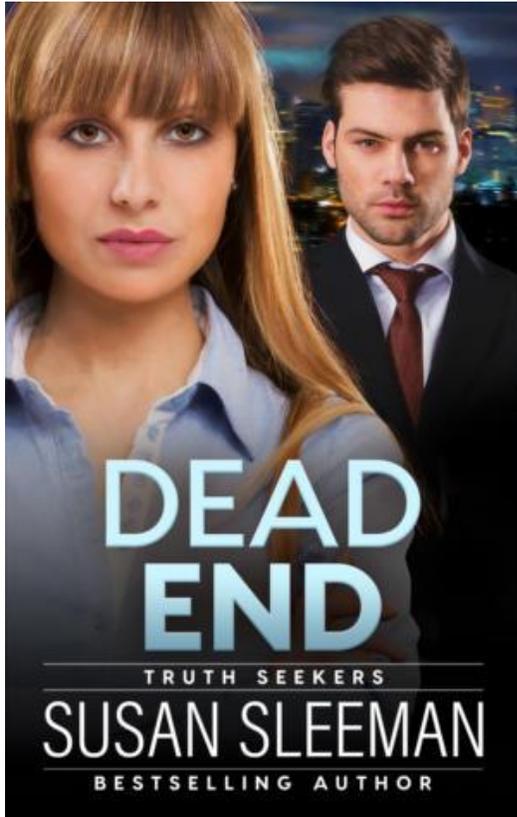


DEAD END SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

Truth Seekers Series – September/2019

ISBN-10: 978-1-949009-20-0

ISBN-13: 1-949009-20-3

Evaluating trace evidence is her job...

When Sierra Byrd's father needs a kidney transplant, despite her parents' protest claiming they could never ask for her help, Sierra insists on being tested for the transplant. But when results prove it is physically impossible for her father to be her biological father, her family finally confesses their long-held secret. She was conceived in an affair her mother had the summer before her parents' wedding. The man she'd come to know as father is named on her birth certificate, but he truly isn't her father.

But the job just turned personal.

Shocked and hurt, Sierra goes in search of her biological father in the small coastal town where he owns a property management business. But when she arrives in town to find her father has recently disappeared, and she starts asking questions, FBI Agent Reed Rice delivers her second shock in as many days. Her father is wanted for embezzling money from the properties he manages. Despite the evidence staring her in the face, Sierra holds out hope that her father isn't the criminal that Reed believes him to be. But as Sierra's desperate search for the truth unearths long-buried secrets and she runs into dead end after dead end, she ignites a killer's fury, and suddenly her own life is on the line.

Chapter One

“He’s not my father? What do you mean?” Sierra gaped at her mother seated at the bedside of the man she’d called father for thirty-two years, but now? Who was her *real* father?

“I...I...” Tears filled her mother’s eyes, and she clutched her hands in her lap, while she tried to compose herself.

“It’s my fault, sweetie,” her father said from his hospital bed. As a retired Multnomah County Deputy, he was still in good shape and very active, but his face and lips were pale today, his energy non-existent as he waited for a kidney transplant. “I didn’t want you to know. I thought it might change our relationship.”

“And I agreed because your dad married me when I was pregnant and alone.” Sierra’s mother took his hand. “He’s been an excellent father to you, and we’ve both been blessed since the day he came into our lives.”

“How...I...this...” Thoughts whirled through Sierra’s head. Spinning. Rushing. Taking her down. She collapsed on a hard chair and blinked. Over and over again.

This made no sense.

She lifted her gaze to the pair who felt like strangers. This man and woman who had raised her. Cared for her. Loved her.

Lied to her.

“This is why you didn’t want me to be tested for a kidney donation,” she muttered, letting the thought linger in the tense air.

Another lie. They claimed they didn’t want her to give up a kidney at her age. She believed them, but what they really wanted was to stop her from discovering her blood type. She desperately wanted to help her dad so she’d gone ahead and gotten tested only to learn she couldn’t possibly be this man’s biological daughter.

“I hope you can understand and can forgive us,” her father said, his tone pleading when she had never heard him plead for anything for her entire life.

“Understand? How?” She shook her head—kept swinging it as if that would make the thought more palatable. Could she ever understand? Ever forgive? Certainly not until she heard their reason for withholding the information from her.

She looked at her mother, the woman Sierra very much resembled. Her hair was still dishwater blond but streaked with gray. Her honey-brown eyes matched Sierra’s, too. As did her full lips and broad nose. Looking at her mother was like looking in the mirror at an older version of

herself. But she didn't have a hint of her father's features when all five of her brothers were spitting images of him.

Now she knew why. She had a different father. Her brothers weren't her full blood brothers. An ache cut through her body so fierce it took her breath. She clutched her arms around her stomach. Felt like she might be sick.

She swallowed hard and sat up straight. She pinned her gaze on her mother. "Tell me about my biological father."

"His name is..." Her mother's gaze flew around the room as if looking for a way out. She took a long breath and settled her focus on Sierra. "He's Edward Barnes, but he goes by Eddie. He still lives in Seaview Cove where I grew up."

Seaview Cove. Of course. Things were starting to fall into place for Sierra. "Is that why you never wanted to go back there?"

Her mother nodded. "I really don't like the beach. That wasn't a lie. I got pregnant there." She paused and frowned, but then stiffened her shoulders. "Eddie and I were only eighteen. He didn't want to be a father, and honestly, he wasn't mature enough to be one. Not that I was ready to be a parent either, but after the way I was raised, I was committed to being the best mother ever."

Sierra tried to process the news and compare this information to the stories her mother had told her. "So what you said about growing up in poverty was true?"

Her mother nodded. "I didn't want that life for you, but it was looking like that was going to happen. My parents threw me out of the house when they found out about you."

Her anguish cut Sierra to the quick, melting a thin slice of the anger in her heart. "What did you do?"

"I lived with a friend until I finished a high school secretarial course and graduated. Then I moved to Portland." She gave a sad shake of her head. "I only had the money I saved that last six months of school from my job at the Dairy Queen. But I found a cheap motel and got a secretarial job at the county right away."

"And that's where you met...Dad." Sierra wasn't sure what to call this man lying in the bed, and her hesitation resulted in a pained expression making him look older than fifty-five. With him being extremely frail, the last thing she wanted to do was hurt him, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

God, please help me here.

"You know the rest of our story," her mother said. "Except I was pregnant when I met him."

Sierra had always thought her parents' love story was incredible. They were so in love that they married after knowing each other for only two months. But now Sierra knew her mother's pregnancy rushed them into marriage. "So...your wedding anniversary. It couldn't be when you told me it was, or my birthdate is wrong."

"Your birthdate is accurate." Her mother sat silently for a moment, then shook her head. "Our wedding occurred later than we told you. We didn't want you to know you were conceived out of wedlock. It was a different time then. You would have suffered if you would have known. And you might have been ostracized if anyone else found out."

Sierra looked at her mother and couldn't reconcile this woman who was confessing a lifetime of lies or half-truths with the God-fearing woman who raised her. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"No." Her mother shook her head hard. "Nothing."

"Have you kept up with Eddie?" Sierra asked, not at all sure what to call him either. "And you're sure he still lives in Seaview Cove?"

She nodded. "I haven't sought him out, but he's in the class reunion information I've received. He took over his dad's property management business. Cove Rentals. It's very successful."

"Married with kids?"

"As far as I know he never married and has no children." She looked down at her hands. "I heard he was still kind of a player. Never really could settle down with any woman."

Sierra tried to picture what this man, this Eddie Barnes, looked like and nothing came to mind. Of course not. She'd never met him. Never even seen a picture of him. She had to go see him, that much she knew. "You're positive he still lives in Seaview Cove?"

Her mother nodded. "In the same beach cottage where he grew up. He inherited the place when his parents passed away."

"Do you know the address?" Sierra worked hard to keep the bitterness from her tone for her father's sake. She couldn't let this make him sicker.

Another bob of her mother's head, and she rattled off the address on Ocean Drive. "And his business is on Main Street."

Sierra got to her feet. "I'm going to see him."

"Right now?" Her mother's mouth fell open, and she stared at Sierra.

“Right now.” She looked at her dad lying in the bed, the machines with wires running to his body, beeping a steady rhythm and attesting to his poor health. She wished she could instantly forgive him, as he was already suffering, but she had to come to grips with this news.

She crossed the room and patted his hand. “I need to process this. A drive to the beach and back will help me do that.”

“I understand.” He gave her a weak smile.

She tried to return it, but knew by his continued pain-filled expression that she failed. “Mom was right. You’ve been a great dad. The best a girl could hope for, and I appreciate you agreeing to be my father.” She patted his hand again, but couldn’t find it in herself to hug or kiss him like she usually did after a visit.

She stepped back, and the anguish in his eyes brought tears to hers, but she couldn’t stay. No matter how much she wished he wasn’t suffering. “I’ll spend the night and be back tomorrow. I’ll see you then.”

“Can you call or text me?” her mother asked. “Just to tell me you got there okay?”

Sierra nodded and fled the room. In the hallway, tears replaced her anger, and she barely climbed inside her red Civic in the shadowy parking garage before she totally lost it. A raw sob erupted from her throat and tears poured from her eyes, running down her face. She swatted at them and took long breaths over and over, willing the tears to stop. She grabbed tissues from her purse and tried to keep up, but the torrent continued.

How had this happened to her? Her!

One of Sierra’s partners at the Veritas Center had recently learned she was adopted, and Sierra hadn’t been able to fully empathize with the anguish Emory suffered. But now...now Emory could serve as a role model of forgiveness. She’d gotten over her shock, forgiven her mother for not telling her, and Emory had a second family to love.

That thought should stop Sierra’s tears, but her biological father didn’t sound much like someone who would open his arms to a long lost daughter. Maybe she acted in haste, and she shouldn’t go see him. She had no idea how he would react to her. Would it be the second heartbreaking experience in one day?

She continued taking deep breaths, swiped away her tears, and firmed her shoulders. She wasn’t a crybaby. She was a strong, independent woman who didn’t need anyone in her life to be happy. So what if Eddie laughed in her face or told her to leave? She had to see him. No matter what she found when she got there, he was her biological father, and she at least needed to know her medical history.

But how in the world would she get through that first meeting? What would she even say to him?

Think of this like a difficult investigation. Of the way you collect forensics. Think only of the facts, not how the crime makes you feel.

“Okay. I can do this.” She swallowed away the last of her tears and made the short drive to the Veritas Center to pack an overnight bag.

She parked in the lot and looked up at the pair of towers. They were connected on the ground with a lobby and on the upper floor with a glass-enclosed skybridge. She and six partners ran the private forensic lab. Their toxicology and controlled substances expert, Maya Glass, inherited the building from her grandfather when he passed away. The partners pooled their money, built out the labs in the east tower, and the partners moved into the existing condos in the west tower. As the trace evidence expert, Sierra had a lab on the fourth floor. Her home away from home.

But it didn't feel like home now or her sanctuary.

Odds were good once she made her way inside the building she would run into one of her partners, and she really didn't want to see anyone with this discovery weighing heavy on her mind and heart.

No. She couldn't see them. Not yet. She could buy whatever items she needed in Seaview Cove.

She started up her car and whipped out of the lot.

Chicken. Yeah, she was acting like a chicken all right, but so what?

She pointed her car south on I-5, thankful for the busy Saturday traffic as navigating the many vehicles took all of her attention until she was south of the Portland metro area. And then again in Salem and Eugene, and she soon found herself cutting west toward the coast. By the time she pulled up to Eddie's cottage the setting sun cast a rosy orange glow over the beach.

She killed the engine and sat back. Here she was. At her biological father's house, and she hadn't come to any conclusion on how to act or what to think, other than she needed to keep an open mind.

She shifted her focus to the small cottage painted a powder blue with pristine white shutters. A wide deck, also white, held brightly colored Adirondack chairs and faced the roaring ocean. All in all, it was cheerful and beachy looking. The kind of place she might rent on a vacation if she ever took one, which she hadn't since becoming a partner at Veritas. Her job was her life.

But her life had been a lie. At least part of it.

“Stop thinking that way or you will never be able to forgive. Do something positive.” She checked her appearance in the mirror and was thankful she'd stopped at a gas station a few miles out of town to clean away the mascara under her eyes and comb her hair. She wished she wasn't wearing her Saturday casual clothing, but she would have had to shop to change, and she wanted

to talk to Eddie before it got too late. Besides, he wouldn't care about her yoga pants and top. He might not even care about her.

She stepped out. A gust of salty ocean air buffeted her body with stinging grains of sand, and she struggled to remain upright. Though it was mid-September, the temperatures had already dropped and soon the stormy season would set in. She gathered her shoulder-length hair to stop it from whipping against her face and hunched into the wind. At the drive, she looked for a car or a garage. She found neither. Maybe he wasn't home. Maybe she should go.

No. She wouldn't run again. She strode up to the door and pounded. She waited, time ticking by, her heart racing, but no answer.

She pounded again. "C'mon, Eddie, answer."

She refused to leave and tapped her sneaker on the wood slats. No one answered. She would take a quick look through the windows, but the blinds were closed.

She waited a few more minutes. The ocean waves roared onto the shore and seagulls called out, but otherwise, silence filled the air. He clearly wasn't home. She gave up and returned to her car. She pulled up the map on her phone, looking for directions to Main Street.

She reached the quaint street lined on both sides with colorful shops, but the sun had dropped out of sight leaving the area shadowed, almost ominous. Streetlights popped on one by one down the street, illuminating the area filled with tourists milling about in search of T-shirts, souvenirs, and salt water taffy. She didn't have to go far before spotting Eddie's building painted red, white, and blue with a large Cove Rentals sign over the door.

She angled her car into a space in front of the building and climbed out, the sweet smell of waffle cones wafting through the air. To reach the glass door, she had to step between a smiling family of four eating ice cream cones, their joyful laughs bouncing on the breeze. Their delight was an even bigger contrast to her shocking news.

The lights inside his office were out, and the door locked. Not here either?

Why had she rushed to Seaview Cove? She should've called. Or should she have? Eddie might not have agreed to see her if she'd talked to him first. She planted her hands on the window and peered inside.

"You looking for Eddie?" the male voice behind her startled her.

She spun to see a lanky bald man she put in his sixties staring at her. He wore khaki pants and a navy blue Mr. Rogers sweater, and stood under the glow of a nearby streetlight.

She smiled at him. "Do you know where he might be?"

"That's the six-million-dollar question." He stepped closer. "You a friend?"

“His daughter.” She felt really odd saying that.

The man tipped his head and stared at her. She felt uncomfortable under his watchful eye, but she didn’t budge or offer an explanation.

“Yeah, I can see the resemblance.” He held out his hand. “Mayor Warren Parks. Also Eddie’s landlord here.”

She shook his hand. “Sierra Byrd.”

He arched an eyebrow, likely at her different last name. “I take it you’re not close to Eddie.”

“No,” she said, not wanting him to know she learned of his existence less than six hours ago. “How did you guess?”

“A, he never mentioned you. And B, he’s been missing for four weeks now, and you don’t seem to know about that.”

“Missing?” She blinked. “How can he be missing?”

The mayor frowned, his thin lips dipping above a sparse goatee. “He just up and disappeared. One of his clients called Sheriff Winfield when they couldn’t get ahold of your dad. They cordoned this place off. His house, too. Spent days collecting information and doing that forensic thing you see on TV.”

As a trace evidence expert, she knew all about that “forensic thing,” as he called it. She collected and handled forensics on a regular basis. But she had no idea how to handle the second shock of the day. “Do you know if the sheriff found anything?”

“Guess you haven’t read the papers.”

She shook her head, but wouldn’t explain her limited knowledge of her biological father. “What do they say?”

“Eddie embezzled from his clients and skated with an estimated quarter of a million dollars in tenant rents and security deposits.”

Sierra’s mouth fell open, and she couldn’t close it. Shock number three, and like in the game of baseball, she was *so* out. Her father wasn’t her real father and her biological father was a criminal. A criminal!

Everything caught up to her. She struggled to breathe. Her legs suddenly felt weak. She grabbed onto the wall and started hyperventilating.

“Hey, hey.” The mayor reached into his pocket, and pulled out a full key ring. “You look like you need to sit down.”

He quickly unlocked the door, took her arm, and led her inside the small office. She dropped onto the nearest chair and put her head between her knees before she passed out. She concentrated on taking deep breaths, but she couldn't seem to gain control of her breathing.

"Sit tight," the mayor said. "I'll go grab a bottle of water for you."

He bolted out the door. She didn't want him to watch her make a fool of herself and was thankful he left. She stared at her feet illuminated by a beam of light shining through the glass door and counted over and over the eyelets in her sneakers to take her mind off her breathing. She felt her body eventually relax, and her breathing return to normal, but the mayor hadn't returned.

She sat up and noticed for the first time that the office smelled stale with a hint of mildew, like it had been closed up for some time. She looked at the desk in front of her. Even in the dark she could see it was covered in fingerprint powder as were many other surfaces.

Curiosity got the best of her, and she went to a door heading to the back room to examine the wood doorframe where residual black powder lingered. She assumed the sheriff department's CSI team processed this place when the sheriff had responded to the call reporting Eddie missing. The town likely contracted policing with the sheriff as did many tiny towns on the coast.

She wanted more information on Eddie's disappearance, and the sheriff taking charge of the investigation should work in her favor. Up until six months ago, Veritas's investigator Blake Jenkins had been the county sheriff here, and he might be able to get a copy of the sheriff's file on Eddie's disappearance.

She moved over to a picture on the wall behind the desk taken at a baseball field where the mayor stood proudly with another man at his side, both wearing blue-and-white Seaview Cove uniforms. The other man's smile seemed familiar to her, and it took her a few seconds to figure out why. She'd seen the smile in the mirror her entire life. This was Eddie Barnes, and she had his smile.

She ran a finger over his mouth and quickly searched his other facial features. He had a round face like hers, but deep-set blue eyes and a hooked nose not at all like hers. He wore a ball cap that hid his hair, and she couldn't compare the color to hers.

Tears pricked her eyes again, and she wanted to sit down on the floor and have a good cry. But if Eddie was indeed missing, she needed to call in the considerable resources of the Veritas team to help her locate him. She preferred to think he hadn't absconded with his clients' money, but—criminal or not—she needed to see him.

"FBI, don't move," a deep male voice rumbled through the small space making her jump. "Hands on the back of your head."

"Wait, I..."

“Now!”

She thought to turn, but she was sure this agent had a gun and any sudden move could earn her a bullet in the back. She complied, lifting her arms in the air and slowly placing them on the back of her head.

She heard his solid footsteps cautiously cross the room. She held her breath as she waited. He pressed her against the wall, grabbed one of her arms, and tightly cuffed her wrist. She took a long breath and inhaled his scent of warm cinnamon mixed with citrus and masculine leather.

The law enforcement officers she often interacted with on the job didn't smell this good, and she was instantly curious about him, but not curious enough to forget her anger at being cuffed.

“You're going to regret doing this,” she said, but as he jerked her other arm back, she wondered if she was the one who would regret coming on a whim to Seaview Cove.

Buy It Now for Print or E-book

