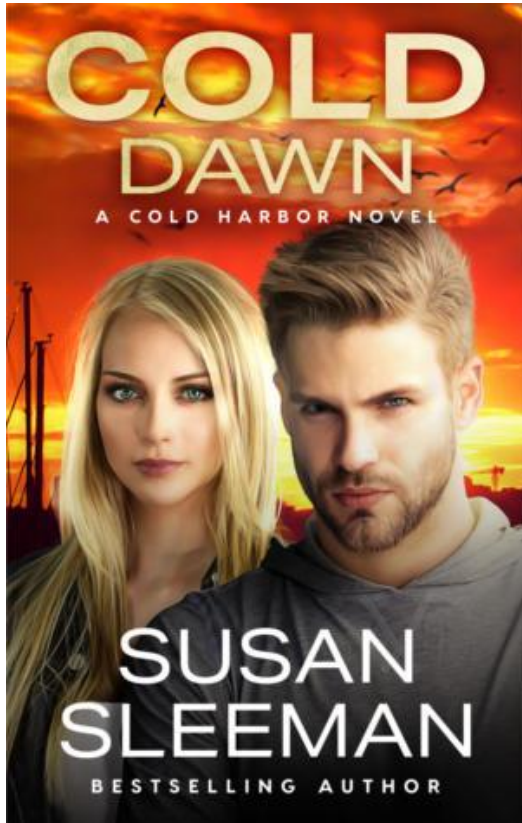


COLD DAWN SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

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She's on the run...

When Whitney Rochester's brother-in-law kills her sister, Whitney fears for the life of her niece and nephew. She can't leave them in her murderous brother-in-law's care so she goes on the run with the children to be sure they're out of his reach. Or so she thinks until a killer shows up—weapon in hand—at the ski resort where she works and targets her.

But he's in pursuit.

Former Recon Marine Alex Hamilton is working an undercover investigation at the resort when a crazed man wielding a gun takes out a guy in close proximity

to Whitney. Despite not having the support of the Blackwell Tactical team, other than their forensic expert, Samantha Willis, Alex isn't about to let the shooter harm Whitney or anyone else. When a blinding snowstorm triggers avalanches in the area, it's too dangerous for the police to reach the secluded resort to stop the killer. Alex and Sam must protect everyone at the resort while they feverishly work to figure out if Whitney or the victim were the intended target. As Alex and Whitney grow close and the killer strikes again, Alex has to find and take down this madman, even if it means risking his own life.

Chapter One

Andy died here. Yesterday. Alone. In a fiery inferno.

What was he doing in an abandoned crab cannery in the first place? He didn't live in Lost Creek. Wasn't a fisherman.

Forensic expert Samantha Willis' eyes clogged with tears, and she blinked hard to clear them and evaluate the scene. But her heart felt heavy as lead, and the tears kept coming. One after another, rolling down her cheeks and dripping onto the charred floorboards.

Oh, Andy. Why?

He was once her best friend. Then he'd asked her to marry him. She loved him, but only as a friend. She turned him down and things got awkward. Too awkward. So they didn't stay in touch. At least not regularly.

Now he was dead. *Dead.* She couldn't even believe it yet.

Her heart clenched, and she touched a charred wooden support beam, ashes whispering to the scorched floor. She took a long breath of air laden with the lingering aroma of scorched wood. Not the pleasant smell from a campfire or fireplace. This was bitter and caustic smelling.

She wanted to sit down and have a good cry, but she was there for a reason. She swiped her tears away with her sleeve and snapped on latex gloves to take a look around the room that was—for the most part—still intact. The fire department arrived to extinguish the flames before the shell of the building suffered tremendous damage. But still, Andy didn't make it.

Did someone lure him here to murder him? Sam didn't know. But she would when she was done.

"I promise, Andy," she said to the large empty crab-packing room. "I *will* find out and make them pay. For you, my dear friend. For you."

She set down her forensic kit by the sliding metal door and propped it open with a metal pole. The heavy door to the canning room had closed and locked behind Andy, trapping him in this room. That wasn't going to happen to her.

She pulled her hair up into a ponytail to keep it out of her face as she worked. She grabbed her camera from the bag and lifted her legs carefully over large chunks of wood, scorched like firewood burgeoning to life in a campfire and then doused with a bucket of water. Except no one roasted marshmallows here. Here they killed her friend.

She snapped pictures. Randomly. A shot here. One there. She tried to focus. Tried to set priorities, but her usual professional eye evaded her. As a former criminalist for the Portland Police Bureau and now the forensic specialist for Blackwell Tactical, she had years of experience and had never failed to do her job. But then, she'd never investigated the death of a friend.

The urge to bolt out the door grabbed her by the throat, tears welling in her eyes again and clouding her vision.

Yes, go. Now. She turned. Took a step.

No. Suck it up. Andy needs you to find out what happened here.

Blake Jenkins, the local sheriff, was called in when the firefighters discovered Andy, but the arson investigator hadn't located a source for the fire and couldn't declare it was arson.

She'd counted on Blake's forensic team to gather evidence, but they found nothing to prove arson and let the investigator's report stand. Which meant they hadn't opened a homicide investigation. That could change after the autopsy, but for now, she was the only one looking into Andy's death.

Her phone pealed out the ringtone "Anchors Aweigh," startling her and cutting through the silence. She'd assigned this ringtone to her boss, former Navy SEAL Gage Blackwell. She didn't want to answer. Not now. Not with her heart breaking. But she would.

She owed Gage so much. She would never ignore his call.

Trying not to sound down, she hung her camera around her neck and answered. "What's up, Gage?"

"Sorry to bother you when you're taking some personal time." His sincere, caring tone almost sent her bawling like a baby.

She swallowed hard. "No worries."

"It's about the fire," he said. "The one that your friend died in."

Say what? "Andy? You know something about that?"

"It's looking like you're right. It might not have been an accident."

Her mouth fell open. She believed the fire had to have been started on purpose, but only because she wanted to blame someone for his death. Wanted a place to direct her anger. But now...

She took another look around the room. "Did they find arson evidence after all?"

"Blake's being closemouthed about his findings as usual, but I talked to the fire marshal. He believes there were two recent fires that were highly suspicious and could be related."

Thoughts pinged in her brain as she tried to make sense of this news. "Were those fires intentionally started?"

"Inconclusive. The fire marshal said the fires burned fast with excessive heat and they all followed a specific path. Plus the utilities were turned off to the buildings, so the source of ignition was either lightning or arson. No lightning in the area any of the nights. Leaves arson. The investigator didn't recover any proof, though. Not in any of the locations."

"Finding arson evidence isn't like a homicide or burglary scene. The evidence often burns up in the fire." She looked around the space. A waterfall of tears started again, and she

quickly snapped her gaze to look out the window to gain control and think. “Wait. I’m confused. Why are you involved in this?”

“Blackwell Tactical has been hired to investigate the fires.”

Color her surprised. Her team? Hired to find her friend’s killer? “But we don’t have any experience with arson.”

“We do know criminal investigations, and we can hire fire experts if we need them.”

“True.”

“I figured you’d be glad to have a first-rate team looking into Andy’s death, so I took the job.”

“I’m glad you did,” she said with vehemence. “Trust me. I really am.”

Silence filled the phone. She hoped she hadn’t offended him. Or made him think she didn’t want the team’s help. She was extremely grateful for their expertise. Plus the friendship and support that came along with working with an incredible group. She’d joined the team less than a year ago, but they were already family.

“You’re in mourning, and I hate to ask this,” he finally said. “But could you cancel your personal leave to run the investigation? We’ll need a forensic expert on this one for sure.”

Could I ever!

“I’m in,” she said tempering her enthusiasm. She didn’t want him to question her ability to keep a level head when investigating a friend’s death.

“Good. Good.” Relief was nearly palpable in his voice.

She understood his concern. Most of her teammates were former military, not law enforcement. Sure, they taught classes for officers, but the courses were tactical in nature, not investigative. So she, plus Eryn who was a former FBI agent, and Riley who once served as a Portland Police Bureau sniper, were charged with making sure the team followed proper evidentiary protocol.

“I’d like you to get over to the cannery ASAP,” Gage continued. “If there’s any evidence to be recovered, you’ll find it.”

“I’m at the scene right now.”

“Figured you’d be going there this week, but I should’ve known you wouldn’t wait.”

He already knew her so well. He took a personal interest in each of his team members. Maybe too much of an interest at times, but she didn’t care. She’d sustained a shoulder injury in her PPB job and faced riding a desk until he’d hired her for the team. In addition to Gage and her, the other six members were also injured while serving their country in the military or in law enforcement.

“Do you need any help or equipment?” he asked.

Now guilt heaped on her head. She’d borrowed team equipment to process the building without asking. She didn’t want to do it, but asking for his permission would’ve started her crying. Crying in front of Gage or the team wasn’t optional for her. Ever. At least not if she could help it.

“It’s okay,” Gage said. “I’ll take your silence to mean you’ve got what you need. That’s all that matters.”

Of course he figured out that she’d taken the equipment. That was Gage through and through. Nothing got past him. Nothing.

Her phone beeped a low battery warning. Right. In her hurry to get here, she’d left her charger in Cold Harbor and needed to buy one soon.

“I gotta go. My phone’s dying.”

“I’ll get the team started on the investigation from our end,” Gage said. “You report in the minute you finish the scene.”

“Will do.” She disconnected and glanced at the battery icon. Five percent charge remaining. Her phone was her lifeline. Like most people these days, she used it for everything. She had to get this place processed and head to the store for that charger.

She lifted her camera again to document the space where tons of crab had been packed over the years. When she’d arrived at the building, she still detected hints of a fishy smell, but nothing seeped through the fire odor in this room. Backing up to the door, she snapped wide shots of the space to capture placement of every table, stool, and the conveyor belts, then moved in to take closer shots of the ruins.

She zoomed in on blackened wood. Ashes. Piles of debris. Charred metal. She followed a grid pattern to get every inch of the room recorded in photos, and then grabbed her kit and went back to the corner where the report stated the fire had started.

She shoved plastic evidence bags in one pocket, tweezers, a tube of swabs in another, and a ruler in her back pocket. In her hands, she carried numbered markers and small empty paint cans. The white-hot burn left little in way of evidence other than ash, and she set markers on the ground where she would select samples. She took even more pictures, and jotted her impressions in a small notebook that would later be transferred to her official report.

Sure, the investigator had taken samples from around the room, but after rush processing, he reported that ignitable liquid residues weren’t found in his samples. Either an accelerant wasn’t used to start the fire, or he didn’t take good samples. She would collect her own to test.

She selected wood pieces boasting liquid stains and placed them in the unused paint cans. She might have something. Might not. The stains could be from accelerants or from years of processing wet crab. She sealed and labeled the paint can, the standard container for storing ILRs, as the cans were impermeable and didn’t taint the samples.

She moved on and found glass fragments. Molotov cocktail? Maybe.

Following the same procedure, she placed an evidence marker, snapped a picture, and bagged fragments in a clean can. If the glass came from a bottle or jar holding an ignition source, analysis of the glass could prove it. The investigator surely would've processed glass samples, too, and she didn't expect it to return a positive result for ILRs, but she was always thorough in her work. Forming a hypothesis before collecting all the evidence could taint her mindset and blind her to looking for every piece of possible evidence.

She grabbed her magnifying glass and searched every inch of the room looking for bloodstains, shoe prints—arsonists often stepped in the liquid flammables they used—and anything else she could find.

Coming up with very little, she sat back on her heels to think. She'd been trained in arson evidence collection, but hadn't actually processed a fire scene. But Andy deserved the very best, so she'd done something she vowed never to do again. She called Matt Griffin, the man she once believed she would spend the rest of her life with, and asked him to meet her here.

A retired Navy SEAL, Griff had picked the perfect second career. Firefighting fit his thrill-seeker personality. Battling fires gave him the adrenaline rush he always sought. Mountain climbing. Hang gliding. Skydiving. He did it all. The riskier the better. She didn't like the way he endangered his life, but that was who he was, and to be with him, she'd had to accept that when they were together.

She sighed at the memory. Between his deployments and outdoor adventures, she prayed more during that year than she had in any prior year. And now after seven years, she was about to see him again.

What was that going to be like? She couldn't even imagine, but tingled with the thought. And her hands trembled when she'd called him. Clearly, she still had some feelings for him. Unexpected feelings.

Focus, girl.

She lowered her magnifying glass and spotted hairs or fibers stuck between floorboards. She held the glass closer. Most likely pet hair. Could be from the killer. Or could have been there for years, but she bagged it anyway. Long hairs. Silvery-gray. Coarse like a dog. Andy was allergic to dogs, and they wouldn't have come from him unless he'd picked them up outside his home.

She sat back on her heels to look around and mentally list out the remaining items to follow up on. There was a metal door in the corner with an unusual latch that she needed to check out, and she still needed to go downstairs and look for any accelerant that might have seeped through the floorboards.

She closed the hard-shell case on her camera and stowed it in her tote then knelt to make sure the paint cans were tightly sealed and packed them in her bag.

A loud bang sounded behind her.

She whipped around. The door had closed.

“Scared me to death,” she muttered and got up. She must not have wedged the metal bar well enough.

The sound of the wide bar that was used to lock the door scraped into place on the other side. She glanced at the floor. The firm length of steel she’d used to prop the door open was missing.

Why wasn’t the steel lying on the floor in this room?

Griff? He liked to play practical jokes.

She crossed the room and tried to push the door open. It wouldn’t budge.

She pounded on solid metal. “Griff, if you’re playing a joke on me, it’s not funny. Open the door.”

Silence. Nothing but silence. The caustic odor of gasoline filtered under the door.

Was someone out there? Starting another fire?

Her heart seized up, and she pounded harder. No one answered. Panic sent her pulse racing.

She couldn’t unlock the door. Not with the one-inch thick bar on the other side. The very reason Andy got trapped in this room, and why she’d taken precautions to keep the door open.

She dug out her phone and woke it up. The wheel spun and spun, then it shut down. “No. No. No. Not the battery.”

She heard movement on the other side of the door. She pounded again and decided to use Griff’s real name which he hated. “Matthew Griffin. This isn’t funny. Open the door.”

No response.

Of course not. Griff would never pull a stunt like this. No way he would make fun of something like fire. Especially when it had killed Andy in this very location.

She rested her head against the cool metal to think and looked down. Smoke slithered under the gap, long fingers creeping into the room and over her feet.

“What? No.” She jumped back.

The volume of smoke increased, curling up into her breathing space. She pulled her shirt over her nose and looked around the room. Sought an exit.

“The windows!” She raced across the floor, dodging debris. Climbing on a metal table, she pulled herself up to take a quick look from the second floor. Could she bail out?

She looked down. The building sat on a hill overlooking the river with large boulders directly below. Certain death if she jumped.

She turned back. Dark clouds swirled over the floor and pooled on the ceiling.

Panic raced up her spine—clutched at her throat as smoke burned her eyes.

She ran a frantic gaze over the area again. Searching. Seeking. Any way to stay alive. Found nothing.

No. No. It can't be.

She was trapped, totally trapped. The only way out—another deathtrap.

*

Griff turned onto Rivercrest Drive and shook his head. How had he driven for an hour and still not come up with what to say to Sam when he saw her again? What could he say?

“Hey, honey. I’m sorry you broke up with me. Sure it’s been seven years, but I’m still in love with you, in case you’re interested.”

Yeah, right. Like he’d ever bare his soul to her again. To any woman. After losing his parents, it took everything he had to open up to her in the first place and risk being hurt again. And now visiting the place where his childhood friend and houseguest Andy died at the same time? The flames taking his life.

Not something Griff would wish on his worst enemies, and he’d seen his share of bad operators in his SEAL days.

He stopped at a red light and glanced down the road to take in the old crab cannery. Smoke billowed up from the building. Thick black clouds of smoke coupled with bright orange flames.

“Say what?”

Someone had set the building on fire again, and the front was fully engulfed.

Sam was there. His heart plummeted.

Did she go inside or wait for him in the lot?

Please let her be waiting.

He floored the gas and shot through the intersection on the deserted road. Punching the emergency button on his dash, he reported the fire to 911. He kept his eyes ahead, trying to see the parking lot. A Jeep was parked there, but no one was inside the vehicle.

“No. Sam. No. I told you to wait for me.” He swallowed hard to keep his mounting panic at bay. He could handle putting himself in danger, but knowing someone he cared about was in harm’s way filled him with terror.

He parked in the lot and jumped from his pickup. The heat radiated from the building. Glass was breaking. Wood snapping. White smoke curled up and over the black. This side of the

building was fully engulfed.

Hurry. Hurry.

He reached into his gear bag stowed in the jump seat to grab a flashlight, bandana, Nomex hood, and fire gloves, then bolted for the other side of the building. Smoke rolled out a window, but so far it was flame free. With the front mostly engulfed, it wouldn't take long for the back to go up, too.

He spotted the exterior stairs and charged up, donning the hood as he moved. It was odd to enter a burning building without full turnout gear or his SCBA and helmet. He'd often considered keeping more of his gear in his truck, but firefighting wasn't an individual activity. It was a team sport, and he wouldn't likely need the gear off duty. The medic in him did keep a large first aid kit in the box of his truck, but he hoped he wouldn't need it today.

He felt the door for heat. Still cool.

Good.

The lock was snapped off.

Did the arsonist know Sam was inside? If so, the person intended to kill her.

His heart lurched, and he doubled his resolve not to let them succeed. He tied the bandana around his mouth and nose, donned his gloves, and jerked the door open.

Smoke flooded out, and the stench of gasoline carried through. Like he suspected. Someone set the fire.

The building plans he'd reviewed earlier told him he had twenty feet to reach the room Andy died in, and he could easily hold his breath that distance. He gulped in air and headed into the smoky haze that darkened the space. Flames dancing along the rear wall illuminated the area.

He placed his hand on the side wall to keep his bearings and moved deeper into the smoke, counting his steps until the door to the canning room appeared under his hand. What if Sam was trapped inside? He felt the door. It was cool.

He lifted the heavy bar and jerked open the door. Tried to see through the smoke, but it was too thick.

“Sam! Sam!” He listened for a moment.

Heard nothing.

Could she have succumbed to smoke inhalation? Or worse?

Panic edged ever closer.

Stay calm. She needs you.

Wait! Was that a tapping sound coming from the corner? He couldn't see a thing through

the concentrated smoke. The urge to rush in hit hard, but he had to find a way to brace the door so he didn't end up trapped, too. He felt around and touched a steel table. He let the door close for a moment and dragged the narrow table to the doorway to wedge it firmly in place.

He got as low as he could and headed straight for the corner where the clanking sound continued. "Sam!"

He reached the back wall. Ran his hands over the area. A metal door. Where it led he didn't know.

God, please. Please let Sam be here and let her still be alive.

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