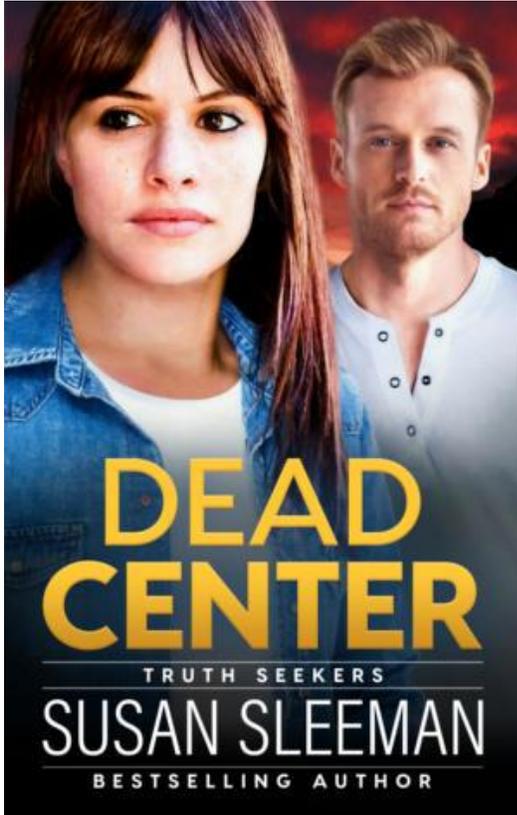


DEAD CENTER SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and eBook

Truth Seekers Series – April/2020

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Everyone has a secret...

When forensic photographer Ainsley Duncan’s brother is arrested for murder, she works hard to exonerate him through her contacts, but nothing clears his name until she happens upon a long-buried secret involving Grady Houston—the Veritas Center’s ballistics, firearms, and explosives expert. Grady’s worked hard to keep this secret buried for years and doesn’t want it coming out, so he balks at her request to help find the real killer and free her brother.

But not all secrets lead to murder.

But when someone takes a dead center shot at Ainsley, Grady has no choice but to expose his past and let the consequences fall where they may. Even if he loses the job he loves and even if the woman who is capturing his heart wants nothing to do with him after she learns his secret. He won’t back down from helping Ainsley free her brother, and they find themselves in a race for their lives to solve the murder before the deadly killer strikes again.

Chapter One

The guns came out of nowhere. Big men. Tall men. Assault rifles. Bursting through the front door, their bodies cloaked by darkness. The gun barrels creeping out of the shadows like fingers. All pointing at her. Ainslie. Just a woman at home minding her own business.

She shrank to the floor in the shadow between her sofa and the wall. Hidden for now. Terrified to move even an inch. A fraction of an inch.

Was she going to die right there? In her place of refuge? As a forensic photographer, she'd shot the aftermath of home invasions, and they'd never ended well. Never!

The men stormed closer, the lights on their guns sweeping the room as if they were hunting prey, a cold wind rushing in behind them.

The light landed on her face, blinding her.

"Hands," the gunmen men yelled. "Show me your hands."

"Please," she cried out as she raised her trembling arms. "I don't want to die."

"US Marshals," he said. "We're not going to shoot you if you keep your hands where we can see them."

"Marshals? Thank you, God!" She heaved out a breath and nearly forgot to keep her arms raised. "I'm a forensic photographer. Used to work for PPB." These men weren't with the Portland Police Bureau, but she wanted them to know she was one of the good guys. "My name's Ainslie. Ainslie Duncan."

"Ainslie." A familiar voice came out of the dark like a warm blanket on a frosty night, even if she couldn't place it.

"Drake Byrd," he said.

"Drake! Oh, good." Sierra's brother. Her boss's brother. *Perfect*. Ainslie had met him once at a crime

scene. “Tell your buddies to put their guns down. It’s just me here, and I’m certainly not armed.”

“Sorry, no can do,” Drake said, his voice sharper. “We had a call that Vito Bittner was holed up here.”

“The escaped convict? Here?” She shook her head in bewilderment. What did the brutal murderer who escaped from the Multnomah County Courthouse at his pretrial motion have to do with her? She pondered the question, forgetting about her raised arms.

“Hands,” the first guy snapped.

She quickly lifted them up. “Sorry. Why would Bittner be here? I don’t know him.”

The first deputy stepped out of the shadows, his eyebrows raised. “You said your name was Duncan. You any relation to Ethan Duncan?”

“Ethan? My brother?” A queasiness that she’d gotten on a regular basis since Ethan developed a drug habit when they were teenagers started in the pit of her stomach. He’d been clean for a year—well, if you didn’t count the last month of some heavy drinking—but he was locked up in the Multnomah County Detention Center awaiting trial for a crime he didn’t commit. She’d tried to get him released, but the judge had set Ethan’s bail too high, and she and Ethan couldn’t possibly pay it. He’d been arrested on Friday night and arraigned at the courthouse the same day Bittner escaped.

“Is he an inmate at MCD?” the deputy asked.

She didn’t like his tone and lifted her chin. “Yes.”

“Your brother was in the holding cell with Bittner when he escaped,” he stated flatly.

“So.” Her shoulders rose in solidarity with her chin, even though her heart dropped. Ethan hadn’t mentioned being in the same group as Bittner, but it didn’t matter. “Just because Ethan might have been in a cell with the guy doesn’t mean he—or I—know him.”

The deputy pinned his dark eyes on her. “Pardon my skepticism, Ms. Duncan, but this can’t be a

coincidence.”

She had to agree, but had no explanation for the phone call.

He looked at Drake. “Stay with her. We’ll finish clearing the place.”

“No one else is here,” she said.

He ignored her and marched off with the other men. The wood floor vibrated under their boots as they invaded her rental house.

“Can I put my hands down?” she asked Drake.

“Sorry, no.”

“Seriously, Drake. It’s me, Ainslie. You’ve met me before. I work for your sister at Veritas Center for crying out loud.” The world-renowned forensic lab processed DNA for private individuals and handled crime scene forensics for law enforcement agencies. The center was owned by experts in DNA, toxicology, osteology, computers, and trace evidence. Sierra headed up the trace evidence division.

“Sierra never told me that.” His accusatory tone bit into Ainslie.

She didn’t like his response. Unfortunately, once people learned of Ethan’s incarceration, they formed an instant distrust of her, as if she were guilty by association. “Does she tell you everything about her work?”

“Not much about work lately. Our conversations are all about her upcoming wedding.” The corner of his mouth quirked up, but he quickly flattened it out. “When did you start there?”

“A few months ago.”

“Ainslie!” Another familiar voice sounded from the front door, but the stress in this guy’s tone was unusual for the calm, unflappable man. “Ainslie! Where are you? Are you okay?”

She looked beyond Drake to see Grady Houston, the weapons expert at Veritas Center and the man

she'd had a huge crush on since the moment they'd laid eyes on each other. His tall linebacker-shouldered body filled the doorway, taking over the room like he always did when he entered. At least taking it over in her mind.

Large and in charge. And in her heart.

Of all the people to show up when she needed her wits about her, not a distraction.

He stepped into the foyer's dark shadows, but she could still make out his khaki tactical pants, black T-shirt, and leather jacket. He didn't wear a jacket just because of the cool April weather, but also to hide the Sig Sauer he kept holstered at his hip.

His sharp gaze searched the room like a heat-seeking missile.

She knew the moment his eyes—so brown that she couldn't even describe the depth of the color—connected with hers, a zing of awareness would shoot through her. He was the last person she wanted to deal with tonight. The very last. And she prepared herself for another assault on her senses. This one feeling just as deadly.

*

Grady marched across the room, hating that sweet, adorable Ainslie was cowering in a corner. Big tough Drake being a bully. Holding a gun on her.

Grady didn't like it. Not one tiny bit. He curled his fingers into fists to keep himself from crossing over there and decking Drake. He might respect Sierra's brother, but Grady was going to put an end to this. Right after he got a good look at Ainslie to make sure she wasn't hurt.

Wishing someone had turned on the lamp so he could get a clear look at her face, he locked gazes with her. He'd always admired her eyes, a russet brown color very much like those of a dog he'd owned growing up. Right now they were wide and terrified, and her pain sliced through him like a hook tearing into a fish's mouth.

Grady swallowed and concentrated on erasing his anger so he didn't sound harsh. "Are you okay? I heard about this on my scanner."

"I'm fine," she said, her soft Texas accent quavering. "Would be better if Drake let me put my arms down."

Grady eyed Sierra's second-to-youngest brother, who had a reputation in the family as the bad boy with often contentious opinions. "Come on, man. Give Ainslie a break. She works for us at Veritas, so I can vouch for her. Totally not a criminal and surely not someone who would harbor a fugitive."

Drake narrowed his gaze, clearly not trusting her. "I guess that means you know about her brother, then?"

Grady didn't even know she *had* a brother. She kept to herself, and he knew very little about her personal life. Or at least she avoided Grady. "What about him?"

Drake's eyebrow went up toward inky black hair that ran in the family of five brothers. "He was in the same holding cell as Bittner the day he made his escape."

Shocked, Grady shot a look at Ainslie. "Is that true?"

She pressed her lips together, seeming disappointed in him for some reason. "That's what they tell me. But Ethan wouldn't have anything to do with a guy like Bittner. Not even back in the day when Ethan was struggling with a drug addiction and needed cash. Bittner probably scared my brother half to death."

Seriously? She didn't know if her brother knew this major criminal? Grady might not still live in Nebraska with his family, but he was close to his siblings and they shared nearly everything about their lives. If they were in a holding cell with a killer, he would have heard about it.

"You don't know?" When her disappointment grew into a full-fledged scowl, he regretted the question.

"I know he's locked up at MCD for a crime he didn't commit." She gave him a glassy stare. "I have

no idea who he talks with because he doesn't tell me about his life there. Says he wants to spare me from the horror of it. So, whoever made this call tonight must know something I don't. Either that or it's a weird coincidence."

Grady was normally a trusting guy, but something seemed fishy here for sure.

"Mind if I turn on a light?" Grady asked, trying to buy time until he could figure out what to do.

"Go ahead," Drake said. "But don't touch anything else."

Grady switched on the nearest lamp, the light flooding the room. It highlighted several framed photographs that he was sure Ainslie had taken. The landscapes were vibrant and dramatic, showing him a side of her that he never knew existed. She had a very scientific, linear mind on the job, but obviously she had a creative side, too. A softer side. And, for some reason, that made him even madder about the way she was being treated tonight. About the way he'd reacted, too.

He needed to give her brother the benefit of the doubt. Maybe offer another explanation. But what? Who would report Bittner being in the house if they had no knowledge of Ainslie or Ethan?

An idea popped into Grady's head, and he looked at Drake. "What if this is a swatting call? Been a rash of them in the city lately, and they haven't found the perpetrators."

He didn't bother to explain the swatting to Ainslie. As part of the law enforcement world, she would know it referred to falsely reporting an emergency to a police department to cause a Special Weapons and Tactics—SWAT—team response to a physical address.

Drake shook his head. "Call came from Ainslie's cell."

"No way!" She glared at Drake. "My phone's on the table. Take a look at it. You'll see I didn't make the call."

Drake eyed her. "I don't think you did. Caller was male, but he could've used your phone, and you could've deleted the call. Phone company records will be more accurate, and we'll request those."

Grady looked at Ainslie. “Swatters often spoof their calls to make them look like they came from the location they’re reporting.”

Her gaze softened a fraction. “Since no one used my phone, that has to be the explanation. I rent this house. The caller might not know who lives here. Maybe he selected the address at random.”

“Did Ethan ever live here with you?” Grady searched her freckled face for answers.

She nodded, setting her reddish-brown hair swinging over her shoulders. She usually wore her hair in a ponytail at work, and he loved seeing how silky soft the thick waves looked.

“He lived here for about six months,” she said, thankfully oblivious to Grady’s wayward thoughts. “You think that’s why I was targeted?”

“Could be.” Grady heard footsteps pounding down the hall. He reached for his sidearm and spun.

“Whoa.” Drake swung his rifle at Grady. “Never draw down on a fugitive apprehension team. Unless you have a death wish.”

Grady held up his hands and gaped at Drake. Grady knew this guy. Had been to parties with him. Socialized. And here he was aiming an assault rifle at him. Unbelievable. “No need for you to point that rifle at me either.”

Drake scowled. “You inserted yourself in our op, and I’ll do whatever it takes to have my guys’ backs.”

“Don’t worry. I understand.” Grady slowly lowered his hands. “Trust me.”

Three tough looking guys with submachine guns matching Drake’s rifle marched into the room. Grady recognized the HK MP-5, the weapon of choice for many law enforcement agencies. He’d analyzed countless 9mms discharged from these weapons and fired his share of this model as well. A sweet gun for sure.

“We’re clear. No sign of Bittner.” The first deputy shifted to glare at Grady from intense gray eyes.

“Who’re you?”

Grady didn’t like the guy’s tone, but he would answer. “Grady Houston. Weapons expert at the Veritas Center. Ainslie works for us.”

The deputy lowered his gun. “And you were just in the neighborhood or what?”

“I live nearby and heard on the scanner that something was going down at Ainslie’s place, Deputy...?”

“Zander. Carl Zander.” He raised a brow. “And you just happen to know her address?”

“Gave her a ride home one night when her car wouldn’t start.” Grady widened his stance. He didn’t like being on the defensive when he wasn’t doing anything wrong, and Ainslie wasn’t either. “Look. Ainslie’s mighty uncomfortable over there. At least let her put her arms down and get up.”

“Go ahead.” Zander waved a hand. “But keep your hands where I can see them.”

She glared up at the deputy and got to her feet.

Grady wanted to help her up. Maybe hold her close until she got over the shock of four armed men bursting into her house. No way he would, though. They’d been dancing around an intense attraction to each other for months. The very last thing she needed tonight was for him to make a move. Supporting her and getting these deputies to take a hike would be far more beneficial.

“As you said, Deputy Zander, the place is clear,” Grady said. “I’m sure you didn’t see any sign of Bittner. Why not apologize to the lady and take off so we can get her door fixed and move on?”

“Apologize for doing my job?” Zander said. “Hardly.”

Grady didn’t like this guy’s attitude. “Then just take off.”

Zander slung his rifle strap over his shoulder. “I have some questions for Ms. Duncan before I go. Maybe you should be the one who takes off.”

Grady firmed his shoulders and eyed the guy.

“Hey, hey.” Drake stepped between them. “Why don’t we take it down a notch here? Grady just wants to help.”

Grady couldn’t believe the usual instigator in the Byrd family was making peace, but Grady was thankful for his intervention before things escalated with this He-Man.

Zander focused on Ainslie. “I’ll need to search you.”

“That’s not necessary,” Grady snapped and started toward them before the guy touched Ainslie.

Drake held out a hand and gave Grady a warning look. Grady wanted to ignore him. How he wanted to. Problem was, they were doing their jobs. If he interfered, he would be arrested. No point in fighting it. In the end, Zander would still search her.

Zander stopped in front of Ainslie and kept his focus on her. “Hands on the wall.”

She glared at him but complied.

Zander started the search, running the back of his hand over Ainslie’s T-shirt then yoga pants. Grady gritted his teeth. The clothing was form fitting enough to prove she wasn’t carrying. Zander had to know that. He could’ve forgone the detailed examination if he’d wanted to.

As the search played out, Grady’s anger vibrated like a jackhammer attacking concrete. He wanted to deck the guy so badly he could taste the need for it.

Zander stepped back. “Go ahead and have a seat, Ms. Duncan.”

“I’ll just join her,” Grady said.

“No!” Ainslie settled on the sofa covered in a soft blue fabric and straightened her shirt as if she was trying to erase Zander’s touch. “I appreciate your support, but I can handle this on my own.”

He had to work hard to keep his mouth from falling open. Sure, he got that they'd been avoiding being alone with each other for months in that unspoken dance, but tonight she needed someone on her side. Was she so troubled by the idea of him being with her that she'd rather face these deputies alone? It was looking that way.

"You heard her," Zander said, seeming to enjoy Grady's discomfort. "Take a hike."

Grady ignored Zander and locked gazes with Ainslie. "You sure you want me to go?"

"Positive," she said with an unwavering voice.

"Okay, then," he stated, more for himself than for her, but he still couldn't make his feet move.

Zander cocked an eyebrow. "Need me to walk you out?"

Grady ground his teeth and spun toward the door. He got his feet moving, one foot in front of the other. One step. Two. Each one feeling like he was betraying Ainslie. How pathetic was that? She wanted him to leave—fairly ordered him to go—and he still couldn't shake the feeling that he was letting her down.

Outside, he shook his head in the nippy air. Clearly, he had more than a physical thing for her. Sure, he'd avoided being alone with her. She did the same thing. But it didn't matter. Not one bit. Over the past few months he'd somehow come to care for her.

Question now was—what was he going to do about it?

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