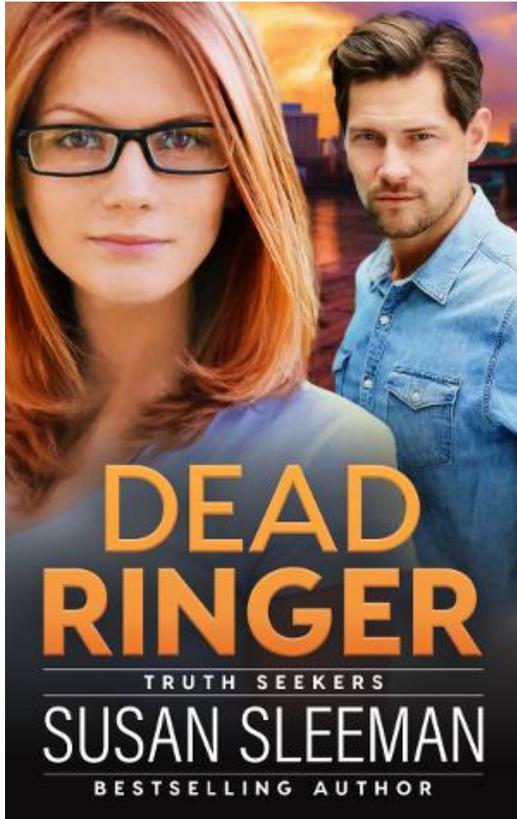


## DEAD RINGER SNEAK PEEK



**Romantic Suspense** – Print and EBook

**Truth Seekers Series** – April/2019

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**She was hiding from her past...**

When a local woman goes missing and Sheriff Blake Jenkins delivers her blood sample to DNA expert Emory Steele for analysis, Blake discovers Emory is a dead ringer for the missing woman. Blake's gut says the woman is related to Emory. But Emory rejects the notion, requiring a DNA test before she'll concede that she does indeed have a twin sister she never knew about.

**Now she'll do anything to see it come to light.**

Emory joins Blake in a search for her missing sister, but when an attempt is made to abduct Emory as well, they begin to think the abduction is related to Emory's birth parents. Blake vows to keep her under his watchful eye until they discover what this maniac is

looking for and bring him to justice. But Emory balks at his constant surveillance as she's struggling to come to grips with a former brutal attack, and she wants nothing to do with a man who might want to get close to her. When it becomes clear that Blake is the only one who can keep her safe, will she let him get close enough to do so?

## Chapter One

Blood-infused water circled the shower drain in Caitlyn Abbot's bathroom and disappeared. Like Caitlyn. Like her life. Like everything she touched.

"This is your last chance, Caitlyn." Her captor lurked in the shadows, his large nose seeming even bigger in an otherwise unremarkable face. "Tell me where she is, or I swear I'll kill you before the night's out."

"If I knew, don't you think I'd have told you by now?" She struggled against her restraints—twisting, turning her wrists as she sat tied to a chair in her bathroom shower. The heavy duct tape held firm—had held firm for five long hours of pain and mental battering by the man she'd come to think of as Igor.

He lumbered across the tiny bathroom. The white coveralls he wore whispered against his legs as his rubber boots thumped on the tile floor. He circled his calloused fingers around her neck. Rough, sandpapery fingers rested lightly against her skin, a grin overtaking his wide mouth.

She stared up at his face, zoning in on a chipped upper tooth as she'd done for hours to keep from recoiling in fear. He rubbed a hand over his blond hair, and it came to rest behind an ear that protruded like Dopey's ears, though this man was far from a dwarf. He was sturdy and tall.

His smile vanished, and he curled his fingers tight, his nails piercing her skin, adding to her already unbearable pain level.

"Stop lying to me." Spittle clung to the corners of his mouth.

Cait bit her lip to keep from crying out and giving him the satisfaction of knowing he was hurting her. "I'm not lying. Please. You have to believe me."

Anger and hatred emanated from narrowed eyes the color of the blackest of coal. This was personal to him. He wouldn't be able to restrain his anger for much longer. This could be it. The end for her. Her ability to hold back faded into a wisp of smoke.

"Help me," she screamed, her voice reverberating and bouncing off the tiled walls. "Someone, please help me."

His fingers tightened into a noose. Crushing, bruising, tearing her skin. Cutting off all oxygen. She bucked against the wrist and ankle restraints. The sticky tape cut against skin already raw from her struggles.

Memories ricocheted through her head, and she knew she had to keep her secret. Just had to. No matter what.

*Please, please, please, don't let me crack. Not now. Not after I just found them.*

“Tell me, Cait.”

Her throat closed. Gurgled. She felt her body relax, saw herself floating up and out of the chair.

*This is it. The end.*

She'd never get to see them. Know them.

Suddenly he let go and stepped back. She dragged in air, filling her lungs, coughing and sputtering, her chest heaving with exertion, a hot burning mass of pain.

Thick lips that had spewed hatred and obscenities split with a sneer. “If you don't want me to do that again, you need to keep quiet. No more attempted screams. Got it?”

“Yes,” she croaked out the single word, but when he wasn't watching, she would cry out again and hope one of her neighbors heard. Not that they'd do anything. She'd only rented this townhouse for a week now and had only met one of them, an elderly lady who wouldn't be of much help.

Her captor shot back up and walked to the vanity. Lifting a bottle of water to his lips, he drank greedily.

Her parched mouth and throat longed for just one of the drops running down his chin, but she'd never beg for water. He went to a cooler he'd brought along with his other supplies and pulled out another bottle. He came close and rested the cold plastic against her cheek. She wanted to turn, to taste the cool damp condensation forming on the bottle, but she closed her eyes and willed the desire to the back of her mind.

“What's the matter, sweetheart?” He bent down, his mouth near her ear, his fetid breath curling toward her nose. “Don't you want a little sip?”

He sounded like the very devil, and she was beginning to think he might be, but she didn't move.

“Fine.” He grabbed her hair and jerked her head back. He poured droplets of water into her open mouth.

*Paradise.* One taste felt like paradise.

“Want more?” he asked.

She nodded. He tipped the bottle. A rush of cold liquid filled her mouth, clogging her throat like the squeeze of his hands. She couldn't swallow fast enough. The icy water ran over her face and into her hair. She coughed. Gagged. Gagged.

She was drowning. Right here in her own shower.

Empty, he tossed the bottle across the room.

She fought for a breath again. Fought a sudden wave of nausea. Pulled in air and coughed out water. Tears filled her eyes as she struggled to breathe deeply.

He got in her face. “Now, I’ll ask again. Where is it? What’s her name, and where is she?”

“I don’t know. Really, I don’t. Please.” She hated that she’d started to beg, but she couldn’t survive much more. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about. I told you that. Why won’t you believe me?”

“This is why.” He lifted a manila folder from the counter and waved it in the air.

“Like I said—I’m searching for my birth parents. If they took something from your family, I don’t know anything about it.”

He slammed the folder onto the counter and dug out his phone.

“She won’t talk, and it’s getting too risky to stay here.” He listened, his narrowed focus never leaving her face.

“You’re sure?” He listened again. “Fine.”

He ended his call and shoved his phone into his pocket, then retrieved the length of fabric he’d used as her gag.

“No please. I won’t say anything. Won’t cry out.”

He twirled the cloth, stirring the air into a whispering breeze. She clamped down on her lips and clenched her teeth. He moved behind her and forced the material into her mouth, the smell of dirty gym socks emanating from the rag. Her chafed skin split, the pain adding to the hundreds of needles pricking at her body. She couldn’t take it any longer. Tears slid down her cheeks. Seeped into the rag.

“No need to cry, my pet.” After securing the gag, he stroked her hair. “We’re going for a ride in the car, and that’ll give you time to realize you need to cooperate.”

He ripped the tape free from one of her arms. Skin and hair peeled from her body, but she refused to moan or groan. He worked to loosen the other strips.

This was it. Her chance. What she’d been waiting for. Time to escape.

The last piece pulled free. She jumped to her feet. Barreled into him, knocking him back. She darted out of the stall and grabbed a jar from the vanity. Heart racing, she raised it overhead and crashed it into his skull.

Glass peppered the room. Cotton balls floated to the floor. He staggered back against the tile, hit his head, and slid down. A trail of blood followed.

She ran for the door. Clumsy. Slowed by stiff legs that had been restrained for hours. She heard him moving. His grunts. His struggle to get to his feet. His footfalls hitting the hallway. They pounded closer. He suddenly roared and lunged. Grabbed her by the hair. Spun her around and threw a solid punch to her face.

The force sent her to the floor, her head slamming against the wood. Pain sliced into her skull and stars danced like fireflies before her eyes. She blinked hard. Her lids refused to comply and remain open. The dark beckoned, cementing her eyelids closed.

“That’s it, my pet,” he said bending over to pick her up and hoist her over his shoulder. “Give in. Sleep. You’ll think much clearer after a little sleep, and then I know you’ll cooperate.”

If she had any hope of escaping, she had to know where he was taking her. She pried her eyes open. Sliver by sliver they raised.

He took something from his pocket and blotted his head before tossing it into the bathroom and stepping through her master bedroom. The room was trashed by her earlier struggle to get free and into the family room. She grabbed at the wall, surprised to see blood on her hand leaving behind a long trail. Had she cut her hand on the jar or was it his blood?

She clutched the wall. Her slick fingers couldn’t gain purchase. Her body was as floppy as a ragdoll, refusing to cooperate, laying limp against the iron bands of his arms. She struggled to move. Couldn’t budge an inch.

He stepped outside, the cold October air doing nothing to help wake her. The sun had sunk below the horizon and the streetlight was burned out. No one would see them. The darkness called louder. Stronger. Demanded that she give in.

Her heavy eyelids carried the weight of the world. They closed in a final surrender to the dark and everything went black.

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