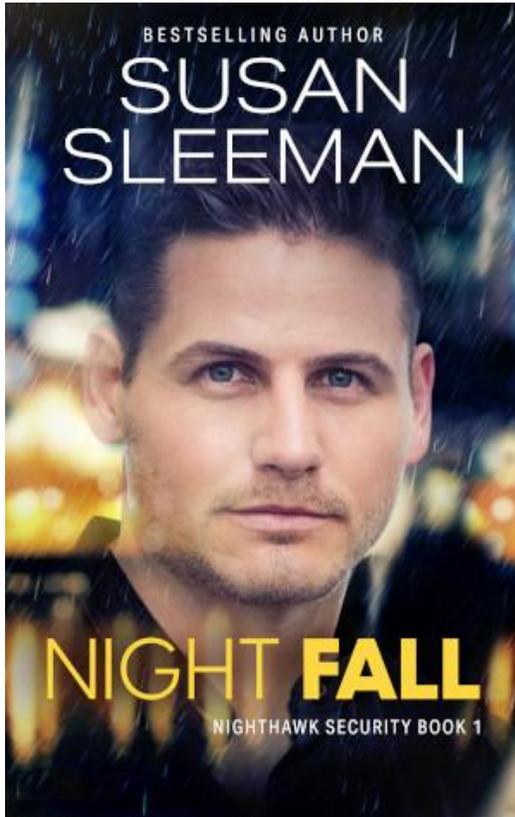


NIGHT FALL SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and E-Book

Nighthawk Security Series – NOV/2020

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She faces dangerous situations all the time...

Olympic downhill skier Harper Young knows what it's like to look danger in the face. After all, she does it every time she races down a ski slope. She's fine with that danger and even excels under the pressure, winning Olympic gold. And as a governor's daughter, she's familiar with receiving threats from the general public. But when a stalker turns his sights on her, she has zero skills to protect herself.

But she has no idea what lurks in the shadows.

Former Navy SEAL and ATF Agent, Aiden Byrd of Nighthawk Security is well versed in protection skills and knows the dangers she faces. Problem is, there's an instant attraction between Aiden and Harper, and Aiden has to fight to remain professional. As the

stalker grows bolder and tries to end Harper's life, Aiden's only hope in keeping her safe is to deny his feelings. Something that borders on impossible.

Chapter One

She was dying, and it was his fault.

Sweat dripping in his eyes, Aiden peered through the billow of acrid smoke to take stock of the op. He didn't like what he saw. Smoke. Bullet-ridden walls and doors. The op with his four brothers had gone sideways. Completely.

He signaled for his youngest brother, Erik, to hand over their protectee, the woman

draped over his shoulder and clinging to life.

Erik grimaced. Paused. Finally complied, shifting her onto Aiden's shoulder. He felt the weight of the dying woman, but he wouldn't let it slow him down. He motioned for Erik to take lead down the narrow alley, the path to freedom. Another flash-bang hit behind them. The boom rang out in the night.

Erik cringed and swiped a hand over his sweat-encrusted face. A look of determination darkened his eyes, and he lifted his assault rifle and set off, one foot in front of the other, carefully. Slowly. Just as Aiden had taught him.

And still...Erik had screwed up. Let the woman take a bullet. Now, they could find themselves in recovery mode instead of protection mode.

Aiden muttered under his breath and followed. Drake's footsteps pounded behind, taking up the rear of their team.

A wounded woman was the worst possible outcome. And it was Aiden's fault. Pure and simple. Sure, he couldn't control his brothers' every move, but Aiden was in charge of this op, and he was failing. Big time. Failing.

Stow it. Move. Save this woman now. Think and analyze later.

He lifted his rifle and moved into place, heading toward Brendan, who was kneeling, rifle up and firing, holding the alley. For now.

Step after step, Aiden inched forward. Carefully. Cautiously. The woman stirred. Moaned. Shifted.

A helo fluttered overhead, swinging low toward the end of the compound, swirling dust into clouds and sending pointed barbs of debris flying.

A sharp rifle report split the night. Brendan went down. Aiden's breath stilled.

Erik paused, another error.

“Move! Move! Move!” Aiden shouted, his mind torn between helping his brother and getting the woman to safety. But his mission was clear. Protect her at all costs. Even at the loss of a team member’s life—at the loss of a brother.

Erik marched to the alley’s opening, his boots thundering on the ground. He tossed a smoke grenade. A cloud of smoke rose in the open area. He scanned for hostiles.

“All clear.” Erik darted into the street.

Aiden followed, sweat trickling down his face as he checked the open space. Skimming. Searching. Certain they were clear, he raced out of the alley. Dodged bullets. Crossed the pavement to the safe zone. Finally.

He knelt and gently laid the woman down on a soft bed of grass. The big red splotch on her T-shirt said the bullet had hit her right above the heart. She wouldn’t have survived if this were real and not a training exercise at Blackwell Tactical’s training facility.

Gage Blackwell strode to Aiden and stood over him, his eyes on his watch.

“You don’t have to say anything.” Aiden got to his feet. “We blew it. Took us too long to get through the course, and in real life, our protectee would be dead.”

“Blew it?” He eyed Aiden, his face a mass of disappointment. “That was an absolute disaster if I ever saw one.”

“My fault,” Erik said. “The hostiles surprised me.”

Sweat trickled down Aiden’s back, and he looked at his brother as the others joined them. “We’ll debrief and run this op again.”

“No.” Gage ran a hand over his inky black hair and narrowed equally dark eyes. “We’ll run other ops, but you know what to expect on this one now, so it won’t do any good to run it

again.”

Erik blinked a few times. “But I—”

“No,” Gage said more firmly, proving he was used to being in charge. “You have to learn to react when surprised. Protective details are all about the surprise. Hostiles aren’t going to tell you when or where they’re coming. You need muscle memory built up so you respond without pausing. You don’t learn that, people will die. You might as well close down Nighthawk Security before it even gets started.”

Erik cringed, and Aiden wanted to offer comfort, but as the youngest member of the team and the one with the least experience, Erik had things to learn, and coddling him wouldn’t help. Not if the brothers wanted to get their new investigative and protection agency off the ground.

“You need to think back to your academy training days,” Aiden told his brother, ignoring the other Blackwell team members, who’d been acting as hostiles and were joining them. “We all ran the same basic drills in law enforcement training. You have the skills. You just need to practice them.”

Erik ran a hand over his sweaty head. “Yeah. I need to put in extra work.”

“I can help you with it,” Blackwell team member Trey Sawyer said. “I had to prove myself to these knuckleheads when I joined the team, and I can show you how it’s done.”

“Hey thanks, man.”

Trey gave a firm nod, his red hair bright even in the low light of night.

“But you owe me a new shirt.” Samantha Griffin tugged on the wet paint splotch on her T-shirt from where she’d taken the hit. “It’s one of my favorites. I’ll send you a bill.”

“I’m sorry.” Erik blushed.

“Hey.” She socked him in the arm. “Just kidding. Figured I’d get shot at some point so

wore the rattiest shirt I own.”

“Okay, Nighthawk, go get cleaned up for the meeting,” Gage directed. “The rest of you, take a break, and I’ll text you when it’s time to reconvene at Blackwell Street.”

Gage and his team trained law enforcement officers all the time, and his large compound held the newest training course, which the Nighthawk team had just run. But the compound included a street with cutout buildings that looked like any main street in America, which was also used for training.

The sweaty team members disbursed in the unusually warm October night, and Aiden walked toward the main road running through Gage’s compound that was hidden from the public’s eyes deep in treed acreage.

“We’ll do better on the next run,” Aiden said.

“I sure hope so,” Gage said. “Or I’m going to regret recommending you to the Young family.”

Aiden’s turn to cringe. They’d done a bad job, sure, but it stung having Gage question the referral to protect Harper Young, Olympic downhill skier, who’d recently garnered a stalker.

“We can do the job.”

“That’s what I thought when I set up the meeting with the Youngs, but now…” Gage shrugged.

“Everyone but Erik did fine. If he doesn’t redeem himself in the next op, I can pull him from the detail.”

“He’s pretty green.”

“Don’t count him out just yet. He was a Portland police officer for several years and has learned a thing or two.”

Gage met Aiden's gaze and held it. "Doesn't equate to our service as SEALs. Or even your experience in ATF."

Aiden swiped his hand over his face. "We both started somewhere, and others gave us a chance."

Gage chewed on the inside of his mouth. "Yeah, we carried the new guys back then, but I'm not willing to work with newbies anymore. At least not on my team. Just be sure you're not swayed by the fact that he's your brother and compromise your security protocols."

They reached the narrow road running through the compound just as a spotless black Escalade pulled to a stop in front of the large building holding the conference room.

Riley Glen, one of Gage's helo pilots, jumped out of the front and opened the back door. Blond and muscular, he stood at attention as an older woman with silvery hair sleeked back into a bun stepped out. Dressed in a black power suit and a white button-down shirt, she commanded attention. While she looked around, a pair of long legs in skinny jeans slid out of the back seat. They were attached to a tall woman with reddish brown hair that fell in soft waves to her shoulders. She stood, taking a wide legged confident and powerful stance. He put her at nearly six feet tall with broad shoulders covered in a black knit shirt and bright pink down vest.

"I guess that's her," Aiden said more to himself than to Gage.

She turned to look around the space, and Aiden took a quick step into the shadows. When he met this woman, he wanted to make a good impression, not show up with sweat and dirt all over his face and wearing torn cargo pants from a failed training op.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Her pictures don't do her justice."

"She's a looker all right," Gage said.

"How many medals has she won?" Aiden asked.

“Four,” Gage said. “She’s the most successful American alpine skier right now.”

Aiden had watched her events in preparation for this meeting. He’d expected her to be a burly, tough looking woman, and she *was* muscular, but also very feminine. Hence, the stalker.

“The mother is a powerhouse,” Gage said. “Has to be as our governor.”

“And the father?” Aiden watched the tall lanky man step from the Escalade. He had hair the color of his daughter’s and wore jeans and a flannel shirt.

“He’s kind of quiet. Lives in the wife’s shadow, but he’s a huge supporter of Harper’s skiing.” Gage met Aiden’s gaze and held it. “The mother’s the one you have to convince of your skills.”

Aiden nodded, but, as he kept his focus pinned on Harper, he knew deep in his soul that she was the one he would have to get on board. Was he up to the task of persuading a woman who chose the very best so she could win to choose a startup agency like Nighthawk Security to keep her alive? Or would he be doomed to fail even before he began?

*

Harper twirled her ring around her finger and looked at Blackwell’s conference room. The place smelled like a mixture of popcorn and sanitizing cleaner. It was smaller and less impressive than she’d expected for the famous Blackwell Tactical facility. But then, they didn’t need impressive. They had a reputation as the best. Something her mother knew about. After she’d received death threats over her stance on gun control, she hired them to assist her Dignitary Protection Unit—DPU.

Too bad for Harper. Now, Blackwell wasn’t available to help protect her from a stalker who was getting more and more aggressive. There were other teams out there. Sure there were. Tons of them. Her mother had already hired two teams for Harper. Two that failed big time when

some of the guys hit on her. Seriously. She'd never expected that. So her mother had asked for a recommendation from Gage. He'd suggested Nighthawk Security and arranged this meeting.

Harper liked the agency name, but they were new to the protection game. Granted, all five brothers who owned the agency had law enforcement experience, and two of the brothers had also served in special ops in the military. But experience keeping women with stalkers alive? Nada as far as she could tell.

She looked at four of the brothers standing by the wall. Military rigid. All over six feet. Not talking. Eyes forward. Intense and buff. All dark haired and resembling each other except the last one. A blond who looked out of place. Sort of a *one of these is not like the other* situation.

Which one was the leader, Aiden? Or was he the missing guy?

She'd read their names online. They went in alphabetical order by birth date. The missing Aiden was the oldest, then Brendan, Clay, Drake, and Erik. Cute idea, but did she want cute to protect her? No. She wanted rugged. Tough. Intense. They were that too. The ones she could see anyway.

Her mother leaned close, bringing with her the subtle scent of flowers from her pricey perfume. "He's late."

She meant the missing brother of course. Harper looked at the clock. "He has three minutes before he's late."

Her mother rolled her eyes.

Right. Mom's time. She frequently quoted, "To be early is to be on time. To be on time is to be late." How many times had Harper heard that? So often that she lived by it. But she didn't hold other people to the exacting standard.

The door opened, and for some reason Harper held her breath and fixed her gaze on the doorway.

Gage entered. As much as she liked the man, she was disappointed he was entering the room instead of the missing brother.

He crossed over to them and held out his hand. “Good to see you, Harper.”

She shook his hand, his skin rough and callused but his nails neatly manicured. “You too. I wish you were available for my detail.”

“You can count on the Nighthawk team.” He quickly switched his focus to her mother.

“Olivia,” he said and shook her hand.

“Your final guy has a minute to arrive or we’re out of here,” her mother said, and Gage didn’t cringe under her characteristic straightforward manner like many people did in.

“My fault,” Gage said. “We had a training op, and our debrief ran long. Aiden wanted to clean up before the meeting. But he’ll be here.”

Ah, so the missing guy is the leader.

“How are my men working out on your detail?” Gage asked, her mother.

“Excellent,” she said. “Though with no attempts on my life, I’m beginning to think the threats were empty threats.”

“You can never be too careful.”

“You would say that. With the astronomical price I pay you for each day your men protect me, I could build you a dozen of these fancy compounds.”

“You know what they say?” he asked, sounding amused at her mother’s whining instead of irritated.

“Do tell.” She rested a delicate hand boasting a giant ruby ring that had belonged to her

mother on the table.

“You get what you pay for.” Gage grinned, and Harper was struck by how handsome and fit he was for a guy who was nearly ten years older than she was. She knew from when her mother hired him that he was a former SEAL, married to a woman named Hannah a few years ago, bringing his daughter and her son together. Since then, they’d had a baby of their own.

“Then I hope that’s true of Nighthawk Security too,” her mother said. “Because my daughter deserves the very best when it comes to her safety.”

“I’m sure you’ll find it’s true.” Gage offered his hand to her father. “Nice to see you, Nelson.”

Her dad shook, and they started a conversation about her dad’s four-hundred-acre filbert orchard that he’d inherited from his father. But when the door opened again, Harper’s attention was drawn to the missing Aiden Byrd, finally stepping across the threshold.

Tall and dark-haired like most of his brothers, he had a wide jaw and large nose. He looked freshly showered, but his jaw was covered in a five o’clock shadow. He wore a black form-fitting shirt and black cargo pants. All the brothers were built, but this guy was even bigger. Huge chest. Wide shoulders. His hands dropped to his trim waist, and his gaze searched the room. His cobalt blue eyes locked on her, and she felt something jar deep in the pit of her stomach. Something she couldn’t name but somehow knew was dangerous.

“I’m sorry to cut it so close to the meeting time,” he said, still holding her gaze. “Shall we get started?”

“You must be Aiden,” her mother said. “The managing partner.”

“I am.” He turned to look at the men against the wall. “And these are my brothers. Brendan, Clay, Drake, and Erik.”

Each of the men tipped their heads ever so slightly when Aiden said their names. Harper thought it was endearing that they had lined up in age order. She imagined they were used to doing that, and it came naturally to them.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Gage looked at her mother. “Let me know when you’re ready to head back to Portland, and I’ll make sure my pilot is at the chopper waiting.”

“Thank you.” Harper smiled at Gage, all the while feeling Aiden’s study on her.

Please don’t let him be one of those guys who hits on me.

Gage exited the room, and Harper turned her focus to Aiden, who was picking up a remote control and turning on a slide presentation. She appreciated the work he’d probably put into it, and her mother would love all the details, but Harper just wanted him to quickly and concisely tell her why they were right for the job.

The first slide came up and held the Nighthawk Security logo.

“As you know,” Aiden said. “We’re a newer agency, and we—”

“How many protective details have you handled thus far?” her mother asked.

“None, but—”

“Then what makes you think you can protect my daughter?” Her mother lifted her chin.

“Because we’re all trained in protection tactics and have the skills needed to do the job.”

Her mother frowned. “Sounds like I could pick anyone out of the phone book and get that answer.”

Harper waited for him to get irritated, but he kept a level expression. “I can see how you might think that, but we have something the other agencies in the phone book don’t have.”

Her mother pinned him with a skeptical gaze. “And what’s that?”

“We’re brothers.” He raised his shoulders even more, looking every bit the warrior

Harper thought him to be. “We’ve spent thirty or so years getting to know each other—our strengths and weaknesses. We know when to compensate for each other and when to let our strengths shine. We don’t have to think about it. We just do. That’s not something any team, not even Blackwell Tactical, can offer you.”

He took a long breath, his gaze never wavering. “That innate something coupled with our training and experience make us the team for the job.”

Her mother tilted her head ever so slightly. “Your website says you have special ops experience. Elaborate on the that.”

“Brendan and I both served in the military. Brendan as Army Delta Force.”

“And you?” her mother challenged.

He looked hesitant to answer and took a breath first. “Navy SEAL.”

Harper had read somewhere that spec ops guys hated to reveal that they were special. They kept it quiet and didn’t need to brag. In fact, those who did were likely posers. Clearly, he was following that tact.

“After that, I was an ATF agent. Brendan, Multnomah County Deputy and SWAT. Clay ICE agent. Drake, U.S. Marshal, and Erik, Portland police officer.”

“Quite the variety.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and her mother cringed. She was vain about her looks and hated being old enough to be called a *ma’am*, especially by a good-looking guy like Aiden. “Our father was a deputy, and we all wanted to follow in his law-enforcement footsteps.”

“So why the change to the private sector?” she asked.

“We believe we can do more good outside the confines of law enforcement rules.”

Her mother arched her eyebrow.

“Nothing illegal. Just not the tight constrictions of agency regulations.”

“And what else do you have to offer?”

“As far as I can tell from the teams you previously employed, none of them had the ability to investigate the stalker’s advances. We do.” He took a long breath, his chest swelling in the tight shirt. “We not only have strong detective skills, but we partner with the Veritas Center.”

Harper had no idea who these other people were, but her mother sat forward. “Is that so?”

Aiden nodded. “Our sister, Sierra, is the trace evidence expert on the Veritas team. We office out of their building and share resources.”

“Impressive.”

Aiden beamed at the compliment.

“When can you get started?”

“I’d like two days to plan and tailor our approach to Harper’s needs.” He looked at Harper again, and a hint of a smile played on his face. It was off-center. Adorable in her book. But there was more there too. A buzz of attraction. Interest. In her.

Grrr. She should be able to count on him not to protect her not have to deflect advances. Sure, this time was different. She’d had no feelings for the other men, but she felt herself pulled toward Aiden. Which made it worse. She had no time for men in her life. Not if she wanted to maintain her slot as the top female skier in the country.

She stood and looked at her mother. “I’ve heard enough. Let’s go.”

Her mother’s eyes widened, but for once she didn’t question Harper’s decision and stood.

Disappointment crowned on Aiden’s face, but he quickly hid his emotions.

Harper headed for the door and stopped at the head of table near Aiden. She had a terrible urge to shake his hand. To see what it would be like to touch him, but she held back. “We’ll call

you with our decision within twenty-four hours.”

He held her gaze. “I’d hoped you would make a decision today.”

“And I’d hoped you were different than the guys on the other teams, but I can see the interest in your eyes, and that doesn’t bode well for a strong working relationship.”

His mouth fell open, and she ignored his confusion to walk out the door.

Outside the building, her mother grabbed her arm. “You’re not being fair.”

“How’s that?” she asked, not that she really wanted to hear the answer.

Her mother rested her hands on her hips, the expensive silk fabric wrinkling under them.

“You were giving Aiden the same vibes he was putting out there. How did you expect him to react?”

That couldn’t be true. Could it? She was at a loss to answer, except to say she expected him to be neutral when it came to her. But deep inside, the buzz that had been racing between her and Aiden thrilled her, and she wanted more of the captivating feelings. Much more.

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