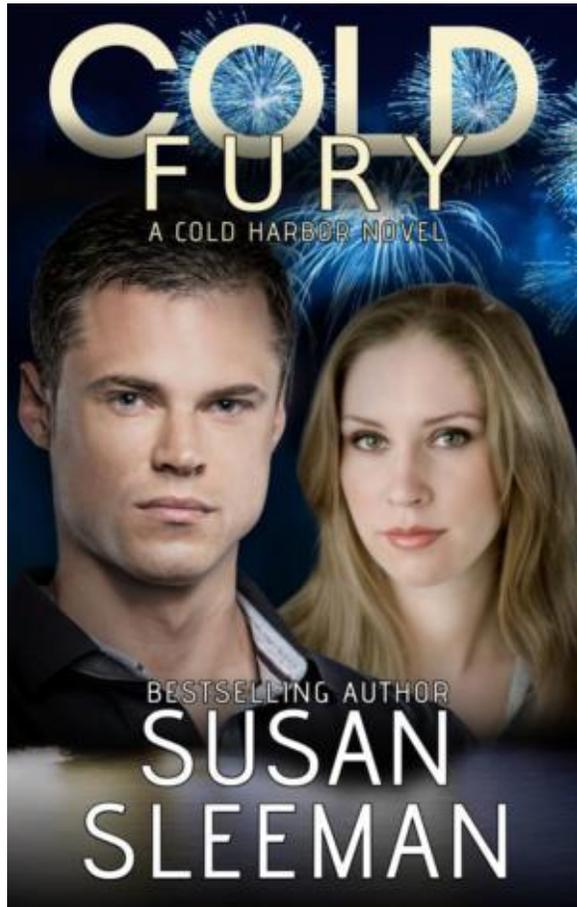


## **COLD FURY SNEAK PEEK**



**Romantic Suspense –E-Book**

**Cold Harbor – Book 3 – March/2017**

*Six years ago tragedy tore them apart...*

Maggie Turner happily works as an assistant professor in the Criminal Justice Department and lives a quiet life near campus. That is until Jackson Lockhart bursts into her life unexpectedly. Then a cyclone of emotions erupt as she remembers the tragedy that once tore them apart. She'd often thought of him, but they'd agreed never to see each other again, and so far, they'd kept their promise. But today...Jackson has a good reason for breaking his promise. Maggie's life depends on it.

*Will it now bring them back together?*

In an ongoing investigation, Jackson has learned that university officials secretly photographed her classroom in a study on attendance. The recorder was supposed to run only during the class session, but it malfunctioned and recorded an entire week, which includes a shocking murder that has now put Maggie's life in danger. Can Jackson unravel the lies surrounding this incident before the killer unleashes his fury on Maggie and takes her life?

## CHAPTER ONE

“A killer’s on the loose, and Maggie will be dead by then!” Jackson Lockhart didn’t bother hiding his irritation as he looked up from the video to find his Blackwell Tactical teammates watching him instead of the footage.

The recording of the college lecture hall continued to run in the background, but Jackson had played it like a hundred times, and he was more interested in his team’s take on the video. Or maybe their take on his outburst. That was more likely the reason for the skeptical looks.

“We have to think about our client’s best interest here.” Company owner Gage Blackwell planted his hands on the long conference room table. “No matter what you uncovered in this video, Martin hired us to find his son’s killer, not to protect Maggie Turner.”

“So, what you’re saying is we leave Maggie to fend off this killer by herself?” Jackson’s heart beat hard at the thought of the woman he once loved in danger. “How can you even think that when the video clearly shows her bumping into the killer? Now that this video is public, he has to know she can ID him. He’ll want to take her out before she can. And you want to let her work that out on her own?”

Jackson took a breath and met his boss’s gaze. “Unbelievable, Gage. Just unbelievable.”

Gage came to his feet and stretched to his full height. Six two like Jackson, his boss glowered at him. As a former Navy SEAL, his intensity was always over the top, and the guy was downright intimidating, but Jackson wouldn’t back down. *Couldn’t* back down when it came to keeping Maggie safe.

“If you’d just listen,” Gage said, his tone low and intense. “You’d know I didn’t say that. I’d no more leave this woman to die than I would my own wife. All I’m saying is it’s going to be tricky to find Scott’s killer *and* protect Maggie at the same time. There’s bound to be a conflict in your priorities.”

Jackson sighed out his relief. Priorities. Right. That was Scott Dawson until an hour ago. He was strangled on his college campus in the last month, and his father Martin hired Blackwell Tactical to find the killer. The murder occurred in a lecture hall where Maggie taught anthropology. And now, the video showing she bumped into the killer on her way out of that classroom had become public. The camera didn’t catch the killer’s face, but Maggie looked him in the eye, and he could be gunning for her.

Jackson couldn’t—wouldn’t—leave her unprotected. Sure, they’d broken up six years ago under difficult circumstances. So what? He would always care for her, and she had to be his priority right now. Trouble was, his team was also counting on him to take charge on the job they were hired to do.

He would balance both aspects. He had no choice.

He drew back his shoulders, making sure he conveyed confidence. “You can count on me to do what Martin needs *and* protect Maggie at the same time. Won’t be the first time I’ve walked a tightrope on one of our investigations. I’ll manage just fine.”

“But it *will* be the first time you’ve done it when you’re emotionally connected to one of the players.” Cooper Ashcroft’s dark brown, almost black eyes locked on Jackson, giving him a moment’s pause. “And trust me. Gage and I both know how hard that’s gonna be for you.”

The pair shared a knowing look. Both men recently headed up investigations involving a woman in danger. Everything turned out just fine. Gage had since married Hannah, and Coop was engaged to Kiera.

Not that their situations related to Jackson’s circumstances at all. This was different. Totally different. He and Maggie might’ve once been in love, but there was no way he’d wind up engaged or married to her. Even interested in her again. Not with the tragedy they’d suffered together. No way.

Like he said. He could handle it. “So, I have the green light to offer protection services to Maggie?”

“You’re good to go.” Gage ran a hand over dark hair, not as deep as Jackson’s coloring, and Jackson preferred a shorter military cut. “But don’t let your personal connection take over and make me sorry I’m not sending one of your teammates instead.”

“Anyone have a problem with this plan?” Jackson surveyed the team, starting with Eryn Calloway who shook her head sending her jet-black ponytail swinging.

The only woman on the team, she was once a cyber security professional and agent with the FBI. She might only be five seven or so, but she was as fierce as the men. Still, it was obvious she was touched by his desire to warn Maggie.

He moved his focus one seat over to Riley Glenn.

“I’m good.” He leaned back and placed his hands behind his head. His surfer blond hair and reddish beard gave him a more laid-back look than you’d expect from a former sniper for the Portland Police Bureau, but Jackson had worked alongside Riley long enough that it wasn’t hard to imagine him perched behind a sniper rifle, target locked in.

“You wouldn’t be my first choice, but let’s see how it plays out,” Alex Hamilton weighed in. As a former Recon Marine, he likely thought he could do a better job scouting out the situation at the college.

Shoot, everyone on the team probably thought the same thing. They all frequently believed they were

the best person for the job. Jackson honestly didn't know how Gage kept their egos in check, but he did.

"Just don't screw it up," Coop added.

Jackson rolled his eyes but didn't respond.

"We're a go, then," Gage said. "Report in on a regular basis, and whatever you do, be mindful of Martin Dawson in every action."

Jackson nodded, his thoughts already going to the logistics of getting from Cold Harbor to Maggie's place in Ashland in the shortest possible time. "I'll need the helo. Who's gonna take me?"

He waited for Gage to veto the resource due to fuel cost, but Gage didn't say a word. He would do everything necessary to protect the innocent, and Jackson was just being touchy because this involved Maggie. He shouldn't have even questioned Gage's motivations.

Jackson glanced from Coop to Riley, both pilots, but Riley only recently received his license.

"I'm always glad for more air time." Riley lowered his arms and snapped his chair forward. "Plus, I have a buddy from the police force in Medford whose dad owns a nearby logging company. I'm sure he'll let us put down at their helipad and lend us a vehicle to make the short drive to Ashland."

"Then let's get after it." Jackson headed for the door and assumed Riley would follow.

Outside, he paused to wait for Riley to join him in the unusually steamy evening for the end of June. The ocean breeze whisked inland from the Pacific, cooling everything in its path, thankfully keeping the temps bearable today.

Riley lifted his hand to a gust of wind. "Gonna be a bumpy ride."

Jackson nodded, but he didn't care. He would take a helo up in a tornado if it got him to Maggie before the killer figured out she knew about him and came looking for her.

Jackson strode to the utility vehicle and climbed behind the wheel, his knee aching in protest as he folded his leg to settle inside. He'd taken a bullet to his right leg in his last skirmish as a Green Beret and was given the choice of riding a desk or leaving the army. Yeah, right, like he was desk-rider material. No way. He wouldn't choose desk duty any more than the rest of his teammates would. They'd all suffered on-the-job injuries. Some in the service. Some in law enforcement. All losing their chosen professions as a result. The loss united them all in a way nothing else could.

Jackson got the vehicle headed down a winding road lined with soaring pine trees, thankfulness for

Gage's rescue from that desk job always at the top of his mind. After a serious injury to his arm, Gage was forced to leave the SEALs and had the brilliant idea to start Blackwell Tactical. The team was devoted to training law enforcement officers, investigating any manner of situations, and providing private protection services for people in distress.

Near the compound's property line, Riley pressed a remote mounted on the visor to turn on in-ground lights circling the concrete helipad. The helo sat in the middle of the pad, a boot on each rotor tip strapping the helo down to an aluminum securing point sunk into the concrete.

Jackson shoved the gearshift into park and left the keys so one of his teammates could retrieve the vehicle while he was gone. He was jonesing to get into the air and get to Maggie before the killer did, but a preflight check was necessary to be sure they were safe. Wouldn't help Maggie in the least if they crashed along the way.

Still, Jackson could help speed things along. "Want me to remove the tie-down boots while you start the checklist?"

Riley nodded and got out of the vehicle. "Just be sure you don't manhandle the rotors."

"Me, manhandle something?" Jackson laughed.

His teammate knew him well. Shoot, all the guys on the team often used more force than necessary to get a job done. Eryn was the only one with any finesse.

Jackson strode to the first ring and squatted, his knee aching. The humid ocean air often made it hurt, but he'd do about anything to stay on this team, and that included enduring a little pain from living on the southern Oregon coast.

He released the first strap and stood to take off the boot and push the rotor up. He tried to imagine the moment he would walk into Maggie's life again. Maybe her home or even her summer school classroom. He saw her standing at the lecture podium, looking to the door and seeing him. Her face creasing in the same agony as the day they'd parted ways.

Pain gripped him like a charley horse that wouldn't release its hold. It'd been some time since this particular ache had taken him down, but even years later it felt the same. He could force the memories away, reason them away, work so hard there was no place for them to surface, but the pain still pushed its way up in unguarded moments and left him reeling.

Did Maggie feel the same way, or had the passing of time healed her wounds?

He had no way of knowing. Meant he couldn't tell her he was coming. She could refuse to see him,

and he wouldn't be able to help her. Actually, odds were good that she would send him packing. After the tragedy that tore them apart, they'd agreed never to see each other again.

In the many years since that day, he kept his promise no matter how difficult it had been.

Surely, she would understand why he was breaking their agreement now and be willing to talk to him. Right?

\*

Devastation stretched out in front of Maggie, and her tears weren't far from the surface. Stately homes now lay in smoldering ruins of rubble and ash in the once-majestic Oregon hillside. Gray skies hung above, dark and ominous like the ash that still drifted in from nearby fires.

She sighed. Rain was coming. That was good for the Middle Fork Fire still burning with a hazy glow in the distance. Not good for the recovery effort, but Maggie wouldn't let that stop her. Couldn't let it stop her. Families depended on her to identify their missing loved ones. She would work in rain, sleet, snow, hail, or you-name-it if she could bring them closure.

She shook her head at the utter and totally preventable destruction caused by teens setting off firecrackers in the Willamette National Forest. High winds took care of the rest, blowing the Middle Fork Fire into the Summit subdivision during early morning hours just a few short days ago. Firecrackers were illegal in the area, and even if they weren't, the teens must have known the spring was drier than normal, already putting forest fire season in full swing.

"Dr. Turner," a female voice came from behind.

Maggie dragged her focus from the disturbing scene and faced the young woman holding a microphone. Maggie was five nine and the woman stood taller, her bleached-blond hair styled to perfection. She introduced herself as Felicia Nutley, but Maggie needed no introduction. She recognized her as an up-and-coming local television reporter.

"How can I help you, Ms. Nutley?" Maggie asked.

"I was hoping you'd give me a minute for an interview."

"I don't know..." Maggie looked back at the search and rescue team hard at work gingerly sifting through the rubble. The sun was already drooping low in the sky, leaving her only three hours or so of daylight to complete her work. "The others are depending on me."

"It'll only take a minute," Felicia said. "Our small community is so devastated by the loss of life. I

know the public will be relieved to hear that a forensic anthropologist has been called in to help with victim identity.”

Would they? The fire burned extremely hot and fast, and the crew was no longer finding bodies, only bone fragments. The team poured debris by the shovelful through fine grates and sifted. They discarded anything that fell through into piles near the foundation of cordoned-off houses and carefully examined what remained.

Wouldn't it creep out the viewing public to learn the crew was only finding fragments? They probably wouldn't want to discover what her job actually was, taking over after the team finished the initial work. She was trained to distinguish a fragment of bone from rock or burnt clay, and it was her job to scrutinize any pieces remaining after the sifting. Still, maybe it would be a good idea to let folks know that she and the team were doing everything they could to recover the missing homeowners. She could leave out details of how that was happening.

Maggie faced the reporter. “I'll give you two minutes, but then I really need to get to work.”

“Thank you.” Felicia smiled and signaled for her cameraman to join them. “Just relax and look at Zeke when you talk.”

Zeke, a scruffy-looking stocky guy, joined them and turned Maggie by the arm. “Light's better facing this way.”

She nodded and took a long breath. She'd been digging through ruins for nearly twelve hours and must look a mess. Maybe just a quick hand through her hair to straighten it. No. No, she wasn't going to primp.

Felicia quickly fired questions at Maggie, and she answered them as succinctly as possible. At the two-minute mark, she excused herself to step behind the barricades and work her way over the ash-strewn street. Brick mailboxes and retaining walls stood at the sidewalk like sentries to former homes. Clay flowerpots once filled with blooming plants sat near metal patio furniture—the only reminders of the lifestyle in the vibrant neighborhood just a few days prior. Now the only colors amidst the gray ash were red flags, planted by dog handlers to mark where the dogs found human remains, and the brightly colored clothing of the search and rescue workers.

Tears pressed against Maggie's eyes again. So much destruction. Total and complete. And fifteen lives lost. Two men still missing.

*Oh, God, why?* she asked but really didn't expect an answer. She'd been asking a similar question for six years without an explanation and didn't think she would get one now either.

She let her nails bite into her palms to stem her tears and continued down the street toward dog handler Parker Amburg, his dog Quasimodo on a leash. The black lab was covered in ash, but still seemed eager to work. Not Parker. No, this job was taking a toll on him. Thin, about five foot nine, his tan face held large splotches of ash, and his shoulders sagged.

He stopped in front of her with a resigned sigh. “We have another one.”

“Another one, what?”

“Victim.” His *well-duh* look told of his frustration. “In the shed out back of 5040. I just confirmed it.”

5040? She shot a look down the street to a house three down from where she’d been working all day. “That can’t be. No one was reported missing at 5040. The entire family is safe and secure on vacation in Florida.”

“Well, I’m telling you, there’s a victim there. Quasi doesn’t make mistakes.”

“He must have.” She frowned. “Only two people were reported missing in the entire neighborhood. This would be number three.”

“Like I said. Quasi doesn’t make mistakes, and he was confirming a hit by another dog.” Parker scrubbed a hand over a jaw covered in stubble. “I marked the location with flags. You do what you want with it.”

“I’m sorry, Parker,” she said sincerely. “I don’t mean to call your expertise into question. Of course, I’ll check it out. And I’ll do it right now.”

He nodded and turned toward the makeshift parking area for workers. Maggie doubted he was done for the day, but since Quasimodo just lighted on a victim, he would rotate out for another dog. This same dance had been going on from sunup until sundown for days now while they checked every home in the large neighborhood, not just the ones whose owners were reported missing.

She continued her course, the first few drops of rain hitting her face. By the time she reached 5040, a steady drizzle was falling. She was glad to see that the crew had already erected a canopy with light over the location to preserve the remains. She stopped to settle a particulate respirator over her mouth and nose and stepped off the road.

She worked her way through the rubble, her boots sure and solid when the ground underneath shifted. Passing by the house, a spiral staircase climbed eerily toward the dark sky. She would never forget the sights and smells of this recovery. Bad dreams haunted her for days now, but she wouldn’t let that scare her off when desperate families needed her help.

She slogged through the debris to the back of the property, where ashen trees stood forlornly looking over the remains of what was once a storage shed. Near the red flags planted by Parker, she set her bag on the ground and snapped pictures of the area for documentation, taking long shots first and moving on to close-ups.

She stowed her phone and set to work, carefully excavating rubble. She found bases for a rake and shovels, the steel impervious to the hot fire, but their wooden handles were gone. Before long, she found her first bone, a femur. Hoping that she might have found an intact skeleton, she continued, carefully picking up and discarding debris from atop the bones. The work was painstakingly slow, but hours later, she reached the upper body covered with a large steel wheelbarrow, and she lifted it off.

Experts told her that this fire burned close to twenty-two hundred degrees, taking most everything in its path. But the melting point of carbon steel was over twenty-six hundred degrees, which is why metal structures remained intact.

As she settled the wheelbarrow out of her way, the sun disappeared below the horizon. Didn't matter. No way she'd quit before learning more about this body. But she needed to turn on the overhead light to continue working.

She stood and stretched up to click on the bulb. She took a moment to give her leg muscles a chance to recover from squatting and let her gaze roam the quiet site. Her fellow workers had all taken off. Not unusual. She worked late most nights by herself just to keep up with the demand for her skills. And standing there wasn't going to get it done.

She squatted again to brush away more debris, revealing a narrow, heart-shaped pelvis that told her she was looking at the remains of a male. One of the missing men? Neither of them lived at this address, but it was possible this guy came over here to get a hose or some other tool to try to stop the fire from spreading.

Eager to find leads on his identity, she moved up to the skull. The head was turned to the side, and she spotted a circular hole in the parietal bone in the rear. The wound beveled in, one of the most obvious responses of cranial bone to ballistics.

This man had been shot.

"No way." She sat back on her heels and stared.

*Murdered.* Someone murdered him. That was obvious by the location of the wound. He couldn't have shot himself in the back of the head.

She examined the front of the skull but didn't find an exit wound. The slug was most likely still in the skull. Would make sense if the wound was caused by a handgun and small-caliber bullet. She quickly

measured the entrance wound. Yeah. Small caliber. Most likely a handgun.

She glanced around, looking for the weapon, but found none. She wanted to do more. To look for the actual slug. But this was a crime scene now, and the medical examiner and county sheriff needed to take over.

Heart hammering, she hurried down the street toward the recovery truck lit by a hastily rigged streetlight so she could make the call and get additional equipment. She passed a burned-out car with melted aluminum rims running in rivulets down the street, the metal now solidified. Past the other homes, their foundations dark with eerie shadows.

At the truck, she pushed up the respirator and snapped off her latex gloves to dig out her phone.

“Nate,” she said after the sheriff answered. “Dr. Turner here. I’m at Summit, and I found something you’ll want to check out.”

“What’s that?”

She leaned against the truck and described her findings. “The circular hole along with the beveling in the skull is clear evidence of a gunshot wound. This man was murdered.”

“Oh, man.” He sighed out a long breath. “You’re sure.”

“Yes. The wound is a classic bullet wound, and he was shot in the back of the skull.”

“Which is unlikely for a self-inflicted wound unless the guy rigged something up to hold the gun and pull the trigger.”

“Right,” she said, her mind racing to make sense of this scene. “And odds are good that he didn’t do that. Much easier to shoot himself in the mouth or temple.”

“I’ll get on the horn with the ME and get her out there. If you need to take off, I’ll dispatch a deputy to protect the scene.”

“I’m not going anywhere until we figure out if this guy is one of our missing men.” She shook her head. “Imagine that. A murder in the middle of this terrible tragedy.”

“You think you’ve seen everything in this job and then…” His voice fell off, but he didn’t have to say more. After years of working forensic anthropology investigations, Maggie got it.

“Okay,” Nate said. “I’m about thirty minutes out.”

“I’ll wait for you at the shed.” She disconnected and stowed her phone. This was such a crazy turn of

events, and it was likely going to be a long night. She should grab a bottle of water and protein bar from the cab before getting the equipment.

She rounded the truck and came up short.

A man stood in the dark, the moon barely outlining him.

Her heart seized with fear, and her arms went out in an automatic defensive posture.

“Hey, sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.” The guy held up his hands and stepped out of the shadows, taking away a bit of the fear factor. He had an average round face, full beard, and glasses making him appear kind of scholarly...like one of her fellow assistant professors or one of the older students on campus. In fact, he seemed familiar somehow.

“Do I know you?” she asked, trying to get a good look at his face with shadows still hiding much of it.

He shook his head. “I just got off work and wanted to check on my house. My place is one of the few that survived.”

He sounded legitimate and didn’t look all that threatening, but still, she wished she had a weapon of some sort or was still on the phone with Nate.

“Which house is yours?” she asked, hoping to ferret out the truth.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Big blue one on the left about a half mile down. Wife put that ginormous concrete fountain out front. Can’t miss it.”

Maggie remembered the house and fountain he was describing.

“It’s crazy how some houses escaped damage, isn’t it?” he asked.

She nodded and started to relax. The fire didn’t burn as hot in some areas, leaving entire homes in the subdivision without any damage. The destruction all depended on how the fire hopped from one location to another.

“Not that I’m gonna live here anytime soon.” He frowned. “Not with the destruction all around. Still, I check on the place every day. Pick up a few more things. Never know about looters.”

“I’ve been working here for days and haven’t seen anyone who wasn’t here to help.”

“Good to know.” He tilted his head. “You’re working kind of late, aren’t you?”

“There’s much to be done.”

“You’re the anthropologist, right? Saw you on the early news tonight.”

She nodded and hoped he didn’t gush about her volunteer work the way others were doing. She was just a regular person whose skills allowed her to be of assistance in this dire time.

“Well, on behalf of myself and neighbors, thank you.” He smiled and erased all worry from her mind. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

She nodded. “Nice talking to you.”

He took off down the street, and she headed for the cab to grab her water and bar, glancing over her shoulder along the way to make sure he kept going. He strolled down the middle of the barren street, the only safe place to walk at night—the best place even in broad daylight. She chugged some water, stowed the bottle and bar in her apron pocket, then went to the back of the truck. She unlocked it and climbed in.

The victim’s teeth, though ashen gray—meaning they were extremely fragile—were intact and could be compared to dental x-rays of the missing men as a quick method of confirming his identity. She would use a handheld x-ray device for that. With only fragments left to recover, no one used it for days, and she suspected it was buried in one of the bins on the truck’s shelves. She worked her way down the right side, pulling out containers, digging through each one until she reached the front of the vehicle.

She found the device in a lower bin. Finally. She pulled it out, and carefully set it on the floor. She stood to stretch, her lower back stiff from bending over ruins.

An arm came around her neck, jerking her back against a hard body.

She screamed.

Once. Twice. Loudly.

Then he cut off her air supply. Totally. Completely.

She strained to speak. Couldn’t emit even a peep. Tried again. Failed.

She only had a minute—maybe less—to get free before blackness settled in.

*Hurry! Hurry!*

She clawed at the arm in long frantic gashes. His long sleeves prevented her from ripping into his skin. She reached up. Clutched a fistful of hair. Yanked hard. Pulling. Tearing.

The man grunted but didn’t release her.

“I’m not going away for murder,” he said, his tone like a hissing snake.

*What in the world?*

He tightened his hold.

She tried to suck in air. Couldn’t gain a breath. Not even a sip of oxygen.

The darkness came, obscuring her vision. Beckoning her. She blinked hard. Blinked again but couldn’t fight the shadows descending over her eyes.

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