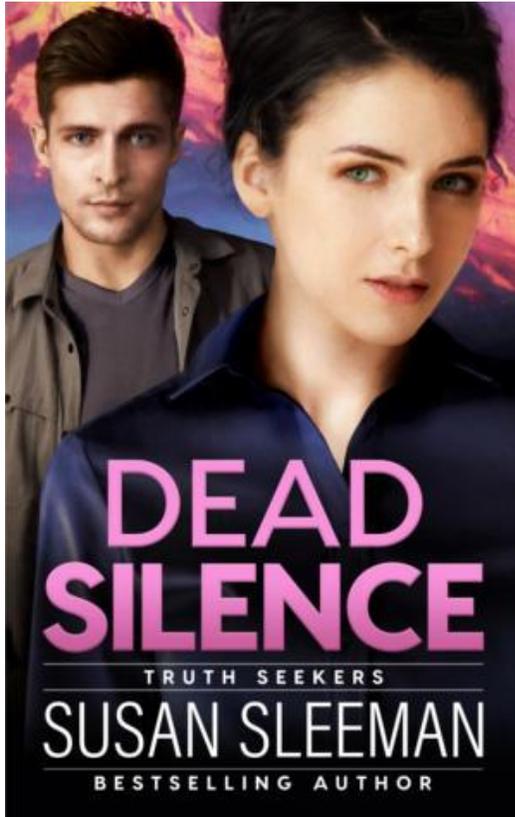


DEAD SILENCE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

Truth Seekers Series – July/2019

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A child she'll do anything to keep.

After Kelsey Moore's husband dies, she wants only one thing. To adopt her husband's son who she has come to call her own. But as she begins the process that her husband had dragged his feet on, she learns a secret so shocking she begins to question everything she knows except for the love she feels for her son. The child is not her husband's biological child, her former husband never had legal custody of the boy, and no one knows where he got the child. Fearing she might lose her son, Kelsey must find his birth mother and convince her to give up her parental rights.

A danger she's never known.

But when Kelsey starts asking questions, she runs into a brick wall named DEA Agent Devon Dunbar. Devon

has been investigating an adoption/human trafficking ring with drug connections for the last six months, and he's not about to let Kelsey interfere in his investigation. But even if Devon brings out feelings she never thought she'd experience again, and he asks her to trust him, Kelsey can't even give him the benefit of the doubt. Not with the way her husband had lied to her and not even when her own life is on the line. If she doesn't succeed, she could lose the one thing that means everything to her – her five-year-old son.

Chapter One

Kelsey didn't like this. Didn't like it one bit. Since her husband Todd had been fatally shot outside his hotel on a business trip, she'd been on guard and tried to avoid being outside after dark. But she'd planned poorly today, and her unease was now the price she paid.

"Let's hurry, Jace." She gripped her stepson's hand tightly as she exited the grocery store with cupcake supplies for his school party tomorrow.

She took off as fast as she could in her mile-high wedge sandals, and the five-year-old had to run to keep up. Her ankles were quickly swallowed up by the soupy fog swirling around the large parking lot, and unease skittered down her spine.

Sure, the dark had nothing to do with Todd's death. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mugged on his way to his hotel room after dinner, but she couldn't stem her fears. They scratched at her like a cat with claws bared, ripping down her back.

Stop it. Just stop it. There's nothing to be afraid of.

"Can I lick the frosting bowl?" Jace asked, his innocent little voice helping to settle her nerves a bit.

She shifted her grocery bag and smiled down at the dark-headed boy with chubby cheeks dotted with freckles and humor glinting his brown eyes. "I'm afraid you'll be in bed asleep by then."

He shook his head hard and jerked his hand free to cross his chubby little arms. He planted his feet and gone was the sparkle in his eyes. "Nu-uh. It's my birthday tomorrow. I'm not sleeping tonight."

She didn't like how he was taking such a stance, but he'd been through so much losing Todd that she ignored it. "But you'll have to try to sleep."

His arms dropped to his sides. "Okay, but can I get up if I don't fall asleep?"

She started to nod, but footsteps quickly approached them from behind, catching her attention. She shot a worried look over her shoulder. A hooded man rushed toward them. Head down, he was five feet behind them. He was really built and tall. His hoodie shadowed his face as he looked at the ground.

A warning raced through her brain, and she reached for Jace's hand again.

Don't be silly, she chastised herself. The man carried a bag of groceries. Just a guy in a hurry. She was being ridiculous. Still, she tugged Jace closer, firmed her grip, and got them moving at a fast clip toward her car.

“Ouch,” Jace complained. “You’re hurting my hand.”

“Sorry.” She relaxed her fingers but kept up her speed.

The footsteps moved closer. Faster. Almost frantic now, sharp thumps echoing into the fog.

She quickly moved Jace to the side closest to her car now only twenty feet away.

The footsteps shifted. Started in a run. A grocery bag hit the ground. Jace’s hand was torn from hers. The man rushed past, Jace locked in his arms.

“Mommy,” Jace screamed.

“Stop!” Kelsey yelled, her heart racing. “Stop! My son! Stop!”

Shocked, she stood frozen for a moment then bolted after them.

The man ran. Fast. Furious. Toward the busy road. Jace’s body was clamped tightly in the man’s arms, his little legs dangling.

She screamed and tossed her bag to the ground. “Someone, help! He has my son.”

She ran full out, her heart thundering in her chest. She took a quick look around the lot. Looking for someone. Anyone who could help them.

It was dark. Empty. Only a few cars. No one in sight.

“Help! Oh, help!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

She ran harder. Faster. Her feet struck the asphalt, the shock traveling from her sandals up her legs.

Her foot caught in a pothole. Her ankle twisted. She lost her balance. Her arms flailed out, trying to right herself. She couldn’t. She pitched forward and tumbled. Landed hard on her shoulder and her knees razored over the rough pavement.

Her breath left her body. She gulped one in and rolled. Raised her head. Saw the man hauling Jace toward a white delivery van.

“No-o-o,” she screamed and pushed to her feet. “Stop. Don’t take him. Please. Don’t. Please.”

She started running again. The fall had cost her precious time. She was too far behind them now. She would never catch them. Never. He simply had to open a door, floor the gas, and her son would be gone. Long gone.

*

DEA Agent Devon Dunbar's mouth hung open as he watched Bruno Cruz barreling across the parking lot toward his dilapidated old van. The lowlife drug dealer had snatched up a child. A child, for crying out loud. Right out of his mother's arms.

Cruz was a drug mule for a Portland gang connected to the Sotos Cartel out of Mexico and hadn't been involved in their child trafficking exploits to this point. Now, Devon had to reassess his take on the situation.

But first...the kid.

Devon had to save the boy, despite the fact that he would likely blow his cover and put an end to his six-month undercover op. An op that could stop child trafficking and keep children with their parents.

But a boy in imminent danger came first. It had to.

Adrenaline licked along Devon's body as he eased through the fog falling heavy on the parking lot and between the parked vehicles. He wanted to draw his weapon, but he needed both hands to catch the child. Still, he flicked off the holster strap just in case.

Keeping hidden in an SUV's shadow, he assessed Cruz's timing. Caught his rhythm and estimated his arrival. Started counting it down.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

Devon took another step closer, making sure to remain hidden in the misty fog so he didn't spook Cruz into doing something stupid.

Seven. Six. Five.

He braced himself.

Four. Three. Two.

Devon came even with Cruz. He launched his body forward. Slid an arm around the child. Grabbed hold of the trembling little body. Snatched him free and held him tight.

"Hey," Cruz complained.

"Mommy," the terrified child screamed.

Devon had no time to offer comfort. He turned. Swept out his foot. Took Cruz down in one swift kick to the knees.

He put the boy down. "Run back to your mom. Hurry. Run!"

The child took off, his little feet pitter-pattering over the concrete.

Devon's heart soared over the rescue. No time to celebrate. Not yet.

He planted a knee in Cruz's back and wrenched his arms into a tight hold.

"Jace, oh, Jace," the mother cried out.

Devon looked up in time to see her drop to her knees and sweep the boy into her arms. In Devon's job, he didn't often get to see happy endings, and he wished he could see the joy on her face, but the fog obscured his view.

Thank you, God for putting me here at the right time.

Keeping his knee planted, Devon searched the man and found a 9mm Glock lodged in his waistband. Devon tucked the gun in the back of his jeans.

"Get off me, man," Cruz complained as he bucked. "You have no right to do this."

"But I do." Devon disguised his voice as best as he could so he didn't risk his undercover status and pressed his knee harder in Cruz's muscled back. "You're the one without rights here. Attempted kidnapping is going to put you away for a long time. And I'm going to assume you don't have a carry permit, so possessing a firearm won't go so well for you either."

"You some kind of cop or something?" Cruz asked.

"Or something." Devon looked at the woman again and raised his voice so she could hear him, but kept it disguised. "Are you two all right, ma'am?"

"Yes, yes." A long sigh filtered out of her mouth. "I think so."

"Hang tight while I call 911." Devon kept Cruz facedown to prevent him from getting a good look at his face and dialed 911. When the operator came on the line, he avoided mentioning his name and explained the situation. "Please tell the responding officer that I'm a law enforcement officer, and I've restrained the suspect."

"Your name and agency, sir?" the operator asked.

"I'll provide officers with ID when they arrive." No way he was going to give out that information in front of Cruz. And honestly, he couldn't give legit ID to the cops either as he didn't carry his credentials while undercover. But that was something to work out with the responding officers. He disconnected before she demanded additional information and turned his attention to the woman and boy.

"Hold tight," he yelled. "Officers are on the way."

“Thank you.” Relief swept through the woman’s shaking voice.

Devon had the crazy urge to rush over to the pair and give them a hug. *Odd*. He wasn’t a hugger. Not much of a touchy-feely guy at all. Being a SEAL for six years and then an agent for the DEA for two, he’d lost that loving feeling. Or maybe it had more to do with the woman he’d once loved not being able to commit. Either way, he remained in place, pressing Cruz to the ground as sirens sounded in the distance. He shifted his attention to the road and the electric blue lights whirling into the cloudy vapors.

“C’mon, man,” Cruz said. “Nobody got hurt. Let me go.”

“Not a chance.” Devon watched as two Portland police cars screeched into the lot and slammed to a nearby stop. The officers got out and moved together in a cautious approach. The male cop whose name tag declared Zellner was tall and lanky with inky black hair. Devon put the female named Almgren at five foot eight with a muscular build and blond hair pulled back into a ponytail.

“He was armed, but I’ve searched him and removed the weapon.” Devon continued to keep his voice in a high, unrecognizable tone for Cruz. “It’s in my waistband in the back if you want to remove it.”

“And you are?” Almgren asked.

“Law enforcement just like you. Take this guy away, and I’ll get my ID.”

“I’ll just grab that gun.” Zellner moved toward Devon, Almgren stood, hand on weapon prepared to act if Devon made a move. Zellner tugged the gun free.

“I’ll secure this guy.” Almgren strode to Cruz, pulling her cuffs free as she moved.

She clamped the cuffs on Cruz, and Devon slowly got up, making sure they could see his hands the whole time to keep them from overreacting and doing something stupid.

Cruz jerked to his knees in an effort to take off, but Almgren grabbed his cuffs and hauled him toward her cruiser. Devon tipped his head for Zellner to join him out of Cruz’s earshot.

“I’m Devon Dunbar,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Undercover for the DEA. Guy’s name is Bruno Cruz. Had my eye on him when he suddenly grabbed the woman’s child and bolted for his vehicle. I don’t carry my official ID on assignment, and I hope not to blow my cover, so if you’ll wait until he’s in the car, I’ll give you a contact number to call and confirm I’m legit.”

Zellner gave Devon a quick once-over, and he knew what the officer was seeing. A rough-looking guy with a scraggly beard. Longer-than-normal hair, messed up and shaggy. Clothes that were too shoddy for even a thrift store and should’ve been washed a few days ago. A tattoo on his forearm with an S scrolling in ruby red and ending with a vivid green snake’s head, mouth open and tongue extended. The hallmark for the Sotos Cartel who exported cocaine to the U.S.

The tattoo was fake, but Zellner wouldn't have any idea about that. The semi-permanent ink lasted for two weeks or so and then Devon had to update it. When it was a problem in his private life, he simply covered it with a large bandage.

Zellner nodded, and Devon quickly looked at the woman again. She'd gotten to her feet, holding the child tightly in her arms even though he was too big for her to easily handle, and was coming toward them. He didn't need her knowing his ID either, so he lifted a hand to tell her to stay put.

"But I..."

"Everything okay, ma'am?" Zellner asked.

"Yes. I just need to tell you what happened so I can get my stepson home."

Zellner gave her a friendly smile, but his eyes remained fixed in the assessing cop stare Devon knew so well. "If you could just hold tight for a little longer, I'll be with you in a minute."

"Sure, fine." She didn't sound so sure, but she stayed put.

Devon checked on Cruz, glad to see the other officer was settling him in the back seat of her cruiser. The moment she slammed the door, Devon turned back to Zellner. "The number I'm going to give you is my supervisor's cell. His name is Bud Hurst. I go by Dillan Webb when on assignment."

Zellner snapped his phone from a holder on his body armor, and Devon shared the phone number. The cop made the call and gave his identifying information. "I have a Devon Dunbar here who is claiming to be one of your agents. I'm going to send you his picture for confirmation."

The officer snapped Devon's picture then lifted the phone back to his ear.

Devon had no idea what Hurst was saying, but as Zellner listened, his tight expression loosened. "Thank you, sir."

He stowed his phone. "You're clear."

"Thanks for working with me on this."

Zellner nodded. "I'm going to talk to the woman and boy. Hang tight and I'll come back for your statement."

Devon wanted to ask to leave before Cruz caught sight of him, but it was dark and foggy enough at this distance that Cruz couldn't likely make out any identifying details. Still, Devon made sure he kept his back to the car.

Almgren marched across the lot and joined Zellner. Devon followed, but then hung back to listen in and gather additional details on the child and her mother.

She wore a flirty little skirt that skimmed her knees and a very feminine blouse. Her shoes were those stylish chunky sandals he thought he'd heard women refer to as wedges, likely for the hunk of cork shaped like a wedge in the heel area. He never got why women tortured themselves with these kinds of shoes, but as a guy, he had to admit it stretched out her shapely legs. Sadly, her knees were bloody from her fall.

"I'm Officer Zellner and this is Officer Almgren," Zellner said to her. "And you are?"

"Kelsey." She ran her free hand over curly hair that rested just above her shoulders. It was full and lush, coffee brown, and looked like it should be in a shampoo commercial. "Kelsey Moore, and this is my stepson, Jace."

Zellner nodded. "Could I see your ID please?"

She fished in a handbag, the strap slung crossbody, and pulled out a wallet. Zellner examined the ID and handed it back, but Devon couldn't seem to take his focus from her for very long. She had this wispy vulnerable vibe going on that always brought out the protector in him. He searched her finger for a wedding ring, but didn't find one.

Divorced? Widowed? Never married? Or maybe just a woman who didn't believe in wearing a ring.

She shoved her license into the purse and grabbed the child's hand again, drawing him tight against her leg. She was still afraid, and Devon didn't blame her. It was going to take quite some time before she got over her shock and fully processed the near abduction.

Almgren squatted in front of the child. "Would you like to see the inside of the police car, young man?"

He cast an excited look up at Kelsey. "Can I, Mom?"

She bit her lip and shifted her feet. "I don't—"

"It'll be the empty vehicle, and I'll stay with him." Almgren smiled, her eyes lighting with it and offering a friendly vibe. "It's better for him not to relive things."

"Oh, right. Thanks. Yes. Please." Kelsey bent down to the boy. "Listen to the officer and don't touch anything without asking first."

"Don't worry. We'll be fine." Almgren held out her hand, and the boy quickly slipped his free hand into hers.

"My mom works with police," he announced. "And I want to be a cop when I grow up."

Devon saw the woman cringe. He doubted any parent wanted their child to go into a dangerous field of work. He knew for sure his own mother still worried about him on a daily basis. Maybe hourly. He couldn't check in with her very often, and she didn't know how he was doing. He hated putting her through that and planned to get out of the undercover work after completing this assignment. If his cover was blown, tonight's incident might speed that change along.

"How exactly do you work with the police?" Zellner asked.

"I'm a forensic anthropologist," she replied, not taking her eyes off of the boy. "I'm a partner at the Veritas Center."

Wow. The Veritas Center—a private forensic lab with a stellar reputation. They started out running DNA to connect adopted and missing loved ones to their families. Since then, they'd branched out to become a full-service lab for law enforcement, too, and most everyone in the local law enforcement field had heard of them and respected their work.

Zellner looked impressed, too. "Do you think tonight's incident has something to do with the center?"

Kelsey tilted her head, her soft-looking hair framing her face. "I can't imagine it's related. I think that jerk just seized the moment. I was coming out of the store, and he grabbed my stepson and ran away with him." Her voice broke on a sob. "I ran after them, but fell. I called for help, and that man over there saved Jace."

She pointed at Devon, her expression relieved and thankful, sending a warm feeling through Devon that he rarely felt these days, thanks to the Sotos Cartel.

"Saved him how, exactly?" Zellner glanced at Devon.

"He jerked Jace out of the creep's arms, and then took his feet out from under him with a swift kick." She shuddered, but respect gleamed from her heart-shaped face. "It was amazing. Like he's trained in martial arts or something."

Or something. Hand-to-hand combat via his years as a SEAL, but no one needed to know that.

"And then he let Jace come back to me while he held the creep down until you got here. That's it." She ran her hand over her face, her tortured expression remaining.

"Do you have any idea why that man might want to abduct your stepson?"

She shook her head hard. "I can't imagine anyone I know would do that."

"And do you? Know this man, I mean?"

She shrugged. "I didn't get a look at his face."

“Have you called the boy’s father?”

Her eyes scrunched up, and her chin wobbled. “Todd died a little over a year ago.”

Ah, the reason for a lack of ring.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Zellner said.

“Thank you.” She lifted her shoulders. “We were only married for two years. It was so sudden.”

“You call Jace your stepson. Does this mean you haven’t adopted him?”

“Not yet. I wanted to.” She frowned. “We just never got around to it when Todd was alive. I’m Jace’s legal guardian, and now that Todd’s estate is settled, the adoption paperwork is underway.”

“When the detective is assigned to this case, he’ll need a copy of your guardianship papers for the files.”

She nodded. “I don’t carry them with me, but have them in my safe at home.”

“I’m sure after Jace confirms your story, our detective can wait on the official papers.”

Kelsey fired a look at the patrol car. “Officer Almgren shouldn’t be questioning him without me.”

“Sorry.” Zellner held up his hand. “She’s not. She really just took him to the car to spare him from hearing my questions. I just meant after the detective talks to him with you present.”

“Oh, okay.”

Devon’s law enforcement training had him on full alert at the woman’s protest. Could she be hiding something or was this just motherly concern? Listen to him suspecting her. He’d been undercover for too long and didn’t trust anyone. She was likely acting as any concerned mother might behave.

“Do you think the attempted abduction has to do with the adoption?” Zellner asked. “Maybe someone doesn’t want you to adopt the boy?”

She tilted her head in a cute puppy dog questioning look. “I don’t see how. Jace’s mother is deceased, as are her parents, and she was an only child. And Todd’s parents are all for me adopting Jace as long as I keep them in his life. Which, of course, I would do. He has every right to know his grandparents.”

Zellner nodded. “Does the name Bruno Cruz mean anything to you?”

“No. Why? Should it?”

“Not necessarily.”

She shot a look at Almgren’s patrol car. “Is that the name of the man who tried to take Jace?”

Zellner didn’t answer. “Okay, is there anything else you think I need to know?”

She bit her lower lip and shifted her stance. “No. No. I don’t think so. I just want to get Jace, go home, and forget all about this.”

“And testify against the suspect when he comes to trial.”

“Yes...oh...yes. Absolutely. He may not have gotten away with kidnapping, but I want to see him pay for trying to abduct Jace.”

Zellner gave a clipped nod. “I’ll get a detective out here. He’ll question both of you and then you’ll be free to go home.”

“Good. Good. My bag.” She spun on those high heels and looked around. “Cupcakes.”

“Cupcakes?”

“I have to bake cupcakes for school tomorrow. It’s Jace’s sixth birthday.”

“Oh, right. Okay,” Zellner said, lifting his cell phone to his ear.

Devon wanted to step over to this distraught woman. Offer her additional comfort, but she’d take one look at his attire and sorry state and likely run the other way. He usually didn’t care what people thought of him, but with her, it seemed to matter. Mattered more than he could have imagined and that surprised him almost as much as the near abduction.

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