering.

He and his brothers were still getting the Nighthawk Security agency off the ground, and that was the last thing the agency needed.

Muffled noises came from inside. Sounded like a scuffle.

Okay, so someone was home and ignoring him.

He heard what sounded like a heavy object being dragged across the room.

Enough with this speculating. If someone was in trouble, he could be wasting valuable time. He jumped down from the porch and went to the nearest window. He could still be arrested as a Peeping Tom, but hopefully the occupants wouldn't see him.

He planted his gloves on the icy sill and rose up on his toes. A family room that was furnished exactly like his family's rental sprawled out before him. He glanced around the room, his gaze stopping at the far corner. His mouth dropped open, and he hung by his fingers. Staring. Processing the scene.

A muscular man was holding a knife to the throat of a woman duct taped to a chair. He reared back, lifting his arm, the knife paused in mid-air.

No! No!

Brendan banged on the window to draw the man's attention. He stopped, arm raised. Brendan didn't wait for him to move again but plowed through the snow. Up the steps. Tried the doorknob. Locked as expected. He slammed a boot into the door. The solid pine shook but held

fast. Again and again, he kicked until the frame gave way.

Grabbing his gun, he barged inside. He aimed his weapon on the area where he'd spotted the man. He was gone, and the woman was attempting to stand with the chair affixed to her body.

"Brendan Byrd, former sheriff's deputy and Army Delta Force," Brendan said so she didn't think he was a thug too. "I'm staying just down the road on vacation."

"Please, help." Her frantic gaze connected with his. "My daughter's hiding in the master bedroom closet. The attacker ran that way. Hurry. Help her, please."

"Don't move," Brendan commanded as he crossed the room. Not like she could. Not tied to the chair, but he'd seen women do miraculous things when it came to saving their children. For all he knew, she would shuffle her way down the hall to her child.

A child. He had no time to waste here.

The cabin layout was identical to his family rental, and the master was at the end of the hall. He reached the hallway and whipped around the corner, gun at the ready. *Empty.* He started down the unlit space.

Even this far away, he could hear the chair banging against the floor in the family room as the woman tried to free herself. *Desperate.* She was desperate. Brendan got that. Lived it even, and had seen it in his family's eyes when his dad needed a kidney transplant. In his own eyes in the mirror.

Maybe he could erase some of this woman's fear by checking on her daughter. He cautiously moved toward the other bedrooms and two bathrooms, clearing them one at a time. Holding his breath, he burst into the master. The window was wide open, the screen pushed out. The suspect's likely escape route.

Brendan cleared the bathroom then went to the closet. The girl was tucked under a blanket, fast asleep, oblivious to the drama. Her soft blond curls lay against her cheek, and she hugged a stuffed plush snowman tightly against her chest.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

He wanted to stay put and look at the precious child, safe and unharmed, when so often as a deputy he'd witnessed the reverse, but her mother still needed him. He closed and locked the window, double-checking to be sure the latches had caught, then raced back to the family room.

The woman had marched the chair almost to the hallway. Her terrified eyes locked on his. "Karlie."

"Is fine." He smiled to ease her mind, while his traveled to catching the perpetrator. "She's sleeping in the closet, and it looks like your attacker took off through the master bedroom window."

"Thank you, God." A rush of air came from her mouth, and her body sagged against the restraining tape.

He dug out the Winchester pocketknife his father had given him on his sixteenth birthday and slashed through the tape at her back. He moved around front, catching sight of the bruise that was forming around her eye and cringing.

He gripped her hands and freed her wrists. "If you'll be okay alone, I want to trail the attacker. He's probably long gone, but it's worth trying."

"Sure. Go." She waved a hand.

He sliced through her ankle tape. "Do you have a flashlight?"

"I saw one under the kitchen sink."

"Lock yourself in the master with your daughter while I'm gone." He bolted for the

kitchen and found the large light. He didn't want to leave them alone, but he had to try to nail this creep before he hurt someone else.

"Be back as soon as I can," he shouted and took off out the back door. He'd call the sheriff's office or ask her to, but a patrol car would take forever to get through in these horrible conditions if it even did, so that could wait. The suspect couldn't.

The biting wind sandpapered snow into his face, and he bent his head against the force. He moved as fast as he could along a single set of large boot prints quickly filling with huge white flakes, leading him into the woods. He lifted his feet high and clomped into the deep drifts. The wind picked up, howling so fiercely he could hardly see. He couldn't continue for much longer, or he'd risk getting stranded, which could mean sure death.

In a small clearing, he started to turn back, but snowmobile tracks caught his attention.

He dropped to his knees. The tracks were fresh for sure. Had to be their guy.

Not good. No way he'd catch up to a snowmobile.

He needed a forensic team, but no way they would arrive tonight. Deputies would have their hands full. This incident would be a priority under normal circumstances, but not when the deputies were out saving people stuck in the horrific conditions before they froze to death.

By morning, fresh powder would completely obscure the tracks and boot prints, and he needed to do something to preserve the evidence. He lodged the flashlight between his neck and ear, shone it on the tracks, then took pictures with his phone. Hopefully, they'd be clear enough to determine the make and model of the machine.

He followed the same procedure with the boot prints. Before moving again, he ran the light over the area. Something dangled from a low hanging branch. He moved closer. A piece of fabric. Navy blue. The attacker had worn a navy jacket. At least this was something to go on.

He carefully extracted the scrap to keep from damaging the cloth, pocketed it, and stepped down the tracks, hoping to determine the direction the attacker had fled. Reaching the private road that ran in front of the cabins, he paused to catch a breath from the strain of plunging through such deep snow and study the tracks that turned sharply north. The creep was headed for the unplowed main road. Headed for more potential victims.

Brendan couldn't stop the guy. Not without a snowmobile. He dug out his phone. Yes! A signal even in this storm.

He tapped 911. He might not be able to go after the guy himself, but he would do everything within his power to keep this armed and very dangerous man from hurting another defenseless person.

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