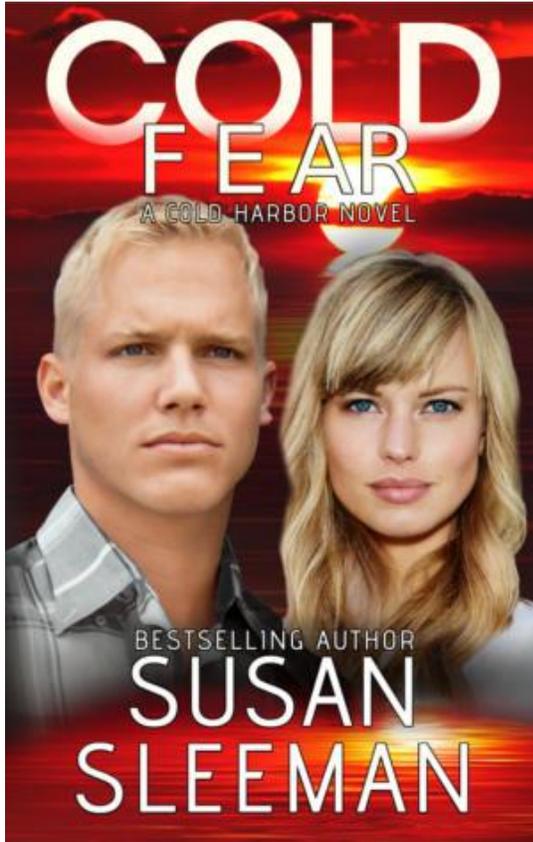


COLD FEAR SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

Cold Harbor– Book 5 – August/2018

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A shared past...

Riley Glen's former girlfriend, recording artist Leah Kent, is performing at a summer concert nearby and calls to tell him she's in danger and needs his help. After the concert, he discovers her bending over a woman's dead body, and the woman has Leah's name freshly tattooed on her wrist. Leah claims she just found the body and didn't have anything to do with the murder. When two other bodies are found, both boasting Leah's name in bright ink on their wrists, she comes under suspicion for the murders. Riley jumps in to defend her from both an imminent arrest and a killer's deadly rage.

A new beginning?

Riley and Leah had once been a music team and deeply in love. But Riley's lifelong dream was to be a sniper, not a musician. He chose to follow his dream and has been successful in his career just as Leah has found success in hers. He still has feelings for Leah, but their lives are on vastly different courses. But when she begs for his help to clear her name and protect her, he agrees to do what he can. Riley soon discovers this killer is highly trained and vicious, and Leah won't survive another day unless Riley uses every skill he possesses to try to save her.

Chapter One

Her life was in danger. That's what Leah said in her cryptic phone call. And now Riley was here to keep her alive.

After nearly five years apart, she needed him. Wanted to hire his team to protect her. And he'd come running. Just like that. One phone call, and he was backstage at the open-air amphitheater at Rugged Point Beach. No questions asked.

He rested his hand on his sidearm and searched the concert crowd for any hint of a threat. Tried to concentrate. Failed. How could he focus with Leah singing on stage, captivating the audience—and him?

He didn't think he would ever see her again after their big breakup. Well, not other than the superstar Leah Kent in music and celebrity news, but here he was. Someone was stalking her. Or so she thought. A man seemed to be following her, concert to concert. Hiding in the dark, then vanishing before anyone could find him. Riley wouldn't let a man, any man, come after her. Not while he was still breathing.

He moved forward to get a better view of the stage. Okay, fine, a better view of Leah. She was tall and blond, the two things he'd noticed about her the first time he'd laid eyes on her across the college quad.

Then he'd approached her, slowly, enjoying the way she met his gaze and watched him cross over to her. Eyes the color of a million sapphires compressed into a single stone had captivated him, and he'd fallen hard for her right then. She'd seemed to fall hard, too. At first, he was shocked to discover she wasn't a student and worked in the cafeteria, but that didn't matter. They started dating and were inseparable for the next two years.

Until they weren't.

Memories. No place for them tonight, but her haunting voice held him in the past. A combination of folk and country. Soft and melodic, but with a bite to it. She was singing a ballad—one they'd written together. Her first big hit. "Never Let You Go."

Did she choose to perform this song tonight to punish him? No, she wasn't vindictive. Unless she'd changed. Fame and fortune could do that to a person, and she surely had both, her songs often lingering at the top of the music charts.

She broke into the chorus, her voice and the band's rhythm swelling.

Loving you. Holding you.

Never let it end.

Never let you go.

You and me, it will always be.

The music reached a crescendo as a soft ocean breeze played over the open stage, the salty smell of waves rushing in adding to the mood. He remembered when they'd co-written it...young, deliriously happy, and in love. The song was coming to a close, and they would be face-to-face for the first time in years. But he had to force down his personal feelings.

He had a job to do—protect her.

He stepped back into the covered area of the small amphitheater to do some deep breathing and clear his head. The song ended. Applause broke out. He waited for her to join him, but she didn't. He peered out. She'd exited on the other side of the stage.

Wait, what? Was he on the wrong side? Could the stalker be over there?

He was about to dash around when she came back on stage for an encore. She sang an upbeat tune, and he scanned the crowd and the surroundings. Nothing threatening. His eyes

snagged on her dancing to the beat in a silvery top and jeans, her shoulder-length blond hair and gorgeous smile captivating him. And everyone else. The crowd cheered and sang along, fans reaching up eager arms to her.

Focus, man.

She finished her song. The applause was deafening now. She bowed and glanced at him. Good. She would step his way this time for sure.

She rose up, blew kisses to the audience then turned and walked off the other side of the stage again while the band continued to play.

Why did she keep going that way? People were swarming the stage—he had to get through them to protect her.

A loud scream sounded from the enclosed backstage area.

Leah?

His heart stuttered, and he sprinted into action, shoving past the backstage lurkers.

“Secure the area,” he called to Sal Arnett, her security guard, who’d let Riley in tonight and then bolted past her manager, Kraig Moon.

Riley charged around the corner and down the hall to the wide storage and staging area. His feet came to a halt.

A woman lay on the wooden floor. Blood oozed from two bullet wounds in her back. Leah was leaning over her. The woman was blond and slender, unmoving.

Leah looked up and met his gaze. Terror filled her eyes. Her pain tore him apart, but he drew his sidearm and scoured the shadowed corners of the room. No one was there, but the shooter could be nearby. He needed to get Leah away and secure the scene.

Leah held up blood-covered hands and scrubbed them down her pants, her panicked gaze searching now.

“Someone shot...she’s...she’s dead.” The words came out on a strangled breath. Sobs followed. Big chest-heaving sobs.

Riley rushed to her, gently took her arm, and lifted her to her feet. “C’mon. We need to move you someplace safe.”

He backed them away from the area, blocking any potential gunshot to her body with his own, alert to any danger.

In the hallway, Kraig stood looking at the victim while wringing his hands. Riley moved past him and pushed open the door marked Dressing Room 1. He quickly scanned the small space. Makeup table. A love seat. Coffee table with bottled drinks and snacks. A hanging rack with clothes on it. Small refrigerator. But otherwise empty. He glanced at the door. Perfect. It had a deadbolt.

He turned back to Kraig. “Take Leah in here and stay with her until I tell you it’s safe to come out.”

“But...”

“No buts. A woman’s been murdered. Leah could be next.”

“Next?” Kraig’s eyes were wide and unfocused, matching Leah’s shocked stare.

“We’ll figure that out later. The shooter could still be here.”

Kraig ran a hand over his dull brown hair pulled back in a man bun.

“Move. Now!” Riley gave the shorter guy a shove.

Kraig took hesitant steps but escorted Leah in the room. Riley shut the door and waited for the snick of the lock, turning as footsteps approached him.

Sal raced into the hallway. His gaze was sharp, his muscular body poised for attack. Perfect. He would act and not falter like Kraig.

“I got the area sealed off. Heard a woman was...” Sal’s words trailed off as he caught sight of the body, his wide jaw clenching.

“It’s not Leah,” Riley said as the woman resembled Leah—long blond hair, about five seven, and her clothing was similar. “Kraig took her into Dressing Room 1 for safety. I need you to call 911 and block access to the staging area while I clear it.”

His eyes widened. “You think the shooter’s still here?”

“I don’t know, but I aim to find out.” Gun raised, Riley cautiously approached the crime scene. Kept his gaze off the victim. Forced himself not to think about the loss of life.

He’d been a patrol officer for three years, a sniper for another three for the Portland Police Bureau, and another two years as a member of Blackwell Tactical—a protection and investigations team made up of former military and law enforcement officers. Riley knew how to tune out the horrific sight of death. How to focus and make sure no one else came to any harm.

As Blackwell’s sniper, he was usually behind the scope of his rifle, but this was no different.

Assess. Evaluate. Act.

It was instinct now.

He passed the body and approached the hallway leading away from the stage. A jarring red neon exit sign at the end announced the door out of the building. Riley hoped the killer hadn’t left and Riley could apprehend him. Or her? He wanted to hurry down the hall and check outside for the fleeing suspect, but he’d have to pass uncleared dressing rooms which would put him in danger. He had to take his time. Protect his own life first.

He pushed open the Dressing Room 2 door and slipped back to wait for any sound inside. Hearing nothing, he took a quick look. A small space. Empty. He moved on to the next room. And the next.

At the last door, splintered wood abutted the lock. A break-in. He steeled himself for an intruder, shoved open the door, and took a quick look. It was a much larger room with a tall dressing screen in the corner. Women's clothes were strewn across a chair, and makeup and hair products covered the table by a large lighted mirror. It was probably Leah's dressing room—unless she got ready in her big fancy tour bus outside—and the shooter could be behind the screen.

“I'm armed and prepared to shoot,” Riley announced from the hallway. “Show yourself.”

He waited, counting. *One. Two. Three. Four. Five.*

He swung around the corner and charged the screen, sending it crashing into the cinderblock wall. He jerked it out of the way, firearm ready. Found no one.

He blew out a breath. A long one. Drew in another and looked around. Behind him, a window was open, gauzy curtains swaying in the breeze. The shooter had likely entered through the window. Maybe exited the same way or even through the door.

Riley holstered his weapon, hurried down the hall, and bumped open the exit door to scope out the area. People were flowing around the building, but no one was running or looked threatening. Time to get official law enforcement on the scene.

Riley closed the door and dialed the county sheriff.

“Sheriff Jenkins.” Blake's voice was sure and strong, just like the man.

Riley could always count on Blake. If a murder had to occur, Riley was glad it happened in their county. “Riley Glen. I'm at Rugged Point Amphitheater. A woman's been murdered.”

Riley brought Blake up to speed on the situation. “We’ve called 911. I’ve cleared the area, and the crime scene is secure and protected. I don’t know if the shooter exited and mingled with the people, though.”

“A murder. Man, oh, man.” Blake was clearly upset that a citizen had been killed under his watch—and the killer was still on the loose. “Keep the scene secure for me. I’m on my way with reinforcements.”

Riley disconnected and called Gage Blackwell, owner of Blackwell Tactical. When his boss answered, Riley told him about the murder. “911’s been called, and I also called Blake.”

“Good. Anything I can do?”

“We should get Sam out here.” Samantha Willis was the newest member of their team. Before her injury, she had served as a criminalist with the Portland Police Bureau and was fully versed in the latest CSI techniques.

“You think Blake will let her touch anything?” Gage asked.

“Nah, but I want her here so the second he releases the scene, she can process the space before it’s contaminated.”

There was a long pause. “Sounds like you don’t trust the county forensics staff.”

“I do to a point, but Sam’s skills are superior. If she works the scene, nothing will be missed.”

“Roger that. I’ll send her over.”

Riley shoved his phone into his pocket and started toward the dressing room to talk to Leah. He was glad that official law enforcement officers were on the way to search the surrounding area, but he didn’t need them inside. He could keep people from contaminating the crime scene and disturbing the body.

What he couldn't handle was the raw pain on Leah's face and being back in her life again. The ache was as bad as a physical knife to the chest, but he'd deal with it later. Right now he was determined to keep her safe, find the killer, and restore her life.

Of that she could be sure. Pain or no pain from their turbulent past.

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