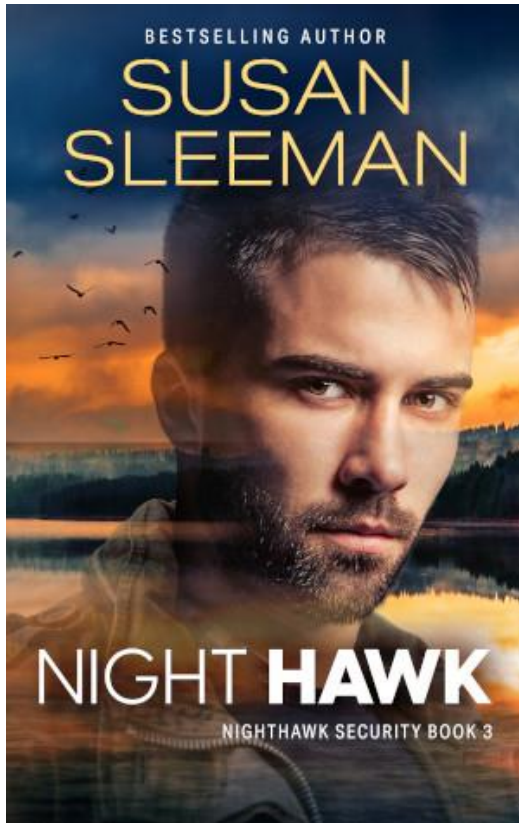


NIGHT HAWK SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and E-Book

Nighthawk Security Series – JAN/2021

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She's determined to find her father's killer...

FBI Agent, Toni Long lost her father a year ago when he was killed in a joint FBI and ICE investigation led by Clay Byrd, a man Toni had found herself infatuated with. Unfortunately, the killer escaped, and if Toni hadn't been distracted by her attraction to Clay, maybe her father wouldn't have died. When she receives an anonymous tip on the killer's identity, she follows the lead and an attempt is made on her life. Clay, having received the same tip, comes to her rescue. Thinking he can help find her father's killer and keep an eye on her safety, he quickly offers Nighthawk Security's help.

But she first has to face down her own dark past.

She fights the idea at first, but she will stop at nothing to find her father's killer, even if it means partnering with a guy she has feelings for. But as the investigation unfolds, they unearth deep, dark family's secrets, that are more dangerous than anything Toni could imagine, and she suddenly finds her life on the line. Problem is, Clay is right there by her side, offering her comfort and support, and protecting her from menacing danger. She soon has to fight feelings she's developing for him when her focus should be on the investigation and staying alive.

Chapter One

They killed Toni's father. She wouldn't let them kill her too.

She lifted her gun and eased into the musty-smelling abandoned high school in Rugged

Point, Oregon. Sweat beading up on her lip despite the frigid January night, she crept down the inky dark hallway.

One foot in front of the other. Inch by inch. The darkness like a cloak around her. Her fingers itched to flick on her phone's flashlight. She couldn't. Not without alerting anyone in the building to her arrival.

Besides, she was an experienced FBI agent. She could handle a little darkness, right?

She continued forward, her ears tuned for any sound, even as tiny as a mouse scurrying across the floor. A nearby broken window let in the sharp cry of a hawk soaring overhead. Almost as if the bird was warning her to take care.

But it was as clueless as she was as to why the note she'd found lodged under her vehicle's wiper summoned her to this school and told her to arrive at exactly five p.m. The note claimed it had to do with her father's murder a year before, but what did he have to do with an old rural schoolhouse halfway across the country? He'd recently lived in Virginia. This place was on the southern Oregon coast. No connection that she knew of.

A pinpoint of setting sun razored through a hole in the wall and spotlighted the crumbling tile floor beneath her feet. She was probably being exposed to all kinds of environmental hazards in the 1940's building. Asbestos being the number one concern. But she'd risk just about anything to find the person who killed her dad.

At the end of the hallway she turned left, following the instructions she'd received. She paused to assess the new space. The directions told her to go to the basement to a janitor's closet at the bottom of the stairs. There she would find the information she needed to arrest the killer

she'd been seeking since the day her dad died.

She inched down, a step at a time and paused on the first landing located above ground. She glanced out a wide window that was so covered with dirt she could barely make out the miles of abandoned land surrounding the property. Giant cobwebs clung to the corners of the window, and her imagination soared. She pondered the immense size of spiders needed to create those webs.

She shuddered, wanting to call it quits. She wasn't much for the outdoors and the creatures it entailed. Not like the native Oregonians she worked with every day.

A bat launched itself from above. She ducked and cringed as it cried out, winging its way across the space. The creature lit on the top of a doorjamb below. *Yuk.* The spiders were bad enough, but this?

Could she keep descending the stairs with the bat above? She could face down killers, but a bat?

Remember Dad. Gunned down in front of you. Deep breaths. Keep going. You can do this.

She inhaled the air with dust particles dancing in the last of the sunlight. Blew it out. Drew more in. And started down the last flight of stairs. One, two...pause. Listen.

Three, four, five...pause. She swiped sweaty palms against her pant leg and gripped her gun again.

What she wouldn't give for this place to have electricity so she could turn on one of the white schoolhouse globes above.

She took another step. Only one more to go.

A car engine rumbled in the distance growing closer. Likely not a concern. Not with the highway running nearby.

She took the last step, sliding her feet over the tiles and letting out a breath. The pale light shone above the door, where the bat watched her with beady little eyes.

She drew in another long breath. Stepped forward into a hallway. Looked both ways. Shadows clung to the area. She squinted, but murky blackness greeted her. She couldn't see a thing beyond six feet. Nothing for it but to move ahead and open the door. A wide bar lifted perpendicular to the door could drop down and hold it in place. A padlock hung from the end. Overkill for few chemicals and a mop bucket, but maybe the room hadn't always been for the janitor.

Shaking her head, she stepped slowly forward. Grabbed the old knob. Opened the door. Entered.

She would need light to see this supposed lead. She reached for her phone to use the light, noticing she had no cell service in the basement. Hopefully she wouldn't need to call for help.

A telltale rattle sounded from the floor near the back of the room.

Her heart lurched, the high-pitched sound like a baby rattle shaken at supersonic speed paralyzing her. A rattlesnake. No doubt.

Move, for goodness sake! Move! Get your gun. Shoot it.

She couldn't. Not when her worst nightmare was unfolding in front of her.

She tried to lift an arm. Her muscles wouldn't move. Not even in a finger. Or her feet. She opened her mouth and screamed like there was no tomorrow. If she didn't get her feet going, there might not be one.

The door slammed shut behind her, sealing her in the tiny space with the snake slithering even closer, and she prepared her mind for the fangs to puncture her skin.

*

Clay stood in the lobby of the yellowed brick school building. A bloodcurdling scream shattered the eerie silence.

His pulse kicked up.

A woman. Obviously in danger. Not at all what he'd expected to find here, but he'd seen a car in the parking lot. Maybe this mystery woman was the reason he'd been sent the note to show up here at precisely five-fifteen p.m. As usual, he was five minutes early. It sounded like it was a good thing he was.

He drew his gun and moved toward the stairwell. The sun had made its last gasp for the day, leaving the space in heavy shadows. Pale moonlight streamed through a broken window. Not enough light to see much, just old bulletin boards on the walls and an empty trophy case with shattered glass.

An ominous feeling permeated the air, and he swallowed hard.

He might've once been an ICE agent and was now a partner in the Nighthawk Security

agency, but his heart thudded in his chest. People thought law enforcement officers didn't get scared, but the reality was, they just knew how to deal with the fear and still act.

Following the note's instructions, he moved as fast as he dared without putting himself in danger. He wanted to help the woman, but he couldn't if he sustained a serious injury.

He paused at the stairwell to listen. Nothing. Only the beat of a clock ticking down in his head. He started down the stairs where he was sure the scream originated, counting as he moved. Seven stairs to the landing. He stopped and waited. No sounds. Not even a rodent scurrying around.

He continued on to an unfinished dungeon-like basement that smelled like years of mold buildup. He listened. Heard a faint rattle.

Rattlesnake? Seriously? As a Boy Scout, he'd learned that rattlesnakes lived in the area, but he'd never seen one.

He stepped to the closet door, marked Janitor. The note told him to go into this room, but the windowless door was closed, and he couldn't see inside.

A faint sound reached him.

What was that? The whimper of a woman from the other side?

Was the woman in there? She must've screamed before the door closed or he wouldn't have heard her.

He twisted the knob. It turned under his hand, and he opened the door. Made out a silhouette of a person standing just inside the small room. Heard the unmistakable rattle of a

snake.

A snake? What in the world?

He had to know what was going on or he couldn't fix it. Even if this person meant to harm him. He flipped on his flashlight. A woman stood terrified as a brown snake with cream and black stripes slithered their direction in the long narrow room, its tongue sliding in and out.

Clay aimed his gun at the reptile.

The door slammed behind him. The lock bar dropped and slid into place with a solid thunk.

He stifled a curse, his brain racing for a plan of action. No time to check the woman's identity. Clay had a snake eyeing him up, and he couldn't predict the snake's actions.

He ran the light over the room and spotted a long mop handle. It had a metal bar on the end, the mophead missing. *Perfect.*

He propped his flashlight on the shelf to keep the beam on the snake and grabbed the pole. He angled it toward the slithering creature now focused on the mop, its rear section pulling up into an accordion coil.

The head raised. Arched in a death pose and struck the metal. Good. It was no longer going for the woman or him.

Clay moved quickly. Jabbed the metal end under the middle of the long body and lifted. The snake dangled in the air, perfectly balanced, but the reptile wiggled to regain control. He pushed the woman aside, and she wobbled.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ll fix this in a flash.” He stepped toward an empty five-gallon bucket, the lid propped against the side.

Now came the tricky part. He maneuvered around, requiring him to point the snake at the woman.

She screamed again, the sound curling his toes. He hated seeing her pain but had to let the sound roll off him if he was going to keep them alive. He picked up the lid then lowered the snake into the bucket and held it down with the handle. He shoved the lid over the top, jerking out the pole as he moved and making sure the lid latched. He dropped down on top of the bucket, his muscles shaking. The snake continued to hiss below him, but they were safe for now.

They. The woman. Who was she? He looked at her in the pale glow reflected from his flashlight. She was tall and lean, wearing dark blue jeans and a mint colored sweater under a waterproof jacket in a deep burgundy. He let his gaze fall on her face, framed with black hair in a feathery cut, and his mouth dropped open.

“Toni,” he said. “Is that you? What are you doing here?”

She didn’t respond. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open as if she’d frozen in place. Apparently, the snake still terrified her even though it was contained in the bucket. He spotted a rusted but heavy vise sitting on a small workbench, he stood, picked it up, and set it on top the bucket for extra measure.

Toni let out a cry of distress.

“It’s all right.” He walked toward her. “The bucket is latched, and the vise will ensure it stays closed.”

She whimpered.

He'd seen people afraid, but this went beyond normal fear. Had she experienced a rattlesnake in her past? An experience that caused such an overwhelming phobia? If so, nothing could be worse for her than being stuck in the room with the snake.

But maybe he was wrong. Maybe the door wasn't locked. He grabbed the knob. Shook the handle. The old wood held fast. He put his shoulder to it and shoved against it. Tried it a few times. Nothing. Not even a fraction of an inch in movement.

They were stuck for sure. But who'd lowered the bar on the door?

He looked at Toni. "Did you see who locked the door?"

She shook her head.

"Someone dropped the bar lock into place. Probably took off thinking we'd die in here."

Her only response was a sharp intake of air.

"Does anyone know you're here and will come looking for you if you don't come home?"

She gave a single shake of her head. He grabbed the flashlight to do a thorough search.

"No!" Toni shouted, her breathing quickening. "The light. Please. Oh. Please. Keep the light on the bucket. I have to see."

She'd totally lost it. He had to get her out of there, but how? He could call the police, but it would be humiliating to be found locked in a closet. It would be embarrassing if he had to call

in his family too—maybe more so—but at least he wouldn't be the latest gossip in law enforcement circles that could spill over into their agency's reputation when they were getting the business going.

Didn't matter. He had to call someone. Thankfully, he'd brought one of the agency's SAT phones and could access signals most everywhere. His brothers would take hours to get there, but Blackwell Tactical's facility was just a few miles away. The fastest response without all the danger to their agency's reputation.

In addition to clearing the building of any danger, he'd want the room dusted for prints, so he'd start with Samantha. She was a former criminalist with PPB—the Portland Police Bureau. As such, she'd been required to serve five years as a patrol officer and could not only clear the building, but could also get them out of this place, and then process the evidence.

He tapped her icon and turned to face the wall.

“Samantha Griffin,” she answered cheerfully.

“Sam, it's Clay Byrd.” He explained his predicament and the need for forensics.

He had to give her credit. She didn't laugh. At least not aloud. “I'll head out right away. Griff can come with me. Or do you need a tactical response?”

“I doubt the person who locked us in is hanging around,” he said, but was glad to have her husband along to help. “But if you'd feel better with backup, bring someone else.”

“Better to be safe than sorry, right?”

“Right.”

“Riley’s on call, so he’ll be with us.”

“If you don’t mind, could we keep this between us and Riley?”

“Sure thing.”

Getting her agreement was far easier than he’d expected, but his brother would be a different story. Clay wouldn’t call Drake, but Clay was supposed to work out with him later that night.

“Yo, man,” Drake answered. “Where’d you disappear to?”

Clay told him, describing the snake and locked door. Drake started laughing.

“Not funny, bro,” Clay snapped. “This is serious. Toni Long’s here. The note we both got said this is somehow related to her father’s death. She’s in shock.”

“Toni,” Drake said. “Aw, man. After her dad died, I bet you never thought you’d see her again.”

Drake was right, but Clay would never discuss it in front of Toni. “I can do without the commentary.”

“Seems like you might need help. Erik’s here with me. I’ll bring him along too.”

“No need. Sam will get us out.”

“Are you kidding,” Drake said. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Before Clay could respond, Drake ended the call. Fine. They were coming from Portland and if Erik was driving, this school was a good five-hours from their office and condos at the

Veritas Center. If Drake was behind the wheel, it would take more like four. At least by the time they got there, Clay would be out of the room. And it would help to have his brothers give the school a good once-over for leads.

Clay turned to observe Toni. She wasn't in medical shock. Her breathing was normal but shallow, and her skin didn't appear to be clammy or pale. He'd seen people react the same way after a car accident. The shock caused adrenaline to flood the body, but a healthy person's body regulated itself as hers seemed to have done. Still, he would watch for symptoms declaring her situation had become a medical emergency.

"Sam from Blackwell and Drake and Erik are on the way," he said. "You remember my brothers, right?"

She didn't speak.

He feared she might hyperventilate. "Just breathe, Toni. Deep breath in. Then out."

He mimicked the actions, drawing in the musty air, making sure to fully expand his chest, and letting the air slowly out. She followed suit.

Just when she seemed to be gaining control, the snake rattled in the bucket.

She jerked back and flailed out. She grabbed onto an old porcelain mop sink stained a rusty-yellow and climbed into the sink. She crouched down to wrap her arms around her shaking knees.

Man, he hated seeing her like this. Scared to death. When they'd worked together on the Child Exploitation Task Force, he'd gotten to know her quite well. She was as tough as any of the agents on the team. Maybe not physically, but mentally she'd endured everything with valor.

Now this. Looked like whoever locked them in here knew she was terrified of snakes and was taking advantage of her fear.

He tried to make eye contact, but she fixated on the bucket. “You want to talk about what’s going on?”

She gave a quick but fierce shake of her head.

Since she didn’t seem to notice him looking at her, he didn’t bother to look away. He loved seeing her again, but the joy of the moment was tempered by the pain in his heart. Not just from her terror right now, either. He took her father’s death personally. Clay had been in charge of the op where Grayson Long had been gunned down. Clay still had no idea what her dad had been doing there. He’d retired from the DEA many years prior and had zero connection to the op. He shouldn’t even have been in the area, much less knocking on their suspect’s door.

Clay had held Toni that day and played the op over and over in his head. He’d felt like a total fraud. Comforting her when he believed he was responsible. He didn’t know what he could’ve done differently, but no one should die on an op. No one. Especially not an innocent member of the public.

Now, her electric blue eyes were wide and unblinking. He’d never seen her so terrified. He had to do something to help. There was no getting out of the room. Maybe he could block her view. He stepped between her and the snake. “What can I do for you?”

Her hands clamped on his shoulders, and she pushed him out of the way. He didn’t fight her, but even if he had, she was strong enough to move him. When they’d partnered on the task force, they’d often worked out together, and he’d seen her toned arms firsthand.

“I’m worried about your stress level. Can you try to focus on something else while we wait for help to arrive?”

She didn’t respond.

He took her hand. The skin was soft but icy cold. She glanced at their intertwined fingers for a beat of a moment before she locked on the bucket with the snake in it again.

“Come on, Toni. Take some breaths. You can do it. The snake can’t get out.”

“I...I...” She shook her head.

His heart cracked under her fear. “Do you want me to sit on the bucket again?”

“Yes, please.” She sounded like a child terrified of the boogeyman.

He wanted to lift her out of the sink and hold her until her fear evaporated. Instead, he took the vise’s place. If she were in her right mind, she wouldn’t appreciate the hug. She was too independent to need a man. She’d told him that. Three times to be specific. Her mother died when she was a kid, and her dad had brought her up to be tough. She’d even been stoic when the gunman took her dad down right before her eyes.

Clay shuddered at the memory and shoved it into the back of his mind to focus on their current situation. He looked around the room, wishing he’d brought someone with him. All four of his brothers would’ve warned him not to go alone if he’d told them. Even his sister, Sierra, a forensic expert at the Veritas Center, would’ve said something. So would his former deputy dad.

His mom—well, she would just as likely choose to keep him home and out of danger no matter what. But once Drake told them all about the night—and he would for sure—they

wouldn't let it go, and Clay would never live it down. Searching for whatever lead they were supposed to discover. Nothing in the space spoke to the investigation or provided the lead they were promised. He just spotted old janitorial supplies.

Clay took a deep breath to clear his brain, and a hint of smoke slithered through the air.

Smoke?

Smoke from a nearby campfire wouldn't settle into this basement room. And it wasn't camping season. He flashed his light at the door. Toni cried out, but he couldn't deal with her fear now.

Smoke seeped under the wood, curling up and into their small room.

"Fire." He jumped up and put the vise back on the bucket.

Toni remained frozen as if she didn't hear him.

He raced across the room. Got in her face. "There's a fire in the building. We have to get out of here, and we have to do it now!"

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