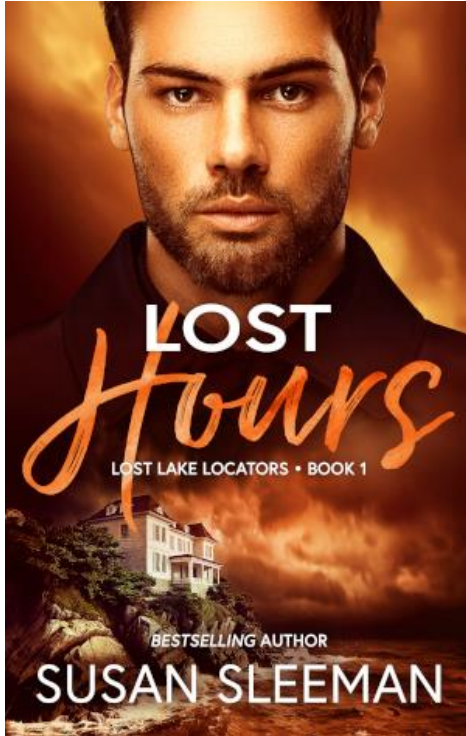


LOST HOURS SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Paperback, E-Book, and Audio

Lost Lake Locators Series Book 1– March/2025

ISBN: 978-1-949009-53-8

Protecting his friends has always come first...

When Nolan Orr, founding member of Lost Lake Locators, and his teammates receive a mysterious invitation to a secluded mansion on Lost Island for what seems to be an innocent game night with his closest college friends, he eagerly agrees to attend. Not only to enjoy the event with friends who were more like family to him than his actual family, but to figure out which friend set up the fun but unusual night.

Until he has to consider one of them a suspect for murder.

However, as the evening progresses, he soon realizes that they are pawns in a deadly game orchestrated by a twisted mastermind. Where betrayal and survival go hand in hand, ultimately leading to a missing friend—to murder and a murder investigation that Sheriff Mina Park arrives to take charge of. Problem is, Nolan and Mina had a brief summer fling one year on his visit to the island, and it ended badly. Will she let him into the investigation and work with him, or avoid him as she's been doing for years?

Prologue

Death. The ultimate payback, and he was the one to inflict it.

A deep, satisfying burst of pleasure exploded in his gut. His whole body throbbed with satisfaction over the well-deserved revenge. He wanted to bask in it. Relish the feeling flowing through his limbs.

Revenge. So sweet.

He sighed but looked at the spilled blood. The corpse wrapped in a striped rug. He couldn't stand around. Couldn't get caught. He had plenty of time for basking later. Now was the time for cleanup. A dull, laborious chore.

"Just remember where you're taking him. The surprised look on the soon-to-be suspects' faces." *Oh yeah.* He grinned and dragged the lifeless body toward the door.

The guy's head bumped like a driven soccer ball over the raised threshold, a hollow thump the resulting sound.

Oh well. No skin off his nose. Well, except the cops would waste time trying to figure out what caused the bumps and bruises when they would have six ready suspects to try to pin this on. Maybe miss all the obvious leads he was providing.

He tugged again and moved a good three feet. Thankfully this man was fit, unlike many men his age, and his weight was manageable. As a bonus, he'd found the guy visiting his daughter who lived in a remote cottage by the ocean where no one would hear or see the shooting or the body being hauled out the door to the van.

The daughter's face flashed in his mind. No one would see him move the body, but she'd witnessed her father's death.

Simple. Take her out too.

Pop. Pop. Pop. Just like her old man.

He tried. Failed. He should never have looked into her eyes. Into the eyes of the younger woman. Pleading. Begging. He couldn't pull the trigger. But he also couldn't let her go. Not when she could identify him.

He had a problem now. A big one. He shouldn't have let her live.

What was he going to do with her? He couldn't keep her captive forever. He'd have to eventually summon up the guts to kill her.

No other option existed.

The second she'd dug out her phone and dialed 911, he'd grabbed her. Ditched the phone before they could possibly figure out who she was or where she was located, then hid her in a secluded place where no one would look for her.

The rug caught on the rough sidewalk, bringing him back to the task at hand.

"Focus, man."

Tugging harder, he backed to the van and shoved the package inside, then took a long breath of the salty ocean air. A glorious March day. Actually even bordering on the side of hot with the sun's brilliant rays glaring down on them. At this time of year fog and rain ruined most every day, sunup to sundown.

He'd even had to turn on the portable AC unit in the place to keep from dropping sweat on the shiny tile floors. Wouldn't do to leave his DNA.

He stretched and took another long breath. He couldn't stand here all day. He would have plenty of days in the future to enjoy the view and weather. But the body? No. Not the poor deceased mayor. He wouldn't wait. He had to be moved into position now.

Then let the game of cat and mouse begin while he hid in the shadows to watch it all unfold, and that loser Lost Lake Locators team take the fall.

Chapter One

A killer of an evening.

Or so the anonymous invitation claimed. But did the claim hold up?

Nolan Orr was about to find out.

He grabbed the embossed invite for the black-tie event from the dashboard of his SUV and slid out. Why he let this expensive piece of paper entice him to show up at the Tidewater Mansion, he didn't know. One thing was sure. He hadn't come for the reason the sender hoped.

No. He didn't want a killer of anything in his life.

Zip. Zilch. Zero.

Even less, if possible. He'd lived enough of those threats as a secret service agent on the presidential detail. And, yet...here he was just to find out who organized the night.

The sun set over his shoulders and a soft breeze drifted across the lush landscape as he approached the wide steps leading up to the 1800s Victorian.

Looked calm. Serene. Peaceful even. But was it?

His steps hitched. Was he a sucker for coming here? Maybe. Possibly even. But not like he had a choice. He'd had to show up. Curiosity and all that. Besides, the rest of his Lost Lake Locators team waited for him on the veranda. He wouldn't bail on them.

"Keep going." Shoving the invite into the breast pocket of his tuxedo, he moved ahead to the sweeping stairs of the renovated mansion. It was perched on a cliff overlooking Lost Lake Bay and was now used as a party venue. He bounded up as fast as his slick dress shoes allowed without faceplanting.

The five other members of his team turned to face him. He'd known everyone since college, and they were like a family, but he'd never seen them in formal wear. Striking really.

All three of the guys had dark hair and close-cut beards and wore tuxedos like Nolan. Not so the women. Abby Day and Reece Waters were nothing alike. Sure, they both wore formal black dresses, but Abby was petite, had short dark hair, and held herself like the former sheriff she'd served as. Reece was tall with long blond hair, and her college modeling showed in her stance. Most people would never guess she was once an ATF agent.

Gabe Irving, a former Oregon state trooper, looked up from his phone and gave Nolan a once over. "Boss man. You clean up well."

"It's been a minute, though." Nolan tugged on his bowtie and resisted pulling it completely free. "I'm not used to it."

"At least you own yours, and it's tailored to you." Hayden Kraus, a former US Customs and Border Protection agent, adjusted his jacket. "This thing is binding up in all the wrong places. Give me hiking or skiing gear over this any day."

Nolan wasn't into the same things as Hayden, but... "Tonight I'd rather be rappelling down a cliff with you than be here."

"You're joking, right?" Hayden creased his forehead. "You're the one who sent the invitations. Never thought you'd fork out this kind of cash for a little team building."

"From me?" Nolan looked around the group. "Is that what you guys think? No wonder no one mentioned it. I wouldn't plan a party when we have work the next day. I'm as surprised by it as you."

Hayden faced the team. "One of you set this up?"

"Not me," Abby said. "I'm with Nolan. Monday night isn't a party night."

"I didn't send it either." Gabe shoved his phone into his pocket.

"Not from me." Reece looked around the area. "No way I can afford a party in an upscale place like this. Not with all my money going to buy into the business."

“None of us can.” A hint of frustration crept into Jude’s tone. He’d had to work the hardest to come up with his buy-in to become an equal partner in Lost Lake Locators and almost didn’t leave the FBI to join the team because of it. Sure, Nolan used an inheritance to purchase the inn where they worked and lived, but the others had to chip in for upfront costs and buying needed equipment.

“Then who in the world sent out these invitations?” Reece asked.

Abby cast a concerned look around the area. “I don’t like this. Something’s up.”

“What, is the question.” Gabe rested a hand on the sidearm tucked under his tuxedo jacket.

The front door groaned open. Nolan’s heart gave a kick, and he felt for his concealed weapon as he spun to face the building.

A man he put in his fifties stepped out. Thick gel slicked back his inky hair, and he wore a formal tux and white cloth gloves. “Wonderful. You’re all here. My name is Smythe, and I’ll see to your needs this evening.”

What in the world? Nolan blinked a few times. Was this man an actor hired to play a formal butler or a real butler? If an actor, Nolan was buying into his role.

“Follow me.” He spun in a precise pivot and entered the house.

Gabe frowned, his gaze locked on Smythe. “This is getting weirder and weirder.”

“Yeah, but if we want to find out what it’s all about, then we do as he says and follow him. But take care.” Nolan gave each team member a pointed look, then strode into the mansion.

The well-groomed man stood just inside the formal two-story foyer, his posture military perfect. Nolan forced himself to look away and take in the building as his teammates entered behind him. He stood on gleaming marble tile with a sweeping grand staircase climbing to the second floor that overlooked the entry, and an impressive chandelier sparkled from above.

The butler moved, and Nolan jerked his focus back to him.

He held out his gloved hand. “The dining room is straight ahead to your right, and dinner will be served in five minutes.”

“So who paid for this night?” Abby asked, not surprising as she was usually the first one to jump in when something needed clarifying.

“That’s information I’m not privy to. I’ve just been instructed to facilitate a special evening for you.” Smythe smiled, but this one was definitely fake. He held out a Faraday bag. “Before you go in, I’ll need you to drop your cell phones in here, and I’ll take your invitations.”

Say what? The bag stopped all signals coming into or leaving a cell phone. This made no sense. Why did he need their phones to basically be inoperative?

“Nah, no way on the phone.” Gabe shook his head and planted his feet. “That’s a deal killer for me.”

“Please do not worry. This is just so you all will enjoy every moment tonight.” Smythe jiggled the bag. “I will put this in the dining room with you. You can see it at all times and know your phones are safe.”

Nolan wouldn’t let this condition stop him. Not when he’d be able to see the bag and retrieve his phone if needed. “That should be fine then.”

He handed over his invitation and dropped his phone into the bag. He stood back so his teammates could follow suit.

“I don’t like this,” Gabe said as he let go of his phone.

Nolan gave a sympathetic nod, but he wouldn’t back out now. Not a chance. His gut burned even more to find out what was going on. “You’re sure you don’t know who paid for this event?”

Smythe glanced around as if checking for a spy. “I’m not supposed to tell you, but the night is courtesy of a client who is thankful for your work.”

So someone was grateful that they'd found a lost loved one and decided to give the team a night out. Despite the person's desire to remain anonymous, Nolan would find out the identity so he could show his appreciation. "Can you tell me which client?"

"I've already said too much." Smythe gave a conversation-ending smile. "Please join me in the dining room."

His chin raised, he marched off.

"He obviously knows who it is and isn't telling us." One of Hayden's piercing expressions took over, and he fisted his hands. "Maybe I should give him some up close persuasion."

Nolan held out a placating hand. "Not necessary. I'm uncomfortable not knowing which client arranged this, but no need to intimidate the butler. We have other ways to find out."

"No surprise the two of you are so uncomfortable." Abby looked between Nolan and Hayden. "You both need to control everything."

Gabe shifted his stance. "I don't like it either, and if it bothers me, there's got to be something to it."

"All I can say is, if I wake up dead in the morning because we're being poisoned at dinner, I'm gonna be mad." Jude grinned.

The others laughed, the tension broken as Jude often accomplished as the team joker.

Nolan appreciated the humor, but he wasn't at peace with everything. Still, he'd stay at least until he had a logical explanation for the night. Or learned enough to investigate and find out what was going on.

Smythe turned at the doorway and gestured for them to join him. "When you finish your meal, I'll invite you to the next room for a night of games prepared just for you."

A vision of the invitation flashed in Nolan's brain. "Is this where it turns into a killer of an evening?"

"Indeed it is, sir." Smythe smiled. "Prepare yourself to be delighted and shocked at the same time."

Hayden's face lit up, and he pulled on his bowtie. "Sounds like my kind of night, and maybe this monkey suit will be worth it."

Shock and delight. Nolan wasn't as quick to get on board as Hayden was. Nolan couldn't imagine shock and delight going hand-in-hand. But did it matter?

Either he walked out now, or he had to wait for the shock. All he knew at the moment was if whatever was planned was enough to stun this team of former law enforcement officers, it had to be big. Very big.

*

Sheriff Mina Park sat behind her desk, her ear tuned to her radio and her eyes drifting closed as she stared at her computer.

Please. Let something happen that needs a sheriff's intervention before both of my eyes close.

She shouldn't complain or wish to be needed. She'd wanted this job for as long as she could remember. Being sheriff of the county where she was raised and providing protection for the people she loved was everything to her. Everything.

She loved most every bit of it. Overseeing not only the county, but the town of Lost Lake too. Kept her busy. Especially in the summer months, but the off-season boredom? Nearly drove her nuts.

Like tonight. Her big highlight? Reviewing and signing off on the recent city council meeting minutes, attesting that she'd read them. Highlight. Hah! More like a lowlight.

She'd take any call to get out of the office. Anything. Even a drunk resident at one of the local bars. An event that could turn interesting, but not in a way to challenge her brain. But she couldn't expect much more in the off-season when all the tourists had gone home.

But then, she didn't want a major crime to occur either. With the annual Founder's Day celebration coming up that weekend, she would make her share of arrests. Surely she could hold on till then.

Besides, she especially wouldn't want the ultimate in crimes. A murder. No, that meant someone lost their life. She'd seen all the reports where tourists died on their vacations in some exotic destination. Exotic, hah! Not her county, holding Lost Lake and Lost Island. Interesting for tourists who loved pristine Pacific beaches and the historic island, filled with century-old Victorian homes, but not exotic.

Problem was, over the years their tourist trade had fallen. A lot. Even the centuries-old Portside Inn and Lighthouse out on the point hadn't been able to survive and had to close. It sat vacant for three years until Nolan Orr swooped in and bought it before she even knew what was happening. Not that she could've stopped the purchase, but if she'd known about it, she sure would've tried.

How she would have tried. With every fiber in her being she would've tried to stop the man who unceremoniously dumped her from coming back to live full-time in her hometown. He probably bought the place in secret because he thought she would try to halt the sale.

Or not.

More likely, he hadn't thought about her from the day five years ago when he'd left at the end of their summer fling without saying goodbye.

An ache wrapped around her heart even after all these years, and she curled her arms around her stomach. She'd been so in love and thought this was the guy she would spend the rest of her life with. She'd met all of his friends, and they seemed to agree she was the right person for him.

Obviously not Nolan. No, not him. They were supposed to meet out at the lighthouse. He didn't show. She waited two hours before going to his hotel. He was gone. Checked out early in the morning and hadn't tried to contact her. End of story.

Her radio squabbled, and she came to attention in her chair.

"Drunk and disorderly at the Thirsty Crab," Deputy Banfield said. "Backup needed."

"Perfect," she whispered to herself. "Something to take my mind off the traitor Nolan Orr."

And something to stop her wondering if her life was as fulfilling as she believed it to be before that man had come back to town and filled her brain with a boatload of *what ifs*.

Buy Now for E-book. Print and Audio.

