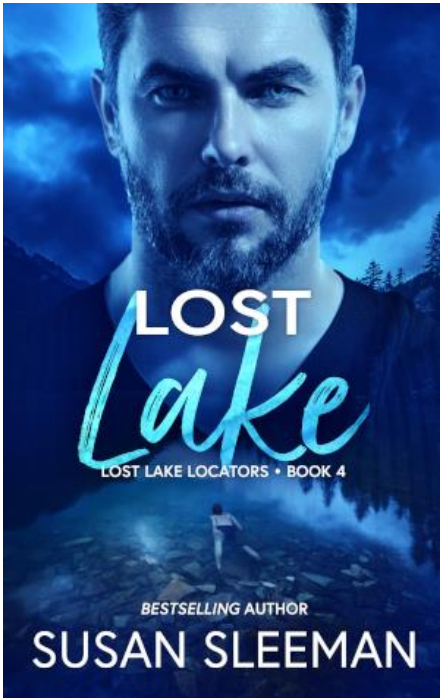


LOST LAKE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Paperback, E-Book, and Audio

Lost Lake Locators Series Book 4– May/2026

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A body in the lake. A child missing.

Detective El (Elaina) Lyons is haunted by her past but relentless in her pursuit of justice. When a woman's body is found in Lost Lake and her child vanishes without a trace, El races against time to solve the crime before it turns into a second tragedy.

A killer and kidnapper still out there.

Enter Gabe Irving—Lost Lake Locator, rogue investigator, and the victim's best friend. He's got a personal stake and zero patience for protocol, putting him at immediate odds with El. And at odds with the ongoing interest they'd been fighting for years.

But as tensions rise and secrets surface, it's clear the case—and the killer—are far more twisted than either expected. Forced to work together, El and Gabe must navigate a maze of lies and danger. Can they find the missing child before it's too late. . . or will the killer disappear with the sweet little girl?

Chapter One

She was missing—maybe dead—and it was all Gabe's fault.

Kenna. His best friend for twenty-five years. Her four-year-old daughter, too. Gone.

Kenna. Lucy. Where are you?

He scanned the shoulder of the narrow winding road, headlights cutting through thick fog. One last attempt. His Lost Lake Locators team had already searched every route from Kenna's house to Lost Lake.

Nothing. Not a trace.

The others had returned to the office, urging him to come with them. He couldn't. Not after her voicemail around six p.m.—her voice shaking, whispering she was in danger. She'd

said she was just leaving home, starting the one-hour drive.

That was nearly two and a half hours ago.

So where was she? Where was sweet little Lucy?

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Sweat slicked his palms despite the cold April air. “Get a grip, man. You’re no good to her like this.”

He reached the intersection for Lost Lake Road and forced his breathing to slow. She shouldn’t have taken this turn. It didn’t lead anywhere she needed to go. Unless Lucy had begged to see the lake.

No. The fear in Kenna’s voice hadn’t belonged to a woman stopping to sightsee.

Still, he and his team had no leads after searching for two hours. None. A quick loop around the lake would take fifteen minutes. That was all.

He crawled forward. Wind howled and buffeted the vehicle. He scanned both sides of the road through the thick mist.

Nothing.

Then—something.

A shadow in the ravine below. Large. Metallic.

His stomach sank. He coasted to a stop at the overlook and killed the engine.

Flashlight. He yanked it from the console and jumped out. Forty-degree air. Misty rain. He jogged to the edge. The beam sliced through fog, catching weeds and rock. The shape below was half-buried, indistinct in the shadows, impossible to make out.

He shifted the flashlight to his left hand and gripped a sapling, easing down the steep incline. Slow steps when every instinct screamed to run. His feet skittered down the slope. Brambles tore at his jeans. His heart pounded in his ears.

Closer. Closer he came.

The light caught a wave of turquoise.

Then cream trim.

No. Please no!

A vintage Volkswagen bus. License plate SUNSHN, the custom plate Kenna had added just last week.

Her bus.

“Oh, God. No. Please.” He let go of the sapling and slid the rest of the way down, landing hard beside the vehicle.

He scrambled to his feet and yanked open the driver’s door. Cream dashboard. A little flower charm hanging from the mirror. Every detail screamed *Kenna*. But maybe...

He lunged across the seat, ripped open the glove compartment, and jerked out the registration.

Confirmation. Kenna James.

“What were you doing on this road?”

Lucy’s freckled face flashed in his mind. Fiery red pigtails. Wide grin.

Air locked in his lungs.

Stop thinking. Move.

He bolted outside and wrenched open the sliding door. The child’s car seat was gone. Floofy Bear lay slumped on the bench seat, abandoned.

“No.” A sickening weight settled low in his gut. “She would never leave her favorite bear.”

He tore through the bus. Three suitcases. A box of toys. Too much for a short visit.

She’d been running.

From what?

Not Lucy’s father. He wasn’t in the picture. Never had been.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Too close.

Cold dread slid through him.

He pulled out his phone and called Nolan, their team leader, to ask if his fiancée, Mina Park, the local sheriff, found anything. “You hear anything from Mina?”

“No. You find them?”

“Not them, but Kenna’s bus crashed in a ravine. Sirens are closing in on the lake.”

“I’ll call Mina. She might know what’s going on. Hang tight.”

Gabe shoved the phone into his pocket and clawed his way back up the ravine. He charged to the overlook. Flashing lights painted the fog an eerie blue glow, and sirens wailed just down the road.

The sound of distress. Trouble needing intervention.

Patrol cars stopped near the beach. Deputies sprinted downhill, flashlights slashing across sand and water. Someone waved frantically then pointed at the water.

Gabe ran to the edge of the lot and zoomed in with his phone’s camera. The image blurred with fog and motion.

His phone rang. “Nolan.”

“Mina said they found a body floating in the lake. A man dragged it to shore. It’s too late.”

Something icy gripped Gabe from the inside. “Male or female?”

“She doesn’t know yet.”

He started toward the beach, every muscle shaking. “The child?”

A pause.

Nolan cleared his throat. “Empty car seat on the dock.”

Gabe’s legs gave out. He hit the ground, his palms striking dirt, lungs burning for air that wouldn’t come.

Kenna. Lucy.

He'd promised to protect them.

Now what?

Either there was still a chance or this was a nightmare he'd never escape.

*

The callout proved accurate, and Detective Elaina Lyons swallowed hard, her pulse stuttering as she took in the scene on the beach below. A woman's drenched body lay face down on the sand and an empty child's car seat rested on the dock.

Her world narrowed to one desperate thought. A child could've wandered off after her mother drowned, lost in the dark.

Then a darker possibility came to mind.

No one swam in Lost Lake in March.

The woman could've been murdered. And the child?

El tried to shut the thought down, but it was as if a neon sign flashed in front of her.

Another missing child.

Victoria's name echoed through her from the past.

No! Focus.

Hurry. Beat the threatening rain. Evidence would vanish if the weather turned.

She pulled on gloves and crossed the nearly empty parking lot. She joined Deputy Ewing at the taped-off stairway leading to the beach. "Did you call this in immediately?"

"Yes, ma'am." He straightened, his expression turning uncertain. "After interviewing the witness. Deputy Massey is with him now."

"Beach secure?"

"Yes. Trails on both sides are cordoned off."

"Keep it that way. Give the ME access. No one else without my say." She looked back at the scene below. "Any witnesses, besides the dog walker who found the woman?"

“No one else. Beach is officially closed this time of year. Sign on the chain strung at the opening warns people off.”

A thick chain dangled between two substantial metal posts at the head of the stairway, the sign stating the beach closure from October through May. A deterrent for most people, but anyone determined to access the beach could easily circumvent it.

She faced Ewing again. “Remember, no one other than the ME and her team enters the scene unless authorized by me.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Not even Sheriff Parks?”

“That won’t be a problem. She’s standing by in her office for a report.”

He nodded.

El slipped under the tape. Hand over her eyes to block the blowing sand, she quickly assessed the scene unfolding before her on a night when the moon had taken refuge behind thick clouds still threatening to drench the evidence. One weak light mounted on the changing room wall illuminated the immediate area but left the remaining space dark and quiet.

Deputy Massey stood near an older man wrapped in an emergency blanket and seated on a concrete bench, a dog straining at the leash.

The witness.

Moonlight broke through the clouds. She’d check the victim first, document the scene, then talk to him.

She couldn’t miss a thing. Every detail mattered.

Footprints near the water. Drag marks. A phone. A half-empty water bottle. A child’s toy rocking in the ripples.

She crossed the sand. The lake reflected the moon in glints, deceptively peaceful as the water lapped against the shore. The wind carried the faint smell of algae and something sharper, metallic. Blood or mud, she couldn’t tell yet.

She knelt beside the woman and began snapping pictures. Her camera flash revealed the victim's pale skin, her forehead, an ugly purple bruise. Weeds tangled in her soaked red hair. Clothes clinging like rags. Wrists and ankles, raw and red, as if they'd been restrained. Dark staining on the woman's knit top, made lighter by her time in the water.

Blood. *Help me find who did such an awful thing to this defenseless woman.*

El narrowed her focus to the blood. No tear in the fabric or obvious wound, so where had the blood come from? Her killer?

El turned to the drag marks. One line, coming from the lake. Probably from the witness who'd rescued her. Not the person who'd put her in the water. Did they drop her from the dock or were they strong enough to carry her?

"What happened to you?" El said under her breath.

"Obviously she drowned," Massey said behind her.

El turned slowly. "Did you look at her?"

He hesitated. "Our witness said he found her floating."

El bit back the sharp reply rising to her tongue. "Come here."

She angled her flashlight at the victim's throat. Raised, reddish welts bloomed under the light. "Tell me what you see."

Massey squatted beside her and went still. "Strangulation?"

"Likely." El stood. "Checking for petechiae in her eyes would help confirm it, but we're hands-off until the ME does her preliminary examination."

Massey nodded, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Right. Burst capillaries, red and purple dots in her eyes. Classic sign."

"ME's on her way. Hopefully she'll check that out and find some ID."

He scanned the shoreline. "Cell phone's over there but no purse. Might've gone under."

"As could the child. We need a dive team." El shot another look at the empty car seat and

nausea rolled through her. “Sheriff Ryder’s county is the closest one with divers. I’ll get Mina on the line and get them over here.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“Bring some lights down here so you can photograph the entire scene then watch the trails. Make sure no one tries to access the scene and contaminate evidence.”

He glanced at the water as if he wanted to say something else. She followed his gaze. This was a real circus. One where she was the ringmaster and everything depended on her direction.

She straightened and made eye contact with Massey. “We find that kid. No excuses. Let’s move.”

He bolted into action. but El allowed herself one more moment to take in the scene. The wind had died down, and Lost Lake was quiet now, too quiet, as if holding its breath. And in that stillness, the weight of the scene crushed El. The lifeless mother, the missing child, and the invisible clock ticking relentlessly against them all.

El shivered. She would never look at the lake the same way again.

Please God, the woman has died, but let me find the child. Watch over her. Care for her before...

No. She couldn’t say it. Not even to God, who knew everything. She forced her attention away from the shadowy water. She had a job to do.

The witness was secure, the scene locked down. Now there was only one priority.

The child.

She pulled out her phone and dialed the office. “Mina. It’s El. We’re looking at a possible homicide. Possible missing child either in the water or the woods. Maybe abducted. I need search teams around the lake. Divers. ASAP. A K-9 unit, too.”

Mina exhaled hard. “I’ll handle it and keep you updated on their arrival times. Do we

have an ID for the woman?"

"Not yet. ME's en route and hopefully she'll find something on the body. There's a cell phone near the water. Might get a quick ID there. I'll get it to our tech team as soon as possible."

A pause. Too long.

"You should know," Mina said. "Gabe Irving's friend, Kenna James, and her four-year-old daughter, Lucy, went missing tonight. They were on their way to see him and should've arrived at the inn more than four hours ago, but they never showed."

Gabe. How hard this must be for him.

They'd worked cases together before. Shared long hours, bad coffee, and an attraction between them they didn't dare to explore. And now this?

"Is this a coincidence or do you have reason to believe the woman might be Kenna and the car seat her daughter's?" El asked.

"It's probably them. Gabe found a VW bus registered to Kenna in a ravine near the lake."

"That's bad."

"Yeah. He's on his way. If he can ID the body, we need that." Mina's tone said this wasn't optional. "We're dealing with two potential investigations here. You'll need some help. I'll pull Ulrich off his current case and get him out there too."

A seasoned officer, Detective Burke Ulrich had joined their team when their department received a grant to work cold cases and he wanted to be close to Abby Day, a Lost Lake Locators team member. El would appreciate his help. Investigating a murder and missing child simultaneously required everyone to work this investigation, and he made things happen.

"How do you want to handle forensics?" El asked.

"With a scene exposed to the elements and a missing child, we can't wait for the state to send someone out. I'll try to get Sierra Rice from the Veritas Center out here."

The Veritas Center in Portland. Perfect. *If* they had the funds to pay for a nationally

known private laboratory with experts in all areas of criminal forensics plus state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

“We can afford that?” El asked.

“No way, but Nolan and his team have a connection to them, and he can hopefully get them to take this case pro bono.”

“What are the odds of that?”

“Their forensic anthropologist has a son and is sympathetic to cases involving children. She can be persuasive, but all the partners have to sign off on pro bono work.”

“Something to pray about then,” El said, surprising herself. She and God had been on a break since Victoria died during El’s rookie year. Not God’s fault. Hers for not being able to let go of the guilt. But this child deserved her every effort, and that included prayer.

“I’ll call as soon as I hear back,” Mina said. “Anything else you need right now?”

“I’ll let you know if something comes up.” She ended their call and strode through the squishy sand to the phone lying too near the lake for comfort.

She photographed it then lifted it. The screen remained dark and water dripped from the case.

Even if the phone still worked, protocol prohibited her from checking for recent calls or texts. It was up to the tech staff to recover information. She bagged and pocketed it.

Nearby, a pink-and-blue squeezable unicorn toy rested close to the water. Even a minor wave could drag it into the water. She also shot pictures of it then slipped it into an evidence bag.

On the dock, her flashlight beam revealed muddy drag marks and boot prints in two sizes.

A car seat sat near the edge. Why was it there?

Had the woman and child been brought there by boat? But if this woman was Gabe’s friend, the van was close enough to walk from. Why use a boat? Maybe they’d find answers when they examined the terrain around the ravine.

In any event, it could explain that the seat was used to keep the child strapped in for safety or to contain her movements. But where had the boat come from and who piloted it? Maybe the dog walker had seen something to clarify things.

She photographed the front of the seat, spotting a small pink sweatshirt tucked inside. Perfect for a K-9 to pick up on the child's scent and it would also contain DNA and fingerprints. She bagged it carefully and eased around to the seat's back. A large sticker of Bluey. The sight of the cartoon character punched her in the chest.

A young child, missing. Her job, to find her.

She clenched her hands to keep her emotions in check and crossed the beach to the witness and his black-and-white dog. The dog came to its feet and wiggled.

"Okay to pet him or her?" she asked the man in his late sixties, she guessed.

"Her. Jinx and sure," the man said, his voice deep and gravelly. "And I'm Curtis Williams."

"Detective Lyons, with the Lost Lake Sheriff's Department." Taking off her gloves, she squatted by Jinx and ruffled her wet fur. "I know my deputy already took your statement, but can you tell me what happened here tonight?"

He frowned, his whisker-covered chin dropping. "Jinx and I were on our normal nightly walk. As a border collie, she needs a lot of exercise."

Jinx lifted her head and looked at him as if he'd called her into duty. He gave her a hand signal, and she settled back down.

"We take this path every day at lunch and after dinner. Nothing out of the ordinary this afternoon, but tonight Jinx started barking the minute we hit the trail. I quickly saw something floating in the water. A woman. I charged in to drag her to shore. I can't even begin to tell you..."

His voice broke, and he clamped the back of his neck. "What it was like to discover she

was dead. Took me a minute or two to get my bearings and call 911. Stayed by her side until the deputy arrived. Not like I could do anything for her anymore, but she seemed like she needed me.”

“Did you see anyone else?”

“No, but I couldn’t miss that car seat. Please don’t tell me there’s a child involved in this. That would be so much worse.”

She couldn’t discuss anything with him. “What about any vehicles in the parking lot? Did you hear anything from up top?”

“No. Nothing. Not unusual for this time of year and especially at this time of night.”

“What about a boat or canoe?”

He shook his head. “Nothing there either.”

“No sound of a motor or no lights out in the lake?” she pressed.

“No. No.”

“And you didn’t touch anything besides the woman?”

“Like I said, I could barely keep it together to call 911, much less think to do anything but wait.”

She fished a business card out of her pocket and handed it to him. “If you think of anything else that might help, please call me immediately.”

He studied her card and looked up. “Does this mean I’m free to go?”

“Yes, thank you for your cooperation. I’ll escort you to the stairway.”

“Let me in.” From the parking lot above, a raw, desperate voice broke through the fog. “I might be able to identify the body!”

Gabe!

El’s chest tightened as he took on a linebacker stance, ready to bulldoze through Ewing, who stood his ground.

“El! Tell him to let me through. I know her! I might be able to identify the body.” Gabe’s tone had gone far beyond someone simply looking for a missing person to a personal loss deeper than she expected.

She had no doubt that if she didn’t intervene, he would break through Ewing’s defense.

“Hurry, El! I think I know who drowned.”

El wouldn’t correct him on the cause of death. No reason to traumatize him until she was certain. And she wouldn’t let him get close enough to see the welts on the woman’s neck for himself. Especially not if she wasn’t his friend, Kenna.

El reached the top of the stairway and caught the anguish on Gabe’s face. His strained expression changed things for her. This was no longer strictly professional. It was personal.

Having worked several investigations with the Lost Lake Locator team, she knew all six team members well. But Gabe? She’d had feelings for him for more than a year, and he felt the same. It didn’t matter. They would never act on it, each for their own reasons.

She lifted the crime scene tape and let Williams and Jinx pass under. “Please call me if you think of anything else.”

Williams gave a quick nod, glanced at Gabe with horror, and raced away, Jinx pulling at the leash to stay behind.

She turned to Gabe. “Mina told me about your potential connection. I’ll walk you down.”

He reached for the crime scene tape as if she’d given him clearance to barge through.

“Hold up.” El raised a hand. “I’ll let you take a look, but we need to do this by the book.”

He paced, exhaling hard. “You think I care about the book when that could be Kenna down there?”

“I know how you’re feeling. If it is her, we’ll find out together, but you have to stay with me. Don’t cross the line.”

He nodded, jaw clenched. “Fine.”

They descended toward the shore, grief radiating off him like heat.

And with every step, a single, icy thought tightened its grip.

If that woman was indeed Kenna, had Lucy followed her mother into the murky lake and lost her life too?

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