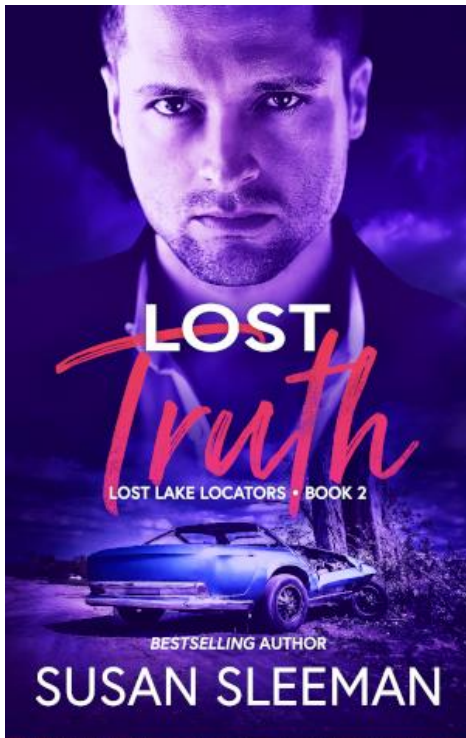


## LOST TRUTH SNEAK PEEK



**Romantic Suspense** – Paperback, E-Book, and Audio

**Lost Lake Locators Series Book 2**– July/2025

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**A vulnerable reporter. A hidden truth.**

Lost Lake Locator Hayden Kraus is thrust into a high-stakes investigation when he's hired to investigate the disappearance of a beloved local resident. As Hayden delves deeper, he crosses paths with Cadence Vaughn, a fearless and resourceful investigative journalist determined to uncover the truth behind her father's mysterious murder—a case she believes is connected to the current investigation. The case quickly unravels into a complex web of deception, corruption, and danger.

**And an investigator pushed to extremes.**

Despite initial friction, Hayden and Cadence realize they need each other to expose the powerful forces at play. As they piece together clues, they uncover evidence pointing to

a sinister cover-up. The threats escalate, and they face increasing danger, but the bond between them strengthens. When they have to risk everything to bring the truth to light will that include risking a future together too?

### Chapter One

Hayden Kraus had never killed anyone.

Please don't let that change now.

He drew his sidearm and eased through the cottage's murky shadows, advancing on the intruder. A sliver of moonlight pierced through a gap in the blinds, illuminating a narrow path, but it did nothing to help him identify the intruder, not even their gender. Burglary statistics said he was likely facing a male so he would go with that.

The person dug through a storage box located on ceiling-high bookshelves consuming the far wall of a compact living room. With his back to Hayden, he seemed oblivious to Hayden's presence as he tread softly over the wooden floor.

Please, please, don't creak.

Hayden eased closer. Closer.

Sharp summer ocean winds buffeted the meager cliffside cottage, rocking the structure. Aged wood creaked and protested like the bones of a hundred-year-old man set into motion.

Hayden felt like an intruder himself, but he had every right to be there. His Lost Lake Locators team

had been hired just hours ago to find Kai Nakoa, the cottage owner. He'd been missing for several days, and it was Hayden's turn to take charge of an investigation. Before the team met to create a plan, he wanted surveillance cameras placed on the property but arrived to discover someone sneaking through a window.

The intruder stilled.

Hayden halted. Held his breath. Waited for the guy to turn. To see him. Perhaps attack.

His heart pounded in his head like a conga drum sending out a warning message.

The intruder shrugged and moved on to another box.

Good. The building's groans must have covered the sound of his favorite tactical boots as they'd hit the floor.

Still, he waited a moment longer—let the intruder settle down. He studied the man's shadowy figure. Small, slight in build. Dressed all in black.

Hayden scanned for a weapon. Squinted. Spotted nothing. Not necessarily because the intruder wasn't armed, but the dim lighting prevented Hayden from making out a weapon. Didn't matter. If Hayden wanted to live to tell about this event, he had to assume an armed foe awaited him.

His heart thundered harder. As a former Customs and Border Protection agent he'd handled far more dangerous situations, but it'd been a while.

Breathe. Calm down.

He steadied his weapon. Sucked in air. Moved through the small dining room. Ten feet between him and the intruder. He reached up to a higher shelf.

Slowly, Hayden advanced. Inch by inch. Closer and closer. The person showed no sign of knowing he was moving in.

Five feet away now. He would soon be within arm's length. Nothing for it but to call out and hope the shock didn't produce a weapon.

He took a deep breath and dredged up the commanding tone he'd used while serving as a CBP agent. "I have a gun at your back. Stop what you're doing."

The person spun. Gaspd. "I—"

"Hands!" Hayden held his sidearm fast. "Your hands up where I can see them."

The intruder raised trembling hands.

Good. No weapon. No assault. Hayden flicked on his flashlight and aimed the beam at his face.

Stunned, he blinked. Once. Twice. Cadence Vaughn. Even with her curly hair pulled up behind her, he would recognize that unique red color anywhere. But that couldn't be her, could it?

No. No. Impossible. Or was it?

"What're you doing here, Cadence?"

"Is that you, Hayden?" Her shocked voice rose into the rush of raging winds.

"In the flesh." He exhaled, sucked in more air, and holstered his weapon.

She lowered her hands and propped them on her hips, jutting one out in the familiar way she had of standing. "Never mind why I'm here. What're you doing here?"

Say what? She thought she could demand his reason for being at the cottage when she was the intruder. "I have a right to be here. You don't. This is private property. I could charge you with breaking and entering."

"Um, Hayden." She cocked her head. "You're not a law enforcement officer anymore, and you can't charge me with anything."

Good point. "Maybe not, but I can hold you here and call the sheriff. Mina wouldn't be happy to arrest you, but she would do it."

For several months, Sheriff Mina Parks had been dating the LLL team founder, Nolan Orr. Hayden and the rest of the team had gotten to know her in that time, and Hayden was certain she wouldn't want to arrest Cadence.

Cadence sighed. "Why don't we sit down and talk about what's going on instead of trading barbs like this?"

No thanks. The last thing he wanted was to turn on the lights. See her face. Look into her chocolatey warm brown eyes. Swirly, crazy emotions that hit him every time he saw her would leave him feeling out of control, pushing his hot buttons, and he would have to struggle to remain in charge. Not how he wanted to spend his night. Not at all. But she didn't deserve for him to be rude and not explain what was going on.

He backed away and pointed at the dining room table. "Have a seat. I'll get the lights."

She crossed the room, her steps pointed and urgent as she rushed to pull out a chair. Heading in the other direction, he flipped on the overhead light, flooding the room in brightness.

His eyes were blinded by the sudden glare. Fine by him. Stopped him from looking into her eyes and sinking hopelessly under her control again.

He remained in place until his vision cleared enough to cross the room without faceplanting. At the table, he turned a chair around to straddle it, but avoided looking at her full on. "So start talking, Cadence."

She waved a hand. "I thought we'd resolved that by now. Cadence is my byline for the paper, but everyone calls me Cady."

"Okay, Cady," he said. "What's going on?"

"Sounds like you're here on official business," she said not answering his question.

Fine. He would answer her and hope she would reciprocate. "Our team has been hired to find the cottage owner."

"Find the owner?" Her voice rose sharply. "Kai Nakoa is missing?"

He looked directly at her then. "He's been gone for a few days. I would think if you knew him that you would've heard that."

"I've never met the man." Her firm tone was almost a challenge.

Was she telling the truth? No reason to ask. He hadn't known her for long, but he knew her and had no doubt she was speaking the truth. "Are you doing a story on him for the newspaper?"

"Story?" She shook her head. "No. No. No story."

"Then why are you here?"

"My dad. A few weeks ago. He... he... even now it's almost impossible to say." She looked up at the ceiling and shook her head. "He passed away."

“Oh man, Cady.” Hayden wanted to put his hand over hers to offer comfort, but they didn’t have that kind of relationship, and even with the strong attraction between them, he would never act on it.

He finally met her gaze head-on. The light caught the shimmer of tears in her eyes. He shouldn’t have looked. It was like watching someone tear a chapter from his own book of sorrow. Her tears didn’t just move him—they struck with the force of a punch.

He paused just long enough to steady himself, careful not to reveal how deeply her grief shook him. “What happened?”

She drew in an agonizing breath. “He was poisoned.”

“Poisoned? No way.” Hayden shook his head as he tried to come to grips with more shocking news. “Who would want to poison your father?”

“That’s what I’m here trying to find out.”

Okay. This was getting weirder and weirder. “You think your father’s death has something to do with Kai?”

“I’m not certain. I’m just following up on things in Dad’s journals, and Kai was frequently mentioned in them.”

“But what about the police? Aren’t they investigating?”

“Sort of, but they don’t have any leads and have back-burnered his case to move on to other pressing investigations. They didn’t say that, but I could read between the lines. So you see, it’s up to me to find his killer.”

“This is crazy.” He hesitated, searching for the right words to say. “I mean, I don’t know you all that well, but it seems like your dad was an ordinary guy. Nothing outstanding or outrageous going on with him, other than his dementia. Why would someone want to poison him?”

“I don’t get it either.” She kept wringing her hands, as if the motion alone could keep her from falling apart. “At first, the medical examiner ruled his death natural causes. Blaming the dementia. She said she found his organs filled with blood and there was foamy blood in his lungs, too, which she said could occur in heart failure deaths.”

“Then how did you find out about the poison?”

Cady pressed her lips into a flat line. “I argued with her. Made sure she understood his dementia hadn’t reached the point where it affected his autonomic nervous system. I asked her what else could account for these symptoms, and she said an overdose.”

Interesting, but not fitting for Percy. “Overdose of what? It’s not like your dad was a drug addict.”

“Exactly. And I told her he didn’t have access to any of the medications he did take. When he moved in with me, I locked them all up and gave them to him when they were due, so I begged her to run a drug test. It came back positive for fentanyl, and then she went back to his body and found a needle mark. He could never have gotten his hands on these drugs. Even if he had, he was terrified of needles. Someone would’ve had to administer it to him.”

“Wow.” He rested his arms on the back of the chair. “That’s surreal.”

“Agreed, and like I said, I don’t actually think it’s real yet. I mean, I’ll never forget finding him in his bed that morning. His body cold. His skin dark. But…” She shuddered.

Hayden couldn’t ignore the anguish causing her to nearly fall apart. He took her trembling hands in his and held them still. They were arctic cold, and he rubbed her silky skin to try to warm it.

Their joined hands looked like they belonged together. He was in a quandary and couldn't let his emotions color his decisions. Did he still report her to the sheriff for breaking and entering? What kind of man would he be if he turned her in or even left her alone in such distress? Not the kind of man he wanted to be, that was for sure.

Helping her find her dad's killer was the only option. "If you think Kai's disappearance could have something to do with your father's death, then we should meet with the team and discuss working together on finding the killer while we look for Kai."

Her eyes widened, a hint of relief breaking through. "That would be amazing."

Fighting the urge to press her for answers about how her father's death connected to Kai, he gave her hands a gentle squeeze before letting go. Time was of the essence when looking for a missing person, and Hayden needed more information—but he would wait. She'd have to share the full story with the team soon enough. Holding back now would give her a chance to pull herself together—and spare her the pain of reliving it twice.

But first... "Before I even suggest our partnership to the others, I'll need to confirm you aren't planning on writing a story about it."

Her posture stiffened. "I would never turn my father's death into a story for the paper. It's private." She stabbed her thumb at her chest. "My wound. My grief. No one else's and certainly not the public's."

Seeing her like that tore him up inside. He was witnessing her pain raw and unfiltered, and no matter how seasoned she was as one of Portland's top crime reporters, he knew this story would never be just another headline—it would live close to her heart.

He dug out his phone. "Let me give Nolan a call. The team's meeting at the inn to plan our investigation into Kai's disappearance, and it would be really helpful if you could be there—if you're okay with that."

"It's more than okay. I'll be forever grateful." She looked up at him with those luminous eyes, and he was once again lost, not only in the surprising way she'd affected him when he'd first met her, but in the grief and pain he would carry with him as if it were his own.

Oh, man. She really got to him, and he would do anything to take her pain away. From this moment on, she could count on him—not just to stand by her in her grief, but to find her father's killer.

No matter what it took. No matter the personal cost.

\*

Cady had assumed she and Hayden would head straight to the old inn where the team lived and worked. Instead, they'd stopped outside Kai's cottage in the warmth of the summer evening, while a sharp wind swept across the cliffside.

She huddled out of the flow of air near the house, but Mr. Adventure didn't care about the forceful winds. He climbed a swaying tree to install security cameras, moving from limb to limb like a monkey at ease off the ground.

"There." He jumped down from the lowest tree branch, sticking his landing. "Not as fun as scaling a mountain or skiing down one, but climbing a tree still has its rewards." He grinned in the moonlight.

Her heart did a crazy somersault. From their first meeting, something about him drew her in a way she'd never experienced. Physical, yes. He was the proverbial tall, dark, and handsome. Piercing charcoal eyes able to cut right through a person but were often tempered by a gentle side she hadn't witnessed in a man in a long time.

Several times while her father's dementia held him captive and terror had him flailing about, Hayden

had tenderly approached him and coaxed him into a relaxed state. If she had any question about Hayden's character, his compassionate behavior told her he was a stand-up guy.

Compassion and keeper material. Too bad she wouldn't follow her interest in him. She had way too many things to do and accomplish before settling down. If she ever said I do—an unlikely event—she would be all in. Everything, including starting a family. But she had big goals for her job as a reporter and couldn't be traveling around the world and be the kind of mother she wanted to be.

The kind she never had.

The familiar ache that thoughts of her mother always brought to the surface over the years gnawed a hole in her heart.

Remember that when he flashes that sweet smile at you. And remember that your mom and dad proved serious relationships didn't work.

Hayden shoved a pair of pliers into a low cargo pocket of his khaki pants. "Would you like to ride with me or take your own car?"

"I'll follow you in my car." She didn't wait for his response, but hiked across the property to her old Honda Accord. The engine grumbled and complained, coughing a few times and then catching. She needed to buy a new car. Chalk it up to another thing that wouldn't happen in her life. Not after depleting her savings to pay for her father's caregivers. She wasn't complaining. Making his last days on this earth the best they could be had been the most important thing to her.

Hayden, on the other hand, drove a newer model blue metallic Ford Bronco Raptor that purred like a grown cat. He eased out of the driveway onto the main road cutting through Lost Lake. She followed close behind as he navigated through the quaint coastal town, steering toward the large inn perched on the ocean cliff ahead.

In the inn's front lot, he smoothly backed into a spot among other vehicles—all parked the same way by the front door. As former law enforcement officers, they all backed in to be ready to move at a moment's notice. Backing up wasn't her forte. She bumped over a few potholes before coming to a stop nearby.

Laptop tucked under his arm, Hayden strode to her car in that eager, confident way he had of walking and stood waiting near the hood. "Welcome to Lost Lake Locators headquarters."

She shoved hard on her groaning door and had to use her hip to fully slam it closed. "Interesting location for your type of business."

He arched an eyebrow. "Yeah, this probably does push the envelope for a team who finds missing people, but Nolan got the place for a great price, and it suits our needs."

She cast a look over the horizon, where the moon glistened off rolling waves crashing into the shoreline below. "With these views, it's probably a great place to live and work."

"You got that right." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Let's go in and meet the whole team."

He led her over a crumbling walkway. "Careful. We need to get the disintegrating concrete fixed, among a million other things."

She wore her favorite red Chuck Taylor All-Stars and didn't want to ruin them, so she watched the ground until the sidewalk improved. He tugged open the bright orange front door and held it for her.

A small sign near the door, displaying the team's name and logo, was the only hint of their business. Worn furnishings in faded oranges and mustards—styles she guessed dated back to the fifties or sixties—filled the spacious but dark and gloomy lobby. Without hesitation, Hayden walked past the wood-paneled check-in desk and continued down the hallway.

He stopped near the first door and glanced over his shoulder. “This used to be the dining room, but we turned it into our conference room.”

The door stood open, and the savory scent of fresh popcorn drifted out. She’d opted to skip dinner to save money on buying takeout food, and her stomach grumbled.

He raised an eyebrow but didn’t mention the noise as he gestured at the doorway. “After you.”

Inside the large room, she found the outdated dining tables pushed together to form a long conference table and worn wooden chairs pressed up to its side. At the wall, two long folding tables held refreshments. His teammates stood in small groups, talking and laughing.

“Popcorn, stat,” Hayden announced and set his computer on the conference table. “We have a hungry one here.”

A slender woman locked startling blue eyes on Cady and held out her hand. “I’m Reece Waters.”

“Cady Vaughn.” She took her hand—her grip surprisingly strong despite her slight frame. Cady couldn’t help but want Reece’s luscious blond hair, wishing her own wild tangle of red curls were as sleek and smooth.

“I’m glad to get you some popcorn, but have you had dinner?” Reece angled her head in question.

“Not yet.” Cady was embarrassed to admit she hadn’t eaten because she couldn’t bring herself to go into her dad’s house yet, and she couldn’t afford takeout food.

Reece rested her hands on slender hips. “Then let me rustle something up. Any allergies?”

“No, but don’t go to any bother.” Now she was really embarrassed that Reece was making a special effort for her. “Popcorn would be wonderful.”

“No bother.” She spun and wound her way toward the swinging double doors that must lead to their kitchen.

“If you’re making a sandwich, you might as well up your number to a dozen or so,” a guy with ebony hair and a matching beard perfectly trimmed close to his jaw called after her.

She glanced back at him. “Are you serious or is this another one of your jokes?”

“Serious.” He straightened his shoulders, but a hint of humor clung to his expression. “I mean, take a vote. I’m sure most everyone would take one of your famous sandwiches.”

“Well?” She scanned the group. “Do I have any other takers?”

Two guys, also with dark hair and close-cut beards, nodded their affirmatives. The closest one of the pair she recognized as Nolan Orr, the team leader and once a Secret Service agent. She’d met him when her father had gone to the local sheriff with a lead related to the murder of Lost Lake’s mayor.

“None for me.” A petite woman with short brunette hair shook her head. “No way I can eat like the rest of these guys and not gain weight.”

“Be right back.” Reece pushed through the swinging doors.

“Come on, let’s go meet the others.” Hayden took off across the room. “Everyone, this is Cady Vaughn. She’s Percy’s daughter.” He clapped a hand on the shoulder of the guy who’d requested a sandwich. “This would be Jude French. He’s our resident joker and a former FBI agent.”

“Perfect timing on the sandwich. My stomach thanks you.” He grinned, his smile playfully devious.

It did nothing to help Cady relax, and she released her nerves by unzipping her lightweight jacket. “I

didn't mean to cause anyone extra work."

Hayden lifted his hands in an easy-going gesture. "Don't worry about it. Reece is the team mom, and she loves spoiling us all."

"But I'm not part of the team," she said, even though she had to admit they were welcoming—and no one made her feel like an outsider.

"I mean, if you want to feel special you can, but seriously, Reece will mother anyone who allows it." Jude laughed.

The other guy she hadn't met stared at his teammate. "Doesn't mean we should take advantage of her. Unless of course she's grilling burgers. Then we must always, always agree to them." He chuckled, his deep amusement rumbling through the room.

Hayden shot the guy a sideways look dripping with sarcasm. "This is Gabe Irving. He served as an Oregon State Trooper and can rate every burger joint in the entire state."

"Hey, don't limit me to Oregon." Gabe gave a sly smile. "I can rate a ton of them in Washington too."

Hayden looked away as if biting back a comment and shrugged out of his jacket. "You remember Nolan, right?"

"I do." Cady smiled at the team founder. "Glad to see you again."

Nolan nodded. "Sounds like we might be working together."

Oh, how she prayed his statement was true. "I would very much appreciate your help if it's possible."

His unyielding attention remained locked on her as if assessing her. "As soon as Reece comes back, we'll sit down and iron it all out."

Hayden had called Nolan from Kai's place, and Nolan made it clear that she'd have to sign a nondisclosure agreement with LLL before they'd even consider working with her.

The other woman stuck out her hand. "I'm Abby Day. A sheriff, once upon a time in a land far, far away. I hope we can help you." She ended with a very pleasant smile Cady wouldn't necessarily associate with a tough sheriff.

But Cady liked her humor and smiled as she shook hands. "Nice to meet you."

Holding a large tray laden with thick sandwiches and a big bowl of fresh fruit, Reece pushed back through the swinging doors, which flapped closed behind her. "Back off, all of you, and let Cady have first choice."

"That's not necessary." Cady's embarrassment surged as Reece fussed over her, especially since she'd already interrupted their evening.

"I assure you it's very necessary." Reece set the tray on one of the long tables pushed against the wall and stood in front of it. "You've never seen these guys when food is put in front of them."

"She's not wrong." Gabe grinned. "Reece has schooled us on proper manners more times than I can count, but we don't always follow them."

"Try seldom follow them." Abby reached into a cabinet and withdrew plates to set next to the sandwiches, then she glanced at Cady. "Quick. We can only hold them off for so long." She laughed and stepped out of the way.

"The sandwiches are turkey with sharp cheddar cheese," Reece said. "Sandwiches on the right half of the tray are loaded with jalapeños, the left half have sweet pickles."



“Which are you?” Hayden looked at her, flirtatious humor lighting his eyes. “Spicy or sweet?”

She caught his gaze and held it, though getting lost in their mutual attraction was the last thing she should be doing in front of this team. But that pull—that instant connection with him—was too hard to resist, and she let his playful mood override her common sense.

Someone coughed, and she broke free, but she couldn’t let the moment end. She offered a Cheshire cat grin and took half of each kind of sandwich before dishing up a generous portion of mixed fruit.

“Yes,” she said in answer to his spicy or sweet question.

He blinked a few times. Good, she’d caught him by surprise as she’d hoped, but he recovered quickly. “Take any clear spot at the table if you can find one. Our team won’t win any awards for neatness.”

“Hah.” Jude pushed up to the food table. “Our team might not, but you would.”

“And proud of it.” Hayden glanced at Cady.

He seemed to be searching for her response to his need for order. She wished she could say she shared that trait, but honestly, she was a bit of a mess. Maybe neatness and organization weren’t important to him in a life partner—or maybe he couldn’t be with someone who didn’t value those traits.

Grr. Stop thinking about being with him.

She found an open slot in the middle of the table, dropped her jacket over the back of the chair, and sat. Her stomach rumbled again, and she stabbed her fork into a plump red strawberry.

Before she could bite into it, Nolan joined her and held out a piece of paper. “Here’s the nondisclosure we spoke about. I need to make sure everything we discuss tonight and in the future isn’t shared with anyone else and especially not published in any public format. If you’d look it over and sign it while we eat, then we’ll talk about working together.”

She took the document with her free hand and gave him a tight smile when she really wanted to grit her teeth. She’d told him and Hayden both in no uncertain terms she wasn’t here in a reporter’s capacity and wouldn’t be writing about this situation, but they couldn’t seem to let it go.

She understood their caution, though. They needed to protect their business and their clients. She would do the same thing in their shoes.

Stuffing the strawberry in her mouth, she laid the page down and chewed as the fresh sweetness saturated her tastebuds. She glanced through the legalese, bored after the first sentence. Too bad. She needed to continue to read. At least she had the tasty sandwich with the sweet pickles—something she’d never had on a turkey sandwich before—to chomp into as she tried to decipher the lawyer speak. It took her exactly half a sandwich to skim the agreement. Before starting the jalapeño one, she grabbed the pen and scribbled her signature.

Holding it in the air, she caught Nolan’s attention. “Here you go. Signed.”

He stepped over to her and collected it. “I hope you’re not offended by this. It’s routine business for us.”

“I understand,” she said, and tried her hardest not to be offended.

As a reporter, she’d developed a thick skin and was rarely put out by anything. Somehow, this seemed more personal. Maybe she believed because she was interested in Hayden, he and his team should trust her. But they knew nothing about her feelings, and her belief didn’t make sense.

She might be attracted to him. She might want to get to know him. She might even want a potential relationship with him. But the fact of the matter was, she didn’t know him, and he didn’t know her.

They would spend time together searching for her father's killer, and she was sure she'd learn more about who he really was. Maybe, just maybe, they'd find they weren't compatible at all. She didn't expect that, though—just like she never imagined he'd hold her at gunpoint in a stranger's house.

She had no idea what lay ahead—and maybe that was for the best. Hunting a killer was dangerous enough, but Hayden had shown her tonight just how quickly the search could turn into a life-or-death situation.

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