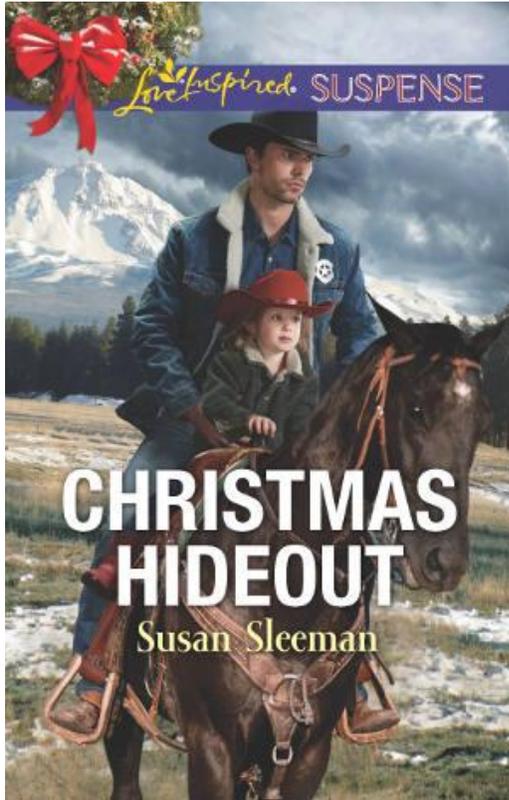


CHRISTMAS HIDEOUT SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

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COWBOY LAWMEN MAKE THE BEST PROTECTORS...

Fleeing from her dangerous ex-boyfriend, on-the-run single mother Nicole Dyer takes refuge in a cabin—and is discovered by the ranch owner, Deputy Matt McKade. It's easy to fall for the handsome lawman and his kind family but staying at the ranch endangers them all. When everything Nicole loves comes under direct fire, can Matt keep her—and her heart—safe?

CHAPTER ONE

The low keening wail reverberated from the walls of Nicole Dyer's apartment as fear skittered through her body.

She listened. Hard. Trying to figure out where the sound originated.

Her. It was coming from her. She was the one crying out.

She clamped a hand over her mouth, stilling the noise before she woke her precious three-year-old daughter. Nicole stared at the warning message. Someone had laid a photo of her on the butcher-block countertop and plunged a large hunting knife into it.

The threat was clear. Someone wanted her dead. And that someone had to be the man she'd recently broken up with. Grady Harmon.

He'd finally lost it. Taken his obsession with her too far. They'd dated for months and all was good, but then he'd turned angry and controlling, and she'd dumped him before he could hurt her or sweet Emilie. But that didn't matter to him.

Not one bit.

Nicole had been receiving texts for a month from various phones and nothing could be tracked back to Grady, but she knew it had to be him. He'd constantly tried to keep her from doing anything without him, hounding her and insisting he know her every move. So she'd ended things with him, and he was angry about the breakup. The messages started right after that, but soon changed to threats on her life.

But this? This physical threat? The hunting knife? This was too much.

How had he even gotten into her apartment?

Wait. Could he still be here?

She spun. Scanned the room, her heart racing.

Emilie. She had to protect Emilie.

Nicole grabbed the knife. Held it tight and raised it. Armed now and prepared to save her child, she charged down the hallway, fear stealing her breath. She shoved open Emilie's door. Her sweet child lay in her bed. Curled on her side. Her thumb firmly planted in her mouth.

Nicole sighed out her relief but didn't relax. She jerked open the closet door. He wasn't there. She knelt to look under the bed. Nothing.

She bolted for the door and checked her own bedroom. The closet. Under the bed. No intruder. She raced to the hallway bathroom. Knife raised, she slid open the shower curtain.

No Grady. No one.

A sigh of relief came to her lips, but she stifled it. She couldn't relax. Not for a second. Not when he'd stalked her. She saw him everywhere. At the grocery store. Outside the school where she taught third grade. At her church. He texted her. Demanded to get back together. Then started threatening her life. Daily. Sometimes hourly.

She'd reported everything to the police, but he used an unregistered phone and they couldn't trace it. She'd considered moving out of Austin to get away from him, but she'd have to quit her job. Her husband had been a great provider before he died, but he'd spent every penny he'd earned and left her with nothing. She had to work, and if she abandoned her job, how would she take care of Emilie?

And what would the point of moving be, anyway? Grady was a police officer, and he had ways to locate her anywhere. Especially here in Texas.

He'd even gotten into her apartment. He could come back at any time. Now. Tonight. Tomorrow. When she didn't know. Couldn't predict.

Panic raced along her nerves. She gulped for air. Couldn't find a breath. Panted. Tried harder. Looked for answers. For what to do.

She suddenly realized she was still clutching the knife and dropped it on the counter. The solid metal landed with a clang, ratcheting up her fear.

She needed help. Her sister. Piper. She'd call Piper. She was a voice of reason and could help Nicole think logically.

She grabbed her phone and dialed. "He's been here. Grady...in the apartment."

“Are you in danger?” Piper’s urgent and worried question was nearly Nicole’s undoing.

She took a breath and blew it out. Took another. “We’re fine at the moment. He’s gone, but he could come back.”

“You need to call the police. Now!”

“What good will that do?”

“He violated his restraining order. They can lock him up, and all of this will be over.”

Nicole snorted. “Like that’s made a difference. I’ve called 911 on him so many times, and he’s long gone before anyone arrives, so they think I’m crying wolf.” Piper had to realize by now that as a cop, Grady knew how to play the game. To disappear as fast as he’d appeared. “I’ll report him, but I can’t rely on the cops to make sure he’s punished for violating the order.”

“Why did I ever date him?” An ache settled in Nicole’s chest. “Him of all people to be the first guy to go out with since Troy died.”

She hadn’t dated in the three years since her husband had been killed in a motorcycle crash. She’d shut down for months, needing Piper just to get through her daily activities. But Nicole soon realized as a pregnant woman she had to find her footing again for the baby. To honor Troy and give their child the best chance in life. She started dating Grady after he came to her classroom to talk to her students. He was so compelling. So sweet with the kids, and she’d never been able to resist a guy who loved kids this way.

“You’ve got to quit beating yourself up about that,” Piper said. “I still think you should call the police.”

Nicole shot a look around her tiny apartment. “Grady wouldn’t have touched anything without wearing gloves, and there’s no sign of a forced entry.”

“Then how did he get in?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the windows.” She ran to check the locks, window by window. “No, they’re locked, and there’s no sign he forced them open.”

“What about the door?”

She raced to the front door. “No scratches or gouges from prying it open. He had to have a key.”

“Did you give him one?”

“No. He insisted I have a key to his place, but I never gave him one for my apartment.”

“Then how?”

“Maybe he used his status as a police officer to get the building manager to let him in. Yeah, that has to be it.”

Piper sighed. “No matter what, you’re not safe there. Come stay with me.”

“No. No way. He’d find us at your place. I need to leave. To run.” Nicole didn’t need to think twice about her decision when Grady threatened to kill her, leaving Emilie an orphan.

Running was the answer.

The only answer.

But how and where?

She’d just have to play it by ear.

“I’ll call you once we’re safe.” A thought burrowed into her brain. “No, wait. I can’t take my phone. He can track it. I’ll have to leave it here. I’ll buy a prepaid phone the minute we’re safe and call you.”

She couldn’t believe she was even thinking about running? Was it the right thing to do? Would they be safe?

“Honey, don’t go,” Piper pleaded, breaking Nicole’s heart even more and raising her doubts. “Not like this. Not alone. I’ll come—”

“I can’t ask you to come along. I’ll go to that cute bed and breakfast in the Texas Hill Country I stayed at with Troy. I’ll call you the minute I get a new phone. I love you, sis.” Nicole disconnected before she caved in.

She left the phone on the counter and raced to her room to jerk a tote bag from the closet. She needed clothes, sure, but she had to take items that were important to her, too. That gave her comfort. She didn’t know when she would be back, *if* she would be back, and the journey would be tough. Nicole would ask Piper to pack the rest of their things and put them in storage.

She grabbed her mother’s necklace. Her wedding ring. Her father’s watch. Put them in the bag. She located Emilie’s baby book and added it, too.

What next?

Should she even be doing this? Could she do it?

She looked at Emilie. Yes, for her, Nicole had to be strong.

She scanned the room. Pictures. She wanted to have family pictures with her. Piper's and their parents', who lived in Minnesota. This was the only way they could be with her to offer strength. She placed the frames into the bag. Next went her laptop and cords. Clothes followed. As many as she could fit in the bag.

She located a large backpack from her college days and hurried to Emilie's room to pack her belongings. She didn't want to risk Emilie dropping Mr. Monkey. Freeing him from her daughter's arms, she put him, then her favorite blanket and several changes of clothing, in the bag.

Bag zipped, Nicole surveyed Emilie's room. They'd just finished decorating the space with playful monkeys in bright colors that Emily had chosen. She'd named each monkey and said good night to them every night. Now she would have to leave them behind.

Tears pricked Nicole's eyes. She swiped them away. No time for tears when their safety was at risk. She slipped on the backpack and slung the tote bag over her shoulder.

Perfect. Nicole set off for the front door, passing the Christmas tree with Emilie's presents below. Only a week away, and Nicole was ready for the usual celebration with Piper. Now Emilie wouldn't have a family Christmas.

Tears flooded Nicole's eyes. Sobs followed, her body convulsing.

No. Stop. You have to keep it together for Emilie. Go! Now!

She breathed deeply, willed her tears away to pack food and her own personal items. She shrugged the bags over her shoulder and returned to pick Emilie up. She held her daughter close, inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo. In the foyer, Nicole snatched her keys from the table where she'd left them when she'd come home from an extended day at work to find the knife. *Home.* Not home any longer. Not since she'd spotted the knife.

She fumbled through the key ring to grasp the fob for her car. She held it at the ready. The moment she got in range of her car, she would press the button and unlock the doors. She wouldn't lock the deadbolt. No time for that. She'd have Piper take care of that, too.

At the door, Nicole pressed her ear against the cool metal and listened. She'd wait to step out until she heard people outside. Grady wouldn't likely approach when others were around and could act as witnesses to his visit. Sure, he would still try to follow her, but if he did, she had to hope she could lose him.

The moment she heard voices, she opened the door. Took a deep breath and mentally prepared to run for her car.

She pressed the button on the key fob. Heard the resulting beeps.

“This is it, baby,” Nicole whispered to her still-sleeping child.

She took off. Moving at top speed through the freezing night air. She reached her car. Jerked open the back door and settled Emilie. Nicole hated having her back exposed, but she had no choice. She couldn’t take off without Emilie safely buckled in her car seat.

Trembling hands made Nicole clumsy with the straps. “C’mon. C’mon. C’mon. Faster.”

She clicked the last one. Ripped the tote from her shoulder. Tossed it inside the car. Did the same with the backpacks and hopped into the front seat. She locked the door and got the car started.

She looked around. Searching. Scanning. Trying to find Grady.

She didn’t spot him. His truck. It made sense that he thought she’d call the police about the knife, and he’d already taken off.

She backed the car out and headed for the exit. She merged onto the street and pointed the car toward the freeway.

Yes! They were going to make it. Going to get away.

First stop would be the ATM for cash.

Wait. Cash.

No, oh no.

She’d left her purse behind. She’d dropped it on the floor when they’d come home, and she’d carried Emilie to her bed. Nicole had no wallet. No ID. No ATM card. No credit card. Not that she’d use one of those, as Grady could track the purchases, but she had to get cash somehow.

She would have to go back. Take Emilie from the car. Race in and grab the purse and race out again. It would be okay. She hadn’t seen Grady in the lot, and it should be safe.

She made a U-turn. Entered the parking lot again. Glanced around. Her gaze locked on a pickup truck. A gray one. Like Grady’s.

She searched the cab.

A man sat there.

He turned.

Smiled.

Locked gazes.

Grady.

No, oh, no. Why did it have to be him?

She shifted into reverse and tore out of the lot, hoping with every fiber of her being that she could lose him before he found a way to stop them and inflict any harm.

*

An intruder?

Deputy Matt McKade parked his patrol car out of view of the cabin, his warning senses tingling. The cabin was located on his family's dude ranch in the Texas Hill Country. He'd grown up at Trails End but now lived in an apartment in Lost Creek, just a few miles away, as did all of his siblings. But his parents and grandparents still lived in the main house. Matt and his three siblings also spent a lot of time there.

His parents and grandparents were out of town, and he'd promised to check in on the cabins while they were gone. Just two days, and they'd taken a break from renting cabins during the holidays and had no guests. He simply had to make a morning and evening inspection to be sure things were fine. No biggie, right?

Yeah, right. Until now. He'd just arrived for his evening inspection and found lights glowing in one of the cabins.

Could be a vagrant squatting again. They'd had problems with that in the past, hence the morning and evening checks. But it could be more than that, too. Vagrant or not, as a deputy, there was no way he would approach without taking precautions. Starting with killing his headlights and parking out of sight.

He climbed out of his vehicle and closed his door with a quiet click that seemed to reverberate through the frosty December night. He lifted his sidearm and approached the small building, the last cabin in a neat row of six. Located nearest to the main road, it was the building that vagrants seemed to favor when it was vacant.

He moved ahead, his breath whispering out in tiny white clouds. He passed the dude ranch's large fire pit. The horseshoe pit. The tall, bald cypress with a tire swing, all items favored by their guests. One step, then

another. Making sure to move slowly to keep his feet from crunching on fallen leaves and alerting the intruder inside.

He approached the side window, the light growing brighter as he walked. He glanced inside. Spotted someone sitting on the sofa, the small lamp illuminating their head tilted at an angle. He watched. They didn't move. Not a fraction of an inch. Asleep or dead, he didn't know.

Warning bells clanged in his brain.

If the person was asleep, his best bet was to make a surprise entry. He took out his master key and went to the door. A quick turn of the lock and knob, then a push, and he had the door open. He flipped on the overhead light.

"Police," he shouted, using the universal name that all law enforcement used regardless of their agency affiliations when approaching a potentially dangerous person. "Don't move."

The person startled. Sat forward.

What in the world?

A young woman holding a child stared at him, her eyes wide, terror etched in the depths.

"I'm sorry." She blinked against the bright light. "I know I shouldn't be here. My car. It broke down. We were so tired and cold. I didn't have blankets for my daughter. She'd freeze. I got the window open, and we came in. I...I'm sorry. Please don't arrest me, Officer..."

"Deputy McKade. Matt McKade." He blew out his adrenaline on a long wave of air, his mind trying to calm down and figure out how to handle this intruder. He'd start by identifying her. "What's your name?"

"Nicole. Nicole Dyer." She peered down on the child. "This's my daughter, Emilie. We live in Austin. I'm a widow and my ex-boyfriend has been stalking me. At first, I thought he was just trying to intimidate me into getting back together with him. But he's gotten progressively angrier and threatening. Tonight, he left a knife in my kitchen. He's threatened to kill me. So I ran, but I left my purse at home and don't have any money. I'd only driven an hour or so when my car broke down and I had nowhere to go." Her words rolled over each other like tumbleweeds in a dust storm on the open Texas range.

Matt didn't like hearing of a stalker. Didn't like it one bit. Stalkers were often all talk and no action, but this guy, if she could be believed, sounded like the deadly type, and she was right to fear for her life.

But could she be believed? His first instinct was to trust her. She seemed too upset to be making this up. Didn't matter. He was a sworn officer of the law, and he couldn't just take her word for it. "Do you have any identification?"

She shook her head and bit her full bottom lip. It was then that he allowed himself to take a good look at her. She had big icy-blue eyes still wide with fear. High cheeks. Wavy blond hair pulled back into a bun, but strands had fallen free and lay softly against her creamy skin. In a word, beautiful, and something about her got to him in a way he hadn't felt in a long time.

Before he communicated his attraction, he forced his gaze from her face and it landed on the child all snuggled up to her mother. She had blonde curls and an angelic face that people must fawn over.

"Are you arresting me?" Nicole met his gaze and locked on.

Her vulnerability pulled at him, triggering something deep inside. She broke into the cabin, had a story to tell and he what? He simply believed her story because she was pretty?

Right. He could just hear his sheriff father lecturing him about this kind of behavior. Matt had a job to do here. To figure out if she was telling the truth. But he clearly didn't need to keep his weapon out.

He holstered it. "Do you know your car's license plate number?"

"Yes! Yes! Perfect. You can check that out, can't you?" She flashed a quick smile—her way of saying thanks, he supposed—and rattled off the numbers. "It's a Honda Accord. White. 1996."

"Registered in Texas?"

She nodded.

"And what's your date of birth?" he asked, now easily sliding into his deputy role.

She quickly provided the information, and he didn't even have to calculate her age. They were born the same year, making her thirty-two.

He inserted the earbud for his radio in his ear. In his mic, he repeated the information she'd provided and requested a DMV lookup, along with information from the associated driver's license and details of the restraining order. If he was in his car, he could handle all of this himself, including seeing her photo on her driver's license, but he wouldn't leave her here and go back to his car.

While he waited for dispatch to retrieve the information, he turned his attention back to Nicole. “Tell me about the warning you received tonight.”

She took a deep breath and shifted to face him. “He left a big knife—a foot long and like the ones I know he uses for hunting. He stabbed it into a picture of me on my countertop made of butcher-block. No written message. Just that horrible, horrible terrifying visual message while Emilie was sleeping in the next room. I panicked. Packed our bags, grabbed Emilie and fled.” She flashed her gaze filled with shock and disbelief up to his.

Whatever had happened had affected her deeply. Despite his desire to remain impartial, his protective instinct rose up. He tried to tamp it down. It was awful early in their conversation to believe she needed protection of any sort, but even a hint of a woman in physical danger riled him to no end, and he couldn’t just push it away.

“Did you call the police?” he asked.

She shook her head and lifted her chin in a defiant tilt. “What good would it do? I called so many times in the past, and they didn’t help. His name is Grady Harmon. He’s a police officer, and by the time his fellow cops show up, he’s long gone, and they don’t believe me.”

Say what? The guy was a law enforcement officer? That put a different spin on things.

Matt didn’t automatically assume all cops were good people. They weren’t, just like anyone in any other profession, but whether or not he was good, officers initially took the side of one of their brothers until facts prove otherwise. Might not be the right response, but they needed to depend on their fellow officers having their backs. Sometimes they took it too far, though, and protected their own when they didn’t deserve it.

She sighed. “You’d think they’d realize I had to have proof of his actions to get the restraining order, but they don’t seem to take that into account.”

“I’m not saying you don’t have proof, but I do know that judges these days will most always side with the victim. Officers know this and can be skeptical.”

“You, too, I see.” Her eyes darkened to the shade of a new pair of Wranglers, and she glared at him.

Even with her tense expression, she touched something inside him, and he wanted to help her. “I’m not saying they’re right or wrong. I’m just saying the burden of proof for a restraining order is lighter than most legal proceedings.”

“He really has been stalking me.” She raised her shoulders into a hard line. “I don’t lie. It goes against my Christian beliefs.”

She was a Christian. Of course, anyone could claim to be a believer. And believers lied at times, too. Matt knew that from his job. People lied to officers all the time. People he saw in church on Sunday.

Sure, he wanted to take her word at face value—wanted to believe her, but even if he wanted to, he couldn’t. He was a deputy, and that meant checking facts and living by those facts. Not the word of a woman who piqued his interest. Actually, just the opposite.

Because he was attracted to her, he would do even more digging before buying into her story. Still, she could be assured if there was any hint of danger, he’d step up and make sure they were safe. No way he’d leave them to the mercies of a dangerous stalker. No way.

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