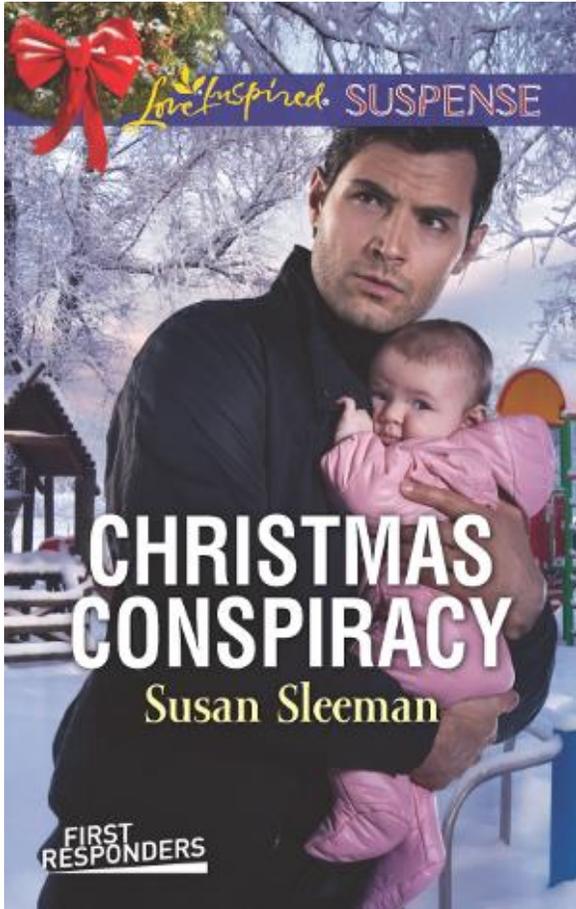


CHRISTMAS CONSPIRACY SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

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WITNESS IN JEOPARDY

It's a typical day at Rachael Long's day-care center—until a masked gunman tries to abduct one of the children in her charge. First response commander Jake Marsh manages to diffuse the situation before anyone is harmed...but not before Rachael unmasks the would-be kidnapper.

Now Jake must lead a manhunt and protect Rachael from the criminal who's turned his focus on her. But the case is reawakening painful memories for Jake, and Rachael's treating emotional wounds of her own. And with danger mounting as Christmas nears, they must learn to let go of the past in order to outwit a killer... and find the peace that's always eluded them both.

CHAPTER ONE

Hot, ugly eyes stared at Rachael from black circles in the gunman's mask. If he planned to kill her, he needed to do it quickly or she would fight him to the last breath. She'd rather die than see him hurt a child under her care.

She straightened her shoulders and checked on Kelly asleep in her crib at Rachael's child development center. Oblivious to the threat, the precious three-month-old pushed her fist under her chin, and soft breaths pursed her lips. She was helpless and depended on Rachael for protection.

The gunman took another step.

Rachael backed up and draped all five-foot-five inches of her body across the front of Kelly's crib. "You'll have to go through me to get to her. I might be small, but I'll put up a fight."

"Don't be a fool." He jerked his gun toward the wall with brightly painted cubbies holding the belongings of the six infants cared for in this room. "Step away from the baby. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to."

Rachael didn't comply, but memorized his voice—the inflection, the slight rasp. If he got away and left her alive, she could help identify him. But first, she needed to make sure she and Kelly lived.

Rachael tightened her hands on the crib rail, connecting with the solid maple and holding on for dear life. "I'm not moving."

His eyes narrowed. "Then we do this the hard way."

"Or you could not do this at all," she suggested, but he ignored her and took long steps across the room.

Dressed in black, he stood six feet tall and had an athletic build. He wore latex gloves and brandished the gun like he'd held one before. He stepped off and she waited, her eyes fixed on his weapon, expecting it to discharge.

Step by step, he moved across the brightly colored area rug with teddy bears and bunnies that she'd chosen when she'd opened the center three years ago. Never in her wildest dreams had she expected a masked man, intent on kidnapping a precious little baby, would cross this rug.

"Please, don't do this," Rachael begged.

He ignored her and kept coming, crossing the room. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* His hiking boots pounded on the gleaming linoleum, the gun still outstretched in his hands.

Her confidence wavered, and her palms grew moist, the solid rail becoming slick under her hands. Panic stole her breath, and she fought to draw in another one.

Stay calm. Kelly needs you.

The gunman slowed, then stopped in front of her, and fixed those burning eyes on hers while pressing the barrel of his gun to her forehead. "Are you ready to cooperate now?"

Fear coursed through her chest, and her hands trembled, but she held her position. Another child's life wouldn't end on her watch. The guilt of losing another innocent baby would tear her apart.

She gave a small shake of her head, feeling the gun barrel cold against her skin.

"Fine." He clamped his free hand on her forearm and spun her swiftly, then snaked his arm around her chest, pinning her arms at her sides and clutching her tight against his body.

The gun no longer at her head, Rachael arched her back and bucked.

His arm held like a vise, tightening, crushing down and bruising her flesh.

She cried out in pain and instantly hated that she'd let him know he'd hurt her.

"You wanted it this way." He laid his gun on the mattress near Kelly's sleeper-covered feet before using that hand to dig through his jacket pocket.

The sight of his gun lying so close to Kelly hit Rachael like a physical punch to her gut.

How had this happened? No—how had she let this happen?

As the center's owner and director, she held the responsibility for Kelly while her mother, Pam, worked. Rachael had wanted to help Pam out today when she'd had to go to work early or risk losing her job, so Rachael had taken Kelly before the center opened. She'd thought it would be fine, but then the first teacher of the day got a flat tire, leaving Rachael alone. And now she'd failed Pam. Failed Kelly.

Rachael had to find a way to save the sweet baby.

But what could she do? She'd already tried everything she could think of. This man wanted Kelly, and he didn't care what he had to do to get her.

Lord, please. Stop this now, she prayed. Don't let him take Kelly.

She waited for a bit of calm, maybe peace, but none came. Nothing odd about that. She hadn't felt true peace since she'd lost her husband and unborn child just over four years ago. Tears rolled down her cheeks and dropped to the crib, landing on the pastel teddy bears covering the mattress.

Kelly shifted, drawing her pudgy little legs up tighter under her body.

"I'm so sorry, Kelly," Rachael whispered.

Her captor tightened his grip while continuing to fumble around behind her. She slowly leaned toward the crib and slid her fingers closer to the gun. Inch by inch she moved. Closer. Closer.

Almost there.

He jerked his hand free of his pocket and karate chopped her forearm. "Don't even think about it."

"Please don't take Kelly," Rachael begged as a raw ache radiated up her arm,

He ignored her again, shifted to the side, and a sharp pain pierced her arm.

What? He'd injected her with something.

"Don't worry." His minty fresh breath crept through her hair as he clamped his arms tighter around her. "When you wake up, I'll be long gone. Of course, so will Kelly. Have a nice nap, now."

No! She had to get free.

She roared like a fierce mother bear with a threatened cub and put all of her strength into one last attempt. But his arms felt like bands of steel, and she couldn't break free.

"Shh," he said. "Just give it a few minutes and you won't care anymore. The drug is a powerful anesthetic. Takes away all your worries and fears before you sleep. Peaceful, sweet sleep."

Time seemed to stand still, but Rachael didn't. She fought hard until the drug he'd put into her body sent waves of relaxation through her muscles.

She whimpered. "Please, I'll do anything. Give you money. Anything. Don't take Kelly."

"Don't fight the drug," he said. "You'll soon be asleep, and all of this will be over."

Her body grew heavy, and it took effort just to keep her head up. He backed away from the crib. Her body flopped like a rag doll as he lowered her to the floor and rolled her to her back. She had one last chance, one more to save Kelly.

Rachael dug deep, beyond the waves of comfort that were flowing through her body, and shot her arm up to jerk off his mask.

His mouth dropped open as he gaped at her in horror. He cursed, but she ignored his words and memorized every pore on his face. A wide jaw. Whiskered chin. Jet-black hair to go with his cold gray eyes. High cheekbones. A mole near his left ear. She'd never seen him before, but she'd be able to describe him to the police.

"I've seen you now," she said, her words slurring. "You won't get away with this."

Her arm fell to the floor, and she dropped his mask.

Her mind clouded, and her strength receded. He retrieved his mask and put it back on, then continued to glare at her. Her eyes blinked closed. She forced them open. Dizziness swept in like a tidal wave. Her muscles liquefied. She felt as if her body floated toward the ceiling.

"I have no choice now," he finally growled out. "I'll have to kill you."

Kill me? Okay. That was fine. Everything was fine. The peace she'd sought a moment ago descended in an ocean of joy.

Yes, this was better. Nothing was wrong. Nothing mattered.

Her head fell to the side. Her gaze caught on Kelly's crib. Precious three-month-old Kelly. Asleep. Like the heaviness pulling Rachael down.

Kelly.

Rachael's thoughts drifted.

Wasn't there a reason she should be concerned about the baby?

Four years of denied sleep beckoned. Her eyelids drooped.

She lay on the floor. Blinking. Floating. Trying to remember what was happening.

As if he had all the time in the world, he sauntered toward her in shoes that made no sound on the floor.

Rachael tried to lift her hand. So heavy. She willed her eyes to remain open to see what he might be planning, but her eyelids closed like the lid on a casket, and soon, she knew nothing at all.

*

“It’s looking like the kidnapper’s really going to kill her.” Jake Marsh, commander of the First Response Squad, stared at the live video feed of director Rachael Long and the gunman in the Columbia Child Development Center.

Jake and two members of the FRS had been on their way to a tactical training session in their command truck when dispatch rerouted them to the center. Thankfully, many child care centers streamed live video so parents at work could see their children. As soon as the call came in, his team had easily accessed the feed, and they now watched the action from their command truck.

The kidnapper slipped the baby’s arms into a snowsuit then strapped her into the infant seat. Taking great care with the baby, he struggled with the straps. Jake had no children, but he knew it almost took a college degree these days to figure out how to properly use a car seat, buying the team time to intercept him.

“The director got a good look at his face before he put the mask back on, so there’s no way he’s going to let her live,” Jake said. “Too bad the camera angles aren’t giving us a look at his face, but I guess it doesn’t matter right now. We just need to get in there quickly.”

“If whatever he injected her with hasn’t already killed her.” Team sniper Brady Owens looked up from behind the video console, an ominous look on his face.

“We don’t have any time to lose,” Cash Dixon, their bomb expert, said.

Jake nodded. “We’ll proceed as if this is a hostage rescue. Cash, you remain here and monitor communications. Brady, let’s move!”

Jake charged out the door, wishing negotiators Skyler Hunter and Archer Reed were with them. As squad leader, Jake had needed to act as negotiator only twice in the six years he’d directed the team.

Well, today will be your third, and a baby and woman’s lives depend on you. No pressure.

He stifled his concerns and took a good look around. Not even seven a.m., the sun hadn’t yet climbed into the sky. Warm light spilled from the center’s windows, sparkling off the recent snowfall, but Jake’s attention went to an empty patrol car sitting in the lot.

Brady stepped up behind him. “What’s a patrol car doing here?”

“My question exactly,” Jake replied.

“Likely some hotshot who ignored directives to stand down.”

Brady sucked in a breath. “The guy’s gonna get himself or the woman killed.”

“Just picked up the deputy on video,” Cash said over Jake’s earpiece. “He’s in the hallway outside the baby room.”

“Then negotiations are off the table, and we’re going in strong.” Jake mentally called up the center’s blueprint he’d viewed in the truck.

A main hall ran down the middle of the building. Doors for classrooms and a kitchen faced that hall. Each room had at least one exit leading to playgrounds behind the tall fence. The baby room was the second room on the south side of the building, with two exterior doors.

Jake shifted his steel-plated tactical vest. “Cash, keep us updated on any movements.”

“Roger that,” Cash said.

Jake started forward as sharp winds howled down the Columbia River, sending trees rustling. Directly ahead sat a fenced yard with two gates—and one of them stood open. Jake held up a hand and paused to check for any sign of danger.

Finding none, he peered at Brady. “I’ll intercept the deputy in the hallway. You hold at the side entrance to the baby room.”

“Affirmative,” Brady replied before moving swiftly toward the open gate.

Jake approached the front door. A fragrant pine wreath with a red Christmas bow caught his attention for but a moment. He turned the doorknob. Entered. Paused again.

Darkness obscured the hallway, but light escaped from under the baby room door and through the window. The wayward deputy stood looking through the window, but he hadn’t yet opened the door.

“Stand down,” Jake announced loud enough for the deputy to hear but, he hoped, not loud enough for his voice to carry into the baby room.

The deputy spun, his weapon raised. He hadn’t rotated fully when he fired.

Bam. Bam.

The bullets slammed into Jake’s vest. The crushing force felt like a baseball bat to the chest, pushing him back and knocking him to the floor while stealing his breath. His first instinct had his hand going to the Velcro to rip off his vest, gain a breath and ease the pain, but the kidnapper would have heard the shots and could open the door and fire off a few rounds.

“Oh man,” the deputy cried out and ran to Jake. “Man, I didn’t...I mean you’re...”

“Shooter spooked by shots fired,” Brady announced over the comms.

“Roger that,” Jake managed to get out as he continued to fight for air. “Make entry now.”

“Affirmative,” Brady replied.

The deputy dropped down beside Jake. Jake glared at the guy and wanted to give him a piece of his mind, but he wouldn’t waste any more time on the deputy. Not when Brady counted on Jake for backup.

He struggled to his feet, his anger barely in check. He should have been the one to breach the perimeter. He was in charge. He was the best trained. He should have taken the risk. Thanks to the yo-yo staring at him, Jake had lost all control of this op. Losing control meant people died.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

The shots sounded from a handgun inside the room. Brady carried a rifle, which meant the masked man had opened fire. Jake listened for Brady’s return fire.

Nothing.

The kidnapper could have taken Brady out, or maybe Brady took cover and didn’t have a shot. Either way, Jake had to get inside.

He eyed the deputy. “Go back to your car and don’t leave it until you’re told to do so. You got me?”

He nodded.

“Now!”

Jake waited for him to step off, then bolted for the door.

“Entering,” Jake said into his mic as he jerked open the door to find Brady, rifle raised, his concentration on the sight as he marched toward the back door.

“Got in just in time to draw the kidnapper’s fire,” he called out. “His shots went wide. Missed the director. He fired on me and took off with the baby. I had to take cover. Couldn’t get a clean shot without risking the baby’s life.”

Jake wished Brady could have taken the shot, but as an extremely capable deputy, if he said there hadn’t been a clean shot, then no shot existed.

Jake glanced at the director. She lay on her back, but she stirred, and her eyes blinked open. Her gaze met Jake’s for a moment before they closed again. He wanted to check on her, but the baby took priority right now.

At least he knew Brady had been wrong in the truck. They weren’t too late, and Ms. Long was alive.

Now Jake needed to make sure she stayed that way

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