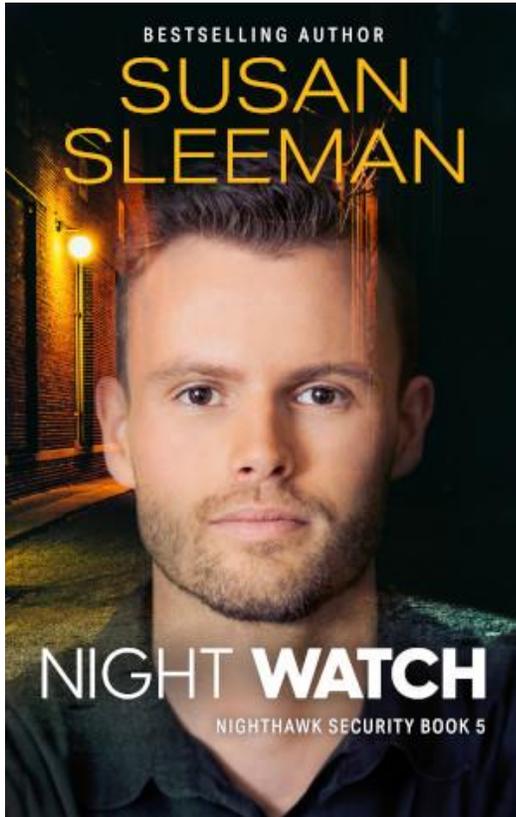


NIGHT WATCH SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print, E-Book, and Audio

Nighthawk Security Series – AUGUST/2021

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Everything points to suicide or accidental death...

Underwater crime scene investigator, Kennedy Walker is shocked when her mother dies and the police rule her death a suicide or an accidental overdose. Her scientist-mother was on the verge of a scientific breakthrough, and Kennedy knows her mother would never end her life, but the detective won't listen. Kennedy moves back to her home town and commits to finding her mother's killer and finishing her work.

And she must prove them wrong.

Kennedy digs deeper, garnering the killer's focus, and he puts her in his cross-hairs. She can't give up on such an important project, so she swallows down her unease over the tumultuous breakup with Erik Byrd in college and hires Nighthawk Security, not only to protect her, but to help find her mother's killer. It takes only one look for both of them to know their feelings for each other haven't gone away. With so many people counting on her to complete the project, giving in to old feelings is a distraction neither she or Erik can afford, and they both need to keep watch. Especially in the darkest hours of the night, when the killer comes out to play.

Chapter One

“Mom didn't kill herself.” Kennedy Walker fisted her hands on her hips and glared at her younger sister, Finley. “And she sure wouldn't accidentally overdose on her medicine.

Detectives and medical examiners are human too. They can make mistakes.”

“Argh.” Finley rubbed her face dotted with freckles. “Mom’s been gone for almost a month, and you haven’t proved foul play in her death. It’s time to give up and move on.”

Move on. Right. The very idea was ludicrous.

Kennedy strode to the wall of windows in their mother’s floating home, where Kennedy had been staying since the funeral. She watched as the Columbia River crashed along the back deck and adjusted her stance for the sway that high winds and fast-moving currents could bring. A sharp gust fluttered curtains on a nearby window, cooling the August heat.

“Staring out over the river isn’t going to change anything.” Finley joined Kennedy, her tone softer now. “Mom wasn’t murdered.”

Kennedy glanced over her shoulder at her sister, who resembled Kennedy in so many ways. They both had shoulder-length hair in an outrageous shade of red and an excess of freckles that they’d inherited from their late father. Finley had more than Kennedy, but Finley covered hers with makeup. Kennedy had never gone in for the girly things in life. She was a self-professed tomboy and glad of it. As kids, Finley had held tea parties while Kennedy had embraced their mother’s interest in science and concocted wild and crazy experiments.

“I’m afraid you’re going to burn out trying to prove something that doesn’t exist,” Finley said. “Once you get something in your mind, you don’t ever let it go.”

“Why should I let it go?” Kennedy snapped. “Mom had everything to live for. She’d finally gotten over losing Dad and loved living in this place. Plus, she was poised to make a breakthrough in her research project. And she was a scientist, for goodness’ sake. She was

meticulous with everything in her life. Every little thing. She would never accidentally take too much blood pressure medicine.”

“You weren’t here.” Finley got in Kennedy’s face. “You didn’t see the stress she was under. She wasn’t sleeping. Or eating. She lived in that lab or at the college. Came home only to feed Oreo.”

As if Oreo heard her name, the cat crossed the room and wound in and out of Kennedy’s legs, purring like a lawn mower. Kennedy scooped up the black creature with a white nose and paws and hugged her close, her soft fur tickling Kennedy’s face. Oreo was missing her owner just as much as Kennedy missed her mom. Desperately.

Kennedy took a breath to keep from arguing with her sister again. They’d had this conversation before, but this was the first time Finley had brought up Kennedy’s living in Virginia, where she worked as a forensic diver for the FBI. Maybe Kennedy should have moved back to Portland to help her mother with her research. If she’d had any idea things were so bad, she’d have come home.

But Kennedy hadn’t seen any sign of this stress. “I talked to Mom every couple of days, and she didn’t appear to be stressed.”

“She didn’t want you to feel like she needed you here. She wanted you to embrace your new career and live your own life.” Finley stroked Oreo’s head. “But she *did* need you. Badly. I don’t want to think she snapped under pressure and ended her life. I think it was an accident. She was tired and worn out. She made a mistake, one that cost her life.”

Finley’s face contorted with pain, and she broke out crying.

Oreo meowed her concern, her focus fixed on Kennedy.

Kennedy's heart split at the pain in Finley's expression and tears begged to be released. She sucked in a breath, then another and another to stop them. She had to keep it together to help her sister. Five years younger, Finley was still trying to become a responsible adult, and Kennedy needed to cut her some slack while she was still grieving the loss of their mother.

Kennedy cinched her eyes closed until she gained control. "Tell you what. I'll keep working on Mom's project until it's completed, but I'll cut back a little on digging into the potential murder if that will make you happy."

Finley dabbed at her eyes, but it did nothing to stop the mascara running down her cheeks. "It's not about making me happy. I just don't want to see you stuck in limbo."

Kennedy released Oreo and drew her little sister into a hug. Sure, Kennedy wanted to offer comfort, but she needed some too. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Finley pushed back. "When you say cutting back, you don't mean dropping the murder investigation, do you?"

Kennedy shook her head.

Finley gave an angry swipe at her tears. "Then maybe you should get some help."

Kennedy eyed her sister. "What do you mean?"

"Erik Byrd and his brothers left law enforcement to form a protection and investigation agency. Nighthawk Security. You should call him and finally end this."

“No!” The word shot out of Kennedy’s mouth like a bullet, before she could swallow and take control of the sudden burst of emotions. “My breakup with Erik was a mess. You know that. I can’t even believe you’d suggest it.”

“You hurt him. Big time. But now that Mom and Dad are both gone, you can explain. I’m sure Erik will understand. And if for some reason you’re right, and Mom was murdered, he’ll have to know about WITSEC.”

“No.” The word held less force this time. Truth was, Kennedy had wanted to tell Erik about her dad testifying against a pyramid scammer and taking his whole family into witness protection. Not that Kennedy had known her family was in the program. Not until her last year of college, when she’d found her parents’ legal documents under a different name hidden in the garage. Their dad wasn’t supposed to keep anything from his prior life, but he’d broken the rules. Thankfully, no one else had caught him.

She’d confronted him, and he explained about WITSEC, but forbid her from telling Erik. Her father’s life depended on her keeping his secret so of course she couldn’t tell. Wouldn’t tell. But every time she looked at Erik after that, she felt like she was living a lie. No way she could live a lifetime of lies and deceit. Now, the tumultuous breakup was behind them, and they’d both moved on. No point in going to see him and bringing it all up again.

“It took me years to get over Erik.” *If I even am.* “And I’m not going to reopen that old wound.”

“Not even if he can help you prove your point about Mom?” Finley crossed her arms. “Or are you afraid he’ll do the opposite and side with the ME’s findings?”

A vision of Erik came to mind. His dishwater blond hair. Wide jaw. Fit body. Those strong arms holding her. His ready smile that evaporated when she'd told him she didn't want to be with him. And then she'd walked out without an explanation. "Not for any reason."

"Fine." Finley tightened her arms. "Be that way. You always were too stubborn for your own good. I don't know why I thought you moving away for a few years would change that."

Kennedy took her sister's hand, her skin soft but cool from the night breeze.

"I don't want to argue with you anymore," Finley said. "Mom wouldn't want that. We should be sharing our memories of her and celebrating her life."

"You're right." Kennedy tried to sound cheerful but wasn't sure she accomplished it.

"Why don't we look at some old family movies?" Finley grabbed the TV remote and popped a DVD into the player and it whirred to the beginning of the first recording.

Kennedy settled next to her sister on the beige sofa in the small living area with an equally small L-shaped kitchen at the far end of the room. Their mom had moved into the floating home less than a year before, about two years after their father's passing, and Kennedy had only visited a handful of times. The small place that moved with strong winds and currents didn't feel solid like the home she'd grown up in, and she was still getting used to living on water.

A video from Finley's first birthday started playing. She sat in her high chair, and their mother was placing a small cake in front of a very chunky Finley. She plunged her fingers into the cake, and a wide grin brightened her chubby face.

“I thought this would be a good idea, but now...” A sob stole Finley’s words.

Kennedy put an arm around her sister and held her close as tears rolled down her cheeks too. “Maybe we should hold off before watching more of these.”

Finley punched the remote button, blackening the screen, and shot to her feet. “I need some air.”

“We could sit on the deck.”

“I need to head home and run this off.” She started for the door to the street.

“Okay.” Kennedy knew running was the way her sister often dealt with stress. As long as her sister was dealing with stress, maybe Kennedy could help. “I was wondering if you’d be willing to take Oreo.”

“Like adopt her?”

Kennedy nodded. “I’m working so many hours while I’m here, leaving her alone a lot of the time.”

“She’s used to it from Mom working so much.”

“Maybe, but I think she’s really lonely. And when I go back home, I’m not around much either. Plus I travel a lot so it wouldn’t be fair to Oreo. And if you took her, you could snuggle. Maybe that would give you some comfort.”

Finley looked at the cat curled in a ball on the sofa, her white paws covering her cute white nose as she slept.

Kennedy didn't want to give up the sweet cat, but if Oreo could help Finley, Kennedy was all for it. "How about trying it for a few days, and if it doesn't work, you can bring her back."

"Okay, but don't get your hopes up."

"Let me get her things together for you." Kennedy raced around the house gathering toys, a bed, food, and dishes. She scooped the litter box so it was fresh for Finley. "Go ahead and take this stuff to your car, and I'll get Oreo into her carrier."

Finley picked up the bags and marched out the door.

Kennedy let out a long sigh. Things shouldn't be this hard between sisters, and she really did hope the cat would bring Finley comfort and allow her to let go of her grief. Maybe then she could consider how important it was for Kennedy to look into their mom's death.

"Come on, sweetie." Kennedy scooped Oreo up and took her soft purring body to the carrier. The precious kitty didn't even fight going into it, just turned and looked up at Kennedy with big, sad eyes, tugging at Kennedy's already raw emotions.

Finley returned, her expression tight, and picked up the carrier. "I'll let you know how it goes."

"Call me later today, okay?" Kennedy asked. "I want to make sure you're all right."

"Sure." Her sister spun and left, leaving the door open behind her.

Finley was still upset. The last thing Kennedy wanted. She could hardly fathom having lost both of their parents within three years of each other. She needed her sister right now. Desperately.

Kennedy closed and locked the door to keep out the racing wind, then paced the room. She stopped at the patio door to look at the gray skies. Rain was rare in the Willamette Valley in late August, but not unheard of, and she'd love to stand by the window and watch, but Finley spurred Kennedy's need to look through their mom's things again. She'd searched this place a dozen or so times to no avail. She was missing something. She was sure of it.

She climbed the spiral staircase to her mother's bedroom. Her floral perfume still lingered in the room. Kennedy opened a drawer and riffled through the clothing. Tears wet her eyes again, and she blinked, trying to keep them at bay. Such an invasion of privacy to paw through the belongings of the woman who'd raised and cared for Kennedy every day of her life. She'd been an amazing and supportive mother. Always sacrificing to put Kennedy's and Finley's needs first.

Kennedy shoved the drawer closed. She couldn't do this now, not after arguing with Finley. Kennedy should have been more understanding and supportive of her sister. As the older sister, Kennedy should do everything in her power to take over for and emulate their mother and be sure Finley was okay.

"Oh, sis," Kennedy whispered as the tears finally came. She tumbled onto the plush bed, grabbing a pillow with her mother's lingering scent and curled around the soft fabric. "I'll do better next time. I promise."

Hugging her knees, she cried until her head ached and she could no longer keep her eyes open. An image of Erik Byrd came to mind, and her brain floated into college memories and thoughts of the man she once thought she would spend her life beside. Until her father's news ruined that.

She sighed, and sleep beckoned. Her eyelids grew heavy, and she drifted off.

Kennedy dreamed of trying to save her mother from a faceless fiend and woke with a start. Daylight had faded to dark. A shaft of moonlight pierced the open curtains, flapping uncontrollably in the brisk wind and highlighting the familiar bed, dresser, and floral wallpaper.

She was in her mother's bedroom.

A scraping sound on the first floor grabbed her attention.

What was that? Couldn't be Oreo.

Just water lapping on the deck, right? Or the wind? Maybe Finley had come back.

Or was it more?

Listen to her. Thinking something was going on when it was just the creaking and groaning of the home. She'd heard it plenty of times in the three weeks since she'd been staying here. She hadn't wanted to live here, and she'd started out bunking with Finley, but they hadn't been able to get along enough to share her place.

Kennedy closed the window against the threatening rain, and her stomach grumbled. She headed for the stairs. The top step squeaked under her weight.

A figure cloaked in shadows spun in the family room to look at her, the person's hand resting on the drawer handle for the sofa table.

"Finley?" Kennedy asked.

"What the heck?" The man ground out the words between clenched teeth then growled. A deep male growl, and stepped out of the shadows.

Not Finley. A big burly guy with a mask over his face and a stocking cap on his head. He was dressed in a green T-shirt and camouflage pants, and his eyes bored into Kennedy.

She glanced at the table holding her purse and gun. Her phone lay silently next to it. She couldn't access either item.

The man marched toward her, drawing a gun on the way.

A gun! Ohmygoodness. Ohmygoodness.

Her throat closed. She couldn't speak.

Think. Act. Do something.

She bolted back into the bedroom and twisted the lock, but it wouldn't hold him for long.

The dresser.

She rushed across the room and pushed it toward the door.

The door shook. The handle rattled.

Her heart raced. Nearly burst.

A thump sounded against the door.

He was trying to break it down.

She couldn't possibly get the dresser over there before he broke down the door. The only way out was the small patio. She bolted for the sliding door and flung it open. On the patio, she looked around for something to grab. Anything. To lower herself to the river-level deck and escape the gunman.

Nothing. Nothing at all. She searched her neighbors' properties, looking for lights. For help. Darkness greeted her. Why was no one home?

No. No. Not tonight.

She had no hope other than to leap into the water. Then she could hide near the small ski boat moored at the deck. Hopefully, the intruder wouldn't see her and think she'd succumbed to the current and cold water.

She climbed onto the rail. Issued a silent prayer. And leapt.

The water enveloped her body. Cold and breath stealing, She clamped her lips closed to resist gasping.

She got her bearings and swam toward the boat. She slid between the slippery fiberglass and the deck, the water roiling under her.

The intruder raced out the bedroom onto the upper deck, his solid footsteps sounding in the night. He remained in the shadows, but she knew he was looking for her. She wished she could see his face. How she wished that.

She tried not to move—not a fraction of an inch—but her body shivered.

Please go away. Please.

His feet pounded over the deck, heading back to the house.

Now! She had to move now before he got down the stairs and out to her location.

She tried to scoot free but couldn't move. The boat had shifted in the current and wind, pinning her against the dock.

She shoved against it, the fiberglass cold under her already chilly hands. The boat bounced up and down, splashing water, but didn't move away from the dock.

No. No. This couldn't be happening.

Footsteps sounded nearby. Feet came into view. Big feet wearing military style boots. She caught a glimpse of a crooked nose through the mask and a narrow face.

He gripped his gun with confidence as if trained to use it. No. Not just trained. Experienced.

His boots came closer, looking elephant-sized in her eyes.

She slid further under the boat.

Water lapped at her mouth. Her nose.

Please, don't let him find me. Please. Please. Please.

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