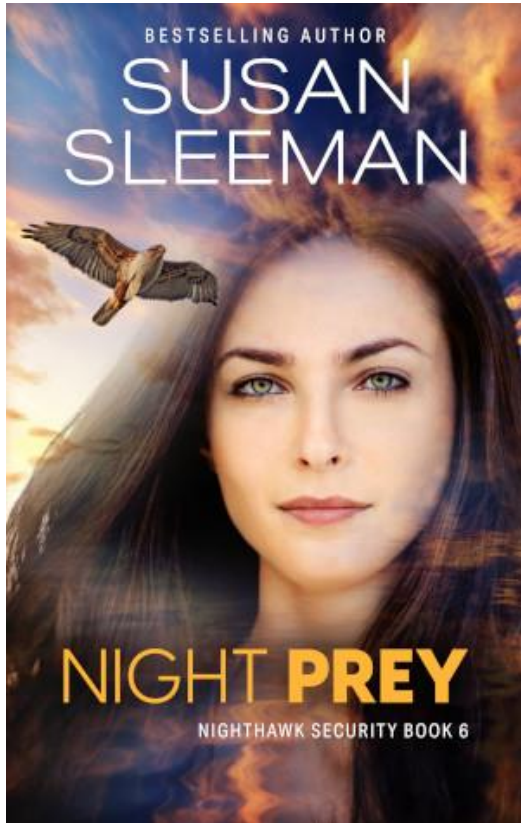


NIGHT PREY SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print, E-Book, and Audio

Nighthawk Security Series – OCTOBER/2021

ISBN-10: 978-1-949009-38-5

Defense attorney, Malone Rice, doesn't want to go to her fifteen year class reunion. Attending means running into her former high school flame, now Portland police detective, Ian Blair. But when the committee decides to honor her for her pro-bono work with homeless teens, she knows it would be churlish not to attend. She will have to go and make the best of it.

But now the law won't save her.

As expected, Ian attends the reunion, but what Malone doesn't expect—could never expect—is that Ian would find her standing over their classmate's dead body. Or that she would still have feelings for the once bad-boy of their high school. Ian's struggling too, between arresting Malone for murder and his age-old attraction

to her. He walks a tightrope, until evidence surfaces that the real killer's still out there, and Malone becomes his prey. Can Ian overcome his feelings to focus and uncover the truth before the killer strikes again and Malone ends up dead?

Chapter One

Just the sight of this man curled Malone's stomach and sent a bead of sweat down her back.

Horrendous memories that she'd battled for seventeen years came rushing back.

Sickening, terrible ones. Suddenly she was there again, smelling his rancid breath, aching under his grip on her wrists. Thank God she'd managed to avoid the worst, but only just.

Acid rose up her throat. She planted her feet to keep from bolting from the ballroom filled with round tables draped in white cloths, each anchoring colorful balloon bouquets reaching for the ceiling.

She forced herself to look at the offender, Gilbert Flagg Jr., otherwise known as Junior. He hadn't grown even a fraction of an inch since she'd last laid eyes on him at high school graduation. Now, fifteen years later at their reunion, if his high boot heels were any indication, he still had an issue with barely clearing five feet in height.

She glanced at his fingers. No wedding ring. He'd been desperate all through high school for a girlfriend, but very few girls were his height or shorter, and he'd been too self-conscious to date a taller woman. Drug and sexually assault one? Sure. That he could do. Namely her, but date one? Nah.

Chad Williams crossed in front of her and headed straight for Junior. One of their meaner classmates, who now played professional football, had his arm slung around a slinky woman, looking up at him with hero worship.

He strolled past Junior, cockiness oozing from Chad's pores as he nudged junior out of the way.

"Hey, shrimp," Chad said, his tone raised for others to hear. "I see you're still a junior version of the old man."

Chad's rumbling laugh filtered through the crowd, causing the others to shift uncomfortably.

Junior gritted his teeth and fisted his hands.

Normally, Malone would feel sorry for a guy in such an uncomfortable situation. She might even call their classmate out for calling him Junior Shrimp. But not with Junior. She was just thankful that Ian Blair had come along that horrible night at the football field, or Junior would've finished what he started.

“Lay off, Williams.” A deep voice took control of the crowd and burned a path through Malone’s heart.

Ian. He was there. Sticking up for the underdog, as usual. Even a creep like Junior.

Malone wanted to turn. To drink in the sight of him, but she couldn’t. Wouldn’t. No way she would risk him seeing that she still had the same stupid crush on him that she’d had in high school. Maybe it was more like he was her hero, but no matter. She was a grown, thirty-plus-year-old woman, and she didn’t need to be infatuated with anyone. Especially the class bad boy, Ian Blair.

“Still sticking up for the wimps, I see.” Chad cast Ian a challenging look.

“And I will be as long as there are bullies like you in the world.” Molten iron ran through Ian’s tone, and she could remember the fire in his eyes, the same fire she’d seen when he’d pulled Junior off of her.

“Chill, dude.” Chad lifted his hands and backed away.

The others in the room let out a collective sigh, and Malone had to grip the back of the chair next to her not to turn and look at Ian. She heard footsteps, and Junior materialized in front of her.

“I need to talk to you,” he said, his tone demanding. “Alone.”

She gritted her teeth to keep from telling him off in front of the whole class. “If you think I have anything to say to you, you’re wrong. And I’ll never be alone with you again.”

He inched closer. She jerked back.

“You’ll want to hear this.” He leaned in close, his voice low. “It’s about your parents. Their car crash wasn’t an accident.”

“What?” Her voice rose, drawing attention from her former classmates, and she had to work extra hard to control the pain that rose up at his comment about her parents’ crash that had killed them back in the nineties. The sheriff’s office had ruled it an accident, and Junior was just likely blowing smoke to get her attention. “How dare you even talk about them after what you did to me.”

She glared down at him and tried to ignore the other guests’ questioning stares.

“I was young. Stupid. I’m sorry.” He looked like he regretted his actions, but an *I’m sorry* for attempted rape didn’t cut it.

“Please leave me alone.” She gritted her teeth. “I can barely look at you.”

“If you want to know how they died, I’ll wait for you in Ballroom D.” He marched off.

Feeling her classmates eyeing her, she concentrated on taking deep breaths and trying not to flee. She’d never told anyone about the assault. She was too embarrassed, and she worried the authorities would take her from the foster home, and she hadn’t been willing to risk being separated from her older brother, Reed. She’d had to swallow the pain to be sure they would remain together and stay with the loving foster family they’d been placed with. She knew that this family was a blessing from God. God had watched out for her and Reed after the car crash

that had killed their parents when she was six and Reed was eight.

And now this guy, this creep, was telling her the crash wasn't an accident? She'd done a report in her high school psychology class about the crash and the influence it had on her life, but Junior wasn't in her class. So how did he even know about it?

"You think he really knows something?" Ian's voice came from behind her.

Startled, she spun and locked gazes with those large eyes the color of rich sapphires, forgetting all about Junior for now. She freed her gaze to run the length of his body, taking in his black zip leather jacket, white button-down, and V-neck sweater in a cashmere gray. Deep navy jeans and suede chukka boots rounded out his attire. All of it fitting a body that he'd kept toned since high school.

"Like what you see?" He grinned, revealing his even white teeth.

She hated that he caught her ogling him, but it wouldn't be the first time and perhaps not the last. He'd been a fine looking teenager and was an even finer looking man. Partially due to the fact that he carried himself with an air that said he couldn't care less what anyone thought about how he looked. It was intoxicating.

"I do, actually," she said. "You're still something to look at, and you know it. Though you work very hard to pretend you don't."

He snorted. "Still the outspoken Malone, I see."

She nodded. What did a grown woman say to a man that she'd followed around with a huge puppy dog crush her last years of high school?

“You look quite nice yourself,” he said. “I always knew you would be a stunner as a woman, and I wasn’t wrong.” He gestured at their classmates. “The guys can’t take their eyes off you.”

She waved a hand, though she had indeed caught a few of the guys studying her when all she wanted to do was fly under the radar until the ceremony. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Why’s that?”

“You never took any interest in fitting in. Always the loner and happy to be one, if I’m right. So why hang out with people you spent two years avoiding?”

“I saw your name on the invitation and had to see if I was right.”

“About what?”

“About if you turned out to be a stunner.”

“Oh, that.” She shook her head. “Here we are talking like we’re back in high school. That how we look is *so* important when it’s not a big deal at all.”

“Sure, there are more important things, but isn’t seeing how people age the biggest reason for coming to a reunion?”

“Maybe.” She looked around the room, searching for Junior now, trying to decide what to do about his comment. “I wasn’t planning on coming until they promised to donate to my favorite charity if I attended a brief ceremony.”

“I like that the reunion has a purpose. Says a lot about the committee that they took what we’re going through in our country right now and decided to focus on outreach and how we can

make a difference.”

She nodded. “I hope our classmates give generously to all the causes the committee is highlighting.”

His eyes darkened. “I see the need every day and have the same hope.”

She didn’t know anything about the current-day Ian Blair, and as much as she was thinking of going after Junior, she wanted additional details about Ian too. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a detective with the Portland Police Bureau.”

“You’re what?” She gaped at him. “That’s the last thing I would have guessed.”

“Yeah, me too.” He grinned.

She had to swallow hard not to lean closer to that magnetic smile. “How did you get into law enforcement, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“You remember my parents are loaded, right?”

She nodded.

“My dad made his fortune in the movie industry before we moved up here from LA. Their lifestyle was—actually still is—such a waste. Parties. Living for social standing. Superficial.”

Memories came back from high school. “Their parties were legendary at school.”

“Yeah, and I wanted no part of it. When I graduated, I knew I had to do anything but

what they were doing. I wanted to make a difference. So I got a degree in public administration, but I figured I needed to live the life of service first before taking charge and making changes.”

“And being a cop was the route you chose.”

“It kind of chose me.” He focused on his feet, uncharacteristic for this take charge guy. “We had a situation with my mom. An overdose. A veteran cop showed up and handled it well. I was impressed with him and told him so. He said they were looking for good men, so I signed on. I thought it would be a short-term gig. I didn’t expect I would really like the job and stick with it.”

His decision fascinated her, and she needed to know more. “What do you like about the job?”

“I encounter people on their worst days. Many of them are just misunderstood and need someone to advocate for them. Touches a nerve with me.” He took a long breath. “I was misunderstood in high school. When we moved here in my junior year, it didn’t take long for my parents’ partying ways to get around. Everyone expected me to be a Hollywood party guy. But I wasn’t—I’m not—and I wouldn’t pretend to be one just to fit in. That’s all kinds of freak show in high school. Everyone couldn’t get why I turned my back on the lifestyle they would love to have. But I wouldn’t pretend to be anything to fit in, and no one knew how to classify me. So I kept to myself.”

“Except for that night when you intervened on my behalf.” She swallowed and searched the crowd for Junior but didn’t see him.

Ian ground his teeth. “I can’t believe you didn’t press charges against the little creep.”

“I couldn’t.” She explained about staying with Reed. “And after all my work with runaway teens, I think I might’ve been right, and I would’ve been moved to a new home.”

“I wish I could say you were wrong, but I could see it happening.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “It really doesn’t. Not anymore. It’s all in the past now. In a way, his attack was a good thing.”

Ian snorted. “How can that be?”

“It helped make me want to do what I’m doing now, and my underserved clients benefit from that. And it also helped me learn to forgive.”

“So you’ve forgiven the little creep?”

She glanced past him at the group and wondered what they thought of her outburst with Junior. “It was either that or let it eat me alive. My youth leader helped me see that wasn’t a good option. I still don’t like him or what he did, and I don’t want to be around him. But I *have* forgiven him and moved on.”

Ian tilted his head and studied her. “I’m most impressed, Malone Rice. You’re not only something to look at, but you’ve developed into quite the person too.”

She felt a blush crawling up her neck and heating her face. “It’s no biggie.”

“But it is. I mean look at that.” He pointed across the room at the displays set up to highlight charities where her picture was posted outside the office of *Teen Solutions*. “You’re a charity rock star.”

His tone held respect, but his gaze was playful, and if she wasn’t mistaken, he was

flirting with her. She couldn't hold her own in the flirting department. She had little to no practice, and she was sure Ian had fully mastered the skill in grade school.

She pointed at the door where Junior was exiting the room. "I need to decide if I want to hear what he has to say."

"I remember when you did that report in school. You said the crash was an accident. So do you think he's right? That there's more to it that you don't know about?"

"Doubtful. There was never any question that it was more than an accident. He probably has something else up his sleeve."

"But you don't know what he's playing at?"

"No," she said. "But, heaven help me, he piqued my interest enough that I have to find out."

"Want me to come with you?"

"No." She pulled her shoulders back. "I'm a big girl now, and I won't drink anything from an unknown source tonight. I can fight my own battles."

"That, I don't doubt one bit."

Those eyes, with ever-changing shades of blue, lit with humor, and his face was alive and tempting. Now, there was a battle she was losing.

"Excuse me." She forced herself to walk away before she decided to linger in the warm, calming, and yet exciting effect Ian still had on her.

She strode out the door and down a long hallway in the posh hotel to Ballroom D. Why he'd chosen that room she had no idea. Could just be because it wasn't booked for the night.

The smaller ballroom held a stage at the far end of the room. Tables and chairs were stacked near the side walls. Junior sat on the stage swinging his legs. When he caught sight of her, he stilled. His gaze lit up, raising Malone's concern. He jumped down and rushed toward her, the sound of his boots rustling over the carpet, bringing a tinge of fear to her heart.

She planted her feet and pulled her shoulders back. She would make herself look confident even if she didn't feel it.

"You came," he said. "I didn't think you would."

She eyed him with her best *federal prosecutor* stare, which could strike fear into the toughest defendants—and sometimes defense lawyers. She held up her evening bag. "I have pepper spray in my purse, and Ian knows I'm here with you."

"Your knight in shining armor." He fairly spit the words out, telling her he might not really regret what he did. Or he was just jealous of Ian's height.

She resisted the urge to get into an argument with him. "We're not here to talk about Ian. We're here because you said my parents' deaths weren't an accident. But there was never talk of anything else. Do you have information?"

Before he could answer, a door for staff along the side of the ballroom opened, drawing their attention. A man wearing a black ski mask entered. Around six feet tall, he was slender and wore all black. His gaze locked on Junior. He lifted his arm and aimed a gun at Junior.

She gasped.

“No, no, please!” Junior cried out.

“You messed with the wrong person.” The man planted his feet and fired two rounds.

The retorts erupted like explosions. Malone jumped with each bullet that struck Junior. They pierced the linen fabric of his shirt, and blood spread across his chest.

His eyes wide, he collapsed on the carpet, lying spread-eagle on his back.

Her breath trapped in her chest, Malone lifted her gaze again to the gunman. She couldn't just stand there. She needed to do something. But what?

She wanted to move. To act, but her body remained frozen.

Did she check on Junior? Try to talk the shooter down?

The gunman marched across the room toward her, his gun still aimed, now at her, the firearm glinting in the overhead light.

She took a step back, dropping her purse and putting her hands up. “Please, don't shoot me. I don't know what's going on. Junior didn't tell me anything.”

He stopped in front of her with a thump of his boots and eyed her for a long time, those dark, almost black eyes burning into her through the opening in the mask. Keeping his gun trained on her, he dropped down on his knees and dug through Junior's pockets until he found a phone. He pocketed it.

He stood and stepped toward Malone.

She lurched back, but he grabbed her raised hand with his gloved fingers. She wanted to

jerk away, but he still had the gun trained on her. He placed the weapon in her hand and wrapped her fingers around it.

After a long look, some sort of warning in his eyes that she couldn't decipher, he turned and walked away.

“Stop!” she shouted, cupping the gun and lifting it.

He kept walking.

She checked the safety to confirm it was still off. She aimed the barrel at him. Dropped her finger to the trigger.

No. This isn't right.

She wasn't a killer. She couldn't pull the trigger. Couldn't shoot a man in the back. Was that what he was counting on when he'd handed her the gun? That she couldn't shoot him?

He stepped over the threshold, and the door closed behind him with a solid thump.

Should she run after him?

No. Junior. She dropped down next to him and felt for a pulse. Nothing. But she shouldn't be surprised with his eyes open and rolled back.

No. If there was still hope, she couldn't let him die.

She laid the gun on his belly, started CPR, and screamed for help.

The front door burst open.

The shooter coming back the other way?

Malone grabbed the gun and pointed it at the door, her hands shaking.

“Drop it, Malone.” Ian stood in the doorway, his own weapon drawn and pointed at her.

“He...” She looked down at Junior and lowered her hand. “I think he’s dead.”

*

The sound of two gunshots, as crisp and clear as could be, had Ian calling for backup and running for the room down the dark hallway. Finding Malone leaning over Junior with what was likely the murder weapon in her hand. No. He’d never imagined he’d find that. Never.

He crossed the room, gun still trained on her, and eased the gun from her hand. He kept his gaze on her in case she decided to run and holstered his firearm. He put on gloves he always carried in his jacket pocket, and popped out the clip on the gun he’d recovered from her, surprised not to find any bullets. He shoved the magazine back into the gun and tucked it in his belt.

She stood, eyes trained on Junior, shock creating a tight mask on her face. He couldn’t tell what she was really feeling as he kept his focus on her but squatted down and checked Junior’s pulse to be sure he was dead.

“I didn’t shoot him,” she said.

“No?” He tried not to sound disbelieving, but it sure looked like she was the shooter.

She shook her head. “I didn’t even bring my gun tonight. I left it at home. It took up too much room in my evening bag.” She pointed at a sparkly little purse lying on the carpeted floor a few feet from Junior’s body.

Ian stood, evaluating the size of the bag which could hold a gun, but not along with other essentials. “Then where did the gun come from?”

“The shooter had it.” She lifted her trembling hand to point at the side door, her focus following along. “He came in that way. Shot Junior twice and then crossed the room to steal Junior’s phone. Then, he put the gun in my hand.”

Ian didn’t think the Malone he knew would lie about such an important thing, but if she did kill Junior, she might. Nor did he think she would commit murder, but her story of a shooter handing over his gun stretched credibility. “You don’t think the guy was worried you might shoot him?”

“He didn’t seem to be.” She finally looked at Ian, and her haunted eyes were like a physical punch to his gut.

“I thought about it,” she said. “But I couldn’t shoot a man in the back. Maybe couldn’t shoot a man at all. He must’ve been counting on that.”

“Maybe that’s why there were only two bullets in the gun.”

“Right, yeah. That makes sense.” Her eyes cleared. “Either way, you have to go after him. He’s getting away.”

“I called for backup on the way, and officers will seal off the hotel, but I suspect we might already be too late. I need to stay here to preserve the murder scene and keep an eye on you.” He took a breath. “Describe the man so I can tell the officers who they’re looking for.”

“He was wearing a black ski mask so I couldn’t see his face. He was six feet tall or so. Slender. Dressed all in black.”

“That describes half the guys in our class, but I’ll still put out an alert.” Ian took out his phone and shared the description, but he sounded skeptical.

“You know I didn’t do this, right?” she asked when he ended his call.

He didn’t answer.

“Seriously, Ian. I might not have liked Junior, but I’m not a killer.”

He wanted to assure her, but he had to consider the evidence in front of him, not how he felt about the person. “Look at the incident from my point of view. The point of view of a police officer. Two gunshots are fired, and I enter the room where they were fired to find one person deceased from gunshot wounds and one living person with a gun in hand, the living person having recently argued with the deceased. What conclusion would you draw?”

“Not the one you’re drawing.” She crossed her arms. “I’d take into account the character of the people in the room. In this case, it would be clear to me that someone is trying to set me up for murder.”

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