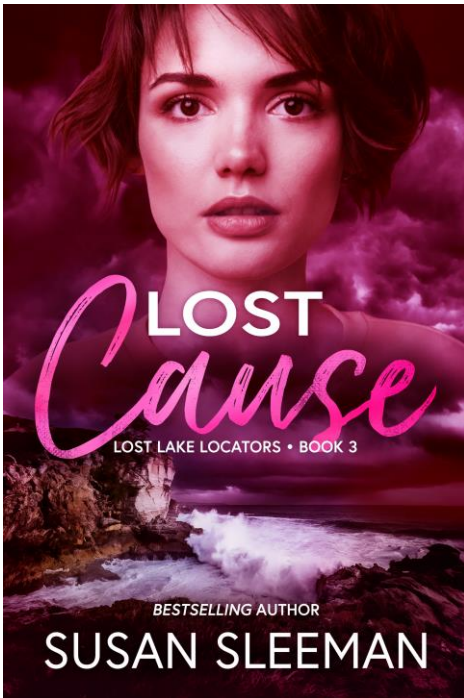


## LOST CAUSE SNEAK PEEK



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

**Lost Lake Locators Series Book 3**– Nov/2025

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### **Working together is a challenge...**

Detective Burke Ulrich is known for his unyielding dedication to justice and his methodical approach to solving crimes. When a valuable family heirloom is stolen from a recluse's rundown estate on mysterious Ravenhook Island, Burke is called in to investigate. Despite the theft appearing straightforward, Burke senses there is more to the case, especially given the homeowner's mysterious history.

### **But catching a killer is their priority.**

Enter former sheriff Abby Day, a sharp and resourceful Lost Lake Locator hired by the recluse to find the missing heirloom. Abby's involvement immediately

irritates Burke, who is wary of private investigators interfering in police work. However, as the investigation progresses, Burke and Abby uncover a complex web of deceit involving long-buried family secrets, and a string of unsolved crimes connected to the estate, ultimately uncovering a murder. Burke orders Abby off the investigation to protect her, but will she listen, or will she risk her life and a potential relationship with Burke to catch a killer?

## Chapter One

Secrets. They wanted to stay buried. Deep. Hidden, often needing help to rise from the dark.

No matter. Abby Day was just the person to dig them up, starting tonight. She had to. Her friends and fellow teammates were counting on her to get this assignment and keep their company from going under.

She took a firm stance on the nearly deserted ferry as it cut through the turbulent water while powerful engines growled in a low rumble. The double-decker boat navigated through

thick fog swirling like a living entity around them. She squinted to see her destination, but mist swallowed the island's rugged outline, hiding the estate.

She shivered and tightened her coat against the damp chill—against whatever awaited her on Ravenhook Island.

The island wasn't just remote—it was ignored by most. If you didn't count the stories and the rumors. They continued to be whispered and shared on a regular basis.

Once home to six lavish houses for wealthy trendsetters, now most properties were in disrepair. Some deserted. A few remained to shelter recluses—long-term occupants like Mr. Lemoine, who'd desperately called the Lost Lake Locator's team to report a mysterious theft on his secluded estate. She couldn't shake his cryptic words.

Another shiver raked over her body.

*Stow it. Keep your imagination in check. Think like the former sheriff you are.*

Nothing good came from chasing unsettling shadows and jumping to conclusions. Hold back. Wait. Look for evidence. Tangible things. Things she could use in a court of law if it became necessary.

*Right. Focus on something else.*

Balancing against sudden swells, she zoned in on the lighthouse's rotating beam struggling to light the way to the island. She held on, and the boat soon bumped against a large moss-covered dock with weak lights on tall poles that barely lit the way for the crew scurrying off the boat to secure heavy ropes so she could disembark.

Dressed in a green rain slicker, the burly captain opened the security gate and cast her a concerned look. "Remember, Ms. Day, we leave precisely at nine, and it's the final ferry of the

day. This island is the last place you want to be stranded for the night.”

“Don’t worry.” She lifted her shoulders in an attempt to appear fearless. “I’ll be back before it’s time to leave.”

*Please make that true!*

Her heart kicked into a rapid rhythm.

*Chill. You’ve got this.*

She crossed the narrow public road to the mansion’s long stairway. Her boots landed on the first step, and she raised her flashlight. Trees twisted with age, and severely overgrown hedges obscured part of the imposing estate, but the mansion’s grand front door came into view. Still, everything was cloaked in darkness. Everything.

If Mr. Lemoine was expecting her, wouldn’t he have left on a light?

Uneasiness creeping over her, she rested her free hand on her sidearm, pausing to listen. Behind her, distant waves crashed and the idling ferry engine hummed, but otherwise the night remained quiet.

She swung her flashlight through the fog to the 1800s Victorian, revealing thick vines of ivy crawling up the walls. Broken shutters shifted in the breeze.

The most interesting sight? Fragments from a shattered window shimmering beneath the porch.

The likely entry point for the thief? Maybe.

An air of neglect hung heavy in the cool night as she pounded on the thick wooden door. It swung open under her hand, rusted hinges protesting. Cold air spilled out from the darkness.

She caught a whiff of damp wood and something older. Something rank.

Abby stood still, pulse ticking in her throat as the door finally settled open wide enough to step through, but just narrow enough to make her wonder if she should.

“Mr. Lemoine?” She poked her head around the door and called out. “It’s Abby Day. Are you here?”

Light seeped from under an interior door to the left of the dark, mysterious foyer. She waited for the door to open and Mr. Lemoine to appear, but nothing moved.

Had something terrible happened to him after they’d spoken?

*Please don’t let this turn into a murder investigation.*

She crept into the entry hall. Silence and shadows clung to the dark walls, seeping into corners. Above the grand staircase at the back of the room, light beamed through a cracked windowpane, projecting splintered patterns on the floor.

Creepy was the only fitting word that came to mind, but she had to continue on even if her heart rate shot higher.

She aimed her flashlight to her right and made her way to the lighted room. Pushing open the door, she found a large library with overflowing bookshelves covering every wall. Peeling paint chipped from the woodwork, and torn, faded wallpaper covered the exposed walls. An odor of old, maybe decaying air clung to the room. But no Victor Lemoine in sight.

Rumor had it he hadn’t left Ravenhook Island for decades, having all services brought to him along with supplies and food. She was beginning to believe it.

The large marble fireplace, once opulent, was cold. A ring of soot marked the hearth, the

lack of ashes suggesting it had just been cleaned.

She backed into the foyer. “Mr. Lemoine? Mr. Lemoine? It’s Abby Day. Where are you?”

No answer.

She was technically trespassing, so did she move ahead or leave?

*Call him.* She dug her cell out and tapped her most recent call. A landline phone’s shrill ring reverberating from cracked plaster walls had her spinning toward a table less than three feet away.

The rotary phone continued to ring. Two. Three. Four times.

She ignored it and eased closer to the sweeping staircase. The sharp trill sounded from above too. His bedroom? The ringing stopped, and her call went to an old-fashioned answering machine.

She pocketed her phone, the urge to leave nearly overwhelmed her. But she couldn’t. If Victor wasn’t answering the phone, it could mean he was hurt and needed help.

She waited, listening to the hall clock ticking down in the musty air. This was pointless. She couldn’t just stand there. She crossed a worn Persian runner, muffling the sound of her tactical boots hitting the floor. Her flashlight illuminated portraits of stoic ancestors with pale eyes hanging on the walls. Several frames were missing, leaving hooks and picture outlines on faded brocade wallpaper.

Around the first corner, a stone stairway descended into darkness. Carefully finding her footing, she traversed the stairs and located an antique push-button switch. She held her breath and pressed it down. Light flickered from the underpowered ceiling fixture.

*Wow! Oh wow!*

A time capsule greeted her of heavy stone walls and iron pots hanging from blackened hooks above a soot-stained hearth. She eased carefully over rough, uneven flagstones to take a better look. A butcher's table stood in the center, covered in knife marks and stains from years of use. She caught the scent of rosemary. Not just the pungent herb. Something older—earthy and metallic permeated the air too. But what?

Footsteps echoed behind her.

She spun.

“What are you doing here?” a male voice challenged from the stairway, hidden in shadows beyond her light beam.

She caught a deep breath. “I’m Abby Day with the Lost Lake Locators. You contacted me and asked me to come right out. I drove down here and took the first ferry to get here as soon as I could.”

An older man stepped into the light. Despite his age, his eyes were sharp and unwavering. His hand rested on an ornate cane. His seventy-plus years on this earth had hollowed his cheeks and stooped his frame, but he seemed far from frail. Had to be Victor Lemoine.

“I wasn’t sure you would come.” He spoke with a raspy, measured voice.

“Is that the reason you didn’t answer the door?”

“I apologize. My afternoon rest time ran longer than I expected.” His liver-spotted free hand clutched a once-elegant velvet smoking robe. “How did you get in?”

“The door was open.”

He frowned. "I was certain I'd locked it."

"I'll check the lock to see if it's been tampered with," she offered, though he'd likely had a senior moment and failed to secure the door. Could be another way the burglar had gotten into his home.

"We can discuss the theft in the library." He pivoted, his posture stiff like a precision soldier.

She trailed him up the stairs and down the hallway. He had a slight limp, his cane thumping on the wooden floor. He didn't bother to turn on a light, something she would expect a man who likely had the poor eyesight of his advanced age might do.

He pushed the front door closed, then turned. "You can inspect the door later. After I provide details on the theft. Then I assume you'll want to check all the entrance points for the house."

"That's fine by me."

From his pocket, he handed her a large ring filled with jingling keys. "You'll need these, along with the blueprint of the house and drawing of the property waiting for you in the library."

She pocketed them and followed him into the lighted room.

Regal looking, he flicked a hand at a nearby loveseat as he settled in a high-backed chair. "Sit."

She hung her soggy jacket on the back of a chair before taking a seat. His deep-set eyes followed and evaluated her. Something about the intense study said he was weighing her very character. She didn't appreciate how he behaved like an aristocrat, and she was beneath him, hers to do his bidding and then be discarded. But the team needed him as a client, and she kept her

mouth shut.

He tapped a rolled set of documents sitting on the nearby table then poured a full snifter of brandy. He took a long sip and pointed at the table, no offer of something to drink for her. “The blueprint and property layout as I promised.”

She swallowed away her irritation and smiled her acknowledgment. “Thank you for calling our team, Mr. Lemoine. You were very cryptic on the phone. So what exactly do you need our help with?”

“Call me Victor.” He set the glass down and ran a hand over his head. Wispy and messy silver hair was cinched tight with a tie in the back. “I—”

A long, low creak echoed in the hallway and took his attention. “The front door.”

Abby froze. Listened. Heard the rusty hinges. Her heart galloped into high gear, and she shot to her feet. “Probably just the wind. Stay here. I’ll check it out.”

She rested her hand on her sidearm before starting for the shadowy hallway.

As she’d crossed the bay, a storm had been brewing, but there was no wind in the hallway. No draft. Just the front door inching open into the dim foyer, and she braced herself for whoever would come through.

\*

The Lemoine Mansion hadn’t seen many visitors in years, and it showed in the serious disrepair, cobwebs, and dirt surrounding the main entrance. But it welcomed Detective Burke Ulrich with an unlocked door.

Not a good sign after Victor Lemoine’s frantic call to 911 about a theft. Not good at all.



He drew his weapon and carefully pressed on the splintered wood. Light spilling into the space to his left illuminated the dark, shadowed foyer and outlined a petite woman facing the door, feet planted, weapon drawn.

“Police!” he shouted as he tried to make out her facial details. “Lower your weapon to the floor.”

“You have no worries with me.” She dropped her arms, revealing her face.

*Say what? Couldn't be!*

He knew her—former sheriff Abby Day. The one woman who'd managed to break through the wall he'd built since his fiancée left him at the altar a little over a year ago. What in the world was she doing here?

“I'm Lost Lake Locator, Abby Day. I'm going to holster my gun.” Her movements were exaggerated, likely for his benefit.

This county was Burke's jurisdiction, but they'd once worked a murder investigation together when she was a nearby sheriff. The last one she handled before leaving the job to join the new firm of investigators who specialized in finding missing people and things. They'd recently been praised in newspapers and on TV for their good work.

*Of all the people!*

They hadn't seen eye-to-eye before, and now she was a nosy private investigator. If Lemoine hired her to find his thief, she was bound to be a thorn in his side. Not only as far as the investigation went, but also by raising old feelings he'd worked very hard to banish from his life. Just what he didn't need.

“Detective Burke Ulrich,” he said in case she'd forgotten him.

“I remember you, Detective.” Her unfavorable memories of their time together came through loud and clear.

He got it. They’d had a love-hate relationship, disagreeing on most investigative steps, yet finding themselves attracted to each other and fighting it all the way. Could she have left the job because he’d questioned her all the time?

Nah. She didn’t seem overly bothered by his behavior. More likely, she left because they’d investigated three young children who’d been abducted on their way home from school and brutally murdered. The horrific details nearly caused him to leave his job. Why wouldn’t it do the same to her?

Old news, but her change of careers was important news. Still, now wasn’t the time to bring it up—he couldn’t allow himself to get lost in memories or his feelings for her. “I assume Mr. Lemoine called your team to investigate the theft.”

“I did,” an older man said from the doorway, the light behind him accenting his age-diminished build.

“Detective Burke Ulrich.” He offered his hand to the gentleman. “You must be Mr. Lemoine.”

“Victor.” His dry, papery skin rasped against Burke’s as he latched on with a surprisingly strong grip. “It’s about time law enforcement showed.”

Haughty was the word that came to Burke to describe this guy’s tone. He could be acting due to stress from the theft. Burke didn’t want to make it worse for him by responding with a sharp reply.

“Unavoidable transportation delay,” he said. “I would’ve been here sooner if your call

indicated you were in any danger and needed immediate attention.”

“It seems your understanding of the matter is quite limited.” Mr. Lemoine’s upper lip curled ever so slightly. “I’m always in danger.”

Burke shot a look at Abby for her reaction. She planted a hand on her hip, long lashes blinking at him. Apparently she hadn’t heard about this either.

He returned his attention to Victor. “Then let’s sit down, and you can tell us about it.”

Victor didn’t speak, but clunked with his cane to his chair in the library and gingerly lowered himself to the worn cushion. Burke waited for Abby to enter the room and drop onto the sofa’s plush cushions, slightly uneven from years of wear.

Her black tactical pants and matching polo shirt spoke to her law enforcement training and professionalism, but he saw more than the uniform. So much more. Her chin-length hair hung around her face, and her large brown eyes remained sharp.

Memories of how those luminous eyes often sparked in response to him came back. But more so, they reminded him of everything he respected about her. Resourceful, intuitive, compassionate, quietly courageous. Not to mention grounded in an unshakable faith.

She looked at him, and he jerked his attention away like a teenage boy with a crush.

*Seriously? Get control.* He remained standing and formulated his line of questioning. “So, Victor, tell us about this theft, and the danger you think you’re in.”

“Not *think*. I’m in danger. I know I am.” He stared at the fireplace, silent and imposing, then whipped his attention back to them. “You must promise to keep the information I’m about to share to yourselves.”

Abby met the older man's gaze with the confidence of a seasoned investigator. "If you want us to find your missing item, I'll have to share with my team everything you tell me. We'll keep it strictly between us."

"And you, Detective?" Victor raised a bushy eyebrow. "Can you guarantee this will not leak to the public?"

Burke couldn't offend this guy if he wanted to keep his job, the only thing he had left in his life, but he also wouldn't make a promise that he couldn't keep. "I'm sorry, Victor, but I can't guarantee that. I can assure you that I won't share any information unless absolutely necessary, and absolutely nothing with the public without your knowledge."

Victor sniffed, as if the air smelled foul. "I suppose it's the best I can do. But this has remained a secret since 1887, and I would hate for it to get out now."

"An extremely long time to keep something quiet." Abby ran her gaze over him. "This all started back then?"

"Yes, 1887 in France under the rule of the French Third Republic. Just after the fall of Napoleon III and the monarchy, the Republic saw the Crown Jewels as symbols of tyranny." His brows drew together, forming deep creases across his forehead. "They decided to liquidate almost the entire royal collection, both to make a political statement and to raise funds. The sales included multiple royal crowns—some bejeweled, some stripped. Many were bought by private collectors or dismantled for their gems."

"Interesting story, but what does it have to do with you?" Burke asked.

Victor lifted his pointy chin and aimed it at Burke. "My great-grandfather, Valère Lemoine, was an art historian living in Paris at the time, and he bought the Crown of Napoleon

III to bring it back to America. When he returned, he had this house built.”

“It’s a long way from Paris to the Oregon coast.” Burke quickly reviewed information from his Oregon history classes to try to remember what was going on in the state in the late 1800s. “If I remember it right, Oregon was just being developed then. Kind of rowdy and unruly in those days for keeping an expensive item safe.”

“Probably not the best place for an art historian to find a job either,” Abby added.

Victor wagged a finger at her. “It’s not like he ever worked a day in his life. He didn’t need to. Not with our family money. He’d gotten an art history degree to please his father, but his heart wasn’t in it. He was a real adventurer. After a single trip out here, he wanted to claim land and build before anyone else came along to spoil the nearby beauty.”

Again, interesting, but it still didn’t explain what was going on. “So what does this crown in the 1800s have to do with your call?”

“Like I said.” His tone turned condescending as if he’d expected them to figure everything out by now. “He had this house built, and he included a special hidden display case for the crown. From that point forward, he lived here alone and didn’t tell anyone about the family treasure until he was on his deathbed. He then revealed it to my grandfather, who then inherited it. It’s been kept a secret and passed down to the firstborn son in every generation, currently my responsibility.”

“Oh my goodness!” Abby shot forward on the cushion. “The crown! The crown was stolen.”

A swift nod was Victor’s only response.

Far more interesting than a simple burglary. “I assume it’s quite valuable. Do you have a

recent appraisal?”

Victor crossed his arms. “It’s politically correct these days to return artifacts to their country of origin. An appraisal would simply draw unwanted attention, and I would likely be forced to return it.”

Abby blinked a few times. “But what you’re saying applies to stolen items, and the crown wasn’t stolen from the French government. Do you have a bill of sale or any proof it was purchased by your great-grandfather?”

Victor nodded. “I not only have a bill of sale, but I also have a certificate of authenticity, both of which are kept in a safety deposit box in the local bank. However, it doesn’t matter. It’s considered **a national treasure of France**, and the French government would ignore my legitimate rights and claim it under cultural patrimony laws.”

Abby’s lips pressed into a line. “Makes sense why you couldn’t have it appraised, but you won’t be able to determine the value.”

“I have conducted internet research for that. As far as the art history world is concerned, its current whereabouts are unknown, and it hasn’t been displayed in any museum or private collection. Of course it hasn’t.”

His laughter came slowly at first, like a creaky door easing open, but then it developed into a gravelly chuckle. “This absence has led to speculation about its fate. They’re wondering whether it was lost, destroyed, or remains hidden in a private collection. The crown’s disappearance adds to the mystique of the French Crown Jewels, and articles I’ve read claim it would command up to sixteen million dollars at auction.”

Burke let out a low whistle and shook his head. He didn’t expect anything like this when

the call had come into his office. In fact, he'd thought it was a simple theft and begged his sheriff to assign the investigation to someone else. Didn't happen. Apparently, Victor Lemoine held some political sway, and the sheriff wanted his best investigator on the case.

He'd picked Burke—even after everything. Burke had just gotten off probation after losing it when his fiancée ran off with his partner, Miles Ramsey, leaving Burke at the altar. Burke lost it. Couldn't cope with the betrayal from the two people closest to him. After a fight with Ramsey at the office and the obvious tension between them, Burke got demoted and Ramsey took over. A year later, Burke was back to normal status at work, but one wrong move now, and he could kiss the only thing he'd managed to hold onto goodbye.

Now that Lemoine's story intrigued him, Burke was more motivated to work this case. More than motivated—downright fascinated. “Can you show us the crown's display case?”

Victor gripped the carved arms of his chair and pushed to his feet. “It's just over here.”

He hobbled across the room, leaving his ornate cane behind and limping heavily. At the bookshelves, he turned to them. “Take a good look. Can you see the hidden compartment?”

Abby brushed past Burke to the bookshelf and bent close. She was a petite thing, so he stepped up behind her to look over her shoulder, catching a whiff of the same tantalizing citrus scent he remembered from the weeks they'd worked together.

He forced himself to concentrate. “There.” Reaching over her shoulder, he stabbed a finger at the third shelf down. “The books are fake. There's something behind them.”

“Wow.” Abby leaned closer to the shelf. “Your great-grandfather did a good job of camouflaging the display case.”

Victor lifted his shoulders and expanded his chest. “Money can buy the very best

craftsmanship.”

“Show us the case,” Burke said.

Victor flicked his fingers as if he wanted Burke and Abby to back up, so they did.

He reached into the space above the fake books. The shelf dropped open until it lay flat, the fake books still connected and hanging underneath. He raised the shelf above it. A light came on, revealing an empty glass-front display case lined with rich purple velvet.

A bare crystal pedestal—the resting place for the crown—cast shimmering sparkles of light glinting over the velvet like little jewels. A crystal pedestal of this size from the 1800s had to be worth good money too. Why hadn’t the thief taken the stand too? Perhaps too bulky and too much to carry.

Burke looked at Victor. “Do you have a picture of the crown?”

Victor withdrew a worn photograph from the pocket of his ancient smoking jacket and pressed out a few wrinkles before handing it to Burke. “This is the best one I have.”

Abby scooted closer, and they studied the gold-framed crown boasting arches shaped like eagles.

Victor tapped the top of the crown. “This **monde** or **globe-shaped ornament** symbolizes the monarch’s authority over the world. It’s surmounted by the **cross** signifying divine authority.”

He drew another picture from his pocket and handed it to Burke. “This case held the crown when my great-grandfather bought it. It has a mahogany frame with leather dyed deep red. The lining is of the finest velvet, and the royal initials are embossed on the box. It was kept on the shelves below. It’s also missing.”



Abby shook her head, her eyes wide open. “Now I understand why you didn’t want to talk about it on the phone.”

“And like I said,” he shifted his gaze between them, “you must keep this as quiet as possible.”

Burke didn’t know how he could enforce Victor’s wishes and still properly investigate the theft. Questions had to be asked, often requiring him to give information to get information. But more concerning to him was the sharing of this investigation and information with Abby Day and her team. Not only because she was a former sheriff and would likely want to take over, but he didn’t need to have a woman distract him when he was finally on solid footing in the job. And especially not during such a high-profile investigation.

Losing control was the one thing he couldn’t afford. Especially if he wanted to keep his job. He would cling to it with everything he was made of, no matter how hard she tried to break through.

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