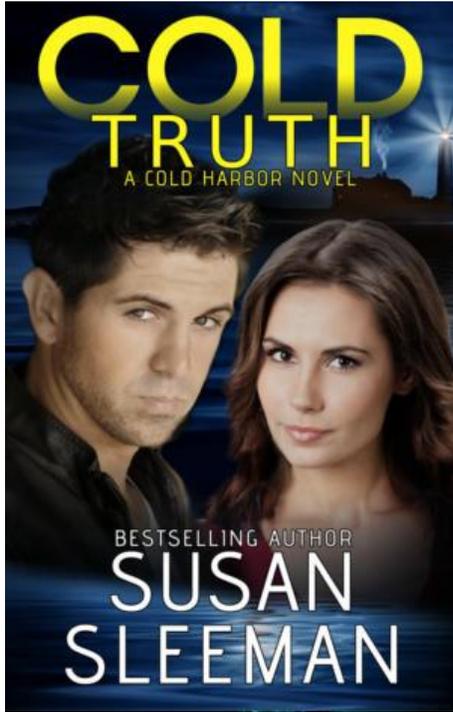


# COLD TRUTH



**Romantic Suspense – Ebook**

**Cold Harbor – Book 2 – December/2017**

**Want to play a game...**

When research chemist Kiera Underwood receives the cryptic phone call about her twin brother, she tries to contact him to no avail. Her twin sense tingles, warning her that something is wrong. When he doesn't return her call, and his supervisor at Oceanic Labs claims he didn't come into work, she heads to Cold Harbor. But when she arrives in town to find the door to her brother's house ajar, she races to the lab to question his fellow employees.

**Solve the puzzle and save your brother...**

Kiera's not prepared when an attempt is made on her life and Blackwell Tactical operative Cooper Ashcroft delivers her second shock of the day. Someone killed the lab research supervisor and stole a deadly biotoxin. The main suspect? Her brother, and Blackwell Tactical has been hired to bring him in. If that wasn't shocking enough, she's suspected of colluding with him. She had nothing to do with the theft or murder, and despite the evidence staring her in the face, she knows that her brother is innocent of all charges. She sets out to prove it, and she's soon the victim of a near abduction thwarted by Coop. He's faced with the reality that she's telling the truth and someone has likely abducted her brother—perhaps killed him—and now Kiera's very life is in danger, too.

## Chapter One

“Want to play a game?” the scrambled voice rasped through Kiera's phone.

“Who is this?” she asked, irritated that someone would prank call her and use one of

those voice-altering devices to do it.

“Solve the puzzle and save your brother.”

“What? What puzzle?” She was getting angry now. “And my brother is fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am. I just talked to him last night. Not that it’s any of your business.” She sighed. “Who is this anyway?”

“I guess if your brother is fine, you don’t need to know.” Silence filled the phone for an uncomfortable moment. “Open your mind to my request, Kiera, or your brother will die.”

The line went dead. She stared at her phone. This had to be some sort of a joke. A stupid joke, but still, a senseless one.

She pressed redial for the caller. No answer. No voicemail message. Just silence. “Sure, run and hide, but when I find out who you are...”

She punched her twin brother Kevin’s icon on her phone. It rang. Once. Twice. Continued ringing. Voicemail picked up.

“Kev,” she said after the tone. “Call me the minute you get this message.”

Other people might panic after getting a call like this and their sibling not answering, but Kevin often failed to answer his phone. He got lost in his work. Day or night, it didn’t matter. She understood that to a degree. After all, she was a research chemist, too, but he took his withdrawal from the world to extreme lengths when he was working on something he loved. And right now, he was involved in a big hush-hush project to synthesize a biotoxin carried by seafood, and he hoped to create an antidote. The lab put great pressure on Kevin to succeed, as they could make big bucks on the antidote. Money that would fund all of their other research.

She scrolled down the contact list on her phone and punched the number for Oceanic

Labs in Cold Harbor where Kevin was employed. “Kevin Underwood, please.”

“I’m sorry, Kevin isn’t working today,” the polite female voice responded.

Not at work. Really. Now *that* got Kiera’s attention and a spark of worry ignited in her brain. He never missed work. Never. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Transfer me to his supervisor, please.”

“She’s not in either.”

“The lab manager then.”

“May I tell him who’s calling?”

“Kiera Underwood. Kevin’s sister.”

“One moment, please.”

Kiera got up and started pacing across her living room. Back and forth she moved over the smooth wood floors gleaming in the sunlight pouring through her window. She glanced at her watch. Ten thirty. She’d had a dentist appointment this morning, or she’d be at work by now. The hygienist had made a mess of her blouse, and Kiera popped home to change. Good thing she’d stopped by. With a call like this, she wouldn’t be able to concentrate at work, and that could be deadly in her research for a pharmaceutical lab.

“C’mon, pick up the call already,” she muttered under her breath as she stared out the window of her high-rise apartment in downtown Portland.

If the manager didn’t know where Kevin was and why he hadn’t come to work, she needed to come up with a plan of action. She could call his local sheriff’s department, she supposed, but with nothing to tell them other than her brother hadn’t gone to work and wasn’t answering his phone, they’d dismiss her.

So what could she do other than drive to Cold Harbor and check out his house? Nothing. She'd have to make that five-hour drive to the southern Oregon coast.

"Ms. Underwood, this is lab manager, Nigel Moody. How can I help you?" He sounded helpful, but his tone was restrained.

"I'm trying to locate my brother. The receptionist said he didn't come to work, and he's not answering his phone."

"We'd like to know where he is, too."

"He didn't call off work?"

"No."

"Do you know why?"

"I have my suspicions, but I'm not at liberty to share that with you."

Her spark of worry burst into a full-blown flame, and Kiera resumed pacing. "Do you think something's wrong with him?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. Something very wrong."

"What do you mean?" Kiera's worry reached full blaze.

Nigel sighed. "Like I said, I can't give you any information, but if you talk to him, be sure he calls me."

"But you have to help me. You just have to." She waited for a response to her plea.

Nothing.

"Hello. Are you there?" She held her phone out. The call had ended. He'd ended the call.

*What in the world is going on?*

She dialed Kevin again, and when he didn't answer, she ran to her bedroom to pack an overnight bag. She made quick work of it and phoned him again as she started for her front door.

Still no answer.

She exited her apartment and ran for her car in the parking structure. On the way, she called her work to tell them she had a family emergency. She settled her phone in the car's dashboard holder and wasn't surprised to see her hands trembling. Not with her twin missing.

It took all of her concentration to get her car safely on the road and pointed toward Cold Harbor, but once she left the city behind, she dialed Kevin again. Recent legislation now made it illegal to use her cell in Oregon while driving, but her brother's life could be at stake, so she'd risk using it on speaker while it sat in the holder.

The call went to voicemail, and her hope died. "Kev, please. Please call me. I'm worried about you."

As the miles rolled under her car, she replayed the garbled phone call in her brain. Why did this person—a man by the sound of things—want to play a game? A game involving Kevin. A game of life or death. Could this be some sick joke or was Kevin actually in trouble?

She dialed him again. Got his voicemail. She wouldn't give up. She punched his icon every fifteen minutes during the long drive to Cold Harbor. Usually she loved pulling into the small oceanside town. Loved hearing the waves crashing against a craggy shoreline. Loved the smell of the salty ocean air. But today she couldn't get down the beach road fast enough to arrive at his small bungalow.

She raced across the sandy lot and up the stairs. She lifted her hand to pound on the door. Found it open.

*No. No. God, no. Don't let this be real.*

She wrapped her hand around the mace she carried in her purse and entered. Her fear of finding her brother lying on the floor from some altercation nearly stole her last breath. She

flipped on the overhead light and searched the room. His traditional sofa held no pillows or any other item. The set of three matching tables had no décor save a lone lamp. No dust. Not a speck. The usual immaculate place.

“Kev?” she stepped forward. “Are you here?”

No response.

Her pulse pounded in her ears as she made her way to the small kitchen. Then the bedroom he used for an office. She desperately hoped to find him, face in the computer, working on something, and he’d simply not heard her.

His chair was empty and computer off. His desk clear of all objects.

Her anxiety ratcheted up and her legs felt weak, but she continued down the hall to his bedroom. He’d made his bed—not a crease in it, but no Kevin. “The garage.”

She raced back down the hallway and jerked open the door. His car sat on the far side of the two-stall garage. She hurried to the small Prius hybrid. Empty. She popped the trunk and headed toward it. Held her breath and looked inside. Just his fishing equipment.

“Where are you?” she cried out in panic and shot a look around the garage trying to figure out what to do next.

She dialed his phone. Waited, prayed for an answer. None.

She glanced at the clock. Almost six o’clock. The lab had already closed. She couldn’t call. She’d have to go there and hope he’d shown up.

She pulled the door closed behind her, and locked it with the key he’d given her. She sped across town and pulled up to the lab secured with an impenetrable gate. *No. No.* She’d forgotten. She couldn’t get into the parking lot. The lab had few visitors, meaning no guest entrance.

Parking on the side street, her mind raced for a way to get through that gate. She spotted a car heading for the exit. She could question the driver. She ran to the driveway and stood in the middle of the road, waving her arms and signaling for the driver to lower the window. The thirty-something blond woman complied, an uneasy look on her face.

“I’m Kevin Underwood’s sister,” Kiera said quickly. “Do you know him?”

The woman’s apprehension faded. “Yeah, sure. He works on the second floor.”

“Did you see him today?”

She cocked her head as if Kiera was asking a difficult question. “No. I heard something’s going on up on his floor and no one is working up there today.”

“You’re sure he didn’t come in? Not at all?”

“I didn’t see him, but then things were kind of chaotic today.”

“Do you know what’s going on?”

“No, but I heard rumors that it involved the police. Can’t imagine what kind of crime could’ve occurred here, but the management is keeping it quiet. But I do have to say the way some of the guys dress up there should be against the law.” She chuckled.

Kiera couldn’t even work up a hint of a smile. Not with Kevin missing and her hope of finding him disappearing with the sun sinking below the horizon.

“Look, I gotta get going,” the woman said.

“Will you call me if you hear from him or see him?” Kiera held out her business card.

“Sure, but I doubt I will.” She took the card and studied it before looking up, her face tight with concern. “Sounds like you think something bad’s happened to him.”

“He never takes off work. Never. His car is at his place and he’s not answering his phone. I don’t know where he is.” Kiera’s panic inched higher.

“I promise I’ll let you know if I see him.” She gave a tight smile. “I’m sure it’s nothing, and he’ll turn up.”

*Nothing. Right. No way.*

Kiera watched the car move down the road and disappear into the dusky night. She stood waiting for the next vehicle. Damp winds rolled in from the ocean, the fishy smell strong. She rubbed her arms for warmth, but the salty air had settled into her lightweight jacket the moment she’d stepped from her car, and she shivered.

Another car approached, and she went into questioning mode. The man hadn’t seen Kevin either, so she stepped back and watched his car disappear down the road. She waited for the next car, time ticking away. Thirty minutes passed, and no one came out. She was too cold to remain standing there. She’d go back to Kevin’s place and regroup.

She started across the street to her car. Headlights gleamed from the main road, heading toward the lab, the vehicle’s engine sounding more like a motorcycle than a car.

*Odd.* The road dead-ended at the lab. Maybe this person was coming in to work. A person she could question, maybe who would allow her access. She remained in place and would wait for the vehicle to slow at the gate before approaching.

Instead of slowing, the motor revved, and the vehicle picked up speed. It swerved from the path to the gate and headed straight for her.

Headlights pressed down on her.

Didn’t he see her?

He came closer. Closer.

She screamed.

She needed to run, but she couldn’t get her feet moving.

*Move now!* She screamed at herself.

\*

And Coop thought his surveillance detail was going to be boring.

He charged out of the trees and scooped the woman up in his arms. She shrieked and flailed against him, but he held tight and dove for the ditch to dodge the ATV barreling toward her. He landed hard on his shoulder and tried to hold his position, but he rolled and came to rest on top of her. She let out an *unh*, sounding like he'd knocked the wind out of her.

The vehicle swerved. Maybe the driver had gotten distracted or hadn't seen her standing there.

Coop rose up on his arms and waited for the driver to stop and apologize, but he reversed course and charged away from the lab, the roar of his engine disappearing into the cloudy night. Coop had tried to get a good look at the driver and his vehicle, but it was too dark to make out any details.

"Please let me up," the woman demanded in a clipped tone.

*Right. Her.* He'd been so busy watching the ATV that he forgot he was resting atop the very curvy, very pretty woman he'd been watching for the last hour while she'd approached people leaving the lab.

"Sorry about that." He pushed to his feet and offered her a hand.

She ignored it and stood. She brushed off her clothing. Why, he didn't know. She couldn't possibly see any dirt or leaves in the pale glow of distant streetlights.

Her head shot up. She eyed him and took a sudden step back as if planning to flee. "Who are you anyway?"

Coop held up his hands. "No need to worry about me. I'm not some perv waiting to

attack. Name's Cooper Ashcroft, but everyone calls me Coop. I'm on assignment for Blackwell Tactical. Saw the vehicle headed for you and reacted."

The moon broke through the clouds. He could see her face clearly now, and a lovely face it was. Big eyes, deep brown like the stock on his favorite hunting rifle. Petite nose. High cheeks. She also had wavy russet-brown hair falling a few inches below her shoulders and stood a head shorter than Coop.

"Thank you for the rescue." She held his gaze. "Seems like it might not have been necessary since he ended up veering off."

Coop didn't think it was quite that simple. "I tried to take the brunt of the fall, but did I hurt you?"

She shook her head and looked a bit dazed. Not unusual. Someone almost ran her over and a strange male had tackled her. He waited for her to offer her name, but she didn't. Not a problem. Coop had known who she was the moment she'd stepped onto the property. One Kiera Underwood, sister to the missing chemist his team had been hired to find, and a chemist herself. Perhaps one who was involved in the theft of a deadly biotoxin that her brother was believed to have stolen.

"What kind of assignment are you here on?" she finally asked, that wary bent lingering in her tone.

"Sorry. Can't divulge that information." He offered his best charming smile that had always been effective with the opposite sex, but she frowned. "So who would want to run you down?"

She shot a look down the road. "You think that was on purpose?"

"If not, the driver likely would have hung around to make sure you were okay, don't you

think?”

“Maybe, or maybe he has a hit-and-run kind of personality. You know, not someone who would take responsibility for his actions.” She bit down on her full lower lip, her eyes now darkening with fear.

“Something else you’re afraid of, Ma’am? Other than that ATV.”

She eyed him for a long moment. “My brother. Kevin. I got a call...a horrible call saying something was wrong with him. I searched for him all day. He’s missing.”

“You received a phone call about your brother?” He made sure to keep his tone casual when he wanted to give her the third degree about the missing chemist.

She watched him again. He’d have no problem getting lost in those eyes for a year or two, but she could be involved in the theft and made her the last woman on earth that he should connect with.

Her eyes narrowed. “Do you know my brother?”

Coop shook his head. He’d never met the guy, but Coop could spout the background data retrieved by his team the second they’d signed the contract with Oceanic.

Name: Kevin Wilson Underwood II. Middle name came from his father. Kevin was thirty years old. Five-nine, thin with cropped brown hair. Clean shaven and brown eyes. His parents wealthy. Old money from a logging empire and they sat on boards for philanthropic causes. The kind of family Coop couldn’t understand. Not when he came from a lower income area of Portland. They weren’t just on the other side of the tracks, they were in a whole other world.

Still, it wasn’t like her parents got everything they wanted. An older couple, they had to turn to in vitro fertilization. Conceived fraternal twins, Kiera and Kevin. They were born and resided in Portland until they got their PhDs in chemistry from the University of California in

Berkley. Kevin moved to Cold Harbor after graduating. Kiera lived in Portland and worked for a pharmaceutical lab.

Her eyebrow arched. “If you don’t know Kevin, why are you interested in the call I received?”

“You sounded upset. I believe I can help.” He wasn’t lying. She did seem upset, and he was quite able to help her find her brother.

She frowned. “You’re a stranger. How on earth can you help?”

“My team finds missing people. One of the many services we offer.”

“Then I want to hire you,” she said decisively.

*Right.* Like she could hire him. Not when the team had already contracted with the lab to find her brother and recover the toxin, but he wouldn’t share this information. That would shut things down right off the bat when he needed to keep the lines of communication open with her. Figure out if she was involved. Like faking this hunt for her brother to throw people off his trail.

Coop forced a smile to his lips. “The best thing is for you to come out to Blackwell Tactical where we can discuss the options.”

Her wary watch turned downright skeptical.

“Don’t worry. I’m not making this up to lure you into some out-of-the-way place and have my way with you.” He took out his phone and opened the Internet. “Go ahead and look us up. You’ll see we’re legit.”

She tapped on the screen and focused intently, occasionally scrolling down the page to read. “You were being modest. You have quite the operation, including training law enforcement.” She handed the phone back to him. “And you’re all former military special operations or law enforcement.”

“Army Ranger,” he replied, as he was proud of his service.

“I guess if anyone can find Kevin, it would be a group of people like you.”

“Let me make a quick phone call, and then I’ll lead the way to the compound.”

She nodded and shivered.

“Why don’t you wait in your car where it’s warmer,” he suggested.

“Good idea.” She hurried across the road to a small white Honda, and he had to admit enjoying watching the sway of her hips.

*Duty, Coop. Duty. Keep your mind on that.*

He dialed Gage Blackwell, owner of Blackwell Technical. “I need someone to relieve me.”

“Can’t handle standing a little surveillance duty at your old age?” Gage joked, as Coop was only thirty-one.

“I can handle it just fine. But isn’t it more important to bring Kevin Underwood’s twin to meet with you so she can hire us?”

“Hire us?” Gage’s voice shot up. “Are you crazy? She can’t hire us.”

“I know that, but she doesn’t. Not yet.” Coop explained the situation.

“Alex and Riley are still training. Eryn’s running computer support for them. I’ll get Jackson out there on the double.”

“Understood.” Coop disconnected his phone and started for Kiera’s car. After the call with Gage, Coop couldn’t help but think about his fellow teammates.

A year ago, he’d joined three other men and one woman on Gage’s team. All of them had suffered serious on-the-job injuries that prohibited them from continuing in their chosen professions. They’d also experienced a sense of hopelessness over the loss of the work they

loved, and in a sense, their identity. Then Gage gave them their lives back by allowing them to join a team where they could not only use their skills, but their skills were esteemed.

Coop would do anything for his teammates, including taking a bullet for them and especially so for Gage. That meant doing what was best for their current assignment and bringing Kiera to the compound to question her.

He crossed the road, watching for other wayward vehicles. Not that he thought there would be another attempt on her life tonight. If the speeding ATV even was an attempt to kill her.

When he approached her car, she lowered her window. “Everything okay?”

“We’re good to go once my associate arrives.”

“Thank you,” she said sincerity flowing through her words. “I’m so glad you were here.”

A quick smile flashed across her face, and his heart tripped. Oh, man. Even white teeth revealed at the parting of her lips. High apple cheeks going higher. Sparkling eyes with only a hint of worry at the moment. Yeah, she was a beauty all right.

“My brother is everything to me,” she added, her vehemence taking Coop aback. “I’d be lost without him.”

*Great.* Now he felt like a real heel. Here he was suspecting her of colluding with her brother, and she seemed genuinely upset by his absence. Coop would love to give her the benefit of the doubt, believe she really didn’t know where Kevin had disappeared to, but he couldn’t. Not with a missing toxin, that—if weaponized—could kill millions.

No matter how much the despair in those tantalizing eyes made him want to offer comfort, he had to stick to doing his job at all costs. If that meant grilling her to learn if she was involved, so be it. Lives were depending on him.

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