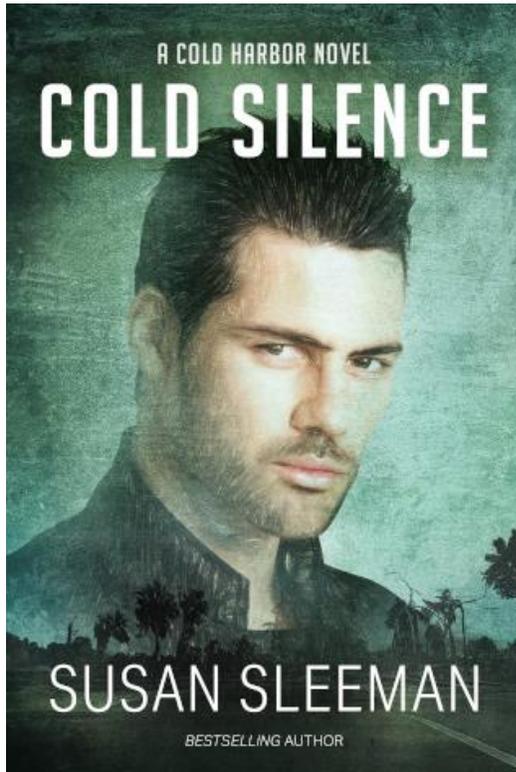


COLD SILENCE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print, E-Book, and Audio

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When his country needs him...

For Green Beret Travis Chapman, special operations and covert missions are his life. When his country calls, he reports without question. Until now. Until he's tasked with protecting a woman he'd once loved and sent him packing. He'd rather go AWOL than spend time with civilian researcher Claire Reed. Even when he learns that her vital research project is stolen, he thinks twice about seeing her again.

Will he heed the call if it means seeing the woman who'd once broken his heart?

But everything changes when he hears that the prototype and specs for the Army's latest virtual training program are worthless without knowledge only Claire possesses, making her a target for abduction by the clever thief. Despite their past, Travis won't let anything happen to Claire and puts aside his feelings to go undercover to keep her safe. Can he convince Claire to rely on him to keep the training program out of the hands of subversive military groups and keep Claire alive?

Chapter One

Captain Travis Chapman readily served wherever his country needed him. All Green Berets did.

But this?

“I realize this operation is a bit unusual.” Colonel Louis Vogler grabbed a marker and

approached the whiteboard in the small Fort Bragg briefing room.

Unusual? Try earthshaking.

Travis tugged at his collar and swallowed the unease threatening to bring up his breakfast. He had to find a way out of this assignment. For once, he didn't care what the team needed. This was personal. He'd do anything else. Go anywhere other than the Army Research Institute in Orlando.

Getting quickly and quietly behind enemy lines and creating insurgencies was what he knew and thrived on—it was how he lived and operated day to day. But working with Claire at the institute? With the woman who'd left him feeling as if a grenade had exploded in his chest, his heart still a torn mess two years later?

Not that.

He shifted in his chair and watched the colonel ink Combat Action and Tactics Simulator on the board in bold red strokes. Vogler turned, dark brows thick as caterpillars drawn together, perpetual scowl fixed on his broad face. “As I mentioned, your familiarity with CATS makes you the ideal candidate for this op.”

CATS. Claire's pet project to develop a lower-cost alternative to the Army's current simulated training program. Travis had spent months by her side working out kinks in it. Discussing enhancements for the prototype. Getting to know her and...

Not going there again.

“Is there a problem with this assignment, Captain?” Vogler's penetrating gaze raked over him.

Travis sat straighter and dug his nails into his palms, pain biting into his skin and keeping him on task. “No, sir, but with all due respect, are you sure this op is appropriate for our team?”

The crease between Vogler’s brows deepened, but his eyes remained riveted on Travis. “Didn’t mention the team. They’re spinning up tonight as planned. This will be just you and your qualifications. You know the facility and CATS.”

And Claire.

Even now, with Vogler watching him intently, Travis could get lost in thoughts of her. The smell of her perfume with a hint of lavender in direct contrast to her down-to-earth personality, almost lingered in the air. He could see her sparkling eyes behind designer glasses. What would’ve happened if she hadn’t rejected him?

Stop it. You’ve asked that like a thousand times. No point in it. None.

Vogler shifted on the balls of his feet, impatience written on his face. “Is there something you need to tell me, Captain?”

I once believed in a forever kind of love and, thanks to Claire, now I don’t. Yeah, right. Like he’d tell Vogler that.

“No, sir. I just need the op details to catch my flight on time.” He opened the briefing folder, the op dubbed Operation Cold Silence, but he had no idea why the title. “So are they looking for me to participate in testing and give the simulator a Green Beret seal of approval?”

“Negative. It’s more involved than that. Project director Dr. Claire Reed has completed a solid prototype. A copy of the software and a virtual device were stolen from the institute last night. Preliminary investigations by Reed point to an inside job, though I must say she’s having a

hard time believing anyone on her team could do this.”

At Vogler’s use of Claire’s name, Travis’s brain snapped to full attention. “Why an inside job?”

Vogler raised his index finger. “First, stealing the software is worthless without the ability to overcome the encryption and obfuscation techniques employed as security features. Only an insider would have that information.”

“That information could’ve been stolen too.”

“True, but less likely, and our other factors point to an insider.”

“Factors such as?”

“Few people outside the staff would know the value of Reed’s breakthrough. She’s taken a technology that has cost us billions of dollars and made it affordable. Means if it was available on the black market, even small guerrilla groups would have the money to turn our training against us.”

Travis shuddered at the thought of the many insurgent groups he’d trained over the years and imagined similar groups whose values opposed America’s using the U.S. Army’s exacting standards to train an unlimited number of soldiers.

“Exactly.” Vogler rested on the edge of the table and lifted another finger. “Also, the thief would have to get past the guards to get on campus.”

“Not an impossible task, but difficult,” Travis said as he remembered the guard post at the campus front gate. “I doubt the thief waltzed through the front gate, but can you get the log

book and security feed for last night?”

“Can do, but I think you’re wasting your time,” Vogler said. “There’s no sign of a break-in, and the only sign of the theft—other than the missing equipment and download of the software—was a problem with security cameras. They were either disabled or malfunctioned last night around 2300 hours for about an hour, but the institute’s exits showed no sign of forced breaching, and the alarm wasn’t activated.”

Travis ran through what he remembered from his prior time on site. “Employees access the institute by key card during operating hours. Key cards are tied to each employee, and we can identify who came and went and at what time. This is true for everyone. Only exception is the time for management who have extended hours. But when I worked there, it was cut off at 2200 hours and needed special permission from Dr. Reed to be on site after that.”

“Nothing has changed.” He narrowed his gaze. “There was no key card access last night. If there had been, it would point to an individual and there would be no need for your services.”

Curiouser and curiouser. “How did the thief get in?”

“That’s one of the big questions we need to answer, and why I called you in.”

Surely they didn’t think his skills were needed here. His deployments on ops usually took him to sub-Saharan Africa in covert operations, not hunting down a thief in the United States. “Won’t local investigators handle this breach?”

Vogler shook his head. “We aren’t informing law enforcement of the theft. This requires covert skills to keep the investigation under wraps. Plus, in addition to locating the thief, you’ll provide protection for Reed.”

“Cl—Dr. Reed—needs protection?” The words shot out of Travis’s mouth before he could filter them.

Vogler eyed him for a long moment before replying. “We believe she’s at risk for abduction, and we need to put our strongest man in place to keep her out of enemy hands.”

Questions swirled in Travis’s brain, mixing with concern for Claire. “I don’t understand. If the thief got what he was after, why would she be in danger?”

Vogler’s jaw firmed. Travis knew his commanding officer well enough to know he wouldn’t like the next words out of his mouth. He braced himself.

“Because of the simulator’s value, the project team opted to keep certain details out of the written specifications,” Vogler said, pausing to flex the muscles in his jaw. “That way, if the technology ever fell into the wrong hands, the prototype would be useless without this additional information. Of course, the data is on file at a secured location, but other than that, Reed is the only person who possesses the information. Security at the offsite facility makes stealing the written documentation impossible so—”

“The only way the thief can deploy the prototype is by obtaining the specs from Dr. Reed,” Travis finished as a sense of foreboding settled over him. “Which means if this really is an inside job, then the thief knows she alone holds the key and will likely force her to share it.”

“Hence her need for protection.”

Travis had way too much experience in obtaining information from noncompliant subjects, and he couldn’t abide thoughts of Claire in such a situation.

And maybe being killed once she provided the information and they no longer needed her.

The room closed in on him. He dug at the knot on his tie. He wanted to help Claire, really he did, but could he let go of his personal feelings long enough to achieve this goal on his own? “Seems to me deploying the entire team would be more effective than sending one guy.”

Vogler shook his head hard, the steely resolve he was known for lifted his shoulders even higher than his already near-perfect posture. “A team of twelve would alert the institute staff to the problem. No one but Reed and her superiors at the institute know about the theft. We want to keep it that way. We don’t want to send the thief into hiding or force him to act immediately on abducting Reed. You’ll go in under the guise of testing the latest equipment. That allows you to stay close to Reed and quietly investigate while no one is the wiser on the theft.”

Stay close to Reed. Close to Claire. A distraction that could threaten his performance.

“I have also requested civilian support from a world-class forensic lab—the Veritas Center. I’m told they’re the best of the best not only in physical crime forensics but IT as well. And as a bonus, they’re out of Portland, Oregon, so if one of them lets it slip about the case, which I highly doubt, it shouldn’t make it back to Orlando.”

Operation Cold Silence. The op name was starting to make sense. Claire had to remain silent on the code and everyone investigating had to keep it quiet too.

“They’re sending a team to process the facility after hours tomorrow,” Vogler continued. “I’ll expect you to coordinate with their team leader and report on the crime scene findings.” He handed Travis a packet of papers. “We have a flight that will put you on the ground for business opening in the morning.”

“Yes, sir,” Travis said, trying to sound enthusiastic about his assignment, though he had no experience with crime scenes.

“You can handle this, Chapman.” Vogler crossed his arms, his shoulders remaining in a hard line, proving he didn’t intend to back down. “You’ve gathered intelligence on enemies before and have plenty of experience in capturing high-value targets. Simply consider this thief high-value and you’ll succeed.”

“That I can do.”

“I’ll text you the contact details for the Veritas Center’s forensic expert. After they complete their evaluation and you do your initial assessment of the situation, I’ll entertain requests for deploying additional support. But keep in mind that this operation remains on the QT until I say otherwise.”

Fine. Travis got it. A covert mission it would be. A forensic team for one night then basically him and Claire alone. The last thing he wanted, but he would do it. And do it well. “You can count on me, sir.”

“We always do,” Vogler said, then dismissed Travis.

In the hallway, Travis glanced at the flight details from the colonel and his watch. He had barely enough time to check a handgun out of the armory and pack his duffle then take a quick flight from North Carolina to Orlando. He would touchdown that night and be at Claire’s side first thing in the morning, as Vogler had said. That gave him a short time to work through residual issues with Claire and get his head in the game.

Failure to clear his brain could put her right in the enemy’s hands—costing Claire her

life.

*

Claire Reed's dream had been stolen. Right here, in the dark of night in her home away from home. She glanced at the sign on the exterior of the tall building. Bold black letters mounted on stucco painted a cheery yellow read: Army Research Institute.

Her sanctuary. Until yesterday morning when she'd discovered the theft.

She settled her foot on a concrete planter filled with swaying grasses and gently stretched the tight muscles in her leg. Music pelted from the outdoor speaker.

Look around

Leaves are brown

And the sky is a hazy shade of winter

Winter, right. Not in this eighty-degree temperature even at seven a.m.

She switched legs and put her weight into the stretch until stiff muscles eased, and she was ready to run. She pounded down the sidewalk, heat reflecting up at her.

Four-foot-tall sandhill cranes strutted across the road. She usually enjoyed the birds' antics on her daily run through the campus. Not today. Today she needed to eliminate her frustration with the Army's response to last night's theft.

"Sit tight," they'd said. "Don't tell anyone about it, and we'll get someone in place to help as soon as possible."

Sit tight, my eye. Not when someone had stolen the software and one of her prototypes, putting six years of work in jeopardy.

Typical military response. Usually she was grateful to have such a prestigious job at thirty-one, and she loved working with this dedicated group of men and women. But today reminded her of the hassles of partnering with the military. The brass rarely told her what she needed to know until they believed she needed to know it. Aggravating to say the least.

Forget about it. Move on.

She tried to empty her mind. Reframe her thinking. Move into a better frame of mind to lead her team. She increased her pace beyond her normal routine and plunged into a secluded parking area with taller trees blocking the sun.

Good. The darkness matched her mood and her disappointment.

How many man-hours had she put into the helmet-mounted display and software to provide a fully immersive virtual training system? A system that simulated a variety of environments facing foot soldiers. Mountains, trees, deserts, jungles. Most everything they would face. All with the hope of saving lives with realistic training that was now endangered if the Army didn't act fast and recover the prototype.

Her project killed before it even had a chance to live.

Angry, she rounded a corner and pushed herself until she neared the end of the loop and her lungs screamed for oxygen. She would soon complete the loop and be back at the institute.

Then what? Her thoughts were still a jumbled mess. She couldn't face her staff this unsettled. They would ask questions, and she had to hide the theft for now.

She ran in place. Breathed deeply of the thick, steamy air. Stared over a small pond.

A hand came out of nowhere and clamped over her mouth. An arm snaked around her chest, pulling her back against a solid wall of muscle. Winded, she barely had the strength to breathe, let alone fight, but instincts kicked in. She jabbed an elbow to the man's gut.

No response. Nothing. He didn't even grunt.

She stomped on his foot and elbowed him again.

He tightened his grip, clamping her arm against her body and dragging her backward. She dug her heels in the thick St. Augustine grass trying to gain purchase and slow their progress.

No change.

Her heart thumped an irregular beat as panic skittered over her spine.

The man increased his speed, moving quickly down the slope toward the pond.

Alligators. No, no, no! Not this.

He drew her closer to the water. Step after step. The sour, organic smell alerted her to the pond's nearness. Movement on the pond. In the distance. The telltale bony armored plates of a gator's back so common in Florida. The creature glided through the water. Sending out ripples over the surface. His elongated head a forewarning of what was to come.

Oh, God, no! Please, no!

Fear twisted her stomach.

How could she have let this happen? Especially now?

She'd screwed up. Let her thoughts of the theft distract her. The colonel had warned her that the thief could be coming after her. The very reason she ran on campus with added security instead of at home this morning. But she'd relaxed. Trusted in security and failed to follow basic Self-defense 101. Prevention.

After her former boyfriend Travis had learned she jogged alone, he'd taught her skills to stay safe. To know the area. Know her exact location and listen for anyone approaching. Know her escape routes.

Travis. What would he tell her to do?

Her mind raced as her captor skirted around the pond. Good. Away from the gator now nearing shore. A moment of relief surged through her. He dragged her toward a parking lot. A van waiting.

This guy wasn't going to kill her. He was abducting her.

No. No. Act. Do something.

Panic claimed her mind, leaving nothing but fog.

Do something. Think, Claire, think!

Drop your weight, Travis had said. Bring the attacker down and elbow his head.

Do it. Now!

She fell forward and juted both elbows upward. He budged but very little and jerked her upright then continued moving. She dug her heels into the grass. Tried to slow him down. No good. Her efforts didn't faze him.

He approached the deserted parking lot. The white cargo van. The side door open like a

waiting prison cell.

No. Oh, no.

If he wrestled her into the van, she might never come out. But how did she stop him?

Travis had shared a last-ditch tactic with her. It would be painful and might knock her out, but she had nothing to lose.

Nothing!

She flopped as far forward as possible and with her remaining strength threw herself back, ramming her head into his face. Her skull connected with his jaw and her glasses flew from her face. Pain sliced through her head.

He grunted, but kept moving.

No.

She slammed him again. Saw stars. A black tinge colored the edges of her vision, already blurred without her glasses.

God, no. Please. Give me strength.

One more try. One more. She had to succeed. Her life depended on it.

She dipped forward and roared back. Her head connected hard. She stomped his foot and elbowed him at the same time. The perfect trifecta, making his arm slacken. With a burst of adrenaline, she spun free and bolted toward the road.

Without her glasses, the trees ahead swam before her eyes, but she dug deep and raced on. She couldn't hear his footfalls behind her, but she sensed him chasing her. He was big with powerful, long legs and was likely gaining on her.

Look back. Check.

No. No. It will only slow you down.

Pain razored up her legs. Her lungs screamed for air. Her entire body begged to crumple onto the thickly matted grass. But she didn't. She kept going.

Down an incline. Up the other side. Along another pond. Her foot sank into slimy wet muck. She catapulted to the ground.

His hand clamped her ankle like a vise.

She screamed and kicked free. She grabbed the thick grass to gain her footing. She righted herself and kicked out with every ounce of energy, connecting with his shoulder and leaving him prone. She charged up the incline.

"Help," she screamed but stopped. Better to save her breath for running.

She picked up speed. Kicking it into the highest gear her fatigue allowed.

Closer and closer to the road. Closer to help. To the faint hint of traffic sounding in the distance.

You can make it. You can make it, her mind chanted with every step until she believed it.

She ran every day. She was fast. She could outrun this creep and flag down help before he caught her. She really could. She had to.

She was racing for her life.

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