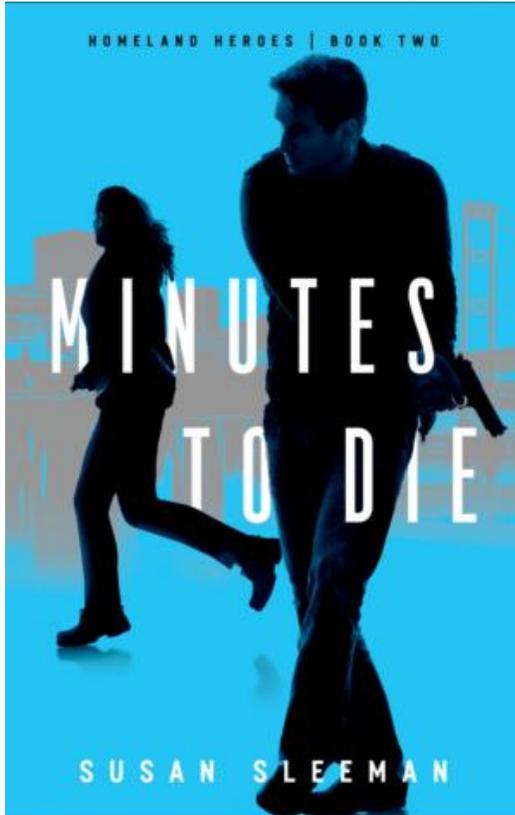


MINUTES TO DIE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and E-Book

Homeland Heroes Series – NOV/2020

ISBN-10: 0764233963

ISBN-13: 978-0764233968

It's the intel every agent fears—terrorists have been smuggled into the country intent on unleashing the most deadly attack since 9/11. With the threat imminent, FBI Agent Kiley Dawson and ICE Agent Evan Bowers are charged with taking down this terrorist cell. Only problem is, Kiley blames Evan for the death of her former partner, and she can barely be in a room with him. But with millions of lives on the line, she has no choice.

If it wasn't for a bad call Evan made, Kiley's former partner would still be alive, and Evan has to live with that guilt for the rest of his life. When he starts falling for her, the agent's death seems an impossible obstacle—but it's also the last thing he needs to think about. As the terrorist plot veers toward targeting Kiley's family, the two are pushed to the breaking point in a race to save countless lives.

Chapter One

Exposed. Kiley felt exposed.

Standing there. In the dark.

Waiting. Waiting.

The moon hunkered behind heavy clouds. The streetlights dim. The quiet Washington,

D.C., suburban shopping area shrouded by foggy mist.

A whisper of wind broke through the trees, carrying the damp, earthy smell from nearby planter beds packed with vivid yellow-and-rusty mums. The rustle of branches created the only sound and movement. A normal fall night.

And yet . . . Kiley couldn't relax. Maybe her FBI agent instincts were warning her to be careful. Maybe. Or maybe it was more.

She looked at her watch, the green number glowing in the eerie fog. 11:20 p.m.

What was taking her confidential informant so long? Firuzeh had promised to arrive by eleven. Had something happened to her?

She'd called Kiley at eight to warn of an imminent terrorist threat. A threat so grand, Firuzeh said it would make the tragedy of 9/11 pale in comparison. Millions of lives could be impacted. Kiley had heard exaggerations like this in the past, but Firuzeh's intel had always been credible.

Millions.

Kiley shuddered and hoped Firuzeh was wrong this time. Not that she ever had been. Not since Kiley first met Firuzeh when she called the FBI a year ago with a tip related to one of Kiley's investigations.

The hum of an automobile droned in the distance, grabbing Kiley's attention.

Finally.

She stepped deeper into the shadows, took a long breath, and held it. She focused her night-vision binoculars across the narrow street where she and Firuzeh often met. Headlights drifted through the fog, two solid beams forming as the small white Toyota drew closer. Kiley zoomed in on the license plate.

Yes. Firuzeh's car. At last.

Kiley released her breath, the puff of air evaporating in the mist, but continued to glass the area with her binoculars, her attention sharp.

The car pulled to the curb and stilled.

Kiley's phone vibrated against her leg. Seeing Firuzeh's name on the screen, Kiley answered. "I see your car."

"Where are you?" An edge of worry cut through Firuzeh's tone.

"Across the street by the coffee shop."

"I can't see you."

"It's foggy, but I'm here."

"I'll be over in a second." Firuzeh's car door opened. She stepped out and glided across the street like a waif, the ends of her brightly colored headscarf fluttering behind her.

Kiley took a long look through the shadows cloaking the storefronts. Made one more check of the road, wet with September rain, and glanced down the street at parked cars.

Nothing out of the norm for a Saturday night in the quiet suburb.

She stepped out to greet the young woman who'd always impressed Kiley with her self-sacrifice for the greater good.

Kiley respected Firuzeh's sacrifices and wouldn't waste any of her time with small talk. "Tell me what you know."

"I cannot." Firuzeh's big brown eyes widened, and she glanced around as she bit her full lower lip. "Not until you promise to bring my entire family into witness protection."

Kiley's mouth fell open at the unexpected demand. "That's not how WITSEC works. I need the information first, and then we can assess the need for security measures."

“No. No.” Firuzeh shifted her stance, and her wide-legged pants in a bright paisley print floated with the movement. “If anyone finds out I talked to you, they will kill us. I cannot keep silent. Not with a threat this big. Millions of lives are in danger, Agent Dawson. Millions! But I need to protect my family first.”

Kiley searched Firuzeh’s earnest face, the muscles tight, her eyes wide.

She really believed she was in danger, and Kiley had to help. Question was, how was she going to get WITSEC approval without details? She had no standing with the U.S. Marshals. She *was* a member of the elite Rapid Emergency Deployment team, or RED team, made up of interagency law-enforcement officers, and they had a deputy on their team. Plus one of their team member’s fiancée was also a deputy. Perhaps together they could make this happen.

She smiled at Firuzeh to ease her worry. “Give me a second to make a call.”

Firuzeh clamped her hands together. “Please. Hurry. I am worried about my family. So very, very worried.”

Her panic cut through the quiet night, and Kiley knew right then and there that this threat was real. No question. Firuzeh and her family did need to be protected, and it was a matter of urgency.

Kiley dialed teammate and Deputy U.S. Marshal Mack Jordan.

“Mack, good,” she said after he answered. “I need a favor, and I need it now.”

“Hey, slow down.” His rumbling Texas drawl stretched out over the line. “Catch a breath.”

“No time to breathe.” Kiley relayed the Abed family’s situation.

“Millions? Isn’t she exaggerating?” His skepticism was deserved. He didn’t know Firuzeh like Kiley did.

“For anyone else I might say yes, but not for Firuzeh. She’s not a player. If she says she has intel this big, she does.”

“Okay. Let me see what I can do.” His instant trust in her judgment was a hallmark of their team’s support. One for all and all for one, she liked to joke.

“Thanks, Mack,” she said, watching Firuzeh searching the darkness as if she believed someone was coming for her now. “Every minute counts.”

“Trust me. I get it.”

“Maybe I should’ve called Eisenhower.” She hated to sound like she doubted Mack when she didn’t, but as the ICE special agent in charge of the Cyber Crimes Center, their team supervisor had more clout.

“Do it, and we can work this from different angles.” Mack’s lack of offense and steadfast cooperation was typical of his kind and compassionate personality lurking under a He-Man façade.

“I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.” He disconnected the call.

She turned to Firuzeh. “My associate’s a U.S. Marshal. He’s working on your request, and I’ll call my supervisor too.”

“Thank you.” She adjusted her purple tunic edged in gold trim. “I am so very appreciative.”

“If this is approved, I’ll need contact information for everyone in your family.”

“I don’t know the numbers, and I left my phone in the car. I’ll get it while you make your call.” She quickly turned toward the street.

Kiley watched her disappear into the haze and offered a short prayer for Firuzeh and her family’s safety as she tapped Eisenhower’s number on her contact list.

“Barry Eisenhower.” His confident voice rumbled deeply through the phone.

“It’s Dawson,” she said.

A gunshot split the quiet, ripping through the night like a car backfiring in the distance. Firuzeh’s body went limp. Dropped to the ground. Sprawled in an awkward pose.

“No!” Kiley shoved her phone into her FBI windbreaker and drew her weapon.

She searched the darkness, her heart thundering in her chest as she made a thorough sweep to assess the threat.

Firuzeh stirred. Moaned in pain.

No. No. No. Not this. Kiley had to help Firuzeh even if the shooter had his weapon trained on them.

Please, please, please. No more shots and let Firuzeh be okay.

Kiley charged across the street. One foot in front of the other, her pulse racing. Waiting for the bullet to come. To pierce her back. Her side. Anywhere.

She reached Firuzeh. Dropped to her knees. Saw Firuzeh’s chest rise and fall. Still alive.

Thank you.

A bullet bit into the road by Firuzeh’s head, the report an echo in the eerie quiet. Sharp shards flew, piercing Kiley’s face. Maybe the shooter wasn’t a good shot. Or he was warning Kiley. She didn’t know which. Didn’t matter. She had to move Firuzeh to a protected area.

Kiley holstered her gun, took a good hold under Firuzeh’s arms, and tugged backward. Sticky, warm blood congealed on Kiley’s hands. Fear blazed a path down her back, so raw she could almost smell it. She swallowed it down. “Hold on, Firuzeh. Hold on. I’ll get you to a safe place and call for help.”

Firuzeh slipped in Kiley’s hands, and she shifted to get a better hold. Another bullet

cracked through the night, razoring past Kiley's head. If she hadn't slipped, that bullet . . .

No, don't think about that.

Kiley gritted her teeth and moved backward. Faster. Faster. She bumped around the front of the car. Another slug slammed into the metal behind her. She nearly yelped but held it together and gently lowered Firuzeh to the ground.

"Agent Dawson?" Eisenhower's voice came from the phone in her pocket. He was still on the line.

Oh, thank you!

She fumbled in her pocket until her slick hand circled the phone. "It's Firuzeh. Someone shot her. Is shooting at me! I need backup."

Kiley took a breath. Searched her brain to cut through the panic and think of their address. Shouted it into the phone. "I have to help Firuzeh!"

"Stay put, and don't try to be a hero."

Hero, right. Kiley just needed to stay alive. To tend to Firuzeh and keep her alive as well.

She ended the call. And it hit her. She was on her own here. Alone. All alone.

Panic raced in. Took hold. Her hands trembled.

Stop. Get control. Firuzeh is depending on you.

She shone the light from her phone on Firuzeh's body, the beam wobbling under Kiley's trembling hand. Firuzeh was still breathing. Barely. Blood pumped from her chest. Spurting.

Kiley dropped her phone. Shrugged out of her jacket. Balled up the fabric and pressed it against the wound. Blood soaked through the cloth and coated Kiley's hands.

"Stay with me, Firuzeh," Kiley pleaded, her heart in her throat. "For the love of God, stay with me."

The mere thought of a terrorist attack so big it made 9/11 seem like a warm-up sent a chill over ICE Agent Evan Bowers' body. In the ditch overlooking the Port of Tacoma, he stared through his binoculars at the dock and couldn't think of a more important mission than stopping this impending threat.

A cold wind swept across the docks while crickets chirped in the background. Thankfully, insects mingling with the rush of water lapping the port wall were the only sounds. No cranes were moving. No trucks hauling. No workers rushing around. Perfectly still as he'd hoped for at eight o'clock on a Saturday night when most of the workers were off for the weekend and only a minimal crew remained on-site.

He scanned the distance, where tall orange cranes rose like giant skeletons above the murky water steaming from the nighttime cool-down. Stacks of metal shipping containers lined the docks, waiting to be moved, and Evan locked his binoculars on the green one in question.

He'd worked similar covert operations like this one in his job with ICE, and for years as an Explosive Ordinance Disposal technician in the Navy. When an EOD tech, he operated with Special Forces like SEALs and Rangers and also with the Secret Service and State Department to protect the president, vice-president, and other state and foreign officials. He also supported Homeland Security as well as U.S. Customs, the FBI, and state and local police bomb squads.

But that was all in the past. Now he hunted terrorists. The most dangerous threat of all.

"Looks clear to me." FBI Agent Ryan Cartwright poked his head up from where he crouched in the ditch beside Evan. "We should get moving."

Evan's gut warned him to take another sweep before breaching the port's perimeter. "Not yet."

“What’s the point of sitting here when our contact is waiting?” Cartwright was a cowboy—rushing in instead of evaluating and planning. The kind of guy who could get himself and Evan killed.

Evan wouldn’t risk a trigger-happy security guard or a startled terrorist training a gun on them, and he sure wasn’t about to explain his that his caution stemmed from an incident a few years back when an FBI agent lost his life. Since that day, Evan knew it took only minutes to die and had erred even more on the side of caution, and no better time to be extra careful than when facing brutal terrorists.

He scanned the dock again, questioning the plan. “I honestly don’t like this approach.”

Cartwright scoffed. “What’s not to like? We have a warrant. We’re just slipping through the back door to keep from alerting port staff with questionable ethics. No way we’ll let them stand in our way and get the container moved before we reach it.”

“I get that.” Evan took a long pull of the fifty-degree air tinged with the smell of diesel. “But I like to complete my due diligence. Tonight that means one more sweep for potential threats before we go.”

“Well, I’m done. You coming or what?”

Evan chose the *or what*. Cartwright started to move, and Evan grabbed the guy’s ankle to pull him back down.

Evan glowered at Cartwright. “We go when I say we go and not until then.”

Cartwright didn’t respond, simply lifted his binoculars and pointed them at the container.

Evan did the same thing but kept his hearing tuned to Cartwright in case he moved again. Evan watched the guard drive his utility vehicle slowly past them. He was five minutes ahead of schedule, and he checked the area with a more thorough focus than he had on the past round. If

Evan had let Cartwright move, they would've run right into this guard, resulting in an altercation Evan surely didn't need tonight.

He kept his eyes pinned on the containers and waited five full minutes before shifting his focus back to Cartwright. "Okay, we go."

Cartwright lowered his binoculars and lifted his radio to his mouth. "Making entry. Rendezvous at container."

"I'm waiting," the port's night supervisor answered.

Cartwright dropped his binoculars and got to his feet. This cowboy didn't know the meaning of restraint and control and could get himself killed. Evan wouldn't mind if the guy learned a lesson, but Evan didn't want him to die, and if Evan was going in, he was leading the way. He eased in front of Cartwright and slowed the guy's approach.

Evan signaled for Cartwright to follow, and the agent fell in line behind Evan as if he were lead on the Joint Terrorism Task Force where they both currently served. JTTF leadership fell to ICE Special Agent Harley Watson, though Evan was in charge of this op.

He climbed the bank, inched toward the chain-link fence, and resisted shaking his head at the minimal security. A simple fence and occasional guard patrol were the only things standing between them and stacks and stacks of containers. Way too easy of a breach in Evan's opinion.

He strapped his rifle over his back to climb the ladder and scale the fence. His tactical boots hit the ground, sounding like an explosion in the quiet.

Cartwright scrambled over the fence, and they lowered the ladder to the ground. Rifle outstretched, Evan signaled to move toward the long metal containers in rusty blues, greens, and oranges. He slipped between a row stacked four high and let out a breath for making it this far unseen. He crept down the dark row, the security lighting doing little to show the way.

Unfortunately the light was too bright for NVGs, yet their path remained dark and uncertain.

At an open lane, he paused and listened. A motorized vehicle sounded nearby. The next guard detail. He held up his hand, warning Cartwright to hold.

Headlights swept over the area. Evan backed into the shadows and held his breath. The vehicle passed. He waited two minutes and lifted his hand to signal their forward progress. He rushed across the lane and moved quickly along another bank of containers. Then another—and another, his back now slick with perspiration under his body armor.

He spotted a tall, stocky man standing near the next row, wearing a port security uniform and white hard hat. He held a walkie-talkie and clipboard.

Evan glanced at Cartwright. “Radio our contact. Let’s see if this guy picks up.”

Cartwright grabbed his device. “In view. Coast clear?”

The man lifted his radio. “Yes, but hurry before someone starts asking questions.”

“We’re right across the lane,” Cartwright said. “On the move.”

The dock supervisor started to turn, and Evan set off again, reaching the man before he could make a complete turn.

“ICE Agent Evan Bowers.” Evan displayed his credentials.

The supervisor shone a flashlight on the ID and nodded. “Tony Lopez. I’ll need the warrant you promised me.”

Evan produced the paperwork from his pocket.

Lopez snatched it as if grasping for a lifeline, shone his light on the papers, and flipped through the many pages. He gave a single nod and fixed the warrant to his clipboard. He set it on the concrete and picked up a pair of bolt cutters. “This container’s odd. Has a small side door. It has a less sturdy lock. Easier to cut. I’ll start with that one.”

He flicked on his headlamp and stepped around the side of the container. He hefted the bolt cutters in solid arms and made quick work of snapping the lock and opening the door.

Looking proud of himself, he stood back.

Evan brushed past him to the entrance and swept the inside of the container with his flashlight. His mouth fell open. “What in the world?”

Cartwright joined Evan and let out a low whistle. “Never expected to find this. Not in a million years.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Evan ran his gaze over the space in front of him, his heart sinking. “But it looks like the terrorist threat is real. Very real and more sophisticated than we could’ve ever imagined.”

Buy It Now for Print or E-book

